

IF YOU BUILD IT...

DWIER BROWN

Praise for *If You Build It...*

“Dwier Brown is a great storyteller—I couldn’t put his book down! He entertains us with behind-the-scenes stories about *Field of Dreams*. He moves us with stories about his own father and the fathers of countless strangers who have approached him because of his role in the movie. He delights us with colorful tales of growing up in rural Ohio and overcoming his inherited stoicism to become an actor. If you loved *Field of Dreams*, or if you just love your father—or wish you could—you’ll love this book.”

– Lawrence Kessenich, editor of *Shoeless Joe*, the basis for *Field of Dreams*

“For Dwier Brown, who played Kevin Costner’s father in *Field of Dreams*, it was the scene of a lifetime. For fans, it was a powerful, evocative game of catch that still resonates 25 years later. Many actors may have bigger names, but few could write as artfully about their craft. Read this book, and you’ll know much more about the movie, the meaning and the man behind the magic.”

– Tyler Kepner, the *New York Times*

“It’s no surprise that Dwier Brown beautifully captures what it was like to film the ending of *Field of Dreams* – after all, he is the ending. What is a revelation is the deeply emotional and honest telling of his story, and – just like the movie – of a father-son relationship you won’t forget.”

– Phil Robinson, writer/director of *Field of Dreams*

“The book is amazing. With *If You Build It...*, Brown makes a powerful literary statement of his own, and reminds us again about the magical, complicated, and lasting bond between fathers and sons. It is a personal journey you won’t want to miss.”

– Christian Red, the *New York Daily News*

“Dwier Brown has written a wonderfully wry and unforgettably charming memoir. He makes a poetic and convincing case that he was somehow fated, if not born, to play the role of John Kinsella, and in his book he has chronicled America’s love for baseball and for a movie that touches the heart of anyone who’s ever missed his dad.”

– Rick Cleveland, Emmy-winning writer and producer
The West Wing, Six Feet Under and House Of Cards

“Dwier Brown is a master story-teller, writing from his heart and awakening yours.”

- Marianne Williamson, author of *A Return To Love*

“Dwier Brown’s *If You Build It...* is, on the surface, about five unforgettable moments in a cornfield in the movie *Field of Dreams*. But it is much more about baseball and dreams and overcoming disappointments and fathers. When I finished it. I wanted to call my Dad and say “Wanna play catch?”

- Joe Posnanski, NBC Sports, former writer at *Sports Illustrated*,
twice voted best sports columnist in America
by the Associated Press Sports Editors

“Dwier Brown has written a wonderful book. He’s managed to elicit much of the same pathos of the movie. He’s deftly woven the narrative of the film’s creation, the narrative of his career, the evolution of his relationship with his father, and the extrapolation of all of our relationships with our fathers and sons. I absolutely LOVE all of the interludes. Not only are they examples of some of his best writing, but wow, every one of them brought tears to my eyes.”

- Brad Herzog, *Why Not Books*

“Wow. I can’t ever remember reading any book that was such a beautiful combination of warm stories, humor, personal reflection, intimate sharing, honesty and vulnerability, gentleness and insight... it is a major accomplishment, and a wonderful and inspiring contribution on many levels. I was touched and moved over and over again. I feel inspired by it.”

- David Feigin, producer

“I have to give author Dwier Brown a lot of credit. His honest story telling invites you in like an old friend, and his relationships – those with his father, his mother, even stars of the movie – feel like my own. I encourage anyone who’s a fan of the movie or looking to explore their relationship with their own father to give this one a read. You’ll finish the book in one sitting, whether that was your intention or not.”

- David Sickels, editor for *The Post Newspapers*

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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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For My Parents

Walter Warren Brown
(March 7, 1921 – June 13, 1988)

and

Elsie Jean Ferris Brown
(November 5, 1922)

If You Build It . . .

LIVING AND DYING IN L.A.

*“There are only two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.”*

- Albert Einstein

In the fall of 1986, I was desperate. My acting career was at a standstill. I had spent a year and a half doing plays in Chicago, and I hit the ground in Los Angeles at a full run in 1981. I had played Stuie, one of the Cleary sons, in the acclaimed miniseries the *Thorn Birds* and a doctor in *To Live and Die in L.A.*, helmed by Academy Award-winning director William Friedkin. I had done a succession of guest star roles on television, but I felt like I was dying.

The feeling had some basis in reality: In the previous five years I had been killed over a dozen times. In films and on TV, I had been shot to death six times, died of a heart attack, been lynched, and knifed and, in the *Thorn Birds*, run over by a wild pig (which I affectionately called being “boared to death”). On stage, I had been stabbed, died of old age and, in an amazing *tour de force* of death, had my neck broken *and* died of an aneurism in the same play.

If expiring repeatedly in various roles wasn't a metaphor for my dying career, I don't know what was. Having had some success in my first few years in Hollywood, I was disillusioned by how empty “success” felt and how most of the shows I was dying in weren't changing the world the

way I had imagined they would when I left my family's farm to become an actor six years earlier.

So, on Halloween night in 1986, I made a deal with God. As I was getting ready to go to a costume party dressed as my favorite movie star, Jimmy Stewart, I looked in the full-length mirror. There I was, dressed in an old-fashioned football jersey. I turned to look at the paused, flickering image of Mr. Stewart on my VCR from the "I'd lasso the moon" scene and I took stock. It seemed hopeless. In that dark, desperate moment of despair, I told God that if He would put me in just one "meaningful" film like *It's A Wonderful Life*, I would try to use that opportunity to help people.

I had come to love Frank Capra's classic 1946 film about the suicidal George Bailey, who magically gets to see what the world would be like without him and finally realizes his value. As a kid, I knew the movie was corny but, as I got older, I realized what a gift it would be to see the difference we each make in the lives of others.

I wanted to use what I had learned becoming an actor to help people and I wanted the film industry to make movies that could make that happen. In short, I wanted to change the world. So on a dark Halloween night in my apartment in Hollywood I made that deal with God. But like many people who make such deals, after the panic passed, I forgot all about it.

I didn't know then that subtle forces were at work to make my dream come true. I would be given the chance to be in a movie that would change people's lives, but I would have to be ready for it to change my life, too. For once, I wouldn't have to play a character who dies at the end of the movie, I would have to play one who is dead before the movie even starts.

GREEN ACRES

“Green acres is the place for me.

Farm livin’ is the life for me.

Land spreadin’ out so far and wide...”

- *Green Acres* TV show theme song, by Vic Mizzy

When I was eight years old, in the middle of my fourth grade year, my father got the idea that he should move his family from the comfort of our suburban duplex to a farm in the middle of nowhere.

The house he found was a hulking two-story affair in Sharon Center, Ohio. It had been built in 1818 and had been struck by lightning sometime in the 1930’s, causing the roof to be partially burned off. Although the charred roof had been covered over, there were no indoor toilets and the house was in such a state of disrepair that the farmer who was selling the 52 acres on which it stood was willing to throw in the house for *free*.

It seemed like a great deal to my father, who had been forced to abandon his dream of becoming a doctor and given up his dream of corporate success, but still had his dream of remodeling an old house. Even though the house was free, my mother, sister, brother and I were sure Dad was getting taken. But we moved in anyway.

On the slushy, January morning of my ninth birthday, after I got up for school and walked through the drizzle and melting snow to go to the

bathroom in our corrugated iron outhouse (there was *still* no indoor toilet), I found myself standing on a makeshift ladder leading down to our new, dirt basement (there were no stairs), passing buckets of muddy meltwater to my siblings who would, in turn, pass them on to my mother who would toss them onto the pile of dirty, melting slush in our side yard.

Back and forth we passed the buckets as my father cheerfully yelled “Bucket brigade!” from his position in freezing, calf-deep mudwater in the shallow basement, hoping to fool us into thinking that this emergency morning flood was some kind of an impromptu dawn submarine game, and not a preview of our new life on *Green Acres*. No one was fooled.

For the next twelve years, until I moved to Chicago to become an actor, my brother and sister and I tore down lath and plaster walls and built new ones with drywall, moved every door in the house to a different location, dug the entire basement four feet deeper, by hand with a pick and shovel, mixed and poured dozens of yards of concrete walls and floors in that basement, tore off the front porch and built a back porch, constructed rock walls, tilled, planted, weeded and harvested a one-acre garden every year, and, most importantly to *us*, built two indoor bathrooms with toilets.

Our weekends were rarely our own and we started early on whatever project struck my father’s fancy. We put in a septic system, connected natural gas, re-wired and re-plumbed the entire house. We got rid of the coal furnace and replaced it with a forced air gas furnace and a wood stove.

My father had no training in construction but was curious and fearless and filled the house with how-to books and *Popular Mechanics* magazines. While replacing a set of upstairs windows, he found some termite damage and when my mother returned from grocery shopping, she found an entire side of the two-story house removed, exposing their bedroom to passing cars, like a giant dollhouse dropped into the green countryside.

I can still remember my mother’s look of horror as she drove in the

driveway to see us waving to her through what had been the solid walls of her bedroom.

BEFORE SUNRISE

“To translate this situation would be like trying to stuff a cloud in a suitcase.”

- W. P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe*

It was still dark. I was the first one in the transpo van so it was a little awkward. I didn't know the driver; he didn't know me. We were in the parking lot of the Dubuque Best Western and it dawned on me that I could be making a big mistake.

“Is this the van to the *Shoeless Joe* set?”

The movie *Field of Dreams* was originally called *Shoeless Joe*, the title of the book on which it was based.

“Yeah.” He shifted in his seat to look at me in the mirror. “Didja think you were in the wrong van?” I could tell he was smiling, even in the dark. His Midwestern accent was thick and familiar and I relaxed.

“It occurred to me.”

“That'd be a great way to start the day, eh?” The flat vowels were like butter melting on corn.

Some of the crew guys climbed into the van, looking beat. I noticed from the call sheet that they had just switched from night shoots to days, so everyone was probably still adjusting. I moved to the back with my gym bag, so it was easier for them to get in.

I pulled the script out, even though it was still too dark to read. I had been carrying it around for weeks, as if I could absorb some of the

magic of the story by osmosis. I had learned onstage that sometimes it's harder to do a small part, because the tendency is to make each word too precious. I already knew my lines, but the stack of paper felt good in my lap.

I had been given the novel *Shoeless Joe* years earlier by a friend from high school, but I had never dreamed that they would make a movie out of it and that, one day, I would be cast in it.

"Shoeless" Joe Jackson was a real baseball player accused of conspiring to lose the World Series for the Chicago White Sox in 1919. The resulting trial was called the Black Sox Scandal, and despite being acquitted of any wrongdoing (Jackson had a Series-leading .375 batting average, with no errors), Shoeless Joe and seven of his teammates were banned from baseball for life.

The novel was a fantasy about Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer, obeying a Voice that tells him to build a baseball diamond in the middle of his cornfield, so that Shoeless Joe can magically come back from the dead to play there.

The story was perfect. It reminded me of my dream of becoming an actor, and how crazy that had seemed to everyone I knew in my farming community. Now, here I was, back in the Midwest to shoot a major motion picture—an uplifting story that might inspire other people to follow their dreams.

As the van sped along the interstate, the sun had just cleared the horizon behind us. You could already tell it was going to be a hot one. I remembered this kind of day from baling hay in Ohio, but usually that was in September, not in June. The eight crew members in the van were finally coming to life, and they started to joke with each other about their work at the farm location.

"Maybe we could dig a trench between two of the rows and Kevin could walk in that," said the stocky, unshaven guy two seats ahead of me.

The bearded guy in the passenger seat said something but I couldn't hear it. There were laughs all around.

"That would be great!" said the salt-and-pepper crewcut in front of me. "Or he could walk on his knees." More laughs.

It was hard to hear them from the back seat with the big guy next to me snoring, but it sounded like they were talking about the corn. I looked out the window and the first rays of sun exposed the stunted corn in the endless fields around us. I vaguely remembered hearing about the drought conditions on the television in my hotel room the night before.

I tried to imagine the scenes with the ballplayers walking out of a cornfield with the waist-high rows of corn stalks I was seeing out the window. It just wouldn't work. Maybe Kevin Costner would have to walk through the corn on his knees to make it look taller. I smiled to myself.

I am about to be in a baseball movie with Kevin Costner.

In July of 1989, I was shopping in a cramped, corner grocery store in Bodfish, California, a small town of 2,000 people near the Kern River where I had spent the weekend camping. I was strolling the aisles, unshaven and smelling of wood smoke, when I made eye contact with a stocky, round-faced man in his late thirties, who also happened to be in the produce section, shopping with his cart.

It was the briefest of encounters but we each nodded an acknowledgment in that way that men do to pleasantly but quickly end the awkwardness of looking another man in the eyes. I passed on to the soup aisle.

Two minutes later, as I was perusing the tea section, I noticed the same man was approaching again from the other end of the aisle. He was looking at me with a quizzical expression on his face. I studied the tea.

I could see from the corner of my eye that he was slowing down as he came near me, so I casually dropped my pretense of looking for a hot beverage and met his eyes. He still had the questioning look on his face, but he stared at me without speaking. "Hey," I said, all friendly-like.

He paused a bit longer. "Do I know you?" he offered slowly.

Having never had a great memory for faces, I was immediately on the defensive. *Do I know this guy and just can't remember him?* I hate when this happens. I smiled and prepared a look of recognition in case it came to me, and then set about scouring my mind for clues as to who this stocky, freckled man might be. Nothing. We stared at each other shaking our heads like reflections in a fun house mirror.

"Did we go to high school together?" he tried next.

"I don't think so. I went to high school in Ohio," I replied.

His face went dark and then brightened in an instant. "You look like that guy from *Field of Dreams*," he blurted. Relief spilled on to his face, the mystery solved. "Anybody ever tell you that?" he added apologetically.

"Yeah," I said, finally relieved of my task of trying to place this man's face in my memories. The little man seemed smaller now as he shuffled backwards, bumping into his shopping cart.

"Sorry, man," he mumbled.

"It's okay." I smiled, trying to cover my glint of pride at being recognized in public. "I *am* that guy."

"No way."

"Yeah," I assured him.

"No way. Really?"

"Yep. That was me," I said.

"Really?" He stared at me skeptically, resting his hand on his shopping cart.

It felt strange now, trying to convince this guy that I was exactly who he thought I was. My stomach growled and I remembered why I had left my campsite in the first place. I was about to offer a handshake and get back to finding my breakfast when his face darkened and tears sprouted in the corners of his eyes.

"I can't believe this," he whispered and he lurched backwards slightly, as if he had suddenly lost his balance. His eyes grabbed deeply at mine. "Unbelievable..."

"What?" I asked quietly. The other shoppers in the aisle were politely moving away from us.

"I can't believe it's you," he sputtered. I stood in the aisle for a long moment, my arms tingling, wondering whether I should hug this little bear of a man or run away from him.

"Can I tell you something?" he whispered. It felt like he was asking himself whether he really wanted to tell me, rather than whether I wanted to hear it.

"Sure," I said.

"When that movie came out, I went to see it because I love baseball. I used to play..." He sucked in his stomach and trailed off, looking at his feet.

"But all's I could think about while watching it was my dad," and again he stopped. This time, he wanted to continue but it was clear his voice would not let him. His mouth started his next words twice without sound, before he looked up to the ceiling and cleared his throat. "My dad..." he finally said, "My dad and me didn't really get along too well."

I looked down into his pleading eyes and nodded involuntarily. The grocery basket pulled heavily on my arm. It felt like he was forcing himself to look at me now, for fear that if he turned away I might disappear and he would be left alone in the grocery aisle with his tears.

"I want to tell you this," he continued, calmer now. "I hadn't spoken to my dad in 15 years, and after I saw that movie, I drove up to Bakersfield and I just grabbed him by the arm and asked him to come with me. He was so surprised, he just got in the car. We sat and watched that movie together and that was it. We just stopped being mad at each other. Just realized, I guess, how stupid it was." He stared off for a moment, as if looking in his memory for any traces of his old resentment.

"That movie changed my life," he sighed, "I just wanted to tell you that."

His eyes danced quickly from the linoleum floor to the water-stained ceiling, avoiding me on the way. His strong, freckled hand grabbed his face, smeared both eyes with one swipe and wiped it roughly on his jeans. His eyes darted to mine with something of a challenge and his chin dimpled and quivered in spasms.

"Thank you," I said, meeting his eyes and offering my hand. "I'm Dwi-er. What's your name?"

His eyes surrendered. "I'm Tommy. Thomas." He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward him and we ended up in one of those awkward "man" hugs where our hands were still clasped between us while our free hands gently thumped the other man's back.

By now, the three older fishermen buying bait were actively ignoring the crying men embracing in the grocery store while at the same time trying to squeeze around us to continue their shopping.

“YOU WANT ME TO SHOW YOU HOW TO PLAY BASEBALL?”

“Baseball is ninety percent mental and the other half is physical.”

-Yogi Berra

It was summer and my brother and sister and I were in the field by our house with the new bat and ball we had gotten for Christmas.

This was a real horsehide baseball with perfect red stitching pulled impossibly tight around the core, as if it was holding in some unstable power source. The bat was our first full-sized Louisville Slugger. It was pale yellow and probably more bat than we could handle, but, as was the custom of the age, Santa Claus brought us things that he knew we would grow into. We had spent the long months since Christmas carefully wrapping, then re-wrapping the grip of the bat with Dad’s electrical tape until we got it just right.

Dad was at work and my eight-year old sister Barb was trying to get my older brother (Ferris was six) and me (five) to play a little game of pitch and hit.

Barb was a bit of a tomboy back then, and, as the oldest, took great pleasure in bossing us around. The preferred method my brother Ferris and I had devised to assert ourselves was to stick together and present a unified front of resistance to whatever plan she was hatching for us.

It must have been working that day, because my mother, who had been inside washing the breakfast dishes, heard us complaining and came out to see what was the matter.

As soon as we saw her emerge from the house, we figured we were in trouble. Ferris and I launched into our joint complaint that Barb was trying to tell us what to do while my exasperated sister explained.

“I was only trying to get them to stand in the right places so we could play!”

“No you weren’t!” I argued.

“She wasn’t gonna let us bat!” Ferris added.

“That’s not true,” Barb intoned righteously, “I was just trying to show them how to do it right.”

“We know how to bat,” my brother offered.

“Yeah!” I said, hoping to have the final word.

Mom looked at us with that “Are you finished?” look on her face and we quickly fell silent. After a long moment, Mom slowly pried the brand new bat from my brother’s white-knuckled hand and walked a few more steps into the open field.

We watched with mouths agape, wondering what she would do next. Would she toss the bat as far as she could into the weeds? Would she forbid us to use it until we learned how to get along?

My mother was not an athlete. She was an only child, raised in a small Ohio town on the West Virginia border. Because she was home alone so often with her mother, they were very close, and my mother spent most of her time reading and playing with her dolls. My grandfather was a stern man who worked constantly and spent his few leisure hours listening to baseball games on the radio. My mother believed that if she had only had someone, anyone, to play with as a child, she would never have argued with them.

After a few steps, she turned around and we waited for her verdict.

She eyed us calmly. "You want me to show you how to play baseball?"

"You're gonna play with us?" I asked, incredulous.

"Why not?" she asked calmly.

"Yippee!" we all squealed. This was a special day for sure. In our excitement, we danced around like moths on a light bulb.

Mom instructed us where to go. "Barb, you pitch the ball to me. Ferris, you go out in the field and Ricky (she called me by my childhood nickname), you stand behind me and be the catcher." It didn't occur to me at the time that Mom was protecting me by putting me behind her, out of the way of any hard grounders or line drives.

The catcher! I thought, *What a great idea, Mom.* Who knew our mom was so smart about baseball? We had never thought to have a catcher before. With only three of us, we had always only had enough players for a pitcher, a batter and a fielder. The batter always had to drop the bat and run to retrieve any pitches that he hadn't been able to hit, which was a lot of them. Now, as the official catcher, I was there to catch them. This would speed up our game considerably.

You could tell my mother was excited, too. She was always happy to play with us inside, but, when it came to outside games, she usually sat on a blanket and watched. Now she was right out here with us and we all felt good about it.

Mom stood next to the worn-down spot in the grass we had designated as home plate. I crouched proudly behind her. She looked sturdy in her exaggerated batting stance, her long, pale legs stretched across our imaginary batter's box. Behind her, in the distance, I saw my sister looking determined, standing at attention on the weathered two-by-four we called the pitcher's mound, our one and only baseball in her hand. Even farther behind her, impossibly far away on the expanse of green, my brother danced into his position. None of us knew how hard Mom could hit, but she looked good in her stance and I was happy that Ferris was taking no

chances by playing her deep.

The moment is etched in my brain, a Polaroid image that is always developing in my mind's eye, the telescoping figures of my mother's bat-laden back emerging from the void in the foreground, my squinting sister in the middle ground and my big brother poised in the distance on a sea of green.

My sister starts into a comically elaborate wind-up and from the distance I hear my brother start his chatter—"Hey, batter, batter, Hey, batter. . ."—as he hunkers into his stance, his head turned slightly to the right to favor his good eye.

As the pitch approaches, my mother's leg muscles tighten and the bat lifts off from her shoulder. She, too, is caught up in the excitement of the moment and swings hard. She narrowly misses the ball and as her bat completes its swing, a flash of white light explodes in my head and I find myself looking up at the sky. My mother's voice whispers "Oh my gosh" and her silhouetted face appears above me. I feel her cool hands on my cheeks and I can taste blood in my mouth. Mom looks me hard in my eyes and asks, "Are you alright?"

My sister's face appears and asks matter-of-factly, "Why did you hit Ricky with the bat?" Mom ignores this, and by the time Ferris arrives from the outfield asking, "What happened?" I am in my mother's arms and we are walking swiftly toward first base. In my delirium, I imagine we are playing a whole new kind of baseball where bloody children are carried around the base paths, a kind of game with rules that grown-ups have kept secret from us. After we pass first base, we continue walking straight down the imaginary foul line toward our neighbor's house.

Mrs. Ulrich is a chain-smoking science teacher with a gravelly voice and a short beehive hairdo. She and her husband have three children close to our ages but we are new to the neighborhood and barely know them. At her kitchen door, Mom explains breathlessly that my dad has our car

at work and that I got hurt playing baseball and need to go to the doctor's. Mrs. Ulrich casually sets down her beanbag ashtray, exhales a long plume of smoke, and comes over to examine my bloody mouth.

"Gees," she says, "that's a lot of blood." She pulls my face away from the blood now drying on my mother's crisp, cotton blouse. "I don't see any cut on the outside, what happened?"

Mom's too impatient to explain, but she is nothing if not polite. "I wanted to show the kids how to play baseball so I went out... I didn't realize Ricky was standing so close behind me and I accidentally hit him in the mouth."

"With the bat?" Mrs. Ulrich tries to hide her surprise. She opens my red-rimmed mouth and pokes around in the bloody saliva. Her fingers taste like metal. It doesn't hurt too much but the blood is disconcerting to me. I want to keep crying but I'm distracted by the dizzy feeling in my head. "Let me get some cotton," Mrs. Ulrich says as she walks to the bathroom, plucking her cigarette from the ashtray as she goes.

Alone with family for a moment, Ferris repeats the question he has been asking *ad nauseum* in the background since our once-hopeful game ended so abruptly: "What happened?"

Mom finally lets her hidden panic show with an uncharacteristic, "Hush!"

Ferris slinks away and quietly whispers to our sister, "What happened?"

"Hush!" Barb says.

Mrs. Ulrich returns with cotton balls and stuffs a few into my left cheek and says, "Let's go."

Mom looks relieved to finally be on our way and we all climb into Mrs. Ulrich's black Corvair. The pain in my mouth is getting sharper, but the big, blood-soaked cotton balls taste like pennies and are comforting to poke at with my tongue. I like looking up at my mom and she strokes

my forehead as we ride. I feel proud that my mother looks a bit like Jackie Kennedy when she smiles. She is trying hard to smile now...

I don't remember much about my visit to the doctor's office, but by the time we left I had nine stitches on the inside of my left cheek and my mouth was filled with fresh cotton. I guess my mom's follow-through had knocked my left cheek into my teeth, which had cut the inside of my mouth.

Despite the embarrassment of having to recount the story endlessly to the doctor's staff, Mom was relieved that it hadn't done more damage.

"You want me to show you how to play baseball?" quickly became a family joke that would evoke mock horror anytime she offered to teach us a new skill, like, "You want me to show you how to trim your hair?" "...mow the lawn?" "...use that chain saw?"

When my dad got home from work that night, Mom must have quickly filled him in with the embarrassing details of her "child abuse." After giving me a quick once over and smiling gamely at my swollen cheek, Dad just tussled my hair and said, "I guess I'll have to teach you how to play catch."

CATCH

“The whole reason little boys bring gloves to baseball games and old boys never do: Because through baseball they have learned what they can reasonably expect from life.”

- David Hinckley

The Shoeless Joe van finally turned north off the interstate onto a smaller paved road. There were nothing but farms, now, and they were getting farther and farther apart. Through the van’s tinted windows I saw the first glow of dawn creeping across the cornfields. I took the script off my lap and slid it back into my gym bag.

My hand brushed against the old mitt I had brought from my parent’s house for luck. I pulled it out of the bag. The worn leather felt soft and cool in my grip. It had only a single leather shoelace strung between the thumb and forefinger for webbing.

The big guy sitting next to me, who had been sleeping almost since the moment he climbed into the van, woke up inexplicably and tried to focus his bleary eyes on the swollen glove that was in my hand.

“Is that from the prop department?”

“No, it’s my dad’s mitt. From when he was a kid.” I held it up for him to see.

“Cool.” I didn’t feel like letting go of it right then, so I hoped he wouldn’t ask to hold it.

“He must be excited for you to be working on a baseball movie. My dad is stoked.”

“Mine too,” I said before I realized it. This was not the first time I had pretended my dad was still alive, but it surprised me nonetheless. It had only been a month since he’d died—thirty-six days to be exact—and I could not get used to the fact that I would never see him again. I turned his mitt over in my hand.

My father had taught my brother and me to catch with this mitt. It looked like a tan leather version of one of Mickey Mouse’s gloves rather than a modern mitt. Catching with it hadn’t been easy. Dad taught us to use our free hand to cover the ball once it hit the old mitt, since there was no way to “close” the glove around the ball. I’d throw the ball back to Dad and then toss the mitt to my brother for his turn. We got pretty good at catching with both hands, but it was tedious to have to share the old split-finger glove.

Determined to buy our own mitts, we washed cars and sold Kool-Aid in the front yard of the duplex we lived in on a quiet, suburban street in Uniontown, Ohio, before we moved to the farm.

So it was a big day when we took our saved allowances to buy baseball mitts at Sears. We tried on every glove they had on display and, like the brothers we were, we picked mitts that were similar but not the same. Both were too big for us. My brother chose a Bob Gibson model, while I opted for one endorsed by my hero, Roberto Clemente.

While dancing around the aisles of Sears, shagging ghost flies, we wiggled our tiny fingers deep into the virgin gloves and pounded our fists into the palms roughly, testing the padding and imagining the deep line drives that would go there to die. I dreamed of seeing my picture in the Baseball Hall of Fame, along with the faces of my heroes on baseball cards, many of which I’d carefully cut out of the back of cereal boxes.

We left the mitts on our hands until our fingers were sticky with sweat, while my father looked for his salvation in the tool aisles. On the drive home, I wore my glove over my face like a knight’s visor, feeling

invincible, looking out the car windows through the holes in the webbing and becoming intoxicated with the smell of new leather.

As we pulled into our driveway, we burst out of our 1960 Ford station wagon before the wheels had stopped rolling and ran around until I found our grass-stained baseball where we had left it in the corner of the lawn. I lobbed it to my brother and he held up his brand new mitt to catch it. The ball landed squarely in the glove, but when he looked to admire his handiwork, the ball rolled out of the stiff leather and onto the ground.

Dad brought out his old mitt to play with us. It was faded with age and you could barely read the autograph of “Johnny Moore” embossed into the leather palm. I had never heard of him. My brother and I stood opposite him and he took turns tossing the ball to us, one at a time, giving us advice as he went. “Keep your mitt up. Thatta boy! Don’t be afraid of the ball. Bend your knees a little bit. Aw, almost got it. Don’t worry, you’ll catch the next one. Keep your eye on the ball. That’s it. Protect your face.”

My father would catch as many of our wild throws as possible with his old-fashioned glove, two-handed in the style of the old-time players he had grown up with. His body would duck and lean empathetically as he watched us struggle with our oversized, stiff, new mitts.

What I know now that I didn’t know then is that my father was not a great baseball player. He had grown up six blocks from the beach in New Jersey and when he wasn’t working to help out his family, he had spent all of his spare time swimming in the ocean. When he was five, he had been tossed off the pier by his father and told to “Sink or swim!” Fortunately, Dad opted for a gentler method of coaching.

He knew the basic rules of baseball and football and how to play, but he was not the kind of father who could teach us how to throw a curveball or improve our swing, the way he would teach us the finer points of the backstroke and that the proper way to enter the cold Atlantic for a swim was to run screaming and dive. He played catch with us until we were

competent and then let our brotherly competitiveness take over.

He taught us a game he had played as a kid, called “Worky-up,” which was handy when you didn’t have enough players for a game. One player was the batter and he would toss the ball up and hit it. The other players in the field would get points for catching the hit: one point for grounders, two points for fly balls. The first fielder to ten points would win his turn to bat while the others all started at zero again. The game taught us to be pretty aggressive fielders, and it was an endless one we could play with the neighbor kids—before the farm, when we still had neighbors.

Before we went to bed, Dad brought out the saddle soap from the family shoeshine kit and showed us how to use it to soften the leather. My brother and I took turns sleeping with the baseball in the glove, shoved under our pillow, to help it form into the perfect “basket.” To this day, the creamy smell of saddle soap has a mildly sedative effect on me.

Once in bed, my brother and I would lie under the cool sheets on hot summer nights and whisper to each other in the space between the wall and our bunk beds which we called the “peep hole,” until one of us would submerge in sleep from the day’s exertions, sometimes fading out in mid-whisper.

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