

Parkside Circle

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My dad was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates right out of high school, skipped college, and married my mom soon after. Following his rookie year in Single-A ball my brother Matt was born. I was born three years later during dad's first stint with the Pirates' minor league affiliate in Triple-A Nashville. I don't remember many of his games, but his last one I'll never forget.

The flags hanging above the center field wall were blowing out toward our apartment on Omena Avenue, and the stadium lights flipped on as the sun set below the leaf-filled treetops. Dad was pitching and he'd already given up two home runs.

"It's the wind," Matt said. "Neither of those balls would have gone out if there wasn't so much wind."

I sprayed a fat line of ketchup across my hotdog while dad through his 54th pitch. He said it was my job to keep track of how many pitches he threw each night, and to update him each inning with the count by show of fingers. He put Matt in charge of tallying how many curveballs, fastballs, and sliders he threw.

"That's the 13th curve he's thrown tonight and none of them have had much movement on them, he looks tired or something," Matt said after pitch 55 was smoked off the left field wall, and for the second game in a row I dropped my hot dog.

Pitch 56 never happened. While I gathered the remains of my fumbled frank, a murmur swept across the stadium. When I looked up mom was scurrying down the bleacher steps while a rush of trainers shoved their way through a group of players huddled around the pitchers mound.

"What happened? I asked Matt. "Are they taking dad out? Did he hang another curve? Why are you standing up?" But he didn't answer.

"Why's mom on the field? Did something happen to dad?"

"He fell," Matt finally responded, "didn't you see him fall?"

"Did he trip over the mound again?"

"No, he just fell, like he collapsed, just shut up!"

A lady wearing a yellow security jacket, the same lady Matt dubbed "Cecil" because of the freakish resemblance between her and Detroit Tiger slugger Cecil Fielder, rushed over to us.

"You two need to come with me," she said frantically.

I thought we were in trouble. Matt and I always joked that Cecil had enough size to be a great DH or could pinch hit and stick her protruding lopsided butt into the ball when the team needed a base runner. Maybe she knew.

Matt nudged me forward as I reached back to grab my bag of peanuts.

"Dammit, move!" he said. "Forget the fucking peanuts and go!"

Cecil grabbed my arm and yanked me up the cement steps. Something is wrong, I thought. Matt usually mouthed cuss words at me when mom and dad weren't looking, but I had never heard him say one. When we reached the back parking lot he did it again.

"Shit," he said, as they wheeled dad into an ambulance.

"What happened?" I asked.

Cecil put her arm around me. "He's going to be fine, okay? Don't worry," she said. "You two are going to come with me. We're going to follow your parents to the hospital."

Matt nodded as a rush of tears wet his eyes. Then I nodded too.

When we got to the hospital I saw mom talking to one of the doctors in the hallway. I was

one step into a sprint when I felt Cecil's beastly hand grab my arm.

"Wait a minute," she whispered, "just wait right here."

I could hear mom crying as she sunk her head into the doctor's chest.

"Is dad's arm going to be okay?" I shouted.

Matt grabbed my other arm and dug his nails into my wrist, gritting his teeth like dad did whenever he was angry.

"He didn't hurt his arm! Does mom ever cry when dad hurts his arm?"

"Then what happened?" I asked, starting to get annoyed. I followed Matt's eyes as he loosened his hold and saw mom approaching us. She had finally stopped crying.

"The doctor said dad had a heart attack," she explained, "but he's going to be okay as long as he stops playing baseball for a while."

"How long is a while?" Matt said, panicked.

"The doctors said he has an irregular heartbeat." She paused with a deep sigh. "They're not sure if he'll ever be able to play again."

"That's bullshit!" Matt shouted.

"Honey, it's okay, dad was thinking about quitting anyway. He's spent so many years trying to make it all the way."

"He's so close though! He just needs to develop a change-up and mix up his pitches a little more. He's going to get called up, I just need to keep working with him!"

Mom started crying again and gave Matt a hug. I was shocked...

"Mom, didn't you hear what he said?"

"It's okay honey."

"Okay? He just said BS..."

"I heard what he said. He's just upset."

"That's bullshit!"

Grandma said we could stay with her until dad recovered and found a job. She lived on a cul-de-sac called Parkside Circle in the small town I was born in, the same place where both my parents grew up, Sturgis. Her house was the first of the string of homes that horseshoed the neighborhood and the only one without kids. Every day Matt and I would play catch in the street while dad coached us as he relaxed in the cool summer shade with grandma tending to his every need.

"Matt come down over the top when you throw, none of that side arm junk, watch your brother." Dad always said that if he combined my mechanics with Matt's power, we'd make the perfect ball player.

It wasn't long before Matt and I had the entire block playing baseball on the street. Matt was the best player by far, he even dominated the two oldest kids in the neighborhood, Lance Bigby and his good friend Alf Blickster. At the end of the summer Matt was going to be a freshman and had a good shot to play varsity ball. Lance and Alf were already in high school, but neither of them played organized sports.

"Your dad's not that good at baseball," Alf said, his way of introducing himself. Alf posed as a bully, but was too fat and animated to really intimidate anyone. He lived with his grandma a few blocks away, close enough to the Circle for us to hear the zips, pops, and bangs from the stash of illegal fireworks him and Lance shot off nightly.

"Yea, my dad told me that your dad wasn't even that good when he played for Sturgis," said Lance, "that his parents paid a bunch of scouts to come watch him play and say good shit about him."

Unlike Alf, Lance scared the crap out of me. He was always angry and I believed every malicious thing that came out of his mouth. Still, he was the second best ball player in the neighborhood and I always thought he was good enough to play for Sturgis.

"Why don't you play for the high school team? I asked him one day.

He looked at me and shook his head. "It's pointless. Everyone knows you've gotta own a business or have the right last name to play in this town."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," I said, forgetting who I was talking to. "I mean umm, you should at least tryout and see if you make it."

Alf shuffled over, following his gut into the conversation like an angry pregnant woman.

"Yea right," he said, "I tried out last year and the coaches were shitty. I quit before they made cuts, didn't want to waste my time playing for a bunch of losers."

Alf sucked at baseball. He always toed the cement chalked batters box so he was barely in it. He was the biggest kid in the neighborhood and the only one afraid of the ball.

"My dad doesn't want me trying out and I don't blame him," said Lance. "He got cut in high school and he shouldn't have. High school sports are all politics. You gotta be a rich bitch or have a daddy that played minor league ball to have a shot to play."

Like Alf, Lance didn't actually live on the Circle. He lived on Walker, the street adjacent to ours, in a crumbling white house with a dog that never shut up. One day I jogged over to his house to get a ball Matt had blasted into his driveway during a neighborhood pickup game. His dad was sitting in a chair by his rusted pickup truck and a tub of iced beer.

"Hi," I said...

He stared at me. His skin was dark and oily like a beat-up catcher's mitt. Sweat was soaked through his faded wife beater and I noticed the wet from his cold beer was dripping beads of filth from his hands down his bulky wrists and forearms. The ball was sitting at the foot of his chair but he made no indication that he knew it was there; he made no indication he knew I was there.

"Can I have my baseball?" I said softly.

He didn't move. His frozen mundane expression chilled like the booze in his tub. The constant waves of "Come ons" and "Hurry ups" from the guys waiting on the Circle was about to be my excuse to get the hell out of there, until finally, he leaned over in his squeaky chair and scooped up the ball.

"This ball aint good no more," he said, examining its fresh new seems. Then with a sudden flick of his wrist the ball splashed in the tub. "Damn things water logged."

He bent down, eyed me sharply like a pitcher checking the runner at first, and slowly reached into the tub of ice water and retrieved another beer.

After living with grandma for over a month, dad was cleared to work and found a job at Hadly's Furniture. The owner, Scott Hadly, was dad's best friend in high school and excited to add him to the team. Scott always told Matt and I stories about his high school Home Economics class and his passion for cooking.

"I used to tell your dad that when he got to the big leagues he'd have to come by one of the five star restaurants I always dreamed of opening and help me promote it!" Scott even went to culinary school for a year, but moved back to Sturgis soon after his father died to help run the store.

With dad working there, Saturdays at Hadly's became "Buy something get an autograph day." Matt and I would sit behind one of Hadly's discounted tables with dad while he signed autographs for the handful of customers that wanted one.

"But remember," Scott would constantly remind him, "they have to buy something first!"

One time a customer bought the autograph table and Scott refused to replace it with any of the tables on the showroom floor. Instead of letting dad go home, he paid Matt and I five bucks to stand there all day while dad used our backs to sign things.

A few weeks later Matt got a job scooping ice cream at Jimmy Joe's to help pay dad's medical bills. Since mom had already been working as a waitress at The Chicken Den, I was now left at home all afternoon with grandma. Every day she took me to her play practices at the auditorium to watch her and the Sturgis Civic Players perform *El Tres Rivers*, a play she wrote herself, one she was trying to get to Broadway. Half of it was in Spanish the other half was in English.

"It's real simple," she said, "By doing all the plays in English we're only offering shows that pertain to half of the Sturgis population. Since we've got so many Hispanics living here, why not do the first act in English, the second in Spanish, and the third in both!" Like usual, she took out an ad in the newspaper to advertise her upcoming production.

*Come see the Sturgis Civic Players this Friday and Saturday a siete de la noche realice
El Tres Rivers, una love historia about antiguo Indian rios dwellers.*

The entire town was on board with the idea and the show sold out a month before opening night. It was her 35th year as a Civic Player and through her time on stage she had become a Sturgis celebrity. I was oblivious to her local fame until a couple of kids from the high school film and video class interrupted a rehearsal and asked her for an interview. After the interview I pulled her aside.

“Are you going to be on T.V.?” I asked.

“I sure am! Those kids are doing a documentary on me. They’re going to show it in the high school gymnasium at the beginning of Michigan Week.” Grandma also told me Sturgis had been chosen as the kick off city for Michigan Week that year, and promised me a seat with her in the parade. This was big.

“Have you ever thought about going pro like dad almost did?” I asked.

“I’ve always wanted to be in the movies, Broadway, but it’s not easy to leave Sturgis,” she said, “It’s a sticky place to live.” It can’t be that hard, I thought.

It was 88 degrees on the day of the parade and mom made me wear the black tux I wore when I was the ring bearer in uncle Jim’s wedding three years earlier. She tried returning the rental after the wedding but her stitching wasn’t good enough to hide the hole I made in the right pant leg when I slid across the dance floor and snagged aunt Jean’s garter out of mid air like Ozzie Smith diving for a line drive. She decided to keep the tux and make me wear it at least twice a year so it’d be worth the \$150 it cost.

“Can’t I wear my Trammel jersey or something?” I asked, staring at the extra wrist and ankle my tux could no longer conceal.

“Grandma wants you to look nice, and I want everyone to see how handsome my dirty little ball player can be,” she said, combing my hair like I was five again. Then Matt walked in.

“Hey!” I shouted. “How come Matt gets to wear his Whitaker jersey?”

“I’m riding with the baseball team, Rita.” He said, laughing.

“Matt, stop it,” mom said, fighting back a smile.

Rita was grandma’s name. A few days before the parade, after her documentary was shown at the high school, a man I’d never met came up to me and said, “Rita Wrinkler, you have to be related to Rita Wrinkler. You look just like her!” All of grandma’s friends in the Civic Players said the same thing. Now Matt was saying it.

“It’s pretty scary how identical you two are.”

“Shut up. Mom make him shut up!”

“I bet if you wore these nobody could tell you two apart,” Matt said, dangling a pair of earrings in my face.

“Matthew, that’s enough.” Mom said. “Now hurry up before we’re all late.”

We met dad at the corner of Lakeview along with the rest of the people in the parade, as they lined up in order. Dad was riding with Scott Hadly and the other furniture employees in their own store made float that looked like a giant mattress. While dad signed a bucket of baseballs to toss to the crowd, Scott offered Mayor Duncan a 30% discount on all furniture if he let their float go first. The mayor agreed and followed Dad and the Hadly’s crew once the parade began. Mom and the other Chicken Den waitresses followed the mayor’s car on foot while handing out coupons for free legs and thighs.

A few spots behind The Chicken Den, Matt rode with the varsity baseball team in the back of Coach Yoder’s truck. A few days before the parade, Coach Yoder saw Matt hitting 90 MPH fastballs in the batting cages behind Dairy Queen and invited him to join the team in the parade.

Grandma and I were in the middle of the pack, sandwiched between the beer guzzling old timers from the VFW and the board breaking members of the Side Kick Tae Kwon Do team.

Grandma was a little disappointed because “handsome” John Kingsman was supposed to be our driver but he fell ill and sent one of his employees from Sturgis Iron and Metal to fill in.

“I seen that La Tres Riverias show you put on,” said Kenny Fish, as he chauffeured us down Lakeview at a smooth 2 MPH in Mr. Kingsman’s 54’ Skylark convertible. “First play I ever saw.”

“Did you enjoy it?” Grandma asked, turning her attention to Kenny.

“Shit, I don’t speak none of that Espanol, but shit, yea it wasn’t bad. Mr. Kingsman gives out tickets to shows and ball games all the time. I thought hell if it’s free why not?”

Grandma smiled politely and got back to the crowd.

“That your grandson?” Kenny asked.

“He is,” grandma said, while blowing kisses to her fans.

“Hell I knew it, boy looks just like you. Don’t worry kid, your grandma aint bad looking for an older...” “Kenny’s flattery was cutoff by a thud, and the slam of the breaks jolted me to the front of the car. “Shit,” he said as he put it in park. Grandma grabbed my arm while she tilted the rear view mirror to fix her hair.

“Are you okay?” She said.

I nodded and peaked over the hood. Kenny had forgotten to stop while the Side Kicks did another one of their routines and slammed into one of its members. For being in Tae Kwan Do, the kid Kenny rear-ended looked awfully big and out of shape.

“Aww he’s fine!” a familiar voice shouted, “he likes it from behind!”

I finally spotted the voice coming from Lance who was sitting on a cooler next to his dad on the sidewalk. Lance laughed hysterically and chugged a beer from a koozie. I looked over as the sobbing victim was rolled onto his back. It was Alf.

“Twenty bucks if your fat ass does a kip up!” shouted Lance.

“I just got hit by a car you prick!” cried Alf, as a group of paramedics tended to his scraped knees and elbows. Kenny yanked Alf’s white tipped purple belt from underneath one of the tires and handed it to him.

“Uhh, sorry bout that,” he said.

“Sue his ass Alf!” shouted Lance, hiding his beer as a cop watched him suspiciously.

Though the medics said nothing was broken or sprained, Alf insisted on calling an ambulance to remove him from the street. While waiting for the ambulance, mom, dad, Matt and all the others in the parade who had finished their journey down Lakeview, walked all the way back to witness the clog that was holding up the parade. Pretty soon the crowd of people grew restless and Lance started a chant of boos. Grandma couldn’t take the heat any longer so mom took her home. I insisted on finishing the ride and Matt and Dad decided to join me. Matt and I sat in the back of the Skylark, still waiting for the ambulance, while Kenny told dad his rendition of the story.

“Next thing I know, this damn kids’ trying to kung fu kick the Skylark!”

Then Matt started telling me how most of the guys on the team were making fun of him for being so small and saying the only reason he got so much hype from coach was because of dad’s baseball credentials.

“They think you’re small?” I said, amazed.

“Yep, that’s why I’m thinking about taking up karate like Alf over there,” he said sarcastically.

“Yea I was thinking about asking dad about that.”

“I was joking.”

“I didn’t know Alf did karate.”

“Me either. He threatened me once, told me he knew a bunch of moves and holds, but he never did anything.”

The incoming sirens brought a round of cheers and applause, and as I looked into the crowd I realized few people had left, the majority stayed put during the half hour delay, and the ones that did leave came back.

“Is there something wrong with Lance’s dad?” I asked Matt.

“I don’t think so, why?”

“He doesn’t talk much, or smile, or move really. Lance said he used to be a good ball player,

but I've never even seen the man stand up."

"Well you know Lance is full of..." Matt said, mouthing "shit."

Kenny started the car and returned to parade pace. Then he tilted the rear view mirror so I could see his reflection suck on a cigarette.

"So what do you boys want to be when you grow up?" He said.

"I want to be a baseball player," I answered confidently.

"Ha!" He said, exhaling a cloud of smoke into the stiff wind blowing in my direction. "I wanted to be a ball player too."