

1 The Scout

Timothy Michael Curry, known to baseball statistics as T. M. Curry and to his old teammates as Curry Powder, or just plain Powder, sat on the barren bleachers and wiped the sweat off his neck. Curry muttered to himself, questioning the sanity of his presence in this little Pennsylvania town, watching a college baseball game that not even the college punks bothered to see. The team favored to win the college World Series played right

here — here, in Pennsylvania, not in California, Arizona, Florida, or any of those other places that reeked of what was chic and trendy. It was probably in California, thought Curry, that baseball players began wearing gold chains around their neck, for chrissake. It wasn't being in Pennsylvania that made him question his sanity. No, he'd rather be here than on the West Coast. It wasn't watching a practically unattended college baseball game that made him question his sanity. He had watched, with pleasure, many a barely attended baseball game. No, what made him question his sanity was that he was here against his wishes, about to bring never-dying disgrace to the greatest game on earth, and it was all the fault of that goddamn Al Mowerinski. And it wasn't the first time that Al had put him in such a position, either.

The first time, though, he had had a choice. This time there was no choice. No, that was technically wrong, Curry realized, correcting his view in midthought much as he would have corrected a catch in midstride. There was a choice — if he didn't mind losing his job. This meant, to T. M. Curry's practical mind, that there was no choice. T. M. Curry was no dummy. Big Al was the owner and president of the Chicago Eagles, Curry only the scout.

The first time. He remembered it all too vividly, even though ten years had already passed. He and Big Al had been off the baseball field for five, maybe six, years. Al had plunged into business, but Curry knew only one life, and that was baseball. He had served the Eagles well as a player and in short time had become one of their scouts. Unlike many a scout, he didn't request a move to California.

A scout out there could practically pick them off the avocado trees. But Curry preferred helping the players of his native Midwest, even though it meant he had to travel six or seven states to do it.

He had never been what you would call close with Big Al, not after Al's rookie year. But they had shared that easy camaraderie of men who had practiced and played and showered and shaved together, men who had gotten drunk together and fought together and thought they knew each other. So when Al had invited him to Pittsburgh that summer ten years ago, he had thought Al wanted to . . . well, let bygones be bygones. He had accepted. That summer — only now did Curry think of it as "the first time," never dreaming back then that there would ever be a second time.

So Curry had gone to visit Big Al, partly because they had played baseball together, and partly because he, Curry, had been curious. When their big league careers had ended, Al had returned to his native Pittsburgh with a vengeance. "You can stick around and be a scout for the rest of your life, Curry," he had said, "but Big Al has *big plans*."

Big Al's big plans — going into the lawn mower business! — had looked like peanuts to T. M. Curry. And yet Curry had heard through the grapevine that the business had made Al a fortune. *Mower Down With Mowerinski*. Billboards sprouted all over Pittsburgh (hell, all over Chicago, too) like an early spring explosion of dandelions. Right up there on the billboards Big Al stood in a smooth, lush outfield, one hand on a Mowerinski Mower. Only a dumb Pollack would be lucky enough to make a fortune selling lawnmowers, especially with that stupid slogan. Why hadn't the big jerk gone into the sausage business like a good Pollack? Then maybe he wouldn't have made a mint and T. M. Curry wouldn't be sitting here, about to betray baseball.

Not even bothering to show him the business, Big Al had shown him around Pittsburgh. Then they had gathered some tackle, hopped into a car, and taken off for fishing country. Even now Curry remembered those two weeks of fishing. Beautiful. And they had topped it off by returning to Pittsburgh to watch a doubleheader.

And then, the day before Curry had been scheduled to fly back to Chicago, Big Al had asked, "Curry, do you know what Freedom looks like?"

"Red, white, and blue," he had replied.

"Not this Freedom. Come on, let's go."

"Where?"

"To Freedom. A perfect way to end the trip. One more baseball game — and a little scouting."

So Curry had leaned back in the car as Big Al drove them through the city. They passed the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela. The Ohio turned northwest and so did Al, naming the towns they sped through: Ambridge, Aliquippa, then Baden and Conway. *Fort Pitt, That's It*, declared a faded and forgotten billboard. Thirsty, Curry opened the cooler and pulled out the beer they had brought, opening one for Al, too.

On the Allegheny Plateau, they followed the river through the small towns that lay between the steel cities of Pittsburgh and Youngstown. The towns looked peaceful and undisturbed. Well, Curry had thought, it wasn't the most exciting way to end a vacation, but, what the hell, it was at least relaxing.

Big Al had stopped before the river turned west to flow to the Mississippi. "Here we are."

"Here? Here where? Where the hell we gonna see a ball game in this place, Al?"

Today, sitting on the bleachers watching the college game, Curry again wiped the sweat off his neck with a handkerchief. Scouts did not sit in the bleachers. They sat behind the screen, usually in small flocks, some of them with radar guns, all of them with notebooks. Curry sat in the bleachers because he did not want to be seen or noticed. Not for this job: no thank you. Frowning at the baseball action below, he folded the white cotton square neatly and put it into his sport coat, which was likewise folded neatly on the bleachers beside him. A tall, muscular man who had played third base by meeting the ball with his body and forcing it down, even now he carried no excess weight for his age. His once blondish-reddish hair, which, along with his temper, had earned him his nickname, was now graying. The temper wasn't. His hair was cut somewhat shorter than was fashionable, but not so short that it was out of style. Curry consciously trod that thin line, priding himself on his ability to blend in. Besides, he thought, rubbing his hand lightly over his hair, the cut did him justice. He

considered himself a handsome man and was not wrong in that judgment. As he stared at the reality of the game before his eyes, he thought back to Big Al's invitation of ten years ago. He, T. M. Curry, had been set up — set up then for what he had to do now.

They had seen a baseball game all right. Al had found a Little League game (or something like it), had driven up behind left center field and parked the car. The two of them left the car and leaned on the chest-high chain-link fence, the sun sparkling off the World Series rings they both wore.

A green chalk scoreboard had informed them that it was the bottom of the first and scoreless. Al passed a flask of Four Roses to Curry.

The team on the field had worn gray and green uniforms, tattered but recognizable. Freedom Fighters had been stitched across the front in cursive script. Offhandedly pointing a thumb at the center fielder's uniform, Big Al had asked, "Good name, huh?"

"Damn good."

The batter popped a fly ball to right field. Easy out. The first two pitches to the next batter hit the ground in front of the plate. Curry winced. Fans, probably parents and other assorted relatives, had filled two short bleachers along first and third. Half had applauded the bouncing ball. The other half had screamed at the pitcher, telling him he ought to be taken out. The next two pitches were strikes. Chatter filled the infield and drifted back to Curry and Al. "Atta boy, Jimmy." "Good work." "Keep it up, Jimbo." "Easy out, Jimmy, easy out." "Swings like a rusty gate." "Won't even see it coming."

The batter connected. A hard grounder. A symphony of clanging cowbells and screeching whistles filled the air. Saved by the shortstop, out at first. "Nice play." Sipping from the flask, Curry gave the shortstop his due. Not so half the fans, who shouted at the umpire who made the call, threatening to end his life.

A strikeout retired the side. The other team took the field, their red and gray uniforms identifying them in block letters as the Warriors.

The Fighters at bat performed an exercise in basic math: three up and three down. In the bottom of the second inning, the first Warrior batter hit a home run. 1-0. The Fighter coach strolled out to talk to his pitcher. "Leave him in," somebody shouted. "Take him out, coach — your son's a bum!" somebody

answered. "Send him to the Peewees!" Spitting tobacco juice behind the mound, the coach talked to his son. Then, empty of saliva and advice, he strolled back to the bench.

Curry observed that the next Warrior batter was the biggest of the bunch. An Al Mowerinski of the Little League, he must have been an old twelve, playing out his last summer, dwarfing the others, who looked like average ten-year-olds. The big kid took two balls and one strike, then smashed a line drive that caromed off the left field fence. The miniature Warrior giant made it to second base. Could have made it to third if he'd been a hustler, Curry informed Al.

Again the Fighter coach sauntered out to talk to his pitcher. Meanwhile, another pitcher began warming up outside the fence. The pitcher on the mound appeared nervous but struck out the next batter. The chatter in the field picked up again. One down, two to go. 1-0. One on base. The batter nipped the ball and it dribbled away from the plate, toward the pitcher. "*Fair ball!*" shouted the umpire. Flinging off his mask, the fledgling catcher ran awkwardly toward the ball. At the same time, the pitcher snapped to attention, running toward the ball and scooping it up.

"*First!*" shouted the shortstop. "*First base! First-first-first!*" The pitcher, his back to the field, turned and fired the ball to third. Too late. Now the Warriors had runners on first and third.

"Should have listened," said Curry, shaking his head at the circus of small-town kids' baseball. What amazed him was that every now and then a scout, tipped off by a network of bird dogs (men who acted as scouts for the scouts), actually found a good player in these places. Now these Warriors, Curry thought, had one good player, the big third baseman who had clouted the line drive. The kid modeled himself on the power hitters, though. That's what every kid wanted to be. Every big kid, too. Some of them could never be broken out of going for the big one. Like Big Al: he had always gone for the big one. So he had been a home run hitter. So what? So that's what the fans paid to see. That's what gave men like Al bigger salaries than men like Curry. The real *hitter*, the guy who choked the bat a little, didn't go for the long one, placed his hits — he was more important to the club, any club, than the 40-home-runs-a-season power hitter. Curry reflected with pride that National League statistics showed that he had a

higher batting average than Big Al Mowerinski. And Curry hadn't been a show-off, either. Many was the time, Curry suspected, that Al had *deliberately* let two strikes go by, waving them aside as if they were nothing, hushing the booing crowd that was ready to kill the umpire, and then swatting the next pitch into the stands. The crowds had loved it.

Swallowing more of the whiskey, Curry passed the flask to Al and appraised the Fighters. Two good players, the shortstop and the first baseman. Both quick on their feet, quick to think. Speed was the first thing a scout looked for. Speed couldn't be taught. You had it, or you didn't. Show me a good fielder, thought Curry, and I'll make him a good hitter. Show me a good fielder with speed, and I'll make him a great fielder. Could either of these two hit? He knew a lot of shortstops who couldn't. Too small, some would say, but that wasn't it. Anybody could hit, thought Curry, if he knew how. Or learned how. A small player could use his speed, his quickness. Of course this shortstop was tall and skinny, the tallest Fighter player on the field. Maybe they had him playing the wrong position. And the first baseman, he was average-sized, maybe smaller. Curry retrieved the flask from Al.

The infield shifted to the left for the next batter, who hit a high fly to left field. It was caught, but the runner on third tagged up and scored; the runner on first advanced. The fans screamed their pleasure or dismay, depending on which team they supported.

Two out, runner on second. 2-0. The coach took out the pitcher and put in another. The one who had been taken out hung his head. Not even coaches' sons could afford to lose.

"*Play ball!*" yelled the ump.

A strikeout quickly retired the side. The Warriors took the field for the top of the third, their spirits lifted by their 2-0 lead. The Fighters' first baseman stepped up to the plate, eyed a fast pitch, and drove it over the center-field fence for a clean home run. The Fighters cheered: 2-1 and no outs. The shortstop came up next. A low, fast pitch. Crack! Another home run, this one over the left-field fence. Curry made a grab for it, knowing even as he did that it was out of reach. Score tied.

He was enjoying himself. Yeah, it was sloppy, it was awkward, it lacked

finesse. It was just a bunch of kids, for chrissake. But it had pizzazz. It was baseball — sport, where skill and chance met and one or the other won. Yeah, thought Curry, that was what he loved about baseball. There was skill, no denying that. Let some of those big football players see how hard it was to hit a little ball coming at you nearly a hundred miles an hour. With a rounded stick, that's all. Just you and the pitcher, face to face, each of you fighting to make a part of the plate your own. Baseball was the American game because it was equality, that's what it was. Curry swallowed more whiskey.

Now these other sports, they had no equality. You take football. Your average American couldn't be a football player. He wasn't big and beefy enough. Wasn't stupid enough, either, Curry thought. Then you take basketball. Today there was no equality in basketball. What chance did the average American have against seven-foot-tall black giants?

Those other sports — hockey, soccer — they weren't American. Let the commies play hockey and the hunkies and guineas play soccer. Baseball was *American*. It was a game of equality. So mused T. M. Curry as he sipped his Four Roses, offering Big Al his thoughts along with the whiskey.

The little guy and the big guy stood an equal chance in baseball. The big bruisers, like Big Al, were power hitters, getting all they could out of their brawn and muscle. Then there were the tough guys like himself. Curry reminded himself again that he had been a better (though less spectacular) hitter than Al. And there were the little guys. Yeah, they could hit, too. And what they lacked in power they made up for in quickness. They were all equal in the batter's box.

Flustered, the Warrior pitcher walked two in a row. His coach came out and patted him on the shoulder, trying to give him some confidence. The next batter struck out. One out. Two on base. 2-2. What they needed was a bunt, Curry informed Al.

A bunt is what they got. Out at first, but now the runners were on second and third. The next Fighter batter hit a ground ball toward the second baseman, who picked it up, fumbled it, then picked it up again and threw it hastily to first, his best bet. But the throw was high; the first baseman missed it and the runner continued to second. A run scored, making the score 3-2. The Fighter runner who could make it 4-2 threatened, but he retreated to third under the shouts of his

coach.

The Freedom Fighters were now winning. Two on, second and third, two out. Out came the Warrior coach to talk to his pitcher. The infield huddled around him, soaking up his wisdom, shuffling under his anger. The next batter was the Fighters' second baseman, a shrimp of a boy whose uniform was so big that he had the pants' waistband rolled over and folded over his belt, which Curry surmised was under all that cloth somewhere. The shirt sleeves, short on the other players, came below his elbows. He looked to be eight, maybe, but he must have been ten. Curry watched. The shrimp caught a piece of the ball, popping it up high, from where it came down without effort into the first baseman's glove, retiring the side.

The sun beat down on the players in their old flannel uniforms. Curry looked at the outfielders nearest him, noticing the dark sweat marks on their uniforms, noticing their wet and clinging hair. They were tired and hot, their reflexes slowing rapidly. From now on it would be a matter of which side weakened less. Sometimes victory depended not on being better, but on surviving — holding in there until the other side tired. An unwillingness to accept defeat, that's what made winners.

Curry chattered as Al watched the game silently. In the bottom of the third, the Fighters' second pitcher was already tiring under the heat. He walked one batter, then another. Two on, no outs. The tobacco-chewing coach ambled out again, talking to this pitcher while a third was warming up outside the fence. The shortstop talked to the shrimp, who played second. The third baseman played close to the bag. The shortstop moved close to second, opening up a bigger hole than Curry thought was safe.

"Come on, Kevin." "Let's go, double play." "Make him hit it, Kev, come on, boy, atta way to go." Kevin pitched a fast ball. *Crack!* A low hopper, hard down the middle. A backhanded grab by the shortstop, who tagged the runner heading for third, pivoted, and fired the ball to second. The shrimp on the bag caught it and threw the ball as hard as he could to first. Out! *A triple play!*

Curry couldn't believe it. He guffawed, poking Big Al in the ribs. "Did you see that?" He was laughing so hard the tears came to his eyes. "My god, I can't believe it. A triple play!"

"For chrissake, not so loud, Curry," cautioned Al. "Don't make the other side feel worse than they do."

But Curry was beyond recall. The whiskey inside him played the event back to him better than instant replay could have. A triple play, a triple play. From short to second to first. A kids' game with a triple play. His laughter (or perhaps the whiskey) toppled him, sending him sliding down to the ground, his curled fingertips holding the chain-link fence. It was so wonderful, baseball, so beautiful.

Al lifted him off the ground, but not even Al could stop the laughter.

Curry brushed off Al's hand and staggered to his feet, holding on to the links. These dumb Pollacks were all alike, no glory in their souls. Oh, if only some of his Irish buddies had been here to see this! Wait till he told them; just wait.

Brushing the dried grass off his clothes and hanging himself over the fence for better support, Curry felt his mirth subside to chuckles. The witnessing of a triple play called for another drink, so he helped himself. The top of the fourth was over with before he stopped chuckling.

"Game warms up the scouting blood, doesn't it?" asked Al.

"I don't know about me blood," answered Curry in a thick brogue, "but me soul's nice and warm, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I'd say that first baseman would warm any scout's blood. Sure an' you'll be givin' the lad a lookin' over, professional like, you might say," Al brogued right back at him.

"Ah, sure an' it's not the first baseman I'm interested in, good as the laddie is. It's the shortstop I would talk to first."

"The shortstop!" exclaimed Al, his eyebrows up. "But the first baseman's a better player, don't you think?"

"Ah, Al, you stick to the lawn mowers and let me stick to the scouting," advised Curry, waving the flask around. Shaking it, he held it to his ear. It sounded empty. Curry peered in: not a drop left. Sure an' it was a shame.

"Oh, there's no denying the shortstop's good," admitted Al. "But between the two, wouldn't you say the first baseman is better? Not as big, but stronger and quicker."

"Stronger, maybe. Just as quick, no! Ain't you got eyes? Can't you see? The shortstop is quicker, quicker on his feet, quick to think. A thinker, that shortstop. More important, *heart*," lectured Curry, waving his forefinger around and poking it in the place where he supposed Big Al's heart to be. "You just leave the scouting to old Curry Powder."

"You can't see heart."

"Ah, if I could, though, I'd be rolling in clover." He let out a sigh. "No, I have to try to see it. Have to guess. 'N I'm not a bad guesser either, don't let anybody fool you." Curry belched and straightened against the fence. Again he wagged his finger at Al. "Now this shortstop could be a big leaguer. Not *will* be, I'm saying. *Could be*. Might be if he wants to be, if he has a good coach, a good scout, the proper conditions. You stick to your lawn mowers and I'll stick to my scouting. I'll check out this kid after the game."

"You're the scout," Al relented with a shrug.

The Fighters were still ahead, 3-2. Al started to say something about the Fighter first baseman, but Curry waved away his comments. Ducking back into the car for a beer, he brought one out for Al, too. Ugh. Warm. He spit out the first mouthful, but then adjusted and sipped the rest slowly.

By the time Curry had finished two warm beers, it was the bottom of the sixth (the last inning in kids' play), and the score hadn't changed. The Fighters were still leading, 3-2. Just hold on now, thought Curry, who found himself rooting for the Fighters. Just hold on. Don't let the others score and you'll be home okay. You'll win — just hold on. The pitcher walked the first batter, bringing up the Warrior who had hit the home run. The Fighter coach yanked his pitcher and put in the one who had been warming up outside the fence. The new pitcher was wild, not soothed by the raw voices of the screaming fans. He threw two balls, then hit the batter with the third. No outs, two on base. Curry believed he knew how the Fighters felt. Tired. Too tired to score, knowing that your only chance is to keep the other side from scoring, but maybe too tired to do even that. "Come on, Freedom Fighters!" he urged loudly. The batter hit a sharp line drive to the first baseman, who caught it just in time. Nobody advanced. One out, two on. Last chance for the Warriors. Last chance for the Fighters, too.

Al elbowed him, nodding toward the first baseman, approving the play.

Curry ignored him. Come on, shortstop, he rooted silently. It was tense, tight. He could practically see the pitcher sweating up there. Up came that big kid, that old twelve. The base runners had big leadoffs. The pitcher wasted some energy throwing the ball to first, then second, trying to pick them off. He just doesn't want to throw to the big one, thought Curry. He didn't blame the kid. He'd never want to be a relief pitcher, brought in at the last minute to stand or fall on half an inning of play, no sirree.

Finally the pitcher mustered up strength and threw to the big one. *Smack!* A hard hit, deep into center. Curry stifled a silly desire to leap over the fence and help the fielder. But the kid didn't need help. He caught it, grabbed it from his glove, and threw it hard to second. Not in time, though, to keep that runner from tagging up and reaching third. But in time to keep the one on first from reaching second. Should have thrown ahead of the runner. Should have had a cutoff man ready for the ball. Should have, should have. Curry felt the sweat on his palms as he gripped the top rail of the fence. Two out. Two on, third and first. "Come on, Fighters!" he cheered, waving his hand and sloshing beer onto the playing field.

The pitcher hurled the ball. Ball one. He got the ball back, wiped it off, looked around, and threw another pitch. Strike one. One-and-one the count. Come on, kid, come on. The pitcher stared at the winning run on first, then went through the motions and threw again. Ball two! Two-and-one the count. Again the pitcher caught the ball, wiped it off, and stared at the catcher. He threw. Ball three. It looked bad. Curry informed Al that it looked bad. Al nodded. It was the best way to win, coming from behind in the bottom of the ninth (sixth, in this case). The worst way to lose. Hold on, thought Curry, hold on. Ball four. Curry sighed. The runner on first advanced. Bases loaded, two out. Curry wanted another beer, but he didn't want to take his eyes off the game.

Up stepped the new batter. Wiped his hands in the dirt, on his pants, on the bat. Took his time getting into the batter's box. Hell of a situation to be in, Curry knew. This was it: he would score a run or lose the game. In came the pitch. A swing! A high fly to the infield! Who would get it? "Mine!" shouted the shrimp. "Mine!" He circled under the ball, shading his eyes for a second.

The ball fell on his head. His cap, already too large, fell over his eyes. Frantically he circled around, searching for the ball. The pitcher, shortstop, and

first baseman ran for the white sphere. The Warrior runners, who had seemed breathlessly suspended on the bags, reminding Curry of the mobiles he used to hang above his children's cribs, now sprang to life and raced around the diamond. The runner on third made it home easily. 3-3. The runner on second raced for home full speed, head down, arms whipping at his sides. He had nothing to lose, all to gain. Trip, why don't you? thought Curry, already seeing the loss. Scooping up the ball, the shortstop hurled it to the catcher. Too late.

The game was over, 4-3. The Warriors cheered wildly, clapping each other on the back, jumping up and down. Some Fighter fans booed the shrimp, who still stood where he had been circling the ball. Suddenly he started to cry. Curry was embarrassed. Baseball players, no matter how young, did not cry. The shortstop put his arms around the shrimp's shoulders, patted him on the back, and picked up the now discarded green cap. The first baseman, too, went to console the shrimp. Then came the catcher. The pitcher walked to the bench: he had problems of his own. The coach started to put away the bats, slamming them together. Then he, too, went out to the shrimp, put his arm around the kid's head, and guided him back to the bench.

Curry slammed a fist against the fence. He liked to win. Winning was what it was all about. His team — the team he had chosen to side with — had not won. Getting another beer from the car, he opened it, tasted it, then emptied it over the fence.

"Too bad," said Al, watching the Fighters.

Curry recovered. He had a job to do, didn't he? "Come on," he said, leading the way around the fence and toward the gate, where the players were stuffing their equipment — bats, balls, gloves, helmets, masks, kneepads — into a large bag. They reminded him of a group of ants, clearing the field of debris after a battle.

"You know, I think you're right about which one's the better player," said Al.

"Course I'm right." He wasn't a scout for nothing, no sirree. "Hey, there," he hailed convivially to the shortstop, who was just coming out of the gate with the first baseman and the shrimp. "That was a good game you played there. Too bad you had to lose. We were rooting for you all the way."

"Yeah," replied the kids in unison.

Curry hitched his thumbs through his belt loops and swayed back on his heels, surveying the three players. "You like baseball?" he asked for starters.

"*Yeah!*" The shortstop replied as if there couldn't be any other answer.

The first baseman shrugged. "Football is better. I'm gonna be a football player when I grow up. Lindy can't, though, 'cause girls can't play football."

Curry felt funny. He was sure the kid meant somebody else. Kids talked like that, as if you knew their brother, sister, best friend, dog, and cat. "Who's Lindy?" he asked, holding his breath.

"Me," said the shortstop.

"You're a girl?" asked Curry, already taking off the kid's hat and looking at her. Now he could see it. A girl. Goddamn it! Curry could see that and more. He could see Big Al grinning. Goddamn it again! T. M. Curry didn't like being played for a fool. The goddamn Pollack, *he had known it all along!*

"What's your name?" Al leaned over and asked her.

"Linda Sunshine." Then, as if responding to a parental reminder, "Sir."

"Well, you're very lucky, Linda Sunshine. This man is Timothy Michael Curry, and he's a baseball scout for the Chicago Eagles."

Curry watched as she looked up at him. *So?* her face seemed to say.

"Mr. Curry was telling me that he thought you were the best player he saw today. If he's a good scout, he's going to report that to the Chicago Eagles. He's going to keep an eye on you, Linda, and if you keep playing baseball someday he might sign you to play for the Chicago Eagles."

"Honest?" she asked, looking at Al, then back at Curry.

"Ah, girls can't play real baseball," said the first baseman. "You're just fooling." He laughed.

The shrimp laughed, too.

Curry saw the girl staring at him, waiting. Two eyebrows, straight and black, gave her small face an intense, solemn expression. The dark eyes stared at him without blinking, waiting.

Big Al poked him in the ribs. "Come on, Curry — didn't you say she was the best player on the field? The kid's waiting to hear what you have to say, Scout."

"Ah, yeah. Yeah." Suddenly he didn't feel so good. His stomach was very upset, and it was all because of Al. "Yeah. It's too bad," he muttered.

"Whaddya mean, too bad?" demanded Al.

Curry glowered at Al. He wanted to hit Al Mowerinski, topple him, make him look ridiculous. Instead, he took a breath through clenched teeth. He wasn't going to play games with this dumb, clever lawn mower salesman. "Too bad she's a girl. She'll never play hardball, and you know it as well as I do." Even as he said it, Curry felt strangely guilty letting her hear it. He turned to her, leaning down so that his face was almost on her level. Her nose wrinkled upward; she took a step back. "You don't want to play baseball when you grow up, do you? You want to be like all the other little girls, don't you? I have four little girls, and none of them wants to play baseball."

The wide dark eyes continued to stare at him. "Uh-uh," she answered. "I *do* want to play baseball!"

"But you're a *girl!*" exclaimed the first baseman. "Who ever heard of a girl signing a contract!"

"That's no reason," she argued back, dragging the toe of her shoe across the dirt.

"Ah, sh—" Curry started to exclaim. Straightening, he waved a hand at the kids. "Forget it," he said, walking away.

Behind him, he heard Al. "Don't pay any attention to him. You keep playing baseball. Just keep playing the best you can, and someday you will be a baseball player."

Curry waited at the fence, by the car. "Ya know," he said to Al, "you've got a piss-poor sense of humor. That wasn't a bit funny. Not a bit."

"That had nothing to do with humor, Curry. Nothing."

Al was stone-cold sober. Jesus Christ, why couldn't he be drunk? Jesus Christ, a sober Pollack was worse than a drunk one!

Big Al stood between him and the car. "You call yourself a scout, do you? You call yourself a scout, then you can't even talk baseball to the best player in the field."

"You're fulla shit, you dumb Pollack! Talk baseball, my ass. I don't believe in wastin' my breath, like some people I know. Whaddya wanna lie to that kid for? What's the matter with you, anyway? Christ, it's bad enough she's on the *Little League* team!"

"I didn't lie to her, you thickheaded mi— jerk. I'm talking about baseball future. Why shouldn't she play if she's good enough?"

"She shouldn't because she can't. Not in the majors. She's a *female*, for chrissake." Curry looked hard at Al. "It's an old argument, Al. I thought you had forgotten it."

"I'll never forget, Curry."

"Dropped it, then: not forgotten." Curry held out an unsteady hand to support his argument. "Women can't do it. They can't."

"Doesn't anything ever change you?" asked Al.

Curry ignored the question. "Naw, you aren't serious. You can't be. Just your idea of a joke. Well, I'm not in the mood for jokes now, Al. Come on, let's get back to the city. I drank too much." He started for the car.

Big Al blocked his way. "I told you before, Curry, I'm not joking. That kid is good enough for you to have a bird dog keep an eye on her. That's what you'd do if you had any balls." He spit out the last word, sneering at Curry.

"That's what I'd do if *she* had any balls." He should have let it go there and walked around Al to the car. But he couldn't let it go. "Even if they *could* play in the majors — which they can't — what would happen to the game, huh? We'd have pantyhose and lipstick in the locker room. We don't need twats in baseball, Al."

Big Al's fist (it must have been a fist, though it felt like a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball) slammed into his jaw. As Curry's knees gave under him, he felt himself propelled backward before he hit the ground.

Staggering to his feet, fists clenched, Curry was about to hurl himself at Al. But in an instant, his brain, reeling as it was, took over and informed him that Big Al had five inches and forty pounds on him, all of it housed on a frame that would have done justice to the Merchandise Mart.

"Come on, you bastard, come on," Al coaxed, his arms held out at his sides in clear contempt.

Oh, yeah, he wanted to. But he couldn't take on Al after drinking in the sun all afternoon. Nobody in the big leagues had ever beaten Big Al anyway. The reverse, however, was not true: there were plenty who had been beaten by Big Al. He, Timothy Michael Curry, wasn't going to be one of them.

"Naw." Curry waved his hand as if to say that this was beneath him. "I don't want to fight you, Al. You're welcome to your ideas." He walked around Al and opened the car door. "Me and the rest of the world, we're wrong and you're right."

Al snorted, dismissing the sarcasm. Before Curry had even collapsed into the front seat, Al was at the wheel. Turning the key with a grip that nearly snapped it in two, he started the car in a fury, pulling away with a squeal of wheels, huge tire tread marks testifying to his anger. It was not a silent anger. All the way back to Pittsburgh Curry had to put up with righteous lecturing. He had to listen to Al bellow at him about equality, democracy, and fair chance — and even worse crap about women and discrimination. Curry kept telling him to shove it and shut up, but that didn't stop Al from bellowing louder.

He took his suitcase from Al's and left without a word. It would be a cold day in hell before he saw that bastard again. One side of his face was swollen and getting worse. He'd have to call in sick a couple of days when he got back to Chicago, until the swelling went down. Goddamn Pollack. Goddamn lawn mower salesman. He'd fix him, but good. Wait till he spread the word, in a casual sort of way, that Al Mowerinski wanted broads in baseball — right there in the big leagues.

Ten years ago he hadn't known that Al Mowerinski was going to make enough dough to actually *buy* the Eagles — buy a major league *baseball team*, mind you. Had he known, he might have become a scout for some other team. But Al had bought the Eagles just two years ago, and by that time it was too late to change. Curry pondered his situation, realizing that the truth was that he had chosen not to leave. Once an Eagle, always an Eagle. Which is why he was here today, at this dumpy Pennsylvania college, watching this goddamn baseball game. Which is why he was about to do something truly terrible.

Although T. M. Curry was not one to forget an injury, he had been polite to Al and had gone about his business. Al would find nothing to complain about, not the way Curry was doing his job. Wasn't he one of the best scouts in the business? Okay, then, just let him go about his business.

And he had, without any problems. Al had even promised (and delivered) big bonuses. There had been \$15,000 the first year for that pitcher, Merle Isemonger. Lenny Black, the manager, had been beside himself with joy; you couldn't shut him up about the kid. There had been \$10,000 the next season for that Mexican kid. He was in the minors now but looked like a sure thing.

This season, though — this season was the catch. This was what Al had been leading up to. Curry knew it. He knew it, but he still couldn't accept it.

Last week Al had called him into the office.

"I've got some scouting for you in Pennsylvania," Al had said, skipping preliminaries. "The Liberty Bells."

Curry had settled into a chair, thinking the whole time. Pennsylvania. Liberty Bells. What was it about them that caused the fluttering in his chest?

"They're going to the college World Series," said Al, watching him. "Take my word for it."

"Who've they got?" asked Curry, unable to associate the school with any top player.

Al had stared at him for a moment. "I want you there the end of this week and all of next," he replied, ignoring Curry's question. "Take a look at the shortstop. I want a full report on her."

Even when the word was said, Curry couldn't believe it. It was from the past, a joke. It couldn't be for real. "*Her?*" His mouth was dry as he finally understood the reason for the fluttering feeling: the Liberty Bells played with a girl on the team.

"Yes, her. I'm glad your hearing's still accurate."

Curry stood up and stared at Al. Turning, he walked to the water cooler and, with fingers shaking, got himself a cup of water. "You want me to go to a college game and tell you how a *female shortstop* plays? C'mon, Al. What good will that do?" He tried to sound nonchalant but was sure he hadn't succeeded.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Curry. Your job is to scout the players. I'm telling you to check this one out and give me a full report. And I don't want a word of this to get out to *anybody*. Understand?"

"Oh, I understand that. I understand why you don't want a word of it to get out." Curry moved back to the chair. "Only thing is, why do you want to do it at

all, Al? That's what I don't understand. Why do you want to waste my time and your money for a joke?"

Big Al's hands, resting on the desktop, twitched. "I told you once before it isn't a joke. You're going out there for one reason only — to fill out a scouting report on the shortstop. I'll take care of the rest." Then he added, "Based on your report, of course."

"You want to sign a woman to play in the big leagues? She'll never make it to the minors. You're out of your mind."

Al, out of his mind or not, appeared unperturbed. "You're behind the times. I want more people at the gate, understand? She'll be a big draw."

Curry took a deep breath, not believing Al's reasons for a minute. It was the past Al was interested in, not the future. "Then have another scout do it, Al. Don't do this to me. I can't do it. Hell, I *won't* do it! Think of what it would do to the team, for chrissake. Nobody's going to play with a broad on the team."

"Watch it," Al warned, pointing a hairy finger at him.

If Al was serious, he was crazy. Crazy. Curry didn't want to be anywhere around when the shit hit the fan.

"You're the one who's going," Al ordered, biting off the end of a cigar. He put it in his mouth and puffed away, trying to get it lit. "Tell me how she plays. Got that? *How she plays*, not the color of her eyes, the length of her hair, or the fact that she's a woman. Just give me the facts."

"Um-hmm. Suppose I tell you she's a two on a scale of eight? Dead bat, swiss cheese for a glove, and afraid of her own shadow — what're you gonna do then, fire me?"

Al waved his hand. "Just fill out the fucking report."

Curry rose from his chair, slammed a fist into his hand, and paced the office. Okay. Okay, he'd go. He'd fill out the fucking report. He had gotten to the door when it hit him, propelling him in an arc, a semicircle that took him straight back to Big Al's desk. "Wait! Just a minute. Just wait a minute." He leaned over the desk, his face inches from Al's.

"You're going to draft her. You're going to draft her no matter what I say. *And then you're going to say I was the one who recommended her!*" Rage overwhelmed him; his hand clenched the desk, the weight of his body pressing

on it. "I'll be the laughingstock of the game! I won't have a friend left! My name will be *shit!* Nothing doing, Al — nothing doing!" Curry walked toward the door. "Get yourself another scout."

He was in the doorway when Al's voice caught him. Just three words: "Ten thousand dollars."

T. M. Curry stopped. "What?"

"Ten thousand dollars. That'll be your raise."

"You're serious," whispered Curry in awe. Closing the door, he walked back to the desk and stared at Al. He licked his lips to wet them, so that he could speak. "Ten thousand? A raise of ten thousand dollars?"

Al, his cigar lit by now, puffed and nodded his head.

Shit, thought Curry. A puff and a nod were no answer at all. "What do I have to do — give her an eight on the scale?" he asked contemptuously.

"You give her what you think she deserves on the scale, Curry. You go there, you watch, and you fill out the fucking report."

"Why?"

"Because I want something to draw the crowds. I explained that already."

Curry shook his head, negating the explanation. "I mean why ten thousand? Why ten thousand when you could get somebody else to do it for nothing, just for his job? Pennsylvania's not even my territory, Al. Why me? Why the money?"

Blowing a puff of smoke into the air, Al followed its drift and dissipation. Then he looked at Curry. "Let's say it's for . . . old time's sake."

Curry swallowed hard, looking away, his mouth dry again. He thought hard, ignoring Al's remark. He could scout her and still disagree with the whole idea. He was just following orders, that's all. She probably wasn't good enough, anyway. Maybe they'd have to lower the scale to rate her. Maybe she wouldn't sign. Maybe somebody else would draft her. All Al was telling him was to go there and look her over. Again Curry crossed over to the fountain of bottled water that stood against one wall. The water was ice-cold. Crushing the pointed paper cup, he tossed it into the basket. "Yeah. Okay. I'll go there and fill out the fucking report, for chrissake."

T. M. Curry was no dummy. He knew who she would be. The mimeographed roster merely confirmed what he had known: SS — Sunshine, Linda. Sitting on the barren bleachers, he watched the Liberty Bells take another game from still another opponent. Liberty Bells. Dingdong Bells is what they were, playing with a woman on the team. Not just on the team, but at short! Curry shook his head, transferring his anger to the players, blaming them for playing something less than baseball. There weren't nine men out there. There were eight men and a woman. Whatever they were playing, it wasn't the same game he had played. His had been played by men.

He had followed his orders and followed the baseball team. Four away games, four home. The coach had recognized him, so he had told the coach that he was just here on vacation, visiting old friends, and thought he would look the team over for a few days. Relaxation only, no business. Sure, it wasn't business at all for a scout to look at a championship baseball team. The coach had just grinned. Eventually, Curry asked, casually, how and why a woman was on the team.

"Pressure. The school."

"Too bad."

"No," answered the coach. "Not really. Oh, I was against it at first. Completely. Said I'd quit if they forced me to put her on the team."

"Yeah? What happened?"

The coach shrugged. "They made me put her on the team, I didn't quit. It was too late in the season then to get another job. I guess the college was more or less forced to do it, you know? Somebody in the administration said alumni donations depended on it — on equality, they said."

"How long ago was that?"

"Four years. This is her fourth season. Made it on as a freshman. Hey, listen, I've got no complaints about her. She's a good player, good as they come. One of the best I've ever coached, I'd have to say. Never missed a practice. No grumbling, no wisecracks. A steady, serious player."

Curry sat there watching her. Whenever the team took the field, he could always spot her. It wasn't the long braid her hair was in, even. Braids on a baseball team, for chrissake! It was the ass. That's what he looked for. Why did

she have to look so goddamn good in uniform? He wondered what the other players thought. Especially the left fielder. What a view *he* had.

Curry watched her. She was leaning forward, balanced on her toes, following the pitch. He had seen enough, to tell the truth. One game had been enough. He stayed all eight, hoping for mistakes, an injury, something. Nothing. She did nothing that he could use against her. All a ball player had to be able to do was hit the ball, throw the ball, field the ball, and run. That's all. Curry snorted at the thought of how few could do those four things well. Linda Sunshine could do them well. If she'd had balls, he'd have given her a seven. If he'd had balls, he'd have given her a two. On his scouting report he gave her a five, which was considered average major league quality.

Big Al was the last person he wanted to talk to, so he sent him a telegram. Like the old days. GOOD FIELD. GOOD HIT. SHE'LL NEVER MAKE IT.

Al telephoned to tell Curry that telegrams were behind the times. Al also told him to bring her to Chicago for a talk.

Curry would carry out his orders, but he would not be responsible for what happened to her. Or to Al, for that matter. It would be a disaster. She'd never make it, and Al wouldn't have a decent player left on the Eagles. Nobody would play for him. Nobody.

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