

Baseball

Families strolling along the beach in the evening occasionally stopped at the edge of the ocean during a full moon. They were not looking out to sea but toward a particular beach house. There was a rather fat man on his balcony jumping up and down looking like he was reaching to catch something or dancing. Most of the beach walkers thought he had too much to drink. They would stare and then resume their stroll with some laughing a bit, some smiling, and some, shaking their heads.

The New Jersey shore in the summer can be almost magical and for Leo, it was the perfect setting to reminisce. He was sitting on the porch of his beach house and he could smell the sea air with the moon shining on the sand and water. It served as a giant white canvas, which Leo filled with past memories. His friend, Jacks, was coming to visit him. He took a long draw from the joint he was smoking, looked up at the stars and laughed about starting life with an alcoholic mother and a degenerate gambler father. Here he was at his Avalon shore house he purchased with his proceeds from his Philly real estate investments. He believed he was enjoying himself in his shore paradise because of one man's unintentional action. Jacks was the magic, the trigger that changed his life.

Leo was very stoned, he laughed aloud at the insanity of life. He took a deep drag on the joint he held and then drank from a glass of Scotch in his other hand. He had faith that whatever he did, it would work out. He sank into his lounge chair and closed his eyes. He let the memory of his favorite teenage event wash over him. "Magic, magic", he whispered into the sea breeze.

Leo and Jacks were a year out of Father Judge High School. It was 1972 and the Viet Nam war was still raging. LSD, pot, hash, speed, coke and heroin were the drugs of the day. Leo worked as a driver for the local drug dealer, Dealer Dave. Dave did drug deals at times behind a 7/11 store. The lot behind the store had two rusted abandoned cars where Dave hid his drugs during the day. Cops let him be unless they wanted money and when they wanted it, he paid them.

Leo and Dave were to make a drive to Kensington to score Pot and Meth from their supplier. Leo was leaning against the wall of the 7/11 smoking a Marlboro, drinking a Coke, and looking out to the street. He looked for potential buyers who wanted to score because he knew where the drugs were and he was able to do deals while pocketing some cash while Dave was buying smokes in the 7/11. Dave was using his wares so much so at the end that he became sloppy and would miss things like Leo making extra money selling the product.

While waiting for Dave to begin the drive, Leo cursed Dave for not starting out to meet the connection. Dave was never on time and Leo hated this fault, after all he thought, money was the issue and Leo believed not doing things half-ass when it came to money. Leo hated Dave because he was careless but did not complain because he made money through Dave's thoughtlessness. His disgust for his boss subsided when he saw his neighbor, Jacks, walking up the street swinging a baseball bat.

Jacks kept his baseball bat next to his bed, if he got up to pee at night he took a few swings at imaginary fast balls in his bedroom then jump in bed as if he was crashing into home plate. Of course, his old bureau had damage as so did his bedroom door due to the length of the bat and the small room. Sometimes, for breakfast, it was common for him to walk up to the 7/11 to buy cigarettes for his mother and father and cupcakes for himself while swinging the bat.

On that day it was sunny with a nice breeze, Leo laughed because he knew Jacks was in his imaginary baseball world and unaware what was happening around him. Leo liked Jacks because he was a person that gave all his attention to something he wanted to perfect, hitting a baseball.

Jacks stood still every couple of feet to swing the bat, thinking of the hits to all fields. On his way up the street, he hit mailboxes, street signs, fences and a parked car or two. Jacks saw Leo, nodded his head while Leo waved him over. When they met, Leo offered Jacks a smoke. Jacks lit it and put it in his month as he started swinging the bat. Jacks stood away from Leo and took vicious cuts while Leo impersonated a sports announcer, "Hit down the third base line, two runs batted in," he yelled, clapping his hands. He was entertained because Jacks had such a serious look of determination on his face.

Leo noticed Dave focusing on his cigarette pack and walking a bit unsteady because of the effects of alcohol, speed and some downs to take the edge off. He walked toward Leo and Jacks. Jacks was preparing to take a hard swing; Dave was going to punch him in the side to surprise him. He disliked Jacks, because Jacks was never a customer and all he talked about was baseball.

Leo thought there might be a chance for a special event to happen. Leo looked as it unfolded before his eyes. He was hoping for it and there were energies of delight in his brain as if he had just snorted cocaine.

Jacks steadied himself, looked at Leo and Leo nodded his head and yelled, "home run swing now!" He saw Dave walking up to Jacks. As Jacks whipped his bat

around, Leo saw Dave's face give of what he thought was helplessness for a split second as the bat hit him flushed.

At the shore, Leo enjoyed remembering the image of Dave's face meeting the bat. He opened his eyes and laughed wickedly over his memory. The crashing of the waves, he thought, did not sound mightier than a baseball bat crushing the skull of his competitor. He stood up and remembered the blood bursting from Dave's skull and Jacks crying and yelling, "Was an accident, an accident!"

The shore breeze was cool and refreshing and Leo yelled into it, "No accident, it was meant to be," while getting up and dancing around his porch as if he had just won a boxing championship.

Being down the shore vacationing was a time to enjoy, get high, drink, eat and invite old neighbors to talk about the good old days. Leo was expecting Jacks to arrive any second. Leo had Jacks come down every year to do repair work on his vacation home and Leo loved talking old times. Leo thought Jacks was a good listener and a man interested in earning money. He worked hard for his wife and daughter in nursing school. Leo felt giving Jacks his fix-it work on his rentals was in a way thanking him for removing Dave. Through Jacks' actions, he truly believed,

he became a successful businessman, a dealer of drugs that enabled him to invest in real estate. Some dealers were successful and he was one of them.

Leo also loved calling Jacks a “murderer” to his face. He loved the look pain in Jack’s face remembering the blood and destruction he caused. He sat back, inhaled, and then laid back in the soft chair taking pleasure in the memory of Dave’s smashed face and chuckling over Jacks sorrow. He watched families walking the shoreline and wondered if the teens would someday be customers for his drug connections.

Outside, Jacks pulled his pickup truck up to Leo’s driveway, took a deep breath and hesitated before opening the truck door. From his wallet, he took out the picture of his wife and daughter. Both had blond hair and blue eyes. Both were wearing yellow dresses. His wife nose was a bit crooked due to a softball incident in High School. Jacks thought they were the most beautiful things ever to come into his life. He looked upon them and truly loved them to the extent that he would do anything for them, “My pride and joy,” he said kissing the photograph of his wife and daughter sitting on the front step of his red brick row home in Philly.

He hated dealing with Burt but the money was good. His daughter was in her last year of nursing school and any extra money to help her out was worth it. Jacks usually dealt with Leo by thinking of baseball and his famous catch in sandlot baseball game. He also thought about his wife and daughter and what extra money could do for each. He opened his truck door, buckled his tool belt around his waist, and then picked up his sledgehammer from the back. As he walked toward the entrance, he took deep breaths of sea air. It smelled fresh, not like city air.

“You here man?” Jacks yelled as he opened the door of Leo’s house. Leo heard him, took a deep drag on his joint, laughed then cough.

“Leo, its Jacks, you here?” Jacks yelled again and waited on the stairs. He listened and thought he heard muffled grunts. He pulled his hammer from his tool belt and slowly walked up the stairs expecting maybe Leo was overdosing, or someone came in to get even with him over a million misdeeds he had performed. Jacks ready himself for anything. He saw the back of Leo’s head on the outside porch chair and slowly walked toward him then stopped to face him. Leo smiled, and his laugh made him flashed his crooked teeth.

“Holy shit man, I wouldn’t have come up after hearing a grunt and all, but you came up all looking serious to do the right thing. Would ya gave me mouth to mouth, love?’ Leo said continuing to laugh.

Jacks sat down on a chair next to Leo and whispered, “ You fat fucker, wish you were dying, I’d spit in your face.”

“ Sorry Jacky boy, it’s vacation and I’m indulging, have a joint and beer, whatever ya want, take it easy, down the shore got to take it easy, “ Leo said throwing him a Bud.

“Tell me what’s gotta be done and I’ll get to it,” Leo said, his voice seriously trying to hide anger.

“I want the wall separating the living room and kitchen knocked down, so when I’m eating, I can still see the sea. Before you get with it, we will sit and remember old times, like last year and the year before that and the one before that. Come on man, we go way back, relax.” Leo said, feeling happy his old neighbor was there with him.

For about five minutes both were quiet watching the sea. Jacks started to relax even though he could hardly tolerate his so-called friend. There was something

memorizing about the ocean and he could not help but just sit there listening to the waves crashing ashore and smelling the sea air under a full moon. The air smelled clean and a slight breeze was refreshing compared to the hot humidity of the city. He wished he were on the beach with his daughter and wife silently walking and feeling the love they had for each other. “Yep, “he said, “Shore is some beautiful place.”

“You know, you were quite the ball player back in the day, still don’t know how you made that catch, how you do it man?” Leo said.

“Timing and balance”, Jacks said.

“Bull shit. It was as if you climbed some invisible wall then leaped and caught the ball. Remember there was a hush over the crowd, and then everyone got up and roared about how fantastic it was. “

“It was magic Jacks, you the magic,” Leo yelled getting up and doing a little dance. The drugs were making him laugh nonstop until he ran out of breath and plopped down again on his lounge chair. He then grabbed the pipe, lit it and took in the sweet smelling herb.

It was the same every year, Jack thought. The one great catch he made playing outfield that won the last game of the season and then the swing.

“And the swing, you were the magical instrument that change my life,” Leo said now rolling another joint on his coffee table.

Jacks hated when Leo had too much to drink along with all the drugs. Every summer it was the same thing; Leo would always go to what Jacks termed an “accident”. Leo thanked him for swinging the bat so well and then proceeded to tell him one had to jump at the opportunity that Jacks had smashed open for him.

“The only thing I remember of that moment was the busted head and getting scared, “Jacks said drinking more of his beer and looking intently at the ocean, trying to stop his mind wandering back to the day.

“You killed a fucken’ drug dealer, a mean ass drug dealer that needed killing, you should feel like a hero. I think of you as good magic and that’s what I thought as we drove away to pick up drugs with his body in the car. Remember that?” Leo said smiling and nodding his head while lighting the joint.

People were walking on the beach and periodically they peered over at the two because of Leo’s loud voice and laughter. Leo would take this opportunity and yell, “Howdy neighbors, beautiful night.” Then he mumbled about wondering if their son or daughter would someday buy drugs from him. Jacks looked at him shaking his head in disgust.

“Everyone’s a mark Jacky; remember when I said that to make you feel better when we were driving to Kensington to score? You were all half crying about what you done. Remember that?”

Jacks remembered sitting in the back seat with Dave on the floor of the car. Leo would now and then reach back, hit the body, and urge Jack to step on Dave’s face. When Leo punched, Jacks thought about leaping from the car and running home, but that’s when Leo grabbed his arm and said, “You were awesome swinging that bat, was a home run my friend and I’ll never forget it.”

Jacks kept looking out the car window as they drove through the red brick neighborhoods of Kensington. He looked out at the people on the sidewalks visiting bars and listening to music. He felt like running to them confessing what he had done and ask for forgiveness.

“Here, take a toke of this,” Leo said, making Jacks look at him. His so-called friend was packing a pipe with pot and lighting it. “Pot smoking down the shore, can’t beat it,” Leo said.

Leo inhaled and then leaned back in his chair thinking of all his young man escapades. They made him dizzy, but the image of Jacks leaping up and catching a

smash to left field made him focus. With bloodshot eyes, he looked at Jacks who was looking out to sea.

“Hey, remember that catch? Hmm, how the fuck you do that? Really how you do it, tell me. Look here and tell me,” Leo said, waiting for Jacks to face him.

Jacks rubbed his face as if waking from a bad dream. He was lost in the memory about taking a life. It haunted him. He thought the only thing making him feel good as a kid was putting on his baseball uniform to play in the game. He turned to Leo and said,

“Just didn’t think about it,” Jacks said making Leo break out into uncontrollably laughter .

“Jesus Jacks. Smashing heads and catching baseballs took no thought. You looked none too happy after you made that catch. Kept asking you why you were so pissed off afterward. Why were you Jacks?” Leo asked.

“Cause the game was over, you fuck face, you don’t get it!” Jacks said, pointing his finger in Leo’s face.

“Forget that finger pointing like you gonna do harm. You ain’t, hang here for a second while I get my smokes from my room. Put some music on why don’t ya.”

Leo said while staggering toward to find his smokes.

Jacks studied the albums on a big shelf against a wall just inside from the porch.

Leo had taken them from someone who owed him.

Jacks picked an old Bobby Darin song his wife enjoyed, "Somewhere beyond the sea". He turned the volume low, not wanting to disturb the neighbors but still hearing the ocean. He sat back down and thought of his wife and daughter. Every moment he thought about them, he felt life was good and he hated being away from them, especially with Leo dragging the past back. He started humming the tune a bit and laughed about his terrible singing with Bobby Darin's voice gracing the moment with the smell and sound of the sea.

After about ten minutes, he thought he would check on Leo to tell him he was leaving and he tend to the work the next day. He found Leo passed out on the chair next to the wall he wanted removed. He was snoring and looking fat and dirty but content. The sight made Jacks think how ugly his life felt after the mishap with the bat. The event was always with him along with past memories of Leo kicking Dave after he hit the ground and yelling, "Die, you mother fucker, die". Leo bent down to check if Dave was breathing and he always remembered not feeling his breath but just the empty stillness of no sign of life.

Jacks stood looking over Leo, remembering Dave's body hitting the murky waters of the Delaware River. There was not a big fuss in the neighborhood when he stopped showing up on the corners. His drunken mother sometimes walked around the neighborhood drunk, asking passer byes if anyone had seen him, "He needs to give me money," she usually said. No one really cared about a drug dealer not showing up anymore. Except his demise crept into Jacks thoughts every day and night when he was younger and still into his adulthood. His wife and daughter were what keep him sane and interrupted his grief.

As he looked upon Leo, he thought about the word "murderer" coming from his lips. Word got around the street corners that he was involved in Dave's disappearance. The cops interviewed him once and it was Lieutenant Lewis, a neighbor, heard about it and came to his house. He asked him if he had any information. Jacks followed the neighborhood code, to deny, deny, deny when cops asked questions. Lewis sent word to the police to leave it be. No one cared about a drug dealer. In the neighborhood, everyone knew who was dealing, who was stealing, who was running numbers, what cops you could pay off. It was a common realization of those who met a bad end, especially drug dealers, deserved what they got and no one would miss them. Cops and those neighbors not on the up-and-up, lived side-by-side still neighbors, like Leo and Jacks.

For a long time, Jacks thought he might be a murderer, especially with Leo telling him he was the perfect assassin. Leo would tell him while slapping him on the back, "You a baseball player and killer on the side". Jacks figured if he thought like a murderer, he could kill Leo. No one would care about a drug dealer.

There were other reasons to do the deed: No more reminders of what happened long ago with Dave, how he made the catch and Leo's laughter. There might be peace of mind, he thought.

The music played and Jacks sang, "My love stands on golden sand". He laughed at his terrible raspy voice and walked back to the deck. He took a deep breath thinking he would take the CD home with him for his wife. He then sat by Leo who was snoring loudly sometimes sounding as if he was fighting for air. Jacks reached into his toolbox and grabbed a handful of old nails, screws, nuts and bolts. He picked a screw, tossed it on Leo's face, and said, "I shouldn't kill him". He then threw a rusty bolt at Leo's head, and said, "I should kill him". Jacks did this for some time and was amazed Leo hardly moved and continued snoring while covered with hardware. Jacks remembered Leo kicking Dave's bloody head and laughing, that laugh he hated. The same laugh he had when the body hit the waters of the Delaware River.

Jacks wiped the sweat dripping down from his forehead, he felt cold and a slight breeze made him colder. He thought of his wife and daughter, and then looked at his arm outstretched after tossing another bolt at Leo's head. How he caught that drive in the summer of '73, he did not really know. All he knew was he had no thoughts and witnessed himself flying through the air as if becoming weightless to make the catch. When he descended, he watched the crowd standing, some clapping and raising their arms. He did not hear them for seconds but then he heard the fans call his name. He stood there thinking and hoping the game would not end because it was a moment of peace and quiet within him. That was the magic, he thought with his eyes closed. The only normal thing that Leo did was when he ran up to him to congratulate him, telling him it was a great catch. Jacks' mood changed when Leo said, "You're a true assassin. You took the heart right out of that team." Leo's voice shook his thoughts and spirt away from his perfect moment.

At the shore, the thought of the perfect moment dissolved in his mind when a gust of ocean air reached him and he started to stand with a chill running through him. He watched Leo sleeping and sweating as the many rusted bolts rolled off his

head. The music stopped, leaving Leo's snoring mix with the sound of the ocean. Slowly Jacks lifted the sledgehammer over his head. Jacks was a strong lean man; he held his sledgehammer like a baseball bat. His veins outlined his taut muscles. Leo looked like a devastated machine with the rusty bolts, washers and nails on top of him. Then he took a powerful swing. Anyone walking the shore could have heard the destruction. The dust from the wall started to cover Leo. He was still drowsy from his constant drug and alcohol cocktail; his eyes fell upon the white dusted Jacks who looked like doom coming upon him. "What...wh...what," he tried to say. Jacks stared down at him and said, "Yellow...Yellow", turning his body ready to strike again.

"Paint the room yellow...my wife's color," he said, making Leo and house shake.

The End

