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This Game Do That to You

THE BASEBALL SHINE under the lights, and this run through your head as the pitch on its way: full count but you don't want no walk. A walk don't get you out of A ball. You swing, but the pitch disappear. Just gone. The catcher block it in the dirt, leap to his feet, tag you out. Game over. This the only night with a crowd—dollar-beer night—and they howling at you walking off the field. The fuck they at the rest of the week?

Already the guys got the music playing in the clubhouse. Wish for something good just one time. Maybe a dude from your own Chicago hood, like Common. He got something to say at least. Swear to God, Single-A make it hard to remember you even like baseball at all. Had fifty stolen out your locker the first week of summer. You can't find out who took it. The Latinos don't know English. The white dudes think you crazy. Like one day Ronnie look over from his locker and point at the five-point star inked on your forearm and ask what it is, so you tell him it's Vice Lords. And he ask what that is, "Like a gang or something?" How to tell him Greg made you get the tattoo when you was thirteen just so you could walk home from school? Greg is Vice Lords. Not you. But your brother always looking out. How to tell Ronnie that? You can't.

Tonight you get on the bus to drive all the way to Grand Rapids for a day game tomorrow, so you sit and untie your spikes and start packing. Ronnie lean over from his locker and smile. He think he all smart because he played in college and he been here a few years since. "Jones," he say, "you ever seen a slider like that before?"

"Fuck no," you say.

"Don't throw no bitch sliders like that in high school, do they?"

"Already said no."

"Dude's gonna be a big-leaguer before long. Nasty shit."

Maybe so. But you know all that mean—better be able to hit that shit if you want to be a big-leaguer. You eighteen already, and no dummy.

The clubhouse empty out and you sit thinking. Seem like you can't get a goddamn

hit anymore. Leroy the clubbie drag his vacuum into the room. Leroy got a gray beard and red face. Always a chew in his cheek.

“Not your fault tonight, big fella,” Leroy say. “Blame the fucking scout that signed you.” Then he start up his vacuum.

The bus rumble out in the lot. Skip sit up front reading over the box score. Don’t need to look to know it say Jones, o for 4. Skip got to be thinking about the new center fielder. The club signed him now the college season ended. Short white dude, but the motherfucker can run. You better hit or they’ll call up his ass before they do you.

Only seat left on the bus is near the back, next to Mordecai. Been everywhere, they say. Played for everybody. Now all the way back down in Single-fucking-A and he don’t hang up his spikes. Mordecai look like an old teacher or something, wearing his glasses and reading a book.

He nod at you. “Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story. I’m shot in the breast and I know I must die.”

You heard crazy shit like that before out his mouth. “Whatever you say, teacher man.”

He crack a smile at that one. “Just something I was reading.” He wave the book and the cover say something about a drum.

Close your eyes after a while. Greg’s waiting here like he do sometimes, pulling you out on the porch at the start of summer, before you leave home to join the club. He point at the ink on your arm and then he lift up his shirt, point at his own five-point star. “Don’t fuck this up,” he say. “Remember what’s back here for you. What ain’t. Don’t fuck this up. You remember.”

Mordecai wake you, tapping your leg. Ask him, “We there?”

He nod at the window. “I didn’t want you to miss this.”

The black trees going by, the sky going orange. “Miss what?”

“Have you ever seen the sun come up before?”

“You woke me up for this?”

Mordecai just smile.

Hot as hell today. Mosquitoes. Nobody going to be in the crowd for a midweek day game either. Check the lineup after batting practice. Sure enough, Skip got the other center fielder, Morgan, in there. Swallow down what you feel. Know you’ll get another chance.

You jog to the outfield to do some running, and all the pitchers out there cluster around something on the warning track. You go check it out. Ronnie stand in the middle of them, using a fungo bat to draw in the gravel. He trace a big circle, four feet around it, a tail, and a head with a smiley face. All the pitchers laugh.

“Fuck’s that?” you say.

Ronnie shrug. “Rain turtle.”

“Huh?”

He spread his arms and look up. “Rain turtle makes it rain.”

You shake your head, smile. A rainout might be nice but the sky blue as ever.

“You got a lot to learn, Jones,” Ronnie say, laughing.

Do your sprints in the grass and get your legs warm. When you finish, all the pitchers gone back to the dugout or into the bullpen, but Mordecai come from somewhere and stand looking at the rain turtle like it something to think about. Then he use his spikes to sweep through the gravel and erase it. He do it until the whole rain turtle gone. Now he look at the sky like he nervous. Still no clouds. Yell at him, “What you doing, teacher man?” But Mordecai just go to the bullpen. He don’t even turn around.

Into the seventh inning, still no score. Zero, zero. Skip yell for you from the end of the dugout. He cough out a dark clump of sunflower seed and point at Morgan in the on-deck circle. “Get your bat,” Skip say. “They bring in a lefty, you’re gonna hit.”

You wait with your stick and helmet and watch their pitcher. Breathing hard, wiping his forehead between pitches. He fall behind three and one but get a pop-up on the next pitch. Two out. All the same their manager come out to the mound and bring in the lefty. Skip call Morgan back, and you stroll to the on-deck circle. The umpire shout when the lefty make his last warm-up.

Kick at the chalk and dig in. Remember. Don’t fuck this up.

The lefty surprise you by coming inside with the first pitch. Turn away and the ball hit you in the back. Don’t hurt bad—sting a bit—but the catcher jump up like you about to charge the mound. Just jog to first.

“That a kid,” the base coach say, coming over close to talk quiet. “Two out. Get in scoring position.”

Take your lead. Expect the throw over. Dive back to the base and the first baseman slap you hard as he can on the helmet with the tag. Get up, don’t worry over no bush-league motherfucker like him. Take your lead again and break soon as the pitcher lift his foot. Your spikes pounding in the clay—you can always do this.

Glance, see the catcher climbing out his stance. Slide hard feetfirst, the clay burn through your pants, and you pop up and stand as the throw get here.

On the next pitch, your hitter poke one through the right side of the infield. This is automatic. Got to score. Going around third, your favorite feeling in the world. Like running downhill. Like you never run this fast ever. Like you and Greg is kids again and you running just because. A Stony Island sidewalk and the Chicago sun. Home plate come into view and you don't think about pro ball or getting called up or nothing.

You know the right fielder going to come up throwing by the way the catcher block the plate. He raise his glove and tense and you feel the throw out there on its way. Dive around the catcher and slap home plate just before he tag you on the feet. No crowd to boo. No sound but your breath. Get up and stand in the clay under the sun, safe at home.

When you jog to center for the bottom half of the inning, Mordecai come out the bullpen and wink as he pass. Scoreboard say 1-0. Ain't going to last, you think. Mordecai got two pitches. Slow and slower.

He go full count on the lead-off man and the dude foul off pitch after pitch. When Mordecai let go the ball you lean to right field, anticipate. But the bottom just fall out the pitch like Mordecai yank on a string tied to the baseball, and the batter whiff, strike out. Mordecai do the next hitter the same way and the third batter roll over the first pitch he see and dribble it in front of the plate. Mordecai field it himself and throw him out. Just like that. End of the seventh and you still up.

Mordecai sit at the end of the bench in the dugout. Already sweating, a towel around his shoulders. Got his elbows on his knees and he stare out at the grass. He just smile, maybe happy there wasn't no rainout.

Team go down one-two-three in the top of the eighth. Back out to center.

Their lead-off man launch Mordecai's first pitch about a thousand miles. It just hang in the air forever till you can't see it no more. You don't even move and the game all tied up. The next batter yank a pitch down the right-field line for a triple. Mordecai fall behind the third hitter three and one. Lean with the next pitch and now break for the gap in right center almost before you hear the crack of the bat. Glance once at the ball—so high up there—to figure where it might land, put your head down, run. The wind whistle. You push, running and running and feeling the ball up there. You and it. Don't fuck this up, Greg say. Don't fuck this up. Stop on the warning track and turn and block the sun with your glove and the baseball almost right on top of you and you catch it. Like that.

Take the baseball from your glove and raise your arm. The runner tagged and just walk home. The go-ahead run. Too far away to do anything about it. Everything so far. You feel like you do in the clubhouse after games. All by yourself.

The next hitter crush the first pitch he see from Mordecai. Gone. Make you hold your breath till it land. Mordecai just stand on the mound, hands on his hips, hanging his head. Simple, man. This game do that to you.

The dugout keep silent in the top half of the ninth. Go down one-two-three again. No fight. Game over.

The dugout about empty but Mordecai still sitting at the end of the bench, elbows on his knees, staring at the cement under his spikes.

Got the music playing again. Even on the road they do. But Skip stick his head in and yell to turn that shit down. Somebody does, and now when it go quiet Skip call Mordecai over to the office. You don't watch Mordecai cross the floor. Least you try. Maybe everyone try. Get up and go to the shower and take your time. The water beating on you. You want to tell Mordecai something. Maybe say thanks for the sunrise. Shake your head. Stupid.

When you come out the shower a book waits for you on your seat. Look around the room. Mordecai already gone. Ronnie just shrug, sitting at his locker. He laugh a bit and say, "At least the old dude don't have to come back tomorrow for another day game."

Don't answer. Just sit down. You wonder if Ronnie ever liked this game. Maybe when he was a boy he did. Somebody creep over to the music now and turn it back up. Same shit. Maybe Ronnie just been here too long. Decide, right now, you don't ever want to draw no rain turtles. Flip through the pages of Mordecai's book. Put it to your ear and listen to them whirl. Start to finish. Like that. Put it in your bag. You picture how Mordecai erased the rain turtle earlier and you know he had something different to say from everybody else. But what of that? The game got no room for him. What can he do now? You don't know. Maybe go be a teacher. Coach high school someplace.

You take up your spikes. Black leather with the metal cleats. See the orange clay in the creases. Like they all just one thing, the clay and the leather. Tomorrow, you get to wear the shoes again. You can remember that.