



W. P. Kinsella

Author of Shoeless Joe

**Magic
Time**



“Kinsella Hits Another Home Run.”

—The Edmonton Journal

Magic Time

W.P. Kinsella

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Prologue

“Mike, I think I’ve found you the perfect place to play baseball,” my agent said, the line from his office in Los Angeles to my home in a suburb of Chicago as clear as if he was sitting across the kitchen table. My father is sitting across the kitchen table, looking expectant. On the first ring, I had reached behind my head and snatched the canary-yellow phone off the hook; it had interrupted our Scrabble game. As I listen, I make a little motion with my thumb and first finger, like a bird feeding its young. My father smiles.

My agent’s name is Justin Birdsong, and we’ve never met. He signed me because a year ago I looked like a top prospect for the Bigs. It’s been a long time since I heard from him. I wasn’t picked up in the most recent college draft, but Justin Birdsong said he was impressed with my credentials and would try to find me a job in minor-league baseball.

Not being drafted was a particular disappointment, though not unexpected. I was prepared for the worst, but right to the last moment I had fantasies of the Cubs drafting me onto their Triple A team in Des Moines, or the White Sox announcing that I’d be the new second-base man at their Vancouver Triple A franchise, and that I’d need only a few weeks’ seasoning before jumping to the Bigs.

I also dreamed of playing baseball in Japan, though I knew the Japanese usually signed utility infielders who couldn’t quite cut it with a big-league club, and aging power hitters who could no longer get around on the fastball. As the draft continued I shifted my hopes to desperate teams like Oakland, Montreal, or Philadelphia — maybe they would find me a spot, any spot, in their organization. But nothing materialized.

In my junior year at Louisiana State I’d been drafted by the Montreal Expos in the fourth round and offered an excellent signing bonus, which, after consulting with my dad, I turned down because I wanted to finish my degree in business management, and because we — we being my dad, myself, and my coaches at LSU — felt I needed another year of college experience.

Unfortunately, my final year as an LSU Tiger was one long, downward spiral. My chances of being drafted would have been better if I’d been injured — I would have had something on which to blame my decline. After being a college all-star in my junior year, my average fell from .331 to .270, my stolen bases from forty-five to nineteen, and I was caught stealing nine times. My walks declined twenty-nine percent. My play at second base, which has always been just adequate, remained that way. My promise had been as a high-average lead-off man who could also steal a ton of bases, like Ricky Henderson in his prime.

I don’t blame the pros for not drafting me. I have no excuses about my senior year but with the hope that springs eternal in every ballplayer’s heart, I feel that with a solid season of minor-league baseball this summer I’ll still be young enough for the pros to have another look at me.

After this year’s draft, *Baseball America* mentioned that I was the best-looking second-base man not drafted. “In practice, Mike Houle is as good as anyone who’s ever played the game. Perhaps with experience he’ll get a second look from big-league scouts.”

“I can get you a contract with this team in Iowa,” Justin Birdsong was saying. “League representative called this morning, one team has openings for several players, but they’re especially interested in you. Asked about you specifically. You’ll be with a semi-pro club in the Cornbelt League. They claim they play good-quality baseball. Double A quality, they assure me. They also tell me that major-league scouts make regular stops at all the ballparks in the league. You ever heard of the Cornbelt League, Mike?”

“No. Have you?”

“I just thought with it being in the Midwest and all ...”

“What part of Iowa is it in?”

“East-central, the guy said. He was quite a small-town booster, could get a job as a sideshow barker any time. Gave me a sermonette on the advantages of small-town life. By the time he finished I was homesick for my folks’ little clapboard house in Arkansas — for about fifteen seconds until I remembered having to sit in the balcony of the movie theater, and that there were two sets of washrooms and water fountains at the town service stations.”

It had never occurred to me that Justin Birdsong was black.

“Anyway, are you interested?”

“Teams in organized baseball aren’t exactly burning up the wires to either of us.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Justin. “I’ll tell them you accept. They’ll wire you your travel money. You’re to report to Grand Mound, Iowa, day after tomorrow. You fly into Cedar Rapids and someone will meet you there. By the way, since the Cornbelt League is unaffiliated, all the teams are self-supporting. What will happen is you’ll get a base salary, and one of the local merchants will give you a job in the mornings. You’ll have your afternoons free to practice and your evenings to play baseball.”

The salary he named wasn’t enough to pay room and board, and I told him so.

“You get free board, and you room with a local family, so that lowers your overhead considerably.”

“Great! I get to live *American Gothic*.”

“In case I didn’t mention it,” Justin Birdsong added, “I only take commission on your baseball salary.”

“What kind of morning job?” I asked. “I’m a business major, I don’t want to work in a packing plant or a welding shop.”

“They were real excited about you being a business major, one of the reasons they asked for you. The local insurance office will pay you to work for them. You’ll do fine, Mike. They’re go-getters out there, small-town proud, real excited about having you play baseball in Grand Mound.”

“It doesn’t look as if I have much choice,” I said. “I’ll be there.”

1

Judging Distances

ONE

My father is a remarkable guy. The older I get the more remarkable I find him. He does not look the way most people would imagine a gentle, self-sacrificing father should look. Dad is a large, lumpy-looking man with coarse hair down his arms and across the backs of his hands. His black hair is receding from his wide forehead, and he suffers from perpetual five o'clock shadow. His huge hands are grease-stained and scarred, his brown eyes large and sad, but they sparkle like polished oak when he smiles, a dimple breaking at the right corner of his mouth.

"In baseball you make the same play thousands, even hundreds of thousands of times, Mike - though, like snowflakes, each one is unique. But it's patience and persistence that carry you through. The same patience and persistence won over your mom.

"You must have wondered how an old warthog like me managed to marry such a beautiful girl. When I was young I wasn't handsome, I wasn't rich, I wasn't an athlete, and I wasn't a hoodlum, so I was gonna convince the girl I'd been in love with since fifth grade to marry me I was gonna have to do it on my own. Gracie only lived a few blocks away and we'd been in the same school all our lives. She considered me a friend, someone who'd always been there — like one of the old buildings in downtown.

"Final year of high school, I was already working weekends at the box factory, and your mom worked a four-hour evening shift at the old Woolworth's. Her dad had been injured in a car accident and out of work for months. She was dating a guy named Karl, who was handsome, a fullback on the football team, and had a recklessness about him that caused girls to turn and stare when he walked down the street.

"The one bad thing I knew about Karl was that he was never on time, and for me that was like a pitcher knowing that a batter swings at the curve in the dirt. I showed up at Woolworth's at closing time, and stopped to chat with Gracie as she waited. I said I was on my way home from the box factory, but actually I watched the clock like a hawk and scooted out of the house in time to arrive just as Woolworth's was closing.

"Sometimes Karl was really late, and Gracie would get cold or tired, or both. I never said anything against the guy. I'd run across the street and get us coffee from the all-night diner, and remember to put one sugar and one and a half creams in hers, and I'd try to have a new silly joke to tell her. (Slime jokes were big then. What slug sees out the old year? Father Slime. What's a slug's favorite song? 'A Slime Goes By.')

"I can't tell you how happy I was the night when, after more than a half-hour wait, Gracie said, 'Hell with him. Walk me home, Gil.'

"The next couple of nights he was on time, but it didn't last. This went on for months. One night

got to the store early, and bought a timing chain, car polish, and a fancy gearshift knob for an old car was trying to get running. When Gracie came out I showed her my purchases and said, ‘You know after you marry me we’re gonna have the best maintained car in the neighborhood.’ Gracie laughed at her merry laugh, but the glance she gave me said it all. Not a month later she came out of the store and said, ‘Karl and I aren’t going together any more.’ By that time I was finished school. A year later we were married.

“You know what I used to like best? After Karl showed up, whether Gracie was walking away with him, or whether she was getting into his old man’s car, she always turned and waved to me, and gave me a big smile.”

Dad would stop, sometimes there’d be a tear in his eye.

“I miss your mom more than anybody could ever know.”

The nail and a half-inch of Dad’s right middle finger predeceased him many years ago, slashed off by a saw at the lumberyard where he’s been employed all his adult life, working his way up from stacking lumber to feeder in the sawmill to servicing the equipment, to full-fledged maintenance mechanic.

I was in first grade the day Dad lost the tip of his finger. I came home after school to find Dad in the living room rather than Mrs. Schell, who babysat my kid brother Byron and me while Dad was at work. He was sitting in his favorite chair, a leg slung over one arm of it, watching a game show on television, drinking a Tab.

“What are you doing home?” I asked.

“Had a little accident, Mike,” Dad said, turning toward me, holding up his hand so I could see his middle finger bandaged in a halo of white gauze, like snow in a coal bin in contrast to the rest of his hairy, grease-stained fingers.

“Had a little run-in with a saw I was repairing. Forgot to unplug it.” And he grinned, his face emitting light. “As you can see, I came out on the short end of the run-in, in more ways than one.”

As I came closer I saw that there was a bright red spot, like the center of a Japanese flag, on the white gauze at the end of the damaged finger. My stomach lurched like it did when Dad and I went over the top on the carnival ferris wheel. I climbed into his lap and burrowed, trembling, into his warmth, soaking up the comfortable odors of grease, tangy sawdust, and Dad’s sweat.

‘What’s the matter, son?’

“You’re not gonna die, are you?”

“Of course not. It takes more than a saw to do in an old warhorse like me. Doc says I’ll be back at work in a week. In the meantime, the Cubs are in town, so I’ll pick up tickets for you and me. Maybe we’ll even take Byron to the Sunday afternoon game, though you have to take your turn ferrying him to the bathroom.” Byron was in play school at the time.

I hugged Dad as hard as I could, burying my face in the comfort of his plaid flannel shirt, and held on until my arms hurt.

“You don’t have to worry, Mike. Your dad’s never gonna leave you.” And he rocked me in his arms.

I pulled myself up and kissed his blue-whiskered cheek. Dad always knew the right thing to say. Neither of us mentioned Mom, but we both knew what caused me to get all scared and shaky.

Though I claim to remember my mom, who died when I was four, I think what I remember are Dad’s stories of her. What I remember is sitting on Dad’s lap, him holding their wedding picture, a

eight-by-ten that still sits on his bedside table, Mom younger than I am now, and beautiful, and Dad telling me about how they began dating, and how thrilled he was when Mom said she'd marry him.

"Look at that, Mike, I look like a gorilla in a tuxedo. What do you suppose your mom ever saw me?"

Or else he'd hold the family portrait one of those door-to-door photographers took not long after Byron was born. I'm sitting on Dad's knee, dressed in yellow shorts, with a white shirt and yellow bow tie, while Mom is holding Byron wrapped in a blue blanket, all that's visible of him a little pin circle of face. Dad would talk about the day the portrait was taken, how I was so hyper that, though you can't see it in the picture, he had a firm grip on the back of my shorts in order to keep me from leaping off his knee.

"Your mom had just washed your face for the third time since the photographer got there. She wiped it again, tossed the washcloth over her shoulder in the general direction of the kitchen, and said to the photographer, who looked like he'd slept in his car with a bottle of cheap wine, 'Shoot us quick before any more dirt gravitates to that boy's face!'"

Other times we'd look at dog-eared photographs from the chocolate box of photos that always sat on the mantel of the pretend fireplace in the living room. There were pictures of Mom next to a half-washed car; in jeans, shirttails flapping, as she ran laughing from a spray of water. Dad said that photo was taken before they were married, and he was on the other end of the hose. There was a color Polaroid of Mom in a yellow waitress uniform, her name, *Gracie*, in brown lettering above her pocket, her red hair spilling over her shoulders, smiling like she'd just received a ten-dollar tip. Her hair was so pretty in that photograph, and the photo was so clear I could see the freckles on her cheeks and the back of the hand that's visible.

"You boys got the best of both of us," Dad would say, holding up a picture of Mom smiling over a birthday cake flaming with twenty-three candles, Dad behind her chair, crouched in order to get in the picture, grinning like a fool, his fingers in a V above Mom's head, making her look like she had rabbit ears.

"You're both built strong like me, with big bones, but you're good lookin' like your mom."

Byron is stocky, but he has Mom's red hair and green eyes. I'm tall and slim like Mom, but I'm strong-boned and have huge hands like Dad. My hair is reddish-brown, and has a cowlick that refuses to submit to a comb, my eyes a greeny-hazel.

Mom's name before she married Dad was Grace Palichuk. Her grandfather had emigrated from Ukraine to work in the packing plants in Chicago. My grandfather, Dmetro Palichuk, followed in his father's footsteps at the packing plant, but chose an Irish girl to marry, Margaret Emily O'Day, with dark rose-colored hair, green eyes, and freckles.

Our family name is Houle. My father's name is Gilbert. Dad claimed the original Houle was a smuggler and privateer, a crewman on Jean Lafitte's pirate ship.

"Lafitte and his men fought for the Americans in the Battle of New Orleans and were pardoned by President Madison. I saw the pardon, or at least a copy of it, when I was a boy. That original Houle settled on Galveston Island after the Civil War, but who knows how one of his descendants got to Chicago?"

Sometimes Dad tells of a descendant of that first American Houle, a Wells Fargo driver and buffalo hunter in the Dakota Territory, who married a Black Hawk Indian woman (or Nez Percé depending on his mood) and later became a livestock dealer before being wiped out by the gre-

Chicago fire.

“Your great-grandfather got mistaken for Billy the Kid. This was in some wild Colorado mining town. He was a skinny little guy with a big mustache. The town folks spotted your great-grandfather riding into town, and some young bucks tried to force him into a gunfight. He moved real careful and unbuckled his guns, let them fall to the ground. ‘You wouldn’t shoot an unarmed man would you?’

“They didn’t shoot him, but they flung him in jail and decided to have a public hanging in three days. And it would have gone ahead except the real Billy the Kid rode into town. It was said he had a look about him, a rock hardness, a death-like stare. Nobody tried to provoke *him* into a gunfight. He made it clear he was Billy the Kid, and dared anybody to do anything about it. He even visited your great-grandfather in jail. He laughed when he saw him. ‘You look like a gunfighter Ned Buntline might have invented. You don’t look nothin’ like me.’ Billy said.

“‘Send this little cowboy on his way,’ Billy told the sheriff, and the sheriff did as he was told. It was said your great-grandfather never again wore a gun on his hip, and skedaddled out of Colorado like he was being chased.

“It was one of his boys that got fleeced out of his socks in a gold-stock scam. I did see a photo of him, and he resembled your cousin Verdell in California; you know, a boy so dumb he’d sell his car for gas money.”

* * * * *

Mom died after being hit by a car right in front of our house. We lived in this quiet, working-class suburb of Chicago, in a wartime house, one of thousands of almost identical box-like structures built right after the Second World War to house returning servicemen and their families. The house was already twenty-five years old when my parents acquired it, just a year before Mom was killed.

Schiffert Box and Lumber, where Dad worked, was an old-fashioned company that had been founded in 1890. They hadn’t manufactured wooden boxes since the 1960s, but retained that part of the name. Dad got paid every Friday, in cash. It’s only within the last five years that Schiffert has paid by check and at two-week intervals.

Every Saturday morning Mom would do the weekly grocery shopping. On Friday evenings she would circle the loss leaders in each grocery ad or flyer, then we’d tour the supermarkets buying only the items on sale.

I was holding Byron’s hand, walking from the house, across the lawn, which Dad kept smooth as a golf green, toward our Ford Maverick, parked at the curb. The car was a shade of gold that Dad laughingly said the used-car salesman had referred to as Freudian Gilt.

The day was hot and breezy, with a few sheep-sized white clouds floating across the sky. Mom was wearing a white dress with red anchors patterned on it, white shoes, and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a red ribbon around the crown. Her family had been over for dinner the previous Sunday and Mom had borrowed some folding chairs from Grandma Palichuk, which we were going to return after shopping.

Mom had the trunk of the car open, had one chair inside and was reaching for a second when a gust of wind whipped her hat off. The hat hit the pavement beside the car, turned on edge, and rolled like a plate into the street. Mom moved instinctively to chase it.

She only took about three steps, the street was narrow and three steps was far enough for her to move right into the path of an oncoming car, driven by George Franklin, who lived only a block down the street. George Franklin didn’t even have time to apply the brakes. The car hit Mom, carried her

about twenty feet down the street and deposited her on the pavement. I can still hear the sound of her head hitting the street. She died instantly, the doctor who arrived with the ambulance said.

Dad was mowing the back yard with a gas lawnmower, so he didn't know anything unusual was going on. Someone had to go to the back yard and get him. The neighbors didn't think to keep Byron and me away from the scene. I was sobbing because I knew what had happened was not play. Byron and I looked down at Mom, and Byron said, "Mama sleeping?" and through my tears I said, "Yes, Mama's sleeping."

Then a woman in a swirling gray housedress took us each by the hand and hurried us into her house. Even though the doctor pronounced Mom dead at the scene, Dad insisted on riding with the ambulance to the hospital.

Mr. Franklin was not at fault. He wasn't speeding. He was in the correct lane. His car was in good mechanical condition. Between the accident and the funeral, Dad walked us down the block to Mr. Franklin's house. I held onto his right hand, and he carried Byron in the crook of his left arm.

Mr. Franklin was a tall, gaunt man with a hairline that went back like a horseshoe, a crooked nose, and sad blue eyes that protruded slightly.

"I just want you to know I realize what happened was an accident," Dad said to him. "There was nothing you could do. Gracie should have looked before she ran into the street after her hat. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could have happened to anyone." Dad held out his hand to Mr. Franklin.

Mr. Franklin's hand was trembling violently as he reached to shake my dad's extended hand. He spoke very softly. He said he hadn't slept since the accident, didn't know if he'd ever sleep again.

"Don't be hard on yourself," Dad said. "It could have been your wife. It could have been me driving home from the hardware store on a Saturday morning."

There was no way Dad could have done more — I don't know if I could be so generous in similar circumstances — but what he did wasn't enough. Mr. Franklin had a nervous breakdown, lost his job as an accountant with the Grain Exchange. He stopped driving. His family left him. He stayed home alone and drank all day. On the first anniversary of my mother's death Mr. Franklin put a gun to his head and ended his pain.

Dad had a married sister in Kansas City; my mother had one in Chicago and one in Milwaukee; and Grandma Palichuk lived only a ten-minute drive from us. Each of them volunteered to take Byron and me, to care for us and to raise us as their own.

And some good cases were made, the best by my dad's sister in Kansas City, my Aunt Noreen, who was married to a lawyer, lived in a five-bedroom house with a swimming pool, had only one child, a girl, Phoebe, and was desperate for a son, but unable to bear any more children. No one considered for a moment that Dad might want to raise his own sons.

But my dad, big awkward rough diamond that he was, refused all their offers, even ignored Aunt Noreen, who, after being turned down threatened to sue for custody on the grounds that Dad lacked the ability to care for us properly. It was about ten years before Dad forgave his sister for that threat. He intended to look after us himself, he said. And when Dad says something, he means it.

It wasn't easy. There were housekeepers, play schools, and day-care centers. There were babysitters who did exactly that — sat — often having friends over who ate everything not locked up. There were housekeepers who drank, who entertained boyfriends, who quit on a moment's notice stealing whatever they were able to carry.

There were also some wonderful women who tried to be mothers to Byron and me, some hoping Dad would take a fancy to them if they were nice enough to us and kept the house spotless. Other simply loved children. One was a middle-aged lady named Mrs. Watts, a black woman whose family had a cottage on a lake some fifty miles out of Chicago. She took us to the lake for two weeks when I was eight and Byron was six. Dad came down on the weekends and slept in a hammock on the porch of the cabin, and we went fishing and boating and collected rocks and shells. But Mrs. Watts' mother became ill and she had to go look after her instead of us.

It was Dad who enrolled me in Little League, where I immediately showed skill and power beyond my years.

"Did you ever play ball?" I asked him.

"I used to play in a commercial league when I was a teenager. I played third base with all the grace of King Kong. The thing I did best was get hit by the pitcher. The ball didn't hurt so much because I have big bones. I'd lean over the plate and dare the pitcher to hit me, and often enough he would."

We muddled through. By the time I was in first grade I'd mastered the washer and dryer, the vacuum cleaner and the dishwasher. We went to school in clean if unironed clothes. I did the dishes as soon as I got home from school. Byron learned to cook, first out of necessity then for pleasure. I can see him standing on a chair in front of the stove, five years old, frying pork chops, boiling carrots that I had cut up, salting, peppering, shooing me away if I tried to help. We got our share of burns and scrapes and cuts, but we were truly scared only once. When I was six, I reached up and put my finger under the knife as Dad was slicing bread for Sunday morning toast. I still have the scar. There was blood everywhere, and Byron kept a washcloth pressed tightly about my finger as Dad hurried us to the Emergency, the cloth turning raspberry colored in spite of the pressure Byron put on it.

"How long will he be on the disabled list?" Dad asked the doctor after he had stitched me up. "The boy's the star of his Little League team and he's only six." I was pale and still snuffling a little. My knees were like water, and I didn't feel the least like a star baseball player.

The hand recovered, and I roared through every league I played in. Our high-school team won twenty-seven games in a row my freshman year and, though we lost in the first round of the Illinois State Championships, I was voted outstanding player.

Afterward, my coach told me a scout from the White Sox had been in the stands for a couple of games.

"Didn't want to put any pressure on you, Son, so I didn't tell you. You've got a big-league future in front of you, or I don't know my baseball players. You've got all the tools. Speed, a strong arm, and a good eye will make up for your lack of power. You're gonna be a great one."

Had he not told me about the scout because he knew I didn't play well under pressure? Or hadn't he noticed? I'd gone 0-5 in our tournament loss, and made an error.

TWO

I was in my second year of high school the day a Cadillac the color of thick, rich cream pulled up in front of Mrs. Grover's Springtime Café and Ice Cream Parlor. Our main street was paved but narrow with six feet of gravel between the edge of the pavement and the sidewalk. Dust from the gravel whooshed past the car and oozed through the screen door of the café.

Byron and I were seated at a glass-topped table, our feet hooked on the insect-legged chairs. We were sharing a dish of vanilla ice cream, savoring each bite, trying to make it outlast the heat of high

July.

It was easy to tell the Cadillac owner was a man who cared about his car. He checked his rear view mirror carefully before opening the driver's door. After he got out — “unwound” would be a better description, for he was six foot five if he was an inch — he closed the door gently but firmly, then wiped something off the side-view mirror with his thumb. On the way around the Caddy, he picked something off the grille and flicked it onto the road.

He took a seat in a corner of the café where he could watch his car and everyone else in the café, which was me, Byron, and Mrs. Grover.

The stranger looked to be in his mid-thirties. He had rusty hair combed into a high pompadour that accentuated his tall front teeth and made his face look longer than it really was. Across his upper lip was a wide coppery-red mustache with the corners turned up and waxed, the kind worn by 1890s baseball players.

Though everything about him was expensive, down to the diamond ring on his left baby finger, he looked like the type who didn't like to conform. I guessed he had grown his hair down past his shoulders when he was a teenager. His hair was now combed back, hiding the top half of his ears and the back of his collar. He was wearing a black suit with fine gray pinstripes, a white-on-white shirt, and shoes that must have cost three hundred dollars.

“I'd like something tall and cool,” he said.

“I have pink lemonade,” Mrs. Grover said in a tiny voice that belied her 250 pounds. She had waddled halfway from the counter to his table, but stopped when the stranger spoke.

“I'll have the largest one you've got,” he said.

Mrs. Grover delivered the lemonade in a sweaty, opaque glass. He took a long drink, stretched his legs, and looked around the room.

“What do you figure he does?” whispered Byron.

When I didn't answer quickly enough he went on. “A banker, I bet — or an undertaker, maybe.”

“He's suntanned,” I said, “and bankers have short hair.” The big brother pointing out the obvious to the little brother. “And look at his hands.”

The knuckles were scarred, the fingers callused.

“What then?”

“Howdy, boys,” the stranger said, and raised his glass to us. His voice was deep and soft.

“Hi,” we said.

“I see you're ballplayers.” He nodded toward our gloves, which rested on the floor by the chairs and legs. “Is there much baseball played in these parts?”

The question was like opening a floodgate. We told him about everything from Little League to the high-school team I played for, to the commercial leagues where the little towns, subdivisions, and bedroom communities competed, to the Cubs and White Sox in nearby Chicago.

I ended the baseball lecture saying, “My brother doesn't play much baseball, at least not the way you do. I'm gonna play pro some day.”

“How did your team do this year?” he asked me, not in the patronizing way most adults have, but speaking with a genuine interest.

“Well,” I said, a little embarrassed, “last year we went to the State Championships, but this season we were two and nineteen. But we're really a lot better ball club than that,” I rushed on before he

could interrupt — or laugh, as most adults did when I announced our dismal record.

“I keep statistics,” I said. “We scored more runs than any team in the league. We’re good hitters and average fielders, but we didn’t have anyone who could pitch. A bad team gets beat seventeen to two. We’d get beat seventeen to fourteen, nineteen to twelve, eighteen to sixteen.”

“They’re really good hitters, especially Mike here,” Byron broke in. “Mike’s gonna make it to the Bigs.”

“I practice three hours a day all year round,” I said. “I’m a singles hitter. A second-base man. I walk a lot and steal a lot.”

“If you’re good you’ll make it,” the stranger said.

“You look like you might be a player yourself,” I said.

“I’ve pitched a few innings in my day,” he said, with what I recognized as understatement, and he made his way, in two long strides, to our table.

“The thought struck me that you boys might like another dish of ice cream. Since you’re sharing, I’ll assume your budget is tight.”

“You’ve had a good thought,” said Byron.

“I notice my lemonade cost seventy-five cents, as does a dish of ice cream. I might be willing to make a small wager.”

“What kind?” we both asked, staring up at him.

“Well now, I’m willing to bet I can tell you the exact distance in miles between any two major American cities.”

“How far is it from Algonquin to Peoria?” Byron asked quickly.

“Algonquin, at least, is not a major American city,” said the stranger gently, “but I did notice as I was driving that the distance from DeKalb to Peoria was 118 miles, so you just add the distance from DeKalb to Algonquin.” Byron looked disappointed.

“What I had in mind, though, were large cities. Chicago, of course, would qualify, so would Des Moines, St. Louis, Kansas City, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Seattle, Dallas, and, if you insist,” and he smiled in a quick and disarming manner at Byron, “I’ll throw in Peoria.”

“How far from New York to Chicago?” I asked.

“Exactly 809 miles,” said the stranger.

“How do we know you’re not making that up?” I said.

“A good question. Out in my car I have a road atlas, and inside it is a United States mileage chart. If one of you boys would like to get it ...”

As he spoke he reached a large hand into a side pocket and withdrew his keys. I had grabbed the keys and was halfway across the room before Byron could untangle his feet from the chair legs.

The interior of the car was still cool from the air conditioning. It smelled of leather and of liniment after-shave. There was nothing in sight except a State Farm road atlas on the front seat. The very neatness of the car told a lot about its owner, I thought: methodical, the type of man who would care about distances.

I carried the atlas into the café, where the stranger was now seated across the table from Byron.

“Let’s just check out New York to Chicago,” he said. “There’s always a chance I’m wrong.”

He turned to the United States mileage chart, and all three of us studied it. There were eighty cities

listed down the side of the chart, and sixty names across the top. Where the two names intersected on the chart was the mileage between them.

“Yes, sir, 809 miles, just as I said.”

The stranger put a big, square fingertip down on the chart at the point where New York and Chicago intersected.

I noticed the stranger had a lantern jaw. He was also more muscular than I would have guessed, his shoulders square as a robot's. His eyes were golden.

I quickly calculated that there were nearly five thousand squares on the mileage chart. He can't know them all, I thought.

“Would either of you care to test me?” he asked, as if reading my mind. He smiled. “By the way, my name's Roger Cash.”

“Mike Houle,” I said. “And this is my kid brother, Byron.”

We were sharing the ice cream because we were saving for a Cubs' home stand. Dad had promised to take us into the city every night as long as we could afford to buy our own tickets.

“Well ...”

“No bets, then. Just name some places. Distances are my hobby.”

“Omaha and New Orleans,” I said.

“Approximately 1,026,” Roger Cash replied, after an appropriate pause.

We checked it, and he was right.

“St. Louis to Los Angeles,” said Byron.

“Exactly 1,838 miles,” said Roger.

Again he was right.

“Milwaukee to Kansas City,” I said.

“One thousand, seven hundred and seventy-nine,” he replied quickly.

We checked the chart.

“Wrong!” we chorused together. “It's 1,797.”

“Doggone,” said Roger, grinning sheepishly, “sometimes I tend to reverse numbers. Seeing as how I couldn't do it three times in a row, I'll buy each of you men a dish of ice cream, or something large if you want. A banana split? You choose.”

It wasn't often we could afford top-of-the-line treats. I ordered a banana split with chopped almonds and chocolate sauce on all three scoops. Byron ordered a tall chocolate malt, thick as cement. Roger had another pink lemonade.

“What made you memorize the mileage chart?” I asked between mouthfuls of banana split.

“Nothing made me,” said Roger, leaning back and straightening out his legs. “I spend a lot of time traveling, a lot of nights alone in hotel and motel rooms. It passes the time, beats drinking or reading the Gideon Bible.

“I've been known to gamble on my ability to remember mileages,” he went on, “and on the outcome of baseball games in which I am the pitcher. I never gamble unless the odds are in my favor, substantially in my favor.”

“Do you pitch for anyone in particular?” I asked.

“One season, I tried to take a team barnstorming. But,” and he shook his head sadly, “that era

dead and gone. When I was a boy I watched the House of David play, and the Kansas City Monarchs. Must have been about the last season they toured. Costs too much to support a traveling team these days, and with television and all, people don't go out to minor-league parks to see their home team alone a team of barnstormers.

"No, what I do now is arrange for a pickup team to back me up — play an exhibition game against a well-known local team.... Say," he said, as if he had just been struck by a brilliant idea. "Do you suppose you men could round up the rest of your high-school team?"

"Byron's not in high school yet," I said. "But I probably could. Most of the players live close by, few on farms. Some will be away on vacation, but I think I could round up a full team without too much trouble."

"In that case I think we might be able to arrange a business proposition."

For the next few minutes, Roger Cash outlined his plans, while Byron and I nodded at his every suggestion. It was obvious he had done this thing many times before.

All the time he was talking, I was eyeing the mileage chart, searching for an easily reversible number.

"Have you spotted one that will beat me?" Roger asked suddenly. He had been talking about how many practices our team would need, and the switch in subject caught me by surprise.

"Maybe."

"You want to put some money on it?"

"A dollar." I gulped. I could feel the pace of my heart pick up.

"You're on," he said, turning away from where the chart lay open on the table top. "Name the cities."

"Albuquerque to New York."

Roger laughed. "You picked one of the hardest. A mileage easy to reverse. Now, if I wanted to win your dollar I'd say 1,997." He paused for one beat. I could feel my heart bump, for the number was right.

"But if I wanted to set you up to bet five dollars on the next combination, I'd say 1,979. I might miss the next one, too. People are greedy and like to take money from a stranger. I might even miss a third or fourth time, and I always leave the chart out where a man with a sharp eye can spot an easily reversible number. You men aren't old enough to go to bars, or I'd show you how it really works."

I took out my wallet, opened it up and lifted out a dollar.

"No," said Roger. "I'll chalk that one up to *your* experience. I have a mind for distances. I once read a story about a blind, retarded boy who played the piano like a master. And I heard about another man who can tell you what day of the week any date in history, or future history, was or will be. Myself, I have an idiot's talent for distances."

"What's so great about distances?" asked Byron. "If I was smart I'd choose something else to be an expert on."

"Let me tell you about distances," said Roger, his golden eyes like coins with black shadows at the center. "Six or eight inches doesn't make any difference, say, between Des Moines and Los Angeles, right?"

We nodded.

"Now suppose you're in bed with your girlfriend."

Roger Cash moved forward, hunching over the table, lowering his voice, because over behind the counter Mrs. Grover was doing her best to hear our conversation. Nothing went on that Mrs. Grover didn't know about. And if there was a shortage of happenings, Mrs. Grover was not above creating some rumors just to get things fermenting.

"Suppose your peter won't do what it's supposed to — you men do know about such things?"

We both nodded eagerly. My experience was more limited than I was willing to admit; but Byron, who was fifteen months younger than me, had always liked girls and girls had always liked him. Though we seldom talked about our sexual adventures, I suspected Byron had more actual experience than I did.

"If your peter won't produce that six or eight inches," our faces were in a tight triangle over the table, and Roger was whispering, "no matter how close you are to pussy, you might as well be 1,700 miles away, which is how far it is from Des Moines to Los Angeles."

Roger laughed, and we joined in, though more from nervousness than appreciation. At the lunch counter, one ear still tipped toward us, Mrs. Grover smiled crossly.

"The distances in baseball are perfect," Roger went on, "ninety feet from base to base, sixty feet from the mound to the plate. Not too far. Not too close. But change any one of them just six or eight inches, the length of your peter, and the whole game's out of kilter."

Byron and I nodded, wide-eyed.

"Well, since you men say you can get me a team, all we have left to do is find ourselves an opponent," said Roger. "Who's the best pitcher in these parts?"

"That would be Silas Erb," I said. "Chucks for First National Bank in the Division One Commercial League."

"Is he crafty or a hardball thrower?"

"Strictly a thrower. Ninety miles an hour straight down the middle, dares anybody to hit it."

"Scratch him. I want a guy who's a curveballer, maybe tries to throw a screwball, has a wicked change."

"That would be McCracken," I said. "McCracken Construction have been Division One Champions two years in a row."

"And he owns the company?"

"His father does."

"Would he be the kind to accept a challenge from an elderly pitcher with a two-and-nineteen high school team on the field in back of him?"

"Who wouldn't? McCracken thinks he's the sneakiest junkball-pitcher since Hoyt Wilhelm. He throws a knuckle curve."

"If we were to set up this game with McCracken, get posters printed, and talk up this challenge game, what sort of attendance do you think we could expect?"

"People are hungry for good baseball," I said. "I think we could get five or six hundred fans or maybe more, with people from the new subdivisions."

"Would they pay three dollars a head?"

"No problem."

Roger Cash grinned, the right side of his mouth opening up to show his dice-like teeth. I noticed

then, even through the suit, that his right upper arm and shoulder were huge, many inches larger than his left.

THREE

What he proposed to McCracken that night was a winner-take-all game, my high-school team with Roger Cash pitching, against McCracken Construction, Division One Champs and one of the best commercial-league baseball teams in the state.

“I said to him,” Roger told us later, “I’ll be happy to cover any wagers you, your teammates, or the good citizens of this area might like to make, all in strictest confidence, of course!

“‘At what odds?’ McCracken wanted to know.”

Byron and I had waited in the cool interior of the Cadillac, outside McCracken’s sprawling ranch-style home, while Roger had done his bargaining and arranging.

“‘Even odds,’ I said. ‘Roger Cash is not greedy.’ And you should have seen him smile.

“‘I’d like to see you work out,’ McCracken said to me.

“‘Oh no,’ I said. ‘The element of surprise is all I’ve got on my side. I hear tell you played in Tripoli for a year, so you’re not likely to be surprised by anything an old amateur like me can throw at myself. I played a dozen games one summer for a Class C team in Greensboro, North Carolina; but they didn’t pay me enough to keep my mustache waxed so I moved on. Actually they suggested I move on, but that’s another story.’ I smiled real friendly at him, and he didn’t give me any argument.

Back in front of the Springtime Café and Ice Cream Parlor, after the game was set, Roger led us around to the trunk of the Caddy. Byron and I were on our tiptoes trying to stare over and around him. The trunk was almost as austere as the car interior.

It contained a black valise, very old, almost triangular, with heavy brass latches, and a canvas duffel bag with a pair of worn black baseball cleats tied around its drawstring.

A few garden tools were cast diagonally across the trunk: a rake, a hoe, a small spoon-nosed shovel, all spotless. Built into the depression where the spare wheel would ordinarily have been was a small, black safe, anchored in concrete.

“We’re going to need some money to finance this operation,” Roger said, and smiled slowly, lines appearing in the deeply tanned skin around his eyes. “I’ll have to ask you gentlemen to turn your backs while I operate on Black Betsy here. I’d be obliged if you kept the secret of her existence among the three of us.”

Though it wasn’t worded as one, Byron and I both recognized that the final statement was a command. We stared up and down the street and studied the windows of the Springtime Café while Roger turned the dial on the safe. It made little buzzy sounds like a bicycle lock.

“You can turn around now,” he said finally.

The safe was stuffed with money; from what I could see, mostly hundreds.

The deal Roger proposed was that each of the eight players to back him up was to receive twenty dollars for the game. Byron and I were to be paid extra for distributing posters to the downtown area and over a thousand handbills to homes in nearby bedroom communities, and on car windshields.

And we were to be paid for selling tickets right up until game time. Roger also suggested that we arrange to sell hot dogs, soda, and popcorn, since I’d told him no one ever bothered to do that at the local baseball grounds.

He peeled off a few bills from a collar-sized roll, advancing us enough to buy and rent what supplies we needed, and to hire people for the concessions. In return, we were to split the profits with him. For the next few days Byron and I felt like real businessmen, going around town hiring women three times our age to work for us Sunday afternoon.

I suspect it was that experience — Roger letting me see how easy it was to set up a business operation if you had the capital — that decided me on a career in business.

Roger let us know he needed a place to stay. Our only hotel had closed up years before, not long after a Ramada Inn opened in a shopping center a few miles down the highway. I was quick to volunteer our home.

The past few years, since Byron no longer required a babysitter, Dad, Byron, and I had lived harmoniously in what Dad referred to as controlled chaos. We struggled along, sharing the household chores, often on Saturday morning, so that by Friday night we had to push our way into the house every dish and piece of clothing we owned in need of washing.

“If he can stand it, I guess we can,” was how Dad answered my suggestion that Roger move into the spare bedroom until the challenge game.

“If you want to check him out first I can arrange it,” I said.

“I’ve got to start trusting your judgment some time, Son. If this Roger friend of yours steals any of our valuable art work or silverware, you have to pay for it.”

Our art work and silverware came from K-Mart.

But Dad was happy to have company, and when Roger arrived carrying only his black valise, Dad was at the door to greet him. Roger accepted a beer and they talked baseball for an hour before Dad headed for bed.

“I need to ask you another favor,” Roger said to me the next morning. “I need a place to work out. A private place. I don’t want McCracken or any of his spies to see me pitch before game time.”

“There’s an abandoned ball field behind the factory where Dad works,” I said. “They used to have a team in one of the commercial leagues, but they dropped out about five years ago. It’s pretty overgrown with weeds, but since all you need is the mound and home plate, I think that can be made playable with an hour’s work. And I bet McCracken doesn’t even know it exists.”

A few minutes with the tools from Roger’s trunk cleared away the weeds, and we embedded a new length of two-by-four in the mound to replace one that was squishy and rotten. We dug a small depression and inset two pieces of wood side by side to form a crude plate, after Roger produced a well-worn tape from his duffel bag. I held one end of the tape on the rubber while he measured to the spot where home plate should be.

Roger then dug out his glove and a ball. He gave me the glove and tossed a few practice pitches while I crouched behind the newly installed plate. I guess I was expecting Nolan Ryan. After about fifteen pitches I said, with that terrible candor the young consider honesty, “You’re not very good.”

“You haven’t seen me with an enemy batter at the plate,” he replied. “I may not look like much and I’m no Roger Clemens, but I change speeds and keep the hitters off balance: that’s a pitcher’s most important function. If they can’t time your pitch, even if you’re slow as water finding its own level, they can’t hit you. Besides, that ain’t a catcher’s glove, and I wouldn’t want to hurt your hand.”

“Yeah, right,” I said under my breath.

Preparations for the big day kept Byron and me running all week. Tuesday night, my dad, Roger

Byron, and I scouted McCracken Construction during a league game in a neighboring town. ~~McCracken was a stocky, barrel-chested man with dirty blond hair. He pitched a three-hitter. Roger~~ made notes on McCracken, and on the batters he would face.

After the game we discussed strategy.

I had a difficult time tracking down enough players from my high-school team. Several were on a summer working shift for the summer and weren't certain they would be available. Some were on vacation. We ended up with a third-string catcher, and I had to recruit Byron to play right field. He was not a total loss as a ball player, but he would rather have charted the game on his computer than play.

"I'm gonna have you lead off," Roger said to me.

I alternated between batting second and seventh most of my high-school career. I showed Roger the statistics I kept on our team's season.

"I prefer being the lead-off man," I said. "How did you know?"

"I know more than you think," said Roger, flashing his disarming grin.

"Look at these stats," I said. "I steal successfully nine out of ten tries. But my high-school coach doesn't play a base-stealing game."

"And you have a high on-base percentage," said Roger. "You walk a lot. Walks are important. You need patience to walk. I need your help here, because I'm going to put my batters up in the order of their patience."

"I don't understand," I said. "McCracken has great control. I went over his stats in back issues of the local paper. They don't always print box scores but the ones I could find show McCracken on average walks 2.1 batters per game and averages 6.4 strikeouts."

"You don't miss a trick, do you?" said Roger. "But it's a strategy, trust me." And he smiled once again, his teeth glinting like porcelain.

We had another practice Friday evening. I'm afraid we didn't look very good. Byron reported that someone from McCracken's team was sitting in a pickup truck about three blocks down the street, studying us through binoculars, hoping to get a glimpse of Roger in action.

Roger did not pitch. Our regular pitcher, Dusty Swan, who I had recruited to play third base because our regular third-base man was in California, threw batting practice.

"I want you guys to lay back and wait for the fastball," Roger told us. "McCracken's got a killer curve, a mean slider, a big-league change-up you can break your back on. But his fastball's nothing. He uses it to set up his other pitches. If we can keep from swinging at anything outside the strike zone he'll give up lots of walks. Then he'll have to throw the fastball and, when he does, we'll hammer it."

Though Roger's strategy went against McCracken's statistics, it was Roger's game, and Roger's money was bet on it.

All that week, in the afternoons, Roger Cash worked out at the abandoned ball field behind the lumberyard. Sometimes I acted as his catcher, but more often he employed Walt Swan, a brother to Dusty. He paid Walt five dollars cash after every workout.

In the evenings, accompanied by his trusty road atlas, he played the mileage game in every bar in the area. Dad heard at work that Roger was picking up several hundred dollars in winnings each night.

"It's also a way for me to become known real quickly," Roger said. "It will help assure a good turnout for the game on Sunday."

By the end of his third evening in town he had a very pretty brunette on his arm. She had a pleasant

laugh, a crooked smile, and pale brown, almond-shaped eyes. She was a cocktail waitress at Mama's on the outskirts of town. Her name was Jacqueline, and she spent the rest of the nights the week in Roger's room, except the night before the big game.

"Do you have any objection, Gil," Roger asked my dad our first night at supper, "to my having occasional female company in my room?"

Dad looked up from his chicken-fried steak.

"You can bring a goat to your room as far as I'm concerned," he said, "as long as you're quiet."

FOUR

It was during that week before the challenge game, that I found out a lot about distances myself. Like myself, most of my friends were just discovering girls. Most of our discoveries involved talk. We talked about the mystery of them, we talked about them individually and collectively, often in a disparaging manner learned from older boys at the Springtime Café or the Main Street Pool Hall.

Byron had gone to the movies a number of times with a green-eyed girl named Janice, who wore no lipstick or make-up because her family belonged to a fanatical religious group that thought the end of the world was imminent, and that everyone should be in a natural state when the end came.

"I asked her why she wears clothes," Byron said, after his fourth and final date, "and she said 'Modesty. The Lord expects modesty from all His creations.'"

It was on that date he discovered the only reason her parents let her go out with him was that she seemed a likely candidate for conversion. That evening, when they arrived back at her house after the show — her father drove them to the movie and picked them up at the Springtime Café afterward — their preacher, Pastor Valentine, and eight members of the congregation were camped in Janice's living room, which, Byron said, was decorated like a church.

Pastor Valentine conducted an impromptu service, and everyone prayed loud and long for Byron's wandering soul. They said many unkind things about the Catholic Church in general and the Pope in particular, having wrongly assumed, I suppose because of our last name being French, that Byron was a practicing Roman Catholic. We had never attended any church, and Dad said our family had had no religious affiliation for at least three generations. "I have no intention of breaking with tradition," Byron said.

Meanwhile I was in love for the first time. Or, more accurately, I had let being in love move from my imagination to real life. Her name was Julie Dorn, and I had become enamored of her just at the end of the school year. She was a farm girl, almost my height and fifteen pounds heavier. She was clean-cut, a hitter for the high-school girl's softball team, and I liked her because she wasn't a giggler, and always looked me in the eye when we talked. She drove a four-ton grain truck to school.

I was attracted to her straightforwardness, her toughness. Julie tolerated my interest in her, but made it plain she would prefer a more masculine beau, probably one of the broad-shouldered farm boys who knew how to deliver calves and had bronzed arms the size of fence posts. She often teased me about my ignorance of farms and was slightly contemptuous of what she saw as my lack of physical strength. Also, she wasn't impressed by my baseball playing, even though I was often the star of the team both offensively and defensively. She preferred to watch the boys she was attracted to grunt like dinosaurs on the football field. To add to my woes, I didn't drive yet. Julie had been driving farm equipment since she was ten years old.

I called on her about once a week, walking the three miles of narrow pavement that passed her

family's farm. She would entertain me in the dark parlor, or we would walk in the sweet dusk watching fireflies rising, sparkling, dissolving in our path. We even kissed a few times. But Julie never let me forget that my interest in her was much greater than her interest in me.

A couple of days after Roger Cash appeared in town, I walked out to the Dorn farm, arriving at mid-afternoon on a high-skied, blazing day. The farm house was tall and sad-looking, badly in need of paint. I knocked at the side door; like farmers everywhere the Dorns did not use their front door. One of Julie's aunts answered, wiping perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Julie and her sister are coiling hay in the north pasture," she said.

I could not see into the house because of the thick screen on the door, but from the dark interior came the smell of pork roast, the fumes mouth-watering, almost tangible.

I walked through a grove of trees, enjoying the temporary coolness in the midst of the fiery day. I picked a bluebell, split the bell, and rooted out the teardrop of honey inside.

In a half-swathed field of red clover, Julie and a younger sister were at work with pitchforks layering the hay into coils, which, when finished, resembled giant beehives.

"You townies don't know how good you've got it," Julie said, driving the tines of her fork into the earth, stilling the vibrating handle, then leaning on it as if it were a tree.

She was flushed and perspiring. Her copper-colored hair spilled over her forehead and was flecked with clover seeds. She wore jeans and a short-sleeved blouse the color of cowslips. The back and underarms of the blouse were soaked dark. She wasn't wearing a bra. I realized that even after my three-mile walk I was still cool. I was wearing a white open-necked shirt and khaki shorts. Even though my hair was lightened by the sun, I had not tanned much. Julie's arms and face were sunblackened, her hair bleached golden in spots.

"Can I help?" I asked, hoping to win favor.

"Sure," Julie said, smiling too knowingly, as if there was some private joke. "Beat it," she said to her sister. The younger girl stabbed her fork into the ground and raced off, happy to be relieved of an unpleasant job.

I have probably never worked as hard as I did in the next fifteen minutes — and accomplished less. I might as well have been trying to coil water with that pitchfork. Julie offered no advice. As I worked I babbled on about my new friend, Roger Cash, and the upcoming baseball game, mileages, distances, posters, concessions, while accumulating a pitiful pile of clover that bore no resemblance to the waist-high beehives Julie and her sister had created, the hay swirled in circular patterns, the swathes interlocked, impervious to wind, resistant to rain.

While I worked Julie sat in the shade of a dark green coil, smoking, a crockery water jug bathed in condensation beside her.

I finally gave up, red-faced and disheveled.

"It's not as easy as it looks," I said.

Julie grinned with what I hoped was tolerance rather than contempt. "You people in town live so far away," she said, her tone still not definable.

"It's only three miles," I said stupidly.

Julie took a final drag on her cigarette and crushed it out on the earth beside her. She looked at me with a close-lipped smile.

"At least you tried," she said, and leaned over so her head rested on my shoulder.

We kissed, both our faces damp from the heat of the day. The smell of freshly cut clover was overpowering. Julie slid closer to me, crossed one of my bare legs with one of her denim ones. She radiated heat. Her breasts burned against my chest as we embraced, only two thin layers of clothing separating us.

Her tongue was deep in my mouth, her large right hand hard to my left shoulder. Before I realized it she was forcing me down on my back, pushing me deep into the sweet clover. I didn't mind that she was stronger; there was nothing I could do about it. It even excited me. I ran my free hand down the thigh of her jeans, let it find its way between her legs.

We stopped kissing and gasped for breath.

"I bet I could take you," Julie said into my neck, and I knew by her tone that she meant in physical strength.

"You probably could," I said, gasping for air. "What does it matter? You work hard, have all your life. I don't."

Suddenly, Julie forced my head deep into the hay. All the sexuality of the previous moment was gone. This was a contest. Julie's hands were on my shoulders, her right leg between my thighs; she held my back down flat on the stubbly earth.

I had no experience roughhousing with girls.

My worst fear, almost certainly a truth, was that Julie would care about being able to out-wrestle me. How hard should I defend myself? If I concentrated on one of her arms, got a solid lock on it . . . but Julie was sitting on my chest. My shoulders were pinned to the earth, and my head partially covered with clover, the tiny red seeds filling my eyes and mouth, spilling down my neck.

I bucked ineffectually a few times.

"Okay, you've proved your point," I said.

Julie scrambled to her feet. I stood and brushed the clover seeds from my face and shirt front. I wanted to reverse time. I wanted the scent, the taste of Julie; I wanted to be inside her mouth, to feel the heat of her breasts burning against me.

But what I read in her eyes was that I was never to be forgiven for my weakness. I was walking toward her with the idea of taking her in my arms anyway, in spite of the coldness in her eyes, when her kid sister reappeared.

"We've got to get back to work," said Julie.

"I'll come by again," I said. Julie didn't reply.

But as I walked slowly back toward town, swinging my shirt in my right hand, the sun burning my back, I knew I wouldn't.

FIVE

Saturday night, Roger went to bed about ten o'clock. Alone.

"Got to rest the old soupbone," he said, as he headed up the stairs, flexing his huge pitching arm.

I went to bed shortly after, but I couldn't sleep. My mind was too full of the game the next day, my thoughts as much on the operation of the concessions as on baseball.

Eventually I dozed fitfully, but late in the night I woke with a start, surprised to hear the stairs creaking. I stretched out my arm and let the moonlight slanting through the window touch the face of my watch. Three A.M. I went to the window. I heard keys jingle in the darkness, watched as Rog

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