

Streetball

Snoteater had the bat that we used to play Home Runs. Bonderante had the ball. It was a plastic job with holes in it, the ball was. It whistled when you shouldered it over the fence. It cracked when you thwacked out a double. After too many doubles, the ball waffled, but home runs did not do it, home runs did not crack it, they were all body, they were a windup, a shouldering over the fence, a long wiffle or waffle over the bushes, over the railing, over the garage door and down, down while we waited listening, down while we listened to the wiffing, waiting while we listened for the bounce of the ball at the bottom. Bonderante could not do it. Snoteater could not do it. Arthur could do it. Nudebum could do it. I could do it. I could lift the wiffle ball out of the playground, over the railing and down, down onto the garage ramp. Rolling down the ramp, it ended its roll against the crinkly door of the garage where my dad kept his Buick.

Stickball was our game, but my dad had taken away the broomstick. Stoopball we played with Spaldeens and Pensy Pinkies when we could get them. Nudebum liked Spaldeens. I liked the Pinkies. I liked to dive sideways onto the dirt for Pinky hundreds that came at crazy angles. Spaldeens went over your head and you had to dive backwards onto the sidewalk to catch them.

Off the Wall was a Pinky game too. You could just nudge the wall with a Pinky in killer shots Nudebum could not see. Nudebum would dive, slaughtering his head against the wall. When we used his Spaldeens, my shots would go out-of-bounds.

I liked Home Runs. Home Runs was my game. Home Runs was our stickball. I would carry Snoteater's bat, hoping for a game of Home Runs.

Snoteater's bat was plastic. It had no handle. The bat was wet, Bonderante said, from Snoteater sniffing on it, from his wiping his nose on it, Bonderante said.

We played over the garage in a playground that was too small to be a playground. The bases were the fences, except second base was this metal hump thing that none of us knew what it was meant for except for second base. Past second base was the fence over which was a home run.

Arthur's home runs were crack-muscle jobs that were doubles or lineouts except for when they were home runs. Arthur had forearms. He hit like name-your-favorite. He hit from both sides of the plate the way your favorite did.

We played Stoopball in the morning. We played Off the Wall at night so our moms could watch us from the windows. We played Home Runs in the playground over the garage in the afternoon until our dads got home. By the time we got down the ramp, sometimes the door would have opened for one of our dad's cars coming home. We would race the door, racing to get in under it before it came crinkling down on our heads.

Me and Nudebum were best friends. We played Stoopball every day after Arthur moved away and the one who won the most games had to buy the Kitchen Sinks at Jahn's until it burned down. After that it was Banana Splits at Carvel. The candy store that had the Pensy Pinkies got destroyed in the Jahn's fire. It was all Spaldeens after that, and the Banana Splits, my whole allowance going into paying off.

My dad said that Jahn's had burned down on purpose. But I do not think anything happens on purpose.

We played Stoopball in the mornings and then we ran, we raced, Nudebum and me, from lamppost to lamppost, from here to the garage door and back. Nudebum was fastest. I was second fastest. I was faster than Arthur was before Arthur moved away. One time I raced Arthur all the way to Jahn's. We were too tired to eat Kitchen Sinks by the time we got there.

Bonderante said that the Banana Splits at Carvel had to be better than the Kitchen Sinks that Jahn's had. But me and Nude-

bum did not say so. We said that Carvel's bananas were too stiff. We said that Kitchen Sinks had Banana Splits in them, and that Kitchen Sinks had all this other stuff in them too, that by the time you ate past it the Banana Splits that you got down to were better than anything Carvel had. Down there was the best kind of murk of melted ice cream that there ever was.

Nudebum could whistle through his teeth. He could click his fingers in a way that we could not do it. He taught me to do it. It was a secret, he said. He showed me it. He said that no one but him could do it even if they knew the secret. But I could do it. I could stiffen my finger but then let it go, loose, like he said. "Let the wind take it," Nudebum said, "Let the wind thwack it against your other fingers." I could do it. I could go loose and let the wind thwack it. But I could not whistle. Nudebum could whistle through his teeth like a scientist.

We played Off the Wall when our moms were calling our names. We played when it was too dark to see the ball anymore and it would come down off the wall and hit us in the head. We played until every shot we made was a killer. We played until our moms found us.

When no one was looking for us, we played Home Runs.

We were getting slaughtered. We were getting destroyed. We had the quadruple jinx. We were dead meat, Bonderante said. He said that we stunk. He said that Snoteater's mother had a moustache. Snoteater was crying. It was hot, like a hundred degrees. The bat was so wet I had to keep wiping my hands on my pants. I was thinking that my hands were covered with crying.

The score was fifteen to one. I had the one homer, a dinky job that just made it over the fence. Bonderante dove for it, the ball **nicking off his fingers and popping just over the fence and into the bushes where we almost could not find it.**

Nudebum had five homers. He had more homers than his favorite ever had in one game in his life. I was thinking of every jinx I could think of, but Nudebum was all body, he was shoulder,

he was hitting under the ball for long wiffle jobs that kept going down to the garage. Home runs that landed on the long ramp and rolled to the garage.

The ball was wiffing the way it never did after Arthur got a hold of it. I was thinking what would Bonderante do if his ball started to waffle.

Last licks.

Snoteater was batting and Nudebum was whistling. He was thwacking his finger. He was throwing the ball and it was going straight for Snoteater. It was cracking Snoteater in the head. Snoteater was crying.

"Take first base," I said, and Snoteater looked like he was not going to do it. He looked like he thought this was some other game. Bonderante looked at him like he meant to tackle him like this was some other game.

But this was not some other game.

I was batting.

I caught Nudebum's first pitch before it got to my head.

"Cut it out," I said.

He was whistling. He was thwacking his finger.

"Cut it out, Richie," I said.

"Don't be a sissy," Bonderante said.

I cracked the next pitch, a single right off Nudebum's head, a single that came crazy-angled back off his head. Nudebum got the ball and he threw it, a long wiffle job that went over the railing, over the garage door, and down onto the ramp that had on it my father's Buick coming home.

"Go get it, Siegelbum," Nudebum said.

I searched under the cars but I could not find it. The garage had swallowed it up. The garage had that garage smell. Nothing moved. There was the garage echo of a car door slamming. I ran. Past the Oldsmobiles and the Fords and the Buicks. Past the empty spots that awaited their cars, I ran. Past where

Arthur's father's Volkswagen used to be. I did not race. There was the garage curse. Things murked in the old garage. There was a hard-to-see dead Pinky in a puddle just past where the Volkswagen had been. There was the uncrinkled door just waiting for an unlooker to crash his head right into it. There was my father's head peeking up over the Buick at me.

I ran.

Bonderante was pitching rocks when I got back. Snoteater was sitting on second base. He was crying. Nudebum was cracking rock doubles.

"No batter, no batter, no batter, no batter, no batter," Bonderante was saying.

"Jesus Christ," I said.

"Where's my ball, Siegelbum?" Bonderante said. "You're dead," he said.

I ran home. My dad told me it was all because I was a Jew. He said I was a Jew, but I did not believe it.

"What about Snoteater?" I said.

My dad said he did not know any Snoteater.

"What about Arthur?" I said.

My dad said Arthur was gone.

"What about Richie?" I said.

My dad said the name was Nudowitz.

"It's those Bonderantes," my father hissed.

"Tell me what to do," I said.

By the time I got back to the playground that my father said was the roof of the garage, Bonderante was the only one there. He was sitting on second base, that hump thing that my father said was some kind of a garage vent. Bonderante was all legs dangling off second base. He was air blowing into chubby cheeks. He was cheek pockets popping with his sweaty hands.

I walked up to Bonderante the way my favorite would have, thumbs in my pockets, fingers dangling down, legs bent out into a waffle kind of a walk.

I could see Bonderante seeing me coming. He did the Nudebum whistle. When Bonderante whistled, the dimples in his cheeks turned to holes.

"Jabs will not do it," my father had said. "Hooks will not do it. You need an uppercut to do it. Crack with a jab and nothing will happen. Muscle a hook and not a thing will happen."

"What about the wind?" I had said, and my dad had looked at me in that way that fathers have of looking at their sons.

"Look," my father had said, "just take your arm and stiffen it like this. The secret is in the body. Every secret is." **Q**