

## Fifty Years Ago

### I

Jim Rollins typically finished raking his southern Maine yard in early November, when it was cool and most of the leaves had fallen. On this particular afternoon he could hear the din from traffic on the interstate a mile away. The sun had started to drop behind the hills to the west, and it was cold, already a few degrees shy of freezing. He felt alive and invigorated.

Suddenly, the sting of an arctic gust hit his face, and as he looked up he saw dark clouds streaking across the sky. A chill ran through him, not from the wind, but from a shot of clarity. For a few seconds it seemed as if he had stepped back fifty years, to a day when a young boy found a new state of awareness.

Perhaps a fragment from a childhood moment had passed through him, the result of an undetectable wobble in the space-time continuum. Or perhaps it was simply another one of the soul baring experiences that accompanies aging. Regardless, it triggered a sort of wistfulness, not longing necessarily, just a greater appreciation of what life was like back then for that unfettered dreamer.

\*\*\*

Jimmy Rollins, ten years old, crouched next to one end of a tangled stretch of puckerbrush that acted as a barrier between his house and the church to his left.

It was early November, 1964, in a small rural town in central Maine, and he was the Scarecrow, the one he had seen in a movie on TV, and how he wished it would play again because he had missed the beginning. But right now his mission was to

sneak past his house and get to the front yard without being detected by his parents and younger sister, who were inside.

Jimmy crept along with stealth and patience. The wall of brush included vines that produced a sparse quantity of small grapes. People said they were poisonous berries because grapes can't grow in Maine, but the farmer up the road said they were wild grapes, and very bitter. Most had dropped, but Jimmy saw a clinger and stopped to squeeze it. It was mushy, having been subjected to several freeze-thaw cycles.

He made it past the house and walked toward their old oak tree. At about ten paces from the tree he pulled his coveted Original Bowie Knife from the sheath attached to his sagging belt. His parents had given him the knife on his birthday several months earlier. It was a bit hefty for him, but he marveled at the shiny stainless-steel blade with its curved top, and the uniquely patterned bone handle.

Facing the tree, Jimmy grabbed the tip of the blade between his right thumb and forefinger and threw it with a motion similar to casting a fishing rod. It travelled perfectly, end-over-end, and pierced the tree. For the first time he had the satisfaction of extracting his knife after a throw.

Jimmy walked onto the middle of their street, named High Street. There was rarely any traffic this late in the afternoon, and he could hear the din from big machines operating in the mill downtown. The sun had started to drop behind the hills to the west, and it was cold, already a few degrees shy of freezing. He felt alive and invigorated.

Suddenly, the sting of an arctic gust hit his face, and as he looked up he saw dark clouds streaking across the sky. A chill ran through him, not from the wind, but from a shot of clarity. He was, after all, the Scarecrow.

## II

The entrance to the church next to Jimmy's house faced Hill Street, which intersected High Street. It didn't really look like a church other than being white. The one-story structure was long and narrow, with a low-pitched roof. The congregation's members were referred to as holy rollers, with lots of singing, chanting, and clapping during worship. It was always packed. The minister and his wife, and their eight-year-old son David, lived in a small section at the rear. Jimmy thought they were nice. David followed him around sometimes, and that was ok.

Bobby MacDonald lived on Hill Street, at the corner of Hill and High. From his vantage point in the street, Jimmy faced the broad side of Bobby's house and its large, attached barn. The MacDonalds wouldn't see him standing in the middle of the road because they were preparing for supper on the other side of the house.

Butch Simonds also lived on Hill Street, directly across from Bobby. He and Bobby were both twelve, and good pals. The Simonds couldn't see Jimmy either. Past Butch's house, High Street descended east, eventually merging with the main road heading out of town.

On a very warm and sunny afternoon in early September, shortly after school had begun, a fire broke out in the MacDonald's barn. It drew a sizable crowd of onlookers. The small voluntary fire department extinguished it efficiently,

minimizing the damage. The catalyst was a pile of rags soaked with paint thinner sitting on a work bench near a south facing window. Firemen attributed the start of the blaze to something called spontaneous combustion.

That was somewhat ironic. During summer vacation, cheap magnifying glasses were the rage. Kids everywhere could be found on their hands and knees attempting to burn stuff, unaware they were sometimes creating conditions similar to those that caused the barn fire. After the fire, spontaneous combustion became a hot topic and the magnifying glasses made a brief return, only to be foiled by a spell of fall-like weather.

\*\*\*

Even though he was two years younger, Jimmy sometimes hung out with Bobby and Butch, mainly to play sports, especially baseball. The three of them had been regulars on the Little League team that summer.

Bobby wasn't much of a hitter, but he was a very good second baseman. Then one day during infield practice the coach hit a hard ground ball at him that took a high hop and hit him square in the forehead. He sank to his knees and wailed. The coach applied a cloth soaked with water from a galvanized bucket. Bobby had a good-sized welt, but was otherwise ok. He did flinch at sharp grounders and line drives for a while, but that passed soon enough. In high school he developed into a decent hitter and started at second base his junior and senior years.

The galvanized bucket was one of two the team utilized for drinking water. Every practice or game, a couple of players would take them across the road to a

dairy farm and fill them up from a hose lying on the floor of a barn full of cows. It was a heavy haul back to the field on a hot day. Drinking warm bucket water from skanky ladles surely helped the boys develop strong intestinal immune systems.

Butch, a big red head, played left field. He was a natural, a graceful fielder who could really pound the ball. And he was a nice kid—kind of a quiet, laid back type. The problem was that most of the soaring fly balls he drove to the outfield were caught. The coach tried to get him to tighten his swing and hit line drives, but Butch only had one swing—for the hay fields in left and center, or the river in right. He eventually gave up baseball, but his athletic ability served him well in basketball. In his senior year he led the team in scoring and rebounds, and they easily won the league championship.

The smallest player always got stuck in right field, so that's where Jimmy played. But he fielded everything that came his way, had a good arm, and was a hitting prodigy, leading the team with a batting average over five hundred.

He became a hero of sorts when they faced their chief rivals in a home game. Their ace was Lance Pollard, a twelve-year-old lefty who appeared to be a clone of his hero, Sandy Koufax of the Los Angeles Dodgers. Lances blistering fastballs were unhittable.

Jimmy, who batted right-handed, led off in the bottom of the first inning. He swung hard at the first pitch, which was on the outside corner. Somehow, bat met ball and a line drive whizzed over the startled first baseman's head. Lance stared in

disbelief at the sight of little Jimmy standing on first base. He then struck out the next three batters on nine pitches.

The rivals won handily, but what would have been a perfect game for Lance was reduced to a one hit shutout. Jimmy became a starter all four years in high school, by then playing center field.

The ballpark was about a mile from the boys' neighborhood. They always biked, with their glove hanging on one of the handle bars and sometimes a bat lying across the top. That made control difficult, and led to the occasional spill.

Many years later Jim would recall the practice of kids sticking baseball cards between the spokes of their tires—held in place by clothes pins, no less—and subject himself to equal amounts of anguish and amusement at the thought of having mutilated cards that were future collectibles, solely for the sake of a cool hot rod sound.

\*\*\*

Baseball camaraderie notwithstanding, Jimmy was still two years younger than his buddies. As a result, the older boys, especially Bobby, had to occasionally reinforce their dominant status by demonstrating a certain disdain toward their companion. Contrived conflicts would flare up out of nowhere, with lots of yelling and gesturing. Jimmy and Bobby even had a fist fight once. Jimmy took the brunt of it by far, but he surprised his opponent by landing a few lightning quick rights to the jaw. There were no more fisticuffs after that.

It didn't take Jimmy long to figure out where he stood, and he developed a sense of when to keep his distance. One such time was after he had purchased an authentic World War II Army combat helmet at the Army-Navy store downtown. The acquisition was inspired by the *Combat* TV show, which his mother declared unfit for him to view. The resourceful Scarecrow, however, was adept at slipping downstairs and watching from a secret vantage point while his father tuned in. The downside was missing out on the ginger ale and Cheez-Its that dad contentedly consumed.

The helmet transaction had required some serious negotiations. It was priced at \$1.25, and Jimmy came into the store every day for weeks to check on its availability. During that time, he supplemented his dime a week allowance by working odd jobs: twenty cents to weed Mrs. Witham's little flower bed (a few flowers were plucked in the process), a quarter to help Mr. Davis stack firewood, fifteen cents in pennies for moving Mrs. Witham's wheel barrow into her barn.

Finally, Jimmy couldn't take it anymore. He marched into the store and boldly offered ninety-five cents. The owner, Mr. Cleaves, countered with \$1.10. Crestfallen, Jimmy emptied his pockets, including, dirt, lint, and a sticky Mint Julep. It turned out he actually had ninety-eight cents. Mr. Cleaves handed him the helmet and the ecstatic Jimmy bolted out the door, almost knocking over Mrs. Landers, one of his grammar school teachers.

With the oversized helmet bouncing around on his head, Jimmy marched briskly toward Hill Street. Suddenly, though, he stopped and removed it. He thought about

Bobby and Butch. They would probably be hanging out in one or the other's yard. He would have to endure a confrontation.

That would be bad, so he decided to hoof it all the way to the beginning of High Street on the other side of town. From there he would start the long, uphill walk to his house.

Jimmy's plan fell apart after he passed Dr. Steven's house. His eagle-eyed nemeses, playing catch in the street, quickly detected him and had paused to glare menacingly as he headed their way.

Between Dr. Steven's house and the town's elementary school a short distance ahead, a tiny brook fed into a culvert. The brook always dried up in August. Jimmy nonchalantly flicked the helmet into the crusty, weed filled bed without altering his gait.

"What did you just throw away?" Bobby sternly asked when the three of them met up.

"Just an old rag I found on Doc Steven's lawn," Jimmy casually replied as he kept walking. "Figured I'd get rid of it for him."

Bobby and Butch looked at each other, then turned to gaze at the area of interest. After a few long seconds, Jimmy glanced back to find they had returned to tossing the ball. Heart pounding, he trotted to his house where he strapped on his Original Bowie Knife. The Scarecrow was on a recovery mission.

Jimmy scooted through a shortcut that led from his back yard to the woods behind the school. From there he followed a path to a dense spruce grove, which he



navigated with ease to the brook. A few minutes later he arrived at the culvert. The helmet was still there—mission accomplished!

### III

It was nearly dark when Jimmy's sister ran onto the front lawn. He was still standing in the middle of the road, daydreaming about future Scarecrow adventures now that his knife throwing skills had been perfected.

"Supper's ready!" she yelled, snapping her brother back to reality.

When Jimmy entered the kitchen, he felt the warmth, and took a moment to savor the medley of pleasant aromas.

"The TV's dead again," his sister announced. "No *Beverly Hillbillies* tonight."

Their father was just hanging up the phone. "Mr. Gillespie will be over tomorrow afternoon," he said. "Says it's probably another blown rectifier."

"Well, he needn't hurry," the kid's mother said. "We've been watching too much TV lately. Tonight we will gather in the living room and read like we used to."

Jimmy exchanged knowing smiles with his sister and father. It would be a quiet evening of feeding their imaginations, and they were fine with that.

\*\*\*

It was nearly dark when Jim's wife walked onto their deck. He was standing next to a pile of leaves, rake in hand, trying to hold onto the last threads of fleeting nostalgia.

"Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes," she announced.

"Jim?"

“Yes...great!” he said, snapping back to the present. “I’ll be right in.”

When Jim entered the kitchen, he felt the warmth, and took a moment to savor the medley of pleasant aromas.

“By the way, dear,” Katherine said wryly, “the cable is dead again.”

Jim walked into the living room and glanced at the TV. ‘No Signal!’ danced around the screen.

He turned to face the coffee table in front of their couch. The book he was reading was on top of the newspaper. Katherine’s current book sat next to a pile of magazines on the small stand between the couch and their recliner.

Also on the coffee table was his Original Bowie Knife. Gone was the surgical tape that acted as a handle after the bone split and fell off decades ago. Now it was a handsome piece of teak wood. The blade, harshly treated during the Scarecrow years, had been meticulously restored. Even the ratty sheath found life again thanks to repaired stitches and leather conditioners. Katherine had given him the refurbished knife on his birthday several months earlier.

“Some things never change,” Jim remarked after returning to the kitchen. “I can try a reboot, and if that doesn’t work I’ll call tech support.”

Katherine looked at him and shrugged.

“Then again,” he said, attempting to appear conflicted, “I could just deal with it tomorrow.”

The two of them exchanged knowing smiles. It would be a quiet evening of feeding their imaginations, and they were fine with that.