

Right in the Back

by Kevin John Phillips

A friend and I spent an evening watching his son's baseball practice. Any time you want to sit and watch baseball of any kind, call me, because it's my favorite way to spend an hour or two.

"Hey, you guys!" the coach yelled, "Step into it, you guys are backing away from the plate, gotta step into it. Don't be afraid of the ball. It'll sting for a minute if it hits you, but that's all."

Heh, heh.

When I was eleven, they let me pitch because I refused to go near a batted ball. I loved baseball and still do, but if you saw me at eleven years old you would not mistake me for that kid over there, the one with even an ounce of talent. Mine you'd measure in atoms. Nano atoms, maybe.

Best pitcher in the American League — and my hero - that year was a guy who threw a fastball, an evil overhand curve and he threw the brush back pitch. If you don't know, the brush back is a pitch hurled close to the batter's chin, the idea being to startle him away from the plate so he's not so eager to face you the next time. This guy threw it, and kept batters off the plate. He also hit about nineteen batters. I worshipped him and was thrilled to join the pitching brotherhood.

At first, I was happy to get the ball within a few zip codes of home plate. With some practice, there were actually a few strikes with all the pitches. This skinny eleven-year-old just wanted to pitch like his hero, and one day the inevitable happened.

On a fine Saturday, the school bully steps up to the plate against me. He was an eighth grader who smoked with style, swore with elegance, and whenever possible, spent time tweaking the five hairs above his upper lip. He struck a jaunty pose that instilled both fear and envy in the rest of us.

He digs in to face me, I throw the curve, and it doesn't really curve. But he doesn't hit it either; it hits him. Sort of between the eyes. Broke his glasses a little bit. Pretty much his nose too.

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He had no choice but to take it. He couldn't pummel me since this thing happened within the confines of the game. The wonderful thing about baseball is its etiquette shines even into the foul depths of Bullyhood.

After that, kids stayed way off the plate against me. Eleven-year-olds are wild anyway, but now I had a reputation. I helped by banging a few off the screen during my warm-ups. I swear to you a hair even sprouted above my upper lip.

Twenty-three kids in twelve little league games felt my wrath that year, and my best friend stopped talking to me after I nailed him one afternoon. But that wasn't the worst; that honor belonged to this very tall, very skinny kid.

He stood five-foot-five, and weighed exactly eight pounds, nine ounces. Hadn't gained a spec of weight since birth and I believe eight pounds of the total was his head. It was as big a head as you're ever going to see. He was a great person, everyone got along with him; he was just a unique physical specimen.

He came up against me and on the first pitch, I slipped and so did the ball. He turned at the last second, the ball hit him square in the back and everyone on the field and in the stands cringed.

It made such a sound; I still couldn't describe it to you. I thought I saw the outline of the ball poke out of his chest (I mean he was skinny!), and when his head flung back at the impact and then forward in painful recoil, we all thought he was going to whip himself into a cartwheel. Lots of momentum with that noggin, you know. It hurt me just to hear it. I thought about him while watching the practice.

"Okay, next batter!" the coach yells.

In steps the next batter, and on the second pitch, guess what? Right in the middle of the back. Sure looked like it hurt.

