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Meeting Ralph Branca

My mother's voice warmed the room. I stood beside her yellow summer dress as she shared her miracle with my father. "You should have *seen* it, Jack. He lifted Andy right up into the air and sat him on his shoulders. Imagine that! A *real* Dodger. Isn't that *wonderful*?"

My father waited a few seconds. His eyes stayed riveted to the black-and-white t.v. screen. Billy Cox had a full count with two out in the fifth. We'd been only the second family in our building to own a t.v. Now, night after summer night, my father could do what once demanded an hour's drive: watch the Dodgers in Ebbets Field, right there in our living room. Night after night I sat at his heels soaking up present baseball tactics and past baseball lore, why Erskine should pitch this guy high and tight, what it had felt like in the late innings of Johnny VanderMeer's second straight no-hitter.

The following spring, 1953, I would be old enough to begin Little League, and for the next five years my parents would attend every game I played.

My father would make notes about what to teach me after the game, ever the demanding coach. My mother, untutored in all but the most obvious elements of this deceptively subtle game, would cheer from a distance, happy to see my father spend his limited free time with his son.

"Jack, I said, 'Isn't that wonderful.' Imagine, *your* son sitting on a Brooklyn Dodger's shoulders."

He turned indulgently toward her. Neither patience nor love could mask his pain at her naïveté. "Marion, there is no way this guy and 'wonderful' belong in the same sentence. Hodges, *that* would be wonderful. Campanella, Pee Wee, *that* would be wonderful. But Branca? Look, I feel sorry for the guy, I really do, but there's no escaping it--he's a bum. He's through."

Something with hard corners twisted in my stomach. I knew it. It wasn't wonderful, not after last fall, October, 1951. My mother's glowing hours of anticipation since she'd first said, "Wait'll Dad hears this," became instantly counterfeit. My father couldn't be wrong, not about baseball. He'd seen the immortals: the Babe, Cobb, Dizzy, Hornsby, Hubbell. He knew wonderful.

I thought of the man who'd reached down that afternoon, thrust his huge hands under my armpits and scooped me into the air. He stood six-foot-three, 220 pounds, his wife at his side. He'd tousled my hair and winked. "Keep pulling for the Dodgers, son," he'd said. Sitting on his muscled shoulders, I could smell the Vitalis on his hair. He'd

grown up in my hometown, Mt. Vernon, New York, walking distance from our modest smattering of apartment buildings called Colonial Village.

Handsome and trim, he didn't look like a bum. But at 26 he did look like his life was prematurely over. When he smiled at my beaming mother his smile seemed constructed of muscles irreparably broken. He was still, months afterward, at the center of the most painful moment in sports within even my father's memory. The past Oct. 3, fresh from the bullpen to save Don Newcombe, who'd left Don Mueller on third and Whitey Lockman on second, Ralph Branca had already won thirteen games, three of them shut outs, and struck out 118 men.

From the mound, Branca stared 60 feet toward Bobby Thompson at the plate, the Giants' potential pennant-winning run. He couldn't walk Thompson with that dangerous new kid Mays on deck. Even I knew that. Two pitches later, the excruciating words echoed throughout New York, "The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!" and all the king's horses and all the king's men could never have reassembled Branca's spirit into the youthful hope now shattered and lost forever.

The next year I began Little League in left field for the Sparrows, compiling a perfect batting average: no base hits whatsoever. It didn't matter. I loved the game more and more. On Sundays, his only day off, my father drove me to Bronxville High School's field, working on my hitting and fielding for hours before taking me to Eastchester Diner where we'd eat hot turkey sandwiches and put nickels in the juke box to hear the Chords sing "Sh-boom." At night we'd watch the Dodgers.

My aesthetic sense formed around the shape of baseball. The first human act I remember thinking beautiful was Duke Snider's swing. My definition of drama was Jackie Robinson leading off base. My sense of history could be charted in statistics: when did Lindbergh fly the Atlantic? the year Ruth hit 60 homers. My academic skills grew out of baseball: divide the number of total bases by times at bat and you have the slugging average. Baseball forged my sense of responsibility: when do I cover the base and when am I the cut-off man?

Because I saw him in daylight only on Sundays, and what we did was throw and bat, baseball became tightly braided with my understanding of my father's love. Baseball/Love. I could not separate them. Simple experiences brought sensuous rapture: the smell of a baseball glove, squeezing handfuls of dirt to keep my hands safe when I'd slide, and, by far the best, the jolt of dawning mastery surging up my arms when the ball met the sweet spot of the bat.

All of this began moving about within me long before that autumn day when the Giants tore the heart out of Brooklyn. I have not only the memory but even the 8 mm. movies. There I am, barely old enough to stand, swinging a bat, my father pitching underhand.

It did not change on the night my father confirmed what I thought I'd seen in Ralph Branca's face, the lesson that one pitch, a few seconds, could devastate a city and shatter a man forever. Baseball still meant love.

But a new dimension to both baseball and love opened that day. Yang was added to baseball's yin. Destiny and heroism grew full bodied as the scents and sounds and hits and runs and the sheer edenic green of the ballpark were suddenly balanced and expanded by the game's capacity for anguish and destruction. As art and relationships and life itself eventually would, baseball assumed a tragic face, epic in scale.

So much vaster than I'd thought, there was now from my second-grade perception of things even more about baseball to love, and a deeper way to understand what loving meant, how it existed in the process of something, not in an outcome, how things could not reach their full size until seen in the mirror of their potential loss. As I would grow to feel about life and beauty and the people I've cherished, I now sensed that baseball's peaks could be scaled only by those willing to risk disaster.