

# MLB

## 4800 words

Gilly finished his corn flakes, going with non-fat milk today, not sure anymore, the mixed signals they gave you about saturated fats. Sometimes he allowed himself straight half-and-half, and dang, the end product was a whole lot more satisfying.

“I mean this is *cows*,” he said to his wife Margaret. “You can even observe some on the way to the ballpark, that clearing where the 101 curves before Terra Linda comes up on you? None of *them* collapsing from heart attacks.”

“A natural source, you’re saying, dear,” Margaret said. She was finishing her green tea and was decked out in yoga gear, about to leave for some kind of workout, not looking bad for mid 50’s and being mostly vegan since the menopause kicked in.

“You bet,” Gilly said. “Cows’s been around a lot longer than these experts who complicate things. Seems to me if something *tastes* good . . . but whatever.”

“You’re in a bad mood because of the situation,” Margaret said.

“Just one more thing on that,” he said. “Guy I grew up with down the block, his old man was a doc. This kid, their rules was no eggs. From birth. Cholesterol. Right on down to margarine instead of butter.”

“Partially hydrogenated,” Margaret said, “now that *will* kill you.”

“Right. So naturally when this guy Mel came over *our* house he’d go wild, whatever was in the cabinets, plus my mom’s cooking.”

“You’ve related this before. Though it changes slightly every time, which I suppose is normal.”

Gilly said, “In fact I wonder sometimes what *happened* to that kid . . . I heard a guy on the radio once, he was talking about the Raiders’ quarterback? This would have been--I’m putting it early 90’s, when they were still down in L.A.”

“That one I’ve heard as well,” Margaret said. “He was denied Big Macs growing up, you said. That it affected his career.”

“Well *sure*. Big Macs, Oreos, Ding Dongs--the works. Birthday parties--imagine this one--your dad makes you pack your special cake, so you don't ingest the *good* stuff . . . Anyhoo, the point this radio host was making, you deny a kid your Big Macs and such, you're looking at a crime committed before the age of 19.”

“Did the Raiders' quarterback commit a crime then?”

“Not sure. I know he got run out of the league pretty quick. Little fuzzy on the details but I'm thinking addiction played a part.”

“So reach *out* to your Mel,” she said. “Catch up.”

“Jeez, you think? After . . . what do we have, like 40 some odd years?”

“Find him on the internet. It's harmless enough . . . Listen, I have to go.” She gave him a peck on the forehead and was out the back door, Gilly admitting she did move pretty light on her feet still--as opposed to him, who limped around on his old catcher's knees and typically kept the Advil in striking distance.

Margaret was right of course, he *was* in a foul mood because of the situation. They had a night game tonight

but still, you better start getting a move on, and Gilly grunted getting up, a couple pops in the joints here and there, and showered and took off. It was what it was.

\*\*\*

Bryce Patters back in the day would have been known as a 'bonus baby', a piece of trivia that Gilly'd tossed around a few times with his best friend on the Giants, 'Easy' Art Sprock.

Gilly was the assistant bullpen coach and Sprock was the assistant strength and conditioning coach. Sprock had never made it to the Show, had been a career minor-leaguer, and typically a legit 9-year MLB veteran like Gilly would have no use for a guy like that--but they were the only coaches pushing 60 and they connected. Gilly had to give 'Easy' Art credit for reinventing himself and figuring out the strength and conditioning nonsense that was so fashionable in today's game. Or at least being able to fake it well enough to get a job.

And in Gilly's case this was the thing. If he could have hung in there one more year--giving him 10--he would have qualified for the *real* pension, which back

then was in the neighborhood of a hundred fifty k . . . as it was Detroit cut him that final spring training and the Angels were in play for a while but by April with the teams heading north he hadn't latched on to one.

Gilly'd been a career back-up player, a light hitter but solid behind the plate, and teams needed those guys, but he couldn't fool himself, the run was over.

So his annual pension was 78, and coupled with some shaky investments--not to blame Margaret, but her brother steered him to a guy--Gilly needed an early payout, he couldn't wait until age 62--leaving the grand total 56 thousand and change.

Which still could have worked if they'd tightened up the bootstraps and so forth--but bottom line, Gilly wanted to be back in the mix, he had nothing else. Sure he'd fooled around restoring VW Beetles and old woodworking machines that he picked up at auctions--but that only got you so far, and after five years largely sitting around, except for helping out with a little high school coaching he got railroaded into by the gal at the Kiwanis club--it was pretty clear nothing beat the smell of fresh cut grass in a real ballpark.

So coming up on two decades now he'd been bouncing around. The Cardinals gave him his first break, which is where he spent most of his playing career, and they were known for taking care of their guys. The problem there was he was the catchers' coach, and catching had changed a whole lot. The technique was different, everything one-handed, the guys slimmer and more flexible, more premium on catchers being able to handle the bat. Even the arm wasn't as important, with the sport evolving into a home run derby and guys stealing less bases. In the old days it went without saying you had to have a cannon, which Gilly prided *himself* on, though admittedly the accuracy could be dicey at times.

So the Cardinals didn't work out, partly because Gilly didn't have much to offer and partly because his season-end evaluation, when the GM called him in, labeled him stubborn and not taking direction well.

After that first season he went from Houston to Cleveland to San Diego to the Rockies, the Mariners and finally landed in 2017 with the Giants. Gilly had Margaret stay put all those years in their original home

in Jupiter, Florida, figuring why make her follow him around the country like a jack-in-the-box when the future is continually up in the air--but when the Giants signed him that felt solid, Gilly had heard good things about the organization--and they picked up and moved to Santa Rosa.

Which is where he was driving to Oracle Park in San Francisco from this afternoon.

The situation Margaret referred to that was eating at Gilly was him being assigned extra duty by someone in the front office--and the duty was to babysit Bryce Patters.

Patters had been missing curfews and night-clubbing it the way rookies can, but there were two incidents that got the attention of management--and worse, were in the news.

One, he got into an altercation with a bouncer on the sidewalk outside a bar in Anaheim. It got cleaned up, the way they work that stuff, and there were no hard feelings from the bouncer . . . which Gilly figured without being a genius involved a sweet payday.

The other more recent, the team back in San Francisco for the current 8-game homestand, the kid being videoed at someone's apartment in China Basin, going to work on not one but two gals simultaneously, who were subsequently identified as high-end madams--and you had the stereotypical backstory, Patters' high-school sweetheart wife pregnant with twins back home in Arlington, Texas.

Someone may have tried to sell the video to one of the internet outfits, Gilly wasn't sure. Either way, once again you figured the powers-that-be stepped in and righted the ship.

The upshot being they assigned one of the batting coaches to watchdog the kid, but that guy fell asleep someplace or otherwise screwed it up, and next thing they hand the job to Gilly, and tonight was going to be his debut.

They told Gilly the gig might only last a night or two--they'd be re-evaluating--so no need to get worked up or draw any wild conclusions, and of course they'd be compensating him for his time.

“You look the part,” ‘Easy’ Art Sprock was saying, getting a kick out of the whole thing. They were in the coaches locker room under the stadium, down the hall from the real one, doing the normal playing cards and unwinding routine before suiting up for warm-ups, the Mets in town and the first pitch 4 hours away.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Gilly said.

“Well you have an authoritative manner, would be the first thing. I didn’t *know* you so well, you could pass for my junior high PE teacher. Mr. Gullickson. Now *that* guy, even now, I wouldn’t mess with.” Sprock concluding it with a big genuine grin.

“Shut up,” Gilly said.

“No I can *see* some of that,” Moose Diggings weighed in. He was the first base coach, meaning when a guy got on--or worse, when the guy doubled--Moose would have to run onto the field and collect the guy’s extra batting equipment that he no longer required for running the bases . . . which included gloves, protective pads and sometimes braces. Moose would trot the equipment back into foul territory and hand it to the

batboy. Gilly couldn't think of a more demeaning job, honestly.

“You blurted one little thing out and stopped,” Gilly said.

“What he's saying,” Sprock said, “or *forget* that--but what the *rub* is, the brass trusts you to mentor that boy, set a good example.” Sprock laughed again, putting his hand up, like sorry, I can't help it.

Gilly wanted to smack someone around, or at least take it out on *something*, but those days were long gone. Once, when he was still active with the Cardinals, he punched the dugout wall after a tag play at the plate where the umpire blew the call, and he dislocated a knuckle and missed a bunch of time, and he knew he was lucky nothing worse happened.

Patters was a big, strapping rookie power-pitcher who they touted as the next coming of Roger Clemens, only the left-handed version, which was even better. And yeah, back in the day he would have fit the ‘bonus baby’ tag. Those guys were amateurs who signed for so much money that the team was required to keep them

on the major league roster the whole first season, even if they turned out worse than expected, or not ready.

Patters had signed with the Giants after his junior year at Texas A & M, where he'd been in two college world series finals, set all kinds of statistical records--though Gilly was dubious of that stuff because they kept inventing more new categories for these guys--and was rated the number two collegiate pitching prospect in the nation.

Right now in August, a month and a half left, the Giants 18 games out and going nowhere, the big lefty was 4-10 with an 8.21 ERA, and had given up 37 home runs, an ugly number no matter how you spun it.

The concerned word that you heard whispered around the clubhouse and the bullpen was his ball didn't move enough.

Gilly knew as well as anyone that non-movement on your pitches--even if you could throw the baseball through a wall--was a death blow in today's game, where everyone had these identical flat mechanical swings that didn't have a lot of flare to them but could catch up with the straight fastball.

So at this point Gilly figured the Giants were nervous for a couple reasons, not the least of which was the 4-year contract clocking in at just under 16 mil for this guy, who was turning into a barrel of laughs off the field as well.

The coaches wrapped up the card game and Gilly eased into the hot tub, not looking forward to this.

\*\*\*

That night's game itself wasn't bad. The Giants erupted for 6 runs in the 8th, came back to win it, a new shortstop they moved up from the minors, Dominican kid, collecting a couple triples, which brought the crowd to life a bit, the dumb giveaway gimmick--Digital Timer Night--not cutting it earlier.

Patters didn't play in the game, his next start would be Sunday, and from the bullpen Gilly could see him horsing around in the dugout with the younger guys he hung with, none of them worried about the score or whether the Giants won or lost, and you couldn't blame them.

You weren't supposed to use your cell phone on the field but in the ninth inning Gilly called Margaret and

told her don't wait up, and she understood and said there'd be pot roast in the fridge if he was hungry when he got in.

She was a good woman, he'd lucked out there--but separately, this was a bunch of crap.

Gilly couldn't help thinking about a story he heard when he flew back to Wisconsin to see his old man at the end, and his connecting flight got messed up by a blizzard and he was stuck in an airport bar for 6 hours, and this rabid Michigan State football fan tells him a star running back--guy may have even been a finalist for the Heisman Trophy--was escorted to class by an assistant coach every day so he could stay eligible.

Meaning . . . all the kid had to do was show up at his classes--not even do the *work*, the athletic department had railroaded that part--and the professors would give him B's and C's, which would keep him academically eligible to play football, and everyone lives happily ever after.

And yet the stud player can't even manage *that*--so the flunky coach has to ring his bell every morning and wake him up--and probably even help him get dressed

and who knows, maybe even help him wipe his ass--and then not only walk the kid to class but sit there to make sure he doesn't leave.

\*\*\*

“So where to, Pops?” Patters said. “What do we got going on?”

Gilly was in the passenger seat, the kid chewing gum, gunning it out of the player's lot at Oracle Park, a 2020 Mercedes GLS in blue metallic, Gilly having left his 2009 F-150 in the lot for the time being.

“Well, I guess first of all,” Gilly said, “are you hungry. I mean you didn't do anything tonight did you, that would work up an appetite?”

This went back a hundred years, everyday players ribbing pitchers, who only got out there every 4th or 5th day. The kid was oblivious though and said, “Dog. Is the Pope Catholic.” Waiting at a light now, heading north on 3rd Street.

Gilly had to admit, he was hungry too. He figured the kid knew a whole lot of places in the city that were open late, and he could only think of one, so he said, “Let's try Joe's. The Westlake one. You can park.”

This was true, and the unfortunate fact he and Margaret discovered after moving out here was parking was joke-impossible in San Francisco, and it made you appreciate your Tampas and Phoenixes and a dozen other cities.

But Westlake Joe's was on the fringes, in Daly City, and the parking was still civilized and they set up at a window booth, and Gilly wondered how long do you drag this out . . . and worse, what was next?

"So then," Patters said, looking around, the chefs visible behind the counter, big white hats, pans flaming up, a reasonably lively scene for a Thursday night in a non-cutting edge joint.

"Yeah?" Gilly said.

"What's like, the *plan* here?"

"You tell *me*. I'm happy to escort you home . . . That is, if I could trust you. Which I'm told is a no-go."

"Okay then Pop--you have my *word, my right hand* . . . What's been going *on--that's--whaddayamacal* . . ."

"Water under the bridge?"

"Bingo," the kid said.

Gilly said, “I was considering that tonight. Freezing my hiney out there in the bullpen. Something me and Coach Sprock have discussed too. We was youths once ourselves.”

“Well *heck* then. That’s *telling* me, y’all can *relate*.”

“We can.”

“So let me *out* of this horseshit . . .”

“You cut me off there son. The post-script was, to a *degree*.”

The kid started working his phone. “Tell you what, Popsie, I’ll make you a deal. Seeing as how I need to be somewhere at 12:30. How’s about 500 to bring it good.” He pulled out his wallet.

“That’d be a negative unfortunately,” Gilly said.

“Worse than bribery though, don’t call me that anymore. *Pop*. Or a variation.”

“Jeez Louise, man. You’re friggin crazy.”

“I’m not joking,” Gilly said.

“Is that right,” Patters said, his lower lip curling into the start of a nasty grin. “What do you *need* to be called then? . . . Chief?”

“Coach works. So does Gilliam.”

The kid was shaking his head, amused. “And if I don’t?”

“I’ll spit in your soup,” Gilly said, surprising himself, but at the same time pretty sure he could do it, watching the idiot dip a hunk of bread into his minestrone.

The kid took a minute, narrowed his eyes, and Gilly met him back and nodded . . . and the kid let it go and went back to eating, the moment had passed, and the kid didn’t call him Pops the rest of the meal but he didn’t call him anything else either.

“What now?” Patters said. They were back in the car, headed up John Daly Boulevard toward 280, and Gilly did feel a little more agreeable with a full meal under his belt--he never ate big after night games, despite Margaret fixing him up with pot roasts and so forth, but now he was thinking maybe he should.

“What did you think of that restaurant?” he said.

“Fine. Why?”

“You put a little *mileage* on, you’ll see there ain’t that many those places left. Not just out here, but nationwide.”

Patters cranked up the radio and said, “I’ll take your word for it there, Boss.”

What Gilly was getting at, the old guard places like Joe’s--simple hearty portions, none of the fusion nonsense, no experiments, the guy sitting at the counter on a given night liable to have been coming in every week for 30 years--when those joints went, that would be it. Obviously it was a reach to expect the kid to absorb that, or care, but he tried.

Gilly said, “Where’s your apartment at? Or condo, or whatever you got.”

“North Beach,” Patters said.

“Montgomery Street?” The kid nodded and that figured, the Giants had a connection over there, a couple complexes at the foot of Telegraph Hill. They encouraged rookies and new guys in general to start off there. Less complications, was the logic.

“In that case,” Gilly said, wondering was this really how it was going to work? “We go back there, we catch some Jimmy Kimmel or whoever’s available--and I put your butt to bed. So to speak.”

“You’re a trip, dude,” the kid said, sticking a lollipop in his mouth as he floored it up 19th Avenue, not missing a stoplight until Geary, the other side of the park.

The building was modern and you could tell going up the elevator there were going to be impressive views of the city and probably you’d see Alcatraz flashing its light in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

They got to the apartment door and Patters knocked.

“Huh?” Gilly said.

“Just to be safe,” the kid winking at him.

You could hear some scrambling around and a guy opened the door, not a ballplayer type guy, that was for sure, and Patters gave him a fist bump and they went in. There was a young gal on the couch wearing shorts and a tank top and she looked reasonably out of it.

Gilly wondered about the closed bedroom door and what if anything might be going on in there too.

“Maurice was looking for you,” the non-ballplayer said.

“So I heard,” Patters said, sitting down next to the gal. “Me and my dad here, we had some previous business got in the way.”

Gilly took the liberty of knocking on the bedroom door, and yeah, there were people in there.

“Hey--” the non-player guy said.

“It’s okay,” Patters said. And to Gilly, “Old man, can we fix you a drink?”

“Maurice was looking for you, *how?*” Gilly said.

“It’s cool,” Patters said. “Don’t be stressing out, getting your tit in a wringer or nothing.” Patters and the other guy laughed, and even the couch woman came to life slightly.

Gilly took a look at the view, and sure enough you could see downtown, across town and more. It was a clear night, bright moon, and to the west he wondered was that Ocean Beach where the streetlights seemed to stop? The first time he and Margaret went out there the fire department was in the middle of rescuing a kite-surfer who got himself in trouble.

Gilly made a decision--this was insane--and if management had a problem, well, too bad.

He said to Patters, “Speak to you for a second?”

“Sure dog,” the kid said, popping up off the couch, and they went out in the hall.

“Okay now the thing of it is,” Gilly said, “this isn’t gonna work . . . What do *you* think of that?”

“Well sure, *fine* . . . What are you telling me?”

“I’m not sure *what* I’m tellin’ ya . . . I’m a magician here?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it ain’t your fault. Necessarily.”

“Man . . . appreciate that. I really do.”

“*No* you don’t . . . But fact is, you got your hands full. There’s enough pressures on dipshits like you, *without* being a star.”

The kid didn’t say anything.

“Not that you’re throwing like one,” Gilly said, “but the spotlight can be tricky. Which I get.”

“Thank you.”

“You know something? You’re getting on my nerves with the *thanking* me . . . Bottom line, taking the whole shooting match into account, I’m going to leave you on

the honor system tonight . . . Just need a little favor from you first, and we'll call it even."

"Sure, dude, *anything*," the kid said.

Gilly had thought of something, a loveseat that he and Margaret had in storage. When they moved to the Bay Area they started off in Burlingame, on the Peninsula. Plenty of players lived down that way because it was convenient, not just to the ballpark but the airport. He and Margaret still had a self-storage dealie down there, and she hadn't mentioned it lately but she'd be happy if he finally lugged the thing home to replace the recliner in the family room that had seen better days.

Gilly said, "What we'll do, switch vehicles, you lend me a little muscle. Whole thing, we're talking 45 minutes."

Patters stuck his head back into the apartment and mumbled something and soon enough they were headed to Oracle, traffic light on the Embarcadero. Gilly panicked for a second, that Jeez, can we still get *in* there, since he'd never tried it this late--and that would be the unthinkable, having to somehow spend the night

in the city at this point--but there was an all-night guy, and the guy smiled and waved them through.

Gilly wondered, if this bozo drops me at my truck now, and says he'll follow me to the storage place--what then, if he doesn't?

Patters was shutting off the engine and getting out, expecting to ride with him, no big deal. Gilly took a moment and said, "Okay now, I'm gonna *trust* your ass." Giving him a look.

The kid said fine with him, and Gilly headed toward 101 and the kid was in the rear view mirror right on his tail. The fact was it was nice to be out of the kid's presence, plus this way you wouldn't have to swing back to the ballpark yet *again* to mercifully conclude this lousy night.

The storage place was low-rise and spread out, kind of surprising there'd be that much available land down here, on the fringes of the Silicon Valley. Whatever.

There was a parking area outside a main gate and the kid dutifully pulled in next to him and got out and said, "24 hours?"

This was something else Gilly stupidly hadn't thought of. There were no signs of any humans--no other cars, no lights on, no caretaker's unit above the office, zippo. Worse, was the welcome sign that told you they were open 6am to 10pm every day.

"Yeah maybe not," he said, and he punched in his 4-digit code anyway, and son of a gun there was a low grinding sound and the gate started to open. They both jumped in the pickup and Gilly found his unit, second aisle from the end, halfway back.

"This is what *I* should have done," Patters said when Gilly opened it up.

"What for? This is almost all junk. Like in your tract neighborhoods, everyone's garage door open, the crap piled so high no car has a chance. You know what I'm talking about? . . . The renters don't realize it, but this place blew up tomorrow, none of 'em would lose 5 seconds of sleep."

"Whatever you say Pops," the kid said. "Let's get the show on the road here, with all due respect." Checking his phone.

They got the love seat loaded and for good measure Gilly grabbed some other items he figured Margaret might be interested in, and stuffed it all into the passenger's side of cab.

“You don't mind walking, right?” Gilly said. “Back to your car?”

Patters had the phone to his ear, was talking to someone, and narrowed his eyes and waved at Gilly to be quiet. When the conversation ended Gilly said, “Like I said, Bud. The *honor* system . . . Are we still good?”

Patters didn't say anything and was dialing another number.

Gilly cleared his throat and said, “*Give* me that thing for a minute.”

The kid looked up and Gilly said, “Or our arrangement tonight is nullified.”

You could see Patters working it around. Then the fake ear-to-ear grin as he handed the phone over. “If you say so, Pop. What--you need to check the weather, make sure it don't rain on your couch on the way home?”

“That's a stupid joke. It never rains here in August. What I need, there's a box of memorabilia in the corner

somewhere, under a bunch of *other* boxes. It should be marked. While we're here I want to take it. Use two hands and don't break anything getting to it."

"Will do, Chief," the kid said, stepping over stuff as he worked his way back there. "A wild guess, this box contains some of your *own* career highlights . . . if you had any of those?" The kid laughed. "Seriously, how'd that go for you, whenever it was you tried to play?"

"It had its moments," Gilly said, and he stepped back outside the unit and pulled the overhead metal security door down and clicked the padlock closed.

\*\*\*

Crossing the bridge Gilly realized, Jeez, unfortunately he was hungry again, and the only option he could think of at this hour was the In-n-Out on the service road, the Blithedale exit in Mill Valley.

The inside part had closed at 2 but the drive-through was still open, and that worked out fine and Gilly sat in the parking lot and ate.

He remembered someone telling him the In-n-Out in El Segundo, you could sit outside and watch the jumbo jets on their final approach to LAX, real nice and

low, right there, and he thought that would be fun to do with Margaret sometime, during the off-season.

**Copyright © 2020 Ted Gross**

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, organizations, events or locales, or to any other works of fiction, is entirely coincidental.