

## *Across the Line*

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*The trouble is that the balls go where you throw them.*

– a well-known saying in juggling

Standing in foul territory over by the corn field, roughing up the game ball, Jack was concentrating, trying to get his mind right for seven innings of combat. It was a matter of getting to know the ball, the perfection of its spherical shape, the sharpness of its tight laces, the smoothness of its shiny white leather. Its newness. He loved this ball, and he wanted it to love him back. Very much. Because this was the ultimate game, the game for the golden trophy – the Championship of the Tuesday Blue Division of the Men’s Municipal Slow Pitch League: Shaman Drum Book Shop vs. Varsity Olds.

But pain was distracting his mind, interfering with his concentration. It was the pain of old wounds, of knuckles jammed, joints dislocated, and bones broken long ago. And one recent injury – after a hard slide, he’d been racked by back pain so severe, he’d watched two games from a prone position on the bench. But this one was too big to miss. He was going to pitch no matter what.

It was 6:30, game time. The August sun was low in the sky, and all around him, the snap of balls hitting gloves and the shrill buzz of excited voices filled the cooling air. Jack liked what he heard: his teammates were teasing each other, joking, making bets. They knew the importance of this game and they were up for it, but they were laughing, and loose.

Wincing in pain, Jack slowly made his way to home plate for the conference with the ump.

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As the visitors, Jack's Shaman Drum team batted first, and after a rocking half-inning, they sported a 3-0 lead. Jack hobbled to the mound, eased his aching left hand into his glove, and pitched his warm-ups. As the infielders flipped the ball around, he stole a glance at the bleachers, hoping to spot his wife.

No sign of her. Well, he wasn't surprised – she never came to his games, even though he always posted the schedule on the fridge. She didn't like his playing ball. "I don't recognize you out there," she'd told him. "You turn into a completely different person."

Maybe she was right. He couldn't say exactly what happened, but every time he stepped between the lines of a softball diamond, he did change. He changed from the easy-going, middle-aged family man he ordinarily was, into . . . he wasn't sure who. But it was someone he'd been wondering about lately.

Varsity Olds didn't so much as get a hit in the first, but they had a huge first baseman who batted clean-up, and leading off the bottom of the second, the big guy clobbered Jack's first pitch, slugging a low line drive toward the gap between Dickie in left and Pack in left center. When Dickie was slow getting the ball in, the big guy took second.

Jack knew their first baseman because the two teams had played one another many times over the years. The guy was not only big, but he had power, speed, and intensity. He was a mean bastard, too: he wore shorts, so he would never slide, and he had a nasty habit of running into people. Rumor had it that he was an ex-con. Jack thought of him as The Slammer.

The next batter singled hard to center, and Jack, anticipating Pack's throw home, lined himself up with the plate for the relay. The ball arced high and long and came down right to him; he took it chest high, turned and fired to the catcher, an old friend named Harry. The ball and The Slammer arrived at the plate at the same time – Jack saw the ball skip off Harry's glove – there was a collision – the ball seemed wedged between Harry's forearm and chest – Harry spun like a pinwheel – dust flew everywhere – and then Harry was kneeling, holding the ball in his bare hand, showing it to the umpire. The Slammer was standing near home plate, breathing hard, and the umpire stood behind them, leaning forward, saying nothing.

Jack, aware of the base runner circling the bases behind him, shouted "Make a call!"

The Slammer stepped on home plate, Harry tagged him, and the umpire yelled "Safe!"

Harry leaped up and began shouting at the umpire, and Jack yelled "Throw the ball!" Too late. The runner thundered into third and stood on the bag, puffing, wheezing, and grinning like a well-fed dog.

Harry went after the umpire, waving the ball and yelling, and Jack charged off the mound – not to argue with the umpire but to restrain Harry, who got thrown out of a couple of games every season and was in danger of being banned from the league permanently.

Jack calmed Harry down, then turned to the ump and asked him about the call. The ump explained that initially the runner had missed home plate and the catcher had not tagged him with the ball.

"What about the guy not sliding?" Jack shouted, furious about the way The Slammer had run into Harry. "The guy's supposed to slide!"

“The catcher didn’t have the ball before the runner got there,” the ump said calmly. “You can’t block the base path if you don’t have the ball. That’s interference.”

Jack walked back to the mound, shaking his head. What was it with umpires, he often wondered. Why did they provoke such rage? He’d often explained to his teammates that insulting umpires was counterproductive; it brought dishonor upon their sponsor and caused umpires to make calls against them. The strike zone tended to shrink like a deflating balloon when an umpire took offense at something one of his players said. Jack had told them over and over: it doesn’t matter what really happened, what matters is what the umpire says happened.

Yet Jack knew that umpires were human and made mistakes. Like this guy – what a jerk! A run in, a man on third – and nobody out! Dire straits: in slow-pitch softball, you could score a lot of runs in a hurry. No lead was ever safe.

Jack shook his head and stared in at the plate, trying to collect himself. Sweat was running down his face, and his heart was pumping fast. His bones and joints and back were feeling better.

The batter was a guy named Vic, small and fast. On the third pitch, Vic hit a hard grounder right at Jack’s ankles. Jack fielded the ball and spun toward third, freezing the runner. He pumped, then whirled and threw hard to Hulk Deegan at first – the Drum had their own big first baseman. Hulk stretched, and they got Vic by half a step. Hulk flipped the ball to Jack. “Two more,” he said.

The number seven hitter singled cleanly, driving in their second run, but then the Drum got out of the inning. Jack bit his lower lip; the score was 3-2, much too close.

In the top of the fourth, the Drum scored four, so Jack almost felt good as he trotted back onto the field. A five-run lead was almost comfortable. He threw a quick glance at the bleachers again, and to his surprise, she was there – the tall blonde sitting in the top row was his wife. He waved, and she waved back.

The batter leading off the bottom of the fourth singled, and The Slammer stepped up to the plate. Jack pitched carefully to him, but he doubled down the left-field line, knocking in a run. The next hitter drove Pack very deep; he made the catch, though, and The Slammer had to hustle back to second.

Then Jack walked Vic. Big mistake. It put men on first and second, with a run already in and only one out.

The next batter sent a slow roller toward Hoak, at shortstop. Hoak scooped up the ball, pivoted to his right and flipped it to Thorney at third – a good play, Jack thought, and the right one since there wasn't time to turn the double play.

But The Slammer hit third base standing and crashed into Thorney, knocking him down.

Somehow Thorney managed to hold on to the ball, but still, Jack was furious, his sermons to his players forgotten. "Ump, come on!" he yelled.

The umpire shrugged. "I called him out."

"That's interference!" Jack shouted. "How about an out at second base? Or first?"

"There wasn't time for another play." The umpire turned and walked back to his position.

The Slammer, heading back to his bench, passed in front of

the mound.

“Hey,” said Jack, “why don’t you slide for a change?” He said it quietly, hoping neither the ump nor his wife would hear him.

“What?” said The Slammer, veering toward the mound.

“I said, buy some fucking baseball pants and learn to slide. You keep on running into my players, I’ll turn my first baseman loose on your team.”

The Slammer glared at him. “You got something to say to me?”

Jack glared back. “I just said it.”

The Slammer, apparently unable to think of a retort, or maybe dissuaded from doing so by Jack’s demeanor, kept walking.

The next batter stepped in. Jack threw a ball, then another ball. Guy’s a bunch of fucking hot air, he thought. I’ll kill the son of a bitch. He shook his head and walked around in a circle behind the rubber, squeezing the ball in his bare hand. Forget him, he told himself. Concentrate, focus. He threw a strike, and then another strike. The batter lined the next pitch straight at Thorney, who caught it and rolled the ball toward the mound.

Jack was leaning over the bubbler near the bench, enjoying the cool water, when he felt a nudge at his shoulder. It was Hulk.

“Hey Coach,” he said, “you got something to say to me?”

Jack looked up. “You heard that?”

“Just say the word, Coach. Turn me loose.” There was an excited glint in Hulk’s eyes.

Jack grinned but shook his head. “That’s okay, Hulk. Thanks, but – just play ball for now.”

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Up 7-3, the Drum rallied again in the fifth. Thorney doubled, Billie Day walked, Hulk singled, and then a double delivered two runs and put men on second and third. And now Jack's left-handed right fielder walked toward the plate with a chance to break the game open. Marty had spent hours in the batting cage lately, and it was paying off: his eye was tuned and his bat was quicker, and he'd been hitting nothing but line drives.

At the plate, Marty settled comfortably into his stance.

Jack looked over toward the bleachers. His wife was watching the action on the diamond and smiling, apparently liking what she saw. Did this signal a thawing of the softball freeze?

More than once, she'd asked him, Why are you still doing it? What's so fun about a softball game?

The humor, he'd said. The guys, the way the kid in them comes out. Or the way sometimes a guy will make a play he's never even imagined before.

But that didn't fully answer the question.

Escape, he'd said next. You don't think about anything else for 75 minutes. It's total concentration on something entirely irrelevant.

That didn't explain his love of the game either.

Harry had once said to him, "It's like stepping out of time. There's no clock, unlike football or basketball, just innings. If nobody makes an out, the game can go on forever."

An interesting idea, Jack thought. But only an idea. Games he pitched seemed to end much too quickly. Softball actually made time accelerate, an uncomfortable proposition at his age.

Maybe there was no explanation for why the game gave him such

a special joy. Maybe it was one of those unknowable things, like the way the universe looked before the Big Bang.

Marty had taken a first-pitch strike, then watched a couple of balls land outside the strike zone.

Jack looked up at the stands. His wife seemed to be enjoying herself. He was delighted, for she'd nearly reached the end of her rope with his last injury. Sliding, he'd damaged his lower back, and the next morning he woke up in so much pain, he didn't dare move. She leaned over him as he lay stretched out on their bed. "Jack, you're too old for this," she said to him. "You're destroying your body, and for what?"

"For fun," he replied.

She touched his hip. "This is fun?"

Well, no, he had to admit, not at the moment. But during the game! There was something about crossing the foul line and stepping into fair territory. It was magical, it transformed you. There were umpires, and people kept score. The next afternoon, the scores and the league standings were printed in the newspaper. Of course it didn't really matter who won and who lost, who made a great play or blew a sure out. But then again, in a strange way it did matter. It mattered a lot. During the game, it mattered more than anything.

And the guys. Sometimes they did crazy things. So did he. Like that time, what, five years ago? The other team was batting, and with two outs, this guy singled. As he stood on first base he asked Jack, who was playing first, "Hey buddy, do you lead off when he pitches the ball, or when it crosses home plate?"

Jack could remember how his whole life flashed in front of his



eyes – high school and first sex, college, a stretch in the army including that bad year in Korea patrolling the DMZ, the wedding, the birth of their first son – everything. Never mind that the guy had to be playing illegally if he didn't know the rules; Jack would never challenge a player's eligibility. No, the question was, what to say?

*Do I tell this guy the truth, or do I go for the out?*

He spoke straight from his gut: "When it leaves the pitcher's hand."

"Thanks." The guy smiled appreciatively.

The pitcher pitched, the guy took a lead, and the umpire yelled, "Time! No pitch! The runner is out!"

When Jack returned to the bench, a couple of his teammates razzed him about unsportsmanlike conduct. But the rest of the guys were doubled over, laughing.

That was the best thing about playing ball, he'd finally decided. It brought out the worst in you.

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At the plate, Marty uncoiled a beautiful, swift, level swing and the ball rocketed off his bat, a rising line drive heading toward right field, traveling fast – *smack!* The Slammer snared it in his big mitt.

End of the Drum's fifth. Score, 9-3.

Jack trudged toward the pitcher's mound, trying not to let the disappointment get him down. An opportunity to bust the game wide open, lost. Think positive, he told himself. Your guys are playing great defense. Relax. Concentrate.

Jack got the first batter to ground to short. He was pitching well, keeping it up there right at twelve feet, working it deep and short, in and out, hitting the corners. He got the second batter to pop up to

left field. He had a feel for the ball, he knew the ball: the spheroid would go exactly where he wanted it to go, and the bat would not, could not, hit it squarely.

He worked the next batter too carefully and went 3-and-0 on him. He wasn't worried. He threw a strike. He threw another strike. He threw another pitch – a strike for sure – and the guy hit a grounder to Jack's left. Jack drifted toward first, gloved the ball, flipped it to Hulk, and inning number five was history.

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Nobody scored in the sixth. In the top of the seventh, the Drum got their lead-off man on. But then Billie grounded into a double play, firing up the Varsity Olds players, and when Dickie fouled out, they went berserk – shouting, belting each other, screaming for hits, for runs, for victory.

Jack trotted to the mound, picked up the ball, and tossed three warm-up strikes. Harry fired it down to second, and the infielders flipped it around. Thorney tossed it to Jack, who stepped onto the rubber, got a grip on the ball, and stared in toward home plate.

Then he hesitated.

He stepped off the rubber and looked past third base, out across the corn field, over toward the west. The sun was setting, orange and big and perfectly round. From the bleachers, people were calling to him, and their voices seemed far away. On the dirt road that ran alongside the ball park, an old blue pick-up rattled past, trailing dust, and the driver turned his head and stared at the diamond. His face, pale in the frame of the window and wearing a wrung-out expression, reminded Jack of faces he'd seen . . .

There'd been evenings like this in Korea, up on the DMZ. Ground fog. Sweat cooling on the back of your neck, the sun an orange memory, and a combination of stillness and threat in the air. It was at about this time of day when, as a young lieutenant, he would shepherd his patrol into a secure location, break out the C-rats, and wait for darkness to fall before moving on to their night ambush position.

Crossing the Military Demarcation Line and heading out into the wilderness of the DMZ was like stepping onto some kind of electric grid. You were awake, alert, alive in a new way. Like stepping across the foul line onto the softball diamond. What you did out there was for real. It counted. You had to make quick decisions, and so did everyone else. You depended on the other guys, and they depended on you.

Softball. In many ways it was like being in a firefight. You just weren't as likely to get killed.

Jack looked down at the ball. It was dusty, grass-stained, beat-up and smudged by many bats. It felt asymmetrical and rough and familiar in his hand. It felt good.

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He was fifty years old, goddamn it. As a young man, he never dreamed he'd live this long. Training to lead men in combat, and later, in Korea, leading a patrol into the DMZ every third night, he hadn't expected to. But for some reason, he had. He'd had twenty-five good years of marriage. His wife loved him enough to come to the game, and he loved her enough to want her to come. He'd fathered two kids and his kids loved him, and he loved and admired them and was looking forward to becoming a grandfather.

And so now, well, now here he was, standing in the middle of a dusty softball diamond, an old man playing in a championship game. It was the last inning, the Drum was up by six, and the bottom of the Olds batting order was coming to the plate. His hands, his legs, his back – everything – felt just fine.

Would he do it again? Would he risk his life? Would he kill men? He stepped back onto the pitching rubber and stared in at the plate. The batter settled into the box, and the umpire signaled for play. Jack took a deep breath and strode into the pitch. The ball left his hand and rose, picking up rotation from his fingertips, smiling back at him with love. It climbed rapidly, then slowed as it reached the apex of its arc, and it hung there – twelve, twelve-and-a-half feet high – a perfect pitch. It hung there. It pasted itself to the darkening sky like the moon, like typescript fused to the page. It hung there. It may hang there forever. □