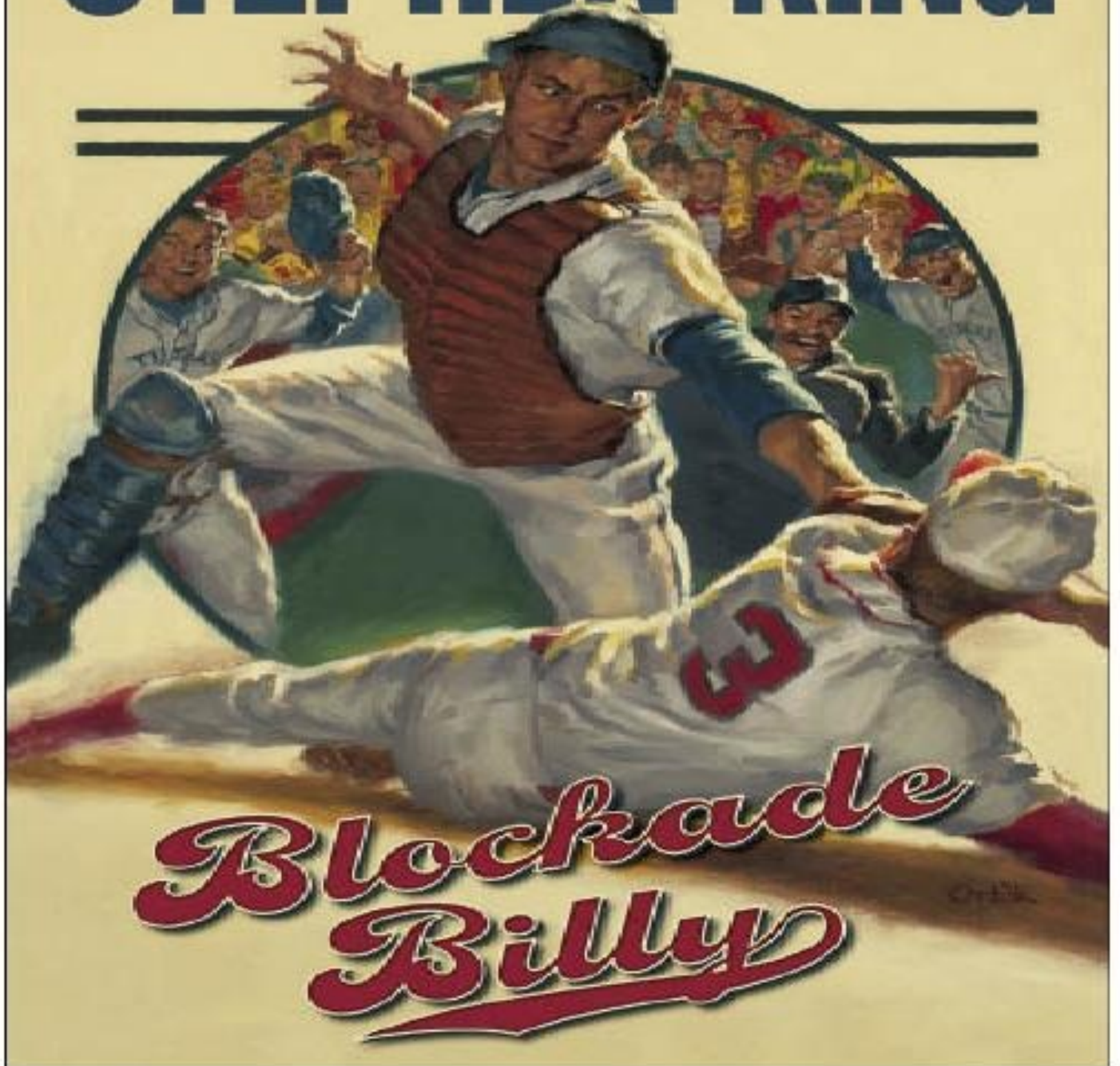


STEPHEN KING



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*Blockade
Billy*

STEPHEN KING

STORYVILLE

❖ 2010 ❖

This is for every guy (and gal) who ever put on the gear.

William Blakely?

Oh my God, you mean Blockade Billy. Nobody's asked me about him in years. Of course, no one asks me much of anything in here, except if I'd like to sign up for Polka Night at the K of P Hall downtown or something called Virtual Bowling. That's right here in the Common Room. My advice to you, Mr. King—you didn't ask for it, but I'll give it to you—is don't get old, and if you do, don't let your relatives put you in a zombie hotel like this one.

It's a funny thing, getting old. When you're young, people always want to listen to your stories, especially if you were in pro baseball. But when you're young, you don't have time to tell them. Now I've got all the time in the world, and it seems like nobody cares about those old days. But I still like to think about them. So sure, I'll tell you about Billy Blakely. Awful story, of course, but those are the ones that last the longest.

Baseball was different in those days. You have to remember that Blockade Billy played for the Titans only ten years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, and the Titans are long gone. I don't suppose New Jersey will ever have another Major League team, not with two powerhouse franchises just across the river in New York. But it was a big deal then—we were a big deal—and we played our games in a different world.

The rules were the same. Those don't change. And the little rituals were pretty similar, too. Once nobody would have been allowed to wear their cap cocked to the side, or curve the brim, and your hair had to be neat and short (the way these chuckleheads wear it now, my God), but some players still crossed themselves before they stepped into the box, or drew in the dirt with the heads of their bats before taking up the stance, or jumped over the baseline when they were running out to take their positions. Nobody wanted to step on the baseline, it was considered the worst luck to do that.

The game was *local*, okay? TV had started to come in, but only on the weekends. We had a good market, because the games were on WNJ, and everyone in New York could watch. Some of those broadcasts were pretty comical. Compared to the way they do today's games, it was all amateur night in Dixie. Radio was better, more professional, but of course that was local, too. No satellite broadcasts, because there were no satellites! The Russians sent the first one up during the Yankees-Braves World Series that year. As I remember, it happened on an off-day, but I could be wrong about that. What I remember is that the Titans were out of it early that year. We contended for awhile, partly thanks to Blockade Billy, but you know how *that* turned out. It's why you came, right?

But here's what I'm getting at: because the game was smaller on the national stage, the players weren't such a big deal. I'm not saying there weren't stars—guys like Aaron, Burdette, William Kaline, and of course The Mick—but most weren't as well-known coast to coast as players like Alex Rodriguez and Barry Bonds (a couple of bushers, if you ask me). And most of the other guys? I can tell you in two words: working stiffs. The average salary back then was fifteen grand, less than a first-

year high school teacher makes today.

Working stiffs, get it? Just like George Will said in that book of his. Only he talked about that like it was a good thing. I'm not so sure it was, if you were a thirty-year-old shortstop with a wife and three kids and maybe another seven years to go before retirement. Ten, if you were lucky and didn't get hurt. Carl Furillo ended up installing elevators in the World Trade Center and moonlighting as a night watchman, did you know that? You did? Do you think that guy Will knew it, or just forgot to mention it?

The deal was this: if you had the skills and could do the job even with a hangover, you got to play. If you couldn't, you got tossed on the scrapheap. It was that simple. And as brutal. Which brings me to our catching situation that spring.

We were in good shape during camp, which for the Titans was in Sarasota. Our starting catcher was Johnny Goodkind. Maybe you don't remember him. If you do, it's probably because of the way he ended up. He had four good years, batted over .300, put the gear on almost every game. Knew how to handle the pitchers, didn't take any guff. The kids didn't dare shake him off. He hit damn near .350 that spring, with maybe a dozen ding-dongs, one as deep and far as any I ever saw at Ed Smi Stadium, where the ball didn't carry well. Put out the windshield in some reporter's Chevrolet—ha!

But he was also a big drinker, and two days before the team was supposed to head north and open home, he ran over a woman on Pineapple Street and killed her just as dead as a dormouse. Or doornae. Whatever the saying is. Then the damn fool tried to run. But there was a County Sheriff's cruiser parked on the corner of Orange, and the deputies inside saw the whole thing. Wasn't much doubt about Johnny's state, either. When they pulled him out of his car, he smelled like a brewery and could hardly stand. One of the deputies bent down to put the cuffs on him, and Johnny threw up on the back of the guy's head. Johnny Goodkind's career in baseball was over before the puke dried. Even the Babe couldn't have stayed in the game after running over a housewife out doing her morning shop-around.

His backup was a guy named Frank Faraday. Not bad behind the plate, but a banjo hitter at best. Went about one-fifty. No bulk, which put him at risk. The game was played hard in those days, M King, with plenty of fuck-you.

But Faraday was what we had. I remember DiPunno saying he wouldn't last long, but not even Jersey Joe had an idea how short a time it was going to be.

Faraday was behind the plate when we played our last exhibition game that year. Against the Red Sox it was. There was a squeeze play put on. Don Hoak at the plate. Some big hulk—I think it was Ted Kluszewski—on third. Hoak punches the ball right at Jerry Rugg, who was pitching for us that day. Big Klew breaks for the plate, all two hundred and seventy Polack pounds of him. And there was Faraday, just about as skinny as a Flav'r Straw, standing with one foot on the old dishola. You knew the game was going to end bad. Rugg throws to Faraday. Faraday turns to put the tag on. I couldn't look.

Faraday hung onto the ball and got the out, I'll give him that, only it was a spring training out,

important in the great scheme of things as a low fart in a high wind. And that was the end of *his* baseball career. One broken arm, one broken leg, a concussion—that was the score. I don't know who became of him. Wound up washing windshields for tips at an Esso station in Tucumcari, for all I know. He wouldn't be the only one.

But here's the point: we lost both our catchers in the space of forty-eight hours and had to go north with nobody to put behind the plate except for Ganzie Burgess, who converted from catcher to pitcher in the early fifties. He was thirty-nine years old that season and only good for middle relief, but he was a knuckleballer, and as crafty as Satan, so no way was Joe DiPunno going to risk those old bones behind the plate. He said he'd put *me* back there first. I knew he was joking—I was just an old third base coach with so many groin-pulls my balls were practically banging on my knees—but the idea still made me shiver.

What Joe did was call the front office in Newark and say, "I need a guy who can catch Harlan Masters's fastball and Danny Doo's curve without falling on his keister. I don't care if he plays for Testicle Tire in Tremont, just make sure he's got a mitt and have him at the Swamp in time for the National Anthem. Then get to work finding me a real catcher. If you want to have any chance at all of contending this season, that is." Then he hung up and lit what was probably his eightieth cigarette the day.

Oh for the life of a manager, huh? One catcher facing manslaughter charges; another in the hospital wrapped in so many bandages he looked like Boris Karloff in *The Mummy*; a pitching staff either not old enough to shave or about ready for the Sociable Security; God knows who about to put on the gear and squat behind the plate on Opening Day.

We flew north that year instead of riding the rails, but it still felt like a train wreck. Meanwhile Kerwin McCaslin, who was the Titans' GM, got on the phone and found us a catcher to start the season with: William Blakely, soon to be known as Blockade Billy. I can't remember now if he came from Double or Triple A, but you could look it up on your computer, I guess, because I *do* know the name of the team he came from: the Davenport Cornhuskers. A few players came up from there during my seven years with the Titans, and the regulars would always ask how things were down there playing for the Cornholers. Or sometimes they'd call them the Cocksuckers. Baseball humor is not what you'd call sophisticated.

We opened against the Red Sox that year. Middle of April. Baseball started later back then, and I played a saner schedule. I got to the park early that day—before God got out of bed, actually—and there was a young man sitting on the bumper of an old Ford truck in the players' lot. Iowa license plate dangling on chickenwire from the back bumper. Nick the guard let him in when the kid showed him his letter from the front office and his driver's license.

"You must be Bill Blakely," I said, shaking his hand. "Good to know you."

"Good to know you too," he said. "I brought my gear, but it's pretty beat-up."

“Oh, I think we can take care of you there, partner,” I said, letting go of his hand. He had a Band-Aid wrapped around his second finger, just below the middle knuckle. “Cut yourself shaving?” he asked, pointing to it.

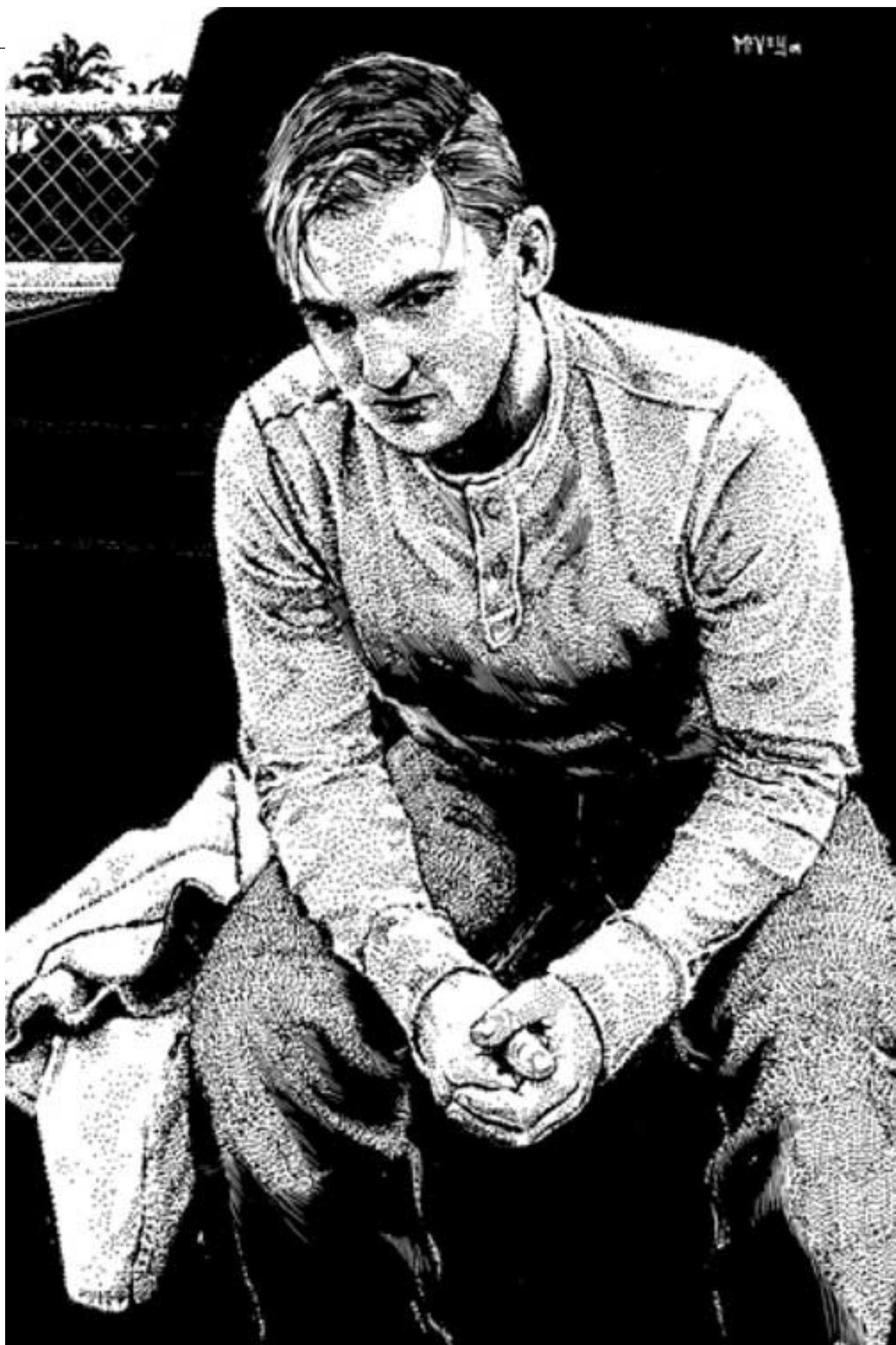
“Yup, cut myself shaving,” he says. I couldn’t tell if that was his way of showing he got my little joke, or if he was so worried about fucking up he thought he ought to agree with everything anyone said, at least to begin with. Later on I realized it was neither of those things; he just had a habit of echoing back what you said to him. I got used to it, even sort of got to like it.

“Are you the manager?” he asked. “Mr. DiPunno?”

“No,” I said, “I’m George Grantham. Granny to you. I coach third base. I’m also the equipment manager.” Which was the truth; I did both jobs. Told you the game was smaller then. “I’ll get you fixed up, don’t worry. All new gear.”

“All new gear,” says he. “Except for the glove. I have to have Billy’s old glove, you know. Billy Junior and me’s been the miles.”

“Well, that’s fine with me.” And we went on in to what the sports writers used to call Old Swamp in those days.



I hesitated over giving him 19, because it was poor old Faraday's number, but the uniform fit him without looking like pajamas, so I did. While he was dressing, I said: "Ain't you tired? You must have driven almost nonstop. Didn't they send you some cash to take a plane?"

"I ain't tired," he said. "They might have sent me some cash to take a plane, but I didn't see. Could we go look at the field?"

I said we could, and led him down the runway and up through the dugout. He walked down to home plate outside the foul line in Faraday's uniform, the blue 19 gleaming in the morning sun (it wasn't but eight o'clock, the groundskeepers just starting what would be a long day's work).

I wish I could tell you how it felt to see him taking that walk, Mr. King, but words are your thing, not mine. All I know is that back-to he looked more like Faraday than ever. He was ten years younger, of course...but age doesn't show much from the back, except sometimes in a man's walk. Plus he was slim like Faraday, and slim's the way you want your shortstop and second baseman to look, not your catcher. Catchers should be built like fireplugs, the way Johnny Goodkind was. This one looked like a bunch of broken ribs waiting to happen.

He had a firmer build than Frank Faraday, though; broader butt and thicker thighs. He was skinnier from the waist up, but looking at him ass-end-going-away, I remember thinking he looked like what he probably was: an Iowa plowboy on vacation in scenic Newark.

He went to the plate and turned around to look out to dead center. He had dark hair and a lock of it had fallen on his forehead. He brushed it away and just stood there taking it all in—the silent, empty stands where over fifty thousand people would be sitting that afternoon, the bunting already hung on the railings and fluttering in the little morning breeze, the foul poles painted fresh Jersey Blue, the groundskeepers just starting to water. It was an awesome sight, I always thought, and I could imagine what was going through the kid's mind, him that had probably been home milking the cows just a week ago and waiting for the Cornholers to start playing in mid-May.

I thought, *Poor kid's finally getting the picture. When he looks over here, I'll see the panic in his eyes. I may have to tie him down in the locker room to keep him from jumping in that old truck of his and hightailing it back to God's country.*

But when he looked at me, there was no panic in his eyes. No fear. Not even nervousness, which would have said every player feels on Opening Day. No, he looked perfectly cool standing there behind the plate in his Levi's and light poplin jacket.

"Yuh," he says, like a man confirming something he was pretty sure of in the first place. "Billy can't hit here."

"Good for him," I tells him. It's all I can think of to say.

"Good," he says back. Then—I swear—he says, "Do you think those guys need help with the hoses?"

I laughed. There was something strange about him, something off, something that made fol-

nervous...but that something made people take to him, too. Kinda sweet. Something that made you want to like him in spite of feeling he wasn't exactly right in the top story. Joe felt it right away. Some of the players did, too, but that didn't stop them from liking him. I don't know, it was like when you talked to him what came back was the sound of your own voice. Like an echo in a cave.

"Billy," I said, "groundskeeping ain't your job. Bill's job is to put on the gear and catch Danny Dusen this afternoon."

"Danny Doo," he said.

"That's right. Twenty and six last year, should have won the Cy Young, didn't. He's still got a real ass over that. And remember this: if he shakes you off, don't you dare flash the same sign again. Not unless you want your pecker and asshole to change places after the game, that is. Danny Doo is for games from two hundred wins, and he's going to be mean as hell until he gets there."

"Until he gets there." Nodding his head.

"That's right."

"If he shakes me off, flash something different."

"Yes."

"Does he have a changeup?"

"Do you have two legs? The Doo's won a hundred and ninety-six games. You don't do that without a changeup."

"Not without a changeup," he says. "Okay."

"And don't get hurt out there. Until the front office can make a deal, you're what we got."

"I'm it," he says. "Gotcha."

"I hope so."

Other players were coming in by then, and I had about a thousand things to do. Later on I saw the kid in Jersey Joe's office, signing whatever needed to be signed with Kerwin McCaslin hanging over him like a vulture over roadkill, pointing out all the right places. Poor kid, probably six hours' worth of sleep in the last sixty, and he was in there signing five years of his life away. Later I saw him with Danny Dusen, going over the Boston lineup. The Doo was doing all the talking, and the kid was doing all the listening. Didn't even ask a question, so far as I saw, which was good. If the kid had opened his head Danny probably would have bit it off.

About an hour before the game, I went in to Joe's office to look at the lineup card. He had the kid batting eighth, which was no shock. Over our heads the murmuring had started and you could hear the rumble of feet on the boards. Opening Day crowds always pile in early. Listening to it started the butterflies in my gut, like always, and I could see Jersey Joe felt the same. His ashtray was already overflowing.

"He's not big like I hoped he'd be," he said, tapping Blakely's name on the lineup card. "God help us if he gets cleaned out."

“McCaslin hasn’t found anyone else?”

“Maybe. He talked to Hubie Rattner’s wife, but Hubie’s on a fishing trip somewhere in Rect Temperature, Michigan. Out of touch until next week.”

“Cap—Hubie Rattner’s forty-three if he’s a day.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. And be straight with me—how long do you think that kid’s gonna last in the bigs?”

“Oh, he’s probably just a cup of coffee,” I says, “but he’s got something Faraday didn’t.”

“And what might that be?”

“Dunno. But if you’d seen him standing behind the plate and looking out into center, you might feel better about him. It was like he was thinking ‘This ain’t the big deal I thought it would be.’”

“He’ll find out how big a deal it is the first time Ike Delock throws one at his nose,” Joe said, and lit a cigarette. He took a drag and started hacking. “I got to quit these Luckies. Not a cough in carload, my ass. I’ll bet you twenty goddam bucks that kid lets Danny Doo’s first curve go right through his wickets. Then Danny’ll be all upset—you know how he gets when someone fucks up his train ride—and Boston’ll be off to the races.”

“Ain’t you just the cheeriest Cheerio,” I says.

He stuck out his hand. “Bet.”

And because I knew he was trying to take the curse off it, I shook his hand. That was twenty I won because the legend of Blockade Billy started that very day.

You couldn’t say he called a good game, because he didn’t call it. The Doo did that. But the first pitch—to Frank Malzone—*was* a curve, and the kid caught it just fine. Not only that, though. It was the kid’s hair outside and I never saw a catcher pull one back so fast, not even Yogi. Ump called strike one and it was us off to the races, at least until Williams hit a solo shot in the fifth. We got that back in the sixth, when Ben Vincent put one out. Then in the seventh, we’ve got a runner on second—I think it was Barbarino—with two outs and the new kid at the plate. It was his third at bat. First time he struck out looking, the second time swinging. Delock fooled him bad that time, made him look silly, and he heard the only boos he ever got while he was wearing a Titans uniform.

He steps in, and I looked over at Joe. Seen him sitting way down by the lineup card, just looking at the floor and shaking his head. Even if the kid worked a walk, The Doo was up next, and The Doo couldn’t hit a slowpitch softball with a tennis racket. As a hitter that guy was fucking terrible.

I won’t drag out the suspense; this ain’t no kids’ sports novel. Although whoever said literature sometimes imitates art was right, and it did that day. Count went to three and two. Then Delock threw the sinker that fooled the kid so bad the first time and damn if the kid didn’t suck for it again. Except Ike Delock turned out to be the sucker that time. Kid golfed it right off his shoetops the way Ell Howard used to do and shot it into the gap. I waved the runner in and we had the lead back, two to one.

Everybody in the joint was on their feet, screaming their throats out, but the kid didn’t even seem

hear it. Just stood there on second, dusting off the seat of his pants. He didn't stay there long, because The Doo went down on three pitches, then threw his bat like he always did when he got struck out.

So maybe it's a sports novel after all, like the kind you probably read in junior high school student hall. Top of the ninth and The Doo's looking at the top of the lineup. Strikes out Malzone, and a quarter of the crowd's on their feet. Strikes out Klaus, and half the crowd's on their feet. Then comes Williams—old Teddy Ballgame. The Doo gets him on the hip, oh and two, then weakens and walks him. The kid starts out to the mound and Doo waves him back—just squat and do your job, sonny. Sonny does. What else is he gonna do? The guy on the mound is one of the best pitchers in baseball and the guy behind the plate was maybe playing a little pickup ball behind the barn that spring to keep in shape after the day's cowtits was all pulled.

First pitch, goddam! Williams takes off for second. The ball was in the dirt, hard to handle, but the kid still made one fuck of a good throw. Almost got Teddy, but as you know, almost only counts in horseshoes. Now everybody's on their feet, screaming. The Doo does some shouting at the kid—like it was the kid's fault instead of just a bullshit pitch—and while Doo's telling the kid he's a lousy choke Williams calls time. Hurt his knee a little sliding into the bag, which shouldn't have surprised anybody he could hit like nobody's business, but he was a leadfoot on the bases. Why he stole a bag that day anybody's guess. It sure wasn't no hit-and-run, not with two outs and the game on the line.

So Billy Anderson comes in to run for Teddy...who probably would have been royally roasted by the manager if he'd been anyone but Teddy. And Dick Gernert steps in, .425 slugging percentage or something like it. The crowd's going apeshit, the flag's blowing out, the frank wrappers are swirling around, women are goddam crying, men are yelling for Jersey Joe to yank The Doo and put in Steve Rankin—he was what people would call the closer today, although back then he was just known as a short-relief specialist.

But Joe crossed his fingers and stuck with Dusen.

The count goes three and two, right? Anderson off with the pitch, right? Because he can run like the wind and the guy behind the plate's a first-game rook. Gernert, that mighty man, gets just under the curve and beeps it—not bleeps it but *beeps* it—behind the pitcher's mound, just out of The Doo's reach. He's on it like a cat, though. Anderson's around third and The Doo throws home from his knee. That thing was a fucking *bullet*.

I know what you're thinking I'm thinking, Mr. King, but you're dead wrong. It never crossed my mind that our new rookie catcher was going to get busted up like Faraday and have a nice one-game career in the bigs. For one thing, Billy Anderson was no moose like Big Klew; more of a ballet dancer. For another...well...the kid was better than Faraday. I think I knew that the first time I saw him sitting on the bumper of his beshitted old truck with his wore-out gear stored in the back.

Dusen's throw was low but on the money. The kid took it between his legs, then pivoted around and I seen he was holding out *just the mitt*. I just had time to think of what a rookie mistake that was

how he forgot that old saying *two hands for beginners*, how Anderson was going to knock the ball loose and we'd have to try to win the game in the bottom of the ninth. But then the kid lowered his left shoulder like a football lineman. I never paid attention to his free hand, because I was staring at the outstretched catcher's mitt, just like everyone else in Old Swampy that day. So I didn't exactly see what happened, and neither did anybody else.

What I saw was this: the kid whapped the glove on Anderson's chest while he was still three full steps from the dish. Then Anderson hit the kid's lowered shoulder. He went up and over and landed behind the lefthand batter's box. The umpire lifted his fist in the *out* sign. Then Anderson started to yell and grab his ankle. I could hear it from the far end of the dugout, so you know it must have been good yelling, because those Opening Day fans were roaring like a force-ten gale. I could see that Anderson's left pants cuff was turning red, and blood was oozing out between his fingers.

Can I have a drink of water? Just pour some out of that plastic pitcher, would you? Plastic pitcher is all they give us for our rooms, you know; no glass pitchers allowed in the zombie hotel.

Ah, that's good. Been a long time since I talked so much, and I got a lot more to say. You bored yet? No? Good. Me neither. Having the time of my life, awful story or not.

Anderson didn't play again until '58, and '58 was his last year—Boston gave him his unconditional release halfway through the season, and he couldn't catch on with anyone else. Because his speed was gone, and speed was really all he had to sell. The docs said he'd be good as new, the Achilles tendon was only nicked, not cut all the way through, but it was also stretched, and I imagine that's what finished him. Baseball's a tender game, you know; people don't realize. And it isn't only catchers who get hurt in collisions at the plate.

After the game, Danny Doo grabs the kid in the shower and yells: "I'm gonna buy you a drink tonight, rook! In fact, I'm gonna buy you *ten!*" And then he gives his highest praise: "*You hung the fuck in there!*"

"Ten drinks, because I hung the fuck in there," the kid says, and The Doo laughs and claps him on the back like it's the funniest thing he ever heard.



But then Pinky Higgins comes storming in. He was managing the Red Sox that year, which was a thankless job; things only got worse for Pinky and the Sox as the summer of '57 crawled along. Pinky was mad as hell, chewing a wad of tobacco so hard and fast the juice squirted from both sides of his mouth and ran down his chin. He said the kid had deliberately cut Anderson's ankle when they collided at the plate. Said Blakely must have done it with his fingernails, and the kid should be put out of the game for it. This was pretty rich, coming from a man whose motto was, "Spikes high and let 'em die!"

I was sitting in Joe's office drinking a beer, so the two of us listened to Pinky's rant together. I thought the guy was nuts, and I could see from Joe's face that I wasn't alone.

Joe waited until Pinky ran down, then said: "I wasn't watching Anderson's foot. I was watching to see if Blakely made the tag and held onto the ball. Which he did."

"Get him in here," Pinky fumes. "I want to say it to his face."

"Be reasonable, Pink," Joe says. "Would I be in your office doing a tantrum if it had been Blakely all cut up?"

"It wasn't spikes!" Pinky yells. "Spikes are a part of the game! Scratching someone up like a girl at a *kickball match*...that *ain't*! And Anderson's in the game seven years! He's got a family to support!"

"So you're saying what? My catcher ripped your pinch-runner's ankle open while he was tagging him out—and tossing him over his goddam shoulder, don't forget—and he did it with his *nails*?"

"That's what Anderson says," Pinky tells him. "Anderson says he felt it."

"Maybe Blakely stretched Anderson's foot with his nails, too. Is that it?"

"No," Pinky admits. His face was all red by then, and not just from being mad. He knew how it sounded. "He says that happened when he came down."

"Begging the court's pardon," I says, "but *fingernails*? This is a load of crap."

"I want to see the kid's hands," Pinky says. "You show me or I'll lodge a goddam protest."

I thought Joe would tell Pinky to shit in his hat, but he didn't. He turned to me. "Tell the kid to come in here. Tell him he's gonna show Mr. Higgins his nails, just like he did to his first-grade teacher after the Pledge of Allegiance."

I got the kid. He came willingly enough, although he was just wearing a towel, and didn't hold back showing his nails. They were short, clean, not broken, not even bent. There were no blood-blisters either, like there might be if you really set them in someone and raked with them. One little thing I did happen to notice, although I didn't think anything of it at the time: the Band-Aid was gone from his second finger, and I didn't see any sign of a healing cut where it had been, just clean skin, pink from the shower.

"Satisfied?" Joe asked Pinky. "Or would you like to check his ears for potato-dirt while you're at it?"

“Fuck you,” Pinky says. He got up, stamped over to the door, spat his cud into the wastepaper basket there—*splut!*—and then he turns back. “My boy says *your* boy cut him. Says he felt it. And my boy don’t lie.”

“Your boy tried to be a hero with the game on the line instead of stopping at third and giving Piersall a chance. He’d tell you the moon was made of his father’s come-stained skivvies if it’d gotten him off the hook for that. You know what happened and so do I. Anderson got tangled in his own spikes and did it to himself when he went whoopsy-daisy. Now get out of here.”

“There’ll be a payback for this, DiPunno.”

“Yeah? Well it’s the same gametime tomorrow. Get here early.”

Pinky left, already tearing off a fresh piece of chew. Joe drummed his fingers beside his ashtray then asked the kid: “Now that it’s just us chickens, did you do anything to Anderson? Tell me the truth.”

“No.” Not a bit of hesitation. “I didn’t do anything to Anderson. That’s the truth.”

“Okay,” Joe said, and stood up. “Always nice to shoot the shit after a game, but I think I’ll go home and have a drink. Then I might fuck my wife on the sofa. Winning on Opening Day always makes my pecker stand up.” Then he said, “Kid, you played the game the way it’s supposed to be played. Good for you.”

He left. The kid cinched his towel around his waist and started back to the locker room. I said, “I see that shaving cut’s all better.”

He stopped dead in the doorway, and although his back was to me, I knew he’d done something out there. The truth was in the way he was standing. I don’t know how to explain it better, but...I knew.

“What?” Like he didn’t get me, you know.

“The shaving cut on your finger.”

“Oh, *that* shaving cut. Yuh, all better.”

And out he sails...although, rube that he was, he probably didn’t have a clue *where* he was going. Luckily for him, Kerwin McCaslin had got him a place to stay in the better part of Newark. Hard to believe as it might be, Newark had a better part back then.

Okay, second game of the season. Dandy Dave Sisler on the mound for Boston, and our new catcher is hardly settled into the batter’s box before Sisler chucks a fastball at his head. Would have knocked his fucking eyes out if it had connected, but he snaps his head back—didn’t duck or nothing—and then he just cocks his bat again, looking at Sisler as if to say, *Go on, mac, do it again if you want.*

The crowd’s screaming like mad and chanting *RUN IM! RUN IM! RUN IM!* The ump didn’t run to Sisler, but he got warned and a cheer went up. I looked over and saw Pinky in the Boston dugout walking back and forth with his arms folded so tight he looked like he was trying to keep from exploding.

Sisler walks twice around the mound, soaking up the fan-love—boy oh boy, they wanted him drawn

and quartered—and then he went to the rosin bag, and then he shook off two or three signs. Taking his time, you know, letting it sink in. The kid all the time just standing there with his bat cocked as comfortable as old Tillie. So Dandy Dave throws a get-me-over fastball right down Broadway and the kid loses it in the left field bleachers. Tidings was on base and we're up two to nothing. I bet the people over in New York heard the noise from Swampy when the kid hit that home run.

I thought he'd be grinning when he came around third, but he looked just as serious as a judge. Under his breath he's muttering, "Got it done, Billy, showed that busher and got it done."

The Doo was the first one to grab him in the dugout and danced him right into the bat-rack. Helped him pick up the spilled lumber, too, which was nothing like Danny Dusen, who usually thought he was above such things.

After beating Boston twice and pissing off Pinky Higgins, we went down to Washington and won three straight. The kid hit safe in all three, including his second home run, but Griffith Stadium was a depressing place to play, brother; you could have gunned down a running rat in the box seats behind home plate and not had to worry about hitting any fans. Goddam Senators finished over forty games back that year. Forty! Jesus fucking wept.

The kid was behind the plate for The Doo's second start down there and damn near caught a no-hitter in his fifth game wearing a big league uniform. Pete Runnels spoiled it in the ninth—hit a double with one out. After that, the kid went out to the mound, and that time Danny didn't wave him back. They discussed it a little bit, and then The Doo gave an intentional pass to the next batter, Lou Berberet (see how it all comes back?). That brought up Bob Usher, and he hit into a double play just as sweet as you could ever want: ballgame.

That night The Doo and the kid went out to celebrate Dusen's one hundred and ninety-eighth win. When I saw our newest chick the next day, he was very badly hungover, but he bore that as calmly as he bore having Dave Sisler chuck at his head. I was starting to think we had a real big leaguer on our hands, and wouldn't be needing Hubie Rattner after all. Or anybody else.

"You and Danny are getting pretty tight, I guess," I says.

"Tight," he agrees, rubbing his temples. "Me and The Doo are tight. He says Billy's his good luck charm."

"Does he, now?"

"Yuh. He says if we stick together, he'll win twenty-five and they'll have to give him the C. Young."

"That right?"

"Yessir, that's right. Granny?"

"What?"

He was giving me that wide blue stare of his: twenty-twenty vision that saw everything and understood practically nothing. By then I knew he could hardly read, and the only movie he'd ever

seen was *Bambi*. He said he went with the other kids from Ottershow or Outershow—whatever—and assumed it was his school. I was both right and wrong about that, but it ain't really the point. The point is that he knew how to play baseball—instinctively, I'd say—but otherwise he was a blackboard with nothing written on it.

“What's a Cy Young?”

That's how he was, you see.

We went over to Baltimore for three before going back home. Typical spring baseball in that town, which isn't quite south or north; cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey the first day, hotter than hell the second, a fine drizzle like liquid ice the third. Didn't matter to the kid; he hit in all three games, making it eight straight. Also, he stopped another runner at the plate. We lost the game, but it was a hell of a stop. Gus Triandos was the victim, I think. He ran headfirst into the kid's knee and just lay there stunned, three feet from home. The kid put the tag on the back of his neck just as gentle as Mommy patting oil on Baby Dear's sunburn.

There was a picture of that put-out in the Newark *Evening News*, with a caption reading *Blockade Billy Blakely Saves Another Run*. It was a good nickname and caught on with the fans. They weren't too demonstrative in those days—nobody would have come to Yankee Stadium in '57 wearing a chef's hat to support Gary Sheffield, I don't think—but when we played our first game back at Old Swamp, some of the fans came in carrying orange road-signs reading DETOUR and ROAD CLOSED.

The signs might have been a one-day thing if two Indians hadn't got thrown out at the plate in our first game back. That was a game Danny Dusen pitched, incidentally. Both of those put-outs were the result of great throws rather than great blocks, but the rook got the credit, anyway, and I'd say he deserved it. The guys were starting to trust him, see? And they wanted to watch him do it. Baseball players are fans, too, and when someone's on a roll, even the most hard-hearted try to help.

Dusen got his hundred and ninety-ninth that day. Oh, and the kid went three for four, including a home run, so it shouldn't surprise you that even more people showed up with those signs for our second game against Cleveland.

By the third one, some enterprising fellow was selling them out on Titan Esplanade, big orange cardboard diamonds with black letters: ROAD CLOSED BY ORDER OF BLOCKADE BILLY. Some of the fans'd hold em up when Blockade Billy was at bat, and they'd all hold them up when the other team had a runner on third. By the time the Yankees came to town—this was going on to the end of April—the whole stadium would flush orange when the Bombers had a runner on third, which they did often in that series.

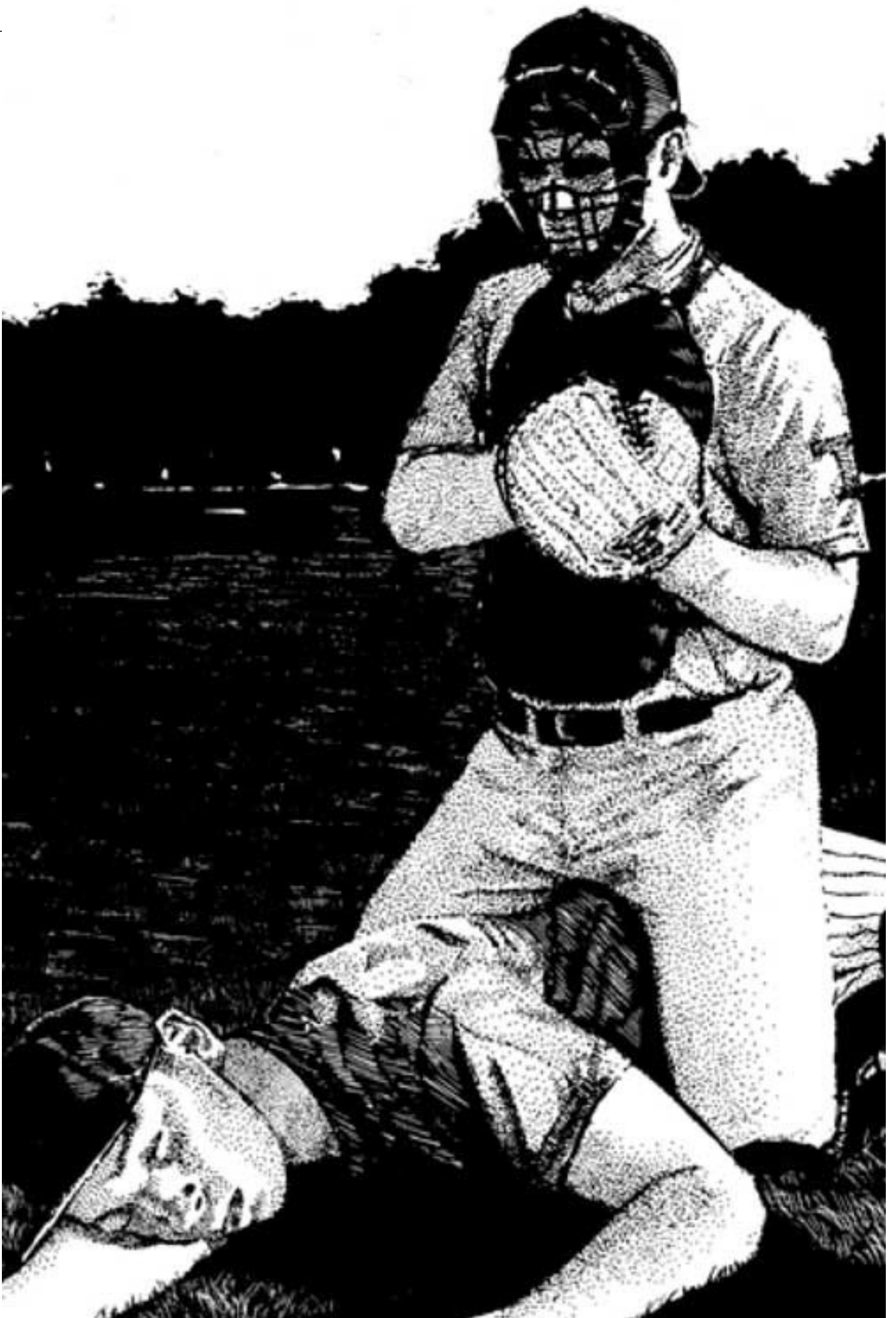
Because the Yankees kicked the living shit out of us and took over first place. It was no fault of the kid's; he hit in every game and tagged out Bill Skowron between home and third when the lug got caught in a rundown. Skowron was a moose the size of Big Klew, and he tried to flatten the kid, but it was Skowron who went on his ass, the kid straddling him with a knee on either side. The photo of the

one in the paper made it look like the end of a Big Time Wrestling match with Pretty Tony Baba for once finishing off Gorgeous George instead of the other way around. The crowd outdid themselves waving those ROAD CLOSED signs around. It didn't seem to matter that the Titans had lost; the fans went home happy because they'd seen our skinny catcher knock Mighty Moose Skowron on his ass.

I seen the kid afterward, sitting naked on the bench outside the showers. He had a big bruise coming on the side of his chest, but he didn't seem to mind it at all. He was no crybaby. The sonofabitch was too dumb to feel pain, some people said later; too dumb and crazy. But I've known plenty of dumb players in my time, and being dumb never stopped them from bitching over their boobos.

"How about all those signs, kid?" I asked, thinking I would cheer him up if he needed cheering.

"What signs?" he says, and I could see by the puzzled look on his face that he wasn't joking a bit. That was Blockade Billy for you. He would have stood in front of a semi if the guy behind the wheel was driving down the third base line and trying to score on him, but otherwise he didn't have a fucking clue.



We played a two-game series with Detroit before hitting the road again, and lost both. Danny Doo was on the mound for the second one, and he couldn't blame the kid for the way it went; he was gone before the third inning was over. Sat in the dugout whining about the cold weather (it wasn't cold), the way Harrington misplayed a fly ball out in right (Harrington would have needed rockets on his heels to get to that one before it dropped), and the bad calls he got from that sonofabitch Wenders behind the plate. On that last one he might have had a point. Hi Wenders didn't like The Doo, never had, ran him in two ballgames the year before. But I didn't see any bad calls that day, and I was standing less than ninety feet away.

The kid hit safe in both games, including a home run and a triple. Nor did Dusen hold the hot bat against him, which would have been his ordinary behavior; he was one of those guys who wanted his fellows to understand there was one big star on the Titans, and it wasn't them. But he liked the kid and really seemed to think the kid was his lucky charm. And the kid liked him. They went bar-hopping after the game, had about a thousand drinks and visited a whorehouse to celebrate The Doo's first long home of the season, and showed up the next day for the trip to KC pale and shaky.

"The kid got laid last night," Doo confided in me as we rode out to the airport in the team bus. "I don't think it was his first time. That's the good news. The bad news is that I don't think he remembers it."

We had a bumpy plane-ride; most of them were back then. Lousy prop-driven buckets, it's no wonder we didn't all get killed like Buddy Holly and the Big Fucking Bopper. The kid spent most of the trip throwing up in the can at the back of the plane, while right outside the door a bunch of guys were playing acey-deucey and tossing him the usual funny stuff: *Get any onya? Want a fork and knife to cut that up a little?* Then the next day the sonofabitch goes five-for-five at Municipal Stadium, including a pair of jacks.

There was also another Blockade Billy play; by then he could have taken out a patent. This time the victim was Clete Boyer. Again it was Blockade Billy down with the left shoulder, and up and over M. Boyer went, landing flat on his back in the left batter's box. There were some differences, though. The rook used both hands on the tag, and there was no bloody foot or strained Achilles tendon. Boyer just got up and walked back to the dugout, dusting his ass and shaking his head like he didn't quite know where he was. Oh, and we lost the game in spite of the kid's five hits. Eleven to ten was the final score, or something like that. Ganzie Burgess's knuckleball wasn't dancing that day; the Athletics feasted on it.

We won the next game, lost a squeaker on getaway day. The kid hit in both games, which made sixteen straight. Plus nine putouts at the plate. Nine in sixteen games! That might be a record. If it was in the books, that is. If any of that month's records were in the books.

We went to Chicago for three, and the kid hit in those games, too, making it nineteen straight. But damn if we didn't lose all three. Jersey Joe looked at me after the last of those games and said, "Don't buy that lucky charm stuff. I think Blakely *sucks* luck."

“That ain’t fair and you know it,” I said. “We were going good at the start, and now we’re in a bad patch. It’ll even out.”

“Maybe,” he says. “Is Dusen still trying to teach the kid how to drink?”

“Yeah. They headed off to The Loop with some other guys.”

“But they’ll come back together,” Joe says. “I don’t get it. By now Dusen should hate that kid. The Doo’s been here five years and I know his MO.”

I did, too. When The Doo lost, he had to lay the blame on somebody else, like that bum John Harrington or that bushy bluesuit Hi Wenders. The kid’s turn in the barrel was overdue, but Dan was still clapping him on the back and promising him he’d be Rookie of the Goddam Year. Not that The Doo could blame the kid for that day’s loss. In the fifth inning of his latest masterpiece, Dan had hucked one to the backstop in the fifth: high, wide, and handsome. That scored one. So then Dan gets mad, loses his control, and walks the next two. Then Nellie Fox doubled down the line. After that The Doo got it back together, but by then it was too late; he was on the hook and stayed there.

We got a little well in Detroit, took two out of three. The kid hit in all three games and made another one of those amazing home-plate stands. Then we flew home. By then the kid from the Davenport Cornholers was the hottest goddam thing in the American League. There was talk of him doing a Gillette ad.

“That’s an ad I’d like to see,” Si Barbarino said. “I’m a fan of comedy.”

“Then you must love looking at yourself in the mirror,” Critter Hayward said.

“You’re a card,” Si says. “What I mean is the kid ain’t got no whiskers.”

There never was an ad, of course. Blockade Billy’s career as a baseball player was almost over. We just didn’t know it.

We had three scheduled at home with the White Sox, but the first one was a washout. The Doo’s old pal Hi Wenders was the umpire crew chief, and he gave me the news himself. I’d got to The Swamp early because the trunks with our road uniforms in them got sent to Idlewild by mistake and I wanted to make sure they’d been trucked over. We wouldn’t need them for a week, but I was never easy in my mind until such things were taken care of.

Wenders was sitting on a little stool outside the umpire’s room, reading a paperback with a blond in step-ins on the cover.

“That your wife, Hi?” I asks.

“My girlfriend,” he says. “Go on home, Grannie. Weather forecast says that by three it’s gonna be coming down in buckets. I’m just waiting for DiPunno and Lopez to get here so I can call the game.”

“Okay,” I says. “Thanks.” I started away and he called after me.

“Grannie, is that wonder-kid of yours all right in the head? Because he talks to himself behind the plate. Whispers. Never fucking shuts up.”

“He’s no Quiz Kid, but he’s not crazy, if that’s what you mean,” I said. I was wrong about that, but

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