

Dirty Work

At the crack of the bat I turned and ran. Over my left shoulder I watched the ball climb over the sun and hesitate at its apex before hurtling toward the warning track far ahead of me. In desperation I pumped my arms and dug my spikes into the soft field but there wasn't time to run. After three long strides I pivoted to face home plate and located the ball falling from the sky like a meteor crashing through earth's atmosphere. Fear froze the blood in my veins. I stretched my glove hand over my head and jumped as high as my eleven-year-old legs could propel me but I caught only a handful of spring air. The ball collided with the outfield wall ten feet behind me, bounced once on the warning track, and caromed off my leg. Scuttling on hands and knees to retrieve the ball, I watched the batter round second base and head for third. There was still a chance. I rose and fired the ball toward the infield in one fluid motion. The ball sailed over the cutoff man, landed on the pitcher's mound, and skittered toward home plate. Afraid the ball might get past him, the catcher left his position at the plate and smothered the ball on the infield grass as the opposing player slid across the plate behind him.

Game over. We had lost. I rested on my haunches, holding my breath to stave off the tears that would betray my shame. After several minutes I spotted my father waiving me off the field, so I shuffled toward the dugout. My teammates, their faces long and sad, walked in a line, congratulating the ebullient winners as we had been taught by our coach. When one of the winning players gave a high five to the kid who had hit the home run, our pitcher yelled, "It was just a stupid fly ball."

My teammates blame me for losing the game. A scuffle ensued but the teams were quickly separated by adults and the players dispersed. Slowly, I walked toward my father and my coach

who waited for me on the third base line with their arms folded across their chests. When I was within earshot, my father said, "You run too long in one place."

I wondered if that was a professional opinion. After all, he was an engineer.

"He shouldn't have looked back," the coach said. "It slowed him down. We teach 'em to run to the spot, then pick up the ball 'cause you run faster looking straight ahead."

"He was playing too shallow."

I was playing where the coach told me to play.

"He doesn't have the speed to cover center field no matter where I position him."

I stopped on the infield grass, not sure if I should join the adult conversation or catch up to my teammates. Fear of ridicule paralyzed me. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear what my father had to say, either. All I ever wanted to be was a center fielder because Mickey Mantle was my father's favorite player and he was a center fielder.

"Are you going to cut him? He can't hit a lick. His baby brother, Timmy, is the baseball player in our family."

Timmy was three years younger but as tall as me. Supposedly he could hit the ball 150 feet.

"No way," the coach said. "Did you see that throw? Your kid's got a cannon."

Surprised, but suddenly optimistic, my father said, "You think he could be a pitcher?"

The coach spat out his chewing tobacco. "Nah, but I need a catcher." He put a hand beside his mouth and leaned toward my father as though he was whispering a secret. "Our catcher should have waited for the throw, blocked the plate." He straightened. "And I'd like to have a catcher with a gun." The coach looked at me before he finished. "If he ain't afraid of the ball that is."

Catcher! The position reserved for kids who can't run and can't hit but are willing to demean themselves by chasing wild pitches around the backstop. Suddenly, the potential

embarrassment of not making the team at all was more terrifying than the loss of my father's approval.

I was pretty sure I could speak now. "I'm not afraid of the ball, sir."

"That's what I want to hear," the coach said.

"Then I guess you're a damn catcher, Jack." My father shook his head and walked away.

The coach shrugged and said, "Somebody's got to do it. Let's get you some equipment."

I followed him to the dugout where he filled a canvas bat bag with shin guards, chest protector, face mask, and a padded catcher's mitt. Then I walked home alone with the "tools of ignorance" slung over my shoulder.

The equipment was old, the seams frayed and torn, the straps stretched until they were no longer elastic, the edges worn smooth by dozens of young boys who had preceded me in the unrewarding role, but they were my ticket to play Little League baseball. The fact that I could do what others couldn't do, or lacked the courage to do, was a source of hidden pride. My father rarely ventured into my room, but to avoid further ridicule I hid the equipment under my bed. On game days I snuck away before he arrived home from work, getting to the field hours before game time so I wouldn't have to hear his excuse for not coming to the game.

As expected, my father didn't waste his time watching a "damn catcher" play Little League baseball. He did watch Timmy's games regularly and bragged about his prowess, relived his exploits at the dinner table. He never asked about my games.

My father was right about my hitting, of course. However, I learned to look fierce in the batter's box and milk wild pitchers for walks. I can't count the times I heard the coach say, "A walk is as good as a hit." I knew—all players knew—a walk was only as good as a hit for a player who couldn't hit.

Which is why the one time I had a chance to be a hero, I chose to swing the bat. We were losing by a run in the bottom of the last inning when I came to bat with a runner on third base and two outs. That the coach didn't pinch hit for me wasn't a vote of confidence; it was awareness that if we tied the game, we had no one else able, or willing, to play catcher. He figured the odds were 50/50 that I would draw yet another walk, giving the next batter in our lineup a chance to drive in the tying run. When the pitch count went full—three balls and two strikes—the coach probably assumed the odds of a walk were still 50/50. Since the pitcher consistently threw an equal number of balls and strikes, I calculated the odds as very much in favor of a third strike. I *had* to swing at the pitch.

And, I did. My eyes may have been closed but the bat and ball shared the same space for a microsecond and the ball flew in a slow graceful arc, over the outstretched arm of the pitcher, between opposing fielders, beyond second base, and onto the outfield grass. The tying run came home from third base and my coach slapped me on my butt as I reached first base. As the coach planned, our next batter up hit a home run, winning the game for us.

When I crossed home plate my teammates were there, waiting for the kid who had hit the home run. I got caught up in the crowd of players congratulating our hero, and the melee gravitated toward the chain link fence behind home plate where I was crushed against it by the jubilant celebration. The sharp point of a twisted metal thread ripped my uniform and gashed my upper arm. It bled a little.

When Mom saw the gash she was horrified and hastened to clean the cut. As she applied Mercurochrome and murmured sweet nothings, my father said, “Stop babying him. You'll turn him into a bigger pussy than he already is.”

Mom paused and gave him a nasty look but didn't argue. As she covered the cut with an unnecessarily large piece of gauze and wrapped an athletic bandage around my arm far too many times, I related my heroics to my father.

He didn't believe me. "Looks more like you've been in a fight."

"No, I drove in the tying run and scored the winning run." Technically, that was true, but I omitted the part about the home run.

All he said was, "Will we have to pay for the uniform?"

We didn't have to pay for it. Mom stitched up the L-shaped tear and I wore my lucky uniform to every game.

In the last game of the season, we played for the championship against the team that had beaten us in the opening game—our only loss, the loss attributed to my slow feet. Leading by two runs in the bottom of the last inning, with two outs and a runner on second base, we gathered on the mound with our coach to get final instructions. The next batter would be the kid who hit the ball over my head to win the first game of the season.

"Let's end this right here," the coach said. "Give him somethin' to hit, make him put the ball in play. "Y'all do your jobs and we'll be champions."

As I trotted back to my place behind home plate the batter took vicious practice swings and sneered at me. "Gonna be just like last time," he said with a laugh.

Fearing he would be right, I squatted behind him and nodded to the pitcher that I was ready. He did as he was told and laid a "fat" pitch down the middle of the plate. The batter swung so hard his helmet flew off and he dropped to one knee in the batter's box, like Mickey Mantle often did. The ball was struck hard but the batter had overswung and topped it. Like a laser beam it streaked

along the ground to the left of second base as the batter got to his feet and stumbled toward first base.

The shortstop, our best fielder, nearly made the play. The ball kicked off the heel of his glove and ricocheted back toward the left field foul line. The runner from second base scored easily, cutting our margin to a single run, as our fielders chased the fleeing ball like cops chasing a purse snatcher. The shortstop finally smothered the ball in foul territory as the batter neared third base. I tossed my mask aside and planted one foot on either side of the plate. The throw was strong and true but a few feet short of the plate, nearly striking the runner as he began his slide.

I wasn't distracted. Ignoring the sliding runner, I concentrated on the ball, caught it with two hands and dropped to my knees as the big batter crashed into me, spikes first. The impact flipped me onto my back as the crowd groaned and murmured ooh's and ah's. Time stood still as the batter and I waited for the umpire's call. When the dust cleared, the umpire reached down and turned my glove over to reveal the ball resting on my chest protector.

Punching the sky with his right fist, the umpire shrieked, "Out!"

Lying there, listening for a glorious second to the cheering of the fans, I realized that my dream had come true: we were champions. The once cocky batter wore a scared look and skittered away; he knew what was about to happen and so did I. Before I could stand, I was mobbed by fourteen delirious teammates, crushed at the bottom of a delicious "dogpile," covered in red dirt and borrowed sweat. When my teammates pulled me to my feet, I discovered that my uniform had been ripped and my thigh had been sliced by the batter's spikes.

After a lengthy celebration, I walked to the dugout to remove my equipment for the last time and heard a shriek from behind me. Mom had a hand over her mouth and her eyes were wide

with fright as she noted the blood on my uniform pants. “Let’s get you to the emergency room, young man. You’ll need stitches.”

“No way, Mom, I’m leaving it just like this for everyone to see.”

She shook her head in the way mother’s do when they disapprove of what their child did but are proud of it too. She took a step to hug me and thought better of it. She placed her hands on either side of my face, careful not to get dirt and blood on her sundress and gave me an air kiss I hoped no one saw. “I’ll fix you up at home,” she said.

“How did you get here?” Mom had never learned to drive a car.

She pointed at the third base line where my father had his arms crossed, talking to the coach. “I made him come,” she said. “He couldn’t say no to a championship game.”

Oh, crap! The coach would tell him I had one hit all season. I wondered how many little Timmy had.

We shuffled over to the men in time to hear the coach say, “I feel pretty smart now. He’s the best dang catcher in the league, made the All-Star team. He wasn’t afraid of the ball, or the bat, or foul tips, or sliding runners. No wild pitches got past him and no runner ever stole a base.”

My father made a sound that betrayed a combination of disbelief and confusion. “Jack is an All-Star?”

It pleased me that he was confounded; it took hard work to prove him wrong. I especially liked being a player with a unique role, but I decided against saying it out loud.

The coach stuck a chew of tobacco in his cheek, his way of celebrating our victory. “Every team needs a catcher, someone to do the dirty work. Takes guts to be a catcher,” he said, nodding his head in confirmation.

“Will we have to pay for the uniform?” my father asked.

Years later I came to understand how my father made a living. He was a mechanical engineer at a nuclear power plant. The nuclear engineers looked down their noses at my father, thought of him as little more than an exalted handyman. He was the catcher on his team, the man who did the dirty work, and he wanted more for his son.

~The End~