

## —EXTRA INNINGS

by John Peters

*Pop.*

Jacob winced as dust mushroomed from his mitt. Gingerly he rolled onto his knees then tossed the ball toward the mound. It took a lazy bounce before stopping at Brad's feet. The pitcher glared at Jacob.

*Sorry.* Jacob's stomach knotted at the guilt of making Brad bend to field the ball. He knew his friend surely struggled with the same pain he felt. The same torment. The same fear.

They all carried it.

Twelve years earlier Jacob had heard Franklin Delano Roosevelt tell everyone the only thing they had to fear was fear itself. Since that time the nation had witnessed thousands--tens of thousands--of men and women and children homeless, some starving to death. The country had seen a man named Hitler roll across Europe, and now was mired in a war that consumed the world.

But until today, Jacob had believed Mr. Roosevelt's words.

Now, he knew there was more to fear. Much more.

Jacob pushed himself back to a squat and labored to maintain his balance. He extended his gloved hand, not bothering to signal a pitch, never looking at the batter.

*Pop.*

He cried out. Tears welled.

On a good day Brad's pitches sliced through the air with a *ppphtttt* sound. Although there was no way to measure such things, Jacob would have bet his bottom dollar some days Brad could fling that ball at one-hundred miles-per-hour. Now Jacob suspected the pitches weren't traveling half that fast. Brad had thrown thirty-one innings of the contest--the first ten, two separate five-inning stints in the middle, and the past eleven. Jacob was awed by the fact that Brad could throw at all. Nearly as much as he was astonished that he could still squat, could still catch.

Legs cramping, hand throbbing, Jacob wept as the memories of the past three days mixed with recollections from recent years.

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"You're the best, huh?"

Innocent enough question, uttered by a simple looking man. He might have been a local farmer, maybe a butcher. Perhaps a mechanic. The man's face was weathered, his shoulders stooped, his disproportionately large forearms attesting to a life spent at hard physical labor with his hands. A construction worker? Stone

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mason? Didn't much matter. They came from different backgrounds, and every town had one--a baseball manager who thought his guys good enough to take on a ragtag bunch of out-of-towners.

Jacob watched Edmond reel in their catch.

"Yep, the best," Edmond said, his aw-shucks smile disappearing to a thin line, his face turning hard and serious.

"If you're so good why aren't you all in the big leagues?"

"Could be," Edmond said. "Most of 'm could be. Things got in the way."

*Things.* Jacob thought that was an interesting term for Edmund to use. For him things had been a pregnant girlfriend and a would-be father-in-law shoving a double-barreled shotgun against his forehead.

That had been a decade ago, when in the space of twenty-four hours Jacob went from standing on the edge of his life's dream to falling into his worst nightmare.

The dream was making *The Show*, playing in the big leagues, walking onto the same fields where Babe Ruth and Lefty Grove had played, having kids across America hear his name called out over thousands of radios, each tuned to the World Series.

Listening to Edmond set up another pigeon, Jacob's mind went back to that day when Clay Turner, the local postman, knocked on his door. Everyone in town knew what Jacob was waiting for, so when the letter arrived Clay took it straight to Jacob's house. His hand was shaking when he delivered it.

On the outside of the envelope, printed all fancy in the upper left corner, was *The St. Louis Cardinals*. Nothing else. No return address, no person's name, just *The St. Louis Cardinals*, as if everyone knew who they were, where they were. Jacob ripped the letter from the envelope.

*Dear Mr. Sommers,*

*We were quite impressed with your performance at the Atlanta try-outs, and we would like to offer an additional opportunity to explore the potential of you joining the St. Louis Cardinals organization.*

*Enclosed is a thirty-day minor league contract. Please report to our Gastonia, N.C., minor league affiliate no later than June 1. The coaching staff there will be prepared for your arrival. If you perform to a satisfactory level, you may earn a longer term contract and a chance to eventually play for our major league club.*

*A second enclosure lists all that you will need to take to Gastonia.*

*We look forward to you joining our organization.*

Jacob sat at the rough-hewn wooden table where his family ate every night. He reread the letter, three times, then let out a whoop, which could be heard a quarter mile away. That night his dad cooked up a freshly butchered hog and brought a new batch of moonshine from the woods. All of Jacob's relatives and friends visited, celebrating his soon-to-be fortune.

The next day, standing beside that very same table, Jacob pissed in his pants. Vernon Womack, Miranda-Jane's red-faced father, pressed the end of a double-barreled shotgun against the middle of his forehead. Vernon looked at Jacob's pants. "Ya pussy-faced sum 'o bitch," Vernon drawled, tobacco-stained spittle trickling from the corner of his mouth. "Git yor ass into some clean ov'ralls. We going to the justice 'o peace."

Jacob whispered "Yes, sir," then stumbled backwards to his bedroom. He stood