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“Jesus Christ, what are you doing?” the guy in the batter’s box said.

Jeb got the ball back from the catcher, wound, and poured in another fastball on the inside corner. Not completely cutting it loose, holding back a little, but still scaring the shit out of the guy.

The catcher called time and took off the mask and came out to talk to Jeb. “Hey now, Bud,” he said. “You’re throwing good, no one’s saying you aren’t. It’s just, this is supposed to be a fun game.”

Jeb didn’t say anything, waited for the guy to get back in the crouch and let go a cutter for strike three. He struck out the next two guys on 7 pitches, which should have been 6 but the umpire didn’t give him a low strike.

He came back to the bench and Coach Wilson told him thanks for the half inning of work, and that’d do it, since there were four or five other guys who wanted to throw.

Jeb got changed in the corner of the dugout and headed over to the barbeque, which was going on in the

parking lot down past third base. His arm felt good, lively. He had no interest in watching any more baseball today. This was a high school alumni game in Orland, California.

He loaded up his plate and Miss Jacoby recognized him and came from behind the lemonade vat and gave him a hug. “My Lord,” she said, “have you grown up.”

“It’s good to be here,” Jeb lied. “Thank you.”

He sat down at a picnic table and Mr. Strohm appeared and took a seat across from him. Mr. Strohm was the football coach back in the day, though Jeb doubted he was still coaching because he looked a little shaky on his feet. “Son,” he said, “I’d say it’s an honor to have you join us. Except you’ve stiffed us all these years.”

“Well this is March. I always had spring training.”

“I ain’t talking just about today, this dip-shit game. All the other stuff we invited you back for.”

There’d been fundraisers for new fields, retirement dinners, MS walks, kids’ sports camps. Events ad nauseum that a somewhat famous baseball player could

help them boost. Jeb had never showed up at any of them.

“That’s my fault,” Jeb said. “I should have made an effort.”

“That’s a bunch of crap,” Mr. Strohm said. “We was proud of you like nobody’s business after you made it up. The first homegrown one ever. Then after a while, it was Jeb who.”

“How’s the team been?” Jeb said, hoping to shift gears.

“Ah, they forced me out. I grabbed a kid.”

“Jeez, you grabbed us all the time. Especially by face mask. You twisted our heads around so we’d listen.”

“Course I did. It’s different now . . . the fuck you doing here anyway, you don’t mind my asking.”

“My dad’s sick. My sister needs help.”

“You got let go, or you retired? It was never clear in the papers.”

“Both,” Jeb said. “I’m hoping for another shot.”

“I can tell. That was some display out there. What did Coach Wilson say?”

“Nothing. He always told us to play hard.”

“Well, you almost killed a couple fat old boys who probably didn’t hold a bat in about 25 years.”

Jeb stood up, looking for a garbage can. “It’s been good catching up,” he said.

“Yeah, and that shot you’re looking for? You’re done, son. You got nothing left.”

Jeb never liked Mr. Strohm. He’d played wide receiver his senior year and the idiot ran the ball every play the whole season. What a waste.

The game was still going on and there were intermittent bursts of applause and laughter from the stands. Jeb felt like an oddball, not sure why he came, except he wanted to get on the mound. He said hello to a few people, got tapped on the shoulder for some autographs and selfies, trying to smile as much as possible but finding the whole thing depressing. He wasn’t close to his dad, but the old geezer might hang on for a while. Jeb was staying with his sister Nell, and that wasn’t going to hold up for long.

The town felt so beaten down. Were there really this many churches growing up, all painted white? His one

dependable hangout, Bea's Cafe, was a chain vision store now. His couple of true friends from back then were long gone and he guessed never showed up for any of these things either, but he was held to a higher standard obviously.

The game ended and everyone filtered into the barbeque area and there was another tap on the shoulder, and it was Doreen, his high school sophomore-year girlfriend. Her husband and little kids were trailing behind her.

Jeb gave her a hug and said, "Last time I saw you . . . I don't even remember. When was it?"

"Chico?" Doreen said. "Bidwell Park? Don't you remember, they had a battle of the bands. I was with Susie."

"That's right," Jeb said. "That was what, maybe 7 or 8 years ago?"

"Try 11 or 12."

"Well how is Susie?" Jeb had liked her more than Doreen, but she always had a boyfriend.

“She’s good. She’s around . . . Listen, I’d like to introduce you to my husband Rich. And the loves of my life, Rebecca and Taylor.”

Jeb bent down to say hi to the girls and Rich said, “I gotta tell you, this is really exciting.”

“Yeah, well,” Jeb said.

“So where is home these days?” Doreen said.

“It’s been Scottsdale for a while. But I got some family stuff here now, so I’m trying to get re-adjusted.”

“That’s interesting . . . In that case, why don’t you come over for dinner tomorrow night?” Doreen looked at Rich who was smiling and nodding like a bobble head doll.

Jeb was thinking what could he say to get out of it. Doreen said, “I’ll invite Susie.”

“Oh . . . She married?”

“She was,” Doreen said. “Around 6?”

She gave him the address. “Laurel,” Jeb said. “Same house?”

“Down the block from it,” Doreen said.

They said goodbye and Jeb figured that's the way it worked if you were unlucky enough to be stuck in this dive town, you moved in next to your parents too.

It was too unpleasant in the house so he told his sister he was taking Dad for a drive.

She was lying on the couch watching a re-run of *The Bachelorette*. "I've tried that," she said. "He doesn't like going out anymore, unless it's to play golf."

"The hell you talking about? He can't hardly walk."

"You know what I mean."

Jeb had no idea but said, "C'mon Dad, let's go play golf," and the old man pushed his way off the chair and determinedly headed toward the car, his walker clanging off the screen door as he went through.

Jeb was currently driving a Chevy Camaro, slightly customized. He'd had a Mercedes SL-65, matte black, drove great, typical ballplayer's car, but it kept getting vandalized, so he said forget it.

They were downtown, Jeb going slow on the wide boulevard, looking around. "They cruise anymore in town, Dad? The kids?"

“You bet, we cruised,” his dad said. “Hot rods.”

“Yeah, tell me about that again . . . That was in Merced, right? In the ‘50’s.”

His dad didn’t answer. It was Saturday night. There wasn’t much doing. Jeb hung a left on Seventh Street and drove out to the dam. Once after a game a bunch of them went skinny dipping in the reservoir. At some point they realized a kid was missing, a guy named Homer Whalen. Little guy, played second. Everyone panicked and they started screaming his name and Search and Rescue showed up and then someone remembered he said he wasn’t coming.

Jeb said, “Dad, I’m thinking of trying it in Japan. They like American ballplayers. Even ones who’re a little over the hill . . . Were you and mom ever over there?”

“Japs,” his dad said.

They put Jeb at the head of the table. Rich was to his left and Susie next to Doreen. Rich said, “Man. So that must been something, facing Buster Posey.”

The questions weren’t going to stop, so Jeb figured might as well get into it. “His rookie season,” he said, “I

was with the Pirates then. I believe I came in with first and second, two down, and I got him on a slow roller to the right side.” What really happened was he left a breaking ball up and Posey doubled off the wall, but what was the difference?

“Wow!” Rich said.

Susie said, “What were the best cities?”

“In terms of what?” Jeb said.

“I don’t know, sights? Restaurants, culture.”

“They were all the same, honestly. You didn’t see much.”

“Really?” Rich said. “What about when you had a night game, you didn’t do anything during the day?”

“Nope. You mostly played cards . . . Except Boston, I liked the Revolutionary stuff. One thing you’d be surprised at -- they’re more rednecky in Boston than they are right here.”

“Gee, thanks,” Doreen said.

“Did you know Bryce Harper? And guys like Kershaw and Bumgarner?” Rich said.

“Yeah, I know Harper and Clayton. Not the other guy.”

“Amazing,” Rich said. “What are they like?”

“Background-wise, something like me, meaning not all that sophisticated. Except with more talent.”

Susie said, “Were there groupies, like you hear about?”

“I guess,” Jeb said.

“Let’s have dessert,” Doreen said.

They were finishing their ice cream and Rich and Doreen were getting ready to read bedtime stories to the girls. Jeb asked Susie if she wanted to take a walk.

“I forgot how cold it gets here at night,” he said, as they turned the corner on C Street.

“Give it another two months,” Susie said. “Us and Redding, when you check your high temperatures, we’re usually it for the state.”

“What about Death Valley?”

“It’s good to see you,” Susie said.

She had a two-bedroom house in what they called the tree section, three or four wide blocks that had old elms and oaks and poplars lining the sidewalks. “I’ll make some coffee,” she said.

“Don’t you have to work tomorrow?”

“It’s all good. It’s not every day I get to meet a celebrity.”

“Okay, knock it off.”

They watched the news and then Jimmy Fallon, and Susie said, “Let’s go back.”

Later, the window open a crack and the hum of the highway in the distance, she said, “Are you planning on sticking around? . . . Or do you know?”

“I got an offer to play in Japan. They don’t mind you over there when you’re on the way out.”

“Don’t say that, you’re not on the way out.”

“I can fool myself, but my arm’s shot. I got nothing left.”

“Where’d you go first anyway? Back then?”

“You mean when I got drafted? Rookie ball. Kingsport, Tennessee.”

“What was it like?”

“A bunch of 18-year-old idiots, is what it was. I was homesick bad, which is hard to believe.”

“That’s when I got pregnant,” Susie said. “That summer.”

“Jesus . . . With who?”

“Kit Bauerman.”

“That guy? Holy smokes . . . What happened?”

“I gave him up for adoption. He’ll be 16 soon.”

Jeb started to say something and then didn’t.

In the morning Susie made French toast and bacon, and Jeb asked if she could call in sick. Susie said she was a very reliable employee, but she supposed she could make an exception.

After breakfast they took a drive. Past the old fairgrounds there was a dirt pull-out alongside a prune orchard.

Susie said, “The blossoms are late this year.”

Jeb said, “My dad’s mixed up. One minute you think he’s with you, and then next thing he’s in the twilight zone.”

“He loves you though,” she said.

“He’s just never shown it his whole life, you mean? That kind of love?”

“Don’t over-think it, it’s there.”

“Once a day, he comes to life. When I tell him we’re playing golf.”

“He still plays?”

“I lie about it. That’s what works, which says it all . . . How pathetic is that?”

“Take care of him,” Susie said.