

~ The Comeback ~

Stepping over the spiked feet of teammates, I trundled down the dirt path between the new aluminum, first base bench and the protective, chain-link fence separating the bench from the ball diamond. Searching for an empty spot to plant my carcass, see? Sunset was an hour away and the field lights were still off. It looked to be another long night on the bench for yours truly.

My ballclub Hillcrest was the home team in our American Legion baseball contest against league-leading College Park. As usual, our starting nine was leaving me behind to take the field, wearing our silver-grey uniforms, trimmed in Kelly green, matching green caps with a scripted, silver *H* on the crown. It was embarrassing actually. Not the uniforms. No, the uniforms looked sharp. They were only a year old, this being the club's second year in the league. They had silver-vested outer jerseys over a white inner shirt with protruding Kelly green short sleeves, silver knickers and Kelly green stirrups—Philadelphia Eagles colors. But here I was about to turn nineteen in a couple months, nearly the oldest player on our club, and I couldn't break back into the starting line-up? Ya gotta be kiddin', right?

See, I had fouled up big time in our opener, also against College Park, over at the University of Maryland's Shipley Field half a season ago. We'd played the entire Legion circuit once since then. The manager had benched me for poor play after that regrettable first game and I'd been in his doghouse ever since. Not to worry, there was plenty of space available on our first base bench.

I planted myself down, pretty much in the middle of the thing. Might as well be comfortable. Folded my arms over my chest, crossed my legs at the ankles, lifted my feet up off the ground, and stuck my spikes into the chain-link fence in front of me. I spit over the fence rail toward the diamond. Then leaned back against the bench-back to expectorate and spectate once again, thoroughly pissed off. While I had no one to blame but myself for my predicament, I felt I'd paid my penance many-fold since our opener. Figured I should have been pardoned back into the starting line-up by now. I'd helped carry the equipment, kept score and chased foul balls. This was the first game of the second half of the season. And here I was still collecting splinters in my butt, even if they were imaginary aluminum ones. In a few short weeks, the season would be over ending my too brief American Legion baseball career.

As the game began, our starters tossed the ball around the horn. My bench mates clapped half-heartedly, chirping up with the usual bit of scattered, compulsory, encouraging banter. In the dozen or so risers behind the bench Hillcrest rooters, comprised of my teammate's family members and girlfriends, sat back to enjoy the game. They knew me from happier, glory days in high school but dared not look me in the face now. I was a baseball pariah, a charity case. Trying not to let all the negative vibes bum me out, I bit my nails, admired my manicure and ruminated on how I had put myself in this unenviable position. And considered what other summertime larks I could be pursuing right now instead of riding metal pine.

I had an aqua-marine, '67 Pontiac, Bonneville convertible with less than twelve thousand miles sitting behind us a couple hundred yards away out in the parking lot. It had three hundred and thirty horses in a V-8 engine under the hood. Wouldn't it be nice to jump in that bad boy, lower the top, groove to some Oldies and fly down the Maryland back country roads lined with leafy woods, tobacco fields and aromatic honeysuckle? Tear through the sweet, summer night sucking up cooling road breezes, rockin' down the highway? Me and the Doobie Brothers, see? But no. Here I was watching my younger teammates play ball while I'm on my duff in the summer swelter. Maybe I'd outgrown this kid's game, anyway? It was amateur baseball after all. Wasn't as if any of us were paid to play, not in dollars and cents. Payment came in the form of playing time—PT. That was the sole currency and, right now, I was gettin' stiffed.

Yeah, I'd f'ed up big time back in May before the summer Legion season even started. I had taken too long coming home from my freshman year of college out on the West Coast. Took a bit of a detour on my return home to visit with my uncle in L.A. Stayed too long and lost my timing. When I got home on the eve of our Legion opener, three weeks had passed since I'd taken live BP with my college team. So what'd I do the next day in our Legion opener? K'd four times, leaving guys on base, too. *Four times!* And we lost. Mann, talk about a bummer. I'd only done that once before in my life, a year ago when I'd tried to play a Babe Ruth game on one leg due to an injury. Well, quite rightly, our Legion manager Mr. Campbell benched me after the opener and I hadn't been on the playing field since. As I said that was half a season ago the first weekend of June. Here it was the sixth of July. The whole thing was embarrassing.

When Campbell wasn't ignoring me, he was passing snide remarks about me. Looked as if I's benched for the rest of the year. My startin' teammates were embarrassed for me, treating me as if I had leprosy. Afraid I was contagious and they too might catch the bench bug if they got too close. Mad at myself, I'd vowed to regain my timing and work my way back into the line-up. However, Campbell had lost all confidence in me. He rebuffed me no matter what I did or how well I stung 'em in BP.

Glancing to my right, outside the fenced-in first base bench near the water fountain that was out-of-play on the asphalt down the right field foul line I spied Campbell and his assistant Jim Cosh chatting in their street clothes. I had known both men from the Boy's Club, where they had coached me in basketball and football, but never in baseball until last year—Hillcrest's first year in the Legion baseball program. Mr. Cosh lived a block up the street from me. I was on friendly terms with his older son and daughter. He had always liked me and I often heard him muttering to Campbell, lobbying in my behalf to get me into the game. For my part, I'd worked on my swing, taken BP every chance I could, as well as hit soft tosses into a fence. (Used my own baseballs so Campbell couldn't chastise me for ruining the club's practice balls.) And I got my timing back and was ready to play ball. Been ready for some time. But Campbell wasn't ready for me. He regarded me as a nuisance now, a has-been flop at eighteen.

I caught the short, stocky coach's eye, but he looked straight through me. Probably thought I was a prima donna, like a couple other hot dogs we had on the club—the "white spikes" kind of guys, who played only for themselves. But he was mistaken, I wasn't like that.

Don't get me wrong. We all played for ourselves, for the sheer fun of it. But the real prima donnas—the hot dogs—acted as if their crap didn't stink. Know what I mean? Both were new to the team this year. One was an athletic, powerfully and sleekly built, swift outfielder. Yeah. But he had just recently taken his glove and white spikes and split the team. Mr. White Shoes had taken my place in the line-up. For all his glowing promise, he'd had only a couple of hits to show for the entire first half of the year. Though he swung for the fences with every stroke of his bat. However, one of his safeties had been a towering, majestic home run. Reggie Jackson didn't have a sweeter home run swing than this dude. And the way this cat had cadillacked his way around the bases after hitting his tater, Reggie could have taken notes on how it was done. Of course, Mr. White Shoes looked good striking out, too. Flourished the bat as if he were the Babe himself—a real hot dog with mustard all over him. And he did strike out. You bet he did. Looked cool doin't it though—if that's possible. Yeah, backwards or forwards "K," he sure acted like a big leaguer.

The other jerk thought he was God's gift to shortstops. Acted as if he was doing all of us a big favor by playing Legion ball with us when he had other higher callings, other leagues pursuing him. Tolerated initially, because he was a newbie to the club, his overgrown, spoiled kid's, aloof attitude was fast wearing out his welcome with the coaches. My teammates had already written him off. I could tell because when he hit one out in his first at bat to put us on the board tonight, few of them congratulated him. And those that did had to force themselves. I didn't bother. At least, he had hit better than his

compatriot prima donna—the departed Mr. White Shoes. You could say our dugout chemistry was sorely lacking. Discord and ill will reigned over the club. The second half of the season looked as if it would prove to be worse than our once-promising but ultimately disappointing, losing first half start of 4 and 6.

I moped on the bench. *This* is what I'd fought through cross-county traffic to get to? Grabbing a quick root beer and a Roy Rogers Double R Bar Burger, choking down what had tasted more like a bite of Trigger's ass? Was it hot and muggy or what? Geeze!

I'd been installing an in-ground swimming pool for my brother's company all day in a typical Washington, DC, 90/90 summer weather. And now the evening wasn't feeling any cooler. Actually, I was one of only two players, me and Tut Thomas our catcher, who had what you might call a regular job working construction. The other guys goofed off all day, layin' out by the pool to improve their tans, watching TV, baby-sitting siblings or playin' grab-ass with their girlfriends. Unlike me and Tut, they came to the park rested and ready to play ball.

Our cotton-polyester uniforms seemed to retain rather than repel heat. I wanted to take off my sleeveless outer vest, sit in my short-sleeved white and green, inner shirt to feel a bit of a breeze that wafted by every so often. But Campbell wouldn't allow that because I'd tried it before. I sweltered in misery beside my fellow bench-sitters. Never yet met a guy yet who liked ridin' the pine or, in this case, the aluminum. Noticed even though he was the coach—the manager—Campbell never wore a uni. Called 'em "monkey suits." Yeah, right.

Thought about strolling over to the first base stands behind our bench to converse with some of my teammates' girlfriends. See if they had any friends or sisters who might be attracted to a handsome, college stud like me. But Campbell had quashed that before, too. Even my patron saint Mr. Cosh nixed any fraternizin'. No, I's stuck here for the rest of the game trying my best not to sweat. To make matters worse, we were getting' our butts handed to us early and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

Our crafty, little, sixteen-year old southpaw Tommy Evans was gettin' into trouble every inning. Only decent fielding of some hot shots by our defense had stemmed off total disaster. Yeah. College Park was nailing our best pitcher. By winning the first half of the league season, CP had already assured themselves one of the two postseason playoff spots. They were loose and having a great time over there on the third base side abusing us. Yeah, our little left-hander wasn't so crafty tonight. Tommy didn't have command of his out pitch, his curve ball. And without it, his fast ball was just battin' practice stuff. Yet, Campbell left the kid in to get hung out to dry. Takin' one for the team, as they say. And we weren't helping' little Tommy out much with our bats, either. Mustered only that lone tally off our diva shortstop's solo shot, while College Park was shelling us.

Campbell had been getting on Hot Dog Number 1—the diva—for the kid's lackadaisical play at short. The dude was out there, stationary, getting no depth at short, wearing a batting helmet, refusing to get down in defensive position before the pitch. He slid his feet well outside of his shoulders and locked his knees, standing upright, costing him any jump he could have gotten on a ball hit his way, severely limiting his range. He looked as if it was a big effort for him to wait out in the field until he got his next ups. When a couple of routine grounders eluded his glove, extending the inning unnecessarily, not to mention Little Tommy's earned run average, Campbell blasted the jerk from the bench. Rightly so and about time, too. Hot dog that he was, the kid blasted right back at Campbell for everyone to hear. The two carried on a running, cross-field feud until we finally got the third out and the prima donna jogged off the field. Campbell intercepted the jerk in front of the bench where they went at each other. It was difficult to tell if the kid quit before Campbell kicked him off the club or visa-versa. Anyway, the diva packed his

gear and left in a huff. Bye-bye—Jerk. Bobby Niff moved over to short while Dan came off the bench to replace Niff at third.

In the sixth, Campbell pulled Tommy—at last. He brought in moon-faced Mac to pitch; he, of the sandy mustache. With that move, I noticed Campbell had cost himself the luxury of the designated hitter, because Mac had been our DH. Though why he was DH-ing, I'll never know. Mac wasn't exactly stinging the cover off the ball. But he stopped the bleeding to get us out of the inning. The side went quietly in our half of the sixth. At this point, down 11 to 1, we were dead in the water. First place College Park was kicking our collective asses heading into the top of the seventh.

Without thinking, I clapped and talked it up a bit, just for the hell of it. For somethin' ta do, ya know?

“Come on Mac, Come on Keed! You're the man, Mac!”

My sullen bench mates, looked at me as if I had gone daft. Suddenly, I had an idea—a *real good idea!* I started talking it up loud—Big Time loud. I stood up, leaning over the fence in front of the bench.

“Come on Mac, shoot 'em down, shoot 'em down Keed! You the man, Mac. You the man. Bring that heat, Baby. ” I clapped heartily. Problem was: Mac's heat wasn't much more than lukewarm.

Nevertheless, Mac looked at me and nodded. He got the message. So did Campbell. I glanced over at our fearless leader. One look told me all I needed to know. His peepers shot daggers at me. He had been ignoring and humiliating me every chance he'd gotten since our opener. I'd tried everything I could to get back into his good graces by keeping score, carrying the equipment to his car and such, but nothing had worked. The guy had a sadistic streak and he seemed to enjoy watching me twist in the wind. He wanted me to go quietly into that gentle good night, like a dying elephant off to its graveyard. Now I was going to stick it to him.

Please understand: all the noise to that point in the game had been generated by our foes on the third base side of the field. Our side had been dead. Down 11 to 1 in the seventh, we were fortunate there was no ten-run slaughter rule. Mac gave up a couple of hits, leaving two on with one gone. With our situation seemingly hopeless, I stood up, draped my arms over the fence, nestling my armpits into the metal rail to clap loudly. Joel Osteen could not have offered any more heartfelt, sincere, positive encouragement than I did for Mac.

“Hey now! Hey now! Come you Mac, come you Keed! You can do it Big Mac! Shoot 'em down, shoot 'em down, shoot 'em down Keed!”

Mac walked the bases full but I kept up the high volume banter. Campbell gave me the evil eye. He was in a bind. My cheering was tip-toeing a fine line between a never-say-die enthusiasm and the obnoxious. But he couldn't tell me to shut up without looking as if he'd given up on the game which, let's face it, like our season had become a lost cause.

My younger bench mates noticed I'd gotten under Campbell's skin. They rose as one to join my voluble exhortations. They were ticked off with Campbell for the way he'd kowtowed earlier to the “white shoes” guys ignoring them and for his preseason broken recruitment promises of victories and playing time. He'd wooed my teammates away from the Babe Ruth and Boy's Club summer leagues, where they could have started, to come and sit the bench for this, this “high school all-star team” to win a championship. Like me they sensed the irony of the situation. We hung over the fence rail together, beating the chain-link with the

flats of our hands, shouting encouragement to Mac and the rest of the team in the field. Made quite a racket. Our opponents merely laughed at us. Up 11 to 1, wouldn't you?

Mac had gotten one out but then he'd walked the bases full. My savior Mr. Cosh was whispering into Campbell's ear down by the water fountain. We hooted louder for Mac, slapping the fence harder, dumbing down our opposition. It was beautiful. Here was a mutiny only Captain Bligh could have appreciated. And I was Mr. Christian. Our now silent opponents stared dumbly at us as if we were nuts.

With the bases full and one gone in the top of the seventh, Campbell trekked to the mound to confer with Mac and our catcher Tut Thomas. Campbell had had the good sense to warm up the red-headed Neal Zurovski at the start of the inning. So Neal was ready to go. Campbell took the baseball from Mac but kept his invisible bat in the lineup by sending him to right field. Then Campbell surprised me. He brought Seegert in from center to catch and benched Tut, inserting me into left field to hit in Tut's number nine slot in the batting order. Campbell shifted our left fielder to center to make room for me. I didn't even know Seegert *could* catch. Guess Campbell figured he'd make me put up or shut up. Or mebbe Mr. Cosh had finally gotten through to him in my behalf. Either way, suddenly, after a month gathering imaginary, aluminum splinters, I found myself in the game. Amidst plenty of pats on the back from my bench cronies, I grabbed my new Rawlings glove and hustled out to left.

Stepping onto the field under the lights that blotted out the black night sky made me feel like Neil Armstrong must have felt stepping on the moon. You know, when he took one giant leap for mankind? As I was doing now in behalf of the overlooked bench-warmers of the world. That's how alien the ball field felt beneath my spikes, like the Sea of Tranquility. And I was far from walking on water. My teammates were happy for me, hoping I was just the first of them to get off their butts into this painfully lost cause. It was solidarity at its purest. One of their own had breached the fence in front of the bench to take the field. And they hoped to follow in my spike steps soon.

Campbell was waiting on the hill for Neal to come in from the pen and take the ball out of his hand. He stood on the mound smirking at me as I jogged past him to take left by storm. I could read his mind as I passed by: *All right asshole, you wanted in the game, now you're in. Can't wait to watch you foul it up.* I just gave him a hard stare in return.

I had brought a ball with me so I could warm up with Maxwell who had shifted into center. As I began to get loose, I noticed several things right away. And all of them were bad. First, all the runs and all the pitching changes had made for a long game. I hadn't thrown a ball in a few hours. Despite the humid heat, I was tight. I wasn't prepared to play mentally, either. I never thought Campbell would put me in. Shoot, I hadn't played in over a month and I hadn't played a night game in over a year! We didn't play night games in college.

Glancing up at the lights now, I noticed a glare in my peripheral vision from my seldom-used, hard contact lenses. I'd been earning my keep days by digging swimming pools and concluded all that sweat, dirt and sand did not mix well with hard contact lenses in my peepers. So I wasn't used to wearing the hard lenses. Lastly, I had a new glove, which I'd never used in a game situation before. The well of the pocket was still a little stiff—hard to close. But my old glove, which I still carried in my bag, was finished. I had patched it up once too often. If I caught the ball wrong in the webbing of that old Spalding, I feared the pill might break through to strike me in the face.

I took more warm-up tosses with Maxwell in center than Neal took on the mound. Usually a starting hurler, Neal was employed now in relief. Campbell had slated him to pitch our next game this weekend. That's probably why he'd been reluctant to bring him in earlier. But Neal was in now with the bases

loaded against him. He struck out the first batter he faced to get the second out of the inning. I kept up the loud-mouthed banter from my spot in left. A couple of my field mates, guys who'd looked up to me in high school, took up the gauntlet, chatting it up as well—though reluctantly. However fragile our psyche was, down 11 to 1 and the sacks loaded against us, I'd resuscitated us with a breath of life. Or perhaps it was Neal's presence on the mound, not my loud mouth in left.

With two down, their right-handed pitcher came up batting lefty. He swung and lofted a towering fly out to me. Wouldn't ya know it? I drifted in under it and froze. The ball soared high above the light stanchions. My pins were unsteady beneath me. I was like a sailor who didn't have his land legs yet. Trying to tread water on the Sea of Tranquility, see?

"I can do this," I told myself. "Shoot! Can o' corn, no problémo."

Geeze. I thought that pill would never come down. With two away and no fear of being doubled up, College Park runners were circling the bases like mad. Looking up, I had my glove above eye level but I had to fight against the glare from the lights bouncing off my contacts. Felt those damn hard lenses movin' around on my corneas. What more could go wrong?

I get under it and, finally, the ball plops into my glove only to carom right back out several feet up into the air, shooting up like a boomeranging bazooka. What more could go wrong? Well, I could drop the thing. I'd squeezed my glove but the stiff pocket had failed to respond in time. I was so mad I could have killed somebody. I should have repositioned myself with my glove under the ball that was squirting up like Old Faithful several feet above my head in front of my right shoulder. I let the pill fall until it dropped to eye level. I was so angry and so did not trust my glove that all I could think to do was to stab with my bare hand at the ball falling before my eyes at 32 feet per second squared, I reached up and out, angrily swiping my open right palm downward to bare-hand the balls smacking down hard atop the horsehide, encircling the it with my fingers and snatching the thing form the air in mid-descent for the third out. I was lucky I didn't slap it to the ground. The CP base runners bowed their heads, slowed into a disappointed trot and loped to their bench.

I watched the batter, halfway to third, shaking his head and kicking the dirt of the base path. As if he were Joltin' Joe for cryin' out loud. Our opponents ragged on me as I, angrily but gratefully, trotted across the diamond into our bench. CP knew I'd been the one with the mouth on the other side, shepherding a hopeless cause. They really let me have it for nearly blowing an easy play with the bases jammed. I jogged to our first base bench trying to look cool, as if I'd planned the whole deal. Neal accosted me with a wry smile curling the corners of his lips.

"Hey Shegogue! You really put excitement back into the routine fly ball."

Grinning self-consciously, I mumbled something about my glove being new and my contacts bothering me. Campbell overheard. He yelled that I should have taken care of that before I'd gone out to the field, griping how somebody with my experience should have known better. I seethed. But he was right, which made his rebuke even more maddening.

I popped out my contacts and changed into my black frame cheaters and found my old glove at the bottom of my gym bag. After righting my equipment issues I summoned the courage to talk it up some more while we rallied. For the first time all night, we showed a bit of life at the plate. My circus catch of a "routine fly ball," as Neal had put it, seemed to ignite our collective pride. This was the bottom of the seventh of a nine-inning game. We filled the bases and brought home a run. With two down, two out and the bases filled, I strode to the plate for the first time in five weeks.

But I was confident now. Hitting was my meat and I felt strong—ready. It was time to make all that extra BP pay off. I stepped into the right handed batter’s box lookin’ to bust one, knowing that, with the bases full, their pitcher would have to come to me. He had pitched the entire game. A right-hander, the dude threw with a three-quarters delivery. I had my timing back. And I knew this pitcher. He was their ace. I’d faced him my senior year of high school a year ago. He had an explosive fastball and one heck of a downer. That thing dropped off the table and, to make matters worse, he threw it with darn near the same velocity as his fastball. Guess they’d call it a slider today. You didn’t have time to double clutch on it and shoot it the other way, out to right. You had to guess with him. That’s what I had done a year ago against him in high school when I had guessed right once in three at-bats. But I’d noticed he’d lost command of his slurve ball this inning, just as Little Tommy had earlier for us. So I was lookin’ dead-red all the way. Yeah buddy—love that heat.

The guys on the bench were up and cheering for me, as were those on the bases. Even Campbell from his third base coaching box was giving me phony, half-hearted encouragement. The smirk on his face told me he expected me to fail, redoubling my resolve. With a run in, the score stood 11 to 2 against us.

The pitcher tried to curve me but he couldn’t get it in there for a strike. Because this was the first time in a month that I’d hit in a game, I was grateful he had trouble finding the plate. Gave me a chance to get my bearings. I worked the count to three and one. Give Campbell credit, he let me hit away and that’s exactly what I did. Opened my stance a hair so I could clear my hips on the inside fastball. Gauged the kid’s delivery and got the center-cut fastball I was expecting. *Boom* —lined it smartly past the pitcher’s ankles. As he fell away on his follow-through towards first, the shot proved too quick for him and the shortstop behind him. Escaping the infield, the ball skipped fast past the bag at second into center for a clean base knock driving in a run to make it 11 to 3.

Our guys were going crazy now. Looking up from the first base water fountain, Mr. Cosh gave me a watery lip-dripping wink. He nodded across the diamond to Campbell in the third base box as if to say: “I told ya so.” I was happy. You bet I was, but we still had a long way to go to come back. Top of the order was due up in the presence of Bobby Niff who, though only a rising high school senior, was our best ballplayer—the white shoes guys be damned.

Unlike those prima donnas, Niff was not a “white shoes” kind of guy at all. He was as traditional and rock solid as you could want any teammate to be. Why Campbell had him leading off though, instead of batting third, was a mystery to me. Maybe Campbell had a crystal ball after all? Mebbe he knew this bases-loaded, come-from-behind situation would arise? Yeah, right. And why the College Park manager left his pitcher in to face Niff, I’ll never know either. Their dude was done. Put a fork in him. Niff was no dummy. A former pitcher himself, he also knew their hurler couldn’t get his curve over.

I took my lead, keeping a wary eye on the first baseman, playing off the bag behind me. Niff would be looking fast ball as I had. I rooted for Bobby as he stood in there at the plate like DiMag. Bobby Niff has a short, compact but powerful swing, kind of like Steve Garvey. I was leading off first base and clapping, when he got the first pitch, another center-cut fastball that he was looking for and—*BOOM!!!!!!*

The concussion of bat on ball sounded like the crack of a rifle splitting the still, country, summer night. I knew it was gone the second I heard it. The pill took off like a rocket to dead center field. My head whipped to the right to follow its rocket-rapid flight. The ball was still rising as it disappeared halfway up the fifty-foot tall trees in the woods behind the little stadium. I circled the bases, clapping my hands. Behind me, Bobby cantered around the bases quickly, head down, careful not to show up the opposing hurler. That was Bobby. No, you’d never catch any mustard on him. No sir.

And just like that, the score stood 11 to 7. And, suddenly, a victory seemed possible. We were still down four but we were back in the game, just one more big blast away from tying it with over two innings left to play. Mann! Yeah. Another slammer like that and we'd be all tied up! Our guys were going crazy and College Park, those first place hot shots, seemed to lose some of their swagger. Bobby had just let a lot of air out of their formerly about-to-burst balloon.

They replaced their pitcher, a little late in my opinion, with a fresh arm who retired our number-two hitter to end the inning. But what a shot in the arm was Bobby Niff's slammer! We took the field for the eighth invigorated with new life. Neal responded to the challenge, setting College Park down in order. Those guys on the third base bench looked as if they were on life support despite their four-run lead. I passed some of their players coming onto the field as I was jogging off, and they were dazed. Their swagger had evaporated.

In our half of the eighth we tallied three more times on the strength of Ronnie Miller's three-run blast over the right center field fence, knocking out another opposing hurler. The inning ended with me on deck and us down by just one measly run: 11 to 10.

As he had in the eighth, Neal took care of business again in the top of the ninth, shutting out College Park for the third inning in a row. Like my teammates, I came off the field pumped up. We *knew* we were gonna take these guys in the bottom half of the inning. I mean, we just *knew* it. It was only a question of how. Old Mo was with us and we were feeling it big time.

I was leading off, a spot I was used to. I couldn't wait to get on and score the tying run. We had nine-one-two due up with Bobby Niff coming off his slammer batting right behind me. College Park had inserted yet another pitcher. I inched as close to the plate as I dared to watch his warm-up tosses. Didn't see anything special with this cat; nothing new, certainly nothing overpowering—no late movement. Looked like BP to me. I was ready. My bench mates were ready, too. They were really hooting and hollering now. What a difference a couple innings and nine runs had made! College Park was the team moping around. They acted as though they'd just stuck their collective heads under the guillotine.

I was just stepping into the batter's box, furtively checking down the line at the third sacker to see if maybe I should drop one down when, suddenly and without warning – *POOOFFF!* The lights went out—literally extinguished. Gone. Every light stanchion in the place went out all at the same time, even the ones behind us over on the vacated softball diamonds. I couldn't believe it. No one could. I stood there, mouth agape with bat in hand ready to hit in utter astonishment absorbed by total, absolute pitch black.

For the first time we heard only the chirping of crickets. Everything was black on this starless, moonless night—and silent. I could barely make out the ump and their catcher who were standing practically right next to me. Couldn't see their pitcher at all, or anyone else for that matter. And their pitcher was just sixty feet away. It is said that the absence of light is dark. I never fully grasped what that meant until this moment. Thomas Edison would have hung his head in shame. From unseen stands and benches on both sides of the diamond, whispers of wonderment gave way to shouts, cackles and catcalls in the pitch black of a cloud-covered, Southern Maryland night.

We waited for the lights to come back on, but no luck. The light banks remained dark as tombs. The plate umpire ordered the players to return to their respective benches. I trudged reluctantly back to the bench, bat in hand. Campbell and Cosh went out to confer with the umps and the CP coaches at home plate. We were out in the country. Watkins Park was a brand new recreational facility, a regional park situated out in



the boonies of central Prince George's County, surrounded by forests and tobacco fields. There were no other lights, no moon, no stars—no nothin'—just pitch black.

After a prolonged discussion among the umps and coaches, Campbell and Cosh came back to the bench to give us the bad news. The lights were on some kind of programming mechanism. They were sequenced to go off at midnight. The fricking game had started at eight p.m. But with the twenty-one runs scored and the numerous pitching changes, the contest had labored on to reach the bewitching hour. Campbell gave us the ruling on the game. He said no park personnel were available to turn the lights back on. The game was called. It would be finished only if the outcome would make a difference in selecting the second half winner for the play-offs. Otherwise, the score would revert to what it was at the top of the ninth, which was 11 to 10. The game wasn't official, but it was unlikely it would ever be finished.

*WHAT!!! You gotta be kiddin' me!*

Quite understandably, my guys and I were shocked, stunned even, by this nefarious turn of events. We had those hotshot, first place bastards over there hanging on the ropes, hanging by a thread. They were on life support for cripes' sake. All we had to do to snuff 'em out was pull the plug. We griped and moaned and bitched but there was nothing we could do about it. To a man, we all knew we'd been jobbed. We all *knew* if those lights were to come back on right now, we'd kick their league-leading behinds back to College Park with their tails dragging between their legs. Let us finish this thing in fine fashion with a big "W" for the home team. They were out o' arms, for cripe's sake. It was battin' practice time.

As we dutifully collected our equipment and hauled our gear back to the cars waiting in the parking lot, we had to be careful. Had to stick together, teammates and girlfriends alike; otherwise, we could have gotten lost in the dark. A funny thing happened on that lengthy, dark trek. We stayed together. We talked about how we'd come back—without the "hot dogs," the much ballyhooed "white spikes" guys. And I offered that if we'd stick together from now on, as we just had on the field and as we were now walking there in the dark, we'd be okay for the rest of the season.

And that's exactly what we did boys and girls. You can bet I started the rest of the way, too—center field, lead-off hitter. Campbell left us to coach his hot-shot, first-place, nineteen year-old Bill Cecil League club in a national tourney in Johnstown—good riddance. By the time he got back (after losing, naturally), I was on a multi-hit game, batting streak, firmly entrenched at the top of the line-up for the duration. And guess what? We won seven of our last nine to finish the overall season with a winning record of 11 and 8 with one—unfinished.

No, we didn't win the second half to make the play-offs. And we never did get to finish the bottom of the ninth to complete our comeback. But collectively as a club and as individuals, we regained our self respect to finish the year—winners with happy memories.

To this day, there's no doubt in my mind we would have won that game had the lights stayed on. No doubt whatsoever. Some things you just know, ya know? There's also no doubt that, had we won, no vindicating victory could have been as memorable, or as bright, as the dark ending we experienced when the lights cut out on us so cruelly and unjustly at the bewitching, midnight hour. Certainly, it would not have been memorable enough to record some thirty-eight years later anyway.

The lesson I learned: *You're never down too far to come back*—provided there's no ten-run slaughter rule.

Post Script

Baseball is a special game, beautifully unique from all others. With special rules that make it so. It's not a contest where the object is tugging a ball across a line by flattening people to the ground, or knocking them out with your fists, or pinning them to the ground with your body. On the contrary, baseball is a gentlemanly contest. Its sole criterion for victory is for one team to come home safely more often than its opponent. What physical match could be more humane, have a more civilized incentive than that? Who doesn't want to come home safely? Isn't that what Heaven is all about? And each time you cross the plate to score baseball gives you a little slice of Heaven right here on earth. This distinguished, grand old game is the national pastime, the noblest of sporting contests because it seems to aspire to a higher calling than other more violent sports. And there is another inviolate principle of this special game. It is the inherent principle of timelessness, which should have remained inviolate that memorable night thirty-eight years ago.

*You see Baseball has no time limit. Baseball ... suspends time. Think of it. The clock never expires on a baseball game because baseball supersedes the physical dimension of time. You play until you put yourself out, win, or Nature rains you out.*

The end of a baseball contest should never be arbitrary. Only when each club has had its fair opportunity to outscore—that is, to “come home safely” more often than—its opponent should the game conclude and not before. The clock does not dictate in baseball, as it does in other sports—as it does in life.

Thirty-eight years ago events conspired arbitrarily and capriciously to overturn the long-honored tradition of timelessness inherent to the greatest game ever invented. I submit that for a lighting glitch to end a ballgame before it had run its full course runs not only contrary to the time-honored traditions of the game itself, it's downright un-American. If the natural physical dimension of time cannot terminate a baseball game then neither should the failure of any mere invention of mortal man—such as the electric light bulb.

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