

Cathy Jacobowitz
from *Melly Mockingbird*

They flew to Toledo to play the Mud Hens, and Walker pitched the opener against Iggy LaComte (3-2). He had been working with Dan Brown to develop a change-up that could substitute for his floppy breaking balls, and he threw well but with a certain grimness that Clyde found painful to watch. He was a man without his talents, grinding on by will alone.

After dinner Clyde knocked on his door. There was a lengthy pause, then the sound of papers being rustled aside, and Tracy opened the door in a black silk robe. The woven hemp necklace that he always wore under his jersey was exposed at his throat. It was strung with small purple shells. He had a very slight look of resignation on his face.

“I’m not here to push you,” Clyde said when he was seated on the side of the bed. Walker was in the small hotel armchair, his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. He listened to Clyde with two fingers of one hand resting on his cheek, just below his right eye. “I know you’re working with D.B. and Kiko. But they’re staff, and I’m your catcher. To me, there’s something you get from a teammate that you can’t get from field personnel. I’m not asking you to change the way you work. But if you want any help from me, I am available for that.”

Tracy didn’t answer right away. He went on gazing at Clyde over his fingertips.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” he said at last, “how old are you?”

“Nineteen,” Clyde said.

He smiled. He had an open, honest smile, entirely different from his usual expression. “They call you Forty.”

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“Yeah.”

“I’m twenty-eight,” he said. “I’ll be eligible for arbitration in September.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“That’s what you’re supposed to say.”

Clyde shrugged.

Tracy sighed and drew up his legs. “What the hell,” he said. He leaned forward between his knees. “They talk about you in Boston, you know. They say you’re the next big thing to come out of the farm system. Do you think that’s true?”

Clyde was used to hearing this, too. He had been drafted in the championship year, and some of the hype still clung to him. “I think people are easily impressed by good catching,” he said. He always said that.

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Clyde got permission from Tony Kikawa and Dr. West to do a little work in the bullpen.

“What do you feel when you throw?” he asked. Tracy weighed the ball in his hand, trying two seams, four seams. “Not much,” he said. “It feels the same in my arm whether it’s going to sink down or flatten out.”

“Every pitch feels like a good pitch?”

“No, a bad one.”

“For how long has this been?”

“Just the past few weeks,” said Walker. Clyde knew he was lying. He squatted in the mud and called for one low and inside. It came in like a roll of toilet paper. “Try your thumb on the bottom,” Clyde said. It was the same. “Try releasing more to the side.”

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“That’s enough,” Walker said at last.

“Give me a few more.”

“I’ve been throwing sinkers that don’t sink for half the morning. I think you get the picture.”

Clyde’s quads burned as he stood up. He took off his mask and let the sea-tinged air, cool and wet for June, loosen the hair that was pasted to his forehead. He could see some children watching from the grassy hill beside the stadium. “What do you do to get your mind off pitching?” he said.

Walker stood eyeing him and rubbing the ball with his thumb. He had a handsome, closed-up face, a long neck and shoulders so straight they looked machined. “That’s kind of personal.”

“Just curious.”

“What do you do?”

“Me? Nothing,” Clyde said.

“To get your mind off pitching?”

“I mean, it never is.”

They began to walk back towards the clubhouse. “I don’t know,” Walker said. “Whatever anyone else does, I guess. Read a book. Knit socks. Call the fiancée.”

“What’s your fiancée’s name?” Clyde said.

“Shawneequa,” said Tracy. He laughed. “No, it’s Emma. Emma Lapham.”

“So she’s white?”

“Lily.”

“You get flack for that?”

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He shrugged. “My mom’s white.”

“So’s mine.”

Clyde meant it as a joke, but Walker didn’t smile. “What’s the rest of you?” he said. “Asian?”

“No, white. Most likely.”

“Most likely,” Walker repeated.

Clyde stayed at the park long past midnight, watching digital video of every major-league start Tracy Walker had ever made. He got the remote and inched through the delivery frame by frame. The pitching from last year and the year before was efficient and assured. The mechanics were the same ones Clyde had seen in the bullpen this morning: the sharp push off the rubber, the arm up at eleven o’clock and the ball rolling off his fingertips. All the MRIs had come back clean. But he was crippled, and every pitch he threw darkened his expectations of the next. He’d reached the barren ground at the bottom of the slump where no rational or irrational strategy was going to help him. If Clyde believed in God, he would have prayed for him.