

## Chapter 20

### Pretty Good Game

The Gas's Ray Flanagan was driving Biggie Bob Arbuster absolutely crazy. Taking a long lead off of first base, Ray, whose nickname could have been "Speed" but wasn't, dared the Donut Hole's massive pitcher to try and pick him off. Biggie Bob tried to do just that, six straight times. After each attempt, Ray bounced up out of the dirt of Robinson Field, grinned at Biggie Bob, and took an even more daring lead. It was the bottom of the last inning in the game that would decide who won the first of two rounds of the Mighty Midget League. Both The Gas and the Donut Hole had won ten games and lost only once. Each team was beaten by the Bread Men of Nouveau Monde. The Microphone was right, when Ricky Cuevas pitched, the Bread Men won every game and when Ricky didn't pitch, they lost every game. Twice they forfeited. The league's directors worried that if they couldn't field a full team that they would mess up the second round of the season. But Mike wasn't right about them seeing me as an answer to the problem. None of that mattered this night though, during the pivotal game of the first round. The Donut Hole led 3 – 2 with one out and only two more to go. Ray Flanagan could tie the ballgame if he could just get from first base to home, and Speed Miller was at the plate trying to get him there.

Speed's dad shouted his own brand of encouragement. "Hey, big boy, throw the ball to home plate so my son can put you out of your misery." Speed's dad didn't live in Morris Heights anymore. The year before he and Speed's mom had gotten divorced. My mom's friend, Mrs. Glassman, told a lot of scary and sad stories about Mr. Miller. I figured that all of them were true. "Throw the ball, tubby," he yelled.

Biggie Bob's dad, who everyone called "Big Daddy", and who filled up an entire section of the bleachers by himself, said, "Shut your face, Miller, or I'll snap you in half." Survival instincts told me to move out of their way.

When Biggie Bob did throw a pitch to home plate, Ray Flanagan took off for second. The catcher fired the ball over the second baseman's head and into centerfield and Ray raced safely to third base. "Let's go, Speed," Mr. Miller shouted. "Get a big hit off the big kid."

"That big kid struck out your kid two times tonight," Big Daddy said.

"Ten bucks, pal, says my kid gets a hit this time and ties up the game."

"You're on, Miller." The money was handed to Tank Arbuster's dad, a slim man who weighed far less than his twelve year old son.

Biggie Bob's first pitch was a ball. Ray took a dangerous lead off of third base and Speed squared around like he was going to drop down a bunt. The fake bunt rattled Biggie Bob and his next pitch was in the dirt for ball two. "Your kid wants to save you the ten bucks," Mr. Miller said. "He's afraid to throw a strike."

But Biggie Bob wasn't afraid to throw a strike. He blazed two of them by Speed and evened the count at two and two. "Don't choke again, boy," the red-faced Mr. Miller screamed. "Do something right for once in your sorry life. I've got good money on you. For once, don't be a loser." There were over a hundred fans at the game in the bleachers and on lawn chairs along the first and third baselines, and every one of them heard those words. Every day at recess Speed would say much nastier things to other kids and kids would say meaner things back at him. Nothing ever seemed to bother Wally Miller, but this time Speed looked into the bleachers and stared at his dad. He stared right at him. He didn't step out of the batter's box and he didn't ask for "time out". He just stared at his angry father as Biggie Bob wound up and delivered the third strike, directly across the heart of the plate.

"Thank you, thank you," Big Daddy yelled. "One more out. You can do it." Big Daddy kissed the ten dollar bill and put it into his pocket.

Speed Miller turned his back to his dad and walked back to the bench. I remembered the time that Speed put dog biscuits in Susan Gross's desk and made her cry. I remembered how he stole baseball cards from Glickman's Drug Store and how he smashed pumpkins in Morris Heights on Halloween night. I remembered how he copied my answers during a grammar test and then told Old Man Enright that I was cheating off of him. I remembered all of it and thought that I shouldn't feel sorry for him; but I did.

Tank Arbuster was up next, the last chance for The Gas. He walked by Speed and said, "Don't worry, buddy, I'll pick you up." Joey Mitchell called the battles between Tank Arbuster and his cousin Biggie Bob, "four hundred pound wars". This was the thirteenth time the cousins faced off against each other in Mighty Midget league action. Biggie Bob had struck out Tank seven times, including once that night, but Tank had slammed two doubles, two singles and

one immense home run. "Hit or miss," Tank once said about his contests with his cousin. "I get him or he gets me."

They did what they always did before facing each other. Biggie Bob winked at Tank and Tank winked back. At the end of the game they would hug each other in a heavyweight bear hug. One time Speed Miller said, "Hey, they like each other. Maybe they're kissing cousins." But this night Speed stayed silent.

Big Daddy said to me, "This is great. I won ten bucks and now I can't lose. Either way, someone I love gets to be the hero."

That night the hero was his nephew. Tank Arbuster kissed a 2 – 2 pitch from his cousin out beyond the monkey bars in left field. Biggie Bob watched it with a small smile on his face. The ball sailed over his left fielder and bounced twice in the parking lot and disappeared into the woods. Tank circled the bases and The Gas swarmed him as he crossed home plate. His mighty home run won the opening round of the Mighty Midget league, 4 – 3.

Coach Reynolds collected money from The Gas parents so the team could go to Tastee Freeze. Mr. Miller said, "Tell my kid to go without a cone. He just cost me ten bucks." Big Daddy took a photograph of Biggie Bob and Tank Arbuster standing next to each other, giant arm in giant arm. Paula O'Connor came out of the stands to see Joey but Joey Mitchell was more interested in stealing his teammates' hats. Speed Miller sat alone on the bench. My brother, Pat, who had played only one inning in the game, came over to see me.

"Pretty good game, huh?" Pat said to me.

"Yeah," I said. "Pretty good game."