

Fly Ball

“blue took it my/far beyond far/and high beyond high”

--e. e. cummings

One by one, my father unwraps each large rubber band encircling the new Rawlings glove. When the last one slips off, the mitt unfolds, revealing three green-stained baseballs which molded the pocket overnight. Yesterday morning it soaked in a bucket of water for an hour, then sat out in the sun all day to dry. In the evening, my father dripped 3-In-One oil over the outside, spread with an old cloth, then let me oil the inside, a double-dose in the middle, the soft spot to clutch the ball.

We walk down the street to Sawyer School. I play catch with my dad who still clings to his mitt from the 1930s, a bird's nest of black leather pads and straps. He cradles each ball as if catching an egg with two hands. Nothing ever falls.

I race into the outfield where my father hits ground balls, telling me not to run where they are but where they are going. Dart left, then in, dart right, then in, stopping, genuflecting on a knee as the ball rolls into the webbing laid flat on the ground. My father changes the angle of his swing, starting back from the waist, then up to the front shoulder, sending out gentle flies, playing catch with me through the bat. Higher and higher the balls rise, deeper and deeper. Week after summer week, month after month, racing for baseballs flying through the white cloud sky, spinning in elegant arcs until they come to rest in my outstretched glove.

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The pick-up game of Over-the-Line is simple. Played in the mist or in the heat, barefoot, socks, or in sneakers, broken mitt stitched together with shoestring, splintered bat repaired with a nail driven through, then bent, the rules remain the same. The batter can toss the ball up himself or have someone pitch to him. Two missed swings, you're out. Two fouls, you're out. Hit on the ground between the two designated marks, past the infielder, base hit. If he catches it, you're out. Ground it past the outfielder, double. Bounce it, triple. Over his head, home run.

Some hit for more power than me. Some hit for more accuracy. Some scoop up ground balls like the "human vacuum," Brooks Robinson. But no one catches fly balls like me. Try and hit it over my head, I dare you. I'll even cheat in and tempt you. Because I know the secret. I watched Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle and Duke Snider. We move to the angle of the swing, one step before the crack of the bat.

Any ball with an arc I will catch.

I will.

#

I'm 11, Greg and Bobby are 10. Big Jim is in high school. We usually play toward the left because a chain-link fence in right field separates the grammar school play area from kindergarten. For today's game, Big Jim decides to bat left-handed, so Greg and I camp out near the short fence. Bobby lobs in the first pitch, Big Jim yells out "Contact" and blasts a ball twenty feet over the fence, landing in the grass with a thud. I climb over, toss the ball back in, and resume my position when, "Contact," another ball flies over our heads onto the kindergarten lawn. I retrieve the second ball, but decide to stay behind the fence.

"Good deal," Big Jim yells out. "If you catch it, it's an out. If not, it's a home run." Greg tries to climb the fence too, but I say, "No, I got it. You catch anything he pops up short."

I bend my knees and pat my glove twice, ready to spring. Before he yells “Contact,” I’m darting to my left. The distant ball soars higher and farther than the first two. I race back, knowing where it’s headed, stretching out my glove as the ball keeps getting larger and larger until it disappears into leaves and something hits me.

When I open my eyes, the leaves sparkle and spin. I try to get up but Big Jim says, “Hold on, partner. You just gave that trunk a pretty good whack. Just lay there for a bit. I sent Bobby and Greg to your parents’ house to tell them what happened and bring some ice.”

My dad shows up in his old blue Dodge. He thanks Big Jim, then puts an ice bag on my right forehead. I wince and try not to cry. He tells me to hold it there, but I want to feel the knot in my head. It’s as big as a baseball. I put the ice back on, and as I am helped up and start to walk away, Big Jim says, “Hey, kid, you had it all the way.” I grin.

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Richard Sanchez steps up to the plate. I picture the dismissive smile he wears after he slides into fielders at bases and sends line-drives past flinching infielders and long fly balls that skirt into the street. He catches for the Phillies, leads the little league in home runs, and lives across Katella Avenue with the other Hispanic kids who attend St. Stanislaus’s grammar school.

I am here because a year ago my father helped organize, fund, then transform the cow pasture next to the grammar school, full of tumbleweeds, snake and gopher holes, into a Little League field for Catholic boys. Each recess we watched the ground cleared and staked, the infield leveled and cut out, the pungent smell of dark manure turning into fresh cut blades of grass. I am here because I made the All-Stars in my first year. I am here in left field because the other team has the home run hitters and my dad knows I can catch fly balls.

As Richard digs into the batter's box, from the dugout my father motions me back and to my left, clenching his fist when I reach the right position. After one mighty swing and miss, an enraged Richard steps back in and launches a low rocket between left and center field. I speed toward the spot it will land. Ten feet away, as I lift up my mitt for the catch, my left foot steps into a gopher hole, sending me sprawling onto the ground. I see the ball bounce in front of me, stretch up with my bare hand, but it grazes my fingertips and bounds past.

I begin crying, as the cheers from the stands for Richard rounding the bases reach my ear. I'm crying even after my dad and another coach reach their fallen outfielder. Though I tell them that my ankle aches, I cry because I know I was going to catch that ball, know I had let my father and his strategy down, know that Richard Sanchez will be smiling at me while he gnaws at his cherry sno-cone after the game. I hobble across the field and sit alone at the end of dugout, mad at my father for not fixing that one gopher hole.

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Rising above the rolling hills of striped asphalt in the empty parking lot, the powder blue walls and green palm trees of Dodger Stadium extend into the brown air of the Los Angeles afternoon. Two hours earlier, Coach Snow, our baseball and football coach, drove the bus through the Chavez Ravine parking booths and turned left, skirting the edge of the lot into the Los Angeles Police Academy, where our St. Jude's J.V. team would battle Cathedral High School on an all-dirt baseball field.

I toss in our practice ball before the bottom of the sixth inning in a scoreless tie and gaze over at the Stadium, sitting like a postcard beyond the right field line. I recall prodigious home runs by Frank Howard flying into the left field pavilion, and sprawling catches by the "Hound Dog," Willie Davis. Sandy Koufax stands on the mound, the southpaw who could fit five

baseballs in his open hand, who beat the New York Yankees and the Minnesota Twins in the World Series. We have our own Koufax, freshman lefty Billy Treece--tall, lanky, ruddy-cheeked--rifling fastballs, spinning curves past each batter. If we can only sneak across a run the seventh, we know he will sew up our first league win.

He strikes out their lead-off hitter with three pitches. The second batter dribbles a ball to first base for the next out. I'm on my toes, watching as the third batter swings, the crack of his bat sending the ball on a line directly toward me. I have no depth perception, no angle of ascent, so I take one step in, then know all is lost. I back-pedal as quickly as possible, leaping up as the low line drive flies over me. By the time I retrieve the ball and throw it to our shortstop, the runner has already crossed home plate. The cheers of their team and sparse crowd seem to echo from the vacant, cavernous tiers of Dodger Stadium.

An inning later we sit silently in the bus, I alone in a seat in the back, face buried in my mitt. The bus tilts slightly as Coach Snow steps on and, before he sits down to drive, he pauses. I can't look up. Last year before I quit football, when the Loyola runner brushed by my outstretched arms in route to a touchdown and I slinked over to our sidelines, Snow grabbed my facemask, jerked it up towards his face six inches from mine, yelling, "Boy, you just pissed in your pants out there, you understand? Pissed in your pants!"

He is quiet this time, either calm or seething. "Gentlemen, this was a tough loss. As tough as they come. But don't for a second think that one person lost this game. We all had our chances. We all could have changed the outcome. We just have to get them next time. Billy, you pitched a heck of a game."

A few players grumble in assent, then the quiet again. His words keep ringing in my ears, "...one person lost this game." I don't allow myself a glimpse of Dodger Stadium as we drive out of the parking lot and head home.

#

During our first round in league, Pius X High School had beaten us badly. At their makeshift campus field, their star player, Dave Manchuk, drove two homeruns on top of the football snack bar in center field, sending him into my pantheon of sluggers, next to Mickey Mantle and Harmon Killebrew.

For the second round, we play them at home, Wardlow Park in Lakewood, and in the sixth inning we have a three-run lead with Treece on the mound. However, with two outs in the inning, Billy begins to tire, walking a batter, then surrendering an infield single to the next. I see Manchuk lumbering out from the dugout into the on-deck circle and, although it's been a while, I start saying a few Hail Mary's to help Billy get through the last hitter. Two quick strikes whiz by, but the next ball zips inside, brushing the batter's jersey, sending him to first base.

I look over at my buddy Dave Lottie in centerfield as we both creep backward a bit, then some more, glad there is no fence. We figure that if we keep Manchuk's ball in front of us, the worst that could happen would be a drop-in single, two runs scoring and Manchuk on first base, capable of no more damage. In the late afternoon sun, he steps into the batter's box, dwarfing both our catcher and the umpire. As the first pitch approaches, he takes an enormous stride, pivoting and spinning on his back leg, nearly corkscrewing himself into the ground as the ball sneaks by and plops into our catcher's mitt. The next pitch Treece tries to waste, throwing low and outside, yet I instinctively take one step to the left as Manchuk lurches at the ball, sending it deep into the blue sky between Dave and I.

“Back!” Dave yells, “Back! Back!” and I know, though the ball is flying between us, that he has no chance to catch it. Normally I would sprint towards a landing spot as fast as I could, but this ball is soaring beyond that, so I continue to run at full speed, keeping my eye on the arc of the ball as it begins its downward descent. Then, the second I realize that I might reach it before it lands, the ball flies into the afternoon sun, searing an image of brief black dot before I am blinded. I’m running too hard and in the wrong direction to block the sun with my mitt, so I stare into it as long as I can, then close my eyes, stretch out as far as I can, and feel a weight pull my glove toward the ground. I start to pinwheel down, and cradle the ball like an egg to my chest as I hit the ground and do a somersault.

As I get up and begin to jog in, I can only see black shadows moving while Dave keeps pounding my back with his glove. When I near the dugout, I wipe the moisture off my cheek. Coach Snow, on his way out to coach third base, slaps me on the butt.

“Nice catch, son.”

#

Coach Jake Martinson looks like a two-legged, oversized bull-dog. He coaches offensive line for our football team and, by involuntary default, varsity baseball. The solution to every miscue in practice is “take a lap.” We may not have the best baseball team by the time I make it my senior year, but we are the best-conditioned.

Dave and I, once star outfielders of the JV team, now occupy a platoon of right fielders who rarely see an in-game at bat. Dave can’t catch up with the speed of varsity level pitching. For me it’s worse. In practice, I make all the plays in the field and hit for power, but in games I lose confidence and strike out. I once trotted into second base with a double in practice and heard Coach Martinson mutter to no one in particular, “Why can’t he do that it a game?” When

a ball rolls between my legs for a triple at an away game against St. John Bosco, my varsity playing time unofficially ends. Dave and I are replaced by a talented sophomore, but by the spring of our senior year, we are over it, just happy to hang out with each other, to be with the boys on drives out to the field, bus rides to and from the games.

Practices drone on with regularity for our last place team--laps, stretching, laps, throwing, laps, fungo, laps, infield/outfield practice, batting practice, laps, go home. During fielding practice every position has one occupant except the pitching mound and right field where three of us stand waiting our turn to catch the ball, then throw it to the designated base. Coach Martinson hit balls to the outfield from about ten feet in front of home plate, and hits the last one of the outfield session today to me.

The ball spins off his fungo bat, curving toward the foul line. I race over and snag it just before it reaches the ground, pirouette on my right foot, and release a throw to home with the full weight of my body behind it. It's right on line, but Coach Martinson has already mentally moved on to hitting ground balls, his back turned as my throw bears down on his head. I want to yell out to him, but am afraid he'll turn and get hit in the face. I stand silent, watching with the rest of the team until our catcher, Matt McCann says, "Coach, watch out." As Martinson begins to turn his head at him, then back at me, the ball whizzes by his nose, skips in the dirt, one hop into Matt's glove. At first Martinson glares at me, then thinks better of it.

"Nice throw," he mutters. "Okay, outfielders, take some laps."

Afterwards, I learn that the rest of the team wishes my throw was more accurate.

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My dad works as an F.B.I. agent in Long Beach with informants and connections. He leans on his connections to find me, his first-born son, summertime blue-collar jobs during my

college years to convince me that pursuing a degree will profit me more than pursuing a hedonistic, hippie lifestyle into adulthood. I push metal racks of tuna into and out of steaming ovens in a San Pedro cannery, load up semis, back to front, ceiling to floor with crates of P & G products, roll galvanized pipes, fresh off box cars onto 10-foot-high stacks, and test high pressure valves for leaks in an assembly line.

After nearly two months, I earn enough respect from the long-term union workers at Pacific Valves to be invited to their first and only practice of the company's fast-pitch softball team at Cherry Park in Long Beach. When I arrive, I join in with warm up, tossing the ball back and forth, noticing that most of the men seem to be somewhere between their mid-twenties to forties. When I'm warm, I decide to throw my partner a knuckle-ball, an art I'd perfected my first year in college, which floats in like a butterfly, startling my partner into a last minute stab, his initial glare turning into a grin. I soon show him and a few of the younger players the grip and the motion

"Infielders, let's take ground balls at short. Outfielders, head to centerfield," yells Jake, a short trim man with greying temples, wearing the team's jersey with his name on the back. He lets his assistant hit grounders to the veterans and walks down the right field line to send line drives and fly balls to assess the new outfield talent. I take my spot at the end of the line and watch the other men, some with starts and stops, others with more certainty, track down the incoming softballs, then lob them back to Jake. When my turn arrives, he seems to put a little extra oomph into his swing, rocketing a ball behind me to the right. But I take off with his swing and quickly track down the ball, firing it back on one bounce into his awaiting hand. I don't bother to look for his reaction.

I subsequently handle high flies and bloopers with equal ease and become somewhat bored with the process. Before my last turn, Jake begins to walk in, so I yell out, "One more!"

He obliges, sailing a ball to my left, then resumes walking towards home plate, as do some of the other outfielders. I slow down for the catch, this time drifting past the landing spot, then reaching behind my back, glove at waist level, to feel it settle into the webbing. I'm just fooling around, but the side-looks from some of the older fielders suggest I have crossed a line. Maybe they think I am showing them up, eclipsing their waning talents, a summer temp from college who has brains, talent, and a future not in the factory. In any case, during batting practice, I stick to hitting singles and don't try to power anything over their heads.

I make all the catches in center field in our first game. I hit two consecutive balls over the fence, one foul, one fair, and send dirt flying, sliding into home headfirst with the go ahead run. The men are pleased with the win, but no one congratulates me for my contribution, or invites me for a beer afterwards. A week later, the union at Pacific Valves votes to go on strike against management. As a non-union temp, I could cross the picket line as a scab, but I choose not to. My days checking pressure valves end.

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My senior year in college, I meet Sydney, a lanky freshman dance major from Berkeley. I am a few months over my two-year relationship with Sharon. I have little doubt that the sex with this, my first partner, prolonged our relationship beyond a mountain of incompatibility. With a razor-like focus, I return to blissful fraternal celibacy with my three housemates who compete for admission to a prestigious law school, while I read and write about Shakespeare, Shelly, and Stevens. I run three miles and play racquetball daily, while alternating between basketball and tennis classes Monday through Thursday. I weigh less than I did when I was a

senior in high school, work as the bouncer at the dorm cafeteria, and need no female in my life to prove my worth or distract me from my own new interest in graduate school.

One evening, Howard, the pitcher for our intramural softball team, brings Sydney as a guest to the campus favorite for Fine Arts credit, the History of Art class with Professor Phil Leider. Though Howard sits between us, I can't help glancing at her long face, sly smile and emerald eyes that belong in a painting. Despite my own admonishments, after class when I encounter her irreverent poise and sarcasm, a distant spark lights.

In addition to dance, she plays tennis at the Berkeley Tennis Club and is trying out for the college team, so I find out when she has practice, then alter my running time so I can scan the courts five times on my three-mile circuit. When she is on a nearby court, I watch her sleek form moving to the ball, and if she happens to look up and recognize me, she waves and I wave back. After a while, she's always at the court next to the running path, and during a break in her match, yells "Faster" at me, and I yell back, "More follow through."

Later in the week, Sydney strides across the large field to our softball game, toweling off sweat from her practice, then sitting on the small towel in her white tennis shorts and green tank top. She waves at Howard on the mound, who apparently invited her, then out at me in left field. In center field, my housemate Scott knows the game plan has changed, grinning at me, shouting out, "Are you going to let me catch anything today?" Not if I can help it.

It didn't take long to strut my stuff. In the first inning, a batter hits Howard's pitch, a routine fly ball. I drift over, flick up my mitt at the last second for the catch, and toss the ball back in submarine style. The next inning a fly ball soars out between Scott and me.

"I got it, I got it," I call, circling in until the ball plops into my mitt.

"I bet you think she's checking you out now, don't you?" Scott teases.

I hadn't looked over at all, trying to maintain a detached attitude.

"Well, she is, brother," Scott says, and I wink. I got it.

In the last inning, with two men on and their best hitter at the plate, Scott and I move back. He swings with all his might but the ball comes off the top of the bat softly, looping over our shortstop's head. I race in, for the first time at full speed, and at the last second, dive at the ball and trap it in my glove, knowing it had barely touched the ground but hoping the umpire at home would rule it an out. I stand there, holding up the ball, but he makes no signal, as the runners circle the bases. My teammates yell, "Throw it!" but if I do, then I admit I didn't catch it, so I wave the ball wildly at him, still with no reaction. I fire the ball home too late. We lose the game.

More importantly, I know I have lost Sydney.

I see her talking to Howard over by the backstop. Neither is laughing or even smiling. I guess Howard takes losses badly. In a minute, he heads up to the parking lot, alone. Sydney walks over to me.

"You know you didn't catch that ball, right?" she says with that sly grin.

"Whose side are you on anyway?" I say.

"You think you get points for effort?" she asks.

"You tell me," I respond.

We are playing doubles at the Berkeley Tennis Club two months later.

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In addition to my first high school English job, I begin a thirteen-year tenure as varsity softball coach. I stick with softball so long because, while the baseball coach plans four hour practices, making his team do wind sprints on the opponents' field after a loss to "motivate"

them, my girls compete with as much vigor and talent, shed tears after losses, then ask the bus driver to play their favorite radio station on the ride home. My 1988 team wins the league championship, with five girls going on to play college softball. The greatest competition they face is each other in practice, and it is fierce.

One day I come up with a new conditioning exercise for them at the end of practice. I have them all line up at the left field line by the fence, then I turn the pitching machine around and unlock it so I can tilt it back and send fly balls way up in the air. One at a time, a player runs toward center field, where I send a ball that they will have to sprint to catch, or chase after if they miss. They then return the ball to the bucket near the machine and go back to left field.

After three rounds they are bending over, trying to catch their breath, so I announce, “Whenever someone makes a circus catch, we are done.” This perks up their competitiveness, but even after amazing, outstretched grabs, they look in and see that I am unmoved. After another great catch, Michelle, my shortstop, the stubbornest member of the team, yells out, “Jeez, Coach, what do you want?”

“I said ‘circus catch’. Would you see any of those catches in a circus?”

They stand there puzzled for a second, then Wendy, my quiet third baseman, the one who tries to emulate all the knuckleballs and trick catches I’d do in warm ups, moves to the front of the line, then sprints out.

I send a yellow softball into the blue sky where it shrinks into the size of a distant sun, then races back toward the green earth where Wendy settles, sticks her mitt behind her back, and catches the ball waist-high.

I thrust my arms into the air and pronounce “We’re done!” The congratulatory cheers ensue, followed by, “Hey, wait a minute, I want my turn.” Michelle is not going to be outdone.

Nor are the other girls, so for fifteen more minutes I loft flies into the air and watch the girls somersault and cartwheel, mitts behind their back, through their legs, and even on the wrong hand. Occasionally, they catch one. They all jeer at and laugh with their teammates.

The baseball coach practicing behind a high green screen on the next field tells me later that all that noise distracts his team.

“Coach, it’s just a game,” I answer, and smile.

#

My coaching days have ended. I have a kid at home and one more on the way. Yet, when the members of my original softball teams from the late 1970s ask me to join them and their husbands on a local co-ed team in 1992, I check with the wife, and then say yes.

I stand in the outfield, basking in the comfort of a ten run lead, agreeing to the fanciful idea that we could all switch positions for the last inning and the team we are playing would still have no chance of beating us. So I leave the comfort of third base, a low impact position assigned to me as the elder member of the team, and move to left-center to enjoy the last three outs from a comfortable distance.

As the opposing pitcher strolls to the plate, powerfully built despite the large gut hanging over his spandex waist band, we all move back, anticipating another vain attempt to go for the fences. He swings so hard at the first pitch, he nearly falls over, catching himself with the bat as his teammates razz him from the dugout. He unleashes another mighty swing, resulting only in a soft arcing fly ball headed about thirty feet in front of me. My rapid first step is followed by a second that sends an electric shock up my spine. I have cramped in the calf many times before, pulled up with a tight hamstring, but some unknown muscle near my knee screams out, and I hit the ground hard.

I have no idea what happened to the ball, nor do I care. I just remember being helped up by Melanie, my former leftfielder and her husband A. J., me refusing their further support. I choose instead to tip-toe on my left foot the length of the field to the bench. I sit in the dugout for one more out, then my old players decide who will drive me home in my car.

As I lean against a street lamp at the curb waiting for Melanie to pull up, one bank of lights goes off behind me, then another, leaving the field in darkness. I cling tightly to my well-oiled mitt, squeezing it even more tightly around a threadbare softball in the pocket. I'll put some rubber bands on and store it when I get home.

