

ESTHER M. FRIESNER

JESUS AT THE BAT

PHILIP ROTH HAD ALREADY written The Great American Novel; Victor Harris was screwed. If you're going to be successful with the writing thing you have to write about what you know, and the only thing Victor Harris really knew was baseball. (He thought he knew sex, but that's another story.) The only question remaining was: How much longer would he be able to keep up the sweet, unstressful position of sensitive, creative, Aspiring-Author/ Househusband (without actually becoming Published Author/Househusband) before Barb, his wife, caught wise?

He kept a copy of Stephen King's Playboy interview prominently displayed in the small basement cubby that was his "office," the better to remind Barb of at least one loyal lady who'd held down a decidedly unfun job (Dunkin' Donuts) while hubby mud-wrestled with the Muse until he hit pay dirt. Stand by your man, it seemed to say, and soon you shall limo beside him. Cast your sugar crullers upon the waters and they shall be returned unto you an hundredfold as caviar. But the interview was curling with age faster than Victor's first rejection slip (also prominently displayed: it was from the New Yorker and had the distinction of sporting an actual, human, hand-written note of comment scrawled in the margin, viz.: "Sorry." Whether this referred to the rejecting editor's regrets or the manuscript's quality was best left nebulous) and Barb was starting to get the hard-bitten, narrow look of a ten-year-old facing off against parents who persist in chirping about Santa. Not good.

So the King interview was a life-vest whose kapok molecules were rapidly metamorphosing into cesium. Victor told himself that many a good woman of Barb's generation would be grateful to have a fulfilling multiphase career as aesthetician by day, Amway rep by night, but Barb didn't see it that way. Why didn't she appreciate the stresses of the Art? Why must he cringe each time she demanded, "Haven't you sold anything yet?" or "Why don't you go down to Four Comers Used Cars and see if Jerry'll give you your old job back?" or "Why in bell did you ever major in English? Everyone around here speaks it already."

Useless to attempt explaining the creative nature to such a scrawny soul. Futile to preach the exquisitely painful yet glacial process of inspiration, motivation, and execution in l'oeuvre Harris to the heathen. None so blind as they who will not see themselves vacationing in Hawaii this year -- again! -- and the Millers next door have already gone four times!

Of the bricks of such marital differences are the divorce courts of this fair nation built. So, too, the occasional ax-murder-with-P.M.S.-defense case. On the surface it would seem that a miracle would be necessary to save Victor Harris' neck from the chop. That was where the Brothers' Meeting Little League came in.

No, really.

And that was why, with luck, there would forever be one less used car salesman at Four Corners and never a moment's peace for the Harris family at the Sharon Valley Regional Elementary School P.T.A. spring picnic.

"Barb, hon, you look just gorgeous!" Sally McClellan swept down on Barb like a tornado on a trailer park.

The McClellans and the Harrises didn't usually move in the same circles.

Victor

Harris moved in circles pretty constantly, while Phil McClellan moved solely in

a steep, straight line of ascent to the windswept heights of financial success whence he might safely piss on the upturned faces of those below.

However, when the first sweet shoots of spring green burst through the hard Sharon Valley earth, Phil McClellan graciously maintained temporary bladder control so far as Victor's face went. As he told The Little Woman, if kissing Victor Harris' skinny ass was called for to achieve your goals, then by God and

Ted Turner Industries, Phil McClellan would take a back seat to no one when it came to posterior pucker-ups. The Little Woman conducted herself accordingly as

regarded Mrs. Victor Harris' more shapely buns, indeed.

Barb was nobody's fool except Victor's and he'd had to marry her for that privilege. She knew just what Sally was after and she sat back on the picnic table bench with all the smirking superiority of a Renaissance prince contemplating where to insert his next dagger. "Sally, darling" she purred. Cheeks brushed. Kissy-kissy mwah-mwahs were uttered. "When are you gonna come around to the La Belle so I can get my hands on your hair?" (La Belle being the town aesthetorium where Barb currently aestheted.)

Sally gave a nervous little giggle and fluffed her golden pour of curls with no apparent need. "Oh, I'll be around. I don't think I'm due for a trim just yet."

"Every six weeks." Relentless, that was Barb in the spring. "And I know I haven't seen you since last September." Somewhere a ghostly poniard glittered. "I hear tell you've been going up to Pittsburgh to have it done." Zzzip-zot, a slender blade slipped in and out between Sally McClellan's spareribs without The Little Woman feeling anything but a draft tickling her pancreas.

Sally turned bright red. "Who told you that?"

"Marylynn Drummer." Barb's eyes were hooded and inscrutable, but she licked her lips to savor the taste of blood.

"Well, it's just a baldfaced lie!" Sally spat. "When did she say so?"

"Mmmmm, hard to recall." Barb sucked a few last crimson drops off the tip of her index finger. "I see her so often. Every week she's in the La Belle for a shampoo and blow-dry at least. She's got a standing appointment." It was time

for the coup de grace, the mercy stroke to end the victim's misery but good. "Sometimes she even brings in little Bobby, and you would be amazed to see how that boy has grown. Why, just the other day Vic was saying to me, 'Barb, I'd like to see what Bobby Drummer could do if I gave him a chance to pitch, I really would.'"

It was all over except for where to ship the body.

Sally McClellan's face sank in on itself like an old helium balloon with a pinhole leak. "Isn't that interesting," she said through a smile so stiff it clattered. "But do you think it's wise? My Jason has always pitched for the Bobcats, and I assumed --"

Barb laughed. "It's not like Vic was breaking up a winning team set-up, sweetie.

Who knows? If Vic gives Bobby a chance to pitch, maybe that'll turn the trick. And you should have seen Bobby's little face light up when I told him what Coach Vic was considering."

"Considering? Then it's not settled?" Sally's eyes flashed. She fingered her hair. "You know, it's so easy to let yourself go over the winter, don't you agree, Barb? Maybe I should take a lesson off Marylynn Drummer. You got room for another standing appointment on your calendar?"

"I'll see what I can do," Barb murmured. "Of course it is harder to fit things in these days. Did I tell you that Pauline Fleck's having me host an Amway party at her family reunion?" Needless to say, Barb went on to rhapsodize over how much dear little Scott Fleck had grown this past winter and didn't Sally agree that the boy deserved a tryout as pitcher for the Bobcats, too?

That night, Victor didn't have to listen to Barb's barbs about where he was on the stairway to success and where he ought to be. Happily swamped with pleas for La Belle and Amway appointments (high tips and high sales guaranteed, you betcha), Barb had better things to do with her tongue than rag on the man whose chronic underemployment made his Little League coaching job possible. Yes, baseball season was upon them once more, and so long as Victor owned the power to say whose son played (and whether the boy's field position were somewhere in this time-zone), domestic bliss and Barb's own auburn-turfed diamond were his all his.

Nor did it matter a lick that the Brothers' Meeting Bobcats were a team so slack and poorly that a reputable publisher of dictionaries had asked them to pose as the illustration for pathetic.

No, it didn't matter to Coach Vic at all, but it mattered very much to Vic Junior.

Vic Junior loved baseball. He was one of those pure souls born with a vision of The Game untainted by the dross and illusion of this sorry world. To him, baseball spoke of Buddha-nature, not Lite Beer. (The Tao which can be named is not the Tao, but the Tao which has its batting stats printed on the back of a

trading card is way awesome.) I The smell of a newly oiled glove, the clean crack of bat hitting ball, the sight of so many strong, young lads tearing around the bases in those tight-fitting pants, all moved him in ways he could not yet hang a name on. It was a source of spiritual pain to him that his team so seldom won.

It was a pain less spiritual every time Jase McClellan knocked him down in the school yard and taunted him with the fact that he wouldn't be on the Bobcats team at all if not for the fact that his old man was the coach.

Vic Junior could have tattled on Jase, but he was what adults called a good child. In other words, there were sponges adorning the ocean floor who had more backbone than he. He went to church without a fuss and riven listened to what his Sunday school teacher had to relate of Hell. He tithed his allowance not because his mother made him but in the sure and certain hope that he was making time payments on one colossal, outsize, super-mega-omniprayer of his own asking being answered some day. He wasn't sure what he was going to request when he finally submitted his sealed bid to Glory, but he knew it would be something much better than just asking God to burn Jase McClellan in the fiery pit until his eyeballs melted and his hair frizzled away and the skin on his face blackened and cracked and flaked from the charting bones and his dick fell off.

And then, one day, something happened. Who knows how these things get started? So much depends on serendipity. Pharaoh's daughter might have kept on walking when she heard that wailing in the bulrushes. "Just one of the sacred cats being devoured by one of the sacred crocodiles," she'd say with a shrug of her sweet brown shoulders, and Charlton Heston's resume would have been several pages shorter.

What serendipped in this case was Vic Junior came into La Belle to see his Morn and by some karmic radar happened to find the one copy of Sports Illustrated in the whole establishment. Like a crow among the lilies it reposed in dog-cared splendor amidst the issues of Woman's Day and Mademoiselle and Good Housekeeping. Last desperate refuge of the male compelled for whatever unholy cause to accompany his woman into the lair of glamor, its well-thumbed antique pages gave moving testimony that a man will submerge himself in last year's sports "news" sooner than he will open a copy of Cosmopolitan to willingly read "Impotence: Things Are Looking Up."

"Mom!" Vic Junior cried, bursting in on his hardworking parent, waving the tattered magazine. "More, did you see this?"

Barb was giving Edna Newburgh a streak job. More couldn't see much of anything for all the ammonia fumes peeling her eyeballs raw. "Don't bother Mommy now, sweetheart," she said testily.

"But Mom, look! There's an article in here about how the American Little League champions got to go to Japan!" Vic Junior was insistent. Despite the noxious atmosphere he jiggled closer to Edna Newburgh's reeking head and thrust the magazine under his mother's nose.

"So what's that to you? Champions means winners. I said not now!" Barb snapped, flipping the open copy out of Vic Junior's hands with one jab of her elbow. (That she could do this at all was mute testimony to the worthiness of Vic Junior's team nickname, "Wimpgrip Harris.") Like some monstrous mutant butterfly, the magazine took wing and fluttered to the hair-strewn floor.

Giving his mother a cold you'll-be-sorry-when-I-grow-up-to-be-a-cross-dresser eye, Vic Junior gathered up his treasure, brushed clots of brown, black, blonde, and red tresses from the slick pages, and retreated to his chair in the waiting area.

He didn't need her to tell him what champions meant. It was a fishbone of resentment lodged deep in his throat, proof against all psychological Heimlich maneuvers, that the Bobcats were the losingest team in the history of Little League, baseball, and American sport. The only time a group of kids ended up with that much public egg on their faces was during the Children's Crusade when hundreds of starry-eyed juvenile pilgrims to the Holy Land ended up in the slave pens of the East instead. But even some of those guys could hit better than the Bobcats.

For Vic Junior it was his mother's scorn that hurt more than losing per se. A man might rail against the sun's rising in the east as easily as against the Bobcats once again playing the part of the walked-on in the league's latest walk-over -- such were the dull-eyed Facts of Life --but she didn't have to be so mean about it! Of course she wouldn't see it that way; she'd say she was only being realistic.

In his subconscious, Vic Junior understood as follows: A man ought to be entitled to hold onto his dreams without some fern ale always yawping at him about reality. Somewhere in the Constitution it should say that any woman apprehended in the act of trying to yank us back down to earth by the seat of our pants will be stood on her head in a pit of hog entrails and left for the buzzards, just to see how she likes that for reality!

But a little above the subconscious, in his heart-of-hearts, all that Vic Junior said into the listening dark was: Please, God, give us the way to win!

It was a child's simple prayer: sincere, unadorned, pure as a baby dewdrop. On the cosmic scale of values it had clout, pizzazz, and buying power.

It worked.

EXCUSE ME, sir, but is this where the Little League tryouts are?"

Victor Harris looked down at the brat presumptuous enough to tug at his clipboard-toting arm. "Who are you?" he snapped. His mirrorshades filtered through the picture of a skinny twelve-year-old kid like many others on the team: dark hair, dark eyes, all arms and legs, a little more sunbrowned than most of the specimens currently blundering through warm-ups on the outfield. "Did you sign up at school?"

"No, sir," the kid replied, too respectful to be true. "I just got here." He

tapped the brim of his cap so Victor could see the Angels logo.

Fine, good, no problemo, that explained it. Brothers' Meeting wasn't exactly your hub of suburban commerce, but it was close to Pittsburgh. You did get the occasional corporate family popping in from points unknown to settle down amongst the simple natives to swap beads 'n' trinkets until Daddy's company shipped the poor bastard somewhere else.

"L.A., huh? Nice tan. Okay, kid, what's your name?"

"Yeshua ben Jose."

Was that an accent? Accents made Victor nervous. So did names that sounded like they ought to be stuffed in a pita pocket instead of spread on Wonder Bread.

"Yeshu -- what?"

"Yeshua ben Jose, sir." The kid pounded a fist into his glove. "Can I play?"

Victor thumbed back the brim of his cap. "You're not from L.A., are you, son?"

"No, sir." The boy didn't volunteer anything more. In another kid, you could put it down to obnoxiousness, but this one's face was empty of anything except a clear-burning eagerness to please. It wasn't natural and it made Victor's teeth curl.

"You wanna tell me where you are from?"

"Israel."

A big fat wrinkled Uh-oh tickertaped across Victor's face and stayed there until he heard the kid go on to say: "Last thing I was in Jerusalem, but I was born in Bethlehem and --"

"Bethlehem?" It was like saying Paris to someone from Kentucky. Notre Dame and la Tour Eiffel just didn't show up in the equation. "Oh, hey, fine, that's all right, then. My mother's people came from Bethlehem," Victor said. He clapped the boy on the shoulder. "So your father work in the steel mills before or what?"

For the first time, the boy looked doubtful. "My father works just about everywhere."

"No fooling. It's a pain, isn't it?" Victor was starting to feel sorry for the kid. Hard enough row to hoe, coming all the way from Israel where things kept going kaboom! Harder when your old man couldn't hold down a job and had to keep switching positions and places to live and even countries just to cam a living.

At least the kid had been born in this country, but still, just wait until the other Bobcats found out he was Jewish! (Brother's Meeting wasn't exactly world famous for its cosmopolitan attitude in matters of religion. Old Mrs. Russell, a devout Presbyterian, had disinherited her daughter for entering into a mixed marriage with a Lutheran.)

Maybe the kindest thing to do would be to send him out onto the field for the tryouts and let him fall on his face. That shouldn't take too long. Everyone knew for a fact -- including Victor Harris, who had once owned a Sandy Koufax card -- that Jews played even worse baseball than Bobcats.

Of course the kid was dynamite. Prayers for smiting your enemies don't get answered with your enemies just catching mild colds and missing a couple of days' work, oh no! It's the plague or nothing. The same and more goes for a child's prayer that the hand of the Omnipotent yank his Little League team out of the cellar. Yes sir, one look at how little Yeshua ben Jose (simpler to call

him "Bennie" and be done with it) hit, pitched, fielded, and ran, and Coach Vic

was left slack-jawed, poleaxed, and passionately in love at home plate.

"Porter

Rickin'," he declared later that night while Barb cleared the dinner dishes.

"That's got to be the only explanation."

"What has?" Barb asked, not really giving a damn.

"That new kid, Bennie. I mean, with a last name like lose? I know he doesn't pronounce it Spanish, but still -- I mean, there is no other way to account for

how good he is and he's still Jewish. His folks might come from Israel, but somewhere back along the line they must've had a Porter Rickin' in the kibbutz woodpile. Or a Mexican at least. Now they can play ball!"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh," said Barb which was her little way of playing

ball with her husband without having to endure the drag of actually listening to

what he had to say.

"He's pretty good, isn't he, Dad?" Vic Junior asked brightly, proud of himself.

"Good? Why he's a fuckin' mira -- !"

"Victor!" Barb's warning tone got drowned out by the shrilling of the telephone.

Coach Vic was still going on about how he was going to play Bennie to best advantage when she went to answer it.

She returned a grimmer woman.

"That was Sally McClellan," she said, in the same way a medieval peasant might have returned from a visit to the local witch to announce The good news is I've

got the Black Death. "She says you're not letting her Jason pitch this year."

"You bet your sweet ass, I'm not!" Victor beamed. "With someone like Bennie who

can actually get the ball over the center of the plate ten out of ten, I should

put in 'Twelve Thumbs' McClellan? What am I, crazy?"

"What you are," Barb said, "is stupid."

"Look, Barb, I know baseball, and I've been coaching this team for five years,

ever since Vic Junior was in Pee Wees and didn't know which end of the bat to hold. And five years is exactly how long it's been since I saw a glimmer of hope for the Bobcats winning even one damn game. I'm telling you, Bennie is it!"

"Is Bennie's mother going to take over the weekly appointment Sally McClellan just cancelled, and pay up all the ass-kissing big tips that went with it?"

Barb

shot back. "Is she going to buy all the Amway products that Sally McClellan just

happened to discover were defective and wants to return for a refund? And if she'll do that, will she do the same when all the other mothers come after us with chainsaws because you dumped Jason as pitcher and didn't replace him with one of their brats? Oh no! You had to pick a newcomer, a foreigner, a Jew!" She

stomped out of the house. The two Victors could hear her car fires gouging canyons in the gravel driveway as she roared off.

Barb's outburst was so shocking that it left her husband staring off agape into

space. "Do you think I did the wrong thing, son?" Victor asked his boy.

Normally

he never asked Victor Junior anything except Where did your mother hide the butter! but these were special circumstances.

"I've got faith in you, Dad." Victor Junior reached across the table to pat his father's arm and got his elbow in the leftover mashed potatoes.

Faith can move mountains even if it's no good at getting mashed potatoes out of

the way. In the next few days, Coach Vic had his faith sorely tested in the raging fires of angry mothers. At every practice, he found another of the ladies

lurking for him, wearing flinty eyes and a deadly ninja combat brassiere that turned perfectly good ornamental boobs into twin symbols of outthrusting, nuclear warhead-tipped aggression.

The questions they inevitably shot at him were always the same:

"Who is that kid?"

"Why are you letting him pitch and not my [insert child's name here]?"

"Is something funny going on?"

"What, did his mother sleep with you or something?"

"Why didn't you tell me that was the way to do it?"

Coach Vic just as inevitably replied, "Bennie, because he's good, no, no," and "Well, it's too late for that to change anything this year because I've got the

roster all set up but I bet by next season Bennie's folks will have moved somewhere else so see me then, honey."

Then the Bobcats met their first opponents of the season and it was a whole new ball game.

"We won."

It was uttered as a whisper, softer than a butterfly's tap-dance routine, on a dozen lips at once. No one dared to say it out loud, at first, for fear that they would wake up and discover it had all been just a Frank Capra movie.

Still, there were the Bobcats, for once getting to give the Good Sportsmanship cheer to the losing team. It was a simple "Two-four-six-eight, who do we appreciate?" holler, but there was a slight delay while Coach Vic taught his boys the never-used words they'd long since forgotten.

"We won."

Mothers turned to fathers, eyes meeting eyes in a climax of mutual awe and wonder better than what most of them had been having in the bedroom. Hands clasped hands, bosoms swelled, manly chests inflated, pulses raced. (There were more than a few damp spots left behind on the bleachers, but delicacy prevents any closer investigation into how they got there.)

"We fuck-u-lutely won!" Coach Vic shouted in the confines of his home, and got a dirty look from Barb that quickly melted when she recalled the ecstatic smiles of the other mothers. For once they had seen their man-children taste the thrill of victory, and lo, it was savory to the max. Their maternal fibers exuded endorphins like crazy. They were happy. A happy more is a beauty-shop-going, Amway-buying mom.

"You fuck-u-lutely said it!" Barb shouted back and threw her arms around her hubby's sweaty neck.

Well, there it was: They won. And there it was again the next week, and the next. Bennie's skills on the mound left other teams looking at a steady diet of three-up-three-down while his batting savoir faire was --

Hmmm. Honesty's best when speaking of matters pertaining to the divine or the IRS. Bennie could hit, but Bennie was only one skinny little kid. He got a homer every time he was up, then Coach Vic had to plod his hitless way through the team roster until Bennie's number came up again before the Bobcats could get another run on the board. They won, but never by much. It was galling.

Still, since Bennie's pitching disposed of the other team one-two-three and the other team's pitcher could do the same for every Bobcat save Bennie, the local Little League enjoyed a season of the shortest games on record. Parents with limited attention spans and only one six-pack in the cooler were grateful.

Ward Gibbon was not grateful.

Ward Gibbon was the father of Jim Gibbon of the Breezy Lake Lions, and up until this Bennie-kid showed up, Jim Gibbon looked fair to cut a major Bennie-like swath through the local opposition, hauling the Lions along with him to the Championship in true and veritable Bennie-style.

Now you've got to understand something about Ward Gibbon: He was a man embittered to the bone. It began when his loving parents named him after their

favorite Golden Age television character. Naturally, once he hit school-age, he was dubbed Mental Ward by his juvenile cronies at Breezy Lake Elementary. (A few of the better educated children preferred to seize upon his last name as the means to make his life a living hell, following him around the school making hooting noises and pelting him with bananas.) Worse, creeping nostalgia for Golden Age TV struck his marriage a telling blow when the kittenish Mrs. Gibbon insisted on initiating intimacy by announcing coyly, "Ward, I'm worried about the beaver."

Ward bore his nominal cross grimly, but resolved that no son of his would suffer so. That was why he gave the boy a simple name: Jim! So crisp, so clean, so common! Let the infant rabble try to make mock of that!

Children love a challenge. Ward Gibbon heard with horror from his son how the other kids at school called him Jungle Jim and Jim Nastics and Jimbo-Bimbo. And there were still some kids around not wholly sunk in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Dorkocracy who knew what a gibbon was. Young Jim Gibbon came home with enough mashed banana in his hair to prove that.

Ward was not a man who gave up easily. If he could not save his son from the horrors of the nyah-nyah mob, he resolved to at least make him proof against all taunts. To this end, there was only one means: Excellence! And for this purpose, diamonds were also a boy's best friend.

Who mocked at Daryl Strawberry's juicy name? Who jeered and jiggled digits at Rollie Fingers? Who had ever been fool enough to make wiggling whisker-signs at Catfish Hunter? Once you climbed the mountain, few hoi polloi you left behind had the nerve to toss insults at you, nor the arm to fling bananas to that Olympian height. Let Jim Gibbon triumph on the Little League field, and none would dare sneer at him off. So Ward Gibbon commenced to push his son harder than Mrs. Gibbon ever did in all her nineteen-and-a-half hours of hard labor, and do you know what --?

It worked. Isn't life strange? No operating manual accompanies the afterbirth, yet somehow, sometimes, natural-born humans do manage to stumble across one of the Answers To It All. For the Gibbons, pere et fils, that Answer was baseball.

Or it was until they came up against Bennie.

Ward Gibbon sat on the top rung of the bleachers, his Sans-a-Belt slacks pressed into permanent horizontal ridges across his butt by the hot aluminum slats. With his 'huff said I'm With Stupid cap pulled low over his eyes and his beaky red nose thrusting out from beneath the visor, he glowered over the ballfield like an avenging, alcoholic owl. He was pissed.

Most loyal dads will become pissed to a greater or lesser degree when their son's team is losing, but this went beyond mere pro forma pissitude. His son's team -- his son, goddamit! -- was losing to the Bobcats! Losing scorelessly,

what's more. It was like being told you'd come in second to Lizzie Borden for the title of Daddy's Girl.

Ward Gibbon's eyes narrowed. He wouldn't know a gimlet unless you poured it into a cocktail glass, yet for all that he now fixed a steely gimlet eye on the one spectacular, incredible, patently obvious cause of it all: Bennie. There was something about that kid. . .Ward's mouth screwed up into a hard, bitter nut of sullen wrath that boded no good if cracked.

The Breezy Lake Lions lost the game, and with it all chance to go on to the Regionals. Jim Gibbon flung down his glove and burst into tears. Ward Gibbon descended from the bleachers with hate in his heart and cold-blooded, premeditated research on his mind.

"Disqualified?" Victor Harris bellowed into the telephone. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

There was a pause while the party on the other end of the call explained. From the motel bed, Barb watched her man go whiter than a sheet washed in Amway detergent. He slammed down the receiver hard enough to score several Loony Tunes sight-gags by making the furniture jump.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Son of a walleyed bitch," he explained. This might have been enough for other wives, but Barb was a Virgo. She demanded details.

Vic strode to the window and gazed out at the inspiring panorama of Williamsport, PA, site of that cosmopolitan Holy Grail, the Little League playoff Finals. The Brothers' Meeting Bobcats had sheared through all intermediate opposition like a hot knife through a mugging victim. Somewhere out there was a Taiwanese team who were about to get their sorry asses kicked (in the spirit of international brotherhood and good sportsmanship). To this peak of glory had Bennie's prowess brought the team, and now -- O ironic son of a walleyed bitch! -- from this peak of glory was Bennie about to get them booted. Off. Of.

"You don't have any forms turned in for the kid?" Barb skirled. "All this time he's been with the team and you never got his papers in order?"

Vic did not like the way she was so lavishly using the second-person-singular. Voiced that way, the situation seemed to be all his fault. He was quick to pivot the spotlight of blame right back to where it truly belonged.

"Shit, those desk jockeys wouldn't've even noticed Bennie's papers weren't in order if not for some ass hole troublemaker coming in, nosing around, and making them get off their butts to look up the kid's records. You think all I've got time for is paperwork? The boys need me on the field, not stuck behind some desk shuffling bureaucratic crap. You think they'd have come this far on paperwork?"

"No," Barb said. She was a reasonable woman. "But if I know my bureaucrats,
I'll bet no paperwork on Bennie equals no Finals for the Bobcats. Also disqualifications on all the games that brought them here. Also one hell of a shit storm for my La Belle and Amway profits when the team parents find out." She reached for the telephone. "Hello, Information? Brothers' Meeting please. I'd like the number of Four Corners Used Cars."

Vic burst out of the room, his jawline a white, tight wedge of bone knifing through taut scarlet skin. He rolled out of the motel and down the street like a

stormeloud. His years as a writer had taught him that there was always a way out: an eraser, a bottle of Wire-out, a delete command, a hundred last-minute ways to drag the Cavalry over the hill to the rescue. He would lay his case before the Little League Powers That Be. He would cajole, he would reason, he would threaten, he would beg he would cite patriotism and misrepresent the entire Brothers' Meeting Bobcats team as composed exclusively of spunky HIV-positive hemophiliac orphans if he had to, but one thing he would not do:

He would not go gentle into that Only-one-owner-creampuff good night.

The Taiwanese team was good, but as Vic Junior told Bennie, they were godless.

Bennie scratched his head and eyed the opposing dugout. "No, they're not."

"Yes, they are," Vic Junior maintained. "They don't believe in You, do they?"

"Well, maybe not specifically, but --"

"So that means they're godless, and that means they're all going to Hell, and that really means they can't win this ball game," he finished with satisfaction.

"Look, Vic, about Hell. . ."

"Yeah?" A keen, canny look came into Vic Junior's eye. Every since Bennie had showed up and made his true self known (It's only good manners to inform the petitioner when the Answer to his prayers blows into town), Vic Junior had peppered him with questions about the Afterlife. In particular, Vic Junior wanted to know what sort of gory, painful, humiliating eternal trials and punishments awaited bullies like Jase McClellan. Bennie remained closemouthed under direct inquiry, and even reprimanded Vic Junior quite sternly for prying too closely into matters Man Was Not Meant To Know (i.e. "Mind your own beeswax!"). But as long as Bennie himself had brought up the subject. . .

"Yeah, what about Hell?" Vic Junior demanded. Hey, the backdoor's better than no door!

Bennie sighed. "Never mind."

"Aw, c'mon!" Vic Junior whined. "I won't tell anyone. Is it really full of fire and brimstone and cool shit like that? Our Sunday school teacher told about how You went down into Hell to yank a whole bunch of guys out, so You oughta know. I mean, how hot was it?"

"Suffer the little children, suffer the little children, suffer the little

children," Bennie muttered to himself, mantra-wise, eyes on the blue sky above.

It was the perfect day for a ball game, cloudless yet cool and dry. He was jabbed out of his reverie by Vic Junior's bony elbow and nasal bleat:

"Pleeeeeeeze?"

Bennie gave Vic Junior a look that would have sent a whole passel of Temple moneychangers scurrying for cover. It was a scowl of righteous wrath fit to turn innocent bystanders into pillars of salt or fig trees or divorce lawyers. Just so had artists through the ages portrayed Him enthroned in glory on Doomsday, running sinful Mankind across the celestial price-scanner to separate the metaphysical Brie from the pasteurized American-style-flavored cheese-food product. He opened His mouth to speak and Vic Junior heard a distant rumble of thunder, saw tiny lightnings flash behind Bennie's retainer.

"Aw, skip it," Vic Junior said. He knew when to quit. He was one of the Top Ten quitters of all time, but for once it was a good idea.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," said Bennie with a smile.

"Yeah," Vic Junior agreed. "Now let's kick butt."

The flags were raised, the anthems played, the cry of "Play ball!" rang out, and the teams streamed onto the field to the wild applause and cheers of the spectators. The Brothers' Meeting Bobcats' parents shouted encouragement to their youngsters and hardly any racial slurs worth mentioning at the Taiwanese team.

"Eat sushi, you heathen zipperheads!" Sally McClellan stood up and hollered.

"Sally, they're not Japanese!" Her husband Phil jerked her back down into her seat by the neck of her Brothers' Meeting Bobcats Booster jacket. "Now shut up. These assholes might have some stupid good-sportsmanship rule in effect. Do you want the boys to lose the game thanks to your big mouth?"

"No, dear," Sally replied meekly, then took advantage of the crowd's overwhelming roar to snarl, sotto voce, "Eat me, darling."

It was a game that would live forever in the annals of Little League and the casebooks of psychiatry. A play-by-play report would profit a man little who might strive to understand what happened that day on the grassy fields of Williamsport. Between Bennie and the Taiwanese pitcher it was a virtually scoreless game. The batting order prevented Vic Junior's visiting miracle from racking up more than one run every three innings, yet even so, it should have been sufficient.

It was not sufficient for some.

"Smite them, O Lord," Vic Junior said to Bennie in the dugout as they prepared to take their last turn at bat in the bottom of the seventh (this being Little League).

"Huh?" said Bennie.

"You know, smite them." Vic Junior gave his Savior a poke in the ribs. "Pour out
out
Thy wrath. Drive them before Thee. Score us some more runs."

"We've got two runs and they don't have any. I'm up third. We'll have three runs
and win the championship. What more do you want?"

"Winning it with three lousy runs? That's not a man's game" Vic Junior's sneer was much like his father's. "That's pussy!"

Bennie's face darkened. "Having enough to win isn't enough for you, huh? You want more runs. You don't need 'em, but you want 'em anyway. Is that all you really want?" It was asked in a tone of voice that should have set off whole carillons of alarm bells in Vic Junior's subconscious. It was the big bad brother of his Sunday School teacher's voice when she oh-so-sweetly inquired, Do
Do
you really want to read that comic book instead of studying the Ten Commandments, Victor?

It was a shame that Vic Junior's subconscious chose that moment to step out for
for
a quick snack and a full-body massage, leaving his feckless conscious mind to eagerly reply, "You bet!"

"So be it." Bennie turned his eyes from Vic Junior's greed-glowing face to the scoreboard.

Numbers twinkled. Numbers crunched. Numbers skittered and fluttered like a yard
yard
full of chickens on speed. All the zeroes in the Brothers' Meeting Bobcats' Bennie-less innings mutated to tens and twenties and portions thereof. A murmur
murmur
went up from the stands. The umpire, blind to anything save the play at hand, commanded that the Taiwanese pitcher stop gawking at the scoreboard and get on with it. The boy, badly unnerved by this Western mystery, actually lost control
control
of his first pitch, leaving a startled Bobby Drummer to get a single.

"What are You doing?" Vic Junior seized Bennie by the sleeve.

"Just what you asked," Bennie replied. "I'm giving you more runs."

"Not that way!" Vic Junior moaned. "They're gonna think we dicked around with the scoreboard somehow and disqualify us!"

"'Dicked around'?" Bennie repeated, the picture of (no surprise) innocence. "That's the first time I've ever heard anyone describe a miracle that way."

"Aw, Jeez, You know what I mean! I wanted us to get more runs on the board by earning them!"

"Oh." Bennie smiled and nodded.

The scoreboard winked one last time, then subsided. Its effect did not. Half of
of
the Brothers' Meeting parents hooted, demanding that a higher score once posted
posted
ought to stay put. The other half shouted that it was all a ploy on the part of
of

the visiting team to make it look like the Americans were cheating when everyone knew the computer system controlling the scoreboard was Made in Taiwan. Newsmen split and scattered throughout the stands, hoping to catch someone with unsportsmanlike foot in mouth, LIVE!

The coach of the Taiwanese team lost it. In the passion of the moment he forgot himself sufficiently to storm the Officials in their lair. The pitcher, stunned to see such behavior in a man he had previously thought of as less volatile than suet, let Jase McClellan connect for a double that placed a bewildered Bobby Drummer foursquare on third.

"I know what you're gonna do now," Vic Junior said, trembling. "You're gonna use this to teach me a moral lesson, like it's a parable or something. You let those guys get on base, and now You're gonna miss Your first two swings on purpose and You're gonna let it get down to the one last swing and if You think I repented enough for being a greedy prick, You'll get that last hit and bring Jase and Bobby home, but if You think I'm not sorry enough You'll strike out and we'll just win the championship by two lousy runs."

An awful afterthought ran him through like an icicle to the heart. "Or -- or maybe You're really mad at me, and You're gonna make the scoreboard wipe out all our runs and we'll -- we'll lose! After everything we went through to get here, You're gonna make us lose the championship! You're gonna smite us! You're gonna pour out Your wrath all over the Bobcats. That's what You're gonna do, right?"

"Who, Me?" Bennie touched the brim of his batting helmet in salute. "I'm just gonna play baseball." And he stepped up to the bat, leaving a white-lipped Vic Junior in the dugout behind him.

Maybe it's not a good notion to drop suggestions into certain Ears. When Nature comes up with new and improved ways to destroy big chunks of mankind, perhaps She's been cribbing over Humanity's shoulder. Heaven knows, we've done our part toward getting those pesky human stains off the face of the earth.

Heaven knows.

In any case, Bennie swung at the first pitch and missed. You'd think it was a bigger miracle than all the times he'd swung and connected for a homer, judging by the gasps that arose from the stands.

Bennie grinned. The Force that (Pick one: created/allowed Evolution to create) the emu, the mandrill, and disco music has to have an ironic sense of humor. He whiffed the second one, too.

Watching from the dugout, Coach Vic felt a sharp pain in his chest. He looked

down and realized he'd ripped out a fistful of hair through his shirt.

Had he begged and beseeched and groveled before the Officials, wildly plea-bargaining for them to overlook the missing paperwork until post-game, for this? ("Do it for America!" he'd implored. "Or I'll write up this whole incident and name names and send it in to Reader's Digest. You wanna be known as The Men Who Stole The Children's Dream for the rest of your lives?") The carpet bums on his knees still smarted.

What was it with Bennie? Sure, the Bobcats were set to win, but the kid's sudden attack of incompetence was no mere fluke. It felt more like a meaning-heavy omen, one that Vic wanted to see averted, and fast. The only hoodoo strong enough to do that would be seeing Jase and Bobby come home. Vic was too staunch a realist to believe that if his star struck out, anyone left in the batting order had the juice to do it, and he was sore afraid. He thought he heard the sound of much weeping and gnashing of teeth. He saw it was only Vic Junior having a conniption fit, babbling about Hell and wrath and smiting and Cooperstown. Coach Vic shook his head: That boy never did do well under pressure.

And then he heard a ghostly voice say unto him Fear not. He looked, and lo, there was Bennie giving him the thumbs-up sign. The boy hunkered down at the plate. He'd only been toying with the Taiwanese, yeah, that was it. Vic didn't know much, but he knew baseball, and he knew Bennie loved the game too much to let it down.

"Hold it right there!"

The man vaulted out of the stands, bullhorn in one hand, a piece of paper in the other. He surged across the field to home plate. The Taiwanese pitcher threw down ball and glove, folding up into the Lotus position until these crazy round-eyes could get it in gear and play the game. A security guard jumped the fence after the man. He caught him within arm's length of the umpire. The man calmly swacked the guard straight in the face with his bullhorn. The guard folded up into a less classical position than the Taiwanese pitcher.

"Who the hell are -- ?" the umpire began. The man drew back his bullhorn in a gesture of invitation to a coma. The umpire bolted. The Taiwanese catcher dropped over backward onto his hands and scuttled away crabwise. The other players remained where they were, frozen on the field.

Alone at the plate with Bennie, the man raised the bullhorn to his lips and bellowed, "There's been a mistake! This whole series doesn't count! The Bobcats should have been disqualified long ago!"

"Who the fuck asked you!" Sally McClellan didn't need a bullhorn to make herself heard. Phil tried to make her shut up. He got a surprise out of her pack of Crackerjacks that the manufacturer never put inside. "Who the fuck are you?" she added while Phil fumbled for a handkerchief to press to his bleeding nose.

"I'm Ward Gibbon, goddammit, and I refuse to see this game destroyed by cheaters! Why don't you ask this kid who the fuck he is!" Ward pointed dramatically at Bennie.

From the dugout, Vic Junior stopped his hysterics, heart somewhere up around the soft palate. The black look Bennie had given him for his greed was nothing compared to the glare Ward Gibbon was now getting from the kid at the plate.

"My name is Yeshua ben Jose. Are you calling me a cheater, Mr. Gibbon?" Bennie sounded modest and respectful and toxic. No one seemed to think it odd that his voice carried as far and farther than Ward's and Sally's combined, though he wasn't shouting at all.

"I call 'em like I see 'em, and this paper calls for plenty?" Ward rattled the sheet in Bennie's face, then waved it from side to side overhead in Perry Mason style, as if the whole stadium could see what it said. "I've smelled something fishy about this team for a long time, so I did some research. This is a permission slip! Every Little Leaguer's got to have one of these on file!"

Sally McClellan told Ward Gibbon where he could file it. Two of the major networks turned cameras on her.

Ward was implacable. "This slip is filled out for Yeshua ben Jose by his coach, Victor Harris, but this slip is not signed!"

"Excuse me, sir." Bennie tugged at Ward's arm. "You mean that because that paper's not signed, I can't play?"

Ward lowered the bullhorn. "That's right, son." He didn't mean his smile for a minute.

"Can't Coach Vic sign it for me?"

"'Fraid not. It's a parental permission slip. Only your father or mother can sign it."

"Yes, sir." Bennie nodded his head obediently. "Coach Vic told me about that, but he said it was all okay because he'd talked to the Commissioners and if I get it signed later on --"

Ward clapped the bullhorn to his mouth and bawled for the benefit of the stands, "And how much did your Coach Vic pay the Commissioners to overlook a FLAGRANT VIOLATION OF THE RULES? That's bribery we're talking about!"

"You bastard!" Coach Vic was on his feet, shaking his fists at Gibbon. "You're the one who raised that stink over Bennie's papers!" He lunged from the dugout, howling for Gibbon's blood. A quartet of loyal Bobcats flung themselves around his legs to save him from certain doom. Gibbon was big enough to snap their beloved Coach Vic into handy, bite-sized pieces one-handed, and he still had that bullhorn. Victor Harris got a good taste of diamond dirt when he went down.

A helpful reporter was right there with a mike when he pushed himself up on his hands, spat dust, and shouted, "I didn't bribe anyone!"

"Well until you can prove that, that's all she wrote for playing this boy!" Gibbon countered. From the corner of his eye, he could see police streaming onto the field. They'd lock him up, but it would be worth it just to boot this miserable Jewboy's ass the hell out of the championship. "Sorry, son, you're history," he told Bennie.

"But I love baseball, sir. I really want to play." It was heartrending that look in Bennie's eyes. It carried the distilled essence of nearly two thousand years of great Christian artworks portraying Jesus' suffering for Mankind's sins, plus a hefty slug of the ever-popular crown-of-thorns-on-black-velvet portraits. Who could resist such an appeal?

One guess. Two words. First word sounds like "Lord." Second word likes bananas.

Ward Gibbon's lip curled into a wolfish leer of triumph. "Tough, kid. You can't always get what you want."

History grants Mick Jagger the credit for originating that phrase, but the smart money knows it was first uttered by an unfeeling hotelier a couple of millennia ago when a weary Nazarene carpenter knocked at Ye Olde Inne door in Bethlehem and said unto him, "My extremely great-with-child wife and I want a room for the night." There's a lot that's been written about what kids remember overhearing from their time in utero. Believe it all, especially about this kid. He remembered it, He didn't like it then, He liked it less now, and this time He was on the outside and able to make His anger felt.

"Sez you," He said. And lo, it came to pass.

The lightning bolt hit Ward Gibbon right up the bullhorn. You never did see a man achieve such instant mastery of hip-hop. Like that other famous Bush (the one that didn't need readable lips to make itself heard), he burned and was not consumed. Of course he yipped a lot.

But that was not all. This was no minor theological tantrum. No, this was a manifestation of the Divine displeasure, and that required more stage dressing.

The heavens opened. Rays of limpid light unfurled from the celestial heights, sending hosts of angels and gaggles of cherubs skidding down the heavenly speed slides. They hit the ground running and did beautiful springboard leaps to get airborne, then soared for the scoreboard. The numbers did that flicker thing again, this time mutating into letters that spelled out REPENT YE NOW, although because there were just nine spaces on the board it looked like REPNTYNOW. Sally McClellan said she was sure it was a city in Yugoslavia. The angels in their robes of glory sang hosannas. The cherubs, bum-nekkid, set up a counterpoint

of

"Take Me Out to the Ball Game." That's cherubs for you.

As the heavenly choirs perched upon the top of the scoreboard, legions of demons

burst from the bosom of the earth. Waving pitchforks and wearing regulation umpires' uniforms, they cavorted along the baselines with hellish glee. On second, Jase McClellan covered his eyes and wet his pants. Bobby Drummer tried to crawl under third base. The Taiwanese infield all started shouting at the top

of their lungs. Either it was an ancient Oriental stratagem for driving off demons or they were just scared spitless, no one ever found out which. The demons abandoned the field and swarmed into the stands, throwing complimentary bags of piping hot Gluttony brand popcorn(TM) to the crowd before they reached the top of the bleachers and vanished. It wasn't very good popcorn, but there was plenty of it.

As soon as the demons disappeared, Ward Gibbon stopped sizzling at home plate. He shook himself like a wet dog, astonished to discover he was still alive, though the bullhorn was past hope. He dropped the lump of slag and would have done so with the permission slip as well, only he could not stir hand nor foot.

His sphincter was business as usual, though.

Aghast, astonished, embarrassed, he stared at Bennie and in an awestruck whisper asked, "Who are you?"

"Who do you say I am?" Bennie replied.

"Ungh," was Ward's best comeback. The angels on the scoreboard held up placards reading 5.6, 5.8, 5.0, and so on. A cherub even jeered, "Throw the bum outa there!" Oh, those wacky cherubs!

Then, "Behold," said Bennie in a tone of awful majesty, and He did take His bat and lo, He did gesture therewith, and lo again, the object of his gesturing was the permission slip whereon were suddenly writ in characters of fire the four letters that are the Name of God.

That is, they might have been. There are no guarantees, and Lord knows, no hard evidence because, being characters of fire, they instantly reduced the permission slip to a smattering of ashes in Ward Gibbon's trembling hand.

"The slip's signed. The Bobcats' wins are legal. I'm going home before I smite someone," Bennie said. And without further ado, He did.

Well, would you have tried to stop Him?

After the paramedics took Ward Gibbon away and the Officials conferred and the angels wandered off and both teams took a much-needed potty-break, a judgment call was made:

"There is nothing in the rule books against having God on your side. Play ball!"

Vic Junior went up to bat, hit a single off the frazzled Taiwanese pitcher,

and brought his teammates home. Jase McClellan's cleats squished when he ran and he never teased Vic Junior again.

When it was over, both teams skipped victory/consolation outings to Disneyworld or Japan or even the nearest ice cream parlor in favor of a quick scamper into the nearest house of worship. The Taiwanese pitcher got separated from his group and couldn't find a church, but he did find something. Later he got credit for bringing santeria to Taipei, but that was about it as far as any repercussions worthy of the name.

VIC SENIOR wrote up the whole incident, couldn't sell it, and got that job at Four Corners Used Cars. When a story is an outright gift from God but the handwriting on the wall still reads Mene, mene, tekel, does not suit our present needs, the wise man finally admits it's time for a career change.

Barb wrote it up too, only she put in a lusty, long-legged, red-haired spitfire of a woman as the team coach. Later in the book she goes on to become the owner of a sprawling multi billion dollar sports equipment and cosmetics empire. Everyone knows that the infamous midnight "sushi sex" scene between Barb's heroine and the Taiwanese coach on the pitcher's mound was what sold the book and a heck of a lot of raw fish, besides.

After the divorce, Victor Harris went in for coaching Pop Warner football and tried to forget. And it worked, too, until the day at practice when he saw Vic Junior talking to a boy he'd never seen before. The stranger was about Vic Junior's height, three times as broad, four times as muscular, and sporting an uninhibited non-reg beard the color of a thunderhead. He'd brought his own helmet. He was clearly a Vikings fan.

The boy noticed Vic Senior staring at him and came over.

"Is this where the football tryouts are, sir?" he asked politely. "A mutual acquaintance said you might like to have me on your team." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Thor."

"Wait'll you're married," Victor Harris sighed.