



— Essay Contest Winner —

## The Cardinal, the Cops, and the Say-Hey Kid

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It gets stranger and stranger as I knock on eighty's door, the way some random thing can summon a skein of apparently unrelated memories, though in some cases it feels more like an explosion than a summons.

A cardinal flew into one of our windows a few mornings ago. We heard the pop against the glass and went to inspect. There the lovely bird lay on new-fallen snow, the very emblem of conspicuous. I watched as my wife went out and picked up his corpse. Dislodged feathers lifted in the January wind, and blood dotted the whited ground in an almost perfect circle around the body.

I was swiftly, unaccountably, jarringly swept back seven decades.

No winter day then, but one in June of 1951. I'd been tingling with excitement since the night before, because my father was taking me to my first major league baseball game. We'd be going courtesy of some friend I didn't know, a season ticketholder. Dad assured me this meant our spot in the stands would be better than almost anyone's. He also told me we'd see a rookie who, he predicted, would become a once-in-a-lifetime player. When I asked this star's name, he said "You'll find out soon enough."

I was intrigued. I mean, Dad had seen Babe Ruth play in his time! I didn't yet know much about the major leagues, but everyone — man, woman, fan, non-fan, kids big and little, everyone! — recognized the illustrious Bambino's name. Would this fellow outshine the Babe? Looking back, I think my father meant once in my lifetime.

He'd be right, as he so often was, bless him. But I get ahead of myself.

All the while Dad and I made our way to our gate at old Connie Mack Stadium, I vainly sought to disengage my hand from his. I wanted to look like more than a youngster. Five times a parent and seven a grandparent since then, I now completely understand his worry that I might get lost among the milling pedestrians.

We were suddenly halted by a clot of them, some cheering as if they were already at the game. I could see nothing but a mass of bodies, but my tall dad observed what was going on, or rather had gone on. His grip

got harder, painfully so, as he dragged me across the street and away from the gawkers.

Despite his strategy, it was from the far side of that small crowd that I could turn and see a black man lying stone-still on the sidewalk, his blood bright against the gray of its concrete. Two cops, one short and pot-bellied, the other tall and slim as a wand, loomed over him, each fondling a night stick and each, it appeared, half-smiling. The fallen man's face, however improbably, looked as peaceful as a sleeping person's. The whole scene completely bewildered and, to euphemize, unsettled me; it has also stayed with me since, even though my look at it was so fleeting.

I importuned my father: "What happened? What did that guy do?" He answered tersely: "I can't say, son. Could be anything." Then, his face showing an expression I'd never seen in all my brief time on earth, he added, "or nothing."

"But why," I asked, "would they beat him up for nothing?" Dad just pulled me along even faster.

"Why?" I insisted. Silence.

A whole lot makes grim sense to me now that didn't when I was so young and guileless. The second great war had ended a mere six years before, and while this was an eternity to a small child, it was an eyeblink to my father, who had commanded a company of so-called Colored Troops during that epic conflict. Though probably eight out of 10 Americans today don't realize as much, it was not until 1948 that President Truman desegregated U.S. armed forces by executive order.

My father rarely mentioned his time in military service, and at such rare moments as he did, it was generally to tell us some funny anecdote. It was therefore my mother who much later told a story that was anything but amusing, and that actually accounted for my being born in Pennsylvania.

Before their transfer to Wales a year and some later and ultimately to Normandy, my dad's unit, all African-American save the commissioned officers, had been stationed in Gadsden, Alabama, the very heart of Jim Crow Dixie. It was my father's conviction, she said, and local customs be damned, that if he wanted to invite one or more of his soldiers into his Gadsden house, well, he would simply do it. Local customs, as it turned out, involved burning a cross on the lawn of any man who entertained such an unacceptable notion.

All but immediately after that incident, my mother chose to flee north to have her firstborn, me. The night before she took the northbound train, however, she woke her husband in the wee hours, convinced she'd heard the sound of a human being in torment outside. Dad, having circled the base with a flashlight and spoken to a sentry, concluded she'd imagined the noise, rattled as she was by the cross-burning. He went back to sleep. She didn't.

It was about a decade later, three years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball — on that Sunday afternoon in June, we finally arrived at our entry into Connie Mack Stadium. A short, rotund man, chewing a dead cigar, took our tickets and, annoyingly, tousled my hair. We were in.

I have a number of stunning memories from that day, the first of which I have described. Others, thank God, are for the most part less grotesque than that one. I can still distinctly picture what I beheld once we emerged from the concrete tunnel to the ballfield: an awesome expanse of green. I remember it literally made me catch my breath. I thought it almost impossible that anyone would besmirch that huge, pristine span of grass by playing a game on it. But for all of that, there were busy human figures out there.

Once we'd found our seats, perhaps five rows back from the home team Phillies' dugout, my father whispered: "That's a guy to watch." He pointed to a man, notable as one of three black Giants, who was shagging fungo flies in center field. He did not say that Giant was the guy to watch, just a guy.

"Why watch him?" I asked. Was that man the star Dad had hinted at? I supposed so but wasn't quite sure.

"Why him?" I repeated.

"You'll see," he replied.

I was curious, to be sure, but also sufficiently entranced by the vista that I didn't even feel impatient for play to begin. But by and by, of course, the players did come off the field and into their dugouts until the P.A. announcer read off the names of the starters for both teams. As the Giants players were introduced and stepped out to face the crowd, the hometown fans booed. That seemed understandable; these were our opponents, after all. But I got confused when, at the words Willie Mays, the jeering got notably louder.

I looked over at my father, who shook his head, if just perceptibly.

Mays batted third in the order. After both preceding hitters grounded out, he sent a single over the second base bag. The hit didn't seem especially impressive. But when the cleanup man stepped into the box — as with so many on both sides, I don't recall his name — Willie took what looked like a perilous lead off first. I do remember that Russ Myer pitched for the Phillies that afternoon, and that three times he tried a pickoff, Willie scooting back to the bag without the slightest difficulty.

On Myer's first delivery home, however, Mays lit out, slid into the second-base bag yards ahead of catcher Andy Seminick's throw, and popped to his feet with a broad smile on his face. Even at nine, I could somehow discern glee in this man's expression, not mockery. He was having fun! Willie took an equally daring lead toward third, but the Giants' cleanup hitter popped harmlessly to the first baseman and the top half of that first inning was over.

***In 1965, I watched TV footage from the state my mother had fled when she was eight months pregnant, the very one in which the great Willie Mays was born. Combat-gearred, white officers, with their dogs, their clubs, and their hoses, were attacking peaceful demonstrators as they crossed a bridge in Selma.***

"Boy, he's fast," I remarked. My father only smiled.

The Phillies' first batter walked, but the two following were uneventfully retired. Then Del Ennis scorched a line drive, and a loud cheer erupted all around us — until the center fielder chased it down, almost casually snaring the potential hit with one hand. Mays's put-out induced an eerie quiet from the stands.

In Mays's second at-bat, I watched his homer clear the opposite field wall, and in one of the later innings, I saw him lay down a perfect sacrifice bunt. Clearly, he could do about anything he wanted.

What I particularly recall but can't quite render in words is that, despite his very recent arrival to the big leagues, whenever this player came to the plate or stood on base or made for a fly ball, the atmosphere in the stadium was instantly, and as I say indescribably, changed, anticipation hanging in the air as thick as the cigar and cigarette smoke all around us. Despite the occasional vile shout from Phillies fans, including the unforgivable N-word, there was just something irrepressible about this player's manner. No amount of boorishness could ever quash it, I felt sure.

I have some fancy terms in my old age that I did not command then, ones like dynamism, verve, elan. Any and all of them would have applied to this amazing athlete, who, in the bottom of the ninth, threw a strike to the plate from deep left center to nab a potentially tying baserunner and end the contest into the bargain.

The game over, we stood to exit the park. I looked up at my father, ready to state the obvious, that here was a person whose capacities and character were unmatched by any I'd ever witnessed.

I didn't get the chance. Seeing my expression, he simply said, "I told you...and he'll be getting even better."

In the later years of this demigod's 22 in the majors, it would pain me to watch him on television. Most of his supernal skills evaporated, he now and then actually bumbled around in the outfield at Shea. In my late twenties by then, I would literally close my eyes when he took a feeble swing at a breaking ball or failed to chase down a fly or stood a mere foot or two off first if he did happen to get there. I didn't want to know him after his prime, didn't want to blemish that earliest of sporting memories. To this day wish I hadn't.

During that game in 1951, I'd been more or less distracted from the sight of the man the cops had knocked to the ground, but I think I know now why my father led us back to the parking lot by a circuitous route. No doubt the police were gone— who knew what had happened to their victim?— so I'd bet he worried some bloodstains might remain on street or sidewalk. I never asked.

I skip ahead to another Sunday, this one in 1965. I was a year out of college and, like so many, I watched TV footage from the state my mother had fled when she was eight months pregnant, the very one in which the great Willie Mays was born. Combat-gearred, white officers, with their dogs, their clubs, and their hoses, were attacking peaceful demonstrators as they crossed a bridge in Selma. Bodies lay inert on the pavement as the phalanx of police made its brutal way through the throng.

I called home that evening from the apartment I shared with two friends not far from the stadium, then in its 56th year of existence. I don't remember what I said to Dad by way of expressing my horror, but I vividly remember what he said just before we finished our conversation.

"I won't live to see it, but you'll see a black president of the United States."

The whole notion was so unfathomably and uncharacteristically asinine that I didn't even respond.

And yet my father turned out to be right on all counts: in 1966, the very next year, he'd drop dead breaking my heart— and I would live to see Barack Obama serve two terms as America's chief executive.

If only that interlude could have changed my country as much as millions of us hoped.

I recall something else from my June afternoon in 1951, something very odd indeed, given all that transpired that day. Brief as my glimpse of the beaten man had been, as we rode home in silence, I remember thinking that his face, unwrinkled and youthfully handsome, resembled the face of Willie Mays. This was not a matter of racial identity, not one of those abhorrent they-all-look-alike surmises. The supine man on the pavement did not remind me at all, say, of Willie's African-American teammates Monte Irvin

and Hank Thompson. It just somehow struck me that the downed man, given far different circumstances, might break into a dynamic smile, full, yes, of verve and elan.

That notion puzzled the hell out of me, and I badly wanted to purge it from my mind— which would take a lot longer than I might have predicted. In fact, to this day I obviously haven't succeeded.

A few days ago, I felt deep, seemingly disproportionate sorrow as I held the dead cardinal in my hand. I hated to do it, but I stepped inside, lifted the top of our woodstove, and dropped in his brilliant body, which felt almost as light as air.

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**Sydney Lea** is 2021 recipient of his home state Vermont's most prestigious artist's distinction: the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. (Past winners include luminaries from Galway Kinnell to Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley, Rudolf Serkin, and many others.) A former Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Poets' Prize, he served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015). He is the author of 23 books, the latest *Seen from All Sides: Lyric and Everyday Life*, essays (Green Writers Press, 2021). The mock-epic graphic poem, "The Exquisite Triumph of Wormboy" (Able Muse, 2020), was produced in collaboration with former Vermont Cartoonist Laureate James Kochalka. Four Way Books (NYC) published *Here*, poems, in late 2019.