

Ronald F. Currie, Jr.

One Play

*Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.
Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
Defiance flashed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.*
—Ernest Thayer, “Casey at the Bat”

I was there the night my father became a baseball pariah. I sat on the first-base line, four rows back, dressed in the uniform and cap of my father's team. This was game seven of the World Series, and that's the only detail I'll divulge. Who my father played for, who he played against, what year it was, whether it was raining on that October evening—none of that matters. That my father batted .289 lifetime, drove in over a thousand runs, won an American League batting title and three Gold Gloves over a fourteen-year career for a team and a city which eventually came to hate him—none of that matters, either.

Most people remember the scene on television. Though I saw it in person, that's what I remember too—the cathode-ray image of my father's moment of shame, broadcast live into a million American homes, preserved for all time on videotape, played again and again over the years. I keep a copy in my living room, on the same shelf as the movies and home videos and my wife's exercise tapes. It bears a simple, generic label—*Game Film*—so my wife won't pop it into the VCR on a whim. I watch it as often as I can. As it begins—with nine men in their positions around the field, gloves at the ready, cheeks distended with tobacco—my father is still a great ballplayer, still a key member of a team on the verge of winning its first World Series in seventy years. Two men from the other team stand at second and third base. They extend their leads as the pitcher goes into his windup. Then, the pitch. The distinctive smack of wood on rawhide, but not the sharp, solid contact of a deep drive. This ball is on the ground. It crawls through the grass to the left of the pitcher's mound, slow and reluctant. It will barely make it out of the infield, but for some reason (and every time I watch the tape

I wait, grit my teeth, hoping he will change his mind) my father thinks the ball will rise, take a hop up out of the grass. He charges, building momentum for the throw to first base, but he doesn't bring his glove down. The ball skitters under his glove, between his legs. A run scores. The game ends. The tape ends. He has lost.

I remember other things: my mother trying to smile as my father emerged from the locker room that night, her hands clasped behind her back, the keys in her palm jingling, worrying. The black welt where a battery hurled from the stands had struck him in the neck. The phone ringing, shrill and angry, through fall and into winter, and my mother's pallid face when she picked it up, listened a moment, and dropped the handset as though it had grown teeth. Then the night, after one of these calls, when my father gathered everything in the house remotely related to baseball and remotely flammable, and burned the whole lot in the front yard, in the snow, feeding the blaze with generous tips of his whiskey bottle.

Still, these memories warp, fade, dim and blur, and now, with my own baseball career started, I find myself going back to the tape. I take it with me on road trips, request a VCR for the room from the concierge, and watch it over and over. There are three moments, spanning less than five seconds, which trace the entire arc of my father's life. First, the instant after the ball is hit, when he squares himself, plants his feet, opens his glove. His movements are graceful, relaxed, almost languid. After all, when taken out of the context of the World Series, this ground ball is no different than the tens of thousands he has fielded before. But every time, the ball squirts through his legs and into the outfield. This is the second moment: I watch the shoulders slump, watch the glove slap a thigh, watch the head jerk to one side in disgust at having blown a play any Little Leaguer could have turned. In this moment, all I see is the simple disappointment of a ballplayer who missed an easy out. An error, nothing more. But then, as his profile turns toward the camera over the backstop, he sees the run cross the plate. He hears 40,000 people inhale violently through clenched teeth, as if they've all been punched simultaneously in the gut, and this is when he realizes. This is when he throws his head back and goes to his knees in the dirt. This is when it ends.

The following spring, my father had new spikes, a new glove, and a new team.

A year after that, he was dead.

*

I was called up from Triple-A Charlotte two months ago, in June. I've done well, batting over .330 in thirty-four games, with eleven home runs and no errors. Already there's talk about me in the newspapers and magazines, on television, the usual overstatement and exaggeration. They compare my glove to Clemente's, my bat to Aaron's, my hustle and grim fearlessness to Rose's. Everyone loves me, because I am good and might be great. They say, "Where did this guy come from?" They want to say, "Where did this kid come from?" but they can't, because I'm twenty-eight, old for a rookie, which only deepens the mystery.

They do not mention my father, because they don't know I am his son. I took my aunt's name when I went to live with her seventeen years ago. My own wife doesn't know who my father was. She thinks my parents died in a car crash. My son, six years old this summer, believes his grandfather was a steelworker, which is what he would have been if not for that perfect, graceful swing.

My wife is starting to believe, too, that baseball isn't good for me. When I turn away from her hands at night she says, "What's wrong with you, lately? Isn't this what we wanted?"

Maybe she thinks it's the drinking. Maybe she thinks I've got women on the side, when the team's on the road.

What can I tell her? That I hate baseball? That I want to quit? That as the first game against my father's old team approaches, I feel something dark rising in me, and though I want revenge I'm still afraid of that feeling, because it's the worst part of my father, the part no one knew about until it was too late? Brutal, murderous, insane. Are these words a husband can use to describe himself to his wife?

No. To tell the first would require that I tell all, and she would not understand. She would see only that I've lied to her all this time. She would think she didn't know me anymore.

So I roll onto my back, not facing her, but not facing away, either. To show that I don't mean to shut her out completely I put my hand on her arm. She covers it with her own hand, searching, questioning, wanting to understand.

"The boy," I say. "I don't want him to play baseball. Hockey, track, lacrosse, anything. Just not baseball."

But my son is already asking for a bat, a glove, a ball. He wants to be just like his old man.

When I was a kid, I would take two weeks off from school to join my father during spring training. The first three years I did this, we went to

Florida. The spring after he lost the World Series, we went to Arizona.

In Florida, we had dinner every night with guys from the team. They ate steaks and drank scotch. I ate chicken fingers and drank ginger ale. They talked about how great the weather was and how much they dreaded going back north when spring training was over. They laughed often, and I laughed with them though I hadn't been drinking and often didn't understand what they were laughing about. Much of their humor was crude, funny only to grown men whose wives weren't around. Many of them, I realize now, were alcoholics, my father included. They had a grand time.

In Arizona, we had dinner in the hotel room, usually around ten at night, an hour later than my bedtime at home. I ate soggy room-service sandwiches. My father drank everything in the wet bar and iced his knees, his shoulders, his elbows. I cried in the bathroom, once, quietly. He took up smoking.

In Florida, my father took a lackadaisical approach to practice. As a young player he'd practiced until he bled, hands blistered, shins raked by cleats, cheeks and chin shattered by hopping grounders. But in this later stage of his career, he would skip practice altogether and drive me to Orlando for Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. He watched me and smiled under the slanting shade of his ballcap, his face seamed and placid. He stood in the March sun all day, and did not sweat.

In Arizona, my father and I arrived at the field an hour before sunrise and didn't leave until it was too dark for him to see the balls hurled at him by the pitching machine. When he wasn't taking batting practice, he had me throw him the nastiest grounders I could muster with my skinny ten-year-old arm. I'd stand five feet from him and throw the ball as hard as I could, and he'd use every part of his body to keep it from getting past him. He had bruises on bruises. I threw until my shoulder quit, then threw some more. He pulled muscles, even broke a tooth. I would say, *Stop*. He would say, *Can't*.

In Florida, when a thunderstorm came through during an exhibition, my father and his friends would strip off their jerseys and put their hats on cockeyed and mime baseball's great moments. They took turns as Babe Ruth, Bobby Thompson, and Bill Mazeroski, hitting phantom home runs, winning pennants, winning championships, and doing great splashing belly-flop slides into home plate on the slick tarp that kept the infield dry.

In Arizona, it never rained. I asked my father why he didn't goof around with the guys from his new team. At first he said he didn't know

them, and left it at that. Later, though, he told me baseball players were superstitious, and his new teammates smelled the stink of failure on him.

But don't worry, he said. That was last year. That was one play. I'm on my way back.

He took a drink from his glass of scotch. We stared at each other. As young as I was, I could tell he didn't believe it.

We're near the end of a long homestand, playing a four-game series against Tampa Bay, the doormat of the American League. In a week, we will play my father's old team. My swing goes tight; I'm opening my front shoulder too soon, pulling my head up, and I go 0-for-4 in the first game, a Saturday matinee. I drop a shallow fly ball that should have ended the game but instead scores the winning run from third. It's my first error since I came up from the minors.

After the game, my wife wants to take the boy to Chuck E. Cheese's, but I know they don't serve alcohol.

"I'm not in the mood for pizza," I tell her.

"They have different kinds of food," she says. "You don't have to eat pizza, if you want something else."

"I'm not in the mood for screaming kids," I tell her. "Or flashing lights, or gongs or bells. Or bumper pool, or video games."

We eat at a quiet steakhouse in our neighborhood. I drink five glasses of Chianti and two beers. My wife speaks to me twice—Pass the pepper. Help the boy cut his steak. I cut my finger, and curse loudly enough that other diners stare. I stare back, fierce with alcohol, and they turn their attention back to their meals.

I wrap my finger with a napkin and glance at my wife. Her expression is closed, exasperated: *What is wrong with you?* I have no answer, so I look away, at the boy. He is staring at the table in front of me. I look down and see a spot of blood on the linen tablecloth, a perfect crimson circle.

After that, no one speaks. Even the boy chews slowly, with exaggerated politeness. He has a napkin tucked into the collar of his shirt, and his brown hair is uneven in the front where he took scissors to it this afternoon while I was at the stadium. The bangs jut up and down across his forehead like stalactites. I want to josh him about it, tell him we're going to leave it that way, poke him in the ribs and watch him giggle. But I'm drunk, and my mood is ruined. I swirl the beer in my glass. After a moment my wife leans over and helps the boy cut his steak, speaking to him low and soft.

When I finish eating I have a glass of port wine, though I don't order dessert. I insist on driving home. After a brief argument in the parking lot, my wife throws the keys into my chest, hard enough to leave a mark.

We squeak past the Devil Rays in the second game, 2-1, but my swing is still off and I manage only one hit, a bloop single to right field that's more luck than skill. They've been pitching me inside, trying to rattle me, and they think it's working, so in the third game on Monday they really pour it on. Their starter is Bart Zelnik, a submariner with a fastball like a Roman candle and a reputation for meanness. He hits me on the thigh in the fourth inning. In the sixth he shoots a fastball up and inside, so close I feel the seams graze my throat. I go down on my back, sending up a cloud of dust that hangs in the air above the batter's box. Zelnik steps off the rubber and waits for me to pick myself up. He is grinning. I glare out and see him mouth the word *rookie*, slow and disdainful, and even at this distance I can see the teeth in his mouth like a car wreck, piled on top of each other, fighting for room.

I turn on his next pitch and let go of the bat halfway through my swing. It spins through the air toward Zelnik, sailing a foot over his head. He does this little dance, ducking down and flailing his arms as the bat cruises over him and lands in center field, just past second base. Guys from both teams come out of the dugouts and stand on the edge of the field, waiting like opposing armies for the signal that will send them spilling into one another. I make a show of scooping some dirt off the ground and rubbing it on my hands, but the umpire wastes no time throwing me out of the game.

I know the boy is watching at home, so I hold my temper until I'm into the dugout and down the hall to the clubhouse, out of range of the cameras. Then I break everything that can be broken.

Things weren't going too badly for my father by the time he returned, with his new team, to the city where he'd spent his best years as a ballplayer, the city that now loathed him. He was batting a respectable .261 through the first forty games of the season, with 28 RBI and the second fewest strikeouts in the league. His defensive play had been solid, sometimes exceptional, though he was hobbled by bad ankles that had flared up during spring training. He'd even made a few friends among the players on his new team—the stink of failure had abated somewhat, apparently.

Then he came to bat for the first time in the stadium that had been

his home and was now the site of his greatest shame. As he bent over to scoop dirt up in his palm, a single plastic beer cup drifted out of the luxury boxes behind home plate and landed near his feet. Startled, my father took a step back out of the batter's box. A cry went up, and suddenly garbage of every variety—cups and aluminum soda cans, empty cigarette packets, wadded-up peanut bags, mustard-stained napkins, stat books, even a soiled diaper—rained down from the stands. Spit flew. Children cursed my family's name. The other players ran off the field as the debris grew larger and more dangerous (several chairs, ripped from their steel-and-concrete moorings, were found on the field after the crowd was finally subdued with tear gas and herded from the stadium), but my father stood rooted to the spot, transfixed by the spectacle, nearly catatonic. A baseball tattooed with pre-game autographs hit him in the head, knocking his helmet to the ground, and a brief hush fell over the crowd when they saw that his hair had turned completely, shockingly white.

Then the tumult resumed. Fights broke out in the stands, and hordes of police swarmed through the entrances, brandishing clubs and riot shields. Still my father stood motionless, his bat dangling from one hand.

What could he have been thinking?

He didn't talk about it, at least not with me, so I'll never know. Maybe he was wishing he'd never picked up a glove. Maybe he was wondering how his life would have turned out if he'd been too slow with a bat, or if he'd been afraid of the ball as a kid and played only one year of Little League, then moved on to football. Whatever his thoughts were, they held him fast, and he did not move until the team doctor emerged from the dugout, holding a clipboard over his head, and talked my father into the clubhouse.

A reporter with the city's newspaper reflected on the scene in the next morning's edition:

It is hard to imagine that Jesus himself—driven through the streets of Bethany, whipped, beaten, lacerated, spat on, crowned with thorns—could have prayed more desperately for God's intervention than _____ must have on this shameful night.

The day before we leave to face my father's old team, I take my son shopping at Play It Again Sports. The boy has been begging to come

here for weeks, and I've been putting it off, but today my wife insisted. We go in through the whisper of sliding glass doors, and the boy runs straight for the baseball section. I follow, glancing around at the shelves of football pads and hockey sticks, trying to figure out a way to hurt myself so I won't have to play tomorrow.

The boy finds a gray catcher's mitt and slides it on. He gives the pocket a few experimental whacks. The glove swallows his small, pink fist.

"That won't fit you for another ten years," I tell him. I look at a set of free weights. I consider for a moment, thinking a twenty-five pound plate, dropped on my foot, would do the trick.

The boy throws down the catcher's mitt and struggles to hoist a thirty-eight ounce Louisville Slugger from a cage full of bats. After much heaving and sighing, he yanks the stick free. With a mighty, comical effort, he swings it once, in slow motion. His follow-through pulls him off balance, and he goes down on the tile floor.

"You could use some work on your form, there," I say, helping him up. I put the bat back in its cage, dust the seat of his pants, and point to a rack full of basketballs. "How about those?"

But he's already pulled his hand away from mine and found another glove. This one, too, is gigantic. He pulls it onto his hand and moves toward the wall, where the baseball spikes are set up on display pegs. He takes a Nike down off the wall: size twelve, men's.

"Why don't you find something that'll fit you?" I ask. My head begins to ache, and my stomach feels heavy and liquid. I long for a drink. It's two in the afternoon. I wish I were a plumber again. An investment banker, a cop, a lion tamer.

A sales clerk sidles up and asks if we're finding everything okay. He recognizes me and asks for an autograph. "You're going to be great," he tells me.

The clerk gives me a scrap of paper to sign. The boy finds a White Sox cap. He puts it on. It's six sizes too big and falls over his eyes. He's still got the glove on one hand and the Nike in the other.

"We'll take all of this," I say.

That night I oil the boy's new glove. He watches as I pour and rub and the leather darkens from tan to brown. I show him how to work the oil into the seams, and the crevices between the fingers. I put a ball in the heel to form a pocket, then wrap the whole thing with rubber bands to hold it together. I hope that by the time he's grown enough to wear the glove he'll have no interest in it anymore. But my hands need

something to occupy them, and I can't stand seeing a glove all stiff and new.

The boy wants to take the thing to bed with him.

"You'll get oil all over your sheets," I tell him. But he doesn't care.

After I've tucked him in I go down the hall to the master bedroom. My wife has packed my bags and left them on the floor near the bathroom door. She is sitting up in bed with her back against the headboard. Her hair is pulled into a ponytail, her forehead shiny with some kind of cream.

"Big road trip coming up," she says.

"Yeah," I say. I sit on the edge of the bed and take off my shoes. I swing my feet up and lie on top of the covers, staring at the wall. We don't touch each other.

"You going to get into bed?" my wife asks.

I don't respond for a moment. Then I say, "I figure tomorrow won't come if I just stay awake."

A week after the season ended, my father was released by his new team. He was thirty-five years old and out of a job. Since he didn't know how to earn a living at anything but baseball, he took up drinking full-time. He spent every day on the screened-in porch, reading paperback spy thrillers, the blizzard of his hair hidden under a red bandana. Whole worlds passed by on the road outside our home; lives which had nothing to do with baseball began and ended in plain sight. My father did not notice any of it.

Back then, ballplayers' salaries were not what they are today, and what little my parents had saved was soon consumed by a mortgage, a car payment, the expenses of daily life. My mother took a job as a school lunch lady, and my father drank her pay. They fought about money all the time, sometimes openly, sometimes in those savage whispers parents use when they despise one another but don't want the children to know. It was, I'm sure, what they were fighting about just before they died.

I went to sleep that night listening to their voices spar in the kitchen—my father's heavy, erratic, my mother's sharp and even. My father screamed something unintelligible, his cry punctuated by the jagged sound of glass shattering in the kitchen sink. My mother shushed him. I heard her say my name. Then the light in the hallway outside my bedroom went dark, and I rolled onto my side, cupped a hand against my ear, and drifted.

I woke to a loud, hollow pop, followed quickly by two others. I

heard chair legs grind against linoleum, then the sound and slight shiver of something heavy hitting the floor. A few moments later, another pop echoed through the house.

I trembled in the darkness of my bedroom, afraid to move. I listened for my parents' voices. All that came to me was silence, and then a smell like the Fourth of July.

Later, when the cop entered and turned on the light and called to me three, four, five times and then tried to lift me from my bed, I bit her on the wrist.

Still later, when my aunt decided I was old enough to know, she told me: "Your mother was tough. She took three. He only needed one for himself, the fucker."

I'm the next to last to arrive at the stadium of my father's old team. I step onto the pavement carefully, worried my legs might fail and send me to the ground, but they hold. I look up at the stadium's gray-green façade and feel a few stray raindrops hit my face. Part of me hopes the skies will open up and flood the city with a Biblical deluge, scratching this game and the three to follow. But it's not going to happen. The rain barely wets the pavement before it stops, and I see breaks in the cloud cover on the southern horizon. There will be baseball tonight.

In the clubhouse, guys dress, shoot the breeze, tape ankles and wrists, pull on their spikes. With only two hours before the game starts, there's not much time to hang around, and most are out onto the field within half an hour to limber up and take some swings in the cage. I put on my uniform and spend the next hour in a toilet stall. Someone must notice I'm not on the field, because the trainer comes in to check on me. He asks if I'm all right, and I tell him my stomach's acting up, which is the truth. He asks if they should scratch me from the lineup. I don't answer. After a few minutes of silence, he says my name. I tell him, no, I'm fine, I'll be out in a minute. I listen to his footsteps going away, then let myself out of the stall, run cold water over my head in the sink, vomit once more into the wastebasket, then head out of the clubhouse and into the hall, toward the field.

I tell myself it's not fear. It's hate.

And I'm right. When I step up out of the dugout and look around, I see nothing has changed. The stadium is more than eighty years old, the oldest in the league, and it looks exactly as it did the last night I was here, fifteen years ago. The stands are filling. The air smells of pine tar and hot dogs, cigars and popcorn.

I am not afraid of this place, and I hate these people. As I trot onto the field, I scuff the chalk of the third base line with my spikes and spit into the dirt, a gesture of disdain that I'm sure goes unnoticed.

In my first at-bat I need only one pitch. I take it deep to right-center field and over the bullpen into the bleachers. We're up 4-0. The crowd mutters angrily and calls for revenge.

In my second at-bat I lift a hanging curveball down the short first base line and into the upper deck, hitting a fat, mustachioed man and opening a gash in his forehead. We're up 9-0. The crowd boos me as I round third base. The fat man finds the ball at his feet. Rather than keep it as a souvenir, he heaves it back onto the field as the medics come down the aisle to patch him up.

In my third at-bat I crush a fastball into left field. It sails over the high wall. The cameras follow its trajectory, and I watch on the center field Jumbotron as it smashes the windshield of an SUV parked across the street. We're up 13-1. The crowd hisses.

In my fourth at-bat I hit a line-drive that leaves the yard in what must be record time, buzzing over the right-field wall and into the bullpen. We're up 17-1. The crowd is quiet as I round the bases. They are stunned, incredulous. I feel nothing but calm.

In my fifth at-bat their fourth reliever walks me intentionally with the bases loaded. We're up 22-3. Cesar Rodriguez hits into a double play. I don't even bother sliding into second base. The inning ends, and I walk to the dugout and ask to be taken out for the last inning.

The stadium is hushed. Even the hot dog vendors have lost their tongues. Forty thousand people, normally the roughest, loudest, most vicious crowd in baseball, sit silent and defeated.

They are so thoroughly beaten, in fact, that they can do nothing but cheer me. It begins in the outfield—a low hoot of admiration, a smattering of applause. This emanates out and around the stands like The Wave, growing louder and wilder, until the entire stadium is stamping their feet, whistling, calling me to come up from the dugout, to tip my cap and take a bow.

I stay seated on the bench, elbows on thighs, staring down into my hands. The cheering goes on; they will not be satisfied until I emerge and give them one more glimpse of myself. A few teammates nudge me and grin. *Get on out there, they say. Give 'em what they want.*

So I go to the top of the dugout steps with my hat in my hand. I gaze around to make sure every person in every seat can see me, and then I jam the hat down firmly over my ears. I lift one arm and flip

them off. I turn slowly, a complete circle, giving everyone a good look. I glance out to the Jumbotron and see a giant version of myself, four stories tall, giving the whole city the bird. Gradually, the applause melts into a perplexed murmuring. No one, not even my teammates, knows what to make of this. Tomorrow, when I tell them my real name and announce my retirement, it will be clear. But for now I'm happy to stand here near the on-deck circle, grinning and exhausted, fully redeemed, hating them all.

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