

Pursuit

By Chris Minton

JJ Pepper sat across from Liz in a corner booth at Skyline Chili, methodically making his way through a large “5-Way” – a plate of spaghetti covered in chili sauce and then generously adorned with onions, beans and grated cheese that was as soft as a cloud. Of the many women JJ had dated through the years, Liz was the only one who shared a similar appreciation.

They’d broken up a several years ago after a brief engagement. It was a mutual decision and a very amiable separation. The two remained friends and still occasionally met for lunch. It had been a few months since their last meeting and Liz had been telling JJ all about a recent vacation she’d taken to Arizona with her husband Todd. JJ liked Todd a lot and wasn’t afraid to admit he was a much better partner for Liz than JJ ever could have been. In fact, JJ told him as much at their wedding.

“Well, enough about me,” Liz said, “what have you been up to?”

“Things have been pretty rough the last few months,” he admitted.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” JJ said and put his fork down. “It began back in March, around my birthday. My vision began to occasionally blur, but in a very weird way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, only certain things would get blurry. You remember that Bob Feller baseball I found at the thrift shop?”

“How could I ever forget? I’ve never seen you so excited over something before. Not even sex,” she laughed.

JJ smiled. He remembered how animated he’d been upon returning with the baseball to their small apartment. He’d gone on and on about Feller’s career with the Cleveland Indians and kept repeating how crazy it was to find a baseball autographed by a Hall-of-Famer for fifty cents at a thrift store. Liz had questioned the authenticity of the signature, but JJ wouldn’t consider it. He just knew it was real.

“I’d be looking at the ball, and it would start to blur but nothing else around it would,” JJ explained. “I know it sounds crazy but it was like the ball was shaking.” Liz raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“It happened with a couple of other random objects as well,” he went on. “A little glass lobster I picked up at a garage sale last summer. This little hand-crafted coffee mug I bought at Java Central that I keep on a shelf. A couple other things. I went to the optometrist but he couldn’t find anything wrong with my eyes.”

“That is strange,” conceded Liz.

“Well it gets better,” said JJ. “A week or two after that my head started to occasionally vibrate.”

“Which head?” asked Liz with a giggle. When JJ didn’t smile, she reached across the table and patted his hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make light of your situation.”

“It’s okay,” JJ said quietly. “At any rate, my head would begin to vibrate – at least that’s how it seemed to me. And I’d hear this incredibly loud buzzing. It was like my head was a bee hive that had just been poked.” JJ paused and took a small bite of his chili. “This is going to sound silly, but...” JJ’s voice trailed off.

“But what?” Liz prompted.

“Well, I thought other people might be able to hear it or feel it. I was lying in bed with Nancy one afternoon and it began to happen. So I pressed my head against hers and was sure she’d notice.” JJ shook his head. “Instead she just yelled at me for knocking my head into hers and disturbing her.”

“JJ, that sounds serious. Have you had it checked out?”

“Oh, yes,” JJ replied. “First I went to my primary care doctor and then to a neurologist he recommended. I went in several times for various tests but they haven’t found anything to explain it. And as if that weren’t bad enough, for the last week I haven’t been able sleep.”

“Jesus, you never have trouble sleeping.”

“I know!”

“So you can’t fall asleep?”

“Oh, I can fall asleep. I just can’t stay asleep. I have this recurring dream – well, it’s really a nightmare. I wake up from it drenched in sweat and then I’m up for the rest of the night. It doesn’t matter how tired I feel, I just can’t go back to sleep.”

“That’s terrible. Do you recall what happens in the dream?”

“Vividly,” said JJ. “I’m sitting at the piano, just practicing some of my songs. I feel happy and at ease, just like I do in real life when I’m playing. And then there’s a moment when my fingers touch the keys and stick. I can’t pull them off no matter how hard I try. As I fight to get my fingers free, the piano keys begin to heat up, and then...”

JJ took a sip of his diet soda.

“And then they begin to melt onto the keys like hot wax. The next thing that happens,” JJ continued, “is the craziest part. My hands start getting drawn into the piano and I know that unless I break free my whole body will be swallowed up. So I stand up and begin pulling as hard as I can. When that doesn’t work, I put my feet against the base of the piano and push backwards. After several attempts, I break free and in the process trip over the piano bench and fall down on my back with a crash. When I raise my arms above my head, my hands are gone. And that’s when I wake up.”

JJ looked at Liz, awaiting her response. She gazed at him but said nothing. Instead, she chewed gently on her lower lip, which JJ knew was a sign she was thinking intently. He assumed she was trying to find the right words to say – an expression of sympathy or encouragement. But no such words came. She simply continued to stare at him.

“Well?” he said after a minute. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

Liz cocked her head to one side. “Have you tried not fighting?”

“What?”

“I’m just wondering what would happen if you let yourself be pulled into the piano. You know, instead of fighting.”

“Liz, it’s a dream,” said JJ, a hint of frustration in his voice. “You can’t choose to alter a dream while it’s happening.”

“How do you know?”

Now it was JJ’s turn to stare silently. He opened his mouth to argue, but thought better of it. Instead he resumed eating his chili and Liz did the same. Their server swung by, collected their empty plates and left the bill, which they split evenly. They walked to the parking lot and exchanged a hug.

“I sure hope they figure out what’s going on with you. Keep me updated, will you?”

“I will,” replied JJ. “Say hi to Todd for me.”

“Will do. Give my best to Nancy.”

“What?”

“You mentioned Nancy, so I just figured you two were back together,” explained Liz.

“Oh, no,” said JJ sheepishly. “We just kind of get together every once in a while.”

“I see.”

JJ thought she was going to make some smart remark, but instead she smiled and began walking towards her car. She looked back over her shoulder and called out to him, “Let the piano swallow you!”

JJ had hoped to stay up for the basketball game. It was game seven of the Eastern Conference Finals between the Indiana Pacers and the Miami Heat. But the game didn't start until 9 o'clock, and by then JJ was completely wiped out. So instead he brushed his teeth, slipped into bed and waited for sleep to take him.

Soon he was sitting at his piano, singing a song he'd written recently as familiar notes rang happily all around. As JJ reached the end of the song, something about the piano changed. Or more specifically, something about his relationship to the piano changed. It was as if their roles had become distorted. Instead of summoning notes from the old upright, it felt as though JJ was now there to do its bidding. This unseen switch scared JJ and he stopped playing. He tried to remove his hands from the keyboard, but his fingers were stuck.

Panic flared. He jerked his hands backwards but to no avail. He tried twisting his hands, but still his fingers remained fixed to the keys. After a moment, JJ felt heat. It wasn't the sort of easily discernible heat that came from a car engine or a fireplace. It was subtle, like the warmth which gently emanates from a radiant heated floor - not nearly as intense but somehow more powerful.

JJ watched in horror as the tips of his fingers began to melt. They weren't dissolving onto the keys of the piano but into them. JJ wondered if his fingertips had become pliable like hot wax and whether he could now extract them. He pulled hard, but they held fast to the ivory. In fact, his jerking had only appeared to accelerate the process, for soon the first few knuckles of each finger had disappeared. He watched in horror as more and more of his hands vanished. JJ screamed.

At this rate, he knew it would only be a minute or two before he'd be entirely swallowed by the piano. His mind raced as he considered his options, which seemed incredibly limited. He stood up and the piano bench fell backwards. He placed his left foot against the base of the piano, and was about to do the same with the right, when he heard a voice.

“Don’t fight,” it said. The voice was soft and familiar.

“I’ll die,” he screamed in protest as he continued to be gradually drawn into the piano.

“Let it take you,” instructed the voice.

JJ began to cry. He wanted to trust the voice. His heart was telling him to comply. But he couldn’t quite bring himself to surrender to it.

“JJ,” the voice came one more time, “you’ll be okay.”

JJ nearly laughed. He didn’t feel safe. Letting go was the last thing the intellectual part of him wanted to do. And yet the deeper, more spiritual part of him knew it was exactly what he needed to do.

With a mournful cry, JJ yielded. He allowed his arms to be pulled into the piano, his face drawing ever closer to the 88 keys he knew so well. He closed his eyes and fell forward.

JJ was in the entryway of an old apartment building. He stood there quietly, taking in his surroundings, grateful that he seemed, at least for the moment, to be alive and safe. His back was to the large front door, protective metal bars affixed to it. In front of him was a narrow, dimly-lit hallway which presumably led to the ground floor units. To his left was a wall lined with tenant mail slots. To his right, a long staircase led to the upper floors of the building. JJ was certain he’d never been there before.

For a minute, all he could hear was the sound of his own breathing. Then he discerned a sound, soft and small, wafting down the staircase. Someone was crying. JJ followed it to the second floor, where an apartment door stood open, spilling light into the hallway. JJ walked towards it, the weeping becoming louder as he approached.

Without knocking, he entered into the living room of the apartment, which was tiny and untidy. A well-worn sofa and chair faced an old TV with a cracked screen. A cheap and dusty table sagged under the weight of dirty dishes. Beyond the living room was the kitchen. Old and yellowed appliances were surrounded by peeling wall paper. More dirty dishes were piled in the sink. The smell of garbage clung to the air.

Past the kitchen was a hallway. It was from there the crying sounds emanated. He walked through the tight corridor, passing an empty bedroom and bathroom. One more door remained at the end of the hall and JJ slipped inside. The room had a much different feel than rest of the apartment. Unlike the other rooms, which felt old, dirty and dead, this space felt

alive. Warm light from well-placed lamps filled the room. As JJ looked around, he felt an immediate connection. The occupant was clearly a baseball fan.

Posters of Cleveland Indians players from the 1990's covered every inch of wall space: Sandy Alomar Jr., Kenny Lofton, Omar Vizquel and C.C. Sabathia. Other Tribe memorabilia – pennants, programs, bobbleheads - littered the room. A boy, who JJ judged to be twelve or thirteen, sat cross-legged on the floor in a corner of the room, crying. The youth stared down at his lap, dirty brown hair obscuring his face.

The boy held something which JJ couldn't quite make out. JJ moved closer. After a few steps, he stopped dead in his tracks. It was a baseball. But not just any baseball. It was the autographed Bob Feller ball JJ had discovered at the thrift store. He would have recognized it anywhere.

"What the hell," said JJ.

At the sound of JJ's voice, the boy looked up, revealing his face. JJ involuntarily drew a sharp breath. The boy had been badly burned across the left side of his face and neck. A long jagged scar ran along the right side of his forehead.

Upon seeing JJ, the boy stopped crying. "I knew you'd come."

JJ couldn't recall ever meeting the boy. Still, he had a powerful sense of connectedness to the boy. "What's your name?" JJ asked softly.

"Alex. It's short for Alexander."

"I see." JJ pointed at the baseball. "Where'd you get that, Alex?"

Alex brought the ball to his chest. "It's mine," he said defensively. "I bought it with my own money!"

JJ held up his hands. "Okay, okay," he said. "Can you tell me where you bought the ball?"

"I got it at The Dugout," replied Alex. "It's a baseball card shop."

JJ knew the place. They sold different types of collectible cards – football, basketball, NASCAR, Star Wars – but their specialty was baseball.

"You see, they sometimes have signing sessions with players," Alex explained. "They had Bob Feller in recently and I went down and paid to get his autograph."

"I see." JJ cocked his head. Bob Feller had died back in 2010 at the age of 92 and JJ suspected he hadn't spent much time autographing baseballs during the last couple years of his life.

“You know Bob Feller,” said Alex. It wasn’t a question. And yet it wasn’t exactly a statement either. It was more of a challenge, and JJ met it.

“I do,” JJ replied with a smile. “The Heater from Van Meter. Led the Tribe to their last World Series title in 1948.”

Alex returned JJ’s smile. “Do you know Ted Williams said he was the fastest and best pitcher he ever faced?”

“That’s quite a compliment coming from the best hitter who ever lived,” said JJ. “Tell me more.”

The boy’s face lit up. “Well, he tossed four no-hitters and 12 one-hitters. Those were records when he retired. He had a total of 266 wins and 44 shutouts. He led the league in strikeouts 6 times and fanned more than 2,500 batters over his career.”

“Those are impressive stats,” JJ agreed. “Did you know he was also the first professional athlete to enlist in World War II?” asked JJ. “He volunteered for the U.S. Navy two days after Pearl Harbor.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” said JJ. “Just think of what his numbers would have been if he hadn’t spent three years fighting in the war.”

“I know!” said Alex. “He’d a had 300 wins and 3,000 strikeouts easy.”

JJ pointed again to the Feller autographed ball, which JJ innately knew was the source of the boy’s pain. “Tell me more about that.”

Alex became quiet and the smile left his face.

JJ sat down on the floor across from him. “I want to know.”

For several minutes, Alex said nothing. JJ let the silence gather around them, not wanting to push the boy before he was ready.

Eventually Alex handed JJ the ball. “That’s not the ball I originally wanted. They had a Feller ball on display at The Dugout. Right there in the window. I wanted it really bad. It was expensive but I began saving up for it. I had a paper route I worked in the mornings and afternoons. I worked real hard and was super nice to everyone so I’d get some decent tips. And I did, especially from old lady Ball. It was fun trying to land the papers in exactly the right spot. It was sorta like pitching.”

JJ nodded. When he was young, every rock became a baseball and every tree a catcher.

“As I started getting money saved up, I’d stop by the card shop and look at the ball. I used to tell Pete – he’s the guy who owns it – that I was gonna walk out of there one day with it. Pete, he knew I was serious but I’m not sure he thought I’d ever really come up with the money. He used to remind me that anyone could walk in the store anytime and buy it, so maybe I shouldn’t focus so much on that one.”

Alex shook his head. “I came so close,” he said. “I just needed one more week’s route money.” Alex looked away, a storm passing over his face.

“What happened?” asked JJ.

Alex looked back at him, eyes cold and narrow. “He took it. He took my money.”

“Who did?”

“My dad.”

JJ hadn’t expected that answer, and the last word hung uncomfortably in the space between them.

“He went into my room and took it when I was at school.”

“How do you know he took it?”

In an instant the boy was raging. “There was only the two of us here,” he shouted at JJ, “and he knew I’d been saving up and then when I confronted him he went ahead and admitted it. I started yelling at him and crying, and...” Alex began sobbing, a harsh and jagged sound. “And he...” More sobs. “And he...laughed at me.”

JJ leaned towards him and reached a hand out to comfort the boy. Alex kicked his legs out and swung his arms wildly in front of him. JJ withdrew and watched as Alex howled in pain.

After his cries receded a bit, JJ spoke. “Why did he take your money, Alex?”

“He told me that he needed it for bills and said I shouldn’t be so...”

“So what?”

“He said I shouldn’t be so f-ing selfish,” he said weakly. “He said now that it’s just me and him I oughta be helping out instead of wanting a stupid expensive baseball.” Alex swiped his eyes.

"But I know the truth. He took it so he could buy booze and get drunk. He had a bottle that very night. I'm not stupid, you know."

"You're not stupid," agreed JJ.

"He's a thieving liar and a drunk," said Alex. "And the Feller ball got bought a few weeks after that."

"I'm sorry that happened," JJ told him.

"I know," said Alex. "It was about a month after that when Pete told me Bob Feller himself was comin' to the store a few Saturdays later to sign autographs. And it would cost less for his autograph than what I woulda paid for the other ball. Plus, I could actually meet him when he signed the ball."

"That's good."

"Yeah, except I didn't have near enough money. So I began asking my dad to give me my money back. I even told him I didn't need it all. He just kept telling me to shut up. Then the night before Bob Feller was going to be at the Dugout, I begged him and told him this was my only chance and besides it was my money that he'd taken and he had no right to take it since he doesn't even give me an allowance and I earned it for myself."

The look on Alex's face suggested things had not gone well. "And what happened?"

"He told me shove off," said Alex. "Except he used different words."

"And then what?"

"I told him he was a thieving liar and a drunk and that I hated him." Alex looked at JJ without saying anything for a minute. "I bet you can guess what happened next."

"He hit you?"

"Boy did he," confirmed Alex. "He really laid me out. I was knocked out for a while and I guess it scared him. He was kneeling over me when I woke up and he kept telling me I was okay. 'You're okay, you're okay' he kept repeating. Then he would say stuff like 'You never shoulda talked to me that way' and 'You had it coming to you' but I could tell he was really just trying to make himself feel better."

"I guess he felt guilty 'cause he gave me ten bucks and he never gives me money. Then he left the apartment and I knew he was going off somewhere to get drunk. He gets paid on Fridays and he goes out and gets loaded just about every time." Alex shook his head. "I almost got smart with him and told him he still owed me fifty more but I didn't want to get hit again."

"I don't blame you," JJ told him.

"Anyhow," Alex continued, "I waited for him to come back, figuring that he would be good and drunk and pass out pretty quick. I was right," he said with a nod. "Then I fished his wallet out of his dirty old pants and took the thirty dollars I needed. I left early in the morning before he woke up and just walked around until it was time for the signing session. Then I went to the card shop and got a Bob Feller autographed ball. Shook his hand and told him how honored I was to shake hands with a real Hall-of-Famer. Then I went home."

The sick feeling which had been gradually growing within JJ since Alex began telling his story was now reaching a crescendo. Although part of him didn't really want to hear the answer, JJ was compelled to ask the question.

"What happened when you got home?"

"When I walked in he was boiling water for his instant coffee. He was a real coffee fiend on Saturdays. Anyway, when he saw me walk in with that baseball, he knew what I'd done. I started to explain I only took enough to pay for the ball and that it was my money to begin with and even offered to give him my paper route money coming up, but he wasn't even listening to me. He didn't even..." Alex looked down, fresh tears falling onto his lap. "He didn't even say anything," he whispered. "He just picked up the pot of boiling water and threw it at me."

"Oh, Alex," JJ said quietly.

"I wasn't expecting that. I thought maybe he'd slug me again and I that might have been worth it. But I was so surprised I couldn't move, and well, you can see the results." He looked up and pointed at his face. "Then he came at me, and I knew he aimed to kill me so I dropped the ball and ran out of the apartment. Stumbled really – I couldn't see very well on account of my face being burned. He caught up with me at the top of the stairs. He swung me around, grabbed a fist full of my shirt, lifted me off the ground and threw me down the steps."

"Oh, my God," was all that JJ could manage.

"Then he turned around and went back inside the apartment and waited for the police to come."

"What happened then, Alex?" JJ asked, although he already knew the answer. It was, JJ now understood, why he was called here.

"Well, they arrested him and he was eventually convicted of murder."

JJ nodded. "And the ball?"

“Well, my mom – she had left about a year before – came by the next day to gather up some things. She found the ball on the floor of the apartment and stuck it in a box along with some of my other baseball stuff. She didn’t know the whole mess happened over that ball. I don’t know if she woulda kept it even if she did. She had her own problems, you know. That’s why she left in the first place. Anyway, she took it over to Goodwill. That’s where you found it.” JJ nodded and smiled in spite of the horrible circumstances which had led the ball to the thrift store.

Alex returned his smile. “I made sure it was you who found it.”

“How did you manage that?”

“I wasn’t able to actually move it, but I kind of covered it up. When you came close, I moved aside so you’d see it. You were so excited when you found it there on the shelf.”

JJ examined the ball. “I sure was.” He held it to Alex. “I’m happy to return it to you.”

“You can’t give it back to me. I’m dead.”

“Well maybe I can place it on your grave or something.”

“No,” he said. “The ball is exactly where it’s supposed to be. I really enjoy the fact you’re a huge baseball fan. That’s why I chose you, you know. I knew you’d take good care of it.”

“I’ll appreciate it even more now,” said JJ.

“Why, because you know the signature is real?”

JJ shook his head. “No, I always knew in my heart it was real. Because now I know the history of the ball. And because now I know the history of you.”

The two looked at each other. Both began to cry. They sat that way for several minutes.

“I wish there was something I could do,” JJ said clumsily as he wiped away his tears.

“But you already have.”

“What do you mean?” asked JJ.

“Well, you’re here. You found me.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” admitted JJ.

“The baseball. You finally saw it moving and you followed me here. You see, I needed to tell you the story. So I can rest.”

JJ’s mind raced as he tried to process what Alex had just told him. “But the baseball isn’t the only thing I’ve seen moving.”

“I don’t know about any of that,” the boy replied. “Maybe there are others who need to share their stories with you.”

Alex yawned and stood up. He made his way over to the bed and lay down. “I think I can sleep now,” he told JJ. “But maybe you can...”

“Can what?”

“Stay for just a little while longer. Maybe you can tell me about some of your favorite baseball memories?”

“I can do that.”

JJ proceeded to tell Alex about watching George Brett play when JJ himself was a boy growing up in Kansas City. He recounted the time he saw Barry Larkin hit three home runs in a game. He shared stories from all the different ballparks he had visited through the years. JJ was just starting to tell him about the time he was at a game that got called because of snow when he noticed that Alex was asleep.

JJ felt sleepy too. He got up and left the apartment and made his way down the stairs where the boy had died. He stood there for a moment before pushing his way outside, where he was met by the stars and a cool night breeze. In his hands he held his most prized possession – an autographed Bob Feller baseball. He gave it a good squeeze and contemplated how to get back to his piano.