

the Bullpen Gospels

**Major League Dreams of
a Minor League Veteran**

DIRK HAYHURST



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Prologue

When we won the division in the first half of 05, I had nothing to do with it. Hell, I was lucky to be employed. I was deadweight on a team full of prospects—a dud, a smudge on an otherwise crystal squad. We may have been guaranteed a spot in the postseason, but I didn't know if I'd be around when we got there.

I was the team's long relief man. A nonglorious pitching role designed to protect priority pitchers. If the starting pitcher broke down or the game got out of control, I came in to clean up so the bullpen wasn't exhausted. Despite feel-good semantics supplied by the organization, my main job was mopping up lost causes. Why waste a talented pitcher when there was a perfectly useless guy for the job? I could pitch five innings in a blowout or face one batter in the seventeenth inning. Put it this way: if I could have done any other role successfully, I wouldn't have been the long man.

I had been struggling all year, inadvertently serving as the league's batting practice thrower. I floundered as a starter and was demoted. Then I brought the kind of relief that made starters moan, "Jesus, *I* could have given up my own runs—no need to bring in this guy!" The way the season was shaping up, it would take a witch doctor to resurrect my career.

I didn't pitch very often, which didn't bother me at all. I knew I couldn't make it to the big leagues if I didn't get out on the mound and show the world what I had, but, at the time, I didn't feel I had much. All I could think about is how bad things could go, even worse than they were.

It's hard to pitch with fear. It was as if baseball's Grim Reaper was watching every time I took the mound. Most of the time he'd show up in little incarnations, like a black cat or a double that landed exactly on the foul line just when I thought I was going to have a clean outing. Lately though, it seemed as if the Baseball Reaper had season tickets for front row seats to every park I played in. He never missed me pitch, sitting silently in the stands, sipping a Red Bull while waving a foam finger that said #1 Fan! From the way he looked at me, I knew he couldn't wait to reach out and snatch my baseball career.

Maybe I'm being a little dramatic, but I had never struggled before. I imagine a lot of guys who get drafted aren't used to struggling. I always knew it would happen eventually, but I envisioned it to be more like turbulence than a fiery plane crash.

The only solution I had was to bear down and work through it. I spent hours on the practice mound refining my delivery. I tried to bend my breaking ball, hasten my fastball, and change my changeup. I even tried sports meditation, which had me standing on the mound with my eyes closed visualizing myself pitching better. I'd picture myself standing on the mound in the heat of battle, with my hair being tussled by a breeze blowing purely for the sake of making me look sexy. At my feet would be the corpses of dragons, ninjas, and Chuck Norris. My pecs would barely fit into my uniform, and I would pitch with a huge sword strapped to my back. I would laugh at batters as they feebly limped to the plate, my voice deep like thunder. I would crush the hitters, see them driven before me, hear the lamentations of their dugouts. I enjoyed the visualizations, maybe a little too much, and would

stop only when I felt I'd centered myself—or after one of my teammates hit me in the nuts with the rosin bag while my eyes were closed.

Come the second half of the season, things were still going bad. My voice was no deeper, and it was all I could do to keep the Baseball Reaper's blade from my neck. The only positive note was that all the team's prospects were promoted to Double-A. A fresh pack of less talented replacements were promoted, filling in vacant spots and allowing me to blend in.

In our first month together, the new squad fell apart. We tumbled from first place in the league all the way to dead last on a twenty-game losing skid. Our manager tried every combination to reverse the streak, but we thwarted them all. We lost on errors and home runs, in extra-inning heartbreakers and first-inning blowouts, and on bad calls and blown saves. We even managed to walk in the winning run. Sometimes it was bad luck, other times we looked like the Lake Elsinore circus.

Fans stopped sitting down the first baseline because the short-stop threw so many balls into the stands. The pitching staff agreed we might as well pitch to the backstop since all our efforts ended up there anyway. We hit so badly you'd think the batting coach had Tourette's. Mix in a lion tamer and a tightrope, and we could have put a tent over the place.

Other guys began to see the Baseball Reaper as well. Haunted and paranoid, we strugglers took refuge in the rear of the bullpen discussing what we'd do after being released. I told everyone I was going to join the circus because it'd remind me of life in the minors. Another guy said he was going to become an executioner because at least he'd feel like he was getting even.

No matter how badly we did, we were still on course for the playoffs. We looked forward to it like a root canal. The second half of the season was a disaster we couldn't wait to see end. Instead

of looking at the postseason as a chance to win some jewelry, a chance for redemption, it was extra days of ass-kicking. We were phonies who hadn't earned our own playoff berth being rewarded for the efforts of the first-half guys who weren't even around anymore.

When we arrived in our first playoff series, the most amazing thing happened: we won. My only explanation was that we had nothing to lose. We hit well, we pitched well, and we made fewer mistakes than the other team, which was unheard of. Suddenly, we were a brand-new team.

The only negative to be mentioned was during the last game of the first series. Our starter got hurt. About the third inning, he stopped pitching, grabbed his arm, and began to cuss under his breath. The trainer and the manager ran out to assist him. I don't know how, but he had incurred a stress fracture in his wrist from throwing. I, as was my role, came in to replace him. The team held the lead and won the game. We swept the Lancaster Jethawks and clinched a spot in the championship series versus the San Jose Giants.

After the game on the bus back to Lake Elsinore, the air was alive with music and celebration. The front office furnished us with enough booze to hammer an elephant. You would have never guessed that a few days previous none of us wanted to be a part of the postseason. Everyone was brimming with confidence and excitement. Someone peed on my backpack, and I still don't know who it was.

On came the Giants, and we won the first two games with the same ease with which we swept the Jethawks. After the second win, the coaches pulled me aside to tell me Luke, the starter who got hurt, would be out for the remainder of the season. They said I, being the long man, would fill in for him if there was a game five. Then they slapped me on the back and told me not to worry about it, as if it were some piece of trivial fine print. They said if

we kept playing the way we were, we wouldn't need a game five. We immediately blew the next two games.

The night before game five, the biggest game of my pro career, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, sleepless. There was nothing I could do to prepare; it was too late. I thought about standing on the mattress and doing some blind visualization, but my roommate was already convinced I was nuts because of my conspiracy references to the Baseball Reaper. I do some of my best thinking when I'm in bed, but all I wanted to do that night was turn my mind off. A river of anxiety was running through my brain. Sleep would be an escape from the lashing of anxious thoughts. Finally, during the dark, forgotten hours of the morning, I went under. I dreamed I was Captain Ahab chasing a big, white, baseball-shaped whale. And I was naked.

The day of game five, my teammates repeatedly approached me asking if I was ready. What a stupid question, of course I wasn't ready. How could I be? I was tossed into this role about forty-eight hours ago, expected to pitch a gem after hurling nothing but turds the entire season! I didn't say that though; I just looked my inquirers in the eye and in my confident, competitor's voice, said, "Oh, you know it, baby." They'd smile, kneed my shoulders, or slap me on the ass, then tell me we were going to get 'em today. It made me wonder if they were faking it too.

I used all my cellular minutes talking to any positive voice that would pick up. I prayed every panic-induced prayer I could think of, being sure to remind God of each and every nice thing I'd ever done. Then I panicked and prayed for something wonderful to happen, like Armageddon, so the game would get postponed. I wrestled with the event I was about to spearhead until I had explored all possible contingencies and I was still feeling nauseous.

By the time I walked out to warm up, I was a mental and emotional ruin, and I hadn't thrown a pitch yet. The stands were packed, and sure enough, there was the Baseball Reaper sitting

in the beer garden—the smoking section—running a sharpening stone over his scythe in between lustful looks at senior citizens. He waved when he saw me. I pretended not to notice.

I warmed up, spinning my arms like propeller blades, contorting my legs at odd angles—*toe touches*, twists, nervous dry heaving. Then before it was time to start throwing, I flopped on the ground and closed my eyes. I had to—some force beyond my understanding made me do it. Twenty minutes before the biggest game of my life, I lay, stretched out like a snow angel with no snow in the middle of the outfield grass.

I was tired of thinking about the end of my career or the meaning one game had over my life. All this time spent being a prisoner of results. I wasn't even having fun anymore. There was no assurance all the work I'd put in would pay off in improved pitching numbers or a win. I'd spent most of the season trying to fix whatever was wrong with me. Even if I'd figured it out, I could take the mound and get shellacked regardless. That's the thing about baseball: every game is a roll of the dice. Once the ball leaves your hand, what happens next is out of your control. Veteran baseball people will tell you the same thing—hard work can only take you so far, the rest is luck and opportunity. Well, I had put in my hard work and landed an opportunity, for better or worse. Now it was time for luck to show up.

I can't explain what it's like to pitch an amazing game. I always wanted to be a superhero when I was a kid, and when I pitch well, it's as if I am, and everyone watching knows it. Still, it's something you need to feel to understand. Words can't tell you how fulfilling, empowering, and relieving it is, all at the same time. How it makes you feel like some great champion, the master of the battlefield. How it justifies all the work you put in to capture it, even though you know it's something so wild and free it can't truly be contained. In the brief moments you hold on to it, it frees

you from your bondage, each perfect pitch erasing a speck of self-doubt. It's a feeling you'll gladly endure a season of hell to experience. It's why you compete.

I was a champion that day. I was a king among men. I was all that and a bag of chips. I carried a one hitter through six before talented pitchers came into relieve me. In my last inning, I struck out the side for good measure. A whole season of treading water justified by one stellar performance. I felt as if a weight was lifted from my chest. The shackles were unlocked, and I was free to believe in myself again. All year I had been a failure, blasted in the media as a letdown and on his way out. But in that moment, I was the hero.

Then minutes after I exited, somewhere between congratulatory butt slaps and getting my arm in ice, my relievers handed the game away. A hit batsman, a walk, a single, a sacrifice . . . We lost the game three to one.

The movie theme music screeched to a halt, the dream burned up like flash paper. When the last out was made, we watched as the other team surged onto the field, dancing around like wild men. They screamed and hugged and waved their jerseys overhead. Fans roared, music blared, cameras clicked to immortalize it. All we could do was sit in silence, too crushed to speak. That was supposed to be us; I was going to be the star.

Long after everyone made his way into the locker room, I remained sitting in the dugout, staring into nothing. I was too numb to move. It wasn't supposed to end up like this, but once the ball leaves your hand . . .

In that moment, I got my first taste of hate for the game I loved. My entire life I had been told that hard work and hustle could get you anywhere you wanted to go. There were always obvious exceptions to the rule, top-dollar assholes who fueled ESPN showcasing how they squandered their talent and resources, but I blocked them out. I thought baseball was a pure thing, magi-

cal, bigger than the men who made it. I thought it was fair. Turns out that baseball is a lot like gambling. I had gone all-in with my beliefs. I bet the house on that championship start, and in those final innings, when it looked as if I was going to win everything back and then some, I got beat on the river.

A manager once told me, you don't have to be a big leaguer to play a big-league caliber game. He said players all through the minors play like big leaguers while some players all through the big leagues play like minor leaguers. On any given day spectacular things can happen in this profession. It's a game of luck and opportunity. Thus, we work hard so that we can make the most of things when they fall in our favor, have no regrets when they don't. Sometimes a player puts it together at the right time even if he isn't the most talented, and sometimes the most talented players fall apart when the spotlight is on them. Call it luck, call it opportunity. The bottom line is, you always have a chance if you have a jersey on your back. What you do with that chance, is a different story.

Chapter One

I toed the rubber, turning my foot to that unique angle that marks my set position—a deep breath, shoulder wiggle, and complete focus. Ball in glove, locked and loaded.

Inner Dirk was talking, “*You’re a winner, you’re a tiger, a champion. You can do this, you will do this.*” I felt awesome. I felt invincible. I felt as if I should be in a sports drink commercial. I was dominating this team, a complete force of nature punishing them from all angles, like throwing to blindfolded children. A grand symphony should have been playing in the background for my display of pitching mastery. At one point I could actually see myself from the outside, really digging myself, like an out-of-body moment of baseball Zen.

I adjusted my hat and took the sign from the catcher. I didn’t like it, so I shook. I didn’t like the next one either, or the next one, or the . . . “Come on man, I don’t even throw a three, why do you keep putting three fingers down?” I shouted.

“I’m sorry, the other guys use three as their curve ball,” he whimpered back. He didn’t come out for a mound visit, yelling at me from across the expanse that separated us.

“Great. Thanks. Just *tell* the guy what I’m throwing why don’t you! Besides, no one uses three for a curveball! Three is always

a slider!” I said. The batter stood awkwardly, looking back and forth between the two of us, confused.

“Sorry, you don’t have to throw it. We could throw your—”

“Use your fingers, not your mouth, okay?” *Stupid rookie.*

He squatted back down and adjusted his mask. I reloaded on the mound. *“I’m a winner. I’m a champion. I will do this. There is no try, only do or do not do. Wait, how did Yoda get in here? I’ll bet he has a filthy changeup, a Jedi mind trick or something . . . What am I doing? Focus Hayhurst! You’re a tiger. . . .”*

I set my feet again slowly. Then for the coolness effect, I lifted my head to lock on with the catcher’s fingers. Fastball. Just what I wanted. Why waste good breaking stuff on these losers when all I needed was good old numero uno to sit them down?

I nodded, then started my windup—left foot back, hands up over head, rock, pivot, knee up, and then a ferocious uncoiling down the slope to where I let loose.

In slow motion you’d see the batter’s hands go back taking the bat to its proper position. You’d see my front foot land in the precise location I practiced repeatedly in front of a mirror. You’d see my torso rotate, level and clean with no balance issues. You’d see the batter’s foot go up as he began to channel his weight for max power. You’d see my elbow give way to my hand as it snaps a screaming fastball into motion. It would all look so flawless, so magical, so poetic. It would leave you scratching your head, wondering how in the hell I could look that good and still drill a poor high school kid in the ribs at around ninety miles per hour.

You know that dull thud sound—the one a blunt object makes when a person gets hit real good? It made that sound. He went down hard, convulsing between screams of pain as he writhed on the floor.

“Ah, Jesus,” I whispered behind my face-covered glove. “I’M SORRY!” *I knew I should have made him sign that liability*

waiver. . . . Way to go, Jedi Master. The kid was crying now. Not all-out tears but enough water was leaking out to show he was feeling all four seams. I thought we were going to have to put him down, shoot him like a lame horse.

The catcher, continuing his streak of helpfulness, came to the rescue with the comment, “Don’t rub it.”

“Nice job, meat,” Mazz said from the next cage over. He’d been tossing batting practice to one of his clients, a big, beefy, future lesbian, the entire time I was throwing live batting practice to this group of high schoolers. This was his place, the perfect extension of his personality.

The joint was a run-down, former machine shop converted into a baseball lessons facility. The walls of the place had grease stains, and metal shavings littered the floor. The windows were old and single paned, holding in little heat. Mazz turned the heaters on only rarely, kept the minimal amount of lights, and didn’t think painting over the dismal gray walls was cost-effective.

The track record for indoor baseball facilities in the area was poor. Mazz had been doing great because he only worried about the necessities. No paint, dim lighting, heaters kept slightly above freezing—it all averaged out to less overhead. He was a Scrooge with his own economic rules, which I called Mazzenomics. He was a good hitting coach, but a ruthless businessman, which is why he made such good money doing lessons. A little extra money and the place could look respectable instead of the baseball equivalent of punching beef in a meat locker, but with lessons second to none, people put up with the substandard conditions.

Mazz played pro ball for several years, then coached it, and then coached college ball. Currently, he was coaching an independent team called the Washington Wild Things when not peddling lessons. Since his life had been spent in the game, his default tone was that of the thick-skinned ballplayer crowd where “What’s up

assbag?” is just as good as hello. He’s never been away from the game long enough to be in any danger of civilizing himself, so screwing up in front of him still warrants high school, bully-style chastisement.

“I wasn’t trying to hit him. It was an accident,” I said.

“I know you didn’t mean it. That’s why you’ve got a career 7.00 ERA—poor command.”

“It’s not a seven, it’s . . . well it’s not a seven.”

“It’s a six, you’re right. That’s *way* better.”

I never played for Mazz, but he told me I would soon. “Don’t worry,” he’d say, “you can still be the ace of the Wild Things after you get released this year.” He tells me that every year, mercifully, as if the thought of him as my manager should somehow make me feel blessed.

“You know, it probably wouldn’t have stung so bad if you’d turn on the heat in here.”

“You guys are here to train. Exercise makes its own heat. If you were working hard, you wouldn’t even feel the cold,” came the Mazzenomics principle in response. The boy continued moaning on the ground.

“Just like if my lungs were tough from working hard, I wouldn’t feel the iron shavings chewing them up?”

“Exactly.” Mazz nonchalantly flipped another ball to the war club of the she hulk.

I walked over to the boy I drilled, who, with the help of his coach, was on his feet now and trying to walk it off. The blow was to his ribs, but baseball law requires players to walk off all wounds, even those not related to walking. When I got beside him, I slapped him on the butt and said, “You alright kid?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he squeaked, trying to act tough. I probably scarred him for life, and he was only a sophomore. He’d never crowd the plate again, that was for sure.

He and the rest of the high schoolers, whom I subjected to this face-off, didn't realize what a favor they were doing for me. I wasn't going to tell them I needed them or that I felt bad about the beaning. I'm a pro; I have an image to maintain. I had to remain strong and impassive like some general. Part of war is casualties, and part of baseball is hit batsmen. If I acted too concerned, it would look as if I weren't in control.

"Hey man, my bad," I offered magnanimously. "I just wanted to brush you back. I was afraid of your power. Didn't mean to come in that far." No need to tell him the pro guy missed his spot by four feet. "If I gave up a hit to you, I'd never hear the end of it." And I'd feel like a complete joke. If Opie here got a knock off me, I might as well call the Padres and tell them I'm done and save them the trouble. Pro pitchers should never give up hits to fifteen-year-olds who weigh as much as the bat they swing.

Now that we were talking, I tried a little misdirection, some smoke and mirrors to change the subject from potential lawsuits. "Go grab a Gatorade, it's free today," I said, squeezing his shoulder as if we were pals. Sugar still distracts kids up to at least age eighteen. I think.

"No, it's not!" Mazz said, cawing from his cage. He was still sacrificing balls to the she-wolf, but he never missed a beat of my conversation.

"I'll pay for it you cheap bastard."

"Then I'll take it out of your next lesson," A buck fifty spent to make a wounded soldier feel better, and he was itemizing it like Satan's CPA.

The boy walked over to grab a cold one out of Mazz's mini fridge. The big softball orc smiled at him. From the way she looked him up and down, I couldn't tell if she thought he was cute—or edible. The rest of the group followed suit, grabbing more Gatorades that I also ended up paying for. Mazz said happy customers

are good for business, but he was only saying that because I was paying for their happiness.

I wanted to keep throwing to hitters, but the boys lost their nerve after watching one of their own reduced to tears. I only had a week before spring training, and this would be my last chance to pitch to live bats before shoving off. However, with no one brave enough to stand in, I had to settle for a standard practice session, tossing openly discussed pitches to the genius behind the plate for the remainder of our time

As I threw, the boys stood sipping their Gatorades outside the cage, watching me do my thing. Their coach pointed at me during key points in my delivery, going as far as to mimic my motion at certain points. Some of the other boys followed suit. It's a good thing they didn't know much about the business of baseball, or they'd see something completely different.

One year had passed since that 3-1 loss in the Cal League finals. During the following season of 2006, I managed to climb up to Double-A, even a short stint in Triple-A. I was, on paper, a Triple-A pitcher, something I could proudly declare whenever asked about my level of experience.

What I couldn't say, however, is that I earned it. My promotions were gilded. Dig a little and you'll discover I really didn't have any tangible success last year. I had poor stats in Double-A. Atrocious ones in Triple-A, and despite my good ERA in High-A, I had a win/loss record of 1-7. I didn't move up because I was a prospect—quite the opposite actually.

Injuries and call-ups drained all the talent from the system. I, not being a priority guy the club felt like focusing on anymore, was the perfect choice to hop around the system and mop up spilt innings. At one time, the Padres may have kept me securely planted on the developmental track. That was back when I was an All-Star in the Midwest League and a choice conversational

piece for media covering up-and-comers in the Padres organization. I was someone to watch out for then. Now four years into my pro career, I was tagged with lines like washout, roster filler organizational guy. The only all-star team I belonged on was the winter batting practice bruisers who bean high schoolers in rusty machine shops. Maybe not even that.

In four years, I'd failed to impress the people who do the promoting. I was a cold product, and folks who knew the game from the inside, folks like Mazz, knew where a guy like me, an aging, senior college signee with a small bonus and unattractive career numbers, was headed.

Mazz understood how the game works. He knew the outward appearance of success was just that, the appearance of it. He knew I was trying desperately to make sure people didn't know the rest of the story, and he loved to call me out on it.

Sure, the game isn't fair and guys who don't deserve it move up all the time. Several players in my situation have hopped up levels, paying no thought to the opportunity or to the way they got it, only to have a run of unprecedented success. I wish I could say I was one of those players.

The vast majority of people who love this game care only for big-time players with big-time numbers. I wasn't one of those, but I was faking it as best I could. The way I carried on, you'd never know I was back in the same situation I was a year ago, standing at the edge, staring into the pit of my career's end. For all the Gatorade-sipping boys knew, I was shooting through the system. Three levels in one year. Triple-A time was just a step away from the big leagues. Sounds impressive, especially when presented in a way that, again, misdirected attention from the whole truth. Yet, no matter how much smoke, mirrors, or sugary sports drinks I used, I couldn't misdirect the truth away from myself. Every opportunity I had last year, I failed to impress. I was on my way

out barring something inexplicable. As soon as the organization found a younger guy to do my job better, I'd get chopped, and there's always a younger guy.

The boys' coach pointed at me, "Watch his finish. See how he gets through each of his pitches?" He bent over in imitation, balancing on one leg.

"Yeah, he's going to look great in a Wild Things uniform isn't he?" Mazz said. He had finished his lesson and now came to mock.

"Why don't you grab a bat and stand in here, Mazz," I called to him.

"No thanks, I don't want to embarrass you in front of your fans," he said. "I might be older, but I can still turn on your eighty-six."

"I thought you said you threw ninety-two," the coach said.

"Whoops," Mazz said, tittering.

"I, uh . . . well . . . *I can*. I mean, I don't right now because it's cold and I'm still getting into shape and . . ." I stammered out some hyperbole on pitching that ended with, "Besides, velocity isn't everything, you know."

"Neither are K's or Wins, which you also don't have. Funny how that works." If I did have Jedi powers, I would use the Force to choke Mazz until his head popped off.

I ended my practice session with a dazzling array of big, loopy curve balls. The kids oohed and aahed over them; Mazz yawned. Finished, I strolled over and addressed my crowd. "Thanks for coming in tonight guys. I appreciate your time."

"It was our pleasure. I think the boys really learned a lot from hitting off you." I nodded and told him they looked good and had a lot of potential, which I would have said regardless. "Hey!" the coach said, forming his hand into a pistol and shooting me as he talked. "If you make it to the big leagues, we expect tickets!" If

I had a dollar for every time I got gunned down with that comment, I wouldn't need to make it to the bigs.

They left, and I went back to my cage to keep throwing, trying to make my pitches obey. Fastballs that wouldn't go down and away, curves you could hang on a coatrack, and a slider I had been tinkering with for years with no luck. I was trying to get better today, but I felt worse than when I came in. The ball felt wrong in my hand, and all the grips were like math problems I couldn't solve. The game didn't even feel right to me anymore.

Mazz, done for the night, said, "I'm leaving. Lock the place up, turn off the lights—"

"And turn off the heat, and enter the alarm, and make sure there's no penny unaccounted for, I know. I'll take care of it Ebenezer."

Mazz stopped and looked at me. In an extremely rare moment of genuine care, he dropped the surly routine and said, "Easy Dirkus, you can't force it. Relax."

"All the same, I'm going to stick around for a while and see if I can." It was kind of him to let me keep working. I won't deny, he did support me in his roundabout, borderline abusive way. Maybe he wasn't that bad after all.

"Well don't blow your arm out. The Wild Things can't use you if you have a bum arm."

Then again, maybe he was.

"I'll remember that—top of my priority list." Right under leaving the door unlocked, turning the heat all the way up, and dumping the rest of his Gatorades.

Away he went, turning out all the lights save for the one cage I was in. I stayed, who knows how long, alone in a cold, dark building, throwing sliders that wouldn't slide into a worn, plastic tarp, trying to figure out more than just pitching.

Chapter Two

When I woke up the next day, my arm was sore from throwing. I lost count of how many sliders I peppered into Mazz's tarps, but the big knot by my scapula and the stiffness in my elbow told me it was far too many for this time of year. I would've loved to have fallen blissfully back to sleep, let my body mend the way God intended it too, but the unholy antics of my housemate wouldn't permit me.

Considering how old my grandma was, you would think her house would be shaped more like a pyramid than a split-level with a leaky basement. God knows how long she'd been up, watching over her precious bird feeders. I honestly didn't think she slept. She just waited, hanging upside down in her room at night, devising more ways to make my life a living hell come sunup. Pounding on the storm door at squirrels at the crack of winter dawn was just the latest development on a long list of tortures.

I rolled over and read the alarm clock: 6:30 A.M. The sight of those cruel digits incited instant fury. Lying with my arms spread wide on the air mattress, my angry face aimed toward the heavens, I screamed at the top of my lungs, "SHUT UP, GRANDMA!"

She continued to bang. She'll pretend she didn't hear me when I ask her, but her hearing is never an issue when she stands out-

side my door, eavesdropping on my phone calls. In an attempt to drown out her noise, I pressed a pillow over my ears. That didn't work, so I tried to suffocate myself with it instead. That didn't work either.

Moments later she burst into my room. "Where's that gun of yours?"

"Why?" I asked, pulling the pillow from my face. "Are there terrorists in your bird feeders?"

"I'm going to shoot 'em! Give me that gun," she said, referencing my pellet gun. I'd shoot up soda cans with it every now and then to blow off steam. Sometimes pretending the cans were her face. She'd taken it before, while I was sleeping, and tried to shoot the squirrels but ended up shooting up the whole neighborhood because her hands shook so badly. My parents had to confiscate the old shotgun she brandished for the same reason.

"I'm not giving you that gun. The squirrels aren't hurting anyone."

"They're plotting something. I know it."

I stared at her blankly. "You've lost your mind."

"Oh, you are good for nothing! You get out of that bed and get those things out of my feeders if you're not going to give me that gun."

"No. It's six thirty in the morning! Let them finish breakfast and they'll leave." I rolled over, but she remained standing there, burning holes in my back. I couldn't sleep with her hexing me, so I rolled back to face her. "I know. Why don't you throw one of the seventy chocolate cakes you bought on sale out there? Try and make friends."

"I bought those cakes for you!" she wailed.

"The squirrels can have my share as a peace offering."

She shook her head at me in a disdainful manner. "The way you talk to me," she seethed, "after all I do for you."

And boy, does she do a lot for me.

My laundry, for example. She still uses a wringer washer, a testament to the time period she's stuck in, in which she threshes my clothes. The wringer sits in the basement like some beast lurking in the dark, waiting for her to feed it my wardrobe with a tall, cool jar of lye soap to wash it down. To date, that machine has mangled melted, or consumed enough fabric to cover a third-world country.

She cooks for me too, mainly because I am forbidden to use the kitchen. She's appointed herself my personal chef, which is more akin to kitchen dictator. She oppresses me with bacon-grease-injected marathon meals chanting, "You're a growing boy, calories aren't going to hurt you!" The grease I don't consume is repurposed into the soap used in her first charitable act.

Some days I don't eat. I can't risk getting her started. She pumps out food like a munitions factory during the war effort—high-calorie rounds of biscuits and gravy aimed directly at my heart. She'll hold me hostage until it's all finished, but it's never finished. At any given time, you can find six gallons of milk, fourteen boxes of cereal, and about one hundred pounds of canned fruit spread throughout the house's three refrigerators and eight pantries. There's enough freezer-burned meat to reconstruct a mastodon.

She shops on my behalf because she says she's such a *great* bargain hunter. She nabs great deals, and by "nabs" I mean she takes everything on the shelf in one swoop. She'll come home with a trunkful: eight chocolate cakes, seventeen loaves of bread, and six gallons of orange juice, all "marked down for a limited time." You could sit her down and explain it all to her, that we beat the com-mies and the local supermarket won't be destroyed by a nuclear attack, but it makes no difference—she won't stop. When turkeys go on sale, it'll be Thanksgiving at her house for the next nine days. It'll be for me anyway, and as long as I keep eating it, she'll keep buying. I'd gladly invite you over to help me get it all down, but she hates you.

She hates pretty much everyone I know and is never shy about telling why. She hates all the presidents, all her doctors, the family, the guy packing groceries at the Food 4 Less, my girlfriends. None of them can do anything right. She hates the neighbors enough to aim that shotgun I told you about out the window when they set foot on her property. She's developed colorful nicknames for the folks on the block, like the endearing bunch across the lawn she commonly refers to as "that no-good pack of lying, hillbilly Satanists!"

The Satanic hillbillies, who own three large, friendly dogs, used to mow my grandma's yard for free until she stepped in dog poop. You should have heard the rant that started. She swore the hillbillies were training the dogs to hold their poop and leave it in great big piles in her yard—mountainous piles, dinosaur turds that suck your foot in like a tractor beam.

She threatened to call the cops on the dogs. Then she threatened to call the cops on the neighbors. Next, she threatened to kill the dogs. Then she threatened to kill the neighbors. It wouldn't be long until there was freezer-burned dog in the fridge.

She provided a roof over my head, and for that I'm thankful, but my life with her is far from fantasy. She'll tell you she treats me like a prince. She'll tell you a lot of things. Like how she saved Einstein from the Nazis or the stretch of Underground Railroad beneath the house. What she won't tell you is how she keeps me in the sewing room, on an air mattress, with nothing but a card table and a suitcase.

My princely suite is filled with her precious treasures: heirlooms; boxes and boxes of worthless, bought-on-sale heirlooms she plans to pass on to us when she dies. I asked her if I could move a few of her artifacts out of "my" room in the meantime, and she told me no. I said I'd do all the work and she wouldn't have to lift a finger, but it was still a no. One day I decided to move one single thing: a broken exercise bike about ten years older than

me. She called a lawyer when she found it was missing. She was going to sue me for the cost of one dilapidated early 1970s exercise bike. She said she was going to use it, and I had no right to throw away her things. I asked her how much long-distance biking she planned on doing at ninety-one years of age, and she told me to go to hell.

There is a real bed in the house, in one of the other junk-stuffed rooms. It's wedged in next to an old flannelgraph and books on how Stalin is the Antichrist. The bed is brand new, but I can't sleep on it. Not that she won't let me; rather, I can't because she won't let me take the plastic off the mattress or the pillows. Ever sleep on Saran wrap? Try it sometime—really opens the pores. I told her princes didn't sleep on plastic, and she told me to go to hell.

She said taking the plastic off was how things wore out and got dirty. I told her everything eventually wore out and got dirty. She said her things were still around because she took care of them. I told her some things had life expectancies on them, like people, hint, hint.

She told me to go to hell.

"All those things you do for me. . . ." I said, being sure to look her straight in the eyes as I spoke. I learned long ago that you can't show weakness when you speak to her or she'll attack. I recounted the list of her services, including, but not limited to, bacon fat, lye soap, the Antichrist, lack of sleep, exercise bikes, and bullet holes. "Chocolate cakes are supposed to make it all better?"

Her face flushed red, and I thought her head would spin around like something from *The Exorcist*. Anger didn't help her looks much. Permanently hunched over like some evil scientist's assistant, if she wore a hood, she could get a job haunting bell towers.

She grabbed my door's handle and just before slamming it screamed, "If you've got it so bad, you can just move out!"

"Good luck with those squirrels."

“You can go to hell!” came her retort. See, I told you she could hear me through the door.

“Pretty sure I’m already there. . . .” I sighed, and flopped back onto my makeshift bed.

Five minutes later, I reluctantly got up and chased the squirrels out of her feeder in my underwear and pair of snow boots. She asked me what I wanted for breakfast as reward for my good deed. I told her I could really go for some chocolate cake.

We fight about the bedding, the food, the clothes, the neighbors, the squirrels, Harriet Tubman, and whatever else she can think up—every day, one futile battle after the next, always ending the same way. You know, Grandma’s house, Grandma’s law. If I don’t like something she does, she tells me I can just move out, and, of course, she knows I can’t.

This is my life now. I’m a poor twenty-six-year-old professional athlete who lives on the floor at his grandma’s. I don’t make enough money during the minor league season to afford living any other way in the off-season, and as long as I want to keep chasing my dream, I’ll have to sacrifice. She’s about as sweet as the living dead, but she’s my sugar momma, and no matter how bad she treats me, I’ll always keep crawling back to her.

My days start with mornings full of obscenities aimed at woodland creatures banging and screaming. I trudge through the snow and run the squirrels off, but they come back—rinse, lather, repeat. It appears the squirrels and I have a common enemy. I guess maybe we should work together. Someday I could leave the door unlocked and let them in when she’s sedated, watching Judge Judy. They could ambush her. I’d act as if I didn’t know anything. I’d feign devastation to the authorities and make a good sound bite for the local news. As soon as it all passed by, I’d throw the rest of the birdseed out, burn those feeders, and drive off into the

night cackling maniacally. But, and this is no joke, she already suspects we're up to something.

Something about lying in my underwear with snow boots on while my right arm throbbed got me thinking. Suffice to say, this was not how I pictured my life as a professional baseball player. Me shacking up with the withered old puppet of evil I called grandma, hanging on to a crumbling dream while the world passed me by, is not how things were supposed to go.

There is so much you don't know when you get into the baseball business. You think you know it all. You've certainly seen enough of it on television to form an educated guess. But the stuff that happens on television isn't real, no matter how bad you want it to be. I thought signing a contract to play was going to be my promotion into the glamour lifestyle. I would walk down the street and people would whisper, "There goes Dirk Hayhurst, professional baseball player." Maybe they'd stop me for an autograph or ask me what it was like to be so awesome. I was going to live the big-league dream life. What the hell happened? Where were all the millions? Where were the luxury cars? Where was my first-class jet to paradise? Where was my dignity?

Instead, my career has crash-landed me on the floor of Grandma's sewing room. If this is a dream come true, then dreams come packed in mothballs, smell like Bengay, and taste like lard-flavored turkey leg. My dream has made me into a commodity, a product, only as valuable as the string of numbers attached to my name—like some printout stuck in the window of a used car. The reality of my professional baseball player's life is that most people have no idea who I am, nor do they care. The pay sucks, the travel sucks, the expectations suck, and, recently, I suck. Instead of gaining ground in life through my dream job, I've lost it. I'm further behind than when I started.

People always say they'd do anything to play professional

baseball. The feel of the grass, the smell of a hot dog, and all that other Disneyland bullcrap. Don't lecture me about the magic of the game; I'm all magicked out. I've heard every cliché, read every quote, watched every Disney movie about overcoming. I know what Hollywood fabricates the sports life to look like, and this ain't it. In real life there are no symphony scores playing in the background while we go through our moments of doubt. There aren't always coaches pulling for us or family members spouting inspirational soliloquies. Sometimes there's just you, your bed on the floor, and a mean old lady telling you to go to hell.

Sure, I smell the hot dogs, and I feel the grass, but I also smell the scent of urine splashed on the walls of the minor league tour bus while the coach seats dig into my ass. I see sugar-crazed gremlins lining park fences, begging for baseballs. I say no, and those cute, innocent, dreamy little faces cuss me out like the drill sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket*. Every two weeks my minor league paycheck affords me another round of value meals, and if I stay in the game long enough, I just might make as much as the high school dropout messing up my order.

I don't have a slick car or a nice condo. I don't have a designer wardrobe or a good investment strategy. I've been slaving away at this job for the last four years, heading toward my fifth, and the only thing I have to show for it is an uncanny ability to hit squirrels with snowballs.

This is my question—my giant, dinosaur-turd-sized question: How much longer do I want to keep living this *dream*? Truthfully, not very much. I know folks would say that walking away from such a great opportunity would be a mistake. But what if giving up some of the best years of your life for something that may never happen is the mistake? There comes a moment in life, no matter what your line of work is, when you have to step back and wonder if you're heading in the right direction.

Most baseball players are content to play until they have abso-

lutely no chance left. In fact, I'd say that's the basic mindset: keep pitching, until your arm falls off or they tear the uniform from your back. However, I'm not most baseball players. I realize that if this doesn't pan out, I'm not going to have anything to show for it except boring stories of glory days.

While I lay there on my air mattress, some unremarkable Tuesday morning with snow and squirrels and screaming, I decided I'd start taking the necessary preparations to make my peace with baseball. I didn't want to quit, but I'd run out of good reasons to keep playing. I couldn't go on living like this, which wasn't really living at all. I needed to get out before too much of my life had collected alongside the other broken-down relics in Grandma's house. I just had one problem: I wasn't the only person wrapped up in this dream.

Chapter Three

Though my parents' house was only a few miles away in Canton, I didn't visit it very often. When I did, I didn't have to be there long before I was reminded why I stayed away. Yet, I had to come home, they deserved to know what I was thinking. My parents were there at the start of my baseball career, and they should know how it would end.

My dad sat at the kitchen table, smoke streaming up from the cigarette pressed in his off hand. I took a seat across from him and waited for a chance to talk. A gray smog had collected in the air above us, hanging there, dimming the light. He was so silent, one might suspect he was dead, stuck in place save for the way the smoke-filled air moved when he breathed.

I didn't know how long he was like that—minutes, hours, or days perhaps. The only way to measure was to check how much ash had accumulated in the tray in front of him. If I had to guess, he'd been motionless for about two hours.

Stomping could be heard upstairs. My mother and brother were moving about. The thumps came and went with long breaks in between—water running, toilet flushing, someone taking a shower. It was just a matter of time before they crossed paths.

I tried to think of something to say to my father as we sat, but

how to begin? Small talk? Something light before telling him I really wanted to quit my dream and ruin the family's big hope of something better for just one of its members? What was there to say?

He had no life, nothing to chat idly about. On the off chance we did speak, he'd regurgitate television programs he'd watched. Some show on how things were made. That's all he did now. Unemployed, angry, unmotivated to live, he sat in front of the television or in the silent haze of a cigarette. We've passed a lot of hours like this: neither of us talking, both sitting in front of his television drug.

My mother's voice broke in above us. The sound of my brother's retort followed—yelling ensued, foot stomps, more yelling. Refreshed, they'd awoken to resume the fight. As much my mother's fault as anything, she couldn't let it go. I'm not sure I blame her, but since she was unwilling to lock him up, the fighting would just meet the same result it always did.

Today was Saturday. My brother was probably drunk last night. Came home late to my mother, who stayed up to ambush him about his debauchery. They fought, maybe something got broken, maybe someone got hit, maybe both. My dad, unwilling to stay in bed and listen, would get up and start screaming at the both of them in a voice that made you wish the world would end. Then, when he couldn't take it anymore, he'd implode, start to cry, and wish he were dead—maybe more than wish, maybe try again. He'd say he hated his life, hated the family, hated everything. Upon losing her ally, Mom would turn on Dad. She'd say he needed to toughen up, quit being a baby, and act like the man she used to know.

Vindicated, my brother would laugh mockingly, calling them both fuckups, horrible parents, the reason for his drinking. And then there would be more screaming, more breaking, and more hitting, followed by a call to the cops, not to make an arrest, but to

scare away the drunk. He'd leave, wreck his car, stumble back, and pass out on the floor in his own vomit. Come morning, when he was hung over, the fight would continue.

My dad sighed at the sound, lifted his head from his hands, and snuffed his cigarette into the ashtray. He was both as sad and angry as a person could be; you could see it when you looked at him, the way his body worked as if under some heavy, invisible weight.

Acting on the urge to leave, he reached down to put his shoes on. His crippled hands grabbed at them with all the finesse of a rusty wrench. Next, he reached for a wooden spoon, his makeshift shoehorn. He attempted shoeing his feet into his Velcro shoes, but the simple motion was too complex and he dropped the spoon. He tried to pick it up, but his fingers would not grab as instructed. Extreme frustration trumped the sadness that kept him in check and he exploded.

"Goddamn worthless fucking hands!" he screamed. Then he began clubbing his hands into the table with the same force someone would smash dry tree limbs. He couldn't feel the blows, the same reason he couldn't feel the shoes or the spoon. Repeatedly, he beat his hands until the frustration gave way to sadness again; then he began to sob. He slumped back into his chair defeated, head in broken hands, heaving.

At one time he built million-dollar machines. Perfect lines of metal intersecting in perfect mathematical harmony. He drafted things, complex mechanical things that would themselves build more complex mechanical things. All of it, pristine, flawless, designed never to break. Now the man behind all that perfection was broken. He couldn't even tie his shoes, Velcro shoes.

I said nothing. I hadn't spoken the entire time I was there—not even hello. I was a spectator in my own home. I was slowly remembering what drove me out in the first place to fight my way toward the big leagues into a better life.

The battle above us stopped. My mother must have detected my father's outburst. She made her way downstairs, rounded the corner into the kitchen, and stood with her hands on her hips, staring at him, a puzzled look on her face. I could see the remnants of compassion in her eyes, deeply buried beneath a layer of resentment, as if her emotions moved away years ago, leaving the place to deteriorate.

She surveyed the two of us. Then, looking to me, she asked, "What's wrong with him?"

I shrugged.

"Sam," she said, turning to my father, "what's the matter?"

No answer.

"Sam, tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing, just leave me alone."

"Tell me what's the matter. What happened? What was all the banging?" At one time, she asked the question in a sweet and caring way. Now, after years of no change, she was tired of being Mary Poppins about it. She asked in a sterile, near annoyed way.

"Nothing, goddamn it, just leave me alone!" my father roared.

My mother sighed. "What's wrong with him?" she asked, looking at me.

"He couldn't get his shoes on," I said, but that wasn't what she was really asking.

"All this screaming and banging because you couldn't get your shoes on? Jesus, Sam."

Anger began to win over my father again. He was so volatile—explosive one moment, despairing a second later. One more push and he'd blow, and this little family reunion would turn into chaos.

My brother began his way down the steps. His footfalls were much heavier than my mother's. He rounded the corner, nudging her out of the way with his beer belly. Full of attitude, he now

stared at the head of the house, laughing to himself like some movie villain at the failed attempts of those who would overthrow him. “What the fuck’s your problem?” he asked.

I’ll answer that one. My dad fell from the roof of our house while he was laying shingles. He fell headfirst, dropping twenty-odd feet before crashing into the rough ground below. He shattered his nose and blew out disks in his neck and back.

I can remember it all, like a memory recalled at the site of a scar. I was the only one home at the time. I heard my father shout, tumble, and hit. I ran from the house to see what had happened and found my father motionless, a pool of blood forming around his face. I asked him if he was okay, even though I knew he wasn’t, but what else is there for a thirteen-year-old son to ask?

He told me, in gurgles and gasps that he couldn’t feel his body, that he couldn’t move. He told me to walk away, to leave him because he was dying, and he didn’t want me to have to see it. I ran into the house and punched 911.

He wouldn’t walk again for two years. After all the rehab, when he could finally stand on his feet without assistance, he was a different man. A shell of one, not the father we had grown to love.

Outsiders would tell me I should be thankful he could walk, what a blessing it was, and all that jazz. I didn’t feel that way about it. Maybe I should’ve, but it wasn’t like the feel-good stories used to sell bracelets with trendy slogans. My dad could walk, but he did so like Frankenstein. He couldn’t feel his hands or his feet. His bowels didn’t wait for his consent to go. His vision suffered and his flexibility disappeared. He couldn’t tell whether he cut his legs or whether he was bleeding. He slept with constant discomfort and medicated himself heavily. When the pills stopped working on their own, he began mixing them with alcohol. The mighty perfectionist was unequipped to deal with his new imperfections. He was disgusted with everything, including himself.

For a time, things plodded along. It seemed as if, despite all of

my father's issues, the family would survive. Things were hard, but we were getting the hang of it. Then dad lost his job—the salary, the benefits, the sense of purpose were all gone. His hands, cumbersome and mangled, could not work the computer keys like they once did. When the company he worked for restructured itself, my dad was restructured by a fresh college graduate with no experience for half the salary.

The termination snuffed out the last remaining pieces my father had to build with. He could not work and so he felt useless. Having already reconciled the demise of his sports hobbies, no longer a softball or basketball player, he was at least a valued member of his work team. Now he was nothing. Coming from the generation that did not require degrees to get a job, any hope my handicapped, undereducated father had of competing in the present market was gone. He had lost his employer and the rest of his identity.

My mother's job supported us while my father looked for work. Then she too was fired. Suddenly, we had nothing but a few waning months of unemployment. My dad had to take manual-labor jobs and simply could not keep up with the work pace. He was let go from all of them.

My brother turned to the bottle to help him cope. He fell into alcoholism about as hard as my father fell from the rooftop. He was a mean drunk, violent and irrational. He'd toss my crippled father aside like a rag doll. He'd smack my mother, choke her, and knock her down. He'd flat out beat the shit out of me. He put my head through picture frames, through coffee tables, and into hospital beds. He hated me because I was the family golden boy, sheltered by the success sports had brought me. I was the enemy—a relationship I'd become accustomed to.

My brother spent a lot of his early life getting into trouble. He had a poor self-image. ADD and a cleft pallet can do that to a person. When he grew up, failed relationships and drunk-driving

charges galvanized him. He was convinced he was a bad egg because all his endeavors met with disastrous results. He dreamed as big as any kid, yet always found himself in situations where no one understood what he was dealing with. *Why isn't he normal? Why doesn't he look like the other kids? Why can't he stay on task?* And, maybe worst of all, *Why can't he be more like his brother?* He would come to wear judgment around his neck like a scarlet letter. The only time he felt relief was when he was drunk.

And so it went. Some days were worse than others, but so common was the domestic violence that the neighborhood cops knew us on a first-name basis. They'd show up and ask if anyone wanted to press charges, and my parents would both say no. When we got hurt, they'd lie about it. We wanted everyone to think we were normal, to keep up appearances. We had a great athlete in the family from a functional home. Nothing was wrong.

Once, when I was so tired of getting my head busted, I made up my mind I was going to lock up my brother and get it over with. I would put an end to the drama. My mom got on her knees and wept at my feet, soaking my ankles with her tears, begging me not to. I told her I had to. It needed to be done because we couldn't keep living in fear of him. She told me I was just as bad as my brother and threw me out. I grudgingly dropped the charges, but I refused to live at home again. I packed up my tiny ship of dreams and set sail for the horizon. Instead of a bright future, I ran aground on the other side of the city, minutes away from my high school, employed in a run-down machine shop, living under the roof on my grandma's asylum.

Today I made a pilgrimage back my parents to talk baseball or rather to talk about quitting baseball. Yet watching them tear each other apart, I didn't have to ask why I should keep playing. If I did it for no other reason than just to escape my home life, it was reason enough.

I stood up from the chaos and walked through their battlefield,

out the door, and into the winter wind. I stood in the drive, listening to the echoing shouts, watching them through the window, wondering how to fix it.

There had to be more than this, more to life than titles and jobs and roles to fail at. My father was a broken heap without a purpose. My brother was a drunk and branded a failure—my mother, a victim. What title would brand me? Was I to be the baseball player who didn't make it? Would I always wear the jersey of a career minor leaguer? Would I be remembered as a washout, a failure, or a nonprospect?

I wanted to find out what I should do with my life from here on. I wouldn't find it in the chaos of my family. I wouldn't find hope there either, just a reason to put my key in the ignition and drive on.

Chapter Four

That night, after I met with my family, I lay on my air mattress at Grandma's, flicking a baseball up into a cloud of swirling thoughts. I sent the ball back spinning in tight, four-seam revolutions, trying to see how close I could make it come to the ceiling without striking it. Next, I tried to make the ball spin like a slider, seams forming a tight, red dot, indicative of a well-spun punch-out pitch. The ball clumsily wobbled up and thunked against the ceiling, then wobbled back down. I caught it on the return; then, irritated, I heaved it into an open suitcase across the room. My bags were packed, though I had no idea why. I couldn't fix my slider, I couldn't fix my career, and I couldn't fix my family. Spring training was around the corner, and the only reasons I had for going was it was better than being at home.

Someone once told me a great way to take your mind off your own problems was to help people with theirs. I'm sure it was some great spiritual leader who said it, the kind who frequents mountaintops and deserts for perspective. I could use some perspective myself. Unfortunately, Ohio doesn't have any topographical features that lend themselves to enlightening breakthroughs. Even so, the idea of helping someone was appealing to me, if not for

perspective, then at least to know that there were some things in the world I could fix.

The next day, after a lard-soaked marathon breakfast, I made my way to a homeless shelter on the eastern edge of Canton called the Total Living Center, or TLC. It sits in a run-down area on the tip of the city's sprawl, surrounded by project homes and government housing. Cops patrol the streets at all hours, and I swear I always hear emergency sirens echoing in the distance when I drive through the area.

I should tell you, this wasn't my first time volunteering at TLC. I started doing it a few months before because, to be perfectly honest, I thought it would make me look good. I can't blame all my actions on the institutionalizing of pro baseball, but one thing a public opinion-based job had taught me was that appearances meant something. Just like people assume things when they hear the words "pro baseball player," they assume things when they hear "volunteers at a homeless shelter." The words conjure visions of caring and self-sacrifice: humility, mercy, and charity.

All I did was take names. I sat at a desk by the door, signing people in, making sure too much warm air didn't escape, doing a job a pencil on a string could have managed. I was a regular Mother Theresa. Originally, I wanted to fly over to Calcutta and help heal people who got bitten by tigers or by whatever they had over there. I didn't research the topic that well; I just thought I should go. When I found out how much it would cost to buy a plane ticket, I had to settle for working at the shelter a couple miles from my house. It wasn't exactly playing baseball with the kids from the "just seven cents a day" style commercials, but it was better than sitting on my hands, I guess.

The experience was a letdown, actually. Taking names at the local shelter wasn't as dramatic or as awe inspiring as picking fleas off people who speak in clicks and pops. No witch doctors grabbed my head and prophesied my fastball's future. No women

with rings in their noses fell in love with me. No one thanked me for saving his life with my semicelebrity presence, and I didn't walk away from the place transformed, ready to market Kabbalah water.

Today I sat at the shelter's door, lethargically making clicks and pops with my pen. Most of the folks who came for the shelter's meal and grocery handouts had already shuffled in. I signed them in, as usual, directed them to the meal, and then closed the door so the winter air didn't leak in. There wasn't much else for me to do except twiddle my pen, wrestle with my thoughts, and wait for the remainder of my time playing benevolent saint to pass.

In hopes of jump-starting an enlightening experience, I brought a collection of my minor league baseball cards. I had this ingenious idea to bring cards so I could sign them for the people who frequented the place. I got the notion because a lot of people asked me for cards once they found out what I did. Some thought it would be worth money someday, if I made it big. Some wanted a card to commemorate their brush with a quasi-famous person. Most wanted it so they could pass it on to their kids. Whatever the reason, there was an undeniable ego stroke from doing it. Someone was asking me to sign a picture of myself like a person would ask a movie star or Pamela Anderson. I thought every smiling face that asked for one of my cards would inspire me to keep soldiering on in my career.

In the same pocket I kept my cards, I kept the meal tickets—nothing more than worthless shards of scrap paper you could forge at home. In my boredom, I plucked one of my cards free and looked it over. It wasn't a great picture of me, my face was puffed out like a blowfish and my hair desperately needed a cut. I wished I had a more impressive picture, let alone stats. I didn't even bother reading the back side where words like "Hayhurst ranked among the top 200 pitchers in the Cal League in ERA and mound visits" were inscribed.

I placed the card back into my jacket pocket and resumed clicking my pen. The door of the center opened, and the room filled with a gust of frigid air. In hobbled a ragged, old man. His face was worn, weathered like cracked leather. His eyes were dull and gray, sunk into his face. He looked like some old prospector who lived his life on the edge of humanity back during the years when the West was wild. Multiple layers of clothing, all of them stained with what looked like dirt or grease, made a patchwork outfit that shielded him from winter's bite. His scraggly beard was matted and tangled in clumps and knots. A green stocking cap covered his head, the top pulled up high like a cartoon elf. His pants were filthy, splattered with road salt toward the bottom and well into the later stages of fray. Slung over his shoulder was a stuffed sack, bulging with lumps on every side. He pushed his forearm across his face and snorted.

"Good afternoon," I said with a big beaming smile. I was clean, well dressed, and ready to sign for such an obvious charitable cause.

This was his lucky day, and I knew it. He didn't respond to my greeting, but walked over to the desk in a side-to-side motion, continually smearing his hands on the sides of his outfit as he came. He took my offered pen, hunched over the table, and began to sign.

"Will you be dining with us tonight, or just here for some groceries?" I asked in a saccharine-sweet voice.

The ragged man coughed, finished scribbling his name, then let the pen drop. He mumbled to himself, wiping his hands on his sides again.

"Will you be eating with us today, sir?" I repeated.

"Yeah, yeah. What ya havin'?" He traced the architecture of the room as he spoke, like an animal measuring its cage.

"We are having yummy roasted chicken with noodles," I said.

Then I added in the same camp counselor voice I used earlier, “It’s mmm-mmm good.”

“Shit, ain’t as if it matters. . . .” His voice trailed off and he returned to mumbling to himself.

“Well, Phyllis and the girls are fantastic cooks, and I’m sure you’ll love it.” I beamed back at him.

It was as if I were Willy Wonka. Everything I said was uttered with an über-excited ring, as if eating chicken and noodles were orgasmic. “Well, you certainly seem excited about it,” the ragged man said. “Can I have my tickets now?”

“Oh, right.” I reached into my pocket and grabbed for the meal tickets. I felt a baseball card’s stiff, cardboard backing, and I pulled it out instead.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, but, *I* am a professional baseball player. I pitch in the minor leagues with the San Diego Padres.” I’m surprised I didn’t brush my nails on my shirt after I said it.

“Uh huh.”

“I brought some of my cards with me. I can sign one for you if you like.”

“*You* are a professional baseball player?” the man asked.

“Yes, sir, I am,” I said, as if I were allowing him admission to a very elite club.

The ragged man reluctantly took the card from my hand, looked at both sides as if it were a shiny rock, then tossed it back down in front of me. I watched the card as it twirled down and spun on the table.

“There,” he said, as if he had done me a favor.

“Do you, uh . . . do you want me to sign one for you? A lot of people like that kind of thing.”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I am a real pro athlete.”

“No.”

“I’ll go ahead and sign one for you and you can give it to your wife or son or . . .”

His eyes came out of the dark clefts of his dense silver eyebrows. His face, so worn and beaten, still had such intensity. “Look at me kid. What in the hell am I going to do with a goddamn baseball card?”

“I, uh . . . I just thought it would make you feel good,” I said, and then smiled.

“Make me feel good?” he heckled. “I live on the goddamn street!”

“Well, I know, but—”

“Do you know why?” he interrupted. I did not, and my blank expression proved it.

“’Course you don’t, why the hell would you bother to find out?”

“ . . . ”

“My wife got sick. I lost my job, and our insurance went with it. With no insurance, we couldn’t afford to keep her in medicine. Then”—if he was remorseful, it was buried in his frustration—“she died, ’cause I couldn’t get a job to pay for treatment. We were married twenty years. Twenty years! I lost everything trying to keep her with me and now she’s gone. I got nothing and nobody. I walk around, and everyone thinks I’m on the street ’cause I’m some crackhead or something. I live handout to handout, and you think you’re just gonna fix it all with your goddamn baseball card?” He stared right through me, his words stealing the noise out of life around us. Then he picked my card up and looked at it again. “Oh, you look real good underneath that jersey, don’t you? Not a care in the world.” Then he crumpled the card in his dirty hand, and tossed it at me. “You can keep your bullshit card.”

All I could muster was, “I’m sorry.”

“You can keep that too!”

I sat at the table, trying to escape his gaze.

“Can’t a man just get a meal here?” he bellowed. “I gotta get preached to before I can eat so I started comin’ late. Now, I gotta listen to your bullshit about how great your life is?”

I fumbled in my pocket and pulled out his meal ticket as ordered. As I plucked it free, the entirety of my pocket’s contents poured forth. Baseball cards and meal tickets splattered on the floor. Cards, worthless cards, with glossy pictures of an inconsequential idiot littered the space at our feet along with precious meal tickets written with a ballpoint pen on nothing more than shards of scrap printer paper.

I bent down on one knee and picked up the mess as fast as I could. The ragged man watched me labor at his feet. He wore black workman’s boots that were falling apart. One boot had duct tape wrapped around it and both soles looked like blown-out tire treads.

“Looks like those shoes have had it?” My voice was back to normal. I must have found my natural tone somewhere in the mess on the floor.

The ragged man kicked out one shoe. “These pieces of shit? Bought ’em at the Super Walmart just a month ago. One month! They’s already fallin’ apart.”

“Why didn’t you take them back?”

“Won’t let me. Didn’t believe me, and I didn’t keep the receipt neither—I finally got enough money to buy me some decent shoes and this is what I got.” He mumbled curses, looking down at his feet.

This time of year in Ohio, the cold weather turns from snow to rain almost every other day. The ragged man’s feet had to be wet; there was no way, with so many standing puddles of slush-filled water, he was keeping his feet dry.

I looked to my feet. I was wearing Bass Company boots, fancy leather workman’s boots but not for working—they were too

dressy. I got them a few years back with some extra Christmas money and kept them in fine condition, only wearing them when the weather necessitated.

“What size are your boots?” I asked.

“They’re a ten.”

It was in my brain. Something was pulling at me. Maybe it was always there, and I just did my best to tune it out. My mouth started talking, “You wanna switch?”

“What?”

“I’m asking you if you wanna swap shoes?”

The ragged man frowned at me as if I were playing a cruel joke. Then as if this was a bet he couldn’t afford not to take, he wiped his face, tugged his matted beard, and said, “I’ll switch, but you’re the one getting the raw end of the deal here, pal.”

“I’ll be alright.”

“Okay then,” he said, and he wasted no time kicking off his mangled boots. I unlaced mine, slipped them off, grabbed the pair together gently above the tongue, and handed them to him. He kicked his across the floor to me to complete the trade. He placed my boots on his feet and tied them up.

“How do they fit you?”

“Real good, these are real good, and”—he took some steps—“fit perfect, like they was made for me.” Reaching down, he pressed the tip of the boot to indicate where his toe snugly stopped. Then he almost began to smile, but stopped himself and eyed me with suspicion.

“Enjoy man. They’re all yours.”

His eyes and face changed, almost softening. The wildness left his countenance. He seemed like a person, like a man, a broken one but no longer disconnected. As cracked and cold as it was, his face began to warm. Maybe it was the way I viewed him now, maybe he was always that way.

“Thank you,” he said, in voice of the most genuine apprecia-

tion I'd ever heard. "This is a great kindness you're doing." The rough grains of his voice had smoothed out, and for a second I thought he might tear up. Instead of speaking, he reached out a dirty hand. Without hesitation, I took his hand in mine, and we shook.

"Thank you," I said, stunned by it all. I gave him his meal ticket, and out of my life he walked in his dry, new boots, enroute to a chicken noodle meal that was mmm-mmm good.

Having nothing else to wear, I put on the ragged man's old boots. They were, as I expected, soaked through. The damp soles discharged icy water into my socks on contact, and I almost tripped when the blown-out soles caught the corner of the steps. Wet, cold, blown apart, those boots were the best shoes I'd ever worn.

I didn't know that man in rags, and he didn't know me, but we knew how to treat each other because of the clothes we wore. Yet, something deeper than stained rags, dirty hands, glossy pictures, and clean uniforms took place between us. In that moment, both awkward and perfect, something happened I didn't quite understand. For a moment the burden of baseball left my shoulders, and I wasn't a player to be labeled. Though I didn't understand it all right there, I knew my life in the game was going to change.