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CLUBBIE: TWO SEASONS WITH BASEBALL'S BROKEN DREAMERS

by

Gregory Scott Larson
B.A. May 2011, Winthrop University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

CLUBBIE: TWO SEASONS WITH BASEBALL'S BROKEN DREAMERS

Gregory Scott Larson
Old Dominion, University, 2017
Director: Dr. Michael Pearson

The main theme of this manuscript is disillusionment. In order for this theme to hit home, I needed the character called Greg Larson, along with the reader, and (for the most part) the narrator, to discover this world of minor league baseball at the same time. This would allow me to tease the illusion—to set up baseball as this grand nostalgic enterprise in the beginning in a way that all three of us could believe it (with the exception of some expository asides from the narrator). I could describe my character's boyish relationship with baseball so that it naturally lent itself to future heartache. That way, all of us together—Greg Larson, the reader, and the narrator—could hop in my beat-down gold Cadillac Deville and drive up to Maryland to lose our youth together, for better and for worse.

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This thesis is dedicated to the thousands of minor league
baseball players who never made it to the majors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my thesis committee for spending their valuable time with my writing. Thanks to the many players and coaches who let me interview them. Thanks to my family and friends.

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A SHOOTING STAR

My 1997 Cadillac Deville looked glamorous from the outside. Its gold paint glistening in the Florida sun could have been the streak of a shooting star as it flashed across the blacktop of I-75. I'd had the car since I was 17—just a high school junior hoping to get drafted into the major leagues. The Caddie was now 15 years old, but its hood ornament, the Cadillac wreath and crest, the symbol of luxury, still stood proudly at the tip of its bow. The ornament pointed north like a compass needle from Fort Myers, Florida, to Aberdeen, Maryland, home of the Aberdeen IronBirds.

But shooting star is a misnomer. The streaks of light we see flashing across the night sky aren't stars at all but space debris burning up in the atmosphere. It's only our perception that makes them look like stars. That was the Cadillac: just a bit of space junk that happened to look pretty slicing across the blackness. In an effort to save money, I'd done away with the A/C compressor rather than repair it, so I had long since come to terms with the incessant sweating that fused my back to the cracked leather of my driver's seat in the mid-summer heat of southwest Florida. The engine had developed this ominous clicking sound that was born deep inside its mysterious caverns. I nicknamed the sound the death rattles. I'd taught myself just enough about car repair to save me a few bucks, but not enough to, say, get all of the windows to roll down. The brakes were well past the squealing stage. The sound had evolved into a rumble that seemed to come from some place deep inside the earth and some time millions of years in the past. The Caddie got me from point A to point B, more or less, but I'd be lucky to make it up to Maryland without spontaneously combusting into a pile of hot ash.

Included in that flame would inevitably be my few possessions. Among them my baseball mitt—a tan Rawlings 11 ¾ inch Pro Preferred model that I'd had since high school—and a

blanket my mom had made me. The blanket had red backing and the blue front was peppered with Minnesota Twins logos.

I had to make choices when I packed the car: it was big, no doubt, but not everything could come with me. I stood looking at that Twins blanket, wondering. My new boss, Jason, who I only knew through two phone conversations, said that the team was putting me up for free in an apartment between Baltimore and Aberdeen to its north.

“Will I be in there alone?” I’d asked.

“Probably not,” he’d said over the phone. “It’s a two-bedroom, so you’ll probably be put up with a couple of players.”

I held the blanket, wondering if the IronBirds players, who were in the Baltimore Orioles organization, would look down on me for having a Twins blanket on my bed or wearing a Twins cap.

“You work in the Orioles system now,” I imagined them saying, “get that Twins shit off your bed.”

And I didn’t question Jason saying “a couple,” even though a couple plus me would make three people in two bedrooms. I didn’t mind much, though, since I would gladly sleep in the living room of a shared apartment rather than live one more day in a Florida golf community.

Ever since I’d graduated in 2011, post-college life had not been what I expected. I was proud of my education from Winthrop University, a 6000-student Division I school in Rock Hill, South Carolina, but my English degree hadn’t done a damn thing for me other than romanticize my view of the future and dent my parents’ wallet by nearly six figures.

Winthrop’s English building, Bancroft Hall, was a beautiful brick Neo-Georgian surrounded by oak trees. There was a poem written on the wall of the first floor girls’ bathroom,

just after you walked through the front doors and got pummeled with that nostalgic must like old books. The poem was Longfellow's *Psalm of Life*.

It starts:

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,

Life is but an empty dream!

For the soul is dead that slumbers

And things are not what they seem.

Indeed, they weren't. Winthrop had been a place of promise for me, but I had all but accepted life as an empty dream. My parents lived in one of those self-contained golf course communities that seemed to spawn fully formed out of the sulphurous bubbling muck that covers the state of Florida. My parents' community was nice—with two golf courses and a pool just down the street—but it was no place for a 23-year-old to be spending his time. What scared me most was how comfortable I had gotten there. I made friends, even. Steve, the Vietnam vet who lived down the street, liked to tell me jokes about semen, rabbis, and loose women. He'd lean in close to see if I was laughing because the war ruined his hearing ("Aw, what d'you know about humor?" he'd say). Judge Bob Danforth, who was exactly 50 years my senior, lived across the street from Steve. Whenever Bob and I went golfing I had to act as his Seeing Eye dog because his cataracts were so bad he'd eat the sandwiches with the wrapper still on. Next to my parents' place was Rick Kaplan, who was all slinged up with a broken arm after a fall on his bike. If I put all three of them together I might've had one complete friend.

The heat was insufferable for a pale-skinned, blue-eyed Norwegian kid who grew up in Minnesota. A few moles had curdled on my skin and the dermatologist lopped them off as if he was picking chocolate chips off a cookie.

Two of my brothers also lived in Fort Myers and they offered me a job at their real estate school. I could help around the office making coffee, answering phones, checking in students, and doing a bit of marketing. I declined, telling them I wanted to focus on writing. I did indeed drive my Caddie into the library every weekday to write, but I wasn't getting paid for it—writing hadn't brought me any closer to escaping my parents' condo. I didn't say this to my brothers, but I think I was afraid of digging myself so deep into Fort Myers that I never left to chase my dreams.

But at the time, my only dream was leaving Florida. When Jason first gave me a phone interview for the job with the IronBirds (as a clubhouse attendant), he said he wanted someone with experience. During my senior year at Winthrop, I was the equipment manager for our baseball team. It was a huge time commitment much of the year (almost as much time as the players) but it included a \$10,000 scholarship plus a few hundred bucks in meal money and a token stipend. The job had been split between me and three other managers. We were in charge of doing team laundry, keeping track of the equipment, and shagging fly balls for batting practice. My fellow managers (all three of them more portly fellows than me) saw that last duty as perhaps the biggest chore on our to-do list. But getting out on the field and catching fly balls with the team was not only one of the highlights of that job, but a highlight of my whole time in college.

Baseball was my first love. Just on the other side of town from my parent's house in Fort Myers was the Twins' spring training complex. When I was in junior high and high school, and before my parents made Florida their permanent home, we'd go down to Fort Myers in the dead of Minnesota winter. My dad used to drop me off at the complex in the morning before the players arrived—my glove on my left hand, a jersey on my back, and a five-dollar bill in my

pocket to buy a bratwurst for lunch. I'd say hello to all of the players as they walked in for the day. "Good morning, Mr. Hunter. Good morning, Mr. Morneau. Good morning, Mr. Mauer." And they'd acknowledge me, every one of them. They sounded a little surprised, though, because games wouldn't start for a week and I was the only person at the stadium that early who wasn't getting paid to be there. I watched them take batting practice on the backfields behind Hammond Stadium. I stood behind the fence in right field foul territory with my cap turned backwards so I could stick my freckled nose through the chain links. I was nearly close enough to smell the sunscreen and sweat of the players on the field. I walked over to the bullpen and gripped my clawed fingers through the fence. More fans might show up after lunchtime, but I stood there, quiet enough that nobody could hear me, and tried to hear the secrets relayed between coach and player on the mound. I could see myself in that same place in ten years: wearing the jersey of my favorite team, having coaches whisper those secrets to me. The day's workouts would end and I said goodbye to all of the players as they left. They all said goodbye back to me, there long after the other fans had left.

A photographer from the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* took my picture at the back fields of Hammond Stadium one time, staring through the fence. He walked up and asked where I was from so he could put it underneath the photo. "Elk River, Minnesota," I said. He wrote that down in his pad. "You look like you want to be out there with them." He showed me the picture on his digital camera and you could see the pure awe opening my wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression. I knew in that moment that one day I would be on that field with those players. The cameraman must've heard me wrong, though, because when I found the picture on the *Star Tribune* website the caption said I was a young fan from Oak River, Minnesota, a place that didn't exist.

As a high-schooler I had a hard time establishing myself as a scoutable player in a state that was more known for hockey, lakes, and snow than it was for baseball. The main problem, I had come to find out, was that major league scouts didn't show up to high school baseball games to see the back-up shortstop. "My god," they would've said, "that young man has his ass planted squarely on that dugout bench more perfectly than any baseball player I've ever seen!"

"But I love baseball," I would've told the scouts, "and I'll work harder than anyone else if I get a chance." No such luck. I was relegated to watch the 8-13 Elk River Elks from the pine.

My .091 batting average in my senior year of high school was good enough to get me a tryout with the Hamline University Pipers baseball team (granted, the lowly Saint Paul-based Division III team would have let your uncle try out if he was a tuition-paying student.) After a week of embarrassing practices, I was cut. I told one of my friends on the track team about it and he said, "That's bullshit. Division III teams don't make cuts." He was trying to be helpful, I think.

Losing baseball was like losing home. The game made sense to me, and I picked it up quickly. The first time I started to uncover the infinite mysteries of baseball—like why players chose to wear certain numbers, what the brown stuff guys spit out was, and just what the hell a balk entailed—I was hooked.

When my parents made their move to Florida after my freshman year of college, I decided there was nothing keeping me in the land of 10,000 lakes, so I escaped the cold and went down to Winthrop in South Carolina (a move that my parents bankrolled, for which I am forever grateful). As I said, I eventually got a scholarship with the baseball team, but it was not in the way I had hoped—washing jockstraps was a long way from the glory of the game I had dreamed of playing.

But washing jockstraps was the extent of my job experience out of college, and I could do worse than to work in professional baseball. So I applied online, Jason offered me the job, and I took it, not realizing that working for the IronBirds would change me and my perception of baseball forever.

I sat shirtless in the dark of my parents' spare bedroom that I'd adopted as my own. The moist heat of the Florida air always found a way to spill into that room and that room only, even when I blocked the sun with the bamboo blinds. A soft glow from my computer was the only light illuminating my face in the darkness. It was a month before I left for Aberdeen and Nicole, my girlfriend, was graduating from Winthrop. Our alma mater hosted a live video feed on the website so far-away friends and family could watch as their loved ones crossed the stage to receive their diplomas. Hers would say English, just like mine did, but her concentration was secondary education, not creative writing like me. This meant she had a job offer straight out of graduation. She'd be teaching English and coaching volleyball at a small private high school in the middle of a peach field in Johnston, South Carolina, just southwest of "Where the hell are we?" They'd pay her \$24,000 a year with no benefits, which, with the 2012 economy still in the crapper, sounded to me like adult money—the kind of salary that allows someone to provide for themselves without leaning on their parents, something I dreamed of.

My stomach clenched in jealousy when I saw her on the screen of my computer. Those people in the stands at the Winthrop Coliseum—they didn't even know Nicole, yet they got to see her in person. All I wanted was to glide my fingers up the smooth patch of skin on the back of her arms, tuck her hair behind her ears, give her a kiss, and tell her I was so proud of her. But instead I had to look at some avatar of her figure gliding across the screen of my computer, so

close yet so very far away. Her smile pushed her dimpled cheeks up under her eyes. She'd dyed her blonde hair black to match her robe and shoes. The black was so fierce that I could almost see her green eyes in contrast on the pixelated video. She shook the president's hand, grabbed her diploma, and stepped forward into the world beyond college.

I'd graduated in the spring of 2011 and we'd tried to see each other once a month in the year that followed. It had worked for a while—us meeting halfway in northern Florida or a visit up to Winthrop or her coming down to my parents' condo—but my joblessness and general lack of effort to leave my parents' home had caused a rift in our relationship. We started going more than a month without visiting each other. We started closing off to each other at the end of those visits—talking less, touching less—just to save ourselves from the pain of departure.

I'd rationalized my own joblessness by saying it was the result of a bad economy that had yet to recover from the mortgage crisis in 2008 (I'd been watching a lot of *Mad Money* with Jim Cramer like the good little golf community resident I had become). I told myself, "People don't want to hire a young college graduate. There are so many more qualified applicants fighting for the same jobs as me."

The \$50 a day I would be making for the IronBirds was approximately \$50 more than I had made in the previous year. "That's fine," my dad said, "you're not going up there for the money."

When I had my second phone interview for the clubhouse job, my future boss, Jason, brought on the General Manager, Aaron, to join in on the call. I hadn't had a lot of social interactions in the last year, so my phone skills were a little rusty. Jason had to intervene a few times on my behalf.

“Tell Aaron about what you told me before,” Jason said, “about the job being like customer service.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, “when I was a manager for Winthrop, I knew that—I know this job is, yeah, it’s kinda like customer service, but you also have to know when to say no.”

“Well this is professional baseball, Greg,” the GM said. “These players are more experienced and they have higher expectations. They expect to get what they want.”

“Sure, that makes sense.”

“So can you tell me about a time when you had to say no and how you handled it?”

I told a convoluted story about some guy asking for a larger baseball belt when all he needed to do was adjust the belt he had to fit his larger waist. It didn’t even make sense because first of all, belts weren’t a hot commodity for players as much as, say, balls and caps and secondly, it didn’t even involve me saying no.

Static silence met me on the other line.

“Okay,” Jason said. “We’re going to interview a few other guys and try to get this over with as soon as possible and get back to you.”

They hung up the phone without saying goodbye. I realized that Aaron, the GM, didn’t even introduce himself on the call. I resigned myself to not getting the job. I made up my mind that I would lie to my family—tell them I was hired—and just get in my car and disappear. June first was the date I set for my escape.

But Jason did call me back.

“If you’re still interested, we’d like to offer you the job.”

“Hell yeah!” I said.

He laughed. “And, if it sweetens the pot, we can offer you a room with a couple of players. You just have to pay utilities.”

He told me that the team had never had a winning season in its 10-year history and nothing suggested that this year would be any different. But they sold out every game.

“How?” I asked.

“The Ripken name. The team is owned by Cal Jr. and Aberdeen is the Ripkens’ hometown.”

“Huh,” I said.

“But the stadium isn’t full every night. It’s mostly just season ticket sellouts. How do you plan on coming up here?”

“Well, I’m a man of few possessions and my car is ready to go.”

He laughed.

“In all seriousness, though, I’d like to come up there as soon as possible.”

“That works,” Jason said. “Oh, and one more thing. You said you’re in Fort Myers, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You should go through Sarasota on your way up here. The Orioles spring training complex isn’t too far off the freeway. I want you to stop by and see Jake Parker at the complex—he used to be the clubbie for the IronBirds and he can give you way more information on this job than I ever could.”

I accepted these terms, but I had to look up that word he used to describe the job—what was it, cubbie? No, I saw online, it was clubbie: another name for a clubhouse attendant. I

cringed at the thought of people calling me something as stupid as “clubbie” for the coming summer, and maybe summers beyond.

Jason put me in touch with the leasing office for my new apartment and I shot my way up north as fast as I could. I was nervous with the thought of living with roommates who weren’t my parents. Will I be friends with them? Will they be messy and immature? How old will they be? I knew some guys in the minor leagues were old—like in their 40s, I thought. Will they have kids? Will they bring back girls?

Will they be future major leaguers?

“I’ve got some good news,” I told Nicole on Skype. “I got that job as a clubhouse attendant.”

I watched her on the screen, sitting on her bed, and her avatar hardly moved. Finally, her mouth bulged out below her bottom lip, like she was chewing on her tongue. She did that sometimes: bit her tongue to keep from saying something.

“That’s good,” she said. Silence. “I don’t think my belief in you is misplaced.”

“For the first time in a long time I agree.”

That Wordsworth poem, the one in the old English building on Winthrop’s campus, ended like this:

Let us, then, be up and doing,

With a heart for any fate;

Still achieving, still pursuing,

Learn to labor and to wait.

Nicole—she was the one who put it up there.

The orange “SERVICE ENGINE SOON” light flashed on the moment I hit I-75 North. I sighed, worried that my only deliverance might not make it past the state line. Adding to my nerves was something Jason had told me:

“The whole coaching staff is former Major Leaguers,” he said.

“Oh, cool,” I said.

“Well, they’ll be used to things being done a certain way. You’ll be fine, but you’ll just have to kinda watch the expectations.”

I tried to do a little research on the coaches before leaving. Apparently, three of the four coaches were new. One of the first things I found after searching for the new IronBirds manager was a video titled, “Norfolk Tides Manager Gary Allenson in Crazy Ejection.” The Tides were the Orioles’ triple-A affiliate, the highest minor league level before the majors. The video was from the middle of June in 2011, which meant he went from managing the top of the minor league system to the bottom with the IronBirds, who were a single-A team. The video showed the top of the 9th inning of a game against the Durham Bulls in Durham, and the Tides were batting with a one-run lead. The batter hit a shot to center field for a home run. He and the runner on first trotted home for two runs. The outfielders raised their hands to signal that they thought it was a ground rule double. In center field at Durham Bulls Athletic Park there was a padded blue center field wall topped with a fence with stiles and a yellow line painted across the top. The commentators called it the bike rack. A ball that goes over the wall, but not over the bike rack, would be called a ground rule double and not a home run (no matter how unlikely such a hit would be). The replay on the video, though, showed that’s precisely what happened, as you could see the ball crossing clearly in front of the yellow line, hitting the bike rack, and falling behind the pad in the wall but not over the fence. An umpire jogged out to center, where the

three Bulls outfielders stood, and reached behind a break in the wall padding. He grabbed a baseball out of the wall like a bunny from a magic hat. He held up the number two with his fingers, to indicate that the home run should not count and the batter should be awarded a double instead. This call wiped two runs off the board for the Tides.

Allenson marched out of the Tides dugout, arms swinging and full of purpose. “Jesus,” I thought. “This guy looks like a fucking drill sergeant.” Allenson barked at one umpire near third base and pointed to the outfield. After a nose-to-nose shouting match, Allenson walked out toward the center field wall. I had to hand it to Allenson: he reached short center before the umpire finally threw him out of the game. The crowd’s boos mixed with cheers as the game paused for Allenson to walk briskly, but on his own time, while the whole world waited for him. The commentators and the crowd alike seemed to think he was making a dramatic exit after his ejection.

It took him a full minute to reach the wall, by which time the crowd had turned mostly silent, awkwardly waiting for Allenson to finish whatever it was he was doing. He climbed behind the outfield wall and up into the grassy knoll above, searching, hunting. Not for an exit, like the announcers thought, but for a baseball—a baseball that, if it were on that grassy knoll, would be a home run. There was nothing frantic about his search: he didn’t seem to mind that there were literally thousands of people waiting for him. Allenson got on his hands and knees to look under the camera well (both sides) to no avail. He pointed to the several-dozen-square-foot patch of thick shrubs just to his left as he exited, making a motion and shouting back into the field something inaudible that could have been, “They’re probably in that fucking shit right there!”

“You’re not gonna find anything,” one commentator said. “It’s over. Move on.”

Allenson climbed back over the fence and metronomically marched his way back to a different umpire to plead his case again. Once he said his piece with him, Allenson worked back to the third base umpire for another round, pointing angrily toward center field. Allenson walked into the dugout and handed his lineup card to hitting coach Brad Komminsk, who sat holding out his right hand without looking at Gary. Gary set his plastic skull cap on the bench, picked up his regular baseball cap, put it on his head, and walked into the tunnel toward the clubhouse. The whole thing took five minutes and gave me an immutable sense of foreboding.

The man Gary handed his lineup card to, Brad Komminsk, would be spiraling down the Orioles' minor league system right along with him, plopping his butt in Aberdeen as the IronBirds' hitting coach. Komminsk was drafted number four overall by the Atlanta Braves in 1979. He was chosen 489 picks before the New York Yankees took a high schooler by the name of Don Mattingly, who would eventually go on to have his number 23 retired by the Yankees. Komminsk was also chosen three rounds before the Royals drafted a right handed pitcher out of Central Catholic in Pittsburgh named Daniel Constantine Marino, Jr. That young man decided not to sign with the Royals, and instead went on to play quarterback at Pitt, before being drafted by the Miami Dolphins. Dan Marino was eventually inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2005. 17 rounds after the Braves picked Komminsk, the Royals drafted a young outfielder from Granada Hills, California. His name was John Elway, and he did not sign with the Royals that year, but went to Stanford, where he excelled in football and baseball. After college, he was chosen by the Yankees in the 2nd round of the 1981 draft and played one season with the Oneonta Yankees of the New York-Penn League, the same league that the IronBirds eventually joined. Elway had a promising .318 batting average and .432 on-base percentage, but, like Marino, he gave up baseball to become a Hall of Fame quarterback. Komminsk, though, did sign

with his drafting team in 1979, and he dominated minor league pitching. By 1982, after nearly an entire season with Atlanta's double-A affiliate, the Savannah Braves, he was hitting .273 with 26 home runs and 78 RBI. In 1983 he started in triple-A Richmond, amassing a .334 batting average with 24 home runs and 103 RBI. Braves farm director Hank Aaron, whose 755 career home runs was the most all-time, said that Komminsk was a "Can't miss major leaguer." Aaron also said Komminsk "will do things Dale Murphy never dreamed of." Braves outfielder Dale Murphy was on his way to his second straight National League MVP award when the square-jawed, black mop-topped Komminsk was called up to the majors for the first time. He hit a measly .222 after his call-up, but in only 26 at-bats there was plenty of room for improvement. However, the next season Komminsk hit .203 in 90 games with the Braves and .227 in the next season, hitting only a combined 12 home runs in 637 at-bats. Bill James, who revolutionized baseball statistical analysis and practically invented sabermetrics, a method for comparing the performances of individual players, said that, "Sometimes a guy simply loses it before he establishes himself in the major leagues. That's what happened to Komminsk, I think—he shot his cannons in the minor leagues."

Komminsk flailed back and forth between the minors and majors, shooting across organizations before finally finishing his career with a one-year stint on the Winnipeg Goldeneyes of the Northern league, an independent league, in 1996. As a 35-year-old, he hit .278 with 16 homers and 66 RBI. He went on to manage and coach in the minors for the Indians and Orioles organizations. He worked his way up from coaching in single-A to double-A in the early 2000s, then became the hitting coach for the triple-A Norfolk Tides in 2011, before crashing right back down to single-A for the upcoming 2012 season. At least his face looked kind in the pictures online—goofy even. Maybe he'd be less intimidating than Allenson.

Alan Mills, though, the IronBirds' new pitching coach, looked downright vicious. Older pictures of the former Orioles right-handed reliever showed a lean young black man with a Fu Manchu mustache hooked like a horseshoe over his top lip. And his face in these pictures—the stare, the furrowed brow—had the look of focus and determination, if not a dash of something more, like a natural contempt. Mills had a successful career as a major league reliever, pitching for 12 years from 1990 to 2001, amassing a 39-32 record and a 4.12 lifetime ERA. But what I found most fascinating, most frightening, about Mills was the following line from his Wikipedia page: “Perhaps the most famous moment of Mills’s career came on May 19, 1998, when he gave Darryl Strawberry a right cross that bloodied his face in the dugout during a bench clearing brawl with the New York Yankees at Yankee Stadium.”

He also attempted a comeback in 2007 with the Erie Seawolves, the double-A affiliate for the Detroit Tigers. He picked up 23 saves and had a 2.79 ERA that season, which would have been very impressive, had he not been a 40-year-old 12-year major league veteran who was 15 years older than his average opponent. “What the fuck am I getting myself into,” I thought.

Our bench coach (whatever that meant) was Cesar Devarez. Cesar was going into his eighth season coaching the IronBirds. He was from San Pedro de Macoris, a hotspot for young Dominican baseball talent. His face, in the few pictures I could find, glowed with friendliness, and his minor league and major league careers looked equally friendly to opposing pitchers. He had a career .256 batting average in the minors and, in 16 at bats spaced generously over the 1995 and 1996 seasons with the Orioles, he had a .091 major league batting average. That .091 mark was, oddly enough, the same exact batting average I had in my senior year of high school.

And Jake Parker, the old IronBirds clubbie who my boss told me to meet in Sarasota, well, Jake Parker might have been a ghost. I couldn't find anything on him—no promising leads

on Facebook, nothing on any Google search about him and the Orioles, and nothing on LinkedIn, the professional networking site. The guy was a mystery.

Ed Smith Stadium and the Orioles spring training complex operated all summer with an Orioles rookie ball team, so the place was full of players and activity even though spring training had long since given way to early June. Jake had worked his way up from being an IronBirds clubbie to being the equipment manager for all Orioles minor league teams while still doing clubbie duties for the rookie ball team in Sarasota.

I wiped the rain from my brow as I entered the lobby of the spring training facilities. Jake came to get me after a few minutes, wearing a black Nike Orioles shirt that hung loose on his muscle-bound torso. He had spiked hair, and was attentive—polite, even—despite his straightforward demeanor. He walked with speed and expected me to keep up.

“You look just like your videos online,” he said as we walked. It was downpouring and players and coaches alike were walking around indoors, bored. I wondered how many of them were major leaguers.

“Oh?” I said. “Which ones did you watch?”

“Stand-up routine. Said Winthrop University, I think.”

“Oh, God.”

“You were kinda funny.”

We walked into his “office,” which was nothing more than a cluttered desk up against the wall of classroom-like space. He told me everything I would need to know for the job: how to keep the stadium beer supplier geared up so I could get free beer for the coaches; how to do laundry as quickly as possible; how much food to put out for pregame meals.

“That money comes out of my pocket?” I said.

He nodded.

“And I use their dues to pay for it?”

“If you do it right, you’ll have plenty of money leftover. What’re you charging, seven a day?”

“Yeah, seven,” I said. Jason had mentioned that players would pay me dues in return for feeding them. He suggested I go with seven dollars per home game.

“That’s a lot at your level—I think guys get like 1200 a month there—but you should be good to go. You’ve basically included your tip in the dues, which is fine, but don’t expect any extra on top of it. Plus you’re new. Respect is earned not given.” He eyed my chest. “You look like you might work out. A little bit.”

I shrugged. I had stayed in shape but I was still pretty thin—about 6-foot, 185.

“You might wanna start lifting weights once you get there—helps to maintain order in the clubhouse. I used to be a teaching sub and you gotta treat these guys just like middle schoolers, because that’s what most of them are. Last week I wrestled one of the players because he said he could take me. Was it joking? Sure. But was it a little serious too? Abso-fucking-lutely. These guys have to know you’re not afraid of them. If they come up giving me an attitude, trying to get extra equipment they don’t need or causing a problem in the clubhouse, I cut a fuckin’ muscle in them and let ‘em know who’s in charge.” He flexed his bicep at me and nodded as if to say, “Capiche?”

He took me to the laundry room and I asked him how much he made when he used to work for the IronBirds. He looked around my shoulder out the laundry room door.

“I’m only telling you this because we’re a part of the same fraternity now, but my last two summers in Aberdeen, I made \$19,000 a summer. Net.”

“Holy shit.”

“You won’t make that much, but you’ll still do well. You don’t show it, though. You live like you’re fucking poor. The second guys start seeing you’re making hand-over-fist, that’s when the tips go down and you lose the clubhouse.”

Shouldn’t be a problem, I thought. I already had a flip phone. Nothing said poor like a flip phone.

He pulled out a pair of surgical rubber gloves and snapped them over his wrist before grabbing the piles of dirty orange and black athletic clothes and throwing them into the washer.

“You use gloves when you did laundry for Winthrop?”

I shook my head.

“Start using them. You don’t know where some of these guys have been. Especially these Coños.”

“The what?”

“Coños,” he said. “Dominicans. Try to split up their lockers in the clubhouse too. And you don’t want them at the end lockers because they never tip.”

A player walked in to talk to Jake.

“Ah, perfect,” Jake said. “Greg this is Alex Schmarzoo.”

“It’s Schmarzo,” the player said.

“Schmarzoo!” Jake said again, like kazoo with a little inflection at the end.

“Greg Larson,” I said, standing up to shake his hand. He looked at me and smiled all the way up to his eyes. He had a huge puff of brown hair on his head, which flowed into a mullet hanging down the back, a style that hadn’t been cool since—well, ever.

“Do you have any nicknames?” Alex said.

“I dunno. People sometimes call me G-Lar.”

“Ehh,” Alex said. “We’ll just call you G.”

“And is it Schmarzo or Schmarzoo?” I said.

“It’s Schmarzo. Jake, being the serious clubbie that he is, decided to pin an extra ‘O’ on my nameplate—what was that, two weeks ago? Anyway, nobody told me all day so I walked around with guys calling me Schmarzoo and wondering what the fuck was going on. Luckily I didn’t pitch.”

“No,” Jake said, “I wouldn’t have done that shit if you were slated to pitch.”

“Although,” Schmarzo said, “it might’ve been better, that way when I gave up five runs in two innings the Orioles could’ve said, ‘Let’s get rid of this Schmarzoo character’ and I could still stick around.” He laughed and clicked his head to the left trying to crack his neck.

“You gotta keep the guys loose,” Jake said to me. “Don’t be scared of some practical jokes. But all seriousness, Schmarzo is the best guy I’ve met in 16 years working in professional baseball. He’ll be your number one guy in Aberdeen.”

I was a little blown away that he’d been working in baseball for 16 years—I would’ve pegged Jake at 28, 30 tops.

“Aw, shucks,” Schmarzo said.

“Okay,” Jake said, “See that? He’s just being bashful because he wants something.”

“You’re good,” Schmarzo said. “I can’t find my warm-up shirt. I’m pretty sure a few of the guys took it just to mess with me but they won’t budge.”

“What about the extra one I gave you last week?”

Schmarzo cringed.

“Here, Greg, you pretend you’re the clubbie and Schmarzo is asking you for gear.”

“Greg,” Alex said. “G, I need a shirt.”

“You’re wearing one,” I said.

“Good,” Jake said.

“Well, I need a different one. My grandma died and—”

“I don’t care,” I said.

“Damn,” Jake said. “Maybe a bit much.”

“No,” Schmarzo said. “Guys pull that shit all the time. Don’t let guys play the dead grandma card.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “Not bad.”

“But really, I just need it for the day. I’ll give it right back. I won’t even sweat in it, I just need something to wear.”

Jake eyed him sideways for a moment. “Here,” he said, and he led us both into a storage room full of gear and pulled out a black dry-fit shirt with the cartoon face Orioles logo on the breast. I found out later that the whole organization had implemented that “New” cartoon bird logo (just the head of a large-eyed Oriole bird wearing a long-billed baseball cap) as part of the 20th anniversary of Oriole Park at Camden Yards. It was a throwback to a time in Orioles history (1966-1989) when they won 3 World Series wearing that logo.

“Thanks, Jake,” Alex said. “I’ll give it back at the end of the day.”

“I know you will.”

“Nice to meet you, G,” Schmarzo said as he walked out.

“Is he really going to return that shirt?” I asked.

“Oh, absolutely. I wasn’t lying when I said he’s the best guy I’ve met in baseball. Here, let’s go meet some of your other staff who’ll be with you.”

He continued talking to me as we walked past half-naked players moving about in the hallways. He pulled me into the minor league locker room, where he grabbed a cart of dirty laundry. I knew that minor leaguers and major leaguers all played spring training games at the same complex for their teams. It seemed like there were a lot of common areas where the different levels of players could intermingle, but the locker rooms were separate. This locker room was specifically for minor leaguers. It looked like what I imagined a prison locker room would look like, if such a thing existed. The lockers were cages, with metal intermeshed on the sides like thick chain link fences. Hot shower mist made it balmy, and half naked men walked around talking and laughing loudly and full of confidence—just a mass movement of skin and testosterone. Jake introduced me to a couple guys who’d be up in Aberdeen. We walked past the Dominicans, who were all bunched together in their own ghetto of lockers. Jake grabbed a canvas laundry bin and wheeled it out. He released his hands and the bin wheeled its way into the laundry room as we walked past.

“Trek will be the trainer in Aberdeen. Trek’s good, as long as you keep him happy.”

“Okay,” I said. “How do I do that?”

“Lots of diet Mountain Dew and Budweiser. Don’t worry, I’ll put you in touch with John, my beer guy up there. He’ll hook you up. And Ripken pays for all the non-alcoholic drinks for

the coaches' office. Ellie Ripken, up in the front office—just give her your receipts and she'll reimburse you. She checks that shit too, so don't try to sneak anything by her.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn't—”

“But let's say you want some Red Bull? Just throw that shit on the pallet at BJ's, put it on the receipt, and it's all yours. Allenson likes Fat Tire, Sam Adams Boston Lager, and sandwiches. Keep his fridge stocked with some meat, bread, cheese, condiments and beer and you're set. He'll tip you good. And Cafe Stella coffee in the morning. Yeah, that's Muggsy. Mills and Brad—never seen 'em drink really. Cesar doesn't either. Cesar won't tip you much but he doesn't ask for much either. Just keep him happy and you'll be fine. Keep your coaches happy— they'll tip you the better than the players. Make them plates after the game too so they get to eat.”

“Plates? Like from the meal?”

“Yeah,” he said. “God forbid if you run out of food with the postgame spread, you want to make sure the coaches eat before the players. But don't you dare run out of food. Nobody gives a shit if you wash a stain from their pants or whether you cleaned their warm-up shorts well. The only thing that matters in this job is food. That's where your tips will come from.” He took a hard turn into the trainers' office. “Here, I'll bring you in to meet Trek.”

Trek looked like he was in his mid-40s with a widow's peak pointing down onto his forehead and a pointy nose. His ears flared out slightly at the top like butterfly wings.

“Trek, this is Greg, your new clubbie in Aberdeen.”

“This the new kid?” Trek said. He spit a brown glob into an empty Diet Mountain Dew bottle and stood up from his desk to shake my hand.

“Tell him where you're from,” Jake said to me.

“Elk River, Minnesota?” I said.

“Oh, yeah?” Trek said. “I’m from Warren, Minnesota.”

“Where’s that?”

“Northwest. Closest cities are Grand Forks and Thief River Falls.”

Jake nodded, satisfied. “All right, I gotta move some laundry over,” he said. “You got a few minutes, Trek?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he said, and Jake walked out.

“So, I’m sure Jake told you, but I like to have a few two liters of Diet Mountain Dew for the road trips and a few cases lying around for emergencies. Just keep a few cases at the bottom of your locker and I’ll grab ‘em from there.”

I nodded.

“And he told you about beer? I like Bud Heavy. I don’t know what Gary drinks.”

I nodded. Silence. I looked around for something to talk about.

“Things look a little slow around here,” I said, remembering all of the players and coaches walking around. “It doesn’t look like guys are doing much of anything.” I forced a chuckle.

“Don’t ever say that,” Trek said. “It might look slow because we’re waiting for the rain to pass, but we got work up to our fuckin’ elbows in here. We got some major league guys we’re trying to heal down here right now, so, yeah, don’t go saying it doesn’t look busy because it is.”

“How’d that go?” Jake said when we walked out.

“Good, good. Just a couple of Minnesota boys.”

He pulled me into a conference room where a half dozen coaches were looking at sheets of paper and talking seriously.

“Muggsy, this is Greg, he’ll be your clubbie up in Aberdeen.”

Gary Allenson (nicknamed Muggsy) shook my hand from his seat and assessed me with his light blue eyes, tonguing something at the front of his mouth while he did so, which wiggled his brown mustache. He looked back at his sheet. “Don’t worry, slick,” he said, spitting into his Dixie cup, “I don’t bite.”

Komminsk was there too, barrel-chested and half smiling. He reminded me of the kind of guy you’d find getting drunk on a golf course: friendly and constantly bullshitting. Cesar was nowhere to be found, but Jake brought me into another training room to meet Alan Mills. When I walked in, it looked like he was holding court while guys received treatment from a team of trainers.

Jake, to my dismay, walked me right in the middle of the circle of players to introduce me to Mills. I was thankful, in that moment, that I was working in the Orioles organization and not the Twins—if I recognized any of these guys I would’ve been petrified by a forced suppression of my adoration.

“Millsy,” Jake said, putting a hand on his shoulder, “this is your new clubbie up in Aberdeen, Greg.”

I reached my hand out but he did not take it.

He was bigger than the pictures I’d seen online. He wasn’t fat, he just took up a lot of space with his energy and movements, even more than some of the players who were larger than he was.

He started talking to me in Spanish—his accent flawless—and I froze.

The guys laughed.

“Puedes hablar ingles?” I said quietly under the laughter.

“What’s up, meat?” he said, stepping out of Spanish mid-sentence. “What’re you looking for? You need autographs from these guys? Autograph time’s not for twenty minutes, come back then.”

“I’m the clubbie in Aberdeen,” I said.

“Oh, shit. You’re the clubbie? Man, I feel sorry for you. I used to be a clubbie. It’s a thankless job. Good luck, meat, that shit ain’t easy.”

He shook my hand.

“Good to meet you—what’d you say?”

“Greg,” I said.

“We’ll get you loosened up in Aberdeen, meat,” he said.

We walked out of the training room. “So that’s Alan Mills,” Jake said.

I looked at him and he smiled.

“He’ll take good care of you,” he said, and I guessed that meant he would tip well. “So you’ve got a long way to go. You’re not going all the way up there today are you?”

“No, no, I’m stopping to see my girlfriend in Georgia then going the rest of the way in a few days.”

“Okay, good,” he said as we walked. “You got a living situation up there yet? I used to share a little apartment with, like, four other guys I think it was. Sounds like a lot, but when they were on the road I had the apartment to myself. Then one summer I lived in the clubhouse. Think about it. You don’t have to pay utilities: free water, free electricity, free air conditioning, and free internet. You don’t have to pay for food: you just eat the leftover spreads from the previous homestand. And you don’t pay for fucking rent. I made bank that summer. I just put down a blanket on the clubhouse couch and I was good to go.”

“Oh, yeah, the team is putting me up in an apartment in White Marsh.”

He stopped walking. “For free?” he said.

“Yeah.”

He squinted, looking at me, thinking. “Interesting.” He started speed-walking again, bringing me through the major league locker room. The walls were lined with dark wood lockers with name plates above them. Above the lockers were words in orange and black painted on the wall: Endurance, Heart, Strength, and so on. A fridge stood stocked with a rainbow of athletic drinks.

“Here,” Jake said, opening the door and handing me one. “For the road.”

“Thanks. Where are all of the major leaguers?” I said.

He looked at me. “Baltimore. Season started two months ago. Where’ve you been?”

“Right,” I said. “I don’t know why I asked that.”

We continued on to the cafeteria, where a handful of players were eating.

“Here, you want some pizza?” he asked. He called out to the guy behind the food counter to put a few slices in some saran wrap. “What do you want—bananas, apples?”

“Oh, no,” I said, “I have some food in the car.”

“Look, when someone offers you something in this game you smile, say thank you, and accept it.”

He handed me the saran-wrapped plate with pizza and a loose orange and banana.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome. How much would it cost to buy lunch on the road, 10 bucks? You just got lunch for free—that’s money in your pocket. You seem like a polite young man, and that’s good, but don’t be so polite that you lose money.”

He walked me to the front lobby, where we could see through the glass entrance that the rain was coming down more heavily than when I came in. Jake asked the receptionist to give me a poncho. She reached underneath her desk and produced a slim packet. I clumsily tried to carry all of my goodies.

“Okay,” Jake said. “You’re all set?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“You’ll be fine. Just keep the guys happy and everything will work out. Alright, I gotta get back to work. I’ll text you when the shipment of game balls is coming up, but other than that just text me if you need some advice.”

He speed-walked off. I stood in that lobby, staring into the storm outside. I put the poncho on and held my lunch in my arms underneath—awkward, but as prepared as I’d ever be to run out into the rain.

“Thank you,” I said to the receptionist.

She smiled back. “Drive safe.”

I ran out into the churning gray Florida afternoon and laughed, my chest swelling with the beating of my nervous heart, all the way to the Caddie, which sat twinkling with droplets of rain beading on its golden body.

BRICK NUMBERS

Only two baseball players from Hamline University in Saint Paul, Minnesota, ever made it to the big leagues. The first was a catcher by the name of Lew Drill, who played four seasons with the Baltimore Orioles, Washington Senators, and Detroit Tigers from 1902 to 1905. (Drill was batting 8th and playing catcher for the Tigers on August 30th of 1905, the same day a young man by the name of Ty Cobb made his major league debut, playing center field and batting fifth.)

The other Hamline player's name was not Greg Larson—that young man was cut one week into his freshman year practices and later transferred to Winthrop University. The second Hamline major leaguer was named Howie “Stretch” Schultz, a six-foot-six-and-a-half-inch basketball and baseball star whose excessive height kept him stateside for World War II. Howie left school in the spring of 1943, his junior year, to go to spring training for the Saint Paul Saints of the American Association, an independent team with no major league affiliation. Howie's childhood home, the Hamline campus, and the Saints stadium were all within a few miles of each other.

Howie's father, Leo, an avid baseball fan, told him, “I hate to see you leave school, but if you're going to have an opportunity, you might really have it now because of the elimination of so many guys going into service.”

Schultz played well for the Saints all the way into August, when they traveled to Louisville to play the Colonels, an affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. In their August 4th game, the Saints were up 3-2 in the bottom of the tenth with the Colonels up to bat. There was one out and Schultz was holding the lone runner on first, the potential tying run. With the pitch, Schultz swung out his long legs and planted his feet (surprisingly small—only size 10s) away from the

bag into fielding position. The batter rifled a line drive, barely off the ground toward the first base bag and the runner broke for second, expecting an extra base hit down the line and a chance to score the tying run. Schultz didn't have time to step and dive, he simply fell prone to his left next to the bag, extending his mitt as far as his wiry frame would allow him. The ball found its way into his mitt for the second out. He then grabbed the ball with his right hand and tapped it onto first base for the third out, as the base runner stood halfway between first and second with his eyes popping in surprise. The play won the game for the Saints.

The crowd fell silent as the loudspeaker played, "Weep No More My Lady." The lights darkened and the people wended their way out of the stadium. Among them was Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey. Less than two weeks later, Rickey bought Schultz's contract from the Saints in exchange for four players and \$40,000. The next season, in 1944, Branch Rickey would buy the entire Saints roster as a farm team for his Dodgers. In that way, he was one of the early pioneers in baseball history—responsible for the expansion and development of the minor league system.

Rickey had been a major league player in his younger years, although an unexceptional one. He played three seasons in total: two with the St. Louis Browns in 1905 and 1906 and one with the New York Highlanders in 1907, amassing a .239 batting average. His skills as a front office executive, however, were what made him a Hall of Famer. After his playing career, Rickey coached the St. Louis Cardinals. During a 1925 season that ended in a fourth place finish in the National League standings, the Cardinals' ownership moved Rickey off the field and into the front office. There, Rickey worked solely on general manager duties, which allowed him to focus more on player development and acquisitions, his specialties. Rickey knew that the

Cardinals team would be doomed to continue sliding in the National League standings if they could not purchase talented players like the wealthier teams could.

In those days, there weren't lower level minor league teams that sent their talent to the bigs through an agreement with a major league team. Instead, major league teams purchased individual players.

"When the Cardinals were fighting for their life in the National League," Rickey told *The Sporting News*, "I found that we were at a disadvantage in obtaining players of merit from the minors. Other clubs could outbid. They had money. In short, we had to take what was left or nothing at all."

At Rickey's suggestion, the Cardinals' ownership had started purchasing interests in entire teams in 1921, starting with an 18% stake in the Houston Buffaloes of the Texas League, working control of the Ft. Smith Twins, and a similar deal with the Sycamore Stars of the International League. Owning entire teams of players allowed the Cardinals to create a chain of minor league teams that would permit them to sign young players cheaply, select only the best to advance to the Cardinals, and leave the rest to develop further or sell to other teams for a profit. Rickey held Cardinals-sponsored tryouts to attract players from all across the South and the Midwest. He came up with player development innovations such as sandpits, which he used to teach players to slide, and the batting tee, on which players practiced their swings. Owning these minor teams and utilizing his skill innovations also allowed Rickey to develop players with more hands-on attention than if they had come from an independent team.

In 1926, one year after Rickey moved into the general manager role, the Cardinals won their first world series. They continued to dominate the National League, winning the pennant in 1928, 1930, 1931, and 1934, with World Series wins in '31 and '34. Other teams started to

follow Rickey's system of buying entire teams to create their own minor league affiliates. But by 1938, Rickey had purchased entire *leagues*, such as the Arkansas-Missouri League and the Nebraska State League. Major league baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis was not impressed with Rickey's innovative minor league system. He saw the Cardinals machine as a threat to baseball's integrity. Landis thought having independent teams (ones that were not owned by any major league organization) in the search for their own championships and playing meaningful games was good for baseball. He reasoned that what Rickey had done, in buying entire leagues, had turned once meaningful games of baseball into glorified exhibitions meant to serve only the Cardinals' interests. After an investigation, Landis forced Rickey and the Cardinals to release 74 of their minor league players. But Rickey set out to build his minor league system even further: by 1940, the Cardinals owned 32 teams and had working agreements with 8 others, meaning the Cardinals had control of more than 800 players.

Although they could no longer purchase entire leagues, every major league team went on to purchase players and teams to develop minor league systems of their own. By 1963, however, only 15 professional baseball leagues survived in the US and Canada, down from 59 at its peak in the post-World War II boom in 1949. It was in 1963 that major league baseball decided to reclassify and formalize the minor league structure that roughly served as the same model still in place when I made my way to Aberdeen in 2012.

Most minor league teams were not owned by the major league clubs (with few exceptions), but instead had working affiliation contracts with them. The major league team, known as the parent, would pay the salaries and benefits for players and coaches and provide bats, balls, and gear for the players, while the minor league front office would pay for travel and operating expenses. The minor league team owners would also have to pay a small share of their

gross ticket revenues to their parent team. The minor league owners, in return, would get the benefit of having the brand name of the parent club associated with them, as well as the on-field talent the parent provided. A minor league team would get the majority of its revenue from ticket sales, concessions, merchandise, and advertising. There were, of course, still independent leagues operating around the country, as there always will be—some of them popping up and folding in the same season (like the South Coast League, which held only a 2007 season), some of them holding on for decades (such as the original American Association, which operated from 1902 to 1997). But independent leagues were not classified in the same way. Affiliated minor leagues were organized from rookie ball to triple-A, triple-A being the highest level before recharging the majors.

Triple-A baseball includes only two leagues. It's a place for seasoned veterans and young prospects alike. Guys who are struggling at the major league level might get sent down to the team's triple-A affiliate to work on some specific skill that might be difficult to hone in the majors. Or sometimes guys are good enough to be on the major league roster, but happen to play a position that's already filled with an excellent player. These players could be sent down to triple-A to continue playing regularly rather than have their skills rot on the major league bench. That way, they can be ready to play if, for example, the player ahead of them in the majors goes down with an injury. (Guys at the triple-A level often deal with the awkward desire for someone else's injury, which could be the worst moment of another player's career, so that they can get called up to the majors, which could be the best moment of their own life.)

Double-A is still a high level of baseball, including three leagues, usually comprised of players with some prior experience in professional baseball, likely in single-A and rookie ball. Jumps from double-A to the majors happen more often than you might expect, mostly because

top prospects are put in double-A leagues to play against each other rather than playing against more veteran players in triple-A. Players rarely (if ever) go as high as double-A immediately after they're drafted.

Single-A is split into three parts: three high-A leagues, two low-A leagues, and two Short-Season leagues. The IronBirds were a short season team, meaning they only played 76 games, compared to the 140 game seasons in the other minor leagues and the 162 game season in the majors. High- and low-A are made up mostly of young players moving up to the next step from short season and rookie league teams. Short season leagues start in mid-June, meant to accommodate those players who have just been drafted. That way teams can select a player in the early June draft, sign him, and immediately place him in professional baseball straight out of college or high school. (There are also rookie leagues in Arizona and Florida, where teams play 60 games, often based out of their parent team's spring training complex, like the Orioles. They often call this "extended," short for "extended spring training.")

The baseball draft, which was implemented in 1965, is used by major league teams to stock all of their minor league affiliates. This makes the MLB draft unique in terms of its sheer size. The NBA drafts only two rounds of about 60 players. The NHL has 7 rounds of about 215 picks. The NFL has 7 rounds as well, with about 250 picks. But major league baseball's draft, under the 2012 collective bargaining agreement, consists of more than 40 rounds of about 1200 players—every year. In Aberdeen, I would soon discover some of the side effects from the sheer size of this draft and the expansiveness of the minors system as a whole.

Although he was not directly responsible for the implementation of the amateur baseball draft, Branch Rickey changed the way talent was purchased and developed in baseball. But his greatest gift to the game was still nearly four years away from his purchase of Howie Schultz's

contract, and it would come at Stretch's expense. Rickey, who had left the Cardinals for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1942, wanted to integrate the major leagues and end the long-standing "gentlemen's agreement" that barred black players from playing at baseball's most prestigious level. The move was as much driven by idealism as it was by practical economics: Branch Rickey saw an untapped market in talented black baseball players and, along with them, black fans. He was also opposed to discrimination, once saying that, "I may not be able to do something about racism in every field, but I can sure do something about it in baseball." So, on August 28th of 1945, Rickey purchased the contract of Jackie Robinson from the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro American League. Rickey chose Robinson as much for his personality as his playing ability—he was a great player in his one season with the Monarchs (though certain accounts differ on the final number, he hit in the high .300s that 1945 season). But there were other Negro League players who may have been more skilled. For example, home run-slugging catcher Josh Gibson of the Homestead Grays had a lifetime .359 batting average in 16 Negro League seasons ending in 1946. Pitcher Satchel Paige, who was on those '45 Monarchs with Jackie, had 103 wins and 1231 strikeouts in 17 Negro League seasons (he eventually pitched for the Cleveland Indians and St. Louis Browns into his mid-40s, once Jackie had broken the color barrier).

But it was Jackie's personality that Rickey wanted—his fierce determination coupled with an ability to withstand abuse while withholding retaliation (until the time was right, when the world would be ready for Jackie's natural aggressiveness). The next season, in 1946, Jackie played for the Brooklyn Dodgers' highest minor league affiliate, the Montreal Royals. Meanwhile, right-handed Howie Schultz split time at first base for the Dodgers with lefty Ed Stevens. In general, Schultz would start against lefty pitchers and Stevens would start against

righties. Schultz finished the season with a .253 average, 3 home runs, and 27 RBI. Stevens ended the year at a .242 clip, but had 10 home runs and 60 RBI. In Montreal, Robinson dominated in the International League, hitting .349 with an incredible .468 on-base percentage, all while playing second base. But the Dodgers had Eddie Stanky, who finished seventh in the MVP voting as a second baseman in that same '46 season.

So Rickey called Robinson up to the Dodgers and moved him over to first base for the 1947 season, meaning there were two men who would soon be out of a job in Brooklyn: Schultz and Stevens. Robinson made his debut with the Dodgers and broke the color line in baseball on April 15, 1947, starting at first base against the Boston Braves in Brooklyn. He went 0-3 at the plate, reaching base once on an error and scoring a run in the 7th inning. In the top of the 9th, with the Dodgers leading 5-3, Brooklyn manager Clyde Sukeforth sent out Schultz as a defensive replacement for Jackie at first base. It became apparent, though, that Jackie needed no help in the field or at the plate, as he went on to hit .287 with 12 home runs, 48 RBI, and 29 stolen bases, winning the first ever Major League Baseball Rookie of the Year award. Schultz didn't see the field again for nearly a month after Robinson's debut. Howie, the Saint Paul Steeple, pinch hit in a game on May 9th and grounded into a double play. After the game, he was sold to the Philadelphia Phillies for \$50,000. Rickey moved Ed Stevens down to Montreal, where he hit .290 with 27 home runs and 108 RBIs. Rickey called Stevens up to the Dodgers late in the season and he went 2 for 14 with 5 strikeouts. He was sold to the Pirates on November 13, 1947.

Rickey got exactly what he wanted in Robinson: a star on the field and the highest ever yearly attendance at Ebbets field with 1,807,526 fans all season. Sportswriter Wendell Smith summed it up like this:

Jackie's nimble

Jackie's quick

Jackie's making the turnstiles click.

Jackie changed the world, within baseball and beyond, with the help of Branch Rickey (and vice versa). Rickey's efforts to integrate baseball would overshadow his invention of the modern minor league system, but his legacy would remain in the shadows of the minor league structure all the way up to that 2012 season with the IronBirds. And Hamline standout Howie Schultz's legacy? He would become the right-handed half of the answer to an obscure baseball trivia question: Who did Jackie Robinson replace on the Brooklyn Dodgers?

Ripken Stadium's address was 873 Long Drive, Aberdeen, Maryland. The numbers represented Cal Jr.'s number 8 when he played for the Orioles, Cal Sr.'s number 7 when he played for the Orioles, and brother Billy's number 3 when he, too, played for the O's. The Long Drive part—well, that was just one of those minor league baseball puns, representing the 431 such long drives Cal Jr. hit over the fence in his 21-year career with Baltimore.

The stadium was oddly secluded in the woods when I approached it in the Caddie (the son of a bitch actually survived the trip!). It was nestled in the woods even though the map showed that I-95 was no more than a few hundred feet beyond the right field foul pole. A brick façade with green roofing arched over the home plate entrance to Ripken Stadium—solid, new, sturdy.

My new boss, Jason, met me in the front office. He stood a few inches taller than me (maybe more if you added the gelled black hair spiking above his forehead) and he had a bit of thickness around his waist. Jason walked me through the front office introducing me to people whose names I forgot the moment I heard them. The office was cluttered with boxes of

programs, foam fingers leaning on the corners of cubicles, and old bobbleheads and figurines peppering peoples' desks.

We went out to the stadium concourse where concession signs had big emblems saying "Ripken Experience" with a blue crab at the bottom, and big white letters above saying "Pizza * Subs * Fried Cheese * Hand Crafted Gourmet Sausage." White letters spelled out "Welcome to Ripken Stadium" as we faced the field.

"Looks amazing," I said.

"The field looks like shit," Jason said. "It's all torn up from high school kids playing on it all summer."

It looked fine to me. Auburn dirt cutouts made walkways in the grass between each dugout and home plate, as close to a red carpet a guy might find on a baseball field. A video board rose up beyond right-center field, above the green-padded fence, with an emblem saying "Ripken Stadium" above it.

Jason asked me how the apartment looked and I said it was great. I'd slept on my air mattress the night before, after I'd paid one of the neighbor kids 10 bucks to help me carry my desk from the Caddie up to my third level unit. I didn't have a television or any furniture other than that desk, so the living room sat empty. I also discovered an unsecured Wi-Fi network from some unsuspecting neighbor, so there'd be no need for me to get internet service.

I'd eaten a bag of Taco Bell chalupas at my desk that first night before passing out from a long day of driving. I'd spent the past few days visiting Nicole in Georgia. She'd been living with her parents in her hometown of Augusta, Georgia, since graduation the month before. Our plan was for her to stay at her parents place until the IronBirds season finished in September, and over the summer she'd make the 45-minute commute from their house to her new job at the high

school in Johnston, South Carolina. We spent part of my visit looking at houses and apartments for rent so we could move in together once the season ended. Nothing caught our eye in our very low price range (\$800 a month was the high limit), but she promised to keep looking over the summer, both of us excited to finally start our lives together—no more long distance. Before I left Georgia, Nicole said she'd visit me in Maryland soon after the season started—sometime during one of the IronBirds' first long road trips.

I thought of her my first night in the new apartment, in those lonely hours between life and sleep. When only the night before she'd been lying naked next to me, now her absence felt like a sinking misstep over a cliff. I took comfort underneath my Twins blanket, flipped so the logos faced my body and only showed red to the world, just in case my new roommates made an unexpected appearance.

I asked Jason: "Do you know when the players will be moving in with me?"

We continued walking up the first base line along the concourse, past a roofed pavilion area with picnic tables and a large sign that said "Conrad's Crabs & Seafood Deck."

"As far as I know," he said, "there won't be anyone in there with you. But if you want someone in there for company, go ahead and ask a couple guys on the team to live with you. There'll probably be someone who can't find a host family."

"I might just stay there by myself," I said, "if it's all the same to you."

"Yeah, you can do that if you want—it's your place." Jason's eyes got big. "Or, you could consider the ethics of having guys stay with you and asking them to pay for it."

We walked on field level now, passing side-by-side batting cages like a double-barreled shotgun. The yellow right field foul pole stood to our left, and on we walked into the clubhouse,

which looked like a long one-story brick rambler. The words “Home Clubhouse” were written in plastic white letters above the door.

The manager’s office was immediately to the left inside the entrance, with its own couch, desk, fridge, and bathroom. Next door was the coaches’ office, with a tiled floor, a dozen lockers, and a bathroom with two shower stalls. That office opened up into the locker room area, where tan wood lockers lined the walls: each with a shelf on top and a metal pole running horizontally to hang clothes. On the left of each locker was a cubby, and underneath were smaller shelves sectioned off all the way down to the bottom. The harsh fluorescent lights reminded me of an office building. Off to the right from the entrance, on the wall, was the IronBirds logo painted on the white concrete. The logo was a cartoon airplane with eyes, a smiling mouth, and a number 8 on the fin in honor of Cal Jr. The IronBirds, in their 10-season history to that point, had one winning season, one .500 season, and eight losing seasons, failing to live up to the standard of greatness set by its owner. Cal Jr. held one of baseball’s most hallowed records: 2,632 consecutive games played. It was Lou Gehrig’s record before it was his, and the feat had granted Cal the nickname of Iron Man. The IronBirds were named in honor of himself and his tie to the Orioles (who were nicknamed “the Birds”) as well as a nod to the Aberdeen Proving Ground just east of Ripken Stadium on the Aberdeen Throughway, where the fighter jets were nicknamed ironbirds.

The place felt empty.

“We’ll get some couches in here for you,” Jason said.

There was a main bathroom with showers for the players like a high school locker room. And to its left, near the back entrance, was the laundry room, with two huge industrial washers and dryers. On the other end of the locker room, near the IronBird logo, a hallway led through

the training room. White, black, and putrid green square tiles lined the ice bath area. Up above the treatment tables another logo adorned the wall: “Orioles” written in cursive with a realistic black and orange oriole bird perched on the “i” and a baseball diamond in the background. Beyond the training tables sat Trek’s tiny office. If he faced his office door from his desk and looked right, he’d peer through a square cutout in the wall of his office into the weight room, which housed a few racks of rusty dumbbells and a couple old multi-use gym machines that looked like they’d been shipped directly from the USSR courtesy of Ivan Drago.

“These are Cal’s personal weightlifting machines,” Jason said. “Hopefully we’ll get these outta here and the O’s will get us some new equipment, but I’m not holding my breath.”

Off to the left side of the weight room were double white metal doors with a little placard on the wall that said “Equipment Closet.”

“Don’t mind the boxes,” he said when we entered, “those are the jerseys and stuff we’ll get hung up tomorrow. And we got new pants this season so we’ll have to figure out what to do with all these old ones.” He opened a box and baseball pants popped out the top like a can of worms. “Give ‘em to some high school or something, I don’t know.”

The 8-by-10 room was lined on all sides with solid wooden shelving extending a couple feet from the walls, each one holding a mess of equipment. Batting helmets were strewn about one sad shelf, like decapitated heads of former players. Some random bats gathered here and there, most of them broken. Jason found an old box of sunflower seeds that had expired the year before.

He peered into the box and said, “Looks like you’re good on seeds for a bit.”

Old mustard and ketchup bottles sat on a shelf next to the door, along with a tub of Utz Pub Mix, half-empty like someone had their arm elbow-deep into it and just thought, “You know

what? Fuck this,” and walked away from this place and never came back. Behind the propped open door were some metal bars that looked like a broken-down squat rack. I pulled the door open and moved the metal to reveal a big brick number 8, about as tall as my chest and a few bricks thick.

“And this?” I said.

“Yeah, that was a gift to Cal and we can’t figure out where to put it. They wanted to stand it out on the main plaza entrance, but I said, ‘You know what’ll happen if we do that? Some kid is gonna climb up onto that thing and knock it over and kill someone.’ ”

I envisioned the bloody splat of a child crushed by this symbol of Cal’s legacy.

“It’s pretty fucking heavy too,” he said, “so we have it down here because where else would it go. Actually, I’d be surprised if anyone knows this thing exists.

“This is a good place to work, and you made the right decision, but you’ll find that a lot of shit here falls to the bottom rung of the ladder. And guess who that is?”

I pointed my thumb to my chest.

“Yeah,” he said. “And me.”

“And what’s your job?”

“I’m the video production manager and I oversee game entertainment. Basically, if you see any of the between inning stuff on the field or on the video board during the game I’m in charge of it.”

“So then, not sound weird, but why are you my boss?”

“Doesn’t make much sense, does it? I kind of like overseeing the clubbie, but that’s just another one of those things that fell to me.”

I looked up to a top shelf where old crock-pots and hot plates looked like they'd been piled together, unwashed. "Jesus," I thought. "How elaborate did Jake and other clubbies get when they made meals for the team? I wasn't planning on making a whole goddamn turkey dinner—maybe some deli meat and PB&J's."

"Well," Jason said. "What d'you think? This'll be your home for the summer."

"Looks pretty good," I said, suddenly homesick for nowhere in particular.

He nodded, staring off at something on the other side of the room. He stepped over piles of loose pants toward a shelf and started rifling through some small New Era boxes.

"You look like you have a decent-sized head," Jason said. "You think you wear a large? I guess it doesn't matter, really—this is all that's left. Here."

He pulled out a blue stretch-fit cap with orange trim on the bill and an orange cursive capital "A" for Aberdeen on the crown. He slapped it onto my head so that the bill sagged halfway over my eyes and I could only see his feet. I left it like that.

"There," he said. "Now you look like a clubbie."

EVEN THE JADED DREAM

I stepped onto the scale at my new apartment's community weight room. 172 pounds, already 13 pounds lighter than when I came to Maryland. My stomach knotted thinking about the players arriving the next day. I already felt socially intimidated by meeting new people, the last thing I wanted was to add physical intimidation on top of it. Jake had suggested I stay strong, so I got a workout in before a long day of preparing for the players' arrivals.

When I got to the stadium, Jason told me to get back in my car and drive to Towson, a nearby city. "Go see Mar at Pro-Am Sports. She's got all of our home jerseys with the name plates on the back. She's a really sweet lady, but she's a bit kooky. The store itself is—well, she gets things done on time, so that's what matters. She does the jerseys for the Orioles and the Ravens too."

Her store was in the middle of a tiny business strip with orange letters: "PRO-AM SPORTS/LETTERING." Taped to the inside of the front window were sun-faded pictures and playing cards from local high school baseball teams, youth football teams, old IronBirds team photos, and cards from ancient Orioles and Ravens players.

A little bell rang on the door when I walked in. Boxes stood crooked atop each other against the wall. Random jerseys draped over the glass display case that served as a cashier counter and a barricade from the mini-sweatshop activity in the back. I could see a young brown-skinned girl, maybe in her early twenties, with her head down running the penetrating woodpecker beak of a sewing machine needle into a pair of baseball pants. On the wall behind me, when I came to the register, were several lonely hooks of merchandise: one sad youth nut cup for sale, a couple rolls of athletic tape, and a batting donut or two—all with price stickers so old they could peel off like crunchy fall-time leaves at any moment.

A little lady emerged from the back. Her face was so bright and cheery that I thought she might be everybody's grandma. Her light blue eyes could've been the origin of that same hue in my own family.

"Hi," she said with pure warmth. She glanced up at my cap. "Are you the new clubbie for the IronBirds?"

"I am. Greg Larson."

"Hi," she said, shaking my hand. "Here are the jerseys. I'll hang onto the rest for when new players come in. You just text me the name and which number you want them to have."

"Okay, great."

"And don't be nervous. It can be stressful sometimes, but just remember to breathe and make sure they're happy."

"How do I do that?" I said.

"Well, Matt, the old clubbie, he always seemed so stressed out that he never even stopped to talk to me. He was just so busy. You can't make other people happy unless you're happy. And I just think it would be so great if you came in here to stop and talk for a bit when you pick up jerseys and pants."

I nodded.

"And, you know, you can put an ice cream machine in the clubhouse."

I laughed.

"When the guys come in from a long hot day on the field, how great would it be if they could cool down with some ice cream? You could put out different flavors and toppings—it would be great."

“That does sound really great, I just don’t know if it would make sense. I don’t even know where that would go.”

“Oh,” she said, “You’ll find a spot.”

The players drove and flew up from Ed Smith Stadium in Sarasota for a week of workouts in Aberdeen before the season started on June 18th. The schedule Trek sent me said the next four games in extended spring training were at noon, noon, 1 P.M., and 10 A.M. I couldn’t imagine how much it must’ve sucked playing in that midday heat down there.

I had the clubhouse ready. Jake had given me a suggested locker order based on relationships between players, positions, who tipped the best, and ethnicities. But as the reporting day approached, Trek kept sending me new players who signed from the draft. I wrote everyone’s last names on athletic tape and stuck them on the little name slots above their lockers.

“We’ll get their real name cards made after workouts end,” Jason said. “There’ll be a lot of guys moving around this first week.”

I put up Schmarzo’s locker tape and wrote “Schmarzoo” on it.

The fridges were stocked for the coaches, I had everyone’s laundry loops hanging in their lockers, each locker had a metal fold-up chair, and I had the new pants and jerseys ready to go in the equipment closet. I sat on the couch in the middle of the locker room, waiting for the players to arrive in the early afternoon. I felt like a kid waiting for his first ever first date to arrive. When I heard the laughing groups approaching the back door near the laundry room I sprang up and escaped to the back equipment closet, convincing myself that something there needed my immediate attention. “Yep, the pants are still in order. Got enough hats? Check. Are all of the new bats still in their boxes? Okay good, they are.”

But eventually the players sniffed me out, and they started pouring in to get geared up. The guys were all very polite and cordial, most of them eager to get their first taste of professional baseball out of the draft. They didn't strike me as bullying muscle-bros—they were just a bunch of athletic guys.

“What size pants do you wear?” I said.

Some guys looked at me like, “I thought you were supposed to know that.”

But I could tell the road dogs from the new draft guys pretty easily—they knew the answer to every question.

“What size pants do you wear?”

“Thirty-six long.”

“Cap?”

“Seven-and-a-quarter.”

“You a pitcher?”

“No.”

“What kind of bat do you use?”

“Got any one-thirteens?”

I'd check. “Looks like it, yeah.”

“Let me get a 34-inch.”

I handed them the bat and said, “If you break it, just give me the broken bat and I'll give you a new one in return.”

Jake told me that this technique not only kept the guys honest, but it could also make me some money. When he was a clubbie, he'd set up a deal with the gift shop so that they'd sell the broken bats for 20 bucks a piece, and \$7.50 of that went to the clubbie. All I had to do was slap a

piece of athletic tape at the bottom with the last name and jersey number of the player who broke it. (At one point during the season, the bats sold so quickly that the supply couldn't keep up with demand. I texted Jake. He said, "There should be some broken bats in the equipment closet—use those.")

The new draftee guys seemed more inclined to grab a bat and chop a few fake swings with it, or stand with it in batting position and look at their reflection in the equipment closet's refrigerator window. They'd ask to see three or four different models and sizes.

Then I'd say, "What size cap do you wear?"

They'd say, "Ah, what do you have?"

"Anywhere from 7 to 8."

"Let me try an 8."

A size 8 could've made a nice lid for a watermelon. They'd wiggle their head and feel the cap swinging around. They'd hand it over and we'd narrow it down until they got to a 7-and-a-quarter or 7-and-three-eighths, almost every one of them.

When Schmarzo walked in it felt like seeing an old friend—the only familiar face in the bunch. Although, he had grown a Fu Manchu mustache since I'd seen him in Sarasota, which, along with his thick brown mullet, made him look like a player from the late 80s.

He was one of the players who'd made a jersey number request to Jake in Sarasota, so I already had his number 13 in his locker. I found it odd, though, because he didn't seem like a number 13 kind of guy to me.

"G-baby," he said, giving me a one armed bro-hug. "What's good with the Craperdeen IronTurds?"

"Nothing much. Just gear day."

“Anyone trying to snag extras off you?”

“Not yet.”

“They will,” he said. “Just give it time. They’ll get comfortable and try to start scamming shit from you. All these new guys are scared outta their wits right now—I know I was when I first got here.”

“Yeah? When was that?”

“Oh, this is my third year in Aberdeen—not good, G, not good. I’m like the resident senior citizen of fucking short season baseball.”

I didn’t know what to say. “What size cap do you wear?”

“7-and-a-quarter,” he said.

“What was the team like last year?”

“We sucked,” he said, “but we had a good group in here.”

“How’d you do?”

“I pitched better than my ERA,” he said.

Someone had taped a Schmarzo baseball card from 2011 on the side of a laundry room dryer. In the picture, Schmarzo was in near profile looking off to the right of the frame, his brown glove in front of his face, index finger peeking out, and his right hand reaching into the mitt. He looked, in the picture, like he’d been clean shaven precisely two days before, save for thick sideburns that reached down precisely to the bottom of his ear lobes. His puggish nose looked prominent on the card, and I could tell he was trying to make his eyes thin and intense, but instead he just seemed sleepy. There was nothing intimidating about Schmarzo, not even when he hammed it up for the photographer. On the back it said, Height: 6’3” Weight: 200 Bats: right Throws: Right Born: 2/28/89 Cincinnati, OH Acquired: 48th round selection, 2010 draft.

The card only had his stats from 2010. I had to look at his profile on MiLB.com to see his 2011 numbers: 0-2 with a 6.69 ERA in 36.1 innings with no saves and one spot start. I hoped he had indeed pitched better than that ERA.

One of the last players to get geared up was Pedro Perez, a Dominican catcher. He came into the back with Roberto Ortiz, an outfielder from Puerto Rico, acting as translator.

Pedro came in holding his catcher's gear in his hands: old black shin guards and a chest protector that looked like it had been beat with a sledge hammer a few thousand times.

"Hey, papi," Ortiz said, "he need new catcher gear."

Pedro spoke quickly in Spanish as he held out the gear and turned it over for me to inspect. I opened up the large black chest that had the extra set of brand new catchers gear. I did it out of instinct, an involuntary reaction: "This is a problem I can fix!" I thought. But I stopped myself.

"Look at this gear," Ortiz said. "Is all old and dirty."

"Why didn't he get new gear in Sarasota?" I asked.

"He say Jake send gear to Aberdeen. We're in Aberdeen, so..."

"Jake said that?"

Ortiz nodded.

"Well let me ask him and I'll see."

I texted Jake about the situation and the guys left as I waited for a response.

"Perez tried pulling that same shit down here," he texted back. "The gear he has is fine—don't give him any more than what he already has."

I stomped out to the locker room, straight to Perez's locker, pulling out his catcher's gear and holding it to his face.

“Jake said you tried this same shit in Florida.”

Ortiz stepped between Perez and me.

“You have gear,” Ortiz said to me. “Why you can’t give it to him?”

“No,” I said, throwing Perez’s gear into his locker. “I’m sick of putting up with this bullshit.” I stormed off back into the equipment closet. The words just sort of came out because they sounded good, but it didn’t make much sense: the day had all gone smoothly to that point, not to mention it was essentially my first day of work—what bullshit was there to be sick of already? I hadn’t talked that way to anyone in, god, I didn’t know how long. “Nobody’s gonna intimidate me,” I thought.

And back in Pedro’s locker sat his stinky, sweaty old black Rawlings catcher’s gear, with the frayed tips of the shin guard straps athletic-taped and the chest protector that wouldn’t save him from a water balloon, let alone a 95 mph fastball.

The Orioles required the players to fill out various paperwork on that first day, the kind of thing that analyzes their psychological and personal stability. Schmarzo sat down to help some of the Dominicans fill out their answers. One of the questions was: “If I weren’t playing baseball, I would be _____.”

Some guys laughed as they put down their answers, writing stuff like, “Professional clown.” Others took it seriously and put down answers like, “Financial analyst.”

Schmarzo explained the question to one of the Dominicans.

“I would cook fries at Burger King in Sarasota,” the Dominican guy said.

Schmarzo thought for a moment, then said, “I’m gonna put Chef!” and bent down to write the answer.

“No, no, no—I can no be chef. But I go cook fries at Burger King in Sarasota. I know manager.”

“That’s what he had waiting for him,” Schmarzo told me later, “and he was stoked about it. He was like, ‘Yeah, man, I know the guy there—I got this job lined up. And all the other Dominicans were looking at him like, ‘Damn, dude, he gets to go cook fries if he can’t make it in baseball.’ It was just scary, man. Real scary.”

A lot of that first day was focused on non-baseball nuts and bolts. Trek handed out housing information for guys. The list had the names, numbers, addresses, and short descriptions of host families. Host families were local families who offered to take in ballplayers for the season. Apparently some of them asked for token rent, something like 10 bucks a day, but a lot of them seemed to do it out of the kindness of their heart and love for the team. I didn't see anything about my apartment on Trek's sheets, and I didn't hear anyone talk about other rooms at Eagle's Walk, the apartment complex where the IronBirds put me.

I asked Schmarzo if he had a spot.

“Thanks, but me, Slime, and a couple other guys got an apartment together. I bet some of the new guys could use a spot—there's not shit for host families this year.”

Two first year players approached me because they heard I had housing available. Sam Kimmel was an 18th round draft pick out of Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. He had black eyebrows, black stubble on his shaved head, and brown eyes, seemingly squinting at all times. He was 6 feet tall but stout, a good physique for his position: catcher. He spoke in a monotone, and his sort of absent-minded smile made you wonder if he was high. With him was Gene Escat, a pretty boy from Honolulu who just signed out of Fresno State in the 23rd round. He was a 6-foot-2 right-hander with long dirty blond hair at the top and a fade on the sides. His eyes were so

light they were almost teal and they popped even more against his tan skin. He was pure West coast.

They said the host families were all taken and they didn't have a car either. I told them if they wanted to ride with me in the Caddie they'd have to stay late after games and come in early in the mornings. They said they didn't care.

I shrugged. "All right, well, if that works for you then let's do it."

"How much will we owe you for rent?" Kimmel said.

I had to make a decision in that moment: do I charge these guys rent like Jason suggested, or do I let it slide, even if I could see Jake in Sarasota, shaking his head saying, "That's money in your pocket."

"You guys take care of utilities," I said. "Don't worry about rent."

"No, really," Kimmel said, "what will we owe you?"

"Just utilities. I promise."

I didn't make the choice because of some inherent kindness in my heart—I simply didn't have the guts to pull off the scam. I took the easy way out (the inadvertently polite way out) and it was already costing me money.

The coaches were last to get geared up. Devarez and Komminsk were no-brainers. Devarez seemed like he would've taken whatever I gave him, sporting a toothless grin all the while, and Komminsk geared up like he was late for a tee time. Then Muggsy came into the equipment closet. He started talking before he was even halfway through the door.

"Get me some 38s, slick."

I shuffled through the pile of pants. My stomach hit the floor—I was out of pants with a 38-inch waist. I continued searching through them, praying that I had accidentally misplaced a

pair here or there in the 36 pile or the 40 pile. He stood there watching me, making this closed-mouth clicking noise in the back of his sinuses, like he was trying to knock loose a stuck piece of phlegm.

I said, almost to myself, “I don’t think—it looks like I don’t have any more 38s.”

“You don’t have what?” he said.

“Any size 38 pants.”

“You make sure the manager has a pair of pants his size, slick. Give me whatever the next size down is.”

He put on a pair of 36s with the elastic at the bottom, so tight they stopped about three inches short of his shoe tops.

“How does that look?” he said.

“Not the best.”

“I look like a goddamn JV coach.”

I got him fitted with the team caps: the blue BP cap (the same kind I wore); the black home cap with the cartoon airplane logo in front of a grey cursive A; and the grey road cap with the same IronBird logo and a black bill (his grey road cap had a high crown, which made him look like a goddamn train conductor).

I quickly learned how to cut the elastic band at the bottom of a pair of baseball pants without ruining them, and how to unobtrusively remove the hard fabric layer inside the front of a baseball cap (the key was to make the first gentle cut on the thick white fabric without piercing through the outer cloth. From there I just worked my way on the edges and pulled out the thick black fish bone-like plastic that popped out along the way). I got his gear all customized and sent him on his way.

I thought my trouble was over until Alan Mills came in.

“Hello, Mr. Mills,” I said.

“Don’t call me that,” he said. “That’s my father’s name.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, meat. So, what, you gotta get me a jersey or something? Let’s go.”

He’d requested to have his jersey number as 75, but our numbers only went up to 65.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not a player—I don’t wear a jersey. I grew up in Florida heat, so I’d just cover it up with a jacket anyway.”

“What size cap do you wear?” I said. I glanced up at his shiny bald head. I wanted him to think I could guess someone’s cap size just by looking at them. “Seven-and-three-eighths?”

“Shit, my head ain’t that big, meat. Get me seven-and-a-quarter.”

I grabbed the cap, forcing a laugh.

“Sheeit,” he said.

He swiped the cap from my hand without trying it on and walked out.

I sighed, but Mills stopped before he made it all the way out of the equipment closet.

“Oh, and another thing,” he said. “My pitchers need baseballs. How many can I get every week?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll have to ask.”

“You’re the clubbie, aren’t you? Don’t you have the balls to give me what I need? Pitchers at this level, they need new baseballs.”

“I know in the majors guys need new balls every at bat, but here—”

“Well, this isn’t the majors,” he said, slowing down his speech so I could understand. “I just need baseballs.”

I put my hands up and shrugged, saying nothing. He let the silence linger, longer than most people would—longer than what any social situation ever called for. He stared at me, too, just trying to figure me out.

“How old are you?” he said, still slowly.

“I’m 23.”

“See, you’re 23 now,” he said, the words falling out in a drip. “I’ve been playing professional baseball for almost as many years as you’ve been alive.” His eyes bulged to emphasize his point. “You’ll learn. We need baseballs, that’s all there is to it. This is baseball.”

Allenson held a team meeting. In the quiet afternoon hours prior to the meeting, I had to call out another guy for trying to pilfer equipment. He came in asking for a couple of bats. I went out to his locker.

“You already have bats,” I said, pulling them out of his locker. “No shot.”

I sat in the equipment closet after that, proud of myself for holding a steady fist over the clubhouse and the equipment. Schmarzo knocked on the door and walked in.

“Hey, man, how’s it going?” he said, scratching his Fu Manchu. “You know, it’s okay to give these guys bats. You probably don’t need to be so strict about giving those out.”

“Oh, yeah, I just didn’t want—”

“No, I get it. You don’t want these guys taking advantage of you, and I don’t blame you. But yeah, you can give them bats.”

I nodded.

“By the way, you’re doing a hell of a job today. This shit can be stressful, and I’ve seen clubbies with a lot more experience handle it worse than you.”

We walked out together for the team meeting. I sat alongside the coaches, which wasn’t natural for me—I felt more like a player than a coach. The players all lined up against one side of the locker room, facing us. The experienced guys seemed to be listening absently, maybe twirling a bat in their hands, or bending the leather of their mitt. The new guys listened intently, peaking behind someone’s head so they could make eye contact with the coaches as they spoke.

The coaches all said their piece, and I noticed that nobody translated for the foreign guys.

Muggsy spoke about team policies: everything from clothing policies (no items with logos from other teams) to tobacco use (tobacco was not allowed in the clubhouse, he said, so keep your cans in your locker cubby just in case MLB’s dip police, as he called them, came sniffing around the clubhouse).

“And the Orioles have a mustache-only facial hair policy,” he said, looking down at the player handbook. “Mustache to the corner of the lips, and sideburns to the bottom of the earlobe.”

I made eye contact with Schmarzo and his full brown Fu Manchu. He had to bury his head smiling.

Gary continued. “Each one of you grab a player handbook before you leave today.”

“I made sure each of them got one,” Trek said.

“Okay, good.” Gary turned to me. “You got something you wanna say?”

I jumped up and spoke from prepared notes like I was giving a class speech.

“As some of you may know,” I said, “my name is Greg Larson, the new clubbie. I’m 23 years old from Elk River, Minnes—”

“You got a nickname?” Muggsy said. “You don’t wanna go around hearing ‘Greg’ all season.”

“Uh, yeah, call me G or anything like that.” I told them about dues, gear policies, and even proper chewing gum protocol (“Don’t leave gum in your pockets after the game,” I said. “I don’t wanna scrub it out of your pants after the wash”)—the least of their worries on what, for many of them, was their first day of professional baseball. “I’m excited for the season,” I said. “I look forward to it.”

Muggsy gave me a look that said, “You’re the only one in that boat, slick.”

I sat down to silence and Muggsy wrapped up the meeting.

The Dominican guys just looked at each other, confused, shrugging their shoulders saying, “Como?”

I grabbed a PowerAde from the coaches’ office before the team went outside for workouts. I had a locker in the coaches’ office, but it was tucked next to the fridge I’d hardly used it for anything other than storage for Trek’s Diet Mountain Dews. Muggsy and Mills sat talking in front of Mills’s locker, where a Darth Vader action figure stood on the top shelf, red lightsaber in hand.

“Hey, meat,” Mills said to me. “Come here. I wanna show you something.” He was inspecting a baseball in his hands. “What’d you hear about those baseballs?”

“I still have to ask,” I said.

“I’ve been in professional baseball 18 seasons,” Muggsy said. “Mills was in the majors for 12. I don’t know how many games that is, but it’s a lot, and we needed baseballs to play in every one of ‘em.”

“See,” Mills said, “look at this ball here.” He tossed it to me. I could see them analyzing me out of the corner of my eye—trying to gauge how I handled the baseball. I remembered watching *The Rookie* with my dad when I was younger. Dennis Quaid, who was playing pitcher Jim Morris, stood on the mound with his glove under his armpit when a scout tossed him a baseball. Quaid caught the ball with both hands like a child cupping a firefly. He then held the ball with his full palm and threw it into his mitt. “Look at that,” my dad said, “he doesn't even hold the ball like ballplayer.” I didn't know exactly what it was that let him know Quaid wasn't a ballplayer, but my dad was right: you could intuit it, the same way you can tell which jersey numbers are good and which ones aren't.

I caught the ball in my right hand and tried to hold it as though it was meant for my hand—born from my hand, like a pearl embedded in the soft tissue of a clam.

“See that scuff there?” Mills said. I twisted it to find a patch of road rash with bits of leather flying away. “That scuff makes the ball move off path. See, a pitcher knows what the ball is gonna do if it's a clean ball, but a scuff will fuck up its path. I don't know if you've ever played baseball before, but if you're throwing with a scuffed ball it's gonna tail from you. If pitchers practice with a ball like that for long enough they'll expect everything to move like that. Then what happens? They get in a game, they're using new balls, and it doesn't tail the same way they're used to. Then they walk the batter and we lose the game. Do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because the damn clubbie didn't give them any baseballs.”

Mills eventually asked me for the information to Rawlings, the company that made the baseballs, so he could order some himself. I asked Jake for the number and when I told him why, he sent back: “Just make Mills happy—it's not worth it.”

The team went out to the field for practice. Alone now in the clubhouse, I picked up one of the player manuals in the locker room. “Did everyone grab one?” I thought. There were only three left. Maybe this meant three players hadn’t gotten a manual yet, so if I took one that player leftover would tell Trek, “Hey, I didn’t get a packet.” And Trek would come out of his office saying, “Who the fuck took one of these player manuals?” I’d have to tell him it was me and he’d come up to me and say, “Those packets weren’t meant for you, Greg, that’s private Orioles information. You’re not an Orioles employee and you’re not a member of this team—you work for the IronBirds and you’re only here to wash our underpants.” Then Jason would fire me and I’d have to drive home, already out more than 1200 dollars of my own money without a single dollar in dues or a single paycheck from the IronBirds—just 1200 bucks of my own savings down the drain from travelling up there and getting necessities for my apartment and the clubhouse.

But the coast was clear. I knew I was just being paranoid anyway, so I picked up one of the packets that said “Baltimore Orioles Player Development: Minor League Player Information & Guidelines.” What I found inside rocked my perception of baseball forever.

It wasn’t the dress code, facial hair policy, or any of those other inane, seemingly antiquated, guidelines that shocked me—it was the salary scale. Look, I didn’t think minor leaguers made Alex Rodriguez money (\$30 million a year), but I had no cognizance of the astronomical difference between major league and minor league salaries. The chart looked like this:

Salary Scale

GCL	1st year	\$1,100 per month
	2nd year	\$1,150 per month
	3rd year	\$1,200 per month

Aberdeen	1st year	\$1,100/\$,1200 per month
	2nd year	\$1,250 per month
	3rd year	\$1,300 per month
Delmarva/Frederick	1st year	\$1,400 per month
	2nd year	\$1,500 per month
	3rd year	\$1,600 per month
Bowie	1st year	\$1,800 per month
	2nd year	\$1,900 per month
	3rd year	\$2,100 per month
Norfolk	1st year	\$2,500 per month
	2nd year	\$2,800 per month
	3rd year	\$3,200 per month

(The Orioles even made a careful effort to insert dollar signs and commas on each number, as if to say, “This is *four* figures we’re talking here.”)

I hadn’t quite memorized the Orioles organizational ladder yet, but it was easy enough to figure that GCL meant Gulf Coast League (all the guys who were left behind in the Sarasota complex for “extended spring training” played in the GCL), Delmarva was low-A, Frederick was high-A, Bowie was double-A, and Norfolk was triple-A.

So, what, this meant the guys working their asses off at Ripken Stadium were making fourteen, maybe fifteen thousand dollars a year? Yeah, I would’ve been overjoyed to make that much money, but I wasn’t a professional athlete. I thought about what Jake had told me, that he’d made nineteen grand one summer working in the clubhouse—the dude washing jockstraps made more in one summer than the guys on the field made in one year? That sure as hell didn’t make sense to me. I asked Schmarzo about it when the players came in.

He laughed as he put his glove in his top cubby. “I wish it was that good,” he said. “We only get paid during the season.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “So you’re making what, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Less than four grand. Way less.”

“A year?”

“With the Orioles, yeah. I teach some clinics in the offseason but that isn’t exactly gonna put my kids through college. Oh, by the way, before I forget, what do we owe for dues during workouts?”

“Oh, yeah. Fourteen—it’s just two bucks a day for laundry since I’m not putting out a spread.”

One player nearby piped up. “Then what’re dues this season?” he said.

“Seven a day,” I said.

“Seven?” He looked at his neighbor in disbelief. I might’ve told him to give me his shirt.

Schmarzo pulled a twenty out of his wallet. “Keep it,” he said.

In November 2006, during Alex Schmarzo’s senior year at California’s Palo Alto High, the 6-foot 3-inch, 180-pound right-hander signed a letter of intent to pitch on scholarship at Saint Mary’s College of California. The 4000-student Division I college was only an hour drive north from Palo Alto, across the San Francisco Bay from his hometown. In early 2007, at an alumni game for his high school, Alex reared back to throw a 3-2 fastball and heard a “pop” in his right arm. Two of his fingers went numb. He didn’t know it at the time, but he had micro tears in his ulnar collateral ligament in his elbow, an injury that usually requires Tommy John surgery. After a week with no improvement in his arm, Alex called Jedd Soto, the head baseball coach at St. Mary’s College. Alex told Soto about the injury, letting the coach know that if he didn’t want to

waste a scholarship on damaged goods, he didn't have to. But the coach stuck with Alex and gave him the scholarship he was promised.

Three seasons passed at St. Mary's. By 2010, Alex had amassed a career 5.30 ERA with a 2-6 record. In that junior season, though, he had an improved 4.50 ERA out of the bullpen in 16 innings. He worked as a closer most of his college career, and his scouting report read: "Not a slam dunk to be picked as a junior, but with an 88-91 mph fastball, and changeup that is average at times, he has a chance to develop in pro ball. Has some deception in the delivery but struggles to repeat it, and he'll have to develop a better breaking ball."

The Baltimore Orioles had been in contact with Alex leading up to that 2010 draft, saying they'd draft the junior anywhere from the seventh round to the 20th round, along with a \$100,000 signing bonus and a promise to pay for his last year of college (since he would give up his scholarship to play in the Orioles organization). But on the day before the draft, Alex broke his pinky on his throwing hand playing pick-up basketball. Once again, he was open and honest with the people taking a chance on him. He told the Orioles and other interested teams about the broken pinky. The Orioles rewarded his honesty by dropping the expected offer to a \$75,000 signing bonus with his last year of school still paid for. As the first day of the draft went by, nobody picked up Alex. The number lowered: \$50,000 and school; \$40,000 with no school; then \$20,000 and no school. At that point, Alex told the Orioles that he'd just go back to St. Mary's and finish his senior year if that was their best offer. The number jumped up a few thousand and the Orioles selected Alex on the third and final day of the draft with the 1438th pick. (They took him in the 48th round, a round that didn't exist anymore by 2012.)

At spring training that year, a time when 48th rounders were put together with top prospects in an organization, Orioles first round draft pick Manny Machado showed Alex a

tattoo on his inner bicep. The design was a stylized M3M, signifying Machado's initials split with a "3," symbolizing his third overall choice in the 2010 draft.

"I thought about getting 'A1438S' tattooed on my bicep," Alex told Machado, "but it just didn't have the same ring to it."

Schmarzo, now 205 pounds, sat in front of his locker in the IronBirds' clubhouse, where everyone was taking a quick break before heading back into the sun for workouts. He ran his hand through his thick brown hair. Spit shot out of his mouth as he stared a hole through the carpet, eyes pulsing ever so slightly.

I sat down in the chair next to him, in front of the locker that belonged to Petersime, his best friend on the team and his roommate.

"What's going on?" I said.

He glanced over to me and clicked his head to the left. "I'm leaving," he said. "Just look at all these guys." He gestured around the packed clubhouse to players enjoying themselves, despite the fact that some of them would inevitably be released. We had more than 40 players in there—so many that I had to bring in portable lockers and double-up some guys.

Schmarzo had already cried wolf about quitting baseball at least twice since he drove up from Sarasota.

"I'm too fucking old to be here, man. What am I even doing here?"

I shook my head and decided against making a joke about his 6.69 ERA last year.

"They'd be doing me a favor if they cut me, really. But what the fuck am I gonna do? Most of these guys—almost none of 'em have a college degree. Jimenez, Rivera, Nivar, they probably never got out of elementary school. Maybe three guys in this clubhouse have college

degrees, and I'm one of 'em. And even I'm fucked. These kids drafted out of high school or these Dominican guys—you think they know how to take care of themselves? Hell no. Because they've had people like you to feed them, do their laundry, and clean up after them their whole lives. Most of us don't have any idea what we'd be doing if we weren't playing baseball. It's our identity."

It was the first time in my postgraduate life that I felt a sense of superiority because I had my degree.

Petersime—a tall, blonde, lanky pitcher—reached around my shoulder to grab something from his locker.

"Slime," Schmarzo said, "what would you be doing if you weren't playing baseball?"

He looked at Schmarzo like they were both stupid. "I have no idea," Slime said, and he walked away.

"See what I mean?" Schmarzo said. "This life fucks with you, man. I always say it's like scratching lottery tickets: when you have enough guys together playing the lottery—buying scratch-offs—of course one or two of them are going to win big. It's inevitable. But they win and you're just left sitting there scratching away. You throw your money and time away one dollar and one day at a time. But those guys won though, right? So maybe I can too. So we keep coming back for more and more until we realize that we're broke and out of time." He broke his frantic eye contact with me, leaned his elbows onto his knees, and worked on staring another hole through the floor. "That's what it's like to play single-A baseball."

Later on, I told Nicole about my conversation with Schmarzo.

"It's validation," she said on the phone. "It's like you seeing what would've happened if your dreams of being drafted had come true."

She and Schmarzo were both right—I knew that. But still, I couldn't help wondering what I wouldn't give to be in his position with his chance to play baseball, even if I'd only have lottery ticket odds.

I pulled the 2011 Alex Schmarzo card off of the dryer. Jake had told me to keep things light and loose with practical jokes, so I decided I would write a fake fan letter to Schmarzo. In the piles of mail I brought from the front office to the clubhouse, so far I'd only seen fan mail for the coaches: letters with self-addressed stamped envelopes inside and some baseball card of glory days long past.

The first day the players arrived, I'd asked Schmarzo to sign the card.

"Absolutely not," he'd said, laughing. "That thing wouldn't be worth the cardboard it's printed on."

I'd had no such intentions to sell it, but I suspected he'd known as much.

So I grabbed his card off the dryer and wrote a note in looping girl's handwriting (and you better believe every "i" had its own heart instead of a dot):

Dear Alex,

I'm a thirteen year old girl and I found your card in a box of tampons. Your icy stare and Zen-like focus penetrated me like only three men have before. Could you please sign your card?

Love,

Susie

I took a solid 10 minutes coming up with that note, hoping desperately that it would make him and the other guys laugh. I wrote his name with hearts and stars on the envelope and put it in

his locker when nob one was looking. The pitchers came in from pitchers fielding practice, sweaty and in a huff.

“Schmarzo,” I said, “you have fan mail in your locker.”

His face lifted for only a moment before he forced it back down. “No I don’t,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. I walked away to the trainer’s room to fold towels just beyond the open door, out of sight but within earshot of the locker room.

“Someone’s messing with me,” Schmarzo said to the guys around him. “Look, no return address. There’s a clue.”

He read it out loud and they laughed at all the right parts. I smiled as I folded towels.

“Hey, G!” Schmarzo called out.

“Yeah?” I said, walking out of the trainer’s room.

“Did Slime do this?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It looks like it’s from a fan.”

He smirked and flicked the letter into his locker, pretending that he didn’t care. But I could see the look on his face when I said it—“You have fan mail”—and there was no faking the pure childish joy on his face. His smiles at other times seemed forced, wrinkled, like he was trying to convince everyone else that he was just fine, and if he did so he might just believe it too. But there was no faking the bright, expectant dreamer that flashed on his face in that moment, happy at the reminder: “Oh yeah,” his face had said, “That’s why we do this.” Because he couldn’t help himself. Because even if his teammates would laugh at him, he couldn’t help but dream, if just for a moment, even if he might walk away the next.

I worried that Schmarzo might throw the card away. So, in a quiet moment later on, I plucked it out of his locker and taped it against the side of the dryer, back where it belonged.

SHADOWBOXING

Orioles pitcher Armando Benitez came set on the mound. It was May 19th, 1998, in the Bronx, and Benitez just gave up a towering three-run home run to Bernie Williams to put the New York Yankees up 7-5 in the bottom of the 8th.

Benitez delivered and plunked Yankees star Tino Martinez in the back with a fastball (Benitez's fastball had been recorded at 100 mph on at least one occasion). The pitch hit Martinez square between the numbers 2 and 4, and he arched his back and neck like someone just dropped an ice cube down his jersey. Home plate umpire Drew Coble stood up and emphatically threw Benitez from the game, much to the pleasure of the packed Yankee Stadium.

Martinez had been plagued with back issues that season, so his Yankee teammates were especially eager to protect their injured star. The benches cleared in what looked like nothing more than a show, a play that any major league team has acted out many times before. The script usually goes as follows: the benches clear quickly as players run to the mound to defend their respective players; the bullpen pitchers run in through the outfield; a few choice words are shared—*cocksucker*, *pussy*, *coward* among them. Ultimately, most of these “altercations” end without a single punch being thrown. But on that night, a balmy 84-degree evening in the Bronx in mid-May, the Yankees and Orioles did not act according to the script.

As the benches cleared, the pitcher, Benitez, raised his hands as if to say, “Whatchu gonna do about it?” to the Yankees who spilled onto the field in front of 31,311 screaming fans. A staggering number of superstars stood on the field at that moment: a twenty-four-year-old Derek Jeter flashed a smile as he held back Yankees star outfielder Darryl Strawberry from going after Benitez; future Hall of Famer Cal Ripken Jr., who was playing in his 2522nd consecutive game, stood apart from the scuffling teams along with second base umpire Ted

Hendry; future Hall of Fame manager Joe Torre tried to calm down his Yankees; veteran superstar and Orioles first baseman Rafael Palmeiro, who would end his career as the 12th most prolific home run hitter of all time, tried to maintain peace in the infield as well; future Hall of Famer Roberto Alomar jogged in from his position at second base toward the crowd at the pitcher's mound, but he maintained his distance.

Things looked relatively benign.

Then one of the Yankees went after Benitez. He started throwing punches like wild fastballs at Yankees players as they abutted their dugout. Their common sense kicked in: they seemed to realize that anything could happen on the concrete steps of the dugout—a slip of their spikes could result in a career-ending cracked skull or worse. So they made every attempt to stay on the field.

The combined effort to keep the scuffle out of the dugout looked like it had squelched the fire. Orioles and Yankees continued to hold onto each other as the umpires regained control and started to dole out ejections. But Tino Martinez remained hot—Benitez didn't get his comeuppance for the cheap shot on Tino's injured back. The crowd jeered as Tino tried to break free of a teammate's embrace to attack Benitez like a dog at the end of his leash. The teams once again shuffled around as a single unit in foul territory near the Yankees' dugout. Orioles relief pitcher Alan Mills—who would never be a Hall of Famer—stopped Tino and started shouting into his face.

Darryl Strawberry, who looked like he was waiting for an opportunity to strike, finally came around the side of the huddle and took a cheap shot at Benitez, which knocked Armando back into the dugout. The crowd roared. Alan Mills, who had extensive martial arts training,

descended upon Darryl Strawberry. One punch knocked Strawberry to the concrete floor of the dugout. Mills reared back for another.

Millsy stood before me, his left hand gripping Darryl Strawberry 14 years before, his right hand cocked back, ready to lay another blow to the imaginary man on the floor. He paused as he told me the story in the coaches' office at Ripken stadium, named after his teammate on that May night in New York. Workouts were over for the day and I sat in front of my locker, listening through the hum of the Coke-branded fridge on my left. Mills's eyes bulged wide open, frighteningly white, as he remembered. I imagined it was something like the look he gave Strawberry that night.

"I'm standing over him," Mills said, "and I wake up." He dropped his fist and released the windbreaker on the ghost of Darryl Strawberry.

"What do you mean you wake up?"

"I mean, I looked down and saw this dude and realized if I take another swing I'd really hurt him." He thought for a moment as he sat down.

I'd only asked him if his Wikipedia page was right—if he'd really punched Darryl Strawberry.

"Changed my life," he said. "I used to be a bad dude, you know? But after that, I never threw my weight around again. At least I tried not to." He laughed. "I realized I could kill somebody."

Guys dealt with the tension in different ways. The purpose of that workout week was to make difficult choices: who to move up, who to release, and who to keep pat. The way I understood it, the same thing was happening at all of the other Orioles affiliates. Some of the

players stuck to themselves in the clubhouse, staring intently as they taped the handle of their bats, silent save the cloth rip of white athletic tape. Others laughed with each other playing poker.

Schmarzo was one of those guys. Except sometimes, instead of laughing like his teammates, he'd yield a quick "Fuck!" when things didn't go his way. He'd then quickly cover it with a forced smile, as if to say, "Don't worry, guys, I'm just kidding." But when nobody else wanted to play, he'd deal himself a game of FreeCell (a variation on solitaire) and sit, hand on his forehead, eyes down at the cards, wondering how the hell he was going to get himself out of this one.

The man making the decisions that dominated Schmarzo's and the other players' thoughts was not team owner Cal Ripken, Jr. In fact, I had seen Cal only once in those first days. Jason, who pretty much left me alone except for when I needed help, came down to the clubhouse one day and looked at me with his bulging eyes. "What?" I said. He cocked his head in indication to his left, toward the front door, and mouthed, "Cal." Behind him walked this tall white dude with a bald head and a stride full of so much purpose that it could only come from having your name synonymous with the stadium, the team, the town. "Hey, Cal," Jason said as the owner passed behind him. "Jason," Cal said, slapping him on the back. An employee followed in Ripken's wake. Cal was through the locker room, eyes straight ahead toward Trek's training room, and I realized he was going back to inspect the equipment closet. I imagined his eyes scanning across the orange and black of the Orioles-branded gear around the closet, before zeroing in on the blue of three Bud Light cases hiding on a bottom shelf. Cal didn't seem to mind the beer, though, because a few moments later he walked back through the locker room, the employee still trailing him, and he was out the front door without a word—without even looking

to his left or right. That was the closest I would ever come to meeting my boss. Instead of Cal, the man in charge of roster moves was Brian Graham, the Coordinator of Minor League Instruction for the Baltimore Orioles. Well, technically he wasn't in charge of the moves, but he was the front office person dispatched to the affiliates in order to make the player assessments. He'd been hanging around the clubhouse and watching intently on the field during preseason workouts.

“God, I hate seeing him,” Schmarzo said one afternoon. “That dude is the grim fucking reaper.”

Schmarzo, at 23 in a clubhouse full of new draft picks, could feel the death rattles building in his lungs every time Graham walked through the clubhouse. I chose to despise Brian Graham in Schmarzo's honor.

Graham, who went by BG, only made it to double-A as a player in the 80s. He went to UCLA for four years, setting school records for hits, stolen bases, and runs. He didn't graduate from UCLA, and instead obtained his B.A. in Behavioral Science from National University in San Diego. The Oakland Athletics took him in the fourth round of the 1982 draft and he played five seasons in the minors with the Athletics, Indians, Tigers, and Brewers, compiling a .253 average as a utility player. But he became a much better coach than a player, leading every minor league team he managed to a winning record (and winning Carolina League and American Association championships in the process). He coached in the Indians organization in 1998 and 1999 before moving to the Orioles in 2000. After a brief stint with the Orioles organization, he went to Pittsburgh and served as the Pirates' director of player development from 2002 to 2007. In that time, the Pirates produced the second-highest total of home-grown major leaguers, ranked fourth in minor league winning percentage, and were awarded the 2002 Topps Organization of

the year. In 2007, Graham served as the interim GM of the Pirates. The next year the Orioles brought him on as the grim reaper.

I grew to despise BG even more as I got to interact with him.

It was one of the last days of workouts and I brushed aside Schmarzo's playing cards to eat my lunch at the fold up table. I'd packed a turkey sandwich and chips from home in a blue cloth Rachel Ray lunch bag my mom had given me.

Brad Komminsk walked across my line of vision as he walked between the training room and the front door. He saw me eating in the empty clubhouse as the team was outside doing drills in the summer heat.

"Why wouldn't ya?" he said, almost to himself.

I chewed wordlessly as he continued walking out to the field.

BG stopped in his tracks when he saw me eating.

"Come here," he said.

Jason once told me: "You don't work for the players and coaches, you work for Ripken." I forced myself to stand straight and breathe as I approached BG. He stared through me with his light blue eyes. He had this way of looking down his long nose at you, head tilted back ever-so-slightly, like you should be honored to be the subject of his analysis. His narrow mouth and steely almost marble-like eyes reminded me of Ty Cobb.

"This is your first year here?" he said. "I know you weren't the clubbie before, but is this your first job in a clubhouse?"

"Yeah, it's my first year, but I used to be a clubbie in college."

"I'm not talking about college, I'm talking about professional baseball."

"Yes."

“How’d you get this job—do you know someone?”

Muggsy walked past behind me and I used it as an excuse to break eye contact. “No,” I said. “I applied on a job board online.”

“Nice,” Muggsy said as he walked by.

“So you’re new at this,” BG said.

I refused to nod.

“Answer a question for me: why don’t you have a meal spread for these guys?”

“Cause I’m only charging them for laundry during workouts, not meals.”

“Who told you to do that?”

“Jake,” I said.

He said, with an executive calm, “Do me a favor: the next time you talk to Jake, tell him to take that idea and shove it up his ass. Let him know I said so.”

“Okay,” I said.

“How many fuckin’ guys you got in here,” he said. “40?”

I nodded.

“So charge them an extra three bucks a day and get them a post-BP spread. These guys are dying in that heat and they’re here all day. Then they have to wake up tomorrow and do it again. Do you know what happens when they don’t get proper nutrition? They get hurt. Most of these guys don’t have cars to get food and they’re too stupid to pack a lunch for the day.

“You seem like a smart enough kid. What’s three times 40?”

“One-twenty,” I said.

“Would it cost you 120 bucks to get some meat, cheese, and bread?”

“No,” I said.

“No. How much would it cost you?”

“I don’t know, 50, 60 bucks for all these guys.”

“Not even. Do me a favor: go out to that little grocery store out here on 22, what’s it called? Go there and buy these guys a spread.”

I did just as BG told me. I strongly considered whether to send Jake a text telling him to shove his idea up his ass. “Would BG find out if I sent the text?” I wondered. But I never told Jake, which gave me a false sense of victory over Brian Graham.

I’d once heard war described as long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. There seemed to be something similar going on in the IronBirds clubhouse. Baseball was full of those long stretches of boredom, and pitchers, more than anybody, were better at filling that time. Why? Because pitchers, even the best pitchers in the world, sat and watched the game go by for innings, maybe days at a time, before actually getting into the action, whereas the best position players, the ones who played nearly every day, would at least be on the field every other half inning, even if they didn’t get any balls hit their way. Relief pitchers, especially, had to find ways to invent fun because of all those hours spent in the bullpen just waiting. (During my days at Winthrop, I came up with a hierarchy for which baseball players were most likely to be nutjobs based on their throwing arm and position on the field:

1. Left-handed relievers
2. Right-handed relievers
3. Catchers
4. Left-handed starters
5. Right-handed starters

6. Every other position)

In one of those dead moments during workouts, a handful of guys started talking about how they wanted to die—a typical pitchers bullshit session.

Gene Escat, the West Coast kid who was still sleeping in my living room along with Kimmel, said he'd like to die drowning in the ocean.

"At what age?" I said.

"I don't know," he said, "maybe 50 or something."

A few guys looked at each other.

"Why so young, man?" I said.

Kimmel said, "That seems pretty old to me."

"Old?" I said. "You think fifty is old to die?"

"I don't know," Kimmel said in his monotone voice.

Bobby Wilkins, a relief pitcher who was drafted in the 6th round (in 2007), piped in.

"Well, fuck, Kimmel, how d'you wanna die?"

"Probably thirty-one or something."

"Not *when*, dumbass," Bobby said, "*how*."

"Thirty-one?" Gene said.

"Yeah," Kimmel said. "What, is that old too?"

Everyone erupted in laughter. Kimmel was 22 and dead serious: he had no idea how he wanted to die, just that he expected to live only nine more years.

"I want to go at 63," Bobby said, "coaching for a minor league team. Nothing too high like triple-A, but not the fuckin' GCL either. Something right in that sweet spot like high-A or

double-A. I'll be throwing batting practice without an L-screen and boom! Line drive to the skull. Game over."

At that moment, Schmarzo walked in from Trek's training room. I could tell by the look on his face that he'd been considering a mortality of a different sort. He smiled but didn't say anything as he sat down at his locker amid our laughter.

"What about you, Schmarzo?" Bobby said. His tongue performed routine maintenance on the stray tobacco flecks on his lips.

"What about what?" Schmarzo said. "I just sat down, how the fuck should I know what you're talking about?"

"How do you wanna die, Schmarzo?" I said.

He stood up like he sat on a bee. "Fuck that," he said. "Fuck no."

"Dude, what?" Bobby said.

"No," Schmarzo said, walking away. "I can't think about that shit or you're gonna depress me even more."

I finally gathered the courage to go outside one day at the end of workout week. 25 feet of forest-green-padded fence ran between the end of section 125 in right field foul territory and the right field wall. Behind that right field wall, next to the foul pole, was the home bullpen. Next door, in foul territory, sat the clubhouse. A left-handed batter would have to pull a foul ball about 330 feet, slicing high above that little strip of fence between section 125 and the outfield wall, to hit the green metal roof of that clubhouse. I leaned with my arms hanging over the edge of that strip of fence, just watching. Mills, who was chatting with his pitchers near the right field fence, noticed me and walked closer, slowly. He asked me if I had his warm-up jacket yet. Mar was

making special warm-up jackets for our whole coaching staff after they'd seen that Trek, from his previous years with Aberdeen, had a blue three-quarter-sleeve polyester warm-up jacket with a cursive "A" over the heart. Mills asked about it every day, like a child waiting for his toy in the mail.

"A couple more days," I said. "But I'm sure you'll keep asking about it until then."

He kind of laughed. "See, you might think I'm arrogant or cocky or something. I don't know. You know what I am, though? I'm a pitcher. And pitchers have to be arrogant if they're gonna be successful." A few pitchers gathered around him as he spoke, as if by instinct. "Pitcher's the only position in sports that's higher on the playing field than everyone else. Batters, fielders, coaches—everyone else on the field is on the ground. But pitchers stand on the mound, closer to God than anyone on the field. People say pitchers are arrogant, but how could you not be, meat?"

"Have you ever heard of the Great Chain of Being?" I said.

He shook his head and pulled his lips back to spit tobacco juice between his teeth.

"What's that?"

"It's this idea that God is up here—" I marked with my hand at eye level and moved down in sequence. "—then spirits, then man, animals, plants, and earth. You're saying that pitchers are somewhere up here with God."

"Not that high," he said. "But almost."

I went back into the clubhouse and saw Ryan Zrenda taking a break at the water cooler. He was a second baseman who graduated from Brown University in 2011 and signed a free agent contract with the Orioles after going undrafted.

"Just hanging out by the water cooler?" I said.

“Yep.”

“That’s the dream, right? Some cushy office job—”

“Wasting 15 minutes of every hour talking at the water cooler.”

We laughed.

That evening, I went into Muggsy’s office to grab his dirty clothes. On his desk was a handwritten roster with some notes. One said they needed to get down to 25 players (from 40) and they could only have three guys over the age of 23 on the team. “Damn,” I thought. “Schmarzo’s 23.” His name was there on the sheet, but Muggsy had written it on the side, separate, along with a few other players. Schmarzo’s name had an R next to it. Released? Rookie ball? I put it down before someone could find me, even though the place had cleared for the day. Now whenever Schmarzo came back the next day and asked me for information I would have to lie to him (“I know you have the inside scoop,” he’d once told me. “The clubbie always knows”).

By the time BG left at the end of the week, they’d moved up a handful of guys to low-A Delmarva and high-A Frederick, and they released four players.

Schmarzo was not one of them.

BG passed me on the last day of workouts with an Orioles bag on his shoulder, wet hair, and street clothes on. He must’ve just hopped out of the shower. I remembered the previous day, as I walked through the coaches’ office to check their towel supply, BG had stepped out of the shower behind me, towel draped around his waist.

He said, “Hey, Greg. I got some hairs on my back. Do you mind shaving ‘em for me?”

The coaches all laughed.

Komminsk said, “It must be June in Aberdeen.”

I didn't know what made me angrier: that BG actually remembered my name; that he'd humiliated me; or that I damn near considered shaving his back.

Now, freshly showered and leaving Aberdeen, he handed me a check as he passed by.

"Buy yourself some lunch," he said with a hard slap on my shoulder.

The Orioles executive had written me a check for 10 dollars. I tore it into confetti and threw it in the trash.

When BG and Muggsy made the cuts the guys said they worded it like this: "We're giving you your release." We're *giving you* your release, as though dashing your dreams was a gift. But who knows—maybe he was doing you a favor by ending the minor league grind. You could go out to your friends in the locker room. They'd do you the favor of being shocked and indignant on your behalf.

"That's bullshit," they'd tell you. "Fuckin' half the guys here could've gone just as easily. Me included."

They'd laugh, and when they did it would mark the exact moment that the game forgot you existed. You'd pretend not to notice.

They'd have the luxury of saying, "Hey, stay in touch, kid."

And you could say, "For sure, man. I'll come see a game or two this season."

You could pack up your stuff as calmly as if you'd be back tomorrow. You'd tell them it's a relief, really, to finally have an answer. You wouldn't let anyone know about the fear in the pit of your belly. How it feels to find out that everything you have ever known about yourself is wrong—that you will no longer be able to do the only thing that exists. You could get on an airplane. Somewhere between Aberdeen and home you'd allow yourself to cry and you wouldn't stop for weeks or months.

And then, finally—mercifully—life could begin, without baseball.

ON A TRAIN BOUND FOR NOWHERE

Workouts finished and the IronBirds hosted a team meal on the crab deck above section 125. I got to work on the day's laundry while the team cracked crabs and drank beer—at least those who were of age.

Schmarzo ran down to the empty clubhouse to grab his ID from his locker.

“G-money,” he said. “Are you coming up to the team meal? Let's go.”

“No,” I said. “I got laundry to do.”

“Come on, G,” he said. “You're a part of this team.”

“Thanks, but really. I still got some work to do.”

“Suit yourself.”

He accepted that and hopped out the door to be with his friends. I hadn't heard anything about this team meal, so I didn't know if I was allowed since I wasn't a player or coach, though I was so hungry I could have eaten the shell of a sunflower seed.

Since I wasn't a player or coach I didn't travel with the team. So, instead of getting on the bus to Hudson Valley for their first road trip, I just watched the game's play-by-play in my apartment (at least whenever I could steal my neighbor's weak internet signal), eating Taco Bell chalupas as the little pitch circles popped up around the strike zone. I kept forgetting to eat three (non-Taco Bell) meals a day during workouts, but even with an underutilized kitchen, inconsistent (stolen) internet, and a lack of furniture, the apartment already felt like home. I'd even gotten used to stepping over Gene and Kimmel's sleeping bodies at night. And, after a few nights of their staying in my living room (neither of them took the spare bedroom for some reason), I took the risk of flipping my Minnesota Twins blanket so the logos faced the world. Neither of them seemed to care or notice that I was a Twins fan—I knew they wouldn't.

Muggsy, during his preseason speech, even had to tell guys not to wear non-Orioles gear in the clubhouse. (In fact, it seemed like players were seen as nerds if they changed their team allegiances. I heard a few pitchers bullshitting in the trainer's room when the conversation turned to favorite teams. "I grew up watching the Padres," one guy said, "but now I'm liking the O's too." Another pitcher put on a nasally voice and said, "I like the Orioles because I play for them." Growing up, I thought all players would be loyal to their team and their team only. Not so, apparently.)

The IronBirds split their first two at Hudson Valley before coming back to Aberdeen for the home opener. Schmarzo had bet me that they'd go 10-5 in the first fifteen games. If they did, I'd have to roast the team, like one of those Comedy Central specials.

"We're gonna be good this year," Schmarzo told me. "I know everyone says that every year, but we looked pretty fucking solid in extended.

"15 games brings us to, what, early July? Yeah, you'll have plenty of dirt on these guys by then."

I took the deal, wondering how I'd ever muster the balls to roast the team. But I realized something when Schmarzo made that bet: he made it for the same reason he paid his dues as quickly as possible during workouts: to prove to himself that he'd stick around. "If I pay my dues through workouts," said his subconscious, "then I'll be here through workouts. If I make a 15-game bet, then I'll be here at least 15 games."

Their 1-1 record was fine by me: I wanted them to play well, but not win so much that they'd make good on Schmarzo's bet. Staying at .500 was excitement enough. More exciting, though, was the influx of cash I got from workouts. The guys ate in content silence when I put

out the little spreads with sandwich fixings, animal crackers, and orange slices. It was full-on 11-year-old soccer practice style, but they seemed to enjoy it nevertheless. All except one person.

The new strength coach, Paul Cater, struck me as quirky from our first phone conversation. He stuttered and mumbled so bad that he could barely finish a sentence, but when he showed up to the clubhouse, his appearance did not match the voice on the phone: Cater was jacked, as you might imagine for a strength coach; his nose sloped down into a point; he had spiked his brown hair with gel; even his ears and chin were relatively pointy. And he was nothing if not respectful when he asked for gear in the equipment room, even apologizing for showing up nearly a week after workouts had started. He'd just come from coaching rugby in the UK.

“Oh, it’s all the same to me,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said, Orioles shirt and shorts in hand. “Bless you.”

He cleared out Cal’s old multi-purpose machines from the weight room and shipped in a new squat rack and flat-screen TV, meant to display weight lifting statistics or god-knows-what. When he first started hauling the gear in, players were moving back and forth between the field and the clubhouse.

“This is what it takes,” he yelled, carrying weight plates. He almost knocked the spread to the ground as he walked past.

A few guys volunteered to help, but others sat on the couch or walked outside.

“What’s the vibe in here?” he said on the next grunt-through. “Playing video games?”

“Mario Kart,” said Sebastian Vader, one of the pitchers. He munched on a palmful of animal crackers.

“You wanna win a championship or play video games?” Cater said.

Vader and another pitcher continued playing.

On the next haul, Cater came through the locker room and yelled, “Why aren’t you guys helping us?” With a 45-pound plate in either hand, he wound up and kicked a two-pound bucket of animal crackers all over the locker room. Little tan horses and goats went soaring through the air and scattered across the floor. For several new draft picks who had signed late, this was their first day in professional baseball.

I thought I’d have the days to myself while the team was on their first road trip, but there was plenty of work to be done before the home opener. First of all, Jason dropped me an email saying we needed to hire a bat boy, preferably some unsuspecting local teen who’d be willing to work for \$25 a night. Jason attached a single lead: an email from one boy’s mother.

We would like to know if you need a bat boy or not because my son loves baseball and wants to get close to the one thing he loves, baseball. If Jonathan does not get the job this year try to contact us next season he will not be mad.

I called and asked for her son.

“Hi, is this Jonathan?”

“Yes,” he said. He sounded like he might be 12.

“Are you still interested in being a bat boy for the Aberdeen IronBirds?”

“Yes!”

“Congratulations,” I said, “You’ve got the job.”

“Okay,” I thought, hanging up the phone, “one down.” Next, I had to get on the same page with the visiting clubhouse attendant. His name was Nick and he’d been working for the IronBirds since he was a bat boy himself, several years before. He was 19 and looked straight out

of the 70s with long moppy hair and a mustache, and the sensitivity to boot. A local newspaper had written an article about him not missing a single day of school in 13 years.

“Were there any roving coaches here during workouts?” he asked.

“Just BG,” I said.

“What did you think of him?”

“I thought he was an asshole,” I said.

“Okay, good. Me too.”

Two down, one to go. I had to get things squared away with the new food services guy. With the previous head of food services, the old clubbie would slip a couple bucks to the people in the kitchen and they’d let him take all of the leftover food from the VIP level box seats. This new guy wanted to do things differently. His name was Barkley and he called me into his office behind the first base concessions. He smiled a lot and wore an IronBirds polo with khaki pants. He had some bald guy in his office wearing a Tampa Bay Rays polo.

“So we’re thinking about three bucks a head,” Barkley said to me across his cluttered desk. He looked at the Rays guy sitting against the wall. “That seems fair, don’t you think?”

The guy nodded.

“I don’t know if that’s gonna work for me,” I said. “The money I make is off of dues and if that gets cut then I might not make anything.”

“So what’re you charging these guys, six a day?”

“Seven,” I said.

“Seven? You must be making a killing.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “This is my first year.”

“So we get three per home game. That still leaves you with four bucks a day, per player, going in your pocket.”

“Well, I still have to buy pregame.”

“And does it cost you four dollars per player to buy pregame?”

“Well, no.”

“Great,” he said. “We’ll get your guys taken care of. We won’t just give you leftover concessions or leftovers from the box seats. And if we do, we won’t charge you for all that. We’ll get a menu set up every game and I’ll give you an invoice at the end of each month—it’ll work out great. Just come in here before the homestands and we’ll get a meal schedule set up for the next few games. Sound good?” He stood up to shake my hand.

I shook it out of instinct.

“Let me know if there's anything else you need.”

I told Jason about the meeting.

He said, “Is that going to work for you or is that too much?”

“I have no idea,” I said, “I don’t have any reference point for this.”

Jake said they were trying to screw me. “Food services always tries to screw the clubbie because they know clubbies have money and they want a cut of it.”

I didn’t have money though. The 300-some bucks I’d been paid in dues hardly covered the up-front costs of spreads, OxiClean, and drinks, let alone the cost of moving up there. I’d been made promises that the front office would reimburse me for all sorts of stuff I hadn’t seen checks for yet, and I was starting to get wary. I didn’t take the gamble of moving to Maryland expecting to make bank, but I didn’t expect to lose money either. A broken promise here and there would be the difference between failure and success for me in minor league baseball.

On the afternoon before the home opener, the pitchers invited me to play poker with them. I had laundry to do and produce to cut, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to bond with the team. The game was Texas Hold 'em and each poker chip was worth a quarter. I sat down and Schmarzo counted out a stack and slid it my way.

I bluffed on nearly every hand just because it seemed silly to me, playing for quarters, but this was no joke to them. Two guys might get sucked into a long, drawn-out hand, then someone would silently count the chips in play and say, without irony, "There's more than 10 bucks in that pot right now." The guys would contemplate each move with forehead-holding intensity.

My bluffing worked for a while until I was finally knocked out when Blackmar, one of our pitchers—a 16th round draft pick with dark stubble, a double chin, and black eyebrows—got wise to my ways.

"What was the buy-in?" I asked as I stood up.

"It was 10," Schmarzo said, shuffling, "but you're good."

"No, I want to," I said. I opened my wallet.

"No, really," Blackmar said, "Don't worry about it, G."

I wanted to say, "Please take my money. I know you guys are being polite—you're just letting me know that I belong—but can't you see it's having the opposite effect? Let me give you my stupid 10 dollars. Let me gamble with you. We're on this train together, aren't we?"

Schmarzo dealt two cards per player and they placed their bets. I put my wallet into my back pocket, walked to the equipment closet, and got back to work cutting oranges.

THE HOUSES THAT CAL BUILT

Bunting adorned Ripken Stadium for opening night. The Kids Zone in left field foul territory looked like a mini carnival with a bouncy castle, an inflatable slide, and a pitch-speed game. The grounds crew got to work watering the infield dirt. If they left the dirt too dry, it would harden and cut up players' legs on slides and cause nasty hops on ground balls. If they got the dirt too wet, it would clump up in players' cleats and make them slip all over the infield like drunken ice skaters. The grounds crew made last minute trimmings to the grass as well, and sprinkled down the lime for the batters box. The gray bird mascots, Ferrous and Ripcord, walked around flag-waving and high-fiving little kids. The day was clear, hot—low 90s.

By game time, the stadium pulsed with the energy of more than 6500 fans. The PA announcer introduced the starting line-up for the IronBirds as their pictures flashed on the video board and the crowd cheered at this team of strangers—so different from the one they'd seen the year before.

The IronBirds stood in a line in front of their first base dugout, with Muggsy and the other coaches closest to home plate. The Hudson Valley Renegades extended along the third base foul line in front of the visitors' dugout. I stood alone at that strip of fence near the batting cages near the right field foul pole. I held my blue "A" cap over my heart for the National Anthem as I looked out to the American flag, limp behind the right-center field fence.

Cal Jr. took the microphone at home plate, looking tanned, tall, and a little chubby.

"I want to thank all of you for your support in the first ten years," he said. "It's been a wonderful ten years. As you can see, we've made some changes in the food. We've got a lot more different options. I know we're very proud of the changes we've made."

A single person yelled out “Woo!” in the silence. The electric crowd had grown silent as Cal talked about the new concession options at Ripken Stadium. I guess you have to talk about something on your team’s tenth anniversary if you’ve only had one winning season and no postseason appearances.

His mom, Violet, threw out the first pitch from halfway between the rubber and home plate. Cal caught the ball, a strike down the middle, and gave his short white-haired mom a kiss and a hug. A little more than a month later, Violet would be abducted at gunpoint from her Aberdeen home. The abductor would drive her around for hours, with her hands tied, and take her back to her home the next morning. Cal would offer a \$100,000 reward for any information that would lead to the suspect, but the reward would yield no results. Cal wouldn’t even discover the motivation for the kidnapping. The way that summer was about to go for Violet and the IronBirds, her throwing the season’s first pitch would turn out to be just about right.

The Renegades got out to an early 3-0 lead against IronBirds starter Jorge Rivera, a lefty from the Dominican Republic. But in the top of the 6th, the ‘Birds rallied to tie the game, 3-3. It stayed knotted that way until the top of the 8th. Enrico Jimenez, another lefty from the DR, came on in relief for the IronBirds and worked out of a jam in the 8th. The crowd cheered for Jimenez as he came off the mound, having given the IronBirds a chance to win the game. But those fans would get post-game fireworks no matter what, win or lose.

The Renegades’ lead-off batter in the top of the 9th reached on an error by Joel Hutter, the shortstop. Jimenez walked the next man. A fly ball to center got Jimenez the first out, but the next batter launched a double to left field, which scored both runners. The IronBirds went quietly in the ninth to lose the game 3-5. I hadn’t watched any of the action, though, as I was running

upstairs to the VIP level kitchen to grab the team's postgame food. Barkley hadn't set up a menu for the homestand, so all I got were a few half-eaten trays of chicken, green beans, and potatoes.

The players filtered in and my stomach sank as I realized just how many we had—there were more than a dozen guys in the clubhouse who weren't even on the roster. They were non-roster guys who were just along for the ride, waiting for the Orioles to officially place them on the roster or let them go. One such player was Schmarzo.

"Go easy on the spread, guys," he said when he walked in. "There's not a lot of food."

"Jerseys off before you eat!" I said. Some guys obeyed, some were already in line scooping more than their share. The "jerseys off before eating" rule was a suggestion from Jake so I could get the wash going as soon as possible after the games.

"Take a shower for your hands!" someone said.

Nobody seemed particularly upset about the game except for Jimenez, who was tagged with the loss. I wheeled the laundry carts (which had been stolen long before me from the Aberdeen Shop-Rite), out of the locker room to get the washes going. I didn't yet have a system in place doing laundry, so I was in for a long night. I'd been on my feet all day. The insides of my shoes squished with sweat. The backs of my knees and ankles ached. Blisters had bubbled on my toes and heels.

One of the roving coaches, Butch Davis, stopped me in my tracks on his way out the back door of the clubhouse.

He said, "Dues here are seven a game, right?"

"Yeah."

He handed me a five and two ones and I grabbed the bills with my gloved hand.

"I didn't eat," he said. "I don't like to stiff guys, but I don't tip unless I eat."

I didn't finish cleaning up and doing laundry until 2 A.M. I thought about Nick, the visiting clubbie, doing the same thing in the other clubhouse and I felt bad for him. It seemed acceptable, if frustrating, for me to be doing this shit late at night, but for someone else to wash towels and scrub pants for grown men? That was just pathetic.

I didn't eat all day. Not because I wasn't hungry, but because I didn't want to take from the spread if players weren't getting enough food. A light film of sweat and grime had built on my skin and a sour smell wafted up from my armpits.

Just after the game had ended, I could hear the boom of fireworks bursting over the stadium. I didn't go outside to watch them, though. Instead, I stood there scrubbing pants, contemplating the cosmic distance between the glory of baseball as I knew it in childhood and the spot where I found myself just then. How could I do this for one more day, let alone the rest of the summer and beyond?

The next morning Cesar, our field coach, sat watching his tiny TV in the coaches' office, turned down to near silence as he ate a breakfast sandwich in the yawning clubhouse. He smiled to me when I came in, but didn't say much of anything. I got a pot of Café Bustelo going in Muggsy's office. A couple of players were already sitting in front of their lockers because, well, they had nothing better to do than come into the stadium.

I went back to the equipment closet to get a head start on chopping fruit and veggies. When I returned to the coaches' office to drop off some towels, Mills and Komminsk were talking at their neighboring lockers. I dropped the stack of towels on the bathroom counter and tried to sneak out to avoid whatever abuse they had in store for me.

“Hey, meat!” Mills yelled.

I kept walking.

“Greg,” Komminsk said.

I stopped and looked back.

“Come here,” Mills said, pointing in front of him.

I obeyed.

“Cesar, me, Brad—we went out to eat after the game last night.”

“Where’d you go?” I said.

“See, that part doesn’t matter. You’re the clubbie, right? Your first question should be, ‘Why didn’t you eat the spread?’ ”

I let the silence sit for a moment. “Why didn’t you eat the spread?” I said.

“We got reports to write. After every game I gotta sit my ass down and write a report for our pitchers and send it to Baltimore. Cesar does the same thing, Brad does the same thing, Muggsy—we all do.”

“We didn’t get any of the spread, slick,” Brad said.

“We didn’t eat here,” Mills said, “so we had to go out.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “we ran out of food.”

“We have reports to write after the game,” Mills said again. “And we don’t want to go in the line cutting off players.” He paused again. “Do I wear a jersey?”

“No,” I said.

“No. I wear a jacket. Where is that new jacket by the way? Is it coming in yet?”

“It’ll be here soon.”

“Mhmm. You said that last week. But I’m not worried about that right now. I wear a jacket, right? Not a jersey, because I’m not a player.”

Brad chimed in. “We don’t play on the field, the players do. We don’t want to cut them off in line because they need their nutrition more than we do. I mean look at us—we’re already fat fucks.”

“So you want me to prepare plates for you guys after the games?”

“I’m not saying you have to do all that,” Mills said. “I’m just saying we didn’t get any of the spread last night.”

I had to keep reminding myself, “These guys aren’t your bosses—you could disobey every single thing they tell you and they still couldn’t fire you.” But I realized that they were all former major leaguers. They’d probably been taken care of by people like me their whole lives—someone else made their copies, fed them, did their laundry, and so on. I imagined Trek asking me in such a roundabout way to make him a plate after the game and I just couldn’t see it, because Trek wasn’t a baseball guy, he was just a guy, and he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. I stewed thinking about it. Here I was, having to take care of these grown men just because that was what the game had done to them. It wasn’t my fault they couldn’t do anything but coach baseball. It wasn’t my fault they couldn’t take care of themselves. It wasn’t my fault even Mills, who had 12 years in the majors, was a failure.

My bitterness simmered all day. I hid away in the equipment closet most of the afternoon while the clubhouse filled with players. I couldn’t stay back there forever—eventually I’d have to bring out the pregame spread and make the daily trips back and forth to the front office. I finally left the equipment closet and walked past the coaches’ office out the front door. Mills spotted me.

“Hey, come here!”

I continued walking like I didn’t see him through the open office door.

“I know you heard me, meat.”

I stormed back into the coaches’ room and walked up to him. “I’m not a dog, man. What do you want?”

He put his hands up. “Nothing, meat,” he said. “It’s all right.”

Before I could derive any false sense of satisfaction from standing up to Mills, Brad whistled and said, “Here, Fido.” He would continue to do that every time he saw me for the rest of the homestand.

Just before the game, when everyone else was out on the field stretching and throwing, Mills and I sat in front of our lockers, alone in silence together. He put on the IronBirds’ white home pants with a blue strip running along the outside of each thigh. The dark blue cage jackets had come in that afternoon, so he slipped his on over a black Orioles shirt. I pretended to diddle on my phone.

His eyes were down, tying his shoes. “You’re an ornery fucker, you know that?”

“I am?”

“You are. And I’ll tell you something: it’s hard to be angry in baseball. I don’t care if you’re the clubbie, a pitcher, the GM—whoever—this game will eventually eat you up if you take this shit too seriously. It’s a long season, meat. They call this short season, but it’s still a long season. And you know what?” He laughed. “I’m gonna wear your ass out.”

“Just ease back some,” I said. “I’m not always in the mood for it. Sometimes I got a lot of shit to do.”

“I know you do,” he said. “I used to be a clubbie when I played.”

“*While* you played?” I said.

“Mhmm. I’d have to go out and find Laundromats during road trips and collect dues from my teammates. It was tough, but I needed the money. And I learned something being a clubbie and a player: this game doesn’t care what mood you’re in, and nobody in this clubhouse does either.”

I looked at the scoreboard as I speed-walked up to the VIP level in the seventh inning. The IronBirds were down 3-1. There were a half dozen trays of food in the kitchen this time—rice, chicken, beans—plenty to go around. I slipped a \$10 bill to one of the high school kids and took all the food I could fit onto the wheeled cart.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Absolutely,” I said, loading another tray.

Bobby Wilkins came in to pitch the top of the 8th, still down 3-1. He gave up a leadoff single and a walk before getting a swinging strikeout. A single loaded the bases, but Bobby backed it up with a pop up to third base. Two outs, bases loaded. The batter hit a single to right, scoring two runs, and the next man hit a double to score one more before Wilkins coaxed a fly ball to right for the third out.

The ‘Birds scored two in the bottom of the 8th to make it 6-3, Renegades. Muggsy seemed content to let Wilkins finish out the game. I watched from the bullpen. Wilkins walked the leadoff batter in the 9th, then he threw a wild pitch to the next batter, allowing the runner to advance to second. “Come on, Bobby, throw strikes,” someone said in the bullpen. Mills made the call to get Escat hot if Bobby couldn’t get things figured out. Bobby worked slowly, his big chest visibly heaving between pitches trying to calm himself down. He lost the man on a walk.

The game slowed to a halt as Bobby tried to find the strike zone. Muggsy let him strike out the next batter just to give Escat enough time to get warm in the bullpen.

Kimmel, who was catching, threw out a runner trying to steal third and Escat came in to get the last batter to fly out to end the top of the 9th, still down 6-3. Creede Simpson, the square-jawed second baseman from Auburn University who now slept in my living room with Gene and Kimmel, led off the 9th with a double. I cringed. The game had already taken three hours and I just wanted it to be over so I could get the laundry finished. Luckily, the next three batters grounded out in succession to end the game in a loss, dropping the IronBirds to a 1-3 record.

Roberto Ortiz came up to me holding a plate of the chicken, rice, and beans after the game.

“Hey, jefe,” he said. “This is a good spread.”

“You like it?” I said.

Somewhere behind Ortiz, Wilkins screamed a “Fuck!” into his locker and nobody blinked. It was so out of order with the rest of the scene of quietly eating players that it almost seemed ostentatious, but he felt that “fuck” more than I had felt anything that day. He felt it more, perhaps, than he did any pleasure in the game.

“Yeah,” Ortiz said, “this is like Dominican food.”

I talked with Jonathan, my bat boy, in the equipment closet. He was sweaty and smiling.

“Was it fun?” I said.

He nodded.

Kimmel knocked on the door holding a broken bat.

I gave him a fist bump. “Nice job throwing that dude out at third,” I said.

“Thanks,” he said. “Did you see the other two I threw out?”

“No,” I said. “I wasn’t watching.”

“Oh. Can I get a new bat?”

I grabbed his broken one and gave him a new one from the shelf.

“Gracias,” he said, walking out.

Jonathan’s eyes followed Kimmel’s broken black bat all the way to its position leaning against a shelf.

“What do you do with the broken bats?” he said.

“Bring them up to the gift shop and sell them.”

He raised his eyebrows, still looking at it. The ash bat was Rawlings brand like all the team bats I gave out. It had a painted logo that said “Bone-Rubbed” with a cheesy picture of a cartoon bone. Its fatal flaw was a greenstick fracture just above the handle. I considered the \$7.50 share I’d get for selling it in the gift shop.

“Do you want it?” I said.

Jonathan looked up at me like I’d just told him he could have the bat Cal Jr. used to hit a homerun in his final All-Star game. I wished I could look at a broken Sam Kimmel bat like that: as though it had the pine tar fingerprints of a Hall of Famer. But it only belonged to the catcher for the Aberdeen IronBirds of the New York-Penn League, a kid who just so happened to be sleeping on the clubbie’s apartment floor. I felt a tinge of jealousy of Jonathan in that moment. Not only because he was still bright-faced in love with the game, but because he got to wear an IronBirds jersey and spend time on the field. My only jersey was a pair of frayed cargo shorts and a sweaty black polyester shirt I brought from Florida.

Later in the night, when I got close to finishing and the clubhouse had cleared out, Nick, the visiting clubbie, texted me. He wanted to know if I could bring him to his truck. I grabbed a

gator utility four-wheeler from the grounds crew warehouse behind the bullpen and drove over to his side. I sat waiting for him in the gator.

“Do you mind coming here for a minute?” he said.

I held the clubhouse door for him while he set the security code and shut off the lights.

“Thanks,” he said. “I just get a little spooked with the dark. I know it sounds silly.”

“No,” I said, “it’s cool.”

We hopped in the gator and the air blew his long hair, tailing behind his black IronBirds cap.

“Why don’t you park your car over by the clubhouse?” I said.

“I don’t feel safe with it there,” he said. “I just don’t want something to happen.”

Nick quit as the visiting clubbie by the end of that homestand. He said something about the late nights taking away from his early morning running time. But really I think he quit because he wasn’t crazy enough for the job—he didn’t have the reckless disregard for his own well-being to stay with it.

One afternoon during that first homestand, before he quit, Nick walked with me to grab some mail from the front office for our respective clubhouses. He struggled to keep up with me, so I slowed down.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just get in a hurry sometimes.”

“No, it’s okay,” he said. “You just already have the clubbie walk.”

With Nick gone, I started working as the clubbie for both the home and visiting sides, which gave me an accelerated lesson in clubhouse scheming. When Ortiz came to my laundry room every night asking for a soda, I told him it’d be a dollar a can even though I got them for free. “Thank you, jefe,” he’d say. The Conrad’s Crab truck, which supplied the crab deck just

above section 125, sat outside of Muggsy's office, steaming up tasty crabs every afternoon. I slipped the Conrad's guy a baseball here, a shirt there, and he hooked me up with blue crabs for Komminsk, who tipped better when he was well-fed with expensive treats. When I was scrambling to get the spread set up one night after a quick game, a couple of the pitchers helped me, so I gave them (and only them) a couple Chick-fil-A sandwiches I'd gotten for free from the concessions people. One night we had a lot of chicken leftover, so I loaded it all up, put it in the fridge, and cut it up for a salad the next day. My favorite money-saving move was taking our leftovers and giving them to the visiting team the next day. The other team would be well fed, happily pay their \$3 a day dues, and I'd pocket that 100% profit. I even started picking up girls for the players for better tips. Well, the picking up girls thing only happened once.

I'd finally gotten comfortable enough to go into the dugout for a few innings. It was a day game against the Brooklyn Cyclones and I was feeling good because Nicole was going to visit during the team's long upcoming road trip. I leaned on the railing talking to Chase Weems, the wiry catcher from Georgia. He'd been drafted by the Yankees in 2007, straight out of high school, but he'd never made it above high-A.

"Huge tits, third row," he said as he pointed over the visiting dugout

I shrugged my shoulders. "You could do better."

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Show me."

I looked around the stadium and saw nothing but families—not a lot of help for a guy trying to find love, whether for one night or all of them. "Okay," I said. "Maybe not."

"Right. Come here." Chase grabbed a ball from the bench and sat down. "You got a pen?"

I'd started to wear a black fanny pack that held everything from scissors and athletic tape to wads of cash. I pulled out a pen and handed it to him. He uncapped it with his mouth and spit the cap onto the dugout floor where it fell among the piles of chewed sunflower seeds and dip spit.

"So here's what you do," he said, writing on the ball. "You take this ball, you walk up to big tits over there, and you give it to her."

I looked at the ball he just handed me. He'd written his phone number, name, and jersey number on the sweet spot of the baseball.

"Atta boy, G," someone said as I jumped out of the dugout and hopped the fence into the stands. "You hustle for that extra tip."

I made my way over to the girl Chase had pointed out. She looked older up close, maybe in her mid-30s. She was sitting with a female friend watching the game.

"Mind if I sit down?" I said.

"Sure," she said, and pulled her legs off the chair in front of her.

"I work for the team in the clubhouse, and one of our players wanted me to give you this." I handed her the baseball. As she inspected it, I looked over to our dugout to see that at least half the players were watching me instead of the game. I didn't see Chase anywhere, though.

The girls laughed and gave each other a look. "So, where on the field is Chase?" she said.

"Well, um, he's not actually playing. He's on the bench right now."

"Oh," she said.

"Yeah. He's one of the catchers," I said for no reason in particular.

“How old are these guys, anyway?” her friend said. “We were wondering why they look so young.”

“Most are like 18 to 20.”

“This kid who gave me his number is 18?”

“No, no. Chase is in his 20s, I think.”

She looked over to her friend and shrugged.

“He’s a super cool guy too—really nice. Never a problem in the clubhouse. So, y’know, maybe hit him up if you’re interested.”

“Sure,” she said. “Okay.”

I went back to the dugout. A few guys turned around from the railing to give me smiles, nods, and words of approval.

Trek, the trainer, said, “Was that your girlfriend you were talking to with the big tits?”

“No,” I said, “I was talking to her for—”

Chase interrupted me. “Damn, dude. Looked like you did okay up there.”

“I mean, yeah, man, she seemed open to hitting you up, but you never know.”

He gave me a slap on the back and pulled me in for a hug.

The next day I asked him if she texted.

He shook his head like the idea disgusted him. “She texted me—”

“Sweet,” I said. “What’d you say back?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t text back.”

I threw my hands up and looked around for some support. Will Howard and Scott Kalush joined my side.

“Why the fuck not, dude?” Kalush said. “I’d a banged her in a heartbeat.”

“No you wouldn’t, Loosh,” Chase said. “She was under 300 pounds and not a mountain gorilla. She wasn’t your type.”

“Why didn’t you text her back?” I said.

“I just wasn’t feeling it,” Chase said.

He’d been so cocky, so sure of himself, when he wrote his number on the ball and enlisted my service to deliver it to Large Assets. How could he not be “feeling it” when all he got was a text message—a sign of interest from a strange woman who *he* had picked out? What was there for him to feel other than her “huge tits?”

I never knew if she really did text him back or not. Either he was lying about her texting or he was too scared to respond. One way or another, his actions contradicted his intentions, which, I was coming to find out, was a running theme in professional baseball.

I wasn’t making everyone happy, though. One night I was washing Tupperware and veggie knives in the sink between the weight room and the training room. Cater, the spiky-haired, animal-cracker-kicking strength coach, had his music blasting as he worked guys out during a game.

“We gotta get you a kitchen,” he said. “Who do I talk to to get you a kitchen in here?”

I looked at him. “Maybe Cal Ripken, Jr.”

He went back to yelling at the players to push themselves through another set.

“We can’t have you cutting up veggies in the House of Pain,” Cater said. “Can’t you do that in the bathroom or something? We got chalk flying, players moving around—the vibe in here is hot. Can’t have you running around here with knives getting people hurt. Can’t you do that after the game?”

“I gotta get home after the game and get the hell outta here.”

“We’ll get you in the kitchen upstairs. I worry about sanitation issues with the players.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “Like washing these in the bathroom would be more sanitary?”

“Look, don’t get defensive, I’m trying to help you.”

“No you’re not, you’re just trying to do what’s best for yourself.

“Listen,” Cater said, “I know you have a lot to do with your job, Gary, but—”

“My name is Greg,” I said, “not Gary. It’s posted on the locker right next to yours.”

“Look, Greg, we’re trying to build a world class organization here and it starts in the weight room. You can’t be washing dishes in the weight room—it’s not professional.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to single-A, dog,” I said, less than one month into my job as a clubbie.

Word spread quickly enough that when I went into the dugout later in the game Komminsk said to me, “No cutting veggies in the House of Pain.”

Cater tipped me nicely when he paid his dues after that homestand. (He’d stiffed me at the end of the first homestand, though. When I texted this fact to Schmarzo he said, “Cater’s presence is the only tip you need.”) Adding together their dues, tips, my first paycheck from the front office, the drink and detergent reimbursement checks, and the fruits and veggies money the Orioles gave me I had the first disposable income of my adult life.

When Nicole visited, I took her out to restaurants on Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, looking out over docked sailboats and a rainbow of two-person paddleboats crisscrossing the water. We went to a vineyard 10 miles north of my apartment and drank wine like we knew what the fuck we were talking about (“Kind of an oaky afterbirth,” we’d say after a long sip, quoting from *The Office*). She still struggled to find a place for us to live on the border of Georgia and South

Carolina, somewhere within driving distance of her new teaching job in Johnston, South Carolina. I could tell that she had her mind elsewhere, even in the midst of her wonderful visit.

I knew something was bothering her besides the fact that we'd been sharing an air mattress over the last week. She stood staring off into the distance while we made dinner together, getting ready to eat standing at the counter in my kitchen.

"What?" I said. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and remained silent. Finally, she said, "I'm nervous to live with you."

"That's understandable," I said. "I'm nervous about it too. But I'm really excited. We can finally start our lives together, remember?"

She shook her head. "I'm nervous because—nothing."

"No, what?"

"You're the same."

"The same as what?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

She shook her head.

"Just tell me."

She chewed her tongue as she formulated what to say. "You're the same as when you were in Florida."

I forced a laugh. My directionless time in Florida, when I had lost confidence and hope, was a million miles away. I pressed my belly into hers and embraced her as fully as I could. I knew she wasn't correct—that I had changed since becoming a clubbie—but, in due time, I'd realize I was right for all the wrong reasons.

We went to an Orioles game at Camden Yards before she went back down south. We got to the stadium early and drank Natty Bohs, a Baltimore favorite, at Pickles, Sliders, and The Bullpen bars before the game. We were full-on drunk by the first pitch as we watched from the right field bleachers.

Baseball plays that I'd watched hundreds of times before had a new effect on me. I couldn't help but cringe every time a player slid into a bag. "That's another five minutes of work for their clubbie," I'd think. I wondered what their clubbie was doing at that moment—if he even gave a shit that he got to interact with major leaguers every day. Or did he feel like me on most days at the park: just waiting for the next out so the thing could already and we could all go home. It didn't matter to me who won or lost at Ripken Stadium—or Camden Yards for that matter. An out was an out, whether IronBird or someone else, and each one brought me closer to whatever it was I was looking for other than a dollar bill I'd hand to some bartender for a Natty Boh.

I'd been to Camden Yards one time before, in 2008 with an Orioles supporting college friend. Back then the Orioles were cellar-dwellers and the stadium was empty enough that you could walk from your cheap outfield seats to sit behind home plate if you wanted to. When we visited I was a sophomore in college, a year removed from being cut by the Hamline Pipers and a year into my time at Winthrop University. I stood in those same right field bleachers and heckled Atlanta Braves players during their batting practice. My buddies laughed when I got a reaction from the players: I pointed to the sky and said, "Heads up!" so that a couple pitchers shagging fly balls in the outfield ducked. Of course there was no incoming baseball. Jeff Bennett, a pitcher for the visiting Atlanta Braves, came over to talk to me.

“You know,” he said, “when we’re out here trying to shag fly balls it’s dangerous. If we get hit by a ball it can hurt us if we’re not paying attention.”

I pointed up to the sky as he spoke and said, “Ball!”

He flinched instinctively, but then realized that there was no baseball and I was hopeless, so he walked away.

I high-fived my laughing friends. I hadn’t been drinking, despite the belligerence, there was just something deep inside of me that needed a reaction from a player, even if something on my surface harbored this odd contempt for him. I wanted to be one of them so badly that just talking to me was validating, even if Bennett only admonished me.

Now it was 2012 and the Orioles were a first place team and the stands were a bit fuller. Orioles starter Jake Arrieta was knocked out in the fourth inning after giving up five runs, ballooning his ERA to 5.81 to go along with his 3-9 record. But he wouldn’t get a decision in the back-and-forth game with the Indians—the Orioles won, 9-8. The game these major leaguers played was a baseball of precision. Even when they made mistakes, they were so good at minimizing them (with scoop here or a swipe there) that it rendered the misfires moot. It looked so different from the mistake-filled games at Ripken Stadium.

I’d already seen guys on the IronBirds get sent to the baseball gallows—how many more drops of the guillotine would they have to survive before they made it to Baltimore? If that Orioles game was any indication, the boys in Aberdeen didn’t have very good odds: none of the Orioles on the field at Camden Yards that night had ever played for the IronBirds.

The stadium went dark and the PA announcer told fans to gather behind home plate for fireworks. Bursts of rainbow lights shot out of center field in coordination with music. I didn’t care a lick about fireworks, but it was the most incredible display I’d ever seen. All the while, the

grounds crew went to work tamping down home plate, raking the infield—doing their job. The Orioles clubbie was probably getting the first load of the wash going. Probably none of them—the clubbie or the grounds crew—could give less of a shit about the fireworks in center field. I sat with my arm around Nicole as she smiled and squealed with glee as the bursts of fireworks reflected in her wide-open green eyes.

I knew in that moment that I'd never see baseball the same way again. Not because of all the scrubbing pants bullshit or the extra work that went on behind the scenes, but because I'd never be able to look at a major leaguer again without wondering how many nameless minor leaguers had fallen away to make his existence on that field possible.

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