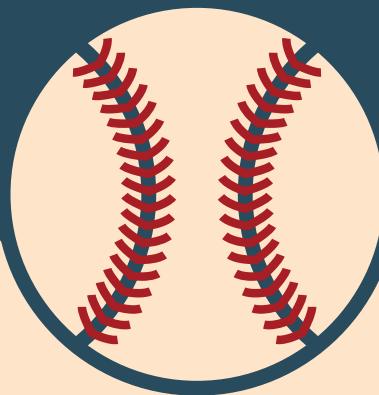
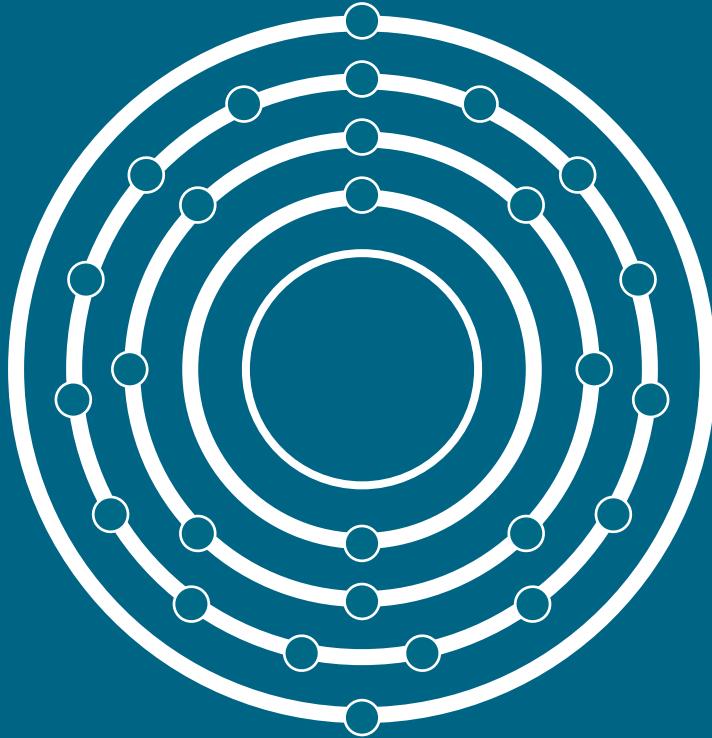


2016 COBALT REVIEW

BASEBALL



COBALT



2016 Baseball Issue

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2016 Earl Weaver Prize

Each of the nine authors included in this issue was selected as a semifinalist for the third annual Earl Weaver Baseball Prize (our fourth baseball prize, overall). Below are the finalist selections.

Liz Dolan, “Schizoid”

Christine Fadden, “Little League Girls”

Amy Miller, “Spring: A Catechism”

Kristina Moriconi, “A Daughter’s Guide to Baseball”

Philip Raisor, “Baseball Redivivus”

Congratulations to the finalists and semifinalists, and thank you to all who have submitted to this baseball issue and supported the Cobalt writing prizes these past five years. We look now toward the +GAMMA RAYS Book Prize and the December poetry issue.

Submissions for the 2017 Earl Weaver Prize will open in February.

Sincerely,

Andrew Keating
Chief Baseball Officer
Cobalt Review/Cobalt Press

Amy Miller

Spring: A Catechism

Baseball takes
as long as it takes.
An inning is like
reciprocal dinners: first
they eat, then we do.
The shortstop's throw
is a hairpin shape:
leg and arm
snap, a bow
of brittle energy.
A cloud pulls
shadows across the field.
We're all small,
sturdy animals stunned
by the April sun, wedged
hip on hip, peanut shells
all over our shoes. We watch
the men out there. We speak
their Spanish,
their Irish names,
speak their same
strange language:
Split-finger. Short porch.
Wheelhouse. Fly.

Liz Dolan

Schizoid

The Golden Age of Baseball.
Bronx kids worshipped
Dimaggio, Rizzuto, Berra.

A stone's throw south of the stadium
where my old man greened the grounds
we could hear the raucous cheers
of beer chugging fans
as we slammed spaldeens over backyard fences.

A traitor, my best buddy adored
Hodges, Robinson and Reese
though Brooklyn might have been Berlin
as we despised Nazis, Japs and the Brooklyn Bums.

Had her corkscrew curls radiated her alpha waves?

In college she accused *ME* of betraying her,
stealing her beau. Her beau?
We'd just met him at a dance three hours before.

Years later, with some loser, she followed her faithless team
to L.A., paid his way.
I begged her not to go.
That user didn't know what hit him.
She returned as whacked out as a foul ball.

She claimed her mother had her
mated with a bull, then sterilized.
Soon came the ceaseless midnight calls,
“Help me, they’re smashing my windows.
I’m being attacked.”

Watching the Dodgers lose on TV today,
I thought of her, ten years old,
hand on her hip, posing, mugging
in our outfield. Her Dodger cap a bit askew
and her Dodger tee bleached of its blue
which she wore until the seams split.

Christine Fadden

Little League Girls

Bob Boone came to the liquor store the summer I was eleven to sign autographs and give out little bats. I didn't care that two Phillies were supposed to come, but only Boone made it. After pitchers, I had a thing for catchers.

He was not only the first baseball player I saw live, but he talked to me longer than he talked to any of the boys who came in. The boys just asked him to sign things, shook his hand, and left. I hung out at his little card table while Uncle Max bought liquor for the party he was holding in honor of his marina's best sales year ever.

Boone asked me about my softball team, The Sandpipers, and what I liked best about pitching. I told him I liked everything about pitching, but that I'd think about what the very best part of it was, and if he'd give me his address, I would write him a letter. He gave me the team address in Philadelphia, and I did write him, and he did write me back. His letter was dated, in fact, just two days before the Phils took the World Series. I have valued ever since, a man with a lot at stake, taking the time to connect meaningfully like that.

I found out many years after my Boone encounter that my mother had made a photocopy of the letter I wrote him before she mailed it. She sent the copy to my grandmother, who locked it in the trunk of baseball treasures that became mine after my uncle's death, which was ten years prior to my grandmother's passing.

"My grandmother got me into baseball first," I told Bob Boone. "She's a true Phanatic."

"She should have come," he said.

"She likes the Big League all in her head. She's devoted to Harry Kalas, if you know what I mean."

"I do." He handed me a Phillies visor and told me to give it to my grandmother.

"My uncle set me up to play and now he tells me all the great stories. He was a great player himself." I told Bob Boone about Uncle Max's minor league career getting cut short because his first love drowned. "She drowned right in the bay here."

Boone frowned. "Sorry to hear that."

"He'll never marry another woman," I said. "Do you think that's sad?"

“It’s hard to say, isn’t it?”

“It is. He’s a pretty happy guy in general.”

“Does he come to your games?”

“Whenever he can. His business is super successful. He sells boats.”

“Well, if all goes well this season, I may be in the market for a new toy,” Boone said.

“I won’t jinx you, but I promise we’ll give you a great deal!”

Bob Boone laughed. A few fathers and sons came in and he signed away. I twirled my grandmom’s new Phillies visor around my finger and looked around for Uncle Max. Wait until I told him Bob Boone was going to buy a boat from him! I pictured Boone at the helm of the Trintella 38 that sat right in the middle of the showroom. I squinted right there in the liquor store, imagining all the chrome I’d have to triple-polish, so it would shine just as bright as the World Series ring that would undoubtedly soon grace Boone’s finger.

I eyed the way Boone signed his name. I noted the hair on his knuckles. I waited for the boy with the one whirllybird eye to shake Boone’s hand and walk away.

“My coach,” I said. “Coach Miller, said way back the game used to be played on a rectangle, like a football field. I don’t even get it.”

“The game was played wherever,” Boone said. “Until a guy named Cartwright came along. That’s when the infield took its diamond shape, and a batter got only three strikes, and then he was out.”

“How many strikes did players have before Cartwright?”

“None. The pitcher, who was called the feeder, threw until the batter, who was called the striker, decided he liked the pitch.”

“Wow,” I said. “People think baseball games are long now!”

Boone and I were sharing a big laugh on that one when Uncle Max finally rolled around with a cart full of rattling bottles.

“You must be Max,” Boone said.

The two shook hands and even though I knew my uncle was a happy guy in general and had a successful business selling boats, I felt right then, all his twenty years of regret. They joked about the Mets and the amount of liquor my uncle was buying, and then a serious looking guy came up to Boone and told him it was time to wrap things up.

“Nice to meet you both,” Boone said.

I shook his hand, like all the boys and my uncle had, and then I made a fist and punched his palm, which he caught, exactly like I wanted him to, like a fastball.

“Hey, Justine,” he said, as he passed us waiting in the cashier’s line. “Catch!”

I caught it.

“That’s Carlton’s April 26th one-hitter!” Boone said.

The ball that had been hit!

I stumbled out of that liquor store into the bright summer sun, punch drunk.

When Uncle Max dropped me back at Grandmom’s, I was surprised to find Amy sitting in the living room.

I was wearing the Phillies visor, and carrying the bats in one hand and the Carlton ball in the other. I quickly forced the ball into the back pocket of my shorts and gave Grandmom the visor and Amy one of the bats.

Grandmom said, “There are Popsicles in the freezer. Help yourselves.”

I led Amy into the kitchen. She twirled her bat like a baton, tossing it behind my head and catching it. “How was it?” she asked.

“Cool,” I said. “Cherry, grape, or orange?”

“No thanks.”

I chose cherry. Amy kept tossing the bat.

“Could you stop that? You might break something.”

She set the bat on the counter. She traced the “P” of the burnt-in Phillies logo with her finger several times. “Did you forget about me?” she said.

I chewed on the Popsicle and my molars squealed.

“You help your mom on Saturdays,” I said.

“It was Bob Boone,” Amy said.

I was trying to maneuver my way around the kitchen so that Amy didn’t ask to see the ball. I didn’t want to talk about the ball.

“He came by himself,” I said. “Well, there was this other guy, a manager or something. But Boone was the only Phillie.”

“To me, he is the only Phillie.”

“You can’t say that.”

“I said it. And I meant it. Did you get his autograph?”

“I did.” I showed her the liquor store postcard he had signed. Boone had perfect capital “B”s.

“Did you get two?”

“He was busy signing a lot of autographs.”

“And you only got one?” Amy picked up the tiny bat and started tapping the counter with it. “My

mom would have given me an hour to see Bob Boone. I told you that.”

“You didn’t tell me that, Amy. You said you’d ask your mom and then you never called. You didn’t say anything about it at Thursday’s game either.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” she said. “My number’s right here.” She pointed, with the bat, to The Sandpipers phone tree taped to the refrigerator door. I stuck Boone’s autograph next to it with a magnet.

“It’s for my grandmother.”

“I know your granny didn’t let you play with me all summer, except for on the field, but summer’s almost over and I thought maybe the rules would change. Talking to her just now, while you were talking to Boone, I made her like me.”

“She never hated you,” I said. “She doesn’t hate anybody.”

“She hates my mom, like everybody else does in this town.”

“No,” I said, “she’s just weird about the no-dads-around thing.”

“What’s she going to do when your dad leaves you?”

I picked up my bat and hit her bat with it. We played sword fight a little.

“Is he nice?” Amy asked.

“He’s strict,” I said.

“Boone?”

“I thought you were asking about my dad.”

“I don’t care about your dad.”

I frowned.

“Not to be mean, but he’s leaving you. Why should I care about him?”

We sat down on the stairs in the kitchen, both of us feeling defeated and rotten. I could feel Carlton’s ball about to rip out of my back pocket, but thought the sight of it would crush us. We wanted dads who could break records, or at least dads who would come to our games and see how good we were.

“My dad’s not so bad,” I said.

“No comment,” Amy said.

“I wouldn’t be here this summer if he wasn’t leaving. And we wouldn’t be friends.”

“Hah! Boone can sign his name on the tombstone of this friendship, for all I care.”

We were sitting so close I could feel Amy’s temperature rise.

“Remember how I told you Carlton rams his pitching fist into a bucket of rice?” I said. Nothing but the refrigerator made a sound. “I might start doing that.”

“Buried,” Amy said, and again the quiet. Except for now I could hear my grandmother in the living room, humming one of the war tunes my granddad used to sing, dedicated to all his dead friends.

Amy’s dad was dead, but I didn’t know the details. Dying to me was still an act I thought of as walking away until nobody could see you anymore. I pictured a hospital bed, with Amy on one side and her mother on the other, each holding one of Mr. Patterson’s hands. His leaving was long and drawn-out, so he got to apologize for the bad things, and tell them a whole bunch of loving things before taking his last breath. I had an after-school special image of it all. A nurse came in while Amy and her mother were still resting their heads on his finally unmoving chest; she put her unshaking nurse’s hand over Mr. Patterson’s open eyes and closed them. Of course, Amy’s dad hadn’t wanted to die. Her dad didn’t have a choice to leave, which made him different from my dad.

I wished I had called Amy. I went through the entire Boone conversation in my head, and realized I hadn’t even mentioned her to him—how she caught every single pitch I threw, chewed Topps gum and traded cards with me, and listened to me ramble on about baseball players and their crazy rituals. How she had dyed her hair blue, believing it would land her a spot on the All-Stars team. I could have asked him if he thought her mom was a little wild for letting her do that. I decided I would write an entire paragraph about Amy in my letter to him, leaving off the question about her mother.

“Boone was really nice,” I said. “He was bigger than I thought he’d be.”

Amy tried to balance the bat on end. It fell and we watched it roll across my grandmom’s slightly crooked kitchen floor until it hit the dry sink.

“So, he’s a fatbutt?”

“He’s taller than I pictured. And his fingers were bonier than I thought they’d be.”

“What’d you do, hold his hand?”

We laughed.

“By the way,” Amy said, “there’s a tumor the size of a baseball growing out of your butt.”

I pulled the ball from my back pocket and handed it to Amy.

“He didn’t sign it,” she said.

I shook my head. “He threw it to me.”

Amy rolled the ball in her hands, like my mom did making meatballs. I looked at the red stitches; I could see the mark in the white leather where Cardinal catcher Ted Simmons’ bat had made contact.

“Look,” I said, “you can have the ball.”

“No. It’s yours. You went.”

“I can think about him throwing it to me,” I said. “Forever. A catcher hit it. Our catcher carried it. It’s good luck for you to have it.”

“Don’t jinx it!”

Amy was wearing a sweatshirt. I shoved the ball in the front pouch. “I’ll pitch them all high and outside Tuesday if you don’t take the ball home with you.”

We sat on the stairs staring out the kitchen windows at the trees.

“I brought back the sweatshirt you lent my little brother,” Amy said.

“Boone’s from San Diego,” I said. “Isn’t that where Joey’s dad lives?”

“He lives in San Quentin.”

“Near Disneyland?”

Amy bonked me in the head with Carlton’s ball. “Dingaling,” she said, “San Quentin’s a maximum security prison near San Francisco. And get this, Number 9: he plays ball for the Giants.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m not stupid.”

“His prison team is called the Giants.”

A strange vision of murderers wearing baseball uniforms, standing on each other’s shoulders tall as giants and spilling over barbed prison fences played in my head. I was grateful when Grandmom walked into the kitchen and asked if we wanted lunch, because I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what crime Amy’s stepfather had committed, and was sure she would tell me.

“I can’t stay,” Amy said. “Weekends are busy.” She stood, took the ball out of her pocket, and tossed and caught it. “The third worst day of my life is now the best.”

I walked her to the front door and we talked about meeting early Tuesday to warm up for our last game. After she left, I went to the closet and pulled on my sweatshirt. It didn’t smell like Grandmom’s laundry room, but it was clean and I was glad to have it back.

My grandmother was at the stove making grilled cheese sandwiches.

“That ball,” I said, “was Carlton’s sixth one-hitter.”

She turned, spatula in hand, greasy cheese dripping from it to the floor.

“Bob Boone gave it to me. I gave it to Amy.”

“Justine Lincoln!” she said.

“Grandmom,” I said. “There’s a trunk full of balls upstairs in the closet. I saw who autographed them.”

My grandmother set the spatula on the counter. She came over and hugged me. “I hope you told Amy to lock that ball up for fifty years.”

“I haven’t told her the story yet.”

“I’d tell her soon, before she and little Joey play catch with it.”

“I want to wait until the last day of summer.”

“Why, it’s almost here, Teeny.”

Teeny Lincoln
114 R _____ Drive
Wilmington, DE

October 11, 1980

Dear Mr. Boone,

I hope you remember me. I introduced myself to you in August, when you were signing autographs all by yourself at the B _____ Liquor Store in M _____, New Jersey. I'm still a Lincoln, even though my parents are getting divorced, like I told you they were going to. My dad is moving to Florida. The only reason I'll visit him there is because he promised to take me to Spring Training. If he doesn't take me, I will:

1. Never visit him again
2. Change my last name to Carter

So just in case we turn into pen pals and my dad breaks his promise, please remember not to throw out letters that come to you from a Delaware girl named Justine Carter.

I've thought a lot about the question you asked me the one I promised to answer. (When you write back, you could tell me what you like best about catching.) I told you already I like facing the girls who I can't let beat me. I told you I like how I feel my teammates' nerves all around me, but can't feel my own in the center of the diamond. I told you that even though the mound isn't that high in my league, and I usually try to hide my height, with that little bit of extra dirt and rubber under my feet, my muscles and bones feel wider. It's a lot to love, pitching. So your question wasn't easy. But see, hard questions are best for me.

What I like best above all about pitching is what I know because of my grandmom and uncle telling me about all the people who pitched before me, how this is a position full of ghosts and even though everyone thinks ghosts are shifty and see-through like fog, pitcher ghosts pin me to solid ground and the planet stops spinning and even though it's against the rules to pitch a curveball or a fastball or a knuckle ball in girls' slow pitch softball, it's not the rules that make me not want to pitch those pitches. I LIKE BEST of all, life slowing down.

My grandmother doesn't come to my games because the bleachers are too hard but when I'm standing in the center of the diamond I believe my 10-13 year old girls' little league softball game is being broadcast ghost speed straight to her ears by Harry Kalas and even though she never cheers an inch when he announces your guys' great plays, when I throw a strike, my grandmother stands from her recliner and does the dance I saw her do once, the day my uncle opened his trunk full of baseball treasures.

Get me? I'm asking because I wrote my stupid "What I Did Over Summer Break" paper for my new teacher and she told me ghosts weren't real, so I shouldn't write about them. Also, she told me pitching wasn't ALL I did over the summer, and so my paper was marked down for being INCOMPLETE. Playing ball is COMPLETE as it gets, lady!

Anyway, school is boring. Next subject!

As you know, you are probably going to win the World Series this year, and my Uncle Max, who you know was a great player before Mindy Applebaum (RIP) died, bought us really great seats for the first game. The bad news is my grandmother is stubborn. She says even the best seats in Veteran's Stadium are too hard for her, so the good news is I get to invite my summer best friend, Amy Patterson. Her mom already said it's okay.

Amy is catcher for The Sandpipers. We are more than just a great pair as pitcher and catcher. Amy is this girl who is braver than me, even though she should be more afraid, because her dad is dead. She always tells the truth too, probably because her mom got accused of doing something she didn't do and so Amy knows the value of truth and how hard it is to come by as much as I do but for different reasons, which makes us a real duo to try to pull one over on. Plus, Amy speaks the Chinese language. I'll ask her how to say 32, and tell you how in my next letter. Also, she dyed her hair blue for luck getting on the All-Star team and it worked. My mother will croak, but now I'm thinking of dyeing my hair red and green this December anyway just to shock my teachers. Nuns aren't teachers, don't you agree? They're angry all the time because only God loves them, and he isn't a human. God is spread out in all the trees and animals and sometimes the wind.

Don't curse the wind when you play ball. (That's a joke for you! I hope it makes you laugh the way you laughed when I said the thing about baseball being a slow game, which I don't care if it is and don't think it is, but that's probably what makes a joke a joke.)

Anyway, Amy is coming to the game with us and I hope this doesn't make you mad, but

remember you threw me Carlton's sixth one-hitter ball, and I caught it? Amy should have caught that ball because she is a catcher and YOU were catching the day Carlton made that statistic and I didn't call her that day to come to the liquor store because I thought she was working. Don't worry, her mother doesn't use her as slave labor, but she does need the help because one husband is dead and the other one lives in San Quentin. He did some bad stuff and Grandmom said it's nobody's business, but I'll tell you this—he plays baseball in the jail yard. I hope it makes him a better man even though I'm not sure Amy is allowed to ever see him again. Or if she wants to, for a bunch of reasons I can't share with you. But mainly, I'm not sure not having any dad is better than not having a real dad. Do you have children?

Amy is brave and honest but she can be cranky about men, probably because of the double-dads-no-dad thing I mentioned above. Which is why I gave her the Carlton ball that you touched. Plus, my uncle has a bunch from my grandfather and they're really mine, because my uncle is sick with a big heart and he won't ever be an old man. I have a lot of famous balls to look forward to.

And now Amy has one, and I hope when we come to the game you'll see me in my very good seat (remember, I have the frizzy red afro and I'm very tall!) and you'll autograph that ball. I wouldn't ask you to do this favor for me but it's a favor for my best summer friend who is a catcher like you and who needs to know AS SOON AS POSSIBLE there is one hero in the world, so please when you are running back to the dugout, look for us.

CHEERS!

Justine "Teeny" Lincoln-Carter

It was easy to understand, when I got to the ballpark that Tuesday morning before anyone else did, how the only sport in the world where the defense has the ball, teaches its disciples when to hold and when to let go. Holding the ball in my pitching hand inside my glove, bringing the glove to the tip my nose, eyeing over the edge of my glove the opponent at the plate, taking one step back as my left arm swung down and behind me, and choosing the very second to let that ball roll from the cup of my hand to the last nerve in my fingers, away from me—I was fully present for every single pitch.

Even with two bleachers full of cheering parents and siblings, the throngs of summer tourists parading past the outfield fence, and facing mean Jackie Murray at bat—for a certain moment in time on the crazy spinning planet I shared with starving girls in Africa and people doing The Hustle on

rollerskates and men playing ball in San Quentin, I was unshakable.

I was stretching on the mound when Amy showed up. She waved, dusted off home plate with her hand, and began her own series of stretches. The day was slightly overcast, which to me was always a welcome break in the summer. The day of our last Sandpipers game, Amy and I were the only two humans on any of the fields. I looked at the sky, Amy took her position, and then I pitched one overhand to break the silence.

“You know your granny’s Plank crush?” Amy said.

“It’s not a real crush. Plank lived in different era than her.”

“Eras don’t make a difference. Elvis is way dead, but I still have a crush on him.”

“Elvis was gross,” I said.

“You obviously never saw him in *Flaming Star*.”

“Is this what you and my grandmom talked about—crushes on dead guys?”

“Baseball, what else?” Amy said. “So Plank was a great pitcher, but a shitty hitter.”

I threw a wild pitch and made Amy scramble.

“You know Carlton won’t bat in this year’s World Series because of Plank and the guy who was his coach when the Phillies were the Athletics. Designated hitters sub for pitchers on even years in the World Series. It’s a rule that changes depending on the league, but that’s why Carlton won’t hit in this World Series, because coaches got tired of seeing their best pitchers flail around at the plate.”

“I can pitch and hit,” I said. “Carlton can too. And I’m sure Plank wasn’t all that bad.”

“*Not all that bad* in the Big Leagues has nothing to do with us,” Amy said. “Plank had a .233 batting average and Carlton batted .223 last year—even worse! It’s a known fact: pitchers can’t bat. Statistics are facts.”

“Have you ever *seen* statistics?” I said. “My uncle has these magazines that are thicker than phone-books.”

“I’m going to study statistics in college,” Amy said.

“College? How do you know?”

“My mom told me to start planning now.”

“Your mom? Really?”

“Your granny has so many numbers in her head,” Amy said. “I’m surprised she taught English and not math.”

“She taught both. History too. She does the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle in one sitting.”

Amy gestured to her water jug over on the bench. We jogged to it, sat down and split it. I pulled a bag of oranges out of my backpack and we started in on those.

“I told your granny I never knew anyone with so many books. Know what she said?”

“Not to call her ‘granny’?”

“What’s the matter with the word ‘granny’?”

“It’s too old for her.”

“Well, your grandmom, who I always call Mrs. Carter, said I can come over starting in September, Joey too, and she’ll help us with our homework.”

I looked out across the parking lot, straining to see the boardwalk. I scratched at the bench Amy and I were sitting on. “Won’t your mom have time to help you after tourist season dies?”

“She’s got steady office cleaning gigs year-round,” Amy said. “Summer she works way overtime, that’s when she needs me and Joey to pitch in.”

I stood up from the bench. My grandmom was right, game seating was not comfortable. I rubbed my butt then leaned against the metal fence and bounced from it. “You guys should study with my grandmom. She’ll like that.”

Amy stood and punched my arm. I pulled out some TOPPS cards and split the gum.

“Hey,” I said. I made our secret “warning” sign with my pitching hand. “My grandmom loves turning people into nerds. She made my mom and Uncle Max nerds. I hope I recognize you next summer.”

“Very funny.” Amy was flipping through the cards I gave her.

“Any good ones?” I said.

“All Astros and Bluejays.”

“Toss ‘em,” I said. “The Bluejays aren’t even American.”

We watched as the parking lot filled. Girls in orange Sandpipers’ uniforms spilled out of cars with a few parents and siblings. Coach Muldoon, Coach Miller, and Danielle showed up. After we unloaded all the equipment, Coach gave his first pep talk of the last game. We had come a long way, had our best season in many a year, and should all feel very proud. A great American tradition was being carried out. We had played fair and square and were to take lessons learned on the field back to our classrooms. Didn’t we now all have something to write our “What we did over summer break” first essays on? And then he told Amy and me to warm up another ten minutes on the side of the field. Amy asked me to pitch her a few bouncers, so she could practice blocking.

“I don’t know your mom,” she said, “but your uncle isn’t a nerd. He played ball and now he walks around in shorts and t-shirts for a living.”

“Uncle Max? He’s Richie and The Fonz rolled into one.”

“That’s what my dad was,” Amy said. “He was an engineer and racecar driver.”

So maybe Amy’s father hadn’t died in a fuzzy after-school special manner after all, but instantly,

in a fiery car wreck. Or maybe he had been a skyscraper engineer and had fallen hundreds of stories. Didn't engineers design fabric, like the stretchy kind our uniforms were made of? I'd heard of food engineers. Electrical engineers. Mechanical.

"What does an engineer do?" I asked Amy.

"My dad designed cities and towns. He was in charge of traffic lights."

I imagined Amy's father sitting at a desk facing a wall of blinking red, green, and yellow pegs, working under the glow of one massive Lite-Brite screen all day.

"How did he die?"

"He was standing in a construction zone telling these guys how to fix a dangerous intersection up in North Jersey. A driver hit him."

"Heads up!" Coach Miller yelled, but not in time. A foul ball came whizzing towards us, hitting Amy to the ground. Coach started to jog over from left field. I ran to Amy. Our team started towards us but Coach, huffing through the infield, shouted, "Girls, as you were!"

Then he turned on a dime jogging toward the parking lot. "Ice and the First Aid Kit! They're in my car."

Amy was in the grass cursing.

"You would have caught that one easy in a game," I said.

"I'm tired," Amy said, lying back in the grass. "I can't play this game."

"It's our last game," I said. "You have to play. Paula couldn't catch a bowling ball if it rolled down the gutter at her."

"My head feels like a bowling ball."

"It does not. That ball hit you in the shoulder!"

"You don't get it. I'm the only girl on this team who has a summer job. It's illegal; I'm twelve. And I don't even get any money. We never have any money."

She was right: I didn't get it. Why did Amy's mom have to clean rich peoples' summer homes for a living? She'd been married to an engineer racecar driver. Racecar driving was no cheap hobby and engineers were planners. I knew that much, and I knew that even men who weren't engineers bought life insurance for their family, so in case they died unexpectedly, everyone could still eat three square meals a day, go to private school, and have canopy beds plus horseback riding lessons. Joey's dad probably had a job before he went to jail, and sometimes bad guys made more money than good guys. My own father said that.

"It's a joke, college. There's no way I'll be able to pay for it," Amy was saying. "Why dream? Who am I kidding? It's a rat race, this world! I'm done for. I might as well buy a lifetime supply of rubber

gloves. It's toilets for me, Number 9. Til the day I die."

I almost told Amy she should consider an acting career, but she really did not seem in the mood to joke around. I was relieved when Coach returned. I put the ice on my head as Coach helped Amy to sitting position.

"Where's it hurt now?" he said.

"Everywhere."

"Where'd the ball hit? It's likely to bruise."

"My shoulder. The one you just made hurt worse by touching it!"

"I can take care of this, Coach," I said. I pressed the ice to Amy's shoulder.

He patted me on the back and went to do the same to Amy, but she flinched and put her hand on mine, over the ice pack I was holding against her. When coach walked away, she slouched over her legs. She threw her hat off in the grass by her feet. Strands of her long brown hair fell forward and stuck to the thin layer of sweat on her face.

"What does Coach think he is, a surgeon?" she said.

"He knows the Sandpipers are a team that can play together. He knows you and me are Carlton and Boone."

"We're stupid girls," Amy said. "Even if we do make it to college, we'll still be stupid women. Look at my mom."

I unraveled the Ace bandage and began wrapping it around the ice pack around Amy's shoulder. What really happened to women left on their own? Did it mean no more tennis camps in North Carolina, or scrubbing strangers' toilets? Was it that extreme? What job skills did Mom have? She had a certificate from a two-year college, but in ceramics. And she hated doing windows. Every time the woman on the Windex commercial said, "I don't do windows," Mom shouted, "You tell 'em, sister!"

My head was supposed to be in our last game, not spiraling into visions of my mother hanging off the side of some big city skyscraper, an enormous squeegee in one hand, an industrial sized bottle of Windex in the other, washing windows in a state of self-indignation and rage. I plopped down in the dirt next to Amy.

"So your mom went to college?"

"Sure. But after my dad died she married Joey's dad and didn't notice he was stealing all our money. Smart, huh?"

"Is stealing why your stepdad went to jail?"

"Murder, mostly."

I buried my face in my glove.

“He bought guns with our money. Sold them to mobsters. Killed a bunch. He’s in San Quentin because he’d be snuffed in a second flat anywhere on the east coast. They changed his face and everything. He looks like Liza Minnelli now for all we know.”

It felt like Amy had been waiting her whole life to tell somebody her stories, even though the locals knew most everything. But me, I hadn’t known. And I wanted to talk more about our mothers, but we had a game to play.

“He might look like Elvis,” I said. “Joey’s dad.”

Amy laughed and pulled her legs into her body.

“Disgusting,” she said. “Point is, I hate North Jersey and I hate Joey’s father.”

“You can’t hate North Jersey: baseball was born there.”

“Baseball is just a dream,” Amy said. “Another dream where girls aren’t invited.”

Amy stood and brushed the grass off her butt. I stood too, and grabbed her arm. “I was going to save this for the last day of summer,” I said. “But I have something to tell you.”

“Whatever it is, I’m not playing.”

“You know the ball I gave you?”

Amy put her hands on her hips. “You want it back? Fine.”

“No, I don’t want it back. That ball isn’t just a ball.”

“Oh, please. Don’t start making things up now, Number 9. You’re the only one around here who doesn’t make things up.”

I had made a few things up that summer. I had fibbed to my grandmother, and had plans up my sleeve for my parents. Lies, I was starting to believe, might keep people together.

“Carlton threw that ball to Boone in April,” I said.

“Carlton throws a lot of balls to Boone,” she said.

“April 26th. Ring a statistics bell?”

“I never said I was a statistics expert now. Which is why I’m going to study with your grandmom.”

“Carlton threw that ball to Boone on April 26th, but Boone didn’t catch it because the Cardinals’ catcher, Ted Simmons, hit it. In the second inning.”

“Did he hit a Grand Slam?”

“Even better.”

“Not much beats a catcher hitting a Grand Slam.”

“That was the only hit of the game. It was Carlton’s sixth one-hitter!”

“And he gave the ball to Boone?”

I nodded.

“Why didn’t he keep it? A one-hitter is a big deal to a pitcher.”

I put my arm around Amy’s shoulders and turned her toward the infield. “They’re teammates.”

Amy put her arm around my waist. “Nah,” she said. “Carlton gave it away because he’s so good. He knows he’ll throw plenty more amazing balls.”

“Amazing balls,” I said, grabbing my crotch. “Get it?”

We walked back to the bench, joined at the hip, laughing and tugging at our crotches. Coach Miller looked at us like he’d had all he could take for one summer.

Gerald Harris

Home Run

Teetering between triumph and disaster
the pitcher, in brief supplication,
swings up his arms
then propels, with hope and hate,
his challenge to the crouching batsman.

As, with unseeable speed, a cobra
strikes its fangs into helpless prey,
the batter's arms uncoil and
the bat, in arching descent,
flashes across the plate,
arrests in mid-flight the twirling orb
and stuns it with venomous fury.

Then, like a fatally stung rabbit,
the ball streaks away in blurred flight
until it loses breath
and drops among the multitude of cupped hands
which, like the mouths of imploring eaglets,
open to be fed.

Its charge spent, the bat is tossed away
and snakes across the grass
as the batter, fist raised and
with an exultant grin,
moves at the pace of suppressed joy
around the bases and
trots haughtily home.

C.B. Bernard

Bottom of the Ninth

They were well into their forty-ninth year together when my grandmother mistook my grandfather for Babe Ruth. Oh, there had been other “incidences of confusion,” as her doctor called them—spreading cream cheese on the paperweight, calling the television repairman when she couldn’t get a picture on the microwave—but this was, somehow, momentous.

She was *literary*, my grandfather was fond of saying. He meant she liked to read. All those years waiting up for him to return from late night trips with his band? She spent them in Juliet’s garden in Verona, expecting Romeo; they’d wait together. Or in Dante’s Inferno with Francesca and Paolo. Or traipsing through the countryside on horseback with Tristram and Isolde. With such a litany of characters loose in her mind, why she chose the Sultan of Swat never was clear.

My grandparents married young. That was common among the second-generation Italians working the textile mills in Lawrence. I asked her once, when she was still lucid and I was still in grammar school, how they met. She told me they’d lined up boys on one side of the street and girls on the other, and let the boys pick. She’d been the last one remaining, she said, and my grandfather was stuck with her. I told her that was how they picked teams at school, in gym class; that without fail, I was among the last chosen, the unwanted. We could commiserate, my grandmother and I.

My grandfather played music with his three brothers and a handful of friends. Swing was king then, and they drove all night to play New England, in dance halls, auditoriums, gymnasiums and hotel lobbies. He worked days, too, shoveling tar or mowing municipal lawns for the city just a few hours after rolling back into town from a dance. My grandmother, left home alone, or later with their two children, would simmer sauce over the hot stove as she hummed to herself, tend roses in the narrow garden hemmed by the walkway along the length of their tenement building, or read. Maybe in those long hours she’d found another hobby to pass the time. I imagine her curled on her rocking chair, knitting, her small collection of Shakespeare piled lovingly on the table beside her. A lamp burns over her shoulder, gleaming off the linoleum of the floor she waxed that evening. A transistor radio on the bookshelf plays the ballgame, batter by batter, from Fenway Park. My grandfather was a Red Sox fan, and for a decade after his wife’s death he sat in front of the television in that very rocking

chair, shaking his head sadly as they broke his heart one piece and one season at a time. He died a few years before they won it all, but the shock might have killed him anyway. And my grandmother? Maybe tuning into the broadcasts while he was on the road reminded her of him. Maybe the presence of Fenway's nine helped fill the absence of my grandmother's one.

By the time anyone thought to ask her, it was too late.

The Alzheimer's worsened with the years, compounded by Parkinson's disease. Cancer took its bite, too. The physical and the mental became inseparable. She died by inches as I grew up. Halfway through my time in high school she'd dropped below eighty pounds, and she had stopped recognizing almost everyone. Her two daughters became, to her, indistinguishable from the nurses who frequented her home to help my grandfather bathe and feed her. But I was a holdout even then. Something about the days I'd spent on her lap as she rocked in that old chair reading me verse after verse of *Othello* or *The Tempest* had drawn us close, and months after everyone else became faceless to her, I was still there. She remembered me.

That, too, changed. And she too became unrecognizable. Her shock of white hair grew matted and wild, as her face, like her body, wrinkled like a raisin beneath it. Her eyes were mostly liquid by then, and she was, in her hospital johnny and slippers, as much a part of that bed as the mattress or the headboard, or the safety rails that ran the length of it. She remained in their little apartment for as long as my grandfather could muscle it. We knew that eventually he would move her up the hill to Bon Secours Hospital, and that would be that.

He held out as long as he could. He did his damndest, carrying her to the bathroom, changing IVs, keeping schedule with the roster of pills and liquids she needed. But her illness took its toll on him too, and even with constant help, it was too much. He all but killed himself over her.

Which is why it came as a surprise to him when, shortly after midnight on a cool, late-summer Tuesday the week she would be moved to the hospital, she said to him: "I know you."

He stopped by her bedside, his sleeping mask propped on top of his head, the elastic tight in his hair. His eyes were red—they always were in those days. He'd woken her for her Parkinson's pills, blue ovals the size of a pen cap. Horse pills.

"Of course you do, dear," he said. "Open your mouth."

"I know who you are," she insisted. She lay still, her body too fragile for motion, as if all the muscle and meat had burned away, even the bone, and all that remained beneath the leather of her skin was the heat of disease. "Where were you last weekend?"

He stared at her, his arthritic hands trembling slightly around the pill vial. "Dear?"

“Bottom of the ninth, one on, Red Sox down by two. I listened for you,” she said. “We all did.”

Over the months of the illness's grip on his wife, my grandfather had grown accustomed to her lapses. But this, he told me, confused him. She sounded so clear. So lucid. So sincere.

“Where were you?” she asked him. “The clown they had batting fouled out on his first swing. Nothing like you, Mr. Ruth.”

“Mr. Ruth?” He spilled a little water on her as he bent closer to her face.

“King of the diamond, Sonny Boy. I was yelling for them to play you. Damn fools. The Sox could have used you. The Yankees won.”

Dumbfounded, my grandfather squinted at his wife in the darkness, his brow furrowed.

“Anyway, I just wanted to tell you. I remembered. It was after the game, but I remembered.”

“Remembered what?” he asked, tentatively.

“I remembered that you were traded.”

“You did?”

“Yes. And that's why you didn't play,” she said, her voice, already husky with the cancer, growing sad. My grandfather leaned closer as she whispered conspiratorially. “I wanted to tell you,” she said “It's okay.”

“It is?”

“Sure. People remember you, Babe. You played right,” she said, wincing with the effort. “Nobody hit that ball like you. And that's what matters.”

She closed her eyes as my grandfather smiled. She smiled back as he closed his gentle fist around the vial, sliding it back into his pocket without opening it. He leaned over the bed, putting his hands on the mattress for support, and kissed her cool forehead.

Years later, I imagine her still in her rocking chair keeping time, listening to the baseball game on the radio, inning by inning, while my grandfather drives somewhere in the New England darkness, thinking of her.

And somewhere else entirely, Babe Ruth swings his heavy bat and pokes another ball through the firmament.

Philip Raisor

Baseball Redivivus

And so it's a game, a game, of course, kids, old men,
winners/losers, a legacy of raked dirt, niche grass
from a boutique, spit (unbalanced ratio of tobacco
to gas), and rules you couldn't auction off at a yard sale.

Nine innings of no-seeums. Learning to stand alone.
Counting perforations in a catcher's mask. Hearing silence
like dollar bills in a stacked pack. Sun in your eyes
and rain-outs with big halting hands like a gatekeeper

for a dying soldier. You can never hit like DiMaggio, catch
like Mays, steal like Henderson, pitch like Clemens, or
twist, soar, smash walls like the new kid Harper. Never,
without transmogrification, will you make the Hall of Fame.

Yet, as a kid, started there, you fondled a ball—breast,
word to shut up your sister—and possibilities corkscrewed
into a new world, you in headlines, you in Ebbets Field,
you on the wind that made flags sing anthems. All-star,

name-dropper, brand, your own line of radial tires,
and when you fired at a target it attached, bulls-eye,
winked back with the promise that you'd be a grown man,
all before you could master the head-first into second,

the muff, the relay, the backdoor slider. Losing hung on like stickum: only four wins on the mound in Little League, .198 clean-up for the high school High Raiders. You heard the shouts: *Give it up! Peckerhead! Squatter! Freak!*

Yet, not once did you lose, really lose, the juice in the jambo, ghost in the gizzard, fire in the fiddle. Tagged out on a run-down, you had ten seconds in-between to spin, dart, fake, dance the do-dad before the seed-head planted you hard.

How could you plummet to last place in the final game of your semi-pro career by dropping a pop fly at the highest note of *It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday?* With laughter, a hardy tour around the outfield, high-fives,

and it worked, all the preparation, resiliency, toughened you for the mill, the graveyard shift, routine lumbering of snakes across the sky, long hours of rusting winters, dreams like broken ankles. You could have quit, punched out early, left

kids in the muck, but here's what you learned: you had no list to present at the Pearly Gate. It didn't matter, really. You were born to the schedule, the teams were set, you would lose in the end. But you could, your choice,

play out the last game of the season. Think about it: your father shot himself, not you. Tsunami's happened elsewhere. Your grandchild, they say, looks like Koufax. Joy is a fastball, brief, present. It smells like it didn't sleep.

KRISTINA (AS CHILD)	DP 6-4-3
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DP

Double Play: *The act of making two outs during the same continuous playing action. Also referred to as “turning two.”*

I grow up believing my father always wanted a son. He never admits that, but I sometimes sense his disappointment. Perhaps that is why, as his firstborn daughter, I assume the role of tomboy, try so hard to impress him, to be both a daughter he loves as if she were a son and a daughter he loves because she is his daughter—a double child.

On opening day each baseball season, my father drives to Fernrock Station in Philadelphia and we take the subway to Veterans Stadium. The round concrete structure is a vertical maze. We climb the endless ramps together, side by side; for each of his steps, I take two.

I can recite the entire Phillies line-up. I collect and catalogue the players’ baseball cards. I try to memorize the batting records on the back of each one.

As we leave for the game, I pull my hair up in a ponytail, slip it through the space in the back of my bright red Phillies cap. My Tug McGraw t-shirt hangs almost to my knees.

I imagine what it might be like to be a boy, to be my father’s son. Sometimes, in front of the mirror, I tuck my ponytail up inside my cap, look at myself in profile. I stop smiling. This works until I hit puberty. Changes start happening then and I am unhappy, begin fidgeting in my girl-body, caught somewhere in between. A boy at school calls me flat-chested. I don’t care. We flip baseball cards on the sixth-grade steps and I win, take the pile of his cards and walk away.

On our way into the stadium, my father buys a program, a foldout scorecard in the center. Patiently, he teaches me how to keep score. For offense, I learn to draw a symbol for a single, a double, a triple, a homerun. And a list of abbreviations for other plays: walks, strikeouts, runs batted in.

I commit it all to memory.

For defense, when our team takes the field, there is a number assigned to each position. I can’t wait to call the defensive plays, stringing together the right combination of numbers. 6-4-3, I shout when the batter on the opposing team hits into a double play.

My father smiles, pats me on the shoulder whenever I get it right.

KRISTINA'S				3B
GRANDFATHER				

3B

Triple: *The act of a batter safely reaching third base after hitting the ball, with neither the benefit of a fielder's misplay nor another runner being put out on a fielder's choice.*

Philadelphia is my father's city. It was his father's city and his father's before that.

I long for somewhere else. But I have made a life for myself here. My roots run deep along this city's rivers and creeks, its cobblestone streets, its bridges and seaports and baseball stadiums.

One of the only photographs I have of my father's father is of his baseball team. The name on their uniforms: Scanlon. The date at the bottom has faded. My grandfather is seated on the lower right, his feet crossed, his face darkened by the shadow of his cap's brim.

I search for information on Scanlon, wanting to know more—where they played their home games, what position my grandfather played. I find only Boger Field in Kensington, at East Tioga and I Streets. It is Scanlon Playground today.

I picture my grandfather as a catcher with a great arm, throwing out runners who try to steal second. Signaling the pitcher. Grabbing foul balls.

That is the position I played. That is three generations of great arms.

KRISTINA'S				HR
FATHER				

HR

Home Run: *Scored when the ball is hit in such a way that the batter is able to circle the bases and reach home safely in one play without any errors being committed by the defensive team in the process.*

We sit in the same section every time: orange seats on the first base side. During the seventh inning stretch we get hotdogs and sodas and peanuts. My father shows me how to crack open the shells with one hand so I don't have to put my soda down on the ground. He takes long drags from his cigarette, blows the smoke up and away from my seat.

On the way home, the movement of the subway lulls me to sleep. I lean against my father's arm.

In the car, I stay awake, replaying the entire game with him. In our best Harry Kalas voices, we announce the play-by-play. Swing...and a long drive, this ball is outta here! In a haze of his cigarette smoke, we speak in what feels like our own secret language.

We reach home safely.

VETERANS STADIUM					3-3 FO
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FO

Force Out: *The putout of a base runner who is forced to go to the next base.*

In March 2004, amidst a crowd of thousands along Pattison Avenue, I await the detonation of Veterans Stadium, home to the Phillies since 1971. Home to the 1980 World Series team.

Beside my father, I had watched so many games inside those giant walls. And now I watch as helicopters hover above. Television trucks swarm the streets. And people snap last minute photographs before the old concrete relic is reduced to a pile of debris. Ash.

On either side of the stadium, two brand new structures that will replace it: Citizens Bank Park for baseball and Lincoln Financial Field for football. The sleek modern design of the new makes the old Vet look archaic. I glance over at those stadiums, and I wonder if either one might ever mean as much to me as the Vet. I wonder if the Phillies will ever bring another World Series win to this city.

And I wonder why I've come here, why I have chosen to witness this destruction.

Veterans Stadium takes one final breath.

I push out a long sigh. And, in just sixty-two seconds, a part of my history collapses inward like a domino spiral, leaving at its center a heap of crushed concrete and twisted metal. We are forced to go forward.

A large cloud of dust drifts north toward where I stand.

The voice of a sports announcer echoes along Broad Street: Ladies and gentlemen, you have just witnessed history. In the distance, someone plays Taps on a trumpet.

Walking back to my car, I cry. Hard. For the orange seats and the scoreboard and the hotdog stand. For my father and for everything I know now: there are things I cannot change and there are things I cannot keep from changing.

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES							F09
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F

Foul Pop or Fly: *A hit in foul territory that is in play and can be caught for an out.*

It rains the day my husband and I take my father to Citizens Bank Park. But the game goes on.

We sit down along the field in a wheelchair-accessible box.

The rain stops and starts. Then there is a downpour that soaks us, floods the area where we are sitting. Empty bottles and trash float on the rising rainwater around our feet.

We don't care. The day is magic.

The catcher from the other team hands my father a foul ball. He grips it tightly in his right hand. And, tucked into the constricted fist of his left hand, paralyzed by a stroke, is a red bandana. His Phillies talisman.

There is no way for me to know then that this will be our last baseball game together.

KRISTINA'S PARENTS							K
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K

Strike Out: Put a batter out (or be put out) from play as a batter by means of three strikes.

Before Veterans Stadium was built in 1971, the Phillies played at Shibe Park, known later as Connie Mack Stadium. I know my father went there as a kid. I remember him talking about the rooftop bleacher seats and the "spite fence" along 20th Street. But I wish now that I could ask him to tell me more, that I could hear the sound of his voice again and listen more closely.

It is impossible when my parents are still alive to know how much I will miss their stories. How pieces will be forgotten, will leave me feeling empty and untethered.

This strikes me.

PARALYZING STROKE									PS
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PS

Passed Ball: *When a catcher fails to hold or control a legally pitched ball that, with ordinary effort, should have been maintained under his control, and, as a result of this loss of control, the batter or a runner on base advances.*

I arrive at my parents' house to find my father on the floor, his left leg twisted, pinned between his bed and wheelchair.

He asks me to lift him, to pick him up, to put him back in bed so we can pretend he hasn't fallen at all. He begs me. But he is six feet tall, outweighs me by at least eighty pounds.

I dial 9-1-1.

He seems angry at first. His forehead creases. His eyes dart back and forth. I apologize more than once then fold myself onto the floor beside him. I lay down facing my father, eye to eye, so he cannot help but look at me. I extend my hand toward his and he reaches out, squeezes my fingers. He does not let go.

I try to distract him. Challenge him: Remember that 1980 Phillies team, Dad? Think you can name all the players?

Mike Schmidt, he says first. Greg Luzinski. Tug McGraw. He goes on to name the entire line-up.

The paramedics arrive just as he finishes the list.

I stand out of the way as two men in uniforms hoist my father onto a gurney on the count of three. He winces. Cries out. Don't drop me, he says, more than once. With his right hand, he clenches the sleeve of one paramedic's jacket, his nails scraping against the heavy nylon.

Both men reassure him: We won't drop you, sir, one says. Relax, you don't have to worry about a thing, the other says, wiping sweat from my father's face.

I don't let him see me cry. I don't want him to know the sadness I feel in having no control.

I climb into the ambulance and listen to the wail of the siren as we speed through intersections. I watch as the two men begin assessing their patient: blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen saturation. Caucasian male, mid-fifties, one announces into the radio transmitter.

LASTING MEMORIES											2
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RBI

Run Batted In: *A statistic in baseball that credits a batter for making a play that allows a run to be scored.*

My father dies on September 10, 2008.

In the beginning of October, the Phillies make it to the post-season. They keep winning.

Game 5 of the World Series is played in Philadelphia on a Monday night. My husband gets tickets and the two of us go. After the top of the sixth inning, the game is suspended due to rain. By then, the infield looks like a lake.

Rain continues to fall through Tuesday so the game is postponed until Wednesday night. We return to Citizens Bank Park, the score tied, 3-3.

Pat Burrell doubles to CF. Pedro Feliz singles up the middle and records an RBI to put the Phillies ahead 4-3.

In my right hand I wave the rally towel that's been handed out at the door. In my left hand, I squeeze my father's red bandana. I scream as loud as I can. And, quietly, I call the plays like my father taught me. Our secret language returns so readily.

I think about how my father led me to this passion. How every memory of baseball I have is a memory of him. Even now. Even without him here.

Relief pitcher, Brad Lidge, gives up a single [1B] and a stolen base [SB] but is able to strike out [K] another batter for the last out of the game.

4-3 is the final score.

KRISTINA (AS ADULT)											U3
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3U

Unassisted Triple Play: *Occurs when a defensive player makes all three putouts by himself in one continuous play, without his teammates making any assists. This extraordinary and rare play has only*

occurred fifteen times in MLB history.

It is easy to conjure the traditional baseball scene: A father playing catch with his son. So as a young girl there was a lot I thought I needed to prove. I practiced for hours. I played hard. I rolled a baseball around on my palm, ran my fingers over the raised red stitches. Counted them until I reached 108. Sometimes, at night, I fell asleep with my hand inside my leather glove.

As a woman, I struggle still with the idea that I somehow disappointed my father. But I know I tried to make him proud of me. I never stopped trying.

In my mind, there are flashes of memory, of constant motion out on that schoolyard field: my father lobbing pitches to me, the swing of my bat, the arc or bounce of every hard-hit ball. My body, lean and fast, rounding the bases.

Ashton Kamburoff

Tagging Up

In the mustard-stained face of a boy
rounding second base, I see you,
Whitman. No longer the ghost

dressed in burlap rags, you sport
summer league attire: cotton knee-
highs, fractured trading cards hidden

in cleats. I think of you now, running
wide beyond base paths of a sandlot
in Brooklyn, crossing left field's foul

line where your America began
as chalk-marked grass and bleachers,
empty between seasons. Turning

to climb the chain-link diamond
in laughter, Whitman, I wait for
you on outfield grass.

Susan Kushner Resnick

Bobby's Game of Catch

When you see a wiry old man in a gritty diner just off the highway, the kind of place where you can imagine rolls of ones being handed off and desperados wrapping guns in napkins, and that man is wearing a Red Sox cap, you need to say hello. You're in the middle of nowhere, that untouristed stretch of Northern California between wine country and Oregon, and it's 101 dry degrees outside. Which is probably why the old man is eating an ice cream sundae on a late Saturday afternoon, but which doesn't explain why he's wearing jeans and a plaid shirt like a cleaned up farmer.

"You like the Red Sox?" you ask.

He cups his ear, leans forward. He's at the next table, but that's not why he can't hear. He can't hear because though he looks fitter than most Americans, he's quite old.

"Red Sox," you shout, pointing to the cap.

"Yup," he says. "You know them?"

"I'm from Boston!" you announce with pride.

He's as incredulous as that type of man can be.

"Are you?" he asks.

There's delight on his face, its surface like a handful of creased linen.

"I've never been."

Well, then.

The story comes out quickly. His uncle, he tells you, played second base for the Sox. He came back home to Sacramento one year with a buddy from the team.

"Bobby Doerr?" he says, looking for recognition.

"Oh yes!" you say, because while you don't know what years or what position Doerr played, you know he's one of the big ones. You've seen his name among the memorabilia hanging along the dark, cool halls that ring the field. He's not as famous as Ted Williams or as tragic as your favorite, Tony Conigliaro, but you know he's a major forefather on the Red Sox family tree.

"He played catch with me," the old man says. "He was awful nice. I've liked them ever since."

He says he was nine or ten when he met that infielder, a Californian who graced Fenway Park from

1937 to 1951. You suppose he's been wearing a Sox cap ever since. The cap is fairly clean, definitely not a remnant of his childhood days, so he must replenish his supply regularly. You wonder how he does it? A handwritten letter wrapped around a money order that he mails directly to the ballpark? A person-to-person call to a Boston souvenir shop during which he reads out his credit card number, one slow digit at a time? Or does his family keep him stocked, making Father's Day and Christmas easier on everyone?

You doubt that last theory because he seems the solitary type and not just because he's dining alone. It's the way he teases the busboy about an upcoming prom, and how the pigeon-toed waitress dotes on him.

"Ice cream cold enough for you today," she asks.

It seems like this is his family.

It's time for you to leave. Places to go, parts of the West to see before returning to Boston.

"Nice to meet someone from Red Sox Nation," you tell the man.

He cocks his head like a little boy waiting for what's next.

"Red Sox Nation," you repeat. But he'd heard the words this time, just never the term before. He doesn't know that he's part of the Red Sox family, too, part of a genus that spreads across the American continent (and probably beyond) and includes anyone who commits to the team and stays committed through the fallow years. Anyone, in short, who believes in the Sox even when the team stinks.

"Like now," you say. The previous month they'd blown most of their games.

"Oh, they're not doing so good?" he says. "I didn't know."

Wait, what? A guy flies the team colors for seven decades and he doesn't keep up with the standings?

Then you wonder: is he truly faithful to the Red Sox no matter whose names make up the roster and what century they're batting in, or is he simply loyal to memories: of the days when games of catch were all that mattered, when glamorous uncles came to visit and when he couldn't imagine eating ice cream by himself? Does he even like baseball or is it the reminder of something lost that keeps him pulling on that ball cap?

As you pay the check, he gets up and walks away, tall but stooped, satisfied but alone. And you wonder: if nostalgia is his impetus, isn't he just like the rest of us.

Genevieve Moinuddin

The Very First Bride of Henry Louis Gehrig

Before the war, Hans Alfred Olson was the best second baseman in the state of Minnesota. Scouts said he showed the promise of a young Rogers Hornsby, and he led the North Star League in stolen bases from 1939-1942, earning him the nickname 'Lightning Bolt,' and the distinction of being the fastest man in the minors. But when he returned from France, dragging his leg a few paces behind him as a result of shrapnel to the thigh, his dreams of making it to the Bigs were shot down. His #17 jersey was given to an incoming rookie from Sioux Falls, and since he could no longer play the game, the ball club gave him a job tending to the grounds, and an apartment in a boarding house near the train depot, half a mile down the third base line. For the next thirty-five years, every morning Bolt Olson would get up out of his twin bed, make his coffee, feed his dog, put on his uniformed shirt, and follow the chalk lines through the wheat field, down to the ballpark. Back in those days, there was no outfield wall, only a chain-link fence.

Most of what I know about Bolt, I learned from other people. I was only acquainted with him for three weeks, the only three weeks that I would ever spend in the North Star League. I bounced through the ranks for seven years before hanging up my spikes to sell insurance and raise a family in Wisconsin. Like Bolt, I never made it to the majors. Though this was a fact about him that I wouldn't learn until after his death.

"I don't like tobacco stains on my dirt."

It was the first thing that Bolt Olson said to me, upon our first meeting. I had just been called up from a semi-pro club in Iowa, arriving into town on the evening train. It was my first time in Minnesota and my first time on a real minor league ballfield, where I wouldn't be asked to get a day job or billet with a local family. So after meeting with the manager in the clubhouse, I headed towards the field, just to get a sense of what being on a professional diamond felt like. The August sun was dipping low in the sky, and the outfield (which still only had a chain-link fence to mark its boundaries) seemed to stretch all the way out onto the prairie and melt into the wheat fields on the horizon. Overhead, the lights came on. I had never played under lights before. Back in those days, semi-pro

teams couldn't afford the electricity of it, and instead played economically-sensible games in week-end sunlight. Sunday afternoon doubleheaders after church or the occasion tilt on a Friday at 3pm, right when the schools were getting out. So as I stepped out of the dugout, onto a field bathing in the glow of 1,500 watt bulbs, I bent down and picked up a handful of dirt. It was childish and nostalgic, but I didn't care. I was twenty years old and had spent the past four months toiling down in Storm Lake. To me, it might as well have been Yankee Stadium.

"I don't like tobacco stains on my dirt," a voice called out to me from inside the visitor's dugout. I turned around.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, I don't like tobacco stains on my dirt." An old man emerged, climbing up the four steps onto the field. His hair was gray and buzzed, a long scar ran down the side of his face, and he was carrying a broom and dustpan. The name on his shirt said 'Olson.'

"Oh, I don't chew." I walked across home plate towards him.

"That's what all the rookies say, and then two weeks later, I'm stuck with an infield that looks like someone took a shit all over it."

"Well, I really don't chew." I held out my hand. "I get my kicks from sunflower seeds."

It was a lame attempt at a joke, and it failed. Bolt—or Olson, as I knew him at the moment—didn't smile. Nor did he shake my hand. He just stared at me for a few more seconds with steely eyes, and then walked past me and down into the home dugout. His foot dragged behind him when he walked. It left a trail in the rust-colored ground.

"So what's with Olson?" I asked my roommate, Sam Pieterangelo, that night, as we lay reading in our respective double beds in a room at the motel that sat half a mile down from the ballpark. There was no billeting here in Minnesota, so the team would put new players at the motel until they could get settled into an apartment in town. Sam was an Italian kid from Chicago, a shortstop who'd busted his elbow in a bar fight during spring training with the White Sox, and was sent to the minors as penance ever since. Convinced he was next in line for a call-up, he never looked for an apartment, instead keeping his bags packed, waiting for the phone to ring. He had been in room 114 since April.

"Olson?"

"At the ballpark," I said. "Old guy... has a limp?"

Sam stared at me and shook his head, shrugging, before his eyes drifted back down to his magazine.

"Wait, you mean Bolt?" he said, setting his magazine down across his chest. I just shrugged and

Sam continued. "He's the groundskeeper. Crazy son of a bitch. He'll talk your ear off if you let him."

"Oh."

"Don't let him." Sam shook his head again. "He'll stick all over you. You won't be able to shake him till November if you do."

"Well, I don't plan to be here long enough to get stuck to anything," I said. I'd batted over .300 for most of the season down in Storm Lake, was leading the league in RBIs, and had started in the All Star Game. Like Sam, I was convinced that my stint here in northern Minnesota was going to be the baseball equivalent of nothing more than a changing of bus terminals en route to a bigger and better location.

Sam snorted and shook his head a third time.

"If you say so."

"I do, because—"

"Goodnight, rookie." He cut me off, and reached over to turn off the light. The motel sat right off of Highway 10, where trucks roared by all night. Each time they did, the windows shook. I didn't even sleep a full hour.

The next day, while waiting on deck to take batting practice, I felt someone watching me. I turned around and saw Bolt leaning against the railing on the third base side, staring me down.

"You spitting tobacco yet?" he called out, the broom in one hand, the dustpan in another.

"No sir," I said.

"I've seen rookies like you, all say the same thing." He pointed at me with the broom. "And they all dip and mess up my dirt."

"Not me, sir." I was trying to keep my conversation short. For fear of him sticking, as Sam had warned me about the night before.

"DiMaggio told me the same thing," he said and shook his head. "My first call-up to the Yankees. He said, 'kid, don't chew.'"

I turned back around to face him; Sam hadn't mentioned that the old man was a former major leaguer.

"Know why he told me that?" Bolt's voice was now a low roar. "Because he didn't want me to piss off the groundskeeper!"

A group of outfielders who'd been stretching looked up and over and laughed. I could feel my face turning red. From middle infield, Sam rolled his eyes at me and mouthed, "What did I tell you?"

"Rookie!" the manager yelled at me, not laughing. The batter's box had cleared out, and its next

occupant—me—was still standing in the on-deck circle. “We don’t have all day. Do you wanna take your cuts or do you wanna be on the first bus back down to Storm Lake?”

I didn’t want to be on a bus down to Storm Lake ever again, so I hurried into the batter’s box. To prove it, I sent six of ten pitches sailing over the outfield fence, deep into the golden wheat beyond.

The team left the next day for a four-game road trip down south to Omaha, so I didn’t see Bolt until the following week. Woken up by both the trucks on Highway 10 and Sam’s snoring, I slid out of the motel early Tuesday morning for a pre-dawn run. Even though it was August, I could see my breath in front of me as I made my way off of the main roads and jogged down small, country ones that wove checkerboard patterns into the fields. It was almost harvest time, and the wheat stood high for miles around me. Finally, as daylight began to creep up in the east and the acres seemed to catch fire the higher the sun rose in the sky, I made my way back towards town, with the country road dumping me out near the ballpark. I slowed to a walk, before stopping to stretch against the railing of the outfield fence. As I leaned over to catch my breath, a small dog ran over to me, nipping at my ankles. When I looked up, Bolt Olson was standing there, a leash in his hand.

“Don’t mind Honus, here,” he said, and snapped his fingers. The dog ran back over to him.

“He was fine.” I dismissed him with a hand, then wiped sweat from my brow.

“He’s a good boy, really,” Bolt said, letting his hand dangle down by his good leg. The dog jump up and licked it. Bolt smiled at him. It was an ugly dog. Wrinkly and gray, just like Bolt. Not much bigger than a cat, and just as skinny, but with longer ears and a shorter tail. Bolt reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of bacon, holding it out to me. “Do you want to feed him?”

I shook my head.

“You spitting tobacco yet, Rookie?” he asked, not looking at me but at the dog to whom he was now giving the bacon. I shook my head again.

“I told you, I don’t do that.”

Truth be told, I did once down in Storm Lake, except I accidentally swallowed some of the dip during the eighth inning, and spent the whole of the ninth—as well as most of the post-game work-out—vomiting in the bathroom.

“Yeah, you’ll be all right, Rookie,” Bolt said, still looking down at the dog. “You got a swing that reminds me of a young Mel Ott. Boy, could old Otter ever tear the cover off a ball.”

“You knew Mel Ott?”

“Course I did. We played together before the war.”

I grinned. I couldn’t help it.

“You’re a baseball guy, aren’t you.” He finally looked up at me. It was a statement, not a question.

“Well, yeah. We all are.”

“No.” Bolt shook his head. “Half of these assholes are only here to avoid the mills. The other half are too stupid to do anything else.”

I said nothing.

“You actually love it though,” Bolt said, staring me down with his hard eyes. “I so much as mention Mel Ott’s name, and you need to change your drawers because you’ve just about pissed all over yourself.”

I said nothing. Maybe if Bolt had smiled, I would have opened up and told him about the nights I spent as a kid under the covers in bed, with a flashlight and a radio, listening to the Cardinals and keeping score with a nubby old pencil that I’d be too scared to sharpen in case the noise woke my parents. I might have told him about my dog, Leo Durocher. Or even about my 5,427 baseball cards, organized first by position, then by alphabet. And then I would have sat down on the grass and asked desperately, just short of begging and pleading, for him to tell me stories about his days in the Bigs.

But Bolt didn’t smile. He just stared me down. I turned away from his gaze and looked out over the ballfield in front of me. It had been watered already; the grass twinkled, still wet, and the dirt looked like chocolate. Bolt must have been up earlier than me this morning.

“Rookie?”

“I should be going,” I rushed, suddenly feeling uncomfortable, remembering what Sam told me. The sun had risen higher now, and the sky was blue. It was going to be a beautiful late summer day in Minnesota.

“Okay,” Bolt said. I moved to leave and he grabbed my arm. “Remind me one time though to tell you about how Lou Gehrig almost became a Cub. Because of a girl.”

“What?”

“Rookie, I’ve got a million of ‘em.” He winked. But didn’t smile. And then whistled for Honus before limping off. His shoe took the grass with it when he walked, leaving a small rut that scarred the edge of the outfield.

Later that week, while taking infield practice before our game against Kenosha, Bolt whistled me over to the dugout. It was early evening, and though the sun hadn’t set yet, the sky was beginning to turn purple. Bolt had already turned the lights on for the game, and was holding a bucket of chalk, instead of the broom. Instead of his groundskeeper shirt, he had on a team jacket. Just a few moments before, I’d watched him in foul territory in the outfield, fixing the first base line. The jacket

was now covered in chalk, as were his pants. Behind the outfield fence, the wheat danced gently in the light Minnesota breeze.

“Hey, Rookie,” Bolt said loudly, after I ignored his initial whistle. “Rookie, c’mere a minute.”

A few of the other players groaned. Sam shook his head and rolled his eyes. I waved Bolt off, but he kept calling me.

“I just want to show you something. Real quick, I promise. Rookie, over here.”

“I’m in the middle of warming up,” I hissed over at him. The infielders all laughed. I could feel my face turning red.

“Two minutes, that’s it,” he called out. “I just want to show this to you, you’ll like it! It’s Mel Ott.”

“I’m trying to warm up for a game.” My face was now burning.

“I swear, just a couple minutes. Come on!”

“You better go over there,” the first baseman, a burly guy from Massachusetts, whose arms were as big as my thighs, said to me, shaking his head and clearly annoyed. A few fans who were already in the stands holding beers and hotdogs were listening to our conversation down on the field. “Old man’s not gonna shut up till you do.”

I threw my hands up and swore under my breath, but made the motion to run to the side of the dugout. Sam intercepted me on my way by third base.

“I told you not to talk to him,” he said, angry. “We just got him to leave us alone right before you came, after he’d latched onto Andrews for the entire goddamn season. Andrews gets called up and we think it’s the end of it, and now you can’t keep your goddamn mouth shut and we’re back dealing with this shit again.”

“I’m sorry.” I pushed him off. “What was I supposed to do? Ignore the man?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “That’s exactly what you were supposed to do.”

“I’m sorry.” I brushed past and headed for Bolt.

“Me too,” said Sam. “Mel fucking Ott.”

Breaking in had been Sam’s idea.

“We’re not gonna hurt him,” he insisted. “Just get him to shut him up for awhile.” He then frowned, and said, “He’s distracting. And we’re coming up on a pennant push. We can’t be focused with him always yapping.”

Id reached the end of my third week in Minnesota. Three weeks, and no call-up. Though I hated to admit it, my performance had slumped since arriving. I wasn’t hitting well, made routine errors, and two games ago was called out looking. Not once, but twice. I wasn’t in Storm Lake anymore, a

fact that my manager made sure I was aware of with every strike out. And while I was learning to sleep through the trucks on Highway 10, I hadn't yet learned to block out Bolt, who was seeking me out daily, limping after me as I left the ballpark, waving old scoresheets and lineup cards. Earlier in the week, he cornered me after practice and invited me to his apartment to look through his card collection. I went, because I couldn't find a polite way to say no, but only stayed for fifteen minutes. His sparse apartment in the boarding house made me uneasy.

"It has to be tonight," the first baseman said. "He'll be here working on the field for at least another two hours." We were sitting in the clubhouse, around Sam's locker, speaking in whispers. Batting practice had finished an hour ago, but other than one lone bar, there wasn't really anywhere else to go in town. So we'd stayed at the ballpark instead, pouring whiskey into the Dixie cups stacked next to the water cooler.

"I don't know," I said. "Do we really need to? He's harmless, really."

"Rookie." The first baseman rolled his eyes. "We're not laying a finger on him. It's fine. Calm down."

"But—"

"No buts." Sam interrupted me, then pointed a finger at my face. "And no saying no. You're the only one who knows which apartment is his."

So as dusk was falling over northern Minnesota, the three of us snuck out of the clubhouse, and headed quietly down the third base line, out past the foul pole, fading into the wheat fields before they gave way to the railroad tracks, the depot, and the boarding house. Our fearless first baseman whistled as we walked, jamming one hand in the pocket of his jacket, while holding rolls of toilet paper and duct tape in the other. It was August, but the first chill of fall was settling in, the type of temperature drop that I hated because it indicated the impending end of baseball for the year.

The front door of the boarding house didn't have a lock on it. There were only six residents — three upstairs, three downstairs — and in those days in northern Minnesota, people didn't lock their car doors, let alone their houses. We let ourselves in, and I motioned silently for us to head up the stairs, wincing as Sam's shoes creaked on the wooden steps. From behind closed doors, I could hear televisions and radios from the other boarders. They were all single men, and all except for Bolt worked on the wheat fields. After harvest, they'd probably all move out, again, except Bolt, until a new crop arrived in the spring.

"In here," I whispered outside of his door, with my hand on the knob. It was locked. From inside, Honus started to bark. Sam began to fiddle with the lock, popping a pin in it, before breaking into a grin as the door swung open.

There we stood in Bolt's sad, empty apartment. The last time I'd been here, the sun had still been

up. By the light of day, the place wasn't so bad. But in the dark, with just a lone, low-watt lightbulb hanging overhead, no decorations on the walls or signs of life other than Honus—who started wagging his tail and licking my hand when he saw me—the single room was unbearable. Three pictures sat on the mantle: one of the 1940 North Star League All Star Game players, one of Honus, and a very old one of a woman, who I assumed was his mother. A large stack of yellowed newspapers stood next to a small television with crooked rabbit ears. And I was angry. That someone who'd kept company with DiMaggio, palled around with Ott, and swung at pitches from Feller would be reduced to such a pathetic existence.

Our first baseman had started wrapping duct tape around the toilet, and I did the same to the fridge, then the stove, when Sam grabbed me.

"Shit," he said and pointed out the window. Down the third base line that extended through the wheatfield out to the railroad tracks, Bolt was walking towards the house.

"I thought you said he was going to be gone another two hours?" I whispered, my heart starting to pound in my throat.

"I thought he was!"

"Shit."

We turned to flee, but Honus sunk his teeth into Sam's pant-leg.

"What the hell?" he yelled, trying unsuccessfully to shake off the small gray dog.

"Honus," I whispered, snapping my fingers at him the way Bolt had. "Honus, c'mere!"

The dog didn't loosen open his mouth or draw his teeth out of the fabric of Sam's trousers, and I could see Bolt getting nearer to the house. He didn't have curtains, and our eyes met. I ducked down, but not before I saw a look of recognition on his face as he realized that there were people in in his apartment. From where I was crouched below the windowsill, I saw him start to walk as fast as he could, dragging the dead leg behind him in a frantic pace to reach the porch.

"He saw me," I shouted, panicked. "He knows it was me."

"He can't see up in here, he doesn't know—"

"HE SAW ME. Sam, he saw me." I was still shouting. "Get the damn dog off of you and let's go."

Sam tried again to dislodge Honus, and then and started to scream. Blood was seeping through his pants, and tears were now streaming down his face. The dog had relinquished his grip on Sam's clothing, only to bite down hard on the soft flesh of Sam's calf. The first baseman tried to pull Honus off, but it only made Sam scream louder and Honus clenched down harder with his teeth. Above the screaming, I heard the front door bang open downstairs, and the thump-drag of Bolt's step and limp move across the foyer to the stairs.

“I saw you, Rookie,” he yelled up the stairs. “I know you’re up there.”

My mouth had gone completely dry.

“Honus,” I hissed one more time. “HONUS!”

The dog didn’t wouldn’t let go, and the bottom of Sam’s pant-leg was now deep crimson. I didn’t know what else to do. And so I kicked him.

I didn’t think it was a hard kick, but Honus landed with an eerie crack against the wall, his head at a sharp angle away from his body. He seized and shuddered and then didn’t move again. The door flew open, and Bolt stood there, sweat dripping down his face, his gray eyes wide. He was breathing hard through his nose, and the foot on his bad leg was encrusted with dirt from having been dragged so ferociously through the soil. As he lunged for me, he spotted Honus’s still body in the corner of the room, let out a strangled cry, and then tripped over Sam’s outstretched, bleeding leg on the ground.

Bolt hit the floor with such a crash that the tea kettle fell off the stove, clanging onto the kitchen tiles. I pulled Sam up and the three of us ran out of the apartment, down the stairs, and along the third base line back to the ballpark as fast as we could, not once looking back.

The next morning, I was woken up by the telephone.

I had been called up to the Triple-A club in Oklahoma City.

I read about Bolt’s death ten years later. It was a two-line obituary printed in a baseball weekly, next to an advertisement for a summer hitting clinic for disabled kids. The state sports association in Minnesota had paid to have it put there, otherwise I never would have known. The obituary was short: just a listing of funeral arrangements and a brief outline of his career. There was no mention of the Yankees or Giants. By that time, I’d already retired from professional ball, with a hitless week in Oklahoma City the highest I would ever make it.

The summer after I learned of Bolt’s passing, I was at a baseball memorabilia show where Joe DiMaggio was signing autographs, and I paid the \$30 fee to stand in line, just so I could ask Mr. DiMaggio if he had heard about Bolt’s death. By that time, Mr. DiMaggio was older, his health was poor, and when I got close to the front of the queue, he wasn’t feeling well, and needed to take a break. He canceled the rest of the appearance that day, and the show promoters refunded my \$30. Later in the afternoon, I visited every booth to see if they had Hans Olson’s card, but no one did. For months, I combed card shows and scoured price guides in search of one. I even spent the money and ran a two-line ad for twelve weeks in the back pages of *The Sporting News*, asking if anyone anywhere had one, and was willing to sell. But I never got a single reply.