



We Decided To Call It Baseball

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For you were for me the measure of all things.

— Franz Kafka, Letter to My Father

Shoulder down, chin out, my father dragged his old athlete's body down the sidewalk and up the steps to my flat. Refusing any help with his suitcase, he entered, looked around, and exhaled. "I don't know what you got me into, but here I am." Though he intended it as a joke, it came out as a challenge. He was nervous. So was I. Surrounded by the general disarray of my single life — books, bikes, West African art, student papers — my father and I were alone

together for the first time in as long as I could remember.

"You got any beer in that fridge?" he blurted, eager for a drink.

He looked tired and older every time I saw him: his hair ever whiter, his six-foot frame smaller, his expression less intense, his brown eyes a little more serene.

Before I could stop him, he'd opened the kitchen cabinet where I stored my growing collection of pills.

"Jeez, it's like a drugstore in here," he sputtered, trying to cover his embarrassment. He quickly closed the cabinet, forgetting to take out a glass, while I buried my face in the refrigerator. "That medicine still working?" he asked.

Grabbing two beers, I mumbled, "I'm fine, Dad. Let's sit outside, OK?" I headed out to the deck, desperate for air.

It had been almost a year since he'd found out that I'm HIV-positive. Feeling cowardly, I'd asked my mother to tell him. Before that, I'd tried a few times, calling and hanging up or rambling on about sports, hoping to find a crack in which to plant the seed. I even tried to visit him but got only as far as a rest stop on Interstate 65 outside of Chicago. I was stricken by fear, not so much of his disappointment at learning that his only son had contracted HIV, but that his response might make me see that it wasn't a virus that was coming between us, but something far more pernicious: pride.

My father and I had been at war for as long as I could remember. I wanted him to be someone other than who he was, and he no doubt felt the same toward me. My father was a high-school baseball coach and later a principal. For years, I'd watched him guide teenagers through the maze of adolescence, yet I never took a word of his advice. I physically couldn't. I would stand by his easy chair in the family room and listen, but his words were like pills that I gagged on or hid in my mouth only to spit out once he was gone. Even my own friends would come over to talk to him, which only drove me farther into angry isolation. To his credit, my father often tried to break through, but he had to fortify himself first with alcohol, and this proved disastrous. I couldn't help but see him as a hypocrite — a man who could counsel and inspire hundreds of young men, but who couldn't reach his own son.

The day after my mother told him the news, he called. His voice cracked, and I could hear him trying to pick up his words and hand them to me, one by one. "Are you all right?" he asked, over and over. It wasn't so much what he said as what I heard in his voice: I heard somebody I'd never met before, a man he didn't even know so well himself.

I'd suggested this visit in our first e-mail exchange. My father had finally gotten online after I'd convinced him that he'd enjoy writing letters to his old friends and to his grandchildren in college. He and I, though, hadn't written to each other in years — not directly, anyway. He'd tack a line onto the letter my mother sent with the check on my birthday, or the occasional postcard from their yearly trip overseas. His one and only correspondence to me during the two years I was in West Africa in the Peace Corps came when I couldn't make it home for my grandmother's funeral. He mailed me a postcard of a cardinal sitting in an evergreen bush. He wrote with such force that his pen made raised letters, like Braille, on the opposite side.

So when he sent me that first e-mail, I wasn't sure how to respond. I was ready for him to go on about our usual topics of conversation — the Cubs' failures, Indiana basketball, how my car was running. But, to my surprise, he'd poured out an uncharacteristically effusive and personal ramble about his past: the story of being thrown in jail for sneaking

a black teammate into a Georgia hotel room. That was back in his glory days, when his future held more than coaching high-school baseball in a farm town in northern Indiana.

I wrote back suggesting we take a trip to Wisconsin, where he used to play for the Milwaukee Braves' farm club in Eau Claire. I knew it wouldn't be easy to convince him to go, so I told him a story about wanting to write an article about his years in the minor leagues. We both knew it was something else forcing us back together, but we decided to call it baseball.

Now here he was in my apartment on the weekend of my fortieth birthday. After he'd settled in, we went out to dinner and talked about what I had in mind for the weekend.

"So we're just going up there to see the ballpark?" he asked. "Is that it? You know how far it is up there? For Christ's sake, we'll be in the car the whole time." He sighed and looked around for the waitress.

"Do you still want to go?" I asked, trying to hold back my anger, reminding myself that he was just tired after driving half the day.

"I about didn't come. Walked around the house wondering if I should come or not. Sorry, I have to tell you that. . . I don't know what we're doing, but I'm here now."

"We'll make it," I said, speaking to myself as much as to him.

For the first hour, we drove through the rings of Chicago's western suburbs. He toyed with the tape recorder, cursing it for not working. Still somewhat in shock that we were actually doing this, I kept thinking that something was going to happen to make us call it off: Car problems. Sickness. An act of God.

My father and I rarely spent time together, just the two of us. Even when I was a kid, I don't remember many outings with no other family members present. He took me to the '72 World Series in Cincinnati to watch the Reds play the A's, and on a few disastrous fishing trips. But we'd never developed any real father-son camaraderie.

We'd tried, of course — perhaps too hard. In high school, I was a jock and loved sports, excelling in football and basketball. But baseball, his sport, the sport that had defined his life, defeated me no matter how hard I tried. I was convinced my failure was a curse, a punishment for something I'd done wrong. I wasn't so bad in the field; I just couldn't hit. Coming up to bat was a drama I dreaded as soon as I put on my uniform.

I remember each hit I got in Little League, all three of them: two bunts and a miraculous grounder up the middle that I hit with my eyes closed. Each inning, I prayed to be up first to get it over with. Making the first out was forgivable; making the last out made me sick to my stomach. I got used to hearing that great baseball lie "Remember, a walk is as good as a hit."

Determined to make me a hitter, my father would take me out in the backyard and go over the basics again and

again: “Level swing now. . . . Choke up. . . . The wrists, turn your wrists like I showed you. ‘It’s all in your wrists’ is what Ted Williams always said. . . . Keep your head in there, even stance.” Then he’d pitch a few. Despite my effort to concentrate on his instructions, my bat grew heavier and heavier with each swing through the evening air. The harder I tried, the more insistent he became: “Keep your eye on it now, God damn it! You’re not watching the ball.”

“I am too!” I’d yell back.

Then he’d explode, or I’d throw down my bat and stomp off into the house. He was sure I was doing badly just to piss him off. And maybe, subconsciously, I was.

Then, in high school, after he had long given up coaching and become the principal, I decided to go out for the school play rather than the baseball team. That night at the dinner table, he threw a fork, nearly hitting my mother. “That’s it,” he pronounced, as if he were God. “You’ll never play again!” And I never did.

In the past few years, I had invited him to Chicago a couple of times to see a Cubs game, but he’d always brought one of my nephews or my brother-in-law. We seldom even talked on the phone. When I’d call, he’d hand the phone to my mother, then listen in on the other line in the bedroom, waiting to say a few words just before we hung up: “What do you think of that Tiger Woods, huh?” Such meaningless phrases would echo in my head long after the call had ended.

“SHE TOLD ME PLAYING BALL WAS FRIVOLOUS.” My father’s amplified voice jumped out of the tape recorder, shattering the silence.

“There. It works,” he said, turning down the volume. “Some of those questions you sent me I already answered on the drive up.”

“‘Frivolous?’”

“My mother never thought much of my playing baseball. I don’t recall her ever coming to watch me play. Oh, she came down that first year, when I was playing in Georgia. But she always thought I was wasting my life. We weren’t allowed to play games in the house. We had no cards, God forbid. No radio or diversions. . . . Should I have the tape recorder on?”

“Yes,” I hissed. I’d been so entranced by his tone of voice, I’d forgotten that I was supposed to be getting all of this down.

My father was born in 1929 to a family of Scotch-Irish farmers who had settled in Blackford County, Indiana, after the Civil War. There, my great-grandfather had started a farm, naming it the Bull Skin for the bloated cattle carcasses that floated up periodically from the depths of a bog on the property; the poor creatures had gotten caught in the muck trying to cool themselves and couldn’t be pulled out.

The Depression took its toll on my forebears. The stories were legend and became more poignant each Christmas. My father would slip into the kitchen to keep his coffee cup warmed with vodka as he reminisced with my aunts

and uncles about not having any presents or Christmas trees. Finally, my grandmother would angrily interject: “We were lucky to have something to eat! People starved, is all I remember.”

Yet the ultimate scar from the Depression was not scarcity; the real pain arose from my grandfather’s death. Perhaps it was because my father felt his absence more at Christmas that he became suddenly obsessed with the past. My grandfather, whose name I bear, didn’t survive the thirties. They say it was the anxiety of farming, my grandmother’s penchant for wearing the pants, the lingering memory of his first son’s death in World War I, and then, months later, his first wife’s. Whatever the reason, he voluntarily admitted himself to the state mental hospital in Richmond; then he came home, supposedly cured, and hanged himself in the garage. My grandmother, an evangelical Methodist who believed that work solved all of man’s miseries, raised my father by herself.

So it came as no surprise when he described to me how, when he was a boy, he took refuge in his imagination and sports (as I did): “I never stayed around the house. If there wasn’t anyone to play with, I threw an old rubber ball against the back porch, making believe I was the pitcher, batter, and fielder all in one.”

“Didn’t you ever play catch with your dad?”

“No. He was . . . unavailable, when he wasn’t in the hospital. He was preoccupied.”

“His illness?”

“Yes, yes. He was there, but he wasn’t. . . . You know?”

He paused. I knew where the conversation had to go, and so did he. His father’s suicide was a subject he didn’t care to elaborate on; he felt people — especially me — made too much of it.

(end of excerpt)