

A Turn at Bat

Early Sunday morning in the summer, Joey walked from home plate down the first base line looking to both sides. Three hundred feet out he turned and walked back to home plate. He squinted, shielding his eyes from the rising sun and shuffled to the backstop. After dragging his foot along the waist-high plywood barrier, he returned to home plate and started out down the third base line. By this time the sun, lifting the overnight moisture from the grass, caused a fog over the outfield and Joey would be slowly swallowed by the fog as he drifted into left field.

He remembered his mother telling him, “We’re new here, Joey, and I’ve been told there are some boys in other neighborhoods who play rough. Please stay nearby; I’m sure there’re plenty of children you could play with in our schoolyard down the block.”

Joey had promised but crossed his fingers behind his back. *What good is a new glove if I can’t show it off?* Billy, one of the kids in his class, told him that on the other side of the highway there was a park with three big dirt baseball fields. “I’ve been there on the weekend and they even play hardball. And ain’t your new mitt for hardball?”

He had drawn him a map, double-lining the pedestrian bridge over the highway. “It’s a blast watching the cars speed underneath. Some got their tops down; makes you want to spit. But my mom said it can cause an accident and if you get caught, they can put you away for the rest of your life. I’m not a chicken, but it doesn’t seem worth it. Yeah, hardball. They only let you play softball in this dumb school; probably afraid you’d hit a liner through someone’s front window. B L O S H!” Billy had punched out his fist and yelled “B L O S H” one more time.

No way am I going to stay in this crummy neighborhood; I put on my Joe DiMaggio jersey special this morning, # 5 on the back!

Joey had looked at Billy’s map so often he could peddle it in his sleep. He was at the park before 10 and biked around from one field to another wondering where all the kids were, forgetting it was Sunday and not realizing that most of the kids were in church with their family.

In the most remote field, he saw three kids listlessly tossing a hardball back and forth. One didn’t have a glove and seemed more interested in the cigarette he was smoking. Joey

watched. They had to be a couple of years older than him. He was thinking maybe he should go home when one of them waved him over. He wheeled his bike to the bench on the first-base side.

“Hey, kid. You new here? Haven’t seen you before.”

Another kid spun him around. “Number 5 and Yankee stripes. You think you’re Joe DiMaggio or something?”

“Well my name is Joey and my mother thought it was rather cute.”

Two of the boys started to banter: “His mother thinks it’s cute.” “No, *rather* cute.” “I bet his mother’s cute.”

The one smoking flicked his cigarette butt at him and said, “Hey, let’s see if cutie here can catch. Go out there to short and I’ll toss you some balls.”

The other two walked over to his bike, circled it, and then started kicking the tires. “New Jew bike I bet.” “Ah, they forgot to clip the grips. Give me your knife, Butch. I’ll go easy, cut the tassels. Maybe little Joey’s foreskin will grow back if he doesn’t play with himself too much.”

Joey had to run after the first toss, deliberately thrown to centerfield. When he ran it back, he saw what was happening.

“Hey, that’s my bike. What are you doing?”

The cigarette smoker cleared his throat and spat at his feet. “Making it a *Kike-bike*, you’re Jewish, ain’t you?”

Joey remembered what his father had told him. “You should never be ashamed of being Jewish. In America, we’re all equal.”

He swallowed. “Hey, you can’t do that. It’s my bike.”

“Like I said – *Kike-bike*. I think it’s time for batting practice. Butch, get the bats, time to practice.”

Butch grabbed two bats leaning against the backstop and returned laughing. “Jack, hold the kid. You’ll get your turn.” He tossed one of the bats to the smoker. One took on the front of the bike, the other the back, smashing the spokes and tires.

Joey was crying, “Stop, you can’t do that. It was a Bar Mitzvah present.”

Butch cackled, “What’d I tell you. He’s a *Kike*.” He pointed to his nose. “They all got big noses so they can smell our money.”

Joey broke free and tried to wrest the bike off the ground.

Butch laughed. "I think the Jew-boy wants a turn at bat. Here," he tossed the bat to Jack, "you give him couple of good whacks. Fuckin' Christ-killers!"

Jack danced around, hitting Joey first in the shins and then on his arms. Cigarette-man pushed him aside and said, "OK, guys, let me show you how to hit a home run."

There was a loud crack, Joey fell to the ground, blood flowing from his ears and mouth.

Jack and Butch stopped and stared. "Fuck, what did you do that for? Kid looks dead for sure."

"No problem. You two grab the bike; I'll drag the kid. Creeks back there ten yards. Allie-ooop behind the cattails and we're out of here. I was going to visit my cousin in Phillie anyhow. You two, just keep shut."

Later that afternoon, people at a church picnic found his body while looking for a foul ball.

Joey's mother had called the police when he hadn't returned for lunch. By suppertime, the local precinct had put the two pieces of information together.

People say you can see Joey on the field early Sunday mornings looking for his baseball glove which was never recovered.