

ASSUMED IDENTITIES

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Browner's Dive

A SUMMER AFTERNOON IN GEORGIA with the last hint of dogwood in the air. It's 1952 and the living is easy, World War II now just a gassy rumble in the belly of America and development everywhere stateside: aluminum kingdoms rising out of red clay. Down here in Statesboro, Georgia, it's Father's Day and the sun smiles upon us. The friendly face of the Christian God, it shoots diamond glints on Coke bottles, stings of light on spires and weathervanes. Over in Pilot Park men are playing baseball—the rubber game of three between our own hometown Pilots and the visiting Fitzgerald Pioneers, a ragtag bunch from the other side of the Altamaha River. It's a sold-out crowd for this one, so many of us eager to see the Pilots dig one out after dropping the first two of the weekend. The stubbornness of civic pride perhaps; we're strictly second division this year, a bottom-feeding ballclub in the Georgia State League. Lowly among the minor league low.

Looking through the crowd, you see who you'd expect. There's Judge Toby Hatcher in his seersucker blue and spectator shoes. The blind eyes of justice in his usual seat. Tobias is a Southern gentleman who lost his eyes to diabetes and spends his Sundays perched in the ballpark, imagining the action by the sound of the play-by-play from a radio in hand. And there's Emma Boyle in her dusty rose dress: a schoolteacher just a week out of season, sharing a milkjug full of lemonade with other mothers' boys and girls. Samuel Pine and Jules Chester sit in the bleachers cracking peanuts, flinging the spent shells at girls they fancy from Statesboro Municipal High. Above them, shaded below the scoreboard, is Bones Jefferson—a bald, bookish Negro with glasses perched on his round brown nose and a library copy of Tennyson or Virgil in his gentle hands.

Down on the bench the Pilots are cooking in the June heat. It's an off-the-chart smoker today and our boys are soaking their flannel red-and-whites with sweat. There'll be no hijinx in the dug-out this afternoon. It's too hot for a hot foot, not worth the chase that'd follow a pie in the face. Plus there's thick tension in the air. Left fielder Rube Emerson is steamed with the team's skipper, Johnny Rogers, for dropping him in the batting order, from fourth to sixth. Emerson has had it coming for weeks—homerless since the middle of May, with only a handful of runs batted in during that time—but still he caused a stink in the clubhouse before game time. Hard to blame him, some fans might think. Batting clean-up in the bush leagues is all this guy's ever going to have. He's a strong natural slugger, but a bum with breaking pitches; he can't hit a decent curve to save his life. He'll never make it to the majors. Christ, it'll take an act of God to get him out of Statesboro. Rogers tried to be sympathetic, but hell, even the worst of the Georgia State League have to save face sometimes.

Frankie Brown's on the mound today. He's our supposed ace, with three wins and seven losses. Doesn't look like the fourth victory's in store this afternoon either. Poor Frankie's got no mustard on his fastball and his curves are hanging like wet drawers on washday. A double to left, singles to right and center. A home run that just misses the A.J. Allison Clothiers bull's eye in the right field gap. "Shit," some Pioneers' slugger curses as he trots around the bases. "If I'd have nailed that I'd have won a suit!" The home half of the fifth approaches and we're down by six: 7-1.

The only thing keeping this one entertaining for the Statesboro crowd today is umpire Ed "Kubby" Kubrick behind the plate. Kubby's so nicknamed because he's a gem, an affable lifer in the Georgia State League, thirty-two years of umpiring and counting. Kubrick's a rare ump in these ballparks too, a guy with plenty of jokes and good humour. Throws balls to kids in the stands even though it's against league rules. Looks a shade sad when he has to send a batter back to the bench after a called third strike. "Sorry, Moose," old Kubby'll say, "he nicked the corner on that one. Maybe next time." Today Kubby's keeping it cute for the hometown fans by mixing up his calls against the Pioneers. One of our boys takes a slider that's inches into the strike zone, and Kubby looks out at the pitcher sincerely and calls it a ball. When Frankie Brown's out there struggling with his control, Kubby gives him a break or two.

A sinker bottoms out and falls into the dirt, but Kubby calls it a strike. The Pioneers are miffed at first, but they're tanning our hides, and it's a lovely day, and it's just Kubby making it fun, so who's to really complain? Even with a little help we go into the top of the eighth losing by eleven: 12-1.

Rogers takes Brown out of the game to start the eighth inning, opting instead for Elvin Hodges, a lanky eighteen-year-old from Jesup. Hodges is self-assured for a kid. He comes into the game throwing nothing but hard strikes, sending the first batter he faces down with a strikeout on four pitches. Second man up in the inning can't do anything with Elvin's curve and grounds a weak one down to shortstop. A quick throw to first and we're two outs through the inning. With the third man up, Hodges gets a bit too precious though and wanders outside the strike zone with the first two pitches, both changeups. Glaring in at the plate, he comes right back with a strike down the middle, a mid-speed fastball that the Pioneers' hitter gets under and lofts toward left field. A big lazy rainbow pop-up, seemingly two-miles high. Rube Emerson starts in on the ball, keeping his squinted eyes and square jaw turned up toward the sun. Someone shouts from the crowd, "Put it away, Rube." Emerson strides in, finds the ball coming down from the sky, pops a bubble with his gum. He's got a bead on this one easy. The ball drops from the heavens, spinning small and hard toward the field, making a sure line toward Emerson's glove. But then Rube turns around, holds his glove behind his back—showboating now, going to catch this one backwards! Then a hum from the crowd as the ball falls fast, hits the fingertips of Emerson's glove and bounces out, skipping away into the grass. None of us can believe it. In the stands Jules Chester rises and tosses his empty popcorn cup onto the field. "You bum!" he screams. Center fielder Matt Webster scoops the ball up from the outfield grass and hauls it in. Hodges looks ripe for murder on the mound; in the dugout, manager Rogers spits out sunflower seeds and fumes. Elvin Hodges strikes out the next batter on three strikes—all fastballs, flaming red with anger—and Rube's error finishes the inning standing at second. The crowd jaws a bit at Emerson as he jogs back to the dugout from the outfield. He's due up to start the home half of the eighth.

In the dugout everybody's steamed at him. Rube knows as much, and doesn't meet anybody's eyes. Instead, he rolls in with

forced nonchalance, tosses his glove under the bench. Popping his gum like nothing's wrong he turns and looks to the team's batboy, Joe Louis Rutherford, a scrawny, coffee-coloured Negro boy that everyone calls Browner. (Our third baseman Dwight Kennedy started the nickname one day, a clipped version of "Brown Bomber"—Joe Louis, of course—for whom Browner time and again will proudly tell you he was named.)

"Browner," Rube calls, "my bat, please."

The boy looks back from the other end, nods seriously and digs out Rube's 34-ounce Louisville Slugger from the bat rack. Rube stretches his arms coolly behind his head, probably feeling that Johnny Rogers has been glaring angrily at him since he made his way in from the outfield. Rogers is a level-headed skipper, so the fire in his eyes is a bad sign. Rube's hotdogging in the field isn't sitting well.

"Take a seat, Rube," Johnny says flatly. "I'm putting in another hitter."

Rube turns around slowly and looks at his manager without a flinch.

"Excuse me, skip?"

"You heard me, Rube. You're out. Someone's going up for you."

Rube exhales. Chomps his gum. "Sorry, Skip. I don't think so. You know I've been taking good swings at this sonofabitch all day. You don't want to pull me when I'm gonna take him long, do you?"

"Grab a seat, Emerson. You're out of the game."

"Skip—"

"Sit there and cool off. We've had enough of the Rube Emerson show today."

Emerson doesn't take a seat though. Instead he chucks his cap toward Johnny Rogers' feet and tramps down to the other end of the dugout. He stands by the batrack cursing under his breath, a picture of frustration with one foot on the dugout steps, poised like Washington leading his troops across the Delaware.

"Who's in, skip?" someone asks.

Rogers looks down his bench at all the available men in uniform. He takes a second.

"Browner," he says.

"What?" several men call in unison.

"Browner," Rogers says again. "Rutherford," he calls to the batboy, "I'm putting you in."

Browner nearly falls over. He's stunned.

"Jesus, skip," Emerson cracks from the other end of the dugout, "What the—"

"Mr. Rogers?" Browner says.

"Yeah, you heard me, Rutherford. You're going in for Emerson."

"Mr. Rogers," Browner says again.

"Ah, for the love of Christ, skip," from Emerson. He turns away.

By this time the absence of a batter in the on-deck circle from the Pilots' dugout is noticeable. Kubby Kubrick wanders over from the plate.

"You putting someone up to bat there, Rogers?" Kubby asks amiably.

"I want to put my batboy in, Kubrick. That okay?"

Kubrick looks back at Rogers. The manager is serious all right.

"This kid?" Kubby asks, looking to Browner.

"Yeah. That gonna be a problem?"

Kubrick looks at the nervous coloured boy by the bat rack.

"Ah, what the hell," Kubby says, after a beat. "Give 'em a show, kid."

Kubrick smiles widely and lumbers back out toward the plate. Browner makes no move to follow. The umpire stops and turns back toward the boy.

"Hey, slugger," he yells. "Come on."

Browner turns to Johnny Rogers. "Sir? I don't have a bat."

Rogers looks back and shakes his head.

"Christ, Rutherford. What do you mean you don't have a bat? You got a whole fucking rack of them there, kid. Grab one and get on out there."

Center fielder Matt Webster grins from his seat on the bench. "Take one of mine, Browner." Webster casts his eyes down Emerson's way.

Browner digs out one of Webster's bats, pulls his cap down snug on his head, and makes his slow, unsteady way out to the plate. The crowd starts to buzz as they see who's coming out to hit for Emerson. An announcement over the stadium PA: *Now batting*

for Rube Emerson—Joe Louis Rutherford. Up in the grandstand, Toby Hatcher cocks his head. He knows the Pilots inside-out. Rutherford's name doesn't register.

"Who?" he asks.

"The little nigger!" someone calls, disgusted, behind him.

Browner takes his place in the right-hand batter's box. He looks down at his feet, at his legs turned knees-in, pigeon-toed. He's not sure how close to the plate he should stand. Shifts back and forth a bit in the sand. Feels his feet fall into the pits and craters of the grown men who've worked the box in all afternoon.

Kubrick lifts his mask and looks at him. "Kid, you're too far off the plate. You're never gonna hit anything. Move closer."

Browner does as told, inches himself closer to the plate. He looks out at the mound, at the Pioneers pitcher. A tall, freckled farmboy grinning widely. This is it. First pitch. The Pioneers' hurler moves in slow motion initially, cocking his body back into the delivery. Rutherford has never seen the game from this angle before. The rangy limbs in pinstripes out there on the hill, the sight of an oncoming pitch head-on. But then—*shit!*—time speeds up. The ball burns in like a bullet. It's headbound. Browner's eyes are closed; he crashes to the dirt. High and inside, that cracker was looking to hit him!

The crowd jeers at this. Even those upset at seeing the coloured boy up to bat as a joke don't like to see a Pioneer try to take one of ours out. The pitcher turns on the mound and tips his cap to them. More hisses from the grandstands. At the plate, Browner picks himself up, dusts off the dirt from his flannels. He grabs the bat tightly in his hands and digs his heels in, more self-assured.

Pitch two comes in hard down the middle. No bullshit, no chin music, this one's a strike. At first Browner thinks it's going to be miles outside. Hard to judge them when they're moving that fast. But then a click below his cap, a superfast reflex from schoolyard practice that gets the bat off his shoulder and sends the whole mechanism in motion. He swings. The pitch meets the bat and the ball skips back to the mound, a whizzing grounder that takes a mean hop by the pitcher's toe. It buzzes up, almost takes the cracker out between the legs, but for a bowlegged leap that gets him out of the way. Browner starts off running, taking the bat two steps too far probably. The surprise of contact nearly wiped away the memory of what's supposed to happen next: *leave the*

stick, head toward first as fast as you can. He puts his head down and hustles. Meanwhile the ball has continued its jagged way up the infield, rumbling out toward second base. Maybe it will see its way to center field; maybe this is a sure base hit— The shortstop dives at it and swats it down. He grabs the ball from under his glove and whips it toward first. No way that coloured boy's getting on base with that. The ball zips across the infield, into the first baseman's trapper, two heartbeats ahead of Browner's size-nine cleats. Winded, Rutherford stumbles past the bag. *You're out!*

The rest of the Pilots' eighth is insignificant. Maybe there's a hit, maybe the next two batters go down in order, who cares. O-for-one, Joe Louis Rutherford has cracked the boxscore and broken down the colour barrier in the Georgia State League. He is the youngest man to ever play pro ball. Up in the bleachers Jules Chester stands and whistles, fingers in his mouth. Somewhere else some wiseass sings, *Did you see Jackie Robinson hit that ball?*

Johnny Rogers opts to keep Browner in the game for the ninth inning. The boy trots out to take Rube Emerson's spot in left at the top of the frame with a glove that one of the pitchers lent him. We can see his nervousness. He paces back and forth on the grass, looking into the crowd. At one point he wets the index finger of his bare hand and checks the wind. Nothing left to chance. Through the first two batters to the plate, his care goes unchallenged. Both strike out on high hard stuff from Elvin Hodges, who's returned to the mound this inning buoyed by the removal of Emerson from the field and the spectacle of Browner's time at the plate. He comes in again with the fastball to the third Pioneer hitter of the inning. The pitch flies in toward the hitter's knuckles and the batter—a lefty—swings weakly, late. Barely finding the ball with his swing, he sends a flare on a low arc toward left field. Browner's territory. The ball seems a sure Texas Leaguer, a drooper over the infield that will hit the ground.

None of us expects the speed of Joe Louis Rutherford. It's a quickness that flares up quickly, like light. A thing that happens before you notice it's begun. Browner darts in, unsteadily, making up for a bad jump on the ball with loping strides. In a collective rush of vicarious adrenaline we see how the trajectories will cross: the ball's spinning decline, Browner's determined sprint. Our eyes try to follow both movements at once, try to guess the point at which they'll meet. Then, for one second—no! it won't be, the

ball's sinking too fast, sure to hit the field before he'll find it. And yet, the speed that none of us expected becomes another unseen ability. The boy dives. Gracefully. Extended with his thin arm out, the glove open for the grab. He lands on the grass in a slick slide as the ball drops tightly into the mitt. A diving catch. He's caught it.

In the swell of excitement that follows, we lose track of those last three outs in the home half of the ninth. An insignificant tying up of loose ends. The buzz in the dugout, in the stands, into the town beyond, is Joe Louis Rutherford's diving catch.

The unexpected high point of Father's Day recedes into quick bitterness as Monday morning comes around. The league office in Atlanta bursts with indignation when the news from Statesboro travels down the wire. The pinkish-white middle-aged men that manage affairs aren't pleased with what's transpired in the Pilots-Pioneers match-up. "The game should be above such antics," they curse over the telephone from afar. "Baseball was not meant to be a free-for-all." Johnny Rogers gets fined fifteen dollars and is suspended from his manager's duties for a couple of games. Kubby Kubrick gets worse: fired outright for allowing the entire escapade to take place. The Pilots and Pioneers are stunned. Kubby never meant any harm. Just understood that on some level even the Great Pastime had to be a show. Players shake their heads throughout the league as the news makes its way through the clubhouses. Who knows what old Ed will do now?

And that's why a few days later, Joe Louis Rutherford is sitting in Johnny Rogers' office down at Pilot Park. On some level, Browner knows that getting called into this space isn't good. On a good day Rogers barely says three words to the kid. Browner's something extraneous to the game for the most part. Something that allows the play to occur, like the bases the boys slide into, the sprinklers that keep the grass green. Rutherford shifts in his chair as Rogers bandies with small talk across the desk.

"How's your mama, Joseph?"

"She's well, sir. Working hard like she does."

"Good to hear," says Rogers. He stuffs tobacco into his pipe. Sits back in his chair. Looks across at the boy.

"I suppose you're wondering why I called you in here."

"Sir?"

"Well, Brown—er, Joseph. You know what happened to Ed Kubrick after the Father's Day game?"

Rutherford holds his response in for a second. What's the answer the man's looking for here? Could play ignorant, but decides against it.

"Yes, sir. I heard."

"Well, you know, Joseph. That Ed Kubrick was a good man. Has a family, two kids. One boy about your age, did you know that?"

"No, sir."

"Well, he sure does. Good man. Good, good man. Shame for him to lose his job like that, just for a little fun, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Joseph. You've got to understand how sad it is for us to see a good man like that lose his job for something we helped bring on. Am I right?"

Rutherford sits tight. Where's this going?

"And Joseph, you know, Ed Kubrick was really a friend to a lot of the guys who play in this league. And you know, a lot of them are real disappointed that he's not going to be behind the plate anymore. You understand that, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And, well, I'm afraid, Joseph, that that's why I'm going to have to make a change around here."

"A change, sir?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to stop working for the Pilots."

Rutherford looks across the desk. The skip's serious all right. Browner tries to process the logic.

"You're firing me, sir?"

"Well, Joseph. Firing? Well, no, not, now, firing. No. But I'm afraid you're going to have stop working here. Just for old Kubby's sake. For the boys out there in the clubhouse."

"Like Mr. Emerson, sir?" Rutherford says.

Rogers is momentarily lost by the comment. Is this kid being wise or sincere?

"Well, yes, kid. Like Rube. You must know how a guy like that hates to see a guy like Kubby lose his job."

"Yes, sir."

“And so, well, that’s how it is, Rutherford. That’s how it’s going to be.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But you know, Joseph. There’s something I want to pass your way. A little memento from the Father’s Day game.”

Browner looks across the desk at Rogers. The manager pulls open a desk drawer, fumbles around inside.

“This’ll be something to help you remember, kid. A legacy.”

And with that, Rogers’ hand comes up from behind the desk. His fingers are coiled around something—spherical, a visible patch of white scuffed cowhide that shows between the nails and the palm. The baseball. Rogers reaches his arm out over the desk and hints at the treasure in hand.

“It’s the one you caught in the ninth, Joseph. With the dive.”

Browner nods. Rogers looks at him with a diamond glint in his blue eyes. The manager smiles and offers up the ball.

“All yours, Browner.”

Rogers thrusts out his arm and uncoils his fingers. *Look at this, kid*, the gesture says, *a throw of the bones in a craps game, another gamble with well-worn dice*. But with the hasty resignation of a man looking at snake eyes, Browner merely ignores the ball and scrambles out the door.