

Great-grandfather loved Jacob, but man, the kid could be annoying, always asking questions about his life in baseball. Sunday visits in the modest old house in the gritty Pennsylvania coaltown turned into a baseball inquisition. Great-grandfather sat at the kitchen table with his head down picking at the label of his bottle of Bud with a fingernail, while Jacob loomed over him with his damn giant baseball encyclopedia and peppered him with questions. What was it like in San Antonio? Did you ride the rails all over California? Did you know you led the New England League in stolen bases in 1948? Did you know you were teammates with Jimmy Piersall in Scranton, Pennsylvania and what was it like there?

Great-grandfather spit nails. At least that's what he said to Jacob, "Answering your questions is like spitting nails."

One Sunday Jacob wanted to know about Great Great-grandfather's major league career. "Great-grandfather, tell me about the home run you hit off Warren Spahn and the time you drank beer with Mickey Mantle."

"Home run, no. Mantle, no. Beer, yes. And the beer was half the damn reason I didn't."

"Didn't what, great-grandfather?"

"Didn't hit a homer off Warren Spahn or anybody else. Didn't make it, damn it. And stop calling me Great-Grandfather."

"But you did Great-Grandfather. You made it to the major leagues and you hit three home runs and one was off Warren Spahn. It says so right here in my baseball encyclopedia."

Jacob read: "Stanley Bendis, born Benton, Pennsylvania, height 5-11, weight 170, bats left, throws..."

"Yeah, blah, blah, blah, don't it say, too, I only got in 50 games and batted .220?"

"Thirty-nine and .207. But great-grandfather you were a professional ballplayer for 11 years. You played in the Baker Bowl. It's the coolest thing."

"Cool? Oh brother. And stop calling me Great-Grandfather."

"What should I call you then?"

"Pops. Stanley. I don't know."

"The little kids call you pops. I'm big now, Great-Grandfather."

"Yeah, you are big. Well, tall, anyway."

One day Jacob brought Brandon with him. "He's my friend from school and he wants your autograph."

"Autograph? What kind of cockamamie stuff has Jacob been telling you."

"He said you played in the major leagues, sir."

"So did a million other guys, why don't you get their autographs?"

Brandon, who looked half the size of Jacob, shoved his hands in his jean pockets, turned red and squirmed. "I don't know any of them other guys," he murmured.

"Huh, what'd you say, kid?"

"Great-grandfather," Jacob said, "please sign the ball. What's the harm?"

Brandon handed great-grandfather a ball and pen and he signed it.

One Sunday Jacob brought his little sister Renee. She looked down and shuffled her feet and stammered, "a... would you..." she stopped and looked up at her brother. "She wants to take you to school for show-and-tell," Jacob said.

"Show and tell? I don't want no damn kids staring at me like I'm some kinda freak. I'll show 'em my tongue and tell 'em to go to hell." Great-grandfather looked like he might really spit nails.

Renee's smile fell. Her eyes got moist. Great-grandfather couldn't stand to see Renee cry, so it was off to school. Fifth period. Miss Redding's sixth grade history class. Jacob and Brandon, dismissed from freshman Spanish, were there, too.

Renee stood in front of her classmates. Great-Grandfather sat in the teacher's chair wearing a dirty old frayed Browns cap. Miss Redding stood by the door.

"This is my great-grandfather Stanley Bendis and he played baseball in the major leagues for the St. Louis Browns and Philadelphia Phillies," Renee said.

The girls giggled. The boys stared at Renee's great-grandfather like he was some kind of freak.

Renee said, "You can ask any questions."

Hands shot up.

Renee called on Max. "My dad said baseball players are a bunch of millionaires and half of them are on dope. Are you a millionaire?" Max asked

"A millionaire? I'm lucky I got a pot to piss in."

"Mr. Bendis, please, watch your language, " Miss Redding scolded.

"Sorry. No, I'm no millionaire. Ballplayers today are, but I played a long time ago. I'm not even a thousandaire."

The kids laughed at that.

"And I'm not on dope."

They laughed again.

They asked him what position he played. "Catcher," he said holding up his gnarled fingers as proof.

They asked him how old he was. "Eighty-nine."

They asked him who was the best player he ever saw and who was the worst. "Ted Williams and me," Great-Grandfather said.

They asked him if he played Little League. "There was no such back in my day. We played in the street or a vacant lot."

They asked him what he did after baseball. "Roofs," he said.

"Roofs?" asked Miss Redding.

"Yeah, I put a roof on half the houses in this town and tarred the one above our heads right now." Everybody looked up.

Renee called on Jacob. "Tell us about the first time you batted in the major leagues."

"Can't remember."

Renee read from her notes. "It was on September 7 in 1950 against Bobby Shantz of the Philadelphia A's in the Baker Bowl."

Great-Grandfather paused and cleared his throat. The room went quiet. "Oh yeah. I was so nervous they said they could hear my knees knocking from the dugout and then I struck out."

The kids all laughed, and Great-Grandfather laughed with them. Great-grandfather couldn't remember the last time he had a good laugh. He looked around the room. He saw Jacob's friend Brandon showing the awed fifth graders the autographed ball. He saw Renee and Jacob beaming with pride and he thought, maybe this baseball hero stuff ain't so bad after all.

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