

A Tip of the Cap

It was in the books while it was still in the sky... the ball descended beyond reach and struck in the crotch where the bullpen met the wall, bounced chunkily, and, as far as I could see, vanished.
-John Updike, upon witnessing Ted Williams' final at-bat

“Im not goin back. Im not gonna do it,” Wiley said into the black mouthpiece of his parents’ wall-mounted telephone. “Im homesick, Joe. Its easy for you, big man on campus football hero, probably going to be governor in Olympia. Im going to major in English? What do you do with that?”

Joe just listened and waited for a pause.

“Think about another simple fact Joe. Twelve fingers! I can hide my toes cept in the pool. Count em Joe. Twelve. I dont fit into white tennis shorts and pretense. And besides, my brother says I can go to the UW and live with him in our own apartment, no more dorms. You wont miss me either. Youre always busy. Id just be there alone, listening to the crickets. I hate crickets, Joe. All they do is remind me Im alone. They just sit there and rub their wings together laughing, and I cant even see em. Know what I mean?” A pause.

“You’re just afraid, and you know it. You want to add regret? Besides, who’ll be my speech writer, my political partner? I thought we were going to change the world together!”

There was a long pause like unintentional radio silence. Wiley did not want to be considered a coward by his best friend. The mere suggestion is a calumny. *Is it?* Wiley sighed. “Ill mull it over. Merry Christmas, Joe”

“Merry Christmas, Wiley. Oh, hey, when we get back to New Haven, let’s take a drama class together.”

Wiley could smell his own fear. He was ashamed. “Maybe.”

The return flight was scheduled for ten p.m. on Sunday, January 4, 1941. All two-dozen Yale students, who had chartered a plane for the holiday break, and three crew members were set to board the DC-3 transport at Seattle's Boeing Field, including Wiley Myles, but there was a delay. Snow had fallen two days before. Though it had melted after a single day, the ground re-froze beneath a heavy layer of icy fog. And then the snow returned.

The green runway lights were not visible from the control tower through the fog, but the owner of the plane, Leland McCray, said he could see clearly to the end of the runway six thousand feet away. The pilot disagreed and suggested delaying a day. Meanwhile, the plane's wings were being cleared of ice with hot water and Iso-Propyl. Friends and family waited anxiously outside the airport administration building as the plane taxied to the south end of the runway. All twelve of Wiley's fingers turned white when he gripped the armrests of his seat, a single row in front of Joe. "Im not thinking this is a very good idea, Joe."

As he said it, Mr. McCray opened the side door and said, "It looks like the fog has cleared. Let's say we give it a go?!"

"How bout we vote?!" Wiley asked.

"OK, all in favor raise your hand." Joe counted eight hands.

"All opposed?" Joe counted fourteen hands. The papers the next day said he was sure of it.

"The ayes have it," McCray reported as he climbed into the cockpit. Wiley looked at Joe then closed his eyes. The engines sputtered and roared for the next thirty minutes, increasing the tension, causing Wiley to sweat even though it was only twenty-six degrees. As the plane began to taxi, Joe told Wiley they were probably returning to the gate. But, the families near the administration building saw the running lights of the aircraft barely airborne, awkward, aflame. Then, the nose of the plane dipped, causing the plane to swerve sharply right, ramming the

revetment around the Boeing Airplane Company hangar. An upswelling black mushroom cloud was swallowed whole by the night. White flames reached at nothing, satisfied with four hundred gallons of fuel and nearly thirty lives. No modern fire-fighting equipment was on hand because the airfield was only in partial operation. The heat of the explosion and the impact of the crash split the plane in half near the wings, right between Joe Robinson and Wiley Myles. Shrapnel struck Joe's forehead. He bled profusely upon his sweater, turning the white Yale Y scarlet red. But as the fire split the plane, the nose slid forward, taking all the flames with it, Wiley Myles too. Wiley's legs caught fire, then the rest of him, then the snow. Sparks leapt from his hair and landed on Joe, burning holes in the dark blue wool of his sweater. Joe closed his eyes, but his ears forced him to listen to Wiley's screams. His desperation was not quiet. He screamed like a man losing a fight against death, hoarse and terrible. "I dont want to die! God, I *don't* want to die." Joe was no god. Thirteen others, all in the front half of their dreams screamed in chorus with Wiley. But the fire was greedy, leaving nothing but echoes and ash.

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Joe lay in his hospital bed ignoring the newspaper. The *Seattle PI* ran Joe's picture. He was disheveled. Other photographs remembered the dead, including Wiley Myles. Wiley's older brother was quoted, "I saw the plane go up and then a crash. Flames were everywhere. I tried to run toward the plane, but I was stopped. They said there were survivors, and I looked at every face that went by. I never saw Wiley's. Wiley was elated being home for Christmas. When he went to Yale last Fall, it was his first trip away from home. He was so homesick." Joe rolled over, wanting desperately to fall asleep. Even the crickets were asleep, *fucking crickets*.

The Seattle papers plastered Joe's psyche with articles and photographs the entire week he was in the hospital. Headlines read: *Death Plane Claims 14 Futures; Seattle Family Left Grief-*

Stricken by Crash; Sons and Daughters Killed When Plane Crashes; Many Hopes Crash with Plane. Professors, Yale's football coach, and administration sent Joe their condolences, a settlement for medical debts, and a pre-mature welcome back. Physically, Joe was remarkably fortunate. Of the twenty-seven passengers aboard the holiday flight, fourteen died, ten were permanently injured. Joe had not broken a single bone nor damaged any soft tissue except a gash to the head and the headlines that zig-zagged through every corridor of his brain. His feet were unscathed. Wiley Myles left his regret for Joe to carry. "I'm joining the Marines," Joe told his dad as they left the hospital.

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Of the eighteen Marine battalion commanders who landed on Iwo Jima, five survived. Captain Robinson had the sudden awareness that he was a high-ranking survivor, a prize capture for the desperate and unrelenting Japanese. He agreed wholeheartedly at the pressing necessity of taking Hill 32. He grabbed Cenari's radio, "Listen. We need to create an arc with our amphib at fifty-yards per." He determined for each tank commander trajectory for their fire. They needed to be fast and accurate. If they missed, they would die, and they all knew it. Sgt. Bruno Sartini unconsciously ran his thumb along the razor-sharp edge of his bayonet. *Amazing*, Joe thought, *he doesn't bleed*. As a precision drill team, each tank commander took his place just outside the break taking desperate aim, target practice at a carnival for the Japanese 210.

"FIRE!!!"

Each tank carried 75- 90 mm shells. They spent every one. Some of the shells picked off incoming seabags and 210's just by fortune. Then-

BOOM!!! The 210 exploded. The amphib made toward land. Then- ***BOOM!!!***

One. Two. Three seconds of malignant silence.

“TAKE COVER!!!” That’s when an enormous rock two feet in diameter whizzed by Sergeant Sartini’s head and crushed Corporal Cenari. “Bail!!!” Capt. Robinson yelled.

Five minutes passed. Then, Captain Robinson’s radio asked, “What the hell was that?!” The radio sounded just like Colonel Hunziker.

“I’m not certain, sir, something large,” Capt. Robinson said.

“No shit, Captain,” the radio that sounded like Colonel Hunziker said. “Gravel just bit my cheeks.” Colonel Hunziker was stationed several miles out to sea.

“Yes, sir. I believe you, sir. It appears the 210 was atop the entire Japanese ammo cache.” Robinson and Sartini swam ashore. Six of the amphib got to the beach and bogged down in the sand. Captain Robinson’s tank sank with Corporal Cenari.

“Grab any weapon available. Get to cover, but don’t follow the tanks if you see or hear heavy artillery, only if it’s machine gun fire. Move!”

Chaos reigned. Men splattered. Captain Robinson found a rifle and a machine gun, no longer of use to the dead Marines at his feet. Sergeant Sartini acquired a flame-thrower, and the two of them took cover behind a boulder that used to be atop Hill 32 fifteen minutes earlier. A Marine lieutenant nearby looked to Captain Robinson for orders. Robinson considered where most the infantry had taken cover and ordered off-shore artillery, establishing coordinates that would not kill friendlies. Captain Robinson could hear Japanese officers rounding up Chamora and Japanese civilians. One officer shouted on a loudspeaker. A private translated. Under duress the civilians hopped in a circle like an Apache war dance. The officer on the loud speaker pointed at a civilian who was promptly beheaded. Infants were tossed off cliffs. The officers yelled, *BABE*

RUTH IS DEAD!!! BABE RUTH IS DEAD!!! They wanted the Americans to think they were insane. “Those fuckers are crazy!” Sgt. Sartini said as the sun escaped Asia and fled to Europe. “You hear that, Captain? What a bunch of bullshit... ‘Babe Ruth is dead,’...”

Captain Robinson heard Sgt. Sartini but didn’t listen to him. Robinson just stared at the strobe-lit sky and the coal-hot undulating links.

“Fuckin seabags, Captain, they’re pure fuckin evil. ’Scuse my French, sir, but those things can alter you from undiscovered angles, you know?”

Captain Robinson, prostrate in a crater-turned-fox-hole behind a boulder, nodded vaguely and took a mindless pull from his canteen.

“‘Babe Ruth is dead,’ shee-it... for all they know, Captain, we’re drinking the Bambino’s piss right now. You ever think-uh dat?”

Captain Robinson’s eyes remained fixed skyward upon the pulsing links that mocked his heartbeat. As soon as they blackened like his thoughts, all hell would break loose, *fuckin seabags*.

“I wonder ’bout that,” Sgt. Sartini said. “I mean, the Babe just drinks water, you know, glass after glass, and he wonders where it comes from, the water.”

Captain Robinson looked at his canteen, then back to the sky. The links flashed on and off like a phone operator’s switchboard.

“Then, the Babe’s bladder’s ’bout to explode like this fuckin’ island. So, he hits the john. Some dribbles in an anonymous puddle at his feet. He tracks it around. Then, gone! Fuckin evaporates. *Snap!* Like that. Makes a cloud, rains and snows. Mountain-tops are sprinkled with urine. You think about it, we’re drinking the piss of all the famous people who ever lived.”

Captain Robinson nearly blinked, but he didn't wonder about any historical urine locked away in the Himalayas. He was thinking of how he got here in the first place. He thought of hate and his contempt for it. He hated war and sin and death and guilt. He wanted to kill them all. So, he joined the Marines. And then, the last link faded, and all hell broke loose.

The first seabag exploded twenty feet away from Captain Robinson, and the concussion ghost hurled him thirty feet. He landed on top of Bruno Sartini and Sartini's new flame-thrower, a man and an instrument that would save Joseph Robinson's life in the next five minutes.

The next five minutes brought on a ferocious mating of the horrific. Dazed, Captain Robinson slithered to a crater near the shoreline and a flowing tide. Another concussion ghost flung him into the water like an oily rag. He arose instinctively and saw an open lane to his left. All he had to do was run up the hole to the end zone, to safety. Instead, he stepped to his right. His indecision was decisive. Another seabag exploded ten yards to his right, just to the left side of Sergeant Sartini. Shrapnel severed a one-inch cross section of Sartini's face and slung it like a pie pan onto Captain Robinson's lap, the collected blood from dozens of prize-fights finally released.

BOOM!!!

Sartini's flame-thrower exploded, sending the rest of him airborne, arcing like a comet, landing on Joe who was bleeding to death out of the stumps where his feet used to be. Sartini's torso was fully engulfed, cauterizing Joe's wounds. Bruno's body morphed into black ash wedded to Iwo Jima's long-shore drift. Captain Robinson rolled violently to his left. In an instant his stumps were pricked by millions of salt-tipped bayonets thrust by the flowing tide. The ocean was relentless, refusing to observe the scene. Captain Robinson closed his eyes as an inch of Sartini's face stared through him into eternity. Bruno did not blink. He did not smile. He did not

care. He just stared then slid from Joe's lap and oozed into the Pacific Ocean. Ten feet up the beach Joe saw amid explosive flashes and burning, writhing flesh, a photograph of a smile, blood soaked and wedged in the sand between leather, cotton, and his toes.

While Captain Robinson lingered in and out of consciousness in the infirmary on Saipan, an inch thick slab of Sergeant Sartini's face hovered like a dirigible, staring at what used to be. Each time this occurred, Joe would close his eyes and hear Sartini repeat over and over, "No need for a compress."

No need for a compress.

Between hallucinations Joe wrote letters to his mind, filling them with malice like a distended helium balloon.

The rocks of Iwo Jima and the serpentine tide of the Pacific Ocean drank the blood of nearly thirty thousand men before they were full. But, they did not ask everything of Captain Robinson, just his feet. Bruno Sartini would have called it "a bad fuckin' trade," if he still had a face. Sartini didn't even have a corpse. The heat incinerated him. He was no more than a black shadow on black sand in a black night.

Joe re-awoke in a Honolulu hospital, surrounded by men devoid of limbs and hope. None of the residents of the amputation ward was prepared to be un-whole. But then, he met a god.

By late March of 1945, Ted Williams had arrived at a military hospital in Hawaii for an entirely different Spring Training, a move designed to increase morale, but instead demonstrated to the infirmed what they could never become. The message was not lost on the Splendid Splinter as he awkwardly shook the hands of the men who still had hands to shake. The thick discomfort became more oppressive when Mr. Williams had no alternative but to squeeze the

shoulder of an armless teenager name Reg Scodeller. Reg had been a prep basketball hero at Everett High with dreams of starring for the University of Washington before a 105 buried them.

Reg and Joe Robinson shared a morphine vacation on Saipan before a transport carried them to Pearl Harbor. Joe could not recollect his return trip to Saipan, a place Reg kept referring to amid his incessant night tremors as an outhouse. “Saipan’s a shit hole, a fucking shit hole!!!” Reg was the kind of guy who spoke with his hands and arms. So, the 105 left him with nothing more to say.

Williams was a Marines pilot on stand-by for Kyushu, the massive land invasion planned against Japan, had *the bombs* not been dropped. In the meantime, he played baseball in the 14th Naval District League and toured the island, visiting men and what was left of men. Today’s was not an entirely abysmal effort, however, for Ted Williams was reverent and naturally distant. He knew what the Marines knew, that they had saved America when they secured Iwo Jima. The end of the war was now in the hands of Time. Joe’s part was finished. Ted Williams shook Joe’s hand. Joe looked up at Mr. Williams and grabbed his shoulder. “I wish we could have met under different circumstances.”

“Yessir, this is a helluva way to meet, a *HELLUVA* way.”

By April’s end, the wounded, who could travel, were loaded onto ships headed to Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco. On deck, Joe felt the Pacific breeze upon his face and Bruno’s breath whispering, “The mother of every abomination sits atop seven mountains, giving birth to the wind.” Waves broadsided the transport at peculiar angles, no rhythm, the same way men learn to sleep beneath uncertainty. The unpredictable pounding lulled Joe to sleep where he watched his friends soaring through the air in accidental prayer mode, landing in the yards of suburbia, holding up mailboxes like lawn jockeys. Some nights Joe watched Sgt. Sartini become

part of the sky, turn to ash, fall like burning snow, and settle among the world's glaciers to mingle with Nero and Abe Lincoln.

Aside from his dreams everything was grey, even the sun. He had heard people dream in black and white, but Joe dreamed in Technicolor. Only reality lost all color as it seeped into the Pacific with Bruno's face. Sometimes everything would go white in the day and black at night and vice versa. But, black and white are just extreme cases of grey. Sometimes the grey would descend like rain, washing everything away. Other times, it just fucking rained.

Letterman General fit Captain Joseph H. Robinson with two new wooden feet while Colonel Hunziker put Captain Robinson in for the Silver Star. Joe thanked the colonel for the honor and asked for his men to receive the same. When the request for his men was officially denied two months later, Captain Robinson refused the Silver Star, but he accepted his honorable discharge.

For months on end Joe walked San Francisco's streets as if on stilts, an unintentional street performer amid a sea of street performers. A gust off the bay blew him into a movie house where he watched *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and he wondered, *Why the hell did I watch that?!* Bewildered, Joe lurched back to the basement room he rented on the corner of St. Joseph's and Geary to read his weekly letter from home. As fog entombed the city from beyond the Golden Gate, he wanted kiss it, a new mask to hide his sorrow.

A day before Thanksgiving Joe received two early Christmas presents: an all expenses paid weekend across the bay at the Claremont Resort near Berkeley, Colonel Hunziker's attempt to make up for the Silver Star, and a reply from a former professor, Dr. Ruggles. Joe had written a letter to Dr. Ruggles, but he couldn't recall what he had written. Joe had spent a desultory 1946 camping in the midst of unoriginal thought. He had erased almost the entire year through one salve or another. He was only certain the Red Sox lost to the Cardinals in the World Series and

that Ted Williams had made a successful return to the team after the war followed by an unsatisfying series, hitting a meager .200.

Dear Joe,

I confess. I am distressed by your most recent note. Yours is a story to which I cannot relate. So, forgive my attempt. While you were in the South Pacific, I served in London as a radio operator. We were in a constant state of darkness and bombardment. To assuage British fears CS Lewis, a professor and former atheist (like myself), was asked to broadcast a series of talks about what he called 'mere Christianity.' At any rate, the talks were both compelling and heartening in exceptionally difficult times. Joe, people often make the most rash and emotional decisions based upon what they think is all the available information when, in truth, they are lucky to know half. The truth of a situation is not rooted in circumstance.

As a student, your perseverance impressed me to the degree that I searched for and discovered a cause for faith. There is a time for endurance. That time is now. You are too bright a light to languish and settle into putrefaction. Return to Yale. Finish your degree. You've got to live with surviving. Live a life worthy of those you mourn. "When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Make that climb, Joe.

With much esteem, friendship, and encouragement, Richard Ruggles

A young Joe Robinson would have stridden into the Claremont lobby atop the eyes of admiration. This day the eyes were filled with indifference, obviated by the upward turns of snobbery and fustian discourses of men who have never experienced physical, financial, or psychological trauma. The pretense stirred within Joe a specific and definable longing. He yearned to hear Bruno Sartini say *fuck*. The thought produced a smile that bred a daydream. Joe did not stay a single night in the Claremont. Instead, he turned to his left, winked at the bay, and

hailed a cab and toured the University of California, stopping by Memorial Stadium to read of Cal's gridiron heroes, known as Pappy's Boys, as they began their run of 33 consecutive regular season wins. After riding through the center of campus, Joe stepped upon Telegraph Avenue and into the Bear's Den for a cup of coffee. The cabbie waited curbside. When Joe returned, he inhaled the eucalyptus trees then noticed something he hadn't seen in two years, the world dressed entirely in color.

"Where to, Mac?"

"The train station."

Joe paid his fare and tipped a three-day voucher to the Claremont.

Dear mother and dad,

I will be spending Christmas and the New Year in Connecticut. I'm returning to Yale. Dr. Ruggles has helped me find an apartment and two roommates: Bill Buckley and Hart Fessenden. I am officially re-enrolled and an expectant member of the class of 1950. I will write again shortly with my schedule and extracurriculars. I'd like to volunteer as a student-assistant coach to the football team.

Love,

Joseph

By 1950, Bill Buckley had adopted his preferred name, William F. Jr. Meanwhile, his friend Hart Fessenden, who was also a Jr. and the son the famous educator and head master of Fessenden School in West Newton, Massachusetts, adopted an affinity for the Yankees. His father, a lifelong Red Sox supporter, and Joe were incensed. By June, William F., Hart, and Joe were Yale alumnus. The Yankees were well on their way to another pennant while Ted Williams was on his way to Korea.

The three besotted roommates dared to pursue the fabulous and the forbidden, planning a graduation trip together before embarking on their efforts to redesign the world. They agreed upon Mexico City and an exhaustive bus trip into the heart of Mayan ruins.

“Cerveza, quiero cerveza! Fria y pronto,” William F. said the instant his cramped right foot exited the bus and landed wearily upon the pan-fried asphalt of Mexico City. Leery of always sounding like he was on the verge of a sneeze, William F. had resolved to speak Spanish the entire trip.

“I’m right behind you,” Joe said, then stumbled and fell upon Hart’s back, forcing both to catapult out of the bus, landing on all fours, hands seared, backs wrenched by the tumbling luggage.

“HA, ha, ho, ho, ho!” William F. chortled. His face contorted in hilarity only to be replaced in an instant by guttural horror. There was no time to yell.

Joe struggled to regain his balance, but his canes snapped, and the weight of his torso caused him to list and stumble into the precise path of a transit bus. He was struck in the left hip and banked into the side of a taxi cab. The bus driver applied the breaks but not before sandwiching Joe between the driver’s side door of the cab and the front right taillight of the bus. The taillight shattered into Joe’s left hip. Both prosthetic feet splintered. A six-inch shard pierced Joe’s ribs but did not break a bone. His pelvis, however, was pulverized as was his right wrist. Adipose tissue dangled and seeped from his left flank. Two brilliant Yale graduates chorused the only phrase that came to their beautiful minds. “Holy shit!”

Emergency personnel peeled Joe from between the crumpled metal masses and disclosed quite readily that if he should survive the trauma, he would never walk again. William F. and Hart merely whispered, “holy shit.”

After three weeks had passed, Hart and William F. agreed with Joe that they should go home and begin their lucrative lives. Joe spent two months in the hospital and convinced everyone he was miraculous as he walked out of the hospital doors with brand new feet, his third pair. He had adopted the visage of abhorrence, the abhorrence of self-pity. He even agreed to fly home to San Francisco. Joe no longer feared planes or death.

By 1954, Joe had acquired a Masters in Economics from the University of California, Berkeley, and he had landed a job with his own business card:

Joseph H. Robinson -Personnel Director
University of California Medical Center
San Francisco 546-5630

By 1960, he was promoted to the System-wide Administration Staff and given the month of September to celebrate. So, he flew to Boston.

The sky was an impeccable union of black and white; heavy and grey. The air was cold and dreary like an attitude. Everything reeked of sameness. But, on this Wednesday afternoon of September 28, 1960, Joseph H. Robinson reveled in anonymity. He entered Oliver's on Brookline Avenue for a pint that played underscore to a symphony of scenery, all adorning America's cathedral, Fenway Park. The Red Sox were mired in seventh place with one final home game against Baltimore before the deplorable Yankees would mercilessly end their season in New York during the weekend. It would seem an uneventful afternoon for a meaningless game, punctuated by twenty-five thousand empty seats. But inside this Wednesday's drab and sullen exterior lurked the extraordinary and fateful.

Though hitting .315 with 28 home runs, Teddy Ballgame was adorning his spikes for the final time, not just at Fenway, but forever. He had decided to skip the trip to New York. "We're 29 games out. The hell with it. This is my last game." He reluctantly agreed to a short pre-game

ceremony at the park, but he refused to tip his cap. Sports writers and fans had derided Williams for “speaking as a god” because Williams admitted as a rookie that he hoped to be remembered as “the greatest damned hitter who ever lived.”

In public, Ted Williams had the aura of a loner. To Joe he was a kindred spirit even if their only interaction had been an anonymous dutiful handshake fifteen years earlier.

Only a handful over 10,000 attended the historic ballgame, but Joe chose to sit in the right field bleachers, Section 41 Row 4 on the aisle just above the Red Sox bullpen and in front of two dozen semi-intoxicated Royal Rooters. To Joe’s right, near the foul line two radiant co-eds with thighs to their neck-lines sat astride the Pesky Pole, caressing it with their breasts. If Baltimore’s right fielder did not take notice, Joe, and dozens of others down the right field line surely did. For an instant Joe wished his face was a yellow foul pole. The thought made him smile.

Joe closed his eyes and listened to the *pop* of the ball as it snapped into the bull-pen catcher’s mitt. He inhaled popcorn, stale beer, hotdogs, peanuts, pheromones, and finality: the life’s blood of Fenway Park.

Through seven innings Ted Williams had come to the plate three times with little to say about their 4-2 deficit. By the eighth, it was well clear Williams was up for his final at bat. Crouched upon one knee in the dirt of the on-deck circle, Williams paid little attention to Orioles reliever, Jack Fisher. As Williams strode to the plate, the crowd of just over 10,000 stood, cried, and screamed. In the right field bleachers Joe could hear radios that sounded just like you, but they say it was Curt Gowdy, “Well, you can bet your bottom dollar Williams would like to hit one out of here right now. He just missed last time up when he drove Pilarcik back to the wall.” Williams ignored the crowd and dug into the box. He was a man about his final business.

Ball one.

Fisher almost looked embarrassed by his limp offering. A hush befell the crowd like the vacuous ebb before a tsunami. Fisher loaded his right hip and unloaded a freight train fastball directly down Main Street.

“A swing and a miss. Oh, Ted would like to have that one back. I can hardly believe he missed that one.”

All ten thousand fans mouthed, *How'd he miss it?*

How the hell'd I miss that? Williams thought as he looked to the batter's box dirt for answers. *That son of a bitch thinks he blew it by me.* Fisher swallowed a smile, certain he could blow another one by the 42 year-old.

Fisher rocked back and almost before the Spalding left his finger-tips, Gowdy hollered, “There's a drive to deep right center. This may be gone. Fred's way back there watching... Home Run, Ted Williams!”

The ball ascended in heavenly pursuit and vanished as far as famous writers and blathering fans could tell. But, one wobbly fan need not have moved an inch, as the result of Ted Williams's final perfect swing landed on Joe Robinson's lap. Williams only looked up for a moment, wondering if the heavy air and 20 mile-an-hour wind would keep it in the park before he put his head down and ran the bases, offering only a flash handshake to third base coach Jim Pagliaroni. Orioles' third baseman Brooks Robinson was a statue of disbelief, fists balled up on his sides, mesmerized, Gowdy adding, “Well, if you had written it that way, nobody would believe it. So, why even try?”

Crossing home plate, Williams finally looked at Fisher as if to say, “Really? Who the hell you think you are? Blow one by *ME?*” As Williams neared the dugout, he looked again, but Fisher just stared at his ineffective rosin bag lying helplessly behind the mound.

The crowd exploded and begged Williams to tip his cap. “We want Ted! We want Ted!!!” Ted refused. The crowd grew louder, the pleas urgent, final. Fisher even looked into the Red Sox dugout to see if Williams would oblige. Ted motioned with one hand, *No, just go ahead and pitch.*

After the third out Williams took the field for the top of the ninth. Manager Pinky Higgins ran a sub out to left to give Williams a final opportunity to tip his cap. He would not do it. He trotted across the infield into the dugout, a trace of water in his eyes as he passed third baseman Frank Malzone and headed down the runway into legend.

No one seemed to notice what ever became of the ball. A few relievers looked Joe’s way, but it never registered that he claimed it. Two drunkards fifteen rows back were horizontal and missed the entire affair. The two co-eds were in the jubilant arms of frenzied and hopeful fans. No one even asked. Instead, Joe arose at the game’s conclusion and patiently waited outside the Red Sox locker room. A suspicious stadium attendant investigated.

“Hey, bud, you need somethin’?” the attendant asked, lips wet and sweaty.

“Well, maybe you could help me with something,” Joe began.

“Yeah, well this place is off limits, family and staff only,” the attendant said, then spit where the asphalt meets Fenway’s ancient foundation.

“Well, ok, I’m neither, but I have something that belongs to Mr. Williams.”

“Yeah, don’t we all? Well, Mr. Williams ain’t havin’ any,” the attendant said then added, “so, beat it.”

Joe wanted nothing more from Ted Williams, not even his air. He would always have the memory of seeing the Splendid Splinter’s final home run in color.

“You might tell him it’s his home run ball.”

“Yeah? Why dint-chya say-so?! Wait here a second, and I’ll ask around what we should do.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet, pal. I’ll be right back.” The attendant opened a green door painted the same color green as the rest of Fenway Park.

“Hey, Mac, Mr. Williams wants to see ya.” The attendant’s eyes inflated as he shrugged his shoulders in disbelief. Pumpsie Green met Joe as he walked through the corridor to the Red Sox clubhouse.

“Say, you’re a fortunate fellow,” Green said.

“Is that right?” Joe asked, leaning on his canes.

Ted Williams sat half-dressed, knees wide in front of his locker, eyes staring at the dingy clubhouse carpet, which was suddenly obscured beneath two shoes filled with wooden feet. Williams peered to his left where Willy Tasby stood, wrapped by a dripping towel and a horde of dead flies scribbling quotes on flimsy notepads. Williams muttered about fuckin’ reporters then lifted his eyes to the owner of the shoes.

“They tell me you caught the ball and want to give it back,” Williams began, “What the hell you want to do that for?”

“I figured it belongs to you, being your last home run. Thought you might like to have it.”

The sports writers approached the stilted stranger holding the ball.

“Goddammit, those sons of bitches heard enough out of me today.” Williams finished dressing and reached into his tan sweater pocket. “Well, piss in a sink!”

Joe leaned on his canes, silent. Ted looked up. “Goddammit, I walked to the park. You got a car?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, mister, let’s go get some oysters.”

When they arrived at Durgin Park, Ted muttered, “You’ll hafta pardon these fuckin’ stairs, but the food’ll make up for ’em. And, listen Joe. A bunch of goons’ll probably be oglin’, wondrin’ who the fuck you are.”

Joe nodded. “I’ve been stared at before.”

“Yeah? So how the hell’d you get that limp?”

Joe spoke the way Ted Williams rounded the bases, eyes down, distant but right in front of you. He told of football prowess and genealogy, Yale and the beach, and only sparingly of The War, how after his feet were blown into the sand on Iwo Jima he first met Ted Williams. Ted was impressed. His eyebrows bounced up and down. In the end the summary was succinct.

“So, you see, Mr. Williams? I’m just a man.”

“Just a man?” Ted was incredulous. “To hell with that notion.” He breathed in the room and leaned forward. “You like to read? ’Cuz I’m reading *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway tells it just like it fuckin’ is, how it is for me and how it is for you. He says we aren’t made for defeat. It can’t destroy us.”

The two men grew quiet in their distance and quieter still in their fraternity. And, thirty minutes later Ted asked, “You like girls?”

When they arrived at the Somerset hotel at four in the morning, the greatest damned hitter who ever lived reached into his pocket and said, “Now about this ball. I’d rather you keep it.”

“Mr. Williams-”

“The name’s Ted, goddamnit, and we aren’t ending this with an argument.”

“Well, if it’s not up for debate, I accept.”

“Well, that’s a damn good thing ’cuz I already signed it for you!”

*To Capt. Robinson.
For tonight and '45, I tip my cap.
Admiringly,
Ted Williams
9/28/60*

“Goddammit!”

“What?” Joe asked, startled.

“I didn’t walk. I left my damn Cadillac at the park. Whadaya say you give me a lift?” As they pulled next to the blue Cadillac, Ted Williams arose, shook Joe’s hand, and doffed an invisible cap.