

## Old Number One

Augie saw the kids playing stickball when he wound up parked by the school <sup>on Sagamore</sup> and Elm. The fight with Susan had been bad enough for him to take a drive and clear his head. He told her she had no right to call him selfish when he mentioned his idea of investing in a baseball camp near Boca Raton; he knew some big names who would help out. She told him to let go of the past and face reality. They shouted back and forth, like a manager and umpire, until he grabbed his keys and left. After going nowhere in particular for about a half hour, Augie was passing by the school when he noticed the game. He pulled over to the curb, turned off the engine, and watched from inside.

They were playing two-on-two. All four kids were wearing shorts and tee shirts; three had on baseball hats. Red and Blue were against Yellow and No-cap. The wall of the school fronted a huge macadam parking lot with hundreds of numbered spaces, and beyond the lot a ribbon of unpaved road ran alongside a combination of trees and thick underbrush. Augie thought about what it would take to blast one into the woods and decided he still had the power to do it.

Augie opened his door, which groaned from the fourteen years of use. "Another damn thing that needs repair," he thought, as he got out and slammed his blue Ford shut. Then he seated himself on the hood and watched the action. Yellow fired a scorching fast ball that slammed into the low, outside corner of the strike box and kicked up a white puff of chalk. "All ri-i-i-ght," said No-cap as Blue handed the broomstick to Red. Three fastballs later Red suffered the same fate.

As the teams changed sides, Augie smiled as he regarded the pitching machine now walking toward the strike box to take his turn at bat.

Yellow was tall for his age, probably only thirteen, and, like Augie, he was a righty. A natural, any coach or scout would say. They'd add, four years of developing those skinny, gangling arms and learning how to pitch in high school. Probably get a scholarship to a U.S.C. , Texas, or Arizona State; that's really how to get noticed. Only a matter of time before getting drafted by the major leagues and hauling in a fat bonus for signing. Barring any arm problems.

Twenty-five years ago it was the same for Augie, a kid as tall, but with big, strong arms already noticed by college scouts. Every time his catcher, Matt Wade, flicked his index finger--number one--signal for the fast ball, Augie was one step closer to the majors. Junior year, first team all-county. Senior year, tendinitis of the right shoulder. Interest from all the colleges fizzled, and Augie barely graduated from high school.

So, instead of the glamour of New York, California, or Florida, life was Henry Street and a clapboard house that time had painted the color of dried blood. There were also Bret and Todd, who would be in college soon, and a wife who called him selfish.

At the moment, the only refuge Augie found were Red, Blue, Yellow, and No-cap, still going at it in the bottom of the ninth inning. Up two-to-one, Yellow got Red on a pop-up to No-cap and then hurled his speciality, inside, inside, and right down the middle, while Blue swung helplessly at something no longer there.

Applauding the boys and thanking them for their entertainment, Augie slid down off the hood and thought about where he would go next. Maybe another school, a baseball field, or a bar.

"Hey mister, wanna play?"

Augie looked in the direction of the voice. No-cap, a short, compact boy with a friendly smile and mop of hair no comb could ever solve,

waited for an answer while the other boys looked on.

"We wanna play again, but Ricky's gotta go," he said, pointing at Blue, who waived and started away from the school.

Augie thought about where else he might go and gave a look at his car heaped at the curb. "Sure," he said, smiling in return.

"O.K., how about me an' Scott again, against you and Doug?"

"I'm sure it doesn't matter. By the way, what's your name?"

"Blake," he said, "we're up first."

Augie and Doug took the field. When Doug said he wasn't a pitcher, Augie took the ball and was transported back over twenty years. Here he was, Augie Gill, powerhouse flame thrower for Madison High School, staring down <sup>another</sup> a victim. He could hear the crowd, see Matt Wade flicking the sign--number one. Augie took a deep breath, stretched his shoulders, wound up and threw his best fast ball, low and outside, a pitch no one could hit.

But little Blake did. The ball boomed off his bat, sailing high over the parking lot and dirt road before vanishing into the woods. For a moment no one said anything.

"We don't have another ball," said Doug, looking at Augie.

Augie stared at the woods. Along with the ball also vanished Matt Wade, a cheering crowd, and a baseball camp near Boca Raton. "Here," he said, reaching for his wallet and peeling out a five-dollar bill. "I've gotta go. You guys get yourselves a new ball and some soda."

"Hey, thanks mister," said Doug, taking the money.

"Thank you," said Augie. He waived good-bye and headed for his car. Once on the road, he aimed the fading blue Ford in the direction of Henry Street and a red clapboard house in need of a strong, right arm.