

# THE END OF BASEBALL

## A Story

*Richard Hawley*

When you are a kid you never think about things suddenly changing. Maybe you do if your mother dies or if you are jarringly relocated to a different state, but usually you just wake up in the morning and expect things are going to stay the way they were when you went to bed. But in the summer between fifth grade and Junior High, something, what felt like the biggest thing in my life, came to an end, and only now, in the declining years of my life, have I begun to find words for it.

That summer there were no words, just sensations and urgent impulses. I would awake to a flash of sky and sun, my eyes barely open before I could feel myself pedaling my fat tired bike to the park where there would still be dew on the infield grass and the faintly sweet, faintly sour smell of the mustard colored dirt. The airless necessities of school had at last opened up into summer, and summer was baseball.

Baseball was not a game I played. It was not a diversion or even a vivid preoccupation. Baseball was an enchanted realm in which I was at once eager explorer and captive, a realm as numinous and charged with feeling as Pan's Arcady or the Garden of Eden. By the time I was eight I was held fast and rapt in the rhythms and textures of baseball—the smack of the ball in the oiled pocket of my mitt, the dink, pop, or crack of the bat striking the ball, the dark dot of a fly ball's arc against sky as I braced to sense its trajectory and took off to get under it, the target, the orange pancake target of the catcher's mitt behind the plate, and I, squinting down from the mound at that target, fingers caressing the raised seams of the ball, savoring, like an assassin, the pause before rocking into my windup.

That summer between fifth grade and junior high would mark a change in all of this, a world opening up to still greater worlds as my friends and I advanced from Junior Little League to the Ten-to-Twelves division—Little League itself. This meant you got to play on the good diamond, which had lights at night. You also got full uniforms with white or gray jerseys and pants, long socks with a loop on the bottom that went over your other socks, and a hat which was just like the real hat of a major league team.

There were try-outs for the ten-to-twelve teams, and the managers picked you. All the teams were supposed to be equal, but they really weren't. The Indians and the Cubs were the best teams every year, be-

cause Mr. Hightower and Mr. Spinks were the best managers, and they always knew who the kids were and who was good, and they always ended up with the best players. I wanted to get on a pretty good team, but I didn't care too much which one, except the Padres, which had the worst uniforms. I was one of the best players in the eight-and nines, but I was a pitcher and also one of the smallest kids, and the pitching rubber in ten-to-twelves was ten feet farther away from the plate and it was up on a little mound.

The tryouts were on a really hot Saturday morning. The managers got everybody signed up for their positions and then had each group go out to a base or to the outfield somewhere and take turns fielding balls. I was with the pitchers and catchers, and after we warmed up for a while, I got in a line behind the pitcher's mound and waited for my turn to pitch to a catcher behind the plate. One of the dads stood in the batter's box, but he didn't swing.

Mr. Hightower, the manager of the Indians, was in charge of the pitcher tryouts, and I was nervous waiting for my turn, because he had a voice like someone with laryngitis, and I thought he might turn out to be kind of mean. "Okay, Force," he said, when it was my turn. He already knew who I was. "I hear you're the strike out king. Let's see what you can do." The mound on the good diamond was built up on a little hill, so you actually looked down at the batter and the catcher. Something about it made the catcher's mitt look really far away, not just ten extra feet.

I threw a pitch, and it was pretty good. It made the right kind of smack in the glove, and I started to feel better. Mr. Hightower said, "That's good, now see if you can bring that down a little bit, right at the knees." I was starting to like the way he talked, and I liked that he thought I knew how to throw my pitch a little lower. I threw the next pitch as hard as I could, and it was lower, but right over the plate. Mr. Hightower didn't say anything for a while, and I kept pitching to the target. Wayne Stegner, my old eight-and-nines coach, was standing behind the backstop, and he was shouting things like, "You're throwing smoke, Lefty, you're burning them in." I didn't look up at him, and I really wished he would go away.

After I had thrown a bunch of pitches Mr. Hightower said, "Nice job," and asked me if I had any other pitches. I said I did. I had a curve, which my father taught me how to throw by putting my first two fingers right next to the seam, and then twisting my wrist as I let go of the ball. I thought my curve was amazing because it would go straight, but with a funny spin on it, until about ten feet before it got to the target. Then it would seem almost to stop in mid air and float over to the right. My father laughed when he caught my curves. He said I had "a big hook."

I actually wanted to show Mr. Hightower my curve, but I had never thrown one with a batter standing there. The dad was batting on the left side of the plate now, and I was trying to figure out where to aim in or-

der to make my curve to end up in the target. I decided that if I threw it toward his hip, it might end up over the plate. I tried it, and for a second I thought the ball might actually go behind the batter's back, but it kind of hesitated, the way I hoped it would, and started floating over to the right. The extra distance from the new mound made it curve even more than usual, and the ball went from almost behind the batter's butt to the front of his pants and then over to the far side of the plate. The dad batting laughed and said something, and behind the backstop Wayne Stegner shouted, "Hey, Lefty, where'd *that* come from?" Mr. Hightower said, "That's a helluva hook," and let the next kid in line pitch.

That night after supper, some kids called me up and said they heard I made the Indians, which made me feel excited but also nervous, and then Mr. Hightower called up and told me I really was on the Indians and that I was going to be the only ten-year-old pitcher. I had a funny feeling about being picked for the Indians. I knew they were the best team and they had most of the best players, but when I pictured those kids in my mind, they were all big kids, and I didn't know them very well. I pictured the best pitcher on the Indians, Craig Cummerford. He was twelve and really big. The kids said he was five feet nine. His legs and arms were at least twice as big around as mine. I wasn't even five feet yet.

Later, when practices started and I came up to bat against Craig Cummerford, his pitches would seem to hiss past me before I could even think about swinging. They cracked into the catcher's mitt with such force I felt jittery in my stomach. I couldn't stand to think about what it would feel like if one of Craig Cummerford's pitches hit me. My father would always tell me that the worst thing in baseball was to be afraid of the ball. When I stood up to bat and Craig Cummerford was going through his wind up, I tried to squint back at him and tighten my grip on the bat like I was ready to take a big swing, but I knew I wasn't going to do it. I wanted him to throw balls and walk me. The truth was that I didn't want to get hit. He was a really good pitcher, and he almost always threw strikes, so I knew I had to swing, but I also knew I could never hit a pitch from Craig Cummerford. From the dugout Mr. Hightower would say, "You're late, you're swinging late." From behind the backstop my father would call out, "You're waving at the ball," and I was.

The kids in my grade I played baseball with were kind of jealous that I got on the Indians, but for some reason I wasn't that glad about it. I was pretty excited before the first game, mainly because of the new uniform and the way INDIANS was written in orange and black letters across the chest of the jersey. Also, my father took me to the sporting goods store and bought me a pair of spikes and a leather pitching toe that screwed in over the front of my left shoe. The smallest pair of spikes they had were one size too big for me, but my father bought them anyway. He said I would grow into them and that we could stuff some cloth up into the toe

area where the extra room was. I was glad they were too big, because they made my feet look bigger.

Even when we were warming up before our first game, I could tell something was wrong. I didn't really know the other kids on the Indians very well, and the one kid I did know, Gary Spender, wasn't much fun to be around. He was also the worst player on the team, and the only reason he was on the Indians was because his dad was one of the managers with Mr. Hightower. Just before the game started, Mr. Hightower called us over and read out the starting line up. It was the opening game, and I knew Craig Cummerford was going to pitch and that I wasn't going to be playing any other position, but it still surprised me for some reason that my name wasn't called and I wasn't going to play. I felt like I might even cry, which would have been really embarrassing, so I started walking fast out toward the outfield.

Maybe my face looked funny, because Mr. Hightower called after me and said I was going to be his fireman. I asked him what that was, and he said fireman was a name for a relief pitcher, a pitcher who came in and put the fire out. I liked the idea of being a fireman for the Indians, but after the game got started, I realized that there wasn't going to be any fire. Craig Cummerford was striking out just about every batter, and the Indians were getting a lot of hits and scoring runs in every inning. The games were six innings long, and by the fifth inning the Indians were winning by about sixteen to nothing. There was no reason for Mr. Hightower to take out Craig Cummerford and put me in, but I wanted him to do it anyway.

I started to make a plan to slip away behind the bench and go home, but I knew my father was somewhere in the stands watching the game and that I would really get it if I went home without him. When it got to be the last half of the sixth inning, Mr. Hightower decided to put in a lot of subs. I was sent out to play right field, and Gary Spender was put in center, which made it worse. It was practically dark, and I'm not sure I would have been able to see a ball if it came out to me, but I could see Craig Cummerford winding up and then hear the ball smacking into the catcher's mitt. When the inning was over, I hadn't even moved. As I ran back to the bench, I saw that our team was forming a big huddle. They started the cheer, "Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate..." and I ran right past them into the parking lot to look for our car. I felt really terrible, and I hoped my father wouldn't make me talk to him, because I didn't want to start to cry.

A few games after that, Mr. Hightower told me I was going to pitch against the Dodgers. It was going to be a Saturday afternoon game, which felt to me less important than a night game, because there wouldn't be the fuzzed, golden look of everything under the lights. The Dodgers were supposed to be a pretty crummy team, but I kind of liked them because of the bright blue color of their hats and letters. Also, some of my friends from

school were on the Dodgers. As soon as Mr. Hightower told me I was going to pitch, I started making pictures of myself up on the mound against the Dodgers on a bright, hot Saturday afternoon, but I couldn't make the pictures seem any good. I knew when the time came I would probably go into my trance, but when I thought about the game in advance, it just seemed like a lot of effort to be throwing all those pitches.

Even so, the night before the game, I did not sleep for one minute. All I could do was make pictures of myself going through my wind-up on the mound and throwing toward the target, but every time something was a little off. I wouldn't shift my weight forward enough, so I would be off balance when I let go of the ball, or I'd be so off balance at the end of my wind-up that I couldn't throw at all. I wondered for a while in the dark whether I might completely forget how to pitch. I pictured myself being totally wild, throwing the ball way behind the batters' backs and over the umpire's head into the backstop. As it was started to get light out, I could hear it begin to rain. At first there was the tapping and hissing of a drizzle, then the splat of the big drops. I really didn't want the game to be rained out. I wanted to be able to stop picturing bad things.

It stopped raining by the middle of the morning, but they sky did not clear up. When I went over to the park at noon to warm up, the light outside was so strange, it almost didn't seem like the regular world. The clouds overhead were black and purple, making the sky look more like night than day, but it wasn't dark at all on the field. In fact, everything kind of glowed. The dirt of the infield, which was usually just dusty and gray, was moist and black, and the wet grass beyond the infield was a sparkly green. The white in our uniforms really did glow in that light, and the color of the letters and numbers—bright blue, black and gold—flashed in your eye the way bluebirds and orioles look in the woods. I had thrown plenty of new baseballs before, but I had never seen anything whiter and redder than the leather and the stitched seams of the ball they gave me to warm up with.

Warming up was nothing like my night pictures. My wind-up was fine, and each white pitch went right into the target exactly the same way. I wanted to relax into my trance, and I'm sure I would have, but Mr. Hightower and the other managers kept talking to the umpires about whether we should play. They thought there might be a storm, but finally, because there was no lightning or thunder, they decided we could play the game.

We were the home team, so the Dodgers batted first. Because of the dark sky and the glowing colors, I went into a different kind of trance than usual. I wasn't thinking or planning at all, and if somebody had spoken to me or asked me something, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been able to answer. My warm up pitches were just like the ones I had been throwing on the sidelines, right in the target, hitting the catcher's mitt with a terrific *smack*.

Then the first hitter came up, Russell Weeks, a kid from my class. He was tall but skinny like me. He stood up straight in the batter's box and looked out at me with an expression that let me know he was never going to hit the ball. I threw three identical strikes to him, and he struck out, swinging at the third one, actually just waving at it. The next two batters also struck out. Mr. Hightower said nice going, and I stayed in my trance while we batted, then I was up on the mound again under the dark sky in the glowing light. I knew most of the other Dodgers. They weren't that good, and they didn't look as if they thought they would hit the ball. This was probably because the first three kids struck out. The next two kids did too, and it felt a little like pitching in the eight-and-nines, except the sixth batter swung and hit a ball pretty hard which bounced chest-high into the glove of our first baseman who trotted over to his base for the out.

When we were up again, I got to bat and walked and then scored. We were winning, but it never occurred to me that we wouldn't be. Then, in what seemed like a second, everything changed. The swollen dark clouds moved on, and the sky was just gray. The color of everything faded back to normal, and when I got back up on the mound to pitch again, there was a wind blowing into my face. I know you can't blame something like the wind, but I remember getting mad at it, because now it seemed like there was something in the way between me and the target.

The first batter of the inning was a big fat kid named Stu Freyberg, another kid from my fifth grade class. He acted big and tough, and some of the dads thought he was really good because of his size, but I knew he wasn't that good, at anything. He was making a fierce-looking face at me, and he twirled his bat in little circles as he waited for me to pitch. I felt myself getting mad at the expression on his face, and I was already mad at the wind. I threw a pretty good pitch, and Stu took a big swing and hit it really far down the third base line. It went foul, but his hitting it like that all of a sudden made everyone on the Dodgers' bench start yelling and cheering. This made me mad too. I wouldn't have minded throwing one right into Stu Freyberg's fat stomach, but that would have been bad sportsmanship, and I wanted him to strike out.

He hit the next pitch even harder, and this time it was fair, into left center field between the two outfielders, who had to chase after it. It was a triple, and it probably would have been a homer if Stu Freyberg wasn't so fat and slow. The kids on the Dodgers bench and now a lot of the dads were whooping it up, and I started to feel really bad, a combination of still being mad and being ashamed that a kid like Stu Freyberg got a triple off me. Then I walked a kid, and the people on the Dodgers side started yelling and jeering. The next kid up was left-handed, and I knew a left-handed kid would have a hard time hitting my curve ball. So I threw one, and it was perfect. It started off headed straight for his butt, then it did its little wiggle and started floating to the right. It ended up right in

the middle of the target. The umpire called out, "Ball!" I felt an electric shock behind my eyes. It wasn't a ball. I walked toward the umpire and said, "That wasn't a ball," and our catcher, Steve Minz, was standing up saying the pitch was right in there. But the umpire shouted right back at me. He said the ball was inside when it passed the plate and only ended up in the target. I looked up at him in a way that I hoped would let him see how mad I was, and as I was walking back to the mound, he came out after me and grabbed my shoulder and said, "What did you say, young man?" I told him I didn't say anything. I did say "total jerk" to myself, but without making any sound. He said he heard me say something and that I should watch my mouth. Then he told me again how my curve was inside when it passed the plate.

Now there was just crazy yelling and the wind and names I was saying to myself inside my head. I threw another curve, which started off toward the kid's butt, which I wouldn't have minded hitting, but then it floated even farther to the right than the last one. Steve Minz had to move the target outside to catch it, but I was pretty sure it was a strike when it crossed the plate. The umpire said, "Ball two!" I said, "What?"--I didn't plan it, it just came out. The umpire said it was a ball, outside, and that I better watch my mouth or I could watch the game from the bench. Mr. Hightower came out to the mound and squeezed my shoulders with his hands. He said to cool off. He said to just throw strikes. I couldn't think. I decided to pitch as hard as I could and not say anything. I threw the next pitch at the left-handed kid's butt, but I forgot to make it a curve, and it hit him. I pretended to be really calm. I walked over to the kid I hit, who was sniffing a little, and I said I was sorry and that I didn't mean it. He was okay, and when he went down to first, all the Dodgers people cheered.

Now the bases were loaded, and Russell Weeks was up again. My first pitch missed the target, and then I threw two good strikes. The next pitch was going to be a strike too, but Russell swung and hit the ball over the shortstop's head into the outfield. The Dodgers were scoring runs, and I went back into my trance, but in a different way, because now I was secretly crying the whole time. I didn't say anything bad. I watched my mouth and threw pitches, but my trance didn't work anymore. The Dodgers kept getting hits off me, and Stu Freyberg got a hit every time. The kids coming up to bat, even quiet kids like Russell Weeks, weren't afraid of the ball. They looked like they wanted to hit it, and they did.

I pitched the whole game, and we lost, nine to four. I knew I wasn't going to be amazing on the Indians. Something final had happened when the field stopped glowing and the wind came up. Mr. Hightower said I could be his fireman again, but I only got to pitch when we were way ahead, usually for just one inning. He also let me play right field a few times, but I almost never had to make any plays. I just stood out there, picturing things, like the night my father taught me how to catch fly balls.

Nobody my age could hit balls like that yet, but one night after supper my father got a bat and sent me down over the slope of our yard, through the bushes and scrub and up over the far side onto the flat place on the Metzger's vacant lot. We were so far away from each other that I could barely hear what he was saying. He would toss the ball up with one hand and then hit it way up in the air out toward me. I didn't get it at all at first. I just stood there trying to track the black dot of the ball against the sky until it thudded down somewhere, and I would run and get it. I could hear my father shouting at me. He said, "*Get under it! Get under the ball!*" He was getting mad, but I saw what he meant. I got so I could get under where the ball was coming down, but I had a feeling that because it was coming from so high up and so far away, it would have a terrific force behind it, and it would shatter my hand inside the glove. When I got under one of the fly balls, I would offer up a stiff arm and make a tight face. I kept missing, and then I saw my father walking down the lawn toward me holding the bat. I started to feel the can't-do-anything feeling, and I thought I was going to get a crack in the head.

But my father wasn't even mad. He talked to me in a slow, nice way. He said that catching a long fly ball was the same as catching a pop up. I just had to keep my eye on it, get under it and gather it in. When he said "gather it in," he showed me how to bring the glove down into my body as the ball fell into it. He showed me what I was doing with my stiff arm and how that didn't work. I had to gather the ball into the pocket and seal it with my other hand. He made it look slow and smooth and graceful. He said to imagine that it was a bird I was taking into my glove. I should take it in firmly enough to keep it, but not to hurt it. He threw me a couple of pop ups to let me get used to the bird idea, then he walked back over to our yard and started hitting me long flies.

After one or two, I got it. I heard the pop of the bat against the ball and tracked the dark dot. I ran a few yards to my right, got under it, and gathered it into the pocket of my glove. The ball made just the right smack in the mitt, and it didn't feel any harder than a pop up. I heard "*Atta boy! Atta boy!*" and I couldn't stop the waves of tingling in my neck. I caught all of the next ones, and in a few minutes I couldn't wait for my father to hit the next ball. I was tracking and getting under everything, including a few that started going way over my head. My father shouted, "Wait a minute!" and went inside the house and got my mother. Then he was hitting me more balls, and I got under them and gathered them in. I knew where the ball was going the second I heard the crack of the bat. I was talking to God out loud, saying please don't let it get dark.

I am not sure those were my precise recollections as I idled in the right field twilight during those seasons with the Indians, but I remember the feeling of being out there, alone and distanced from the action, half fearing and yet desperately wanting to get back inside the bright,

pulsing baseball world that had held me in such thrall.

It would not happen. I suppose I became a serviceable player in the summer leagues and then, for a while, in high school. I had gained what I suppose was necessary perspective. I had a pretty clear idea where I stood, what I could contribute. But although I could not have articulated it then, I felt *diminished* when baseball came to feel like another thing I was expected to do, like taking piano lessons and serving as an acolyte at the early service once a month.

But while I hardened and distanced myself from the game, I did not grow out of baseball—I forsook it, or perhaps just lost it, lost access to its mythic tug. But there had been that tug, that realm. Its intimation has not dimmed in the slightest. At my advanced age I am open to the possibility that its beckoning insistence may be more than baseball, that baseball may have been a mere vestibule to another, still greater world, but it was in baseball that I sensed and for a time dwelled within that world. Far from relegating it to a faded preserve of my boyhood, I find myself coming back to baseball, to what it was trying to tell me, to that time, like the darkening evening in our back lot when my father hit me fly balls and I was talking to God out loud.