

Baseball in April

For three springs my brother and I walked to Romain playground to try out for Little League, and year after year we failed to impress the coaches. The night of the last year we tried out, we sat in our bedroom listening to the radio and pounding our fists into gloves, and talked of how we would bend to pick up grounders, stand at the plate, wave off another player to say you got the pop-up. "This is the year," Rick said with confidence as he pretended to back hand a ball and throw out the man racing to first. He pounded his glove and looked at me, "How'd you like that?"

At the tryouts there were a hundred kids. After asking around, we were pointed to lines by age group: nine, ten, and eleven. Rick and I stood in our respective lines, gloves limp as dead animals hanging from our hands, and waited to have a large paper number pinned to our back so that field coaches with clipboards propped on their stomachs would know who we were.

Nervous, I chewed at my palm as I moved up in the line, but when my number was called I ran out onto the field to the sound of my sneakers smacking against the clay. I looked at the kids still in line, then at my brother who was nodding his head yes. The first grounder—a three-bouncer that spun off my glove into center field. Another grounder cracked off the bat, and I bent down to

gobble it up: The ball fell from my glove like food from a sloppy mouth. I stared at the ball before I picked it up to hurl it to first base. The next one I managed to pick up cleanly, but my throw made the first baseman leap into the air with an exaggerated grunt that had him looking good while I looked bad. Three more balls were hit to me, and I came up with one.

So it went for me, my number flapping like a single, broken wing as I ran off the field to sit in the bleachers and wait for Rick to trot onto the field.

He was a star that day. With the first grounder he raced for it and threw on the run. With the next ball he lowered himself on one knee and threw nonchalantly to first. His number flapped on his back, a crooked seventeen, and I saw a coach make a check on his board. He then looked serious as he wet his lips and wrote something that demanded thought, for his brow furrowed and darkened.

Rick lunged at the next hit and missed it as it skidded into center field. With the next hit he shaded his eyes for it was a high pop-up, something that he was good at, even graceful, and when the ball fell earthward he slapped it with his toe and looked pleased as his mouth grew fat from trying to hold back a smile. Again the coach wet his lips and made a check on his clipboard.

Rick did well at fielding. When the next number was called, he jogged off the field with his head high and both of us sat in the bleachers, dark and serious as we watched the others trot on and off the field.

Finally the coaches told us to return after lunch to take batting practice. Rick and I ran home to fix sandwiches and talk about the morning, then what to expect in the afternoon.

"Don't be scared," he said with his mouth full of sandwich. He was thinking of my batting. He demonstrated how to stand. He spread his legs, worked his left foot into the carpet as if he were putting out a cigarette, and

looked angrily at where the ball would be delivered, some twenty feet in front of him at the kitchen table. He swung an invisible bat; choked up and swung again.

He turned to me. "You got it?" I told him I thought I did and imitated his motion as I stepped where he was standing to swing once, then again and then again, until he said, "Yeah, you got it."

We returned to the playground, and I felt proud walking to the diamond because smaller kids were watching us in awe, some of them staring at the paper number on my back. It was as if we were soldiers going off to war.

"Where you goin'?" asked Rosie, sister of Johnnie Serna, the playground terrorist. She was squeezing the throat of a large bag of sunflower seeds, her mouth rolling with shells.

"Tryouts," I said, barely looking at her as I kept stride with Rick.

At the diamond I once again grew scared and apprehensive. I got into the line of nine-year-olds to wait for my turn at bat. Fathers clung to the fence, chattering last minute instructions to their kids who answered with, "OK, yes, all right, OK, OK," because they were also wide-eyed and scared when the kid in the batter's box swung and missed.

By the time it was my turn I was shivering unnoticeably and trying to catch Rick's eyes for reassurance. When my number was called I walked to the plate, tapped the bat on the ground—something I had seen many times on television—and waited. The first pitch was outside and over my head. The coach who was on the mound laughed at his sorry pitch.

At the next pitch I swung hard, spinning the ball foul. I tapped my bat again, kicked at the dirt, and stepped into the batter's box. I swung stupidly at a low ball; I wound up again and sliced the ball foul, just at the edge of the

infield grass, which surprised me because I didn't know I had the strength to send it that far.

I was given ten pitches and managed to get three hits, all of them grounders on the right side. One of them kicked up into the face of a kid trying to field; he tried to hang tough as he walked off the field, head bowed and quiet, but I knew tears were welling up in his eyes.

I handed the bat to the next kid and went to sit in the bleachers to wait for the ten-year-olds to come up to bat. I was feeling better after that morning's tryout at fielding because I had three hits. I also thought I looked good standing cocky at the plate, bat high over my shoulder.

Rick came up to the plate and hit the first pitch on the third base side. He sent the next pitch into left field. He talked to himself as he stood in the box, slightly bouncing before each swing. Again the coaches made checks on their clipboards, heads following the ball each time it was smacked to the outfield.

When the ten hits were up he jogged off the field and joined me in the bleachers. His mouth was again fat from holding back a smile, and I was jealous of his athletic display. I thought to myself, Yeah, he'll make the team and I'll just watch him from the bleachers. I felt bad—empty as a Coke bottle—as I imagined Rick running home with a uniform under his arm.

We watched other kids come to the plate and whack, foul, chop, slice, dribble, bee line, and hook balls to every part of the field. One high foul ball bounced in the bleachers and several kids raced to get it, but I was the first to latch a hand onto it. I weighed the ball in my palm, like a pound of baloney, and then hurled it back onto the field. A coach watched it roll by his feet, disinterested.

After tryouts were finished we were told—or retold, because it had been announced in the morning—that we would be contacted by phone late in the week.

We went home and by Monday afternoon we were al-

ready waiting for the phone to ring. We slouched in the living room after school, with the TV turned on and loud as a roomful of people: *Superman* at three o'clock and *The Three Stooges* at three-thirty. Every time I left the living room for the kitchen, I stole a glance at the telephone and once when no one was looking I picked it up to see if it was working: a long buzz.

By Friday when it was clear that the call would never come, we went outside to the front yard to play catch and practice bunting.

"I should have made the team," Rick said as he made a stab at my bunt. He was particularly troubled because if anyone should have made the team it was him, since he was better than most that day.

We threw grounders at one another; a few of them popped off my chest while most of them disappeared neatly into my glove. Why couldn't I do it like this last Saturday, I thought? I was mad at myself, then sad and self-pitying. We stopped playing and returned inside to watch *The Three Stooges*. Moe was reading from a children's story book, his finger following the words with deliberation.

"Does the doe have a deer?" read Moe.

"Yeah, two bucks," laughed Larry.

Moe pounded him on top of the head and called him a "knuckle-head." Larry rolled his eyes and looked dizzy.

We didn't make Little League that year, but we did join a team of school chums that practiced at Hobo Park near downtown Fresno. Pete, the brother of Mary Palacio, a girl who was head-over-heels for me, told us about the team, and after school Rick and I raced our bicycles to the park. We threw our bikes aside and hit the field. While Rick went to the outfield, I took second base to practice grounders.

"Give me a baby roller," Danny Lopez, the third base-

man, called. I sidearmed a roller and he picked it up on the third bounce. "Good pickup," we told him. He looked pleased, slapping his glove against his pants as he hustled back to third, a smile cutting across his face.

Rick practiced pop-ups with Billy Reeves. They looked skyward with each throw in the air, mouths hanging open as if God were making a face between clouds.

When Manuel, the coach, arrived in his pickup, most of the kids ran to meet him and chatter that they wanted to play first, to play second, to hit first, to hit third. Rick and I went quiet and stood back from the racket.

Manuel shouldered a duffle bag from the back of his pickup and walked over to the palm tree that served as the backstop. He let the bag drop with a grunt, clapped his hands, and pointed kids to positions. We were still quiet, and when Pete told Manuel that we wanted to play, I stiffened up and tried to look tough. I popped my glove with my fist and looked about me as if I were readying to cross a road. Because he was older, Rick stood with his arms crossed over his chest, glove at his feet. "You guys in the outfield," he pointed as he turned to pull a bat and ball from the bag.

Manuel was middle-aged, patient, and fatherly. He bent down on his haunches to talk to kids. He spoke softly and showed interest in what we had to say. He cooed "good" when we made catches, even routine ones. We all knew he was good to us because most of the kids on the team didn't have fathers or, if they did, the fathers were so beaten from hard work that they never spent time with them. They came home to open the refrigerator for a beer and then to plop in front of the TV. They didn't even have the energy to laugh when something was funny. Rick and I saw this in our stepfather. While we might have opened up with laughter at a situation comedy, he just stared at the pictures flashing before him—unmoved, eyes straight ahead.

We practiced for two weeks before Manuel announced that he had scheduled our first game.

"Who we playing?" someone asked.

"The Red Caps," he answered. "West Fresno boys."

By that time I had gotten better. Rick had quit the team because of a new girlfriend, a slow walker who hugged her school books against her chest while looking like a dazed boxer at Rick's equally dazed face. Stupid, I thought, and rode off to practice.

Although I was small I was made catcher. I winced behind my mask when the ball was delivered and the batter swung because there was no chest protector or shin guards—just a mask. Balls skidded off my arms and chest, but I didn't let on that they hurt—though once I doubled over after having the breath knocked out of me. Manuel hovered over me while rubbing my stomach and cooing words that made me feel better.

My batting, however, did not improve, and everyone on the team knew I was a "sure out." Some of the older kids tried to give me tips—how to stand, follow through, push weight into the ball. . . . Still, when I came up to bat, everyone moved in, like soldiers edging in for the attack. A slow roller to short, and I raced to first with my teeth showing. Out by three steps.

The day of the first game some of us met early at Hobo Park to talk about how we were going to whip them and send them home whining to their mothers. Soon others showed up to practice fielding grounders while waiting for the coach to pull up in his pickup. When we spotted him coming down the street, we ran to him and before the pickup had come to a stop we were already climbing the sides. The coach stuck his head from the cab to warn us to be careful. He idled the pickup for a few minutes to wait for the others, and when two did come running, he waved for them to get in the front with him. As he drove slowly

to the West Side, our hair flicked about in the wind, and we thought we looked neat.

When we arrived we leaped from the back but stayed close by the coach who waved to the other coach as he pulled the duffle bag over his shoulder. He then scanned the other team: Like us, most were Mexican, although there were a few blacks. We had a few Anglos on our team—Okies, as we called them.

The coach shook hands with the other coach and talked quietly in Spanish, then opened up with laughter that had them patting one another's shoulder. Quietly, they turned around and considered the field, pointed to the outfield where the sprinkler heads jutted from the grass. They scanned the infield and furrowed their brows at where shortstop would stand: it was pitted from a recent rain. They parted talking in English and our coach returned to tell us the rules.

We warmed up behind the backstop, throwing softly to one another and trying to look calm. We spied the other team and they, in turn, spied us. They seemed bigger and darker, and wore matching T-shirts and caps. We were mismatched in jeans and T-shirts.

At bat first, we scored one run on an error and a double to left field. When the other team came up, they scored four runs on three errors. With the last one I stood in front of the plate, mask in hand, yelling for the ball.

"I got a play! I got a play!" The ball sailed over my head and hit the backstop, only to ricochet in foul ground on the first base side. The runner was already sitting on the bench, breathing hard and smiling, by the time I picked up the ball. I walked it to the pitcher.

I searched his face and he was scared. He was pressed to the wall and he was falling apart. I told him he could do it. "C'mon baby," I said, arm around his shoulder, and returned to behind the plate. I was wearing a chest protector that reached almost to my knees and made me feel

important. I scanned the bleachers—a sad three-row display case—and Mary Palacio was talking loudly with a friend, indifferent to the game.

We got out of the first inning without any more runs. Then, at bat, we scored twice on a hit and an error that felled their catcher. He was doubled over his knees, head bowed like someone ready to commit *hara-kiri*, and rocking back and forth, smothering the small bursts of yowls. We went on to add runs, but so did they; by the eighth inning they were ahead, sixteen to nine.

As the innings progressed our team started to argue with one another. Our play was sloppy, nothing like the cool routines back at Hobo Park. Flyballs that lifted to the outfield dropped at the feet of open-mouthed players. Grounders rolled slowly between awkward feet. The pitching was sad.

"You had to mess up, *menso*," Danny Lopez screamed at the shortstop.

"Well, you didn't get a hit, and I did," the shortstop said, pointing to his chest.

The coach clung to the screen as if he were hanging from a tall building and the earth was far below. He let us argue and only looked at us with a screwed up face when he felt we were getting out of hand.

I came up for the fourth time that day in the eighth with two men on. My teammates were grumbling because they thought I was going to strike out, pop-up, roll it back to the pitcher, anything but hit the ball. I was scared because the other team had changed pitchers and was throwing "fire," as we described it.

"Look at those 'fireballs,'" the team whispered in awe from the bench as player after player swung through hard strikes, only to return to the dugout, head down and muttering. "What fire," we all agreed.

I came up scared of the fast ball and even more scared of failing. Mary looked on from the bleachers with a sand-

wich in her hands. The coach clung to the screen, cooing words. The team yelled at me to hit it hard. Dig in, they suggested, and I dug in, bat high over my shoulder as if I were really going to do something. And I did. With two balls and a strike, the pitcher threw "fire" that wavered toward my thigh. Instead of jumping out of the way I knew I had to let the ball hit me because that was the only way I was going to get on base. I grimaced just before it hit with a thud and grimaced even harder when I went down holding my leg and on the verge of crying. The coach ran from the dugout to hover over me on his haunches and rub my leg, coo words, and rub again. A few team members stood over me with their hands on their knees, with concerned faces but stupid questions: "Does it hurt?" "Can I play catcher now?" "Let me run for him, coach!"

But I rose and limped to first, the coach all along asking if I was OK. He shooed the team back into the dugout, then jogged to stand in the coach's box at first. Although my leg was pounding like someone at the door, I felt happy to be on first. I grinned, looked skyward, and adjusted my cap. "So this is what it's like," I thought to myself. I clapped my hands and encouraged the batter, our lead off man. "C'mon, baby, c'mon, you can do it." He hit a high fly ball to center, but while the staggering player lined up to pick it from the air, I rounded second on my way to third, feeling wonderful that I had gotten that far.

We lost nineteen to eleven and would go on to lose against the Red Caps four more times because they were the only team we would ever play. A two-team league. But that's what it was that spring.

The sad part is that I didn't know when the league ended. As school grew to a close, fewer and fewer of the players came to play, so that there were days when we were using girls to fill the gaps. Finally one day Manuel

didn't show up with his duffle bag over his shoulder. On that day I think it was clear to us—the three or four who remained—that it was all over, though none of us let on to the others. We threw the ball around, played pickle, and then practiced pitching. When dusk began to settle, we lifted our bicycles and rode home. I didn't show up the next day for practice but instead sat in front of the television watching Superman bend iron bars.

I felt guilty, though, because I was thinking that one of the players might have arrived for practice only to find a few sparrows hopping about on the lawn. If he had he might have waited on the bench or, restless and embarrassed, he may have practiced pop-ups by throwing the ball into the air, calling "I got it," and trying it again all by himself.

Fear

A cold day after school. Frankie T., who would drown his brother by accident that coming spring and would use a length of pipe to beat a woman in a burglary years later, had me pinned on the ground behind a backstop, his breath sour as meat left out in the sun. "*Cabron*," he called me and I didn't say anything. I stared at his face, shaped like the sole of a shoe, and just went along with the insults, although now and then I tried to raise a shoulder in a halfhearted struggle because that was part of the game.

He let his drool yo-yo from his lips, missing my feet by only inches, after which he giggled and called me names. Finally he let me up. I slapped grass from my jacket and pants, and pulled my shirt tail from my pants to shake out the fistful of dirt he had stuffed in my collar. I stood by him, nervous and red-faced from struggling, and when he suggested that we climb the monkey bars together, I followed him quietly to the kid's section of Jefferson Elementary. He climbed first, with small grunts, and for a second I thought of running but knew he would probably catch me—if not then, the next day. There was no way out of being a fifth grader—the daily event of running to teachers to show them your bloody nose. It was just a fact, like having lunch.

So I climbed the bars and tried to make conversation,