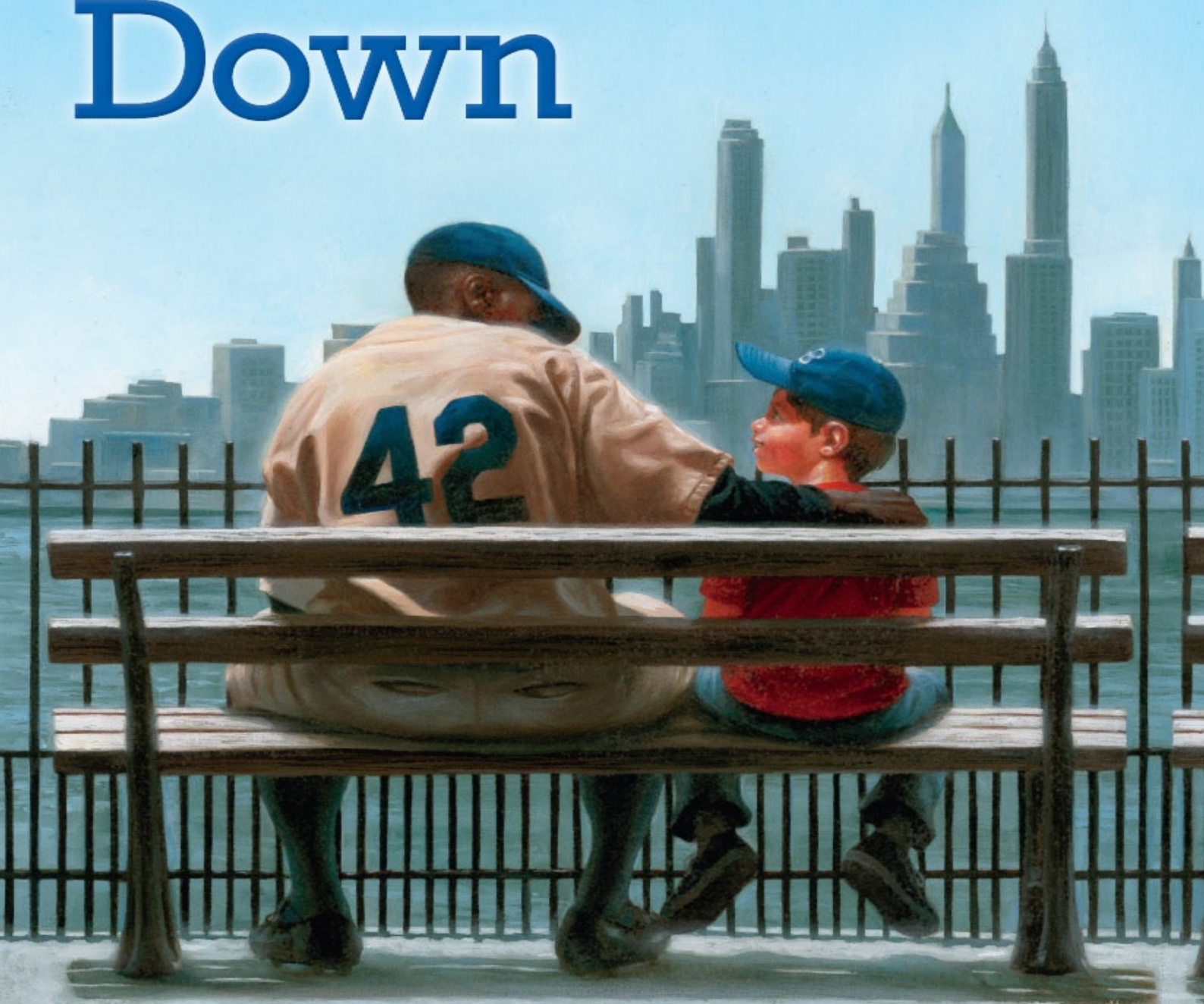


SHARON ROBINSON

The Hero Two Doors Down



Based on the True Story of Friendship between a Boy and a Baseball Legend

The Hero
Two Doors
Down

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Friendship between a Boy
and a Baseball Legend

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*To Jessica and Lucas, you are my wings.
And, to our beloved Jesse; we carry you
in our hearts.*

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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December 5, 1959, turned out to be the worst day of my life.

I was twenty, a sophomore at Brooklyn College. My dream was to one day become a doctor, so I concentrated on being a good student. But I was also a rebel, and my dad was a prime target. Those boyhood years when my dad and I shared a passion for baseball and the Brooklyn Dodgers were gone. Lately, there was more tension between us than love.

That afternoon the fight was knocked out of me. I came home after a swim meet, tired and hungry. Mom met me at the door, looking worried.

“Stevie, your father’s home,” Mom said. “He’s not feeling well. I’m calling his doctor. Go to him.”

If Dad was home in the afternoon, he was really sick. I flew up the stairs. My heart raced as if I was still in the final lap of my last race. When I reached the landing, I was greeted by an eerie silence. It reminded me of a snowstorm that once shut Brooklyn down when I was younger.

I peeked into my parents’ bedroom. My dad was propped up against several pillows, struggling to breathe. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open. “Dad,” I called out as I rushed to him. I leaned in and shook his shoulders. “Dad?” He sucked in air without speaking. I turned and ran back down the stairs. “Getting an ambulance,” I managed as I passed my mother on the steps.

Outside, I felt a burst of cold air on my flushed cheeks. I ran as fast as I could. The fire station on Utica Avenue was only three blocks away. There was always an ambulance parked in front. I reached the open garage. When I saw it was empty, I burst into tears. A fireman came to my rescue. “What’s wrong, son?” he asked.

“My dad’s in trouble,” I gasped between sobs. “We need an ambulance quick!”

“Okay, calm down and tell me what happened,” the fireman said.

“He’s having trouble breathing. I think it’s his heart,” I explained.

“Here, write down your name and address,” he said, slapping a pad of paper in front of me. “I’ll send an ambulance to your house as quickly as possible. Don’t panic. You did the right thing for your dad. Now go home and stay there until help arrives.”

The restaurants I passed on my way home told a story. A kosher deli, a bagel shop, a Chinese takeout, and a Caribbean restaurant stood side by side. On the opposite side of the street, there was pizza and soul food. Over the years, our mostly Jewish neighborhood had become a community more reflective of the diversity of Brooklyn. “Change is inevitable,” Dad would say.

He had spent most of my childhood managing Markell’s Shoe Store on Fifth Avenue and 48th Street in Manhattan. Now he made custom shoes for everyone. “When all people, regardless of race or religion, are welcomed in all parts of New York City, from Brooklyn to Manhattan, then we’ll defeat discrimination,” he’d say at his new shop on Seventh Avenue and 28th Street.

I raced back toward our house. But I was too late.

We buried Dad a couple of days later.

We sat shivah, the Jewish tradition of mourning. All of the mirrors in the house were covered up, and we used boxes to sit on instead of our couches and chairs. Friends and family came over to join us, but I ran away from the talk of Dad in the past tense. I was angry and needed to be alone. I was in no mood to entertain friends. Nothing would bring Dad back. We'd never again press our heads against the transistor radio or watch the news on the black-and-white television in the living room. We'd never work on a car engine or build and fly model airplanes. So what was the point?

I was lying across my bed, thinking of Dad, when my mom walked in with a cardboard box.

"I found this in your father's closet," she said, dropping the box by my bed.

"What is it?" I asked as I lifted up on my right elbow.

"Not sure," Mom replied. "It has your name on it."

I slipped off the bed and settled on the floor beside the box. I lifted the lid and pulled out an envelope addressed to me. It was in my dad's handwriting.

"Oh," Mom said, seeing the note. "Do you want to be alone?"

I shrugged. "I guess."

Mom stood up and slid her fingers through my hair before she left.

The letter was dated December 28, 1957. Two years ago, sometime after we learned that the Brooklyn Dodgers were moving to Los Angeles. It was a particularly rough time for me and Dad.

Steve,

Sorry for the harsh words last night. I woke up this morning wishing we could end each battle with a hug. But we're both stubborn and saying "I love you" no longer comes easily. Instead, I preach and punish when I should be telling you how proud you make me. I complain because your bedroom is a mess. Truth is, my own father died when I was young and unprepared. So just in case history strikes twice, I'm trying to prepare you to be a man while you're still young enough to learn.

When I saw you put aside your boyhood treasures, I collected them in this box, knowing that someday you'd find the joy in their reflected memories. Steve, the past often serves as a guide for the future. This box contains some of those clues. I pray you always know how deeply you were loved.

Dad

The note slipped out of my hands and dropped to the floor. I thought of my dad and I sobbed. I remembered him telling me that life wouldn't always give me the answers I wanted. "The storm will pass," he'd said. "Stick close to family, faith, and friendship. They'll help get you through the worst times, son."

I pushed up on my knees and began to rifle through the box. As I reached inside, the first thing my fingers hit was a ticket stub from the Brooklyn Dodgers 1948 home opener. I stared at the faded paper ticket and thought of how excited I'd been that day. I remembered everything. It made me smile for the first time since Dad died.

The year was 1948. At eight years old, I lived for baseball. The Brooklyn Dodgers was our team. In a few weeks, the Dodgers would be back at Ebbets Field. *Maybe this is the year*, I thought as I leapt from the third stair to the landing of our foyer, *that Dad will surprise me with opening day tickets.*

“Good morning, son,” Dad greeted me when I walked into the kitchen and slid into my chair.

Mom leaned over and planted a kiss on my forehead. “Good morning.”

“I’ve got good news,” Dad said, beaming from behind the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Major League Baseball players have reported to spring training,” he reported.

“Yippee!” I shouted. “Where are the Dodgers?”

“They’re in the Dominican Republic, and Leo Durocher is back as their manager.”

“Is that good news? Didn’t he get fired?” I remembered something about the Dodgers getting rid of Durocher the year before, though I wasn’t sure. I tried to memorize the name of every player and coach on the team, but it wasn’t always easy to keep them straight.

Dad chuckled. “Durocher’s a good manager whose personal life gets in the way of his success. He was suspended for that last season, but he’s served his time and now he gets to come back. Let’s hope he learned his lesson,” he said.

Even without Leo Durocher as their manager, the Dodgers made it all the way to the World Series last season. It was so exciting until they lost to the Yankees in the seventh game. The whole neighborhood still talked about it. Now a new season was about to start. Could they make it back to the championship?

“How come the Dodgers chose the Dominican Republic for spring training?” I asked.

“The weather’s good and the cost of living is low. Besides, Branch Rickey figured the Caribbean would be open to a team with black and white players. But this will be the last year for that. By next year, the Dodgers will have their own training facility in Vero Beach, Florida.”

Branch Rickey was a name I knew for sure. Mr. Rickey was the general manager of the Dodgers. He had signed Jackie Robinson last year. It was the first time an African American player had joined Major League Baseball team. Jackie was a big part of why the Dodgers had won the National League pennant last season.

Dad folded the paper and set it down next to his plate to continue. “According to the *Eagle*, Mr. Rickey is a smart man and his plan is working,” he began. “Dodgers fans are showing up in droves to get a good look at Jackie. And in the Dominican Republic, Jackie can stay at the same hotel as his

white teammates. Progress, son. We're making progress."

I poured milk into my bowl of cornflakes and spooned Nestlé's Quik into my glass of milk. Before diving in, I looked over at my dad. "Does progress mean that when the Dodgers come home, Jackie will be able to stay in the same hotels as the other Dodgers, like Pee Wee, Gil, Carl, and Ralph Branca?"

"Afraid not, Steve," Dad replied. "There are still laws in the South that keep blacks and whites separated in all public places. We still have a way to go before those laws are broken down. It's not just the South with their Jim Crow laws. There will be hotels in the North and Midwest that will try to keep Jackie out. But the Dodgers will figure a way to keep the team together whenever they can."

Dad paused a moment, then continued. "There's more news that's not so good. Pete Reiser, the Dodgers star outfielder, injured his ankle. After years of serious injuries, they're saying his career is over. Mr. Rickey offered Pete this year off with pay so he could recover, but he refused."

"Pete should listen to Mr. Rickey," I said. "Right, Dad?"

"Maybe, son. Pete's career is on the fence. We'll have to see. Jackie Robinson has some issues, too."

I almost knocked over my chocolate milk. "Jackie?"

"That's right. Even though he won the Rookie of the Year award last season, he showed up at spring training twenty-five pounds overweight this year."

"So he's on a diet?"

"He'll lose weight fast. Durocher's so mad that he called Jackie an old lady. He'll make him run hard and sweat away pounds so fast, Jackie won't need a diet." Dad chuckled.

Poor Jackie, I thought. Daniel, one of my friends, was overweight. Boy, did the kids tease him! I never forget the day he ran crying out of school before the last bell. The next day, the principal punished the kids who'd teased Daniel, but I knew it had hurt his feelings.

"But what will happen if Jackie doesn't lose the weight?"

Dad made a mighty grim face. "He'll be fired," he replied.

Fire Jackie! I thought. *Could that really happen?*

After breakfast, I met up with my best friend, Sena, so we could walk the two blocks to P.S. 244, our elementary school.

"The Dodgers started spring training in the Dominican Republic," I announced as soon as our footsteps were in sync.

"That's weird," she replied. "How come they're not in Florida like the Yankees?"

"Because their training facility in Florida isn't finished yet," I explained. Sena was the only kid I knew from Brooklyn who preferred the New York Yankees over the Dodgers. "I'm a little worried about Jackie and Pete Reiser," I added.

“How come?” Sena asked.

“Jackie’s overweight, and Pete’s injured,” I replied.

“They sure better get in shape fast if they have any hopes of beating the Yankees! You know what happened in the World Series last year . . .” Sena declared.

I shot Sena a look. “This year isn’t last year. You just wait and see.”

“Hey, let’s do something fun after school,” she said.

“Stickball?” I offered.

“Too cold,” Sena replied. “Can you come over to my house and play Scrabble? Mom will make us egg creams. Please?”

“With Fox’s U-bet syrup?”

Sena nodded.

“My favorite! I’ll check with my mother,” I said, my mouth already tasting the mix of chocolate syrup, cream, and soda water.

“You aren’t in trouble again, are you?” Sena asked.

“Not exactly, but Miss Maliken sent home another note.”

“Let me guess. Missing homework?”

“You got it,” I replied. “Luckily, that’s all she wrote on the note.”

“Is there more?”

“I got in some trouble last week.”

“What happened?”

“Not much . . .” I said with a chuckle. “I sat in the last row in music class. The violin section was on break and I was bored. I could tell Josh was, too, so I decided to spice things up. I pulled the cord from the window shade behind Josh and tied it to his pants. When the bell rang, Josh hopped up without realizing he was attached to the cord. His pants ripped open and the whole class saw his underwear. It was hilarious until the window shade began to tear right up the middle.”

“Stephen!” Sena shouted.

“Josh turned all red and started screaming at me,” I went on. “Kids circled all around us, laughing while Josh struggled to untie the cord.”

“Does this story have a funny ending or a bad one?” Sena asked.

“It’s not over,” I replied. “The music teacher rushed to the back of the room just as Josh was ready to sock me one. He stepped between us and sent Josh to the principal’s office so he could call his mother and get a new pair of pants. I got sent to Miss Maliken. She kept me after school, made me wash blackboards in six classrooms, and gave me a final warning. She was even threatening to go to my house and talk to my parents.”

Sena’s eyes were wide open. “This could have a very bad ending.” Sena groaned. “Two days ago, Robin and I got into a hair-pulling fight on the playground. I think Miss Maliken has had it with me,

too.”

“Think she’ll really go to my house?”

“She might,” Sena said.

“Yikes! Bad timing,” I told her.

“Because?”

“Baseball season, silly. I’m hoping to go to the Dodgers opener,” I replied.

“Then why don’t you start doing your homework?” Sena asked.

“I will, and I’ll even hand it in on time,” I added as we signed off with a pinkie shake and headed to our classrooms.

But the very next day, I got caught playing stickball in the hallway on the third floor. My fate was sealed. Terrified, I waited outside my classroom for Sena. “I’ve got to talk to you,” I told her as soon as she stepped out the door.

“Geez, Steve. What’s the emergency?”

“Follow me,” I insisted. We crept away from the rest of the students. “I overheard Miss Maliken tell the principal that she was going to make a home visit.”

“Today? To your house?” asked Sena.

“I think so,” I replied.

“Maybe we can talk her out of it?”

“How?”

“I’m not sure. But let’s wait outside and see what direction Miss Maliken heads when she comes out of the building,” Sena said.

“Then what?” I asked.

“If it looks like she’s headed toward your house, we stop her.”

“I don’t think we can convince her not to visit my house.”

“You could tell Miss Maliken that your mother is home sick and wouldn’t want any company,” Sena suggested.

“That’s a lie,” I said flatly.

“We’ll think of something. Just follow my lead,” Sena said, yanking my shirt by the collar and pulling me with her.

Scared, we huddled in the shadows of the school building. When our teacher reached the sidewalk we sprang into action.

“Miss Maliken,” I shouted.

“Hey, Miss Maliken,” Sena called out.

My teacher stopped a few feet away from us. She was a petite woman, not much taller than Sena and me, but I was intimidated as we approached her. I looked over at Sena for strength. I was surpris

to see Sena's hand reaching toward Miss Maliken, but I followed her lead. Together we pushed Miss Maliken, then watched in shock as she toppled over the hedge. The air filled with her screams. I reached over the hedge to help her up but was pushed aside by a dozen mothers and grandmothers who'd come to her aid. Women scrambled to help her. I lost track of Sena while being dragged home by a pack of irate women and my red-faced teacher.

My punishment was swift and harsh. With a ten-day suspension from school and a long list of restrictions at home, I'd ruined my chances of going to the Dodgers opening day.

I knew that pushing my teacher was wrong. And boy, did I pay for it. Ten days of doing extra chores around the house—washing all the dishes and taking out the garbage. Keeping my room clean. I had to make my bed every morning while I was out of school.

The worst part was that I couldn't listen to the radio or ask my dad about how the Dodgers were doing in spring training. It was so boring. I needed to be on my best behavior to have the punishment lifted, so I didn't bother him. I spent most of the time catching up on my missing homework. But I had so many questions. Were they winning? Was Jackie losing the weight? This was torture!

Ten long days later, Dad brought me into the living room.

"Miss Maliken called," he said. "She received your letter of apology and your schoolwork. Your school suspension has been lifted."

"Does that mean I go back to my class in the morning?" I asked. Ten days away from my friends had me missing everything about school.

"They're ready for you, Stephen. The question is . . . are you ready to go back to them?"

"I've learned my lesson," I said.

Dad looked curiously at me. "What lesson is that, son?"

"That I have to be responsible for my behavior and follow the rules," I told him.

"That's an important lesson, Stephen."

"So can I go back to school?"

"You really missed it, didn't you?"

"It's been a long ten days," I admitted.

"You can go back to school tomorrow," Dad said.

"What about at home . . . am I still on punishment?"

"No, Stephen, you're not. Your mother and I have been pleased with your willingness to help out at home and your positive attitude. We expect you to keep it up. Same with your school performance. Miss Maliken will give us daily reports. Your schoolwork is to be done before you go out to play. And you must hand it in on time. Stephen, it's more than just following rules. You must learn to control your impulses or you'll continue to get into trouble. Do you understand me?" Dad asked.

"Sure. I've got to stop acting without thinking about the consequences."

"That's correct," Dad replied.

"I got it, Dad."

"Okay, let's go get some breakfast. Your mother saves making pancakes for special days. I think

this qualifies. Don't you?"

"One of the best days . . . next to Dodgers opening day, of course," I replied. "I missed you reading the sports pages to me. Can we talk about the Dodgers while we eat?"

Dad chuckled and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. "You bet. I've missed sharing the news with you."

In between bites of pancakes and slurps of chocolate milk, I peppered Dad with questions. "How's Jackie's weight?"

"It's down," Dad told me. "He still has a way to go."

"Jackie'll do it, Dad. I know he will," I said.

"There's other news . . . Eddie Stanky was traded to Boston. Pete Reiser's looking healthy for the time being, so he's at first base now and Jackie's playing second, where he belongs."

"Gee, Dad . . . did I miss all of spring training?"

"No, but the Dodgers will be finishing up spring training and exhibition games in Vero Beach. After that, they'll barnstorm through some Southern towns."

"Barnstorm? That's when the team travels to a bunch of towns to play practice games, right?"

"That's right. It's a great way for a team to get into shape, playing exhibition games."

"When are they coming home?"

"Late April, son. So we've got time," Dad replied.

"Think we can go to opening day at Ebbets Field?" I asked.

Dad laughed. "Let's see how the next few weeks go before we make any big plans. The Dodgers season is nine months. Certainly we'll make a game or two," Dad said.

"Gotcha," I replied, feeling hopeful. "Can I call Sena and see if she wants to play stickball?"

"If it's okay with your mother," Dad replied.

An hour later, Sena and I, armed with sticks and a Spalding ball, rode our bikes to the school yard. The courts were filled with other boys and girls. We joined a bunch of kids from our school and started up a game. It felt good to be outside playing with friends. We didn't mind the cold air. Actually, it felt good to run around in. I proudly batted with my toes pointed inward like my pigeon-toed hero, Jackie Robinson.

I wasn't the best hitter and I didn't run very fast. So the other kids held out little hope that I'd score. Still, I swung that wooden stick so hard that it grazed the ball and I got on base. The rest was easier. When I got a chance to run, I'd race around the bases, mustering enough body warmth to keep me going. I was all heart.

Afterward, when we were riding our bikes home, Sena told me that she had heard a black family planned on buying the two-family house at 5224 Tilden Avenue.

"Big deal," I told her.

"My mom said that only Jews should live in our neighborhood," Sena insisted.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Maybe so we can all go to the same temple?” she suggested. “Or so the neighborhood stays the way it already is?”

I slammed on the brakes and stared back at my friend in disbelief. “I’m going home.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Sena asked.

“This whole talk makes me mad!” I yelled as I sped away.

“What about a quick game of stoopball?” Sena called.

“Not today,” I yelled back at her. I didn’t understand my sudden anger, but I knew it had to do with what my friend had said. All I could think of was how hard Jackie had fought his first season with the Dodgers just because his skin was black. Players and fans tried to make Jackie quit so they could keep baseball a white man’s game. Jackie fought back with a well-timed base steal and a mighty swing.

I reached home, hot and frustrated. I stomped through the kitchen and grabbed a quick snack on my way into my room. Trying to make sense of my feelings, I pulled out the tin can that held my most precious baseball cards. I separated them so the Dodgers starting lineup was on top. Jackie was in the mix. *Could Brooklyn win the World Series without him? Could they even get back there if he wasn’t on the team?* I wondered. I skimmed Jackie’s statistics for his rookie year. He’d batted .297, scored 125 runs, and stole 29 bases. His great play was a big part of the Dodgers making it last year. “Pretty impressive,” I muttered. I studied his rookie card before slipping it back on top of the heap—he was the Rookie of the Year, that doesn’t come easy.

Over dinner, I told my father what Sena had said.

Dad leaned in toward me until our foreheads touched. “Son, that’s nonsense and flat-out prejudice,” he said.

Mom walked into the dining room as we were talking. She set the platter of baked chicken and boiled potatoes mixed with carrots in the middle of the table and joined the conversation.

“Some of those same neighbors brought a petition by for your dad and me to sign. It said that they objected to the sale of 5224 Tilden Avenue to a Negro family. I started to tear it up, but ripped into the lady instead,” Mom said.

“What’d you say to her, Ma?” I asked.

“I told her that no Jew should sign that petition.”

I folded my hands in my lap and played thumb wrestle. I was worried. If they didn’t want Negroes in the neighborhood, they wouldn’t want them to play baseball, either. Could this petition get Jackie kicked off the team?

“How come?” I asked.

“Let’s finish this conversation after dinner,” Mom suggested.

Dad led us in prayer and then we ate.

I was starving, so I dove into my meal, tearing the tender brown meat off the leg and thigh bones.

A tense silence filled the air—my stack of baseball cards was all I could think about. I knew Jackie's staying with the Dodgers and Negroes' moving onto my block were connected. But how?

When my belly was full, I peered up at my dad. I wanted to lift the mood in our dining room. He smiled over at me and I sighed. Maybe the news wasn't all bad.

I watched as Dad pushed his plate a few inches forward. He cleared his throat. "Prejudice, Steve, when you judge a person based on the color of their skin or their religion and not by their character. Prejudice leads to discrimination."

"Like what happened with Jackie during spring training when the Dodgers had to play in the Dominican Republic so that they could all stay in the same hotel?" I asked.

"Exactly," Dad replied. "You won't remember this, Steve, but in 1946, Jackie trained with a Dodgers farm team, the Montreal Royals, in Florida. The hotels refused to let Jackie stay with the team because he was a black man. Instead, he stayed in private homes in the black community."

"That's not fair," I said.

"Exactly, son. That's why Branch Rickey had the 1947 Dodgers train in Cuba and this year he brought them to the Dominican Republic. The color of their skin kept black and Latin players out of Major League Baseball for many years, until last year when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. Still, there are a number of baseball teams that are hesitant to field a black and white team. Well, there is also discrimination in neighborhoods. Families who are a different race or come from foreign countries or are Jewish are not welcome and cannot buy or rent an apartment or a house in certain communities. Prejudice and discrimination are wrong, son. Our family will not discriminate against another person."

I smiled, feeling proud of my Dodgers and my family. "So how come Sena's mother wants to keep a black family out of our neighborhood?" I asked.

"Stevie"—my mother stepped in—"we don't know that Sena's mother is prejudiced. This neighborhood has been all Jewish for years. Sena's mom may have been explaining to Sena why some of our neighbors were afraid of changing our neighborhood."

"Your mother's right. We can only speak for ourselves. This household remembers how horribly history has treated people of the Jewish faith. That knowledge makes us opposed to any kind of discrimination."

"What do you mean?" I asked my dad.

"Do you remember that your bubbe and zayde, my parents, left Russia for America when they were in their twenties?"

"Sure," I said. "They still talk with accents."

"They fled Russia, along with two million other Jewish families, hoping to find freedom to practice their religion, live wherever they want, send their children to school, and get a job to support their families," my father explained.

“In Russia, Jews were treated very badly,” my mother added. “There was a lot of violence against them, and many men, women, and children were hurt or killed simply because they were Jewish. They were forced to give up their homes, close down their synagogues, and live in overcrowded conditions in extreme poverty. Russian Jews could not get jobs and their children had limited access to education. So they escaped these terrible conditions in hopes of providing a better life for their families. This happened a long time ago. Long before you or your father and I were born. Your grandparents had the courage to immigrate to the United States.”

“That’s right, Steve,” my father said. “Because of their courage, we now have a better life, but not one that is free of prejudice or discrimination. Some of our neighbors are afraid that opening the neighborhood to people of different faiths, cultures, and races will somehow threaten their way of life. Your mother and I don’t feel this way. We believe in freedom for all people regardless of race, religion, or culture. We welcome families of different faiths and races into our community.”

“That’s why we didn’t sign the petition,” Mom said. “It could have prevented a Negro family from buying a house in this neighborhood. We didn’t agree.”

I sat for a minute trying to put their words together. I sort of understood but could only make sense of it in baseball terms. “Jackie Robinson is one of the best players the Dodgers have ever had, black or white. And now the Dodgers will finally win a World Series. Everyone will see what Jackie can do,” I stated firmly.

“That’s a good analogy, son. Some people wanted to keep baseball all white. But after Jackie’s rookie year and the Dodgers’ success, they’ve learned a lesson. We’re stronger and better when we don’t judge people by the color of their skin or their religion. And, together, we *will* make a winning team.”

I beamed.

As far as I could tell, Jackie Robinson was safe for now.

The next day, Sena pulled me aside. “Still mad at me?” she asked.

“Not really,” I replied.

“Good, because I took some money from my piggy bank so we can stop by the candy store and get milk shakes.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “I can’t stay long, though.”

“Me either,” Sena replied.

We walked over to the Jenkins Candy Shoppe in silence.

“I wasn’t really mad at you. I was just mad,” I told Sena as we climbed up on leather-covered bar stools and ordered two vanilla shakes.

Sena looked embarrassed. “My dad was pretty mad, too. Especially when Mom told him that some of the neighbors sent around a paper asking people to sign up saying that they didn’t want Negroes in our neighborhood. Mom told me that some of our neighbors were afraid of change. She admitted that was her first reaction, too, but she understands now that we can’t be afraid of change or judge someone else based on their differences from us.”

“We had the same talk at my house,” I said. “My parents refused to sign that paper. I’d hate for the Dodgers to go back to an all-white team.”

“Yeah. Jackie’s brought so much excitement to Brooklyn,” Sena agreed.

“True. Since Jackie’s joined the Dodgers, two other teams have signed Negro players. Cleveland brought Larry Doby to the Indians. Hank Thompson plays for the St. Louis Browns. And now Mr. Rickey’s talking about moving their top catcher prospect, Roy Campanella, up from the Minors.”

“Think he’ll make it in time for opening day?” Sena asked.

“I sure hope so,” I said.

“Will you be there?”

“I heard Dad tell my mother that he had to work,” I muttered.

“My father has opening day tickets taped to the refrigerator. It’s all he talks about,” Sena said.

“Is he taking you?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? I’m the only one in the family who’s a Yankees fan. Dad wouldn’t waste his money taking me to a Dodgers game.”

I laughed. “Maybe you’ll get to go when the Dodgers beat the Yankees in the World Series.”

“Keep dreaming,” Sena replied.

We finished our milk shakes and raced each other to my front porch. Sena won by a foot.

Embarrassed, I challenged her to a do-over and beat her! I was glad we could put our fight behind us.

Later, I was upstairs in my room finishing math homework when my father peeked in the doorway. “Hi, son,” he greeted me. His face had a wide grin plastered across it as if he had a secret.

“Hey, Dad,” I called out, studying a man who usually wasn’t so cheerful after work.

“I have good news,” Dad said, venturing inside my room.

“You got us opening day tickets?”

“No, Stephen. I do not have opening day tickets,” Dad replied.

Maybe we really weren’t going to the Dodgers opener, I thought. My father sat on the edge of my bed.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but my news may cheer you up. You remember we talked about a black family buying 5224 Tilden Avenue?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, the sale went through. The Palin family will move in soon.”

“What about that piece of paper and the neighbors not wanting a Negro family to move in?”

“Turns out that only a couple of people signed the petition,” Dad explained. “Most of our neighbors feel as your mother and I do. The Palins should not have any trouble from the neighbors. They will be welcome.”

“Is that the good news?” I asked.

“Part of it,” Dad replied. “The real estate agent who sold the house to the Palins is a customer of mine at the shoe store. He came in today and told me that the Palins have rented the top floor of their house to a player from the Dodgers!”

I jumped up from my desk chair and faced my father. “*Are you kidding?*” I’d heard that players lived in regular Brooklyn neighborhoods, but I’d never dreamed I’d be so lucky to have one live near me. “Who is it, Dad?”

“That’s the thing,” my father said. “My friend said he wasn’t at liberty to share that information. I think they’re waiting until the lease is signed. So I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Aw,” I sighed. “Gee, Dad . . . do you think it’s Pee Wee?”

Dad stood up. “I don’t know.”

“Jackie?”

“Stephen, stop guessing. We’ll know soon.”

I couldn’t sleep that night. I stayed awake thinking about my new neighbors. I knew that when the baseball season was over, players usually returned to their home communities so they could work. At the start of the season, they had to find a new place to rent closer to their teams. Some players shared rooms in private homes and walked to work at Ebbets Field. So it could be any of the players.

At breakfast, I pressed Dad for more details. “Since the Palins are Negroes, it makes sense that they’d rent to a black family. So it’s either the Robinsons or maybe Roy Campanella.”

“That’s a possibility, but just because the Palins are Negroes doesn’t mean their tenant will be black,” Dad reminded me.

“True, but you have to admit it’s likely,” I pressed.

“The Dodgers have forty players on their roster. It could be any of those men.”

“I bet you it’s Jackie,” I announced, jumping up from the table and dancing around the kitchen, shouting, “Jackie! Jackie! Jackie!”

“Sit down, Stephen,” Dad commanded. “You’re getting ahead of yourself. And don’t go to school bragging that Jackie Robinson is moving to Tilden Avenue.”

“Really . . . Dad? A Dodgers player two doors down. I don’t care who it is,” I said. “This is a dream come true.”

He chuckled. “I understand, son.”

The next couple of weeks were absolute torture. In late March, a moving van pulled up in front of 5224. I ran out of the house without a jacket and plopped down on the top step. I watched as the Palin family’s furniture was unloaded from the truck and hauled into the bottom floor. As evening set in, Mom called me inside for dinner.

“The new family has moved in,” I reported.

“Yes, I saw the van. Did you see any children?”

“A boy and girl, but they look like teenagers,” I told her.

“Is that why you look so disappointed?” Mom asked.

“I was hoping it was the ballplayer’s moving van.”

“It shouldn’t be much longer, Steve. I’m planning on cooking a pot roast and taking it over to Mr. Palin tomorrow. Want to come with me?”

“Sure,” I replied. “Think Mrs. Palin will tell us who’s going to be living on the top floor?”

“I don’t know, Stephen. And you are not to bring it up. We’re going over there to welcome the Palins to the neighborhood, not pry into their private business,” Mom scolded.

“But, Mom . . .” I moaned.

“Whoever moves into 5224 obviously wants privacy. They have to deal with fans at the ballpark. When they come home, they’re family men just like your dad. He’ll want time for his family. You will have to respect that, Stephen. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Mom. I won’t be a pest,” I promised.

The next morning, we walked over to greet our new neighbors. It was cold, but I was sweating under my jacket. Would Mrs. Palin tell us who was renting her top floor? Would I be disappointed if it was an unknown player? Or would I get the best news of my life?

Mrs. Palin opened the door on the first ring.

“Good morning,” Mom began. “My name is Sarah Satlow and this is my son, Stephen. We are your neighbors. We wanted to welcome you to Tilden Avenue.”

“How lovely and unexpected,” Mrs. Palin proclaimed. “It’s nice to meet you both. My name is Elinor Palin. Stephen, you’ll see my children around the neighborhood. They’re a bit older than you and go to Tilden High School. You must be at the elementary school, right?”

“Yes, Mrs. Palin,” I replied politely.

“We know how chaotic it is to move, so I baked a pot roast for you and your family,” Mom said, handing Mrs. Palin a covered pan, still warm, along with brownies wrapped in wax paper.

“It smells divine,” Mrs. Palin said. “Thank you.”

Sweat dripped down my neck. Should I risk making my mother angry by asking Mrs. Palin about her future tenant? Or should I keep quiet?

“Are you a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, Stephen?” Mrs. Palin asked.

“I’m a big fan,” I replied, relieved that she brought up the subject.

“Who are your favorite players?”

“Jackie and Pee Wee are my top two. But I also like Ralph Branca and Carl Erskine. Why?”

“Just curious,” Mrs. Palin replied, with a twinkle in her eye.

“But—” I started to push, then looked up at my mom and shut my mouth.

“I know there’s a rumor that one of the Dodgers is moving in upstairs,” Mrs. Palin said.

I nodded.

“Well, Stephen. My husband made me promise not to tell anyone who our tenant is going to be. So we’ll all just have to wait to see who moves in,” Mrs. Palin said with a warm smile.

I almost fell to the ground and screamed out in frustration. Not another person telling me to wait. No, I couldn’t stand it! I barely heard my mother say good-bye. Tears in my eyes, I followed her back to our house.

I trudged up the stairs, feeling mad. “Why didn’t she tell us?”

“For all the reasons we discussed earlier,” Mom said.

“I still think it’s Jackie.”

That night I was sitting on the front stoop when Dad came home from work. He saw me staring down the block at our new neighbor’s house.

“Your mother told me you met the Palins today.”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“I’ve been debating about when was the right time to tell you this,” Dad said.

“Tell me what?”

“I now know who is renting from the Palins,” he replied.

“Who is it, Dad? You’ve got to tell me. Please?” I begged.

“Until they move in, we won’t know for sure,” Dad teased.

“Is it who I’ve been wishing for?”

Dad chuckled. "I think you'll be very happy," he said.

"Dad, are you telling me that Jackie Robinson is going to be my neighbor?"

He beamed. "I saw Mr. Palin today. He told me that Jackie and his family have signed the lease for April first."

I couldn't believe it! Jackie Robinson! I jumped into Dad's arms, yelling with joy. But Dad's laughter worried me. It was almost April 1 and he loved a good April Fool's joke. I pulled away from him. "Are you making up a story?"

"I wouldn't do that to you, son."

"Is it *really* true, Dad?"

"It's true, son. Mr. Palin said that Mrs. Robinson is driving their Cadillac across country with her brother, Raymond, and little Jackie Junior. They're expected in New York sometime between April fifth and seventh—"

"What about Jackie?"

"He's still barnstorming with the team, Steve."

"Oh, yeah. That's right. Is Jackie Junior my age?" I asked.

"I think he's younger than you. You'll know soon," Dad replied.

"I'll bet they'll be here tomorrow. Can I stay home from school?"

"I'm not even going to respond to that question, Steve."

I laughed it off. "All right, Dad, but will you come get me out of school the minute the moving van pulls up?"

"No," my dad said. "I'll be at work and you'll be at school. You've got to give the Robinsons privacy, Steve. Promise me you won't drive Mrs. Robinson crazy with questions about Jackie."

I slid down to the step below my dad. I honestly didn't know how I'd react to Jackie Robinson's living so close to me. It was just too important. None of my friends would even believe me until Jackie actually moved in. I looked up at my dad and shrugged my shoulders. "I'll try not to be a pest," I promised.

I jumped off the stoop. "Time me," I insisted before racing to Jackie Robinson's new house and back. "How long did that take, Dad?"

"Thirty seconds, tops," Dad said.

"Just think, I'll be living that close to a Brooklyn Dodgers player!" I shouted.

Every day after school, Sena and I would race home hoping to find a moving van parked outside of 5224 Tilden Avenue. Wednesday, April 7, I got my wish. We broke into a trot, reaching the truck just as two men lifted an off-white couch from the back of the van.

My heart pounded so hard I was sure the men would see it beating under my coat. I wanted so badly to peek inside the house, but Sena wouldn't let go of my hand. Instead, we stood back and

watched for a glimpse of the Robinson family.

We stood out there for what felt like forever without seeing anyone.

Finally, Sena had to get back home. I knew my mom wouldn't want me to be out there trying to see the Robinsons, so I headed home, too.

This wait was driving me crazy! I kicked a small stone in frustration as I walked toward my stoop.

"There's a moving truck outside the Robinsons'," I reported as soon as I got inside and Mom shut the door.

"I know, honey."

We sat in the kitchen snacking on crisp carrots and apple juice. I was antsy to get back outside and continue looking for our new neighbors. "Can I ride my bike?"

"You promised your father that you wouldn't pester the Robinsons," Mom reminded me.

"I just want to make sure it's them. That's all," I protested.

"Move-in day is stressful. Give them space. Saturday, we can pick cherry blossoms and bring them over to Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. How does that sound?"

"Fine," I muttered. "I'll just sit on the stoop."

"You may not leave the yard," my mother told me.

"I won't."

I sat on the top step until the workmen brought the last piece of furniture into the house. I spotted Mrs. Robinson and her son once, but there was no sign of Jackie. I was being cool and staying at a safe distance from the Robinsons' home. But I couldn't guarantee how I'd react when Jackie appeared. My stomach was in knots. I almost cried when the moving van pulled away from the curb and Mom called me inside.

Saturday morning, I was up before sunrise. I opened my bedroom window and stuck my head out. I stayed there until Mom pulled me back inside.

"Stephen," she scolded. "How many times do I have to tell you not to lean out of the window?"

"Oh, Ma . . . I was just looking for Jackie."

"Get dressed. After breakfast, we'll pick some cherry blossoms from the tree in our front yard and take them over to the Robinsons' house."

I jumped into my mother's arms, kissing her generously on both cheeks. She hugged me tight. "Thank you, Mom."

Chuckling, my mother reminded me that Jackie might still be traveling. "Try not to show your disappointment, Steve."

I looked up at her, wondering how to pull that off.

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