

# A Story from the Diamond

*by* Mario Perez

I never like baseball, well, playing it. I could say I wasn't much of an athlete, when in reality I wasn't much of anything. I barely weighed as much as the bat I clung to as though my hands were frozen to the damn thing and I was just taller than it standing straight. The first hit I ever got was when I swung at a ball chest high with my eyes closed; it clipped my thumb and sailed just over the first baseman's addled head. I cried the whole way, gripping my pounding thumb with the nail teetering off like a piece of skin. I did it for my dad. He loved the sport. I never could figure out why, it didn't seem too interesting to me back then. But, when I stupidly offered to join little league one time after dinner his face lit up. This was back when we ate dinner together, you know, as a family.

A sweltering heat sits on the field like a fog failing to move. From the diamond, you were able to see the Chicago skyline poking above the apartment buildings like antennas, sending signals all throughout the world. A fragile boy, let's call him Nicko, is melting in left field, or the dead zone—hardly anyone hits it that way, it is a place for the most loathsome prick who can barely lift the bat. Nicko always ponders how he finds himself on this field each and every time, usually too tired to stand, so he plops down and watches the game from the dewy grass just like the other spectators. His coach doesn't take to kindly too sitting during games, especially when the rare fly ball finds its way over to him. Nicko watches the pitcher chuck the baseball towards the plate, but usually through the batter. In little league, being at the plate is like being at war, you're bound to get hit by a stray bullet, needing to bob and weave to come out alive. Eventually a pitch sails near the vicinity of the plate and the batter absentmindedly swings and connects sending a singing grounder through the second and third basemen whose heads collide like pool balls sending them in opposite directions but the center fielder hustles scooping it up and chucking it at the first

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baseman ten minutes too late and almost as high as the gates blocking the bleachers causing the spectators to jerk clutching the ball barehanded the first basemen chucks the ball rapidly to the third baseman who is covering second but bobbles it quickly relaying it to third but he isn't there so it just hits the gate and lies innocently on the bag while the runner scores an inside-the-parker. Nicko's tumbling on the floor laughing at the antics while his coaches fumes stomping his hat comically. Peeking at the cheering proud parents all stationed on the sets of benches Nicko searches for any sign of his father, but doesn't spot his old torn Cub's hat, the lucky one he wears during games.

My old man was always stationed in front of our tube during his off times from work. He was like a statue merely drinking in the movements of the players—and downing bottles of Corona, mindlessly spouting drunken commentary about the game to the four empty walls surrounding him. Not sure if you know this, but the Cubs are a pack of losers and have been for more than a hundred years, so being a fan is like picking a snail in a footrace, it just ain't never gonna happen. I'd crawl to the edge of the coach and watch with him, stupidly thinking he was talking to me about the team, the history, and it quenched this insatiable thirst I had to connect with him. I was astonished by how devoted he was to a team that didn't even know he existed. Even in his van he'd turn the dial on the radio and catch the end of the action, on those weekends when he picked us up. If it wasn't about sports he was a mute. It was the only thing that brought out something in him, something real. Looking back, I really had no choice but to try.

Hearing the ping of the bat, Nicko hopped to his feet, knowing just by the sound that this fly ball was sailing his way. All the heads gawked skyward, each searching among the crystal blue ocean for the single white vessel floating among the waves and getting ready to crash. The boiling orange rays burned into Nicko's feeble eyes. He tries to veil its intensity with his glove, like his dad taught him.

All their eyes clung to his image and made a ghastly entity grip his shoulder and make his entire body shake. There isn't a trace of his father in the stands, he thinks, but it would mean something to catch this ball, even if he isn't here. Fumbling where he thinks the ball is, trying to align himself with its trajectory, hoping it will land safely among the comfortably aged webbed glove that he brandishes on his right hand—his father wore it when he was a kid, at least that is what he said. It is descending, he can feel it, thinking he may spot it, growing as it comes closer to earth, the anxiety of the soundless crowd weighing him down, he wants to, needs to catch this ball, but why, why does it mean so much to everyone, to him, whether he does it or not won't change who he is, punching the inside of the glove like the players he's seen on TV do, Nicko patiently awaits the crash landing, feeling a ting of pain radiating from his arms.

There was this empty parking lot within a school nearby that he'd take me to practice. I'd be about where centerfield would be on the diamond and he'd crack a few pop ups at me, yelling out instructions and sermons about the best way to catch the ball. We'd practice grounders as well, with most of them going through my legs or eatin' me up while they treaded into my glove. I'd spot him smiling through the buzzing sunshine, under his Cub's cap, and having what I thought was a proud glint in his eyes. He'd spill the Cub's history during water breaks and his own rise as a baseball player when he was my age. I'd never seen so spout so much words at me all at once, pilling on numbers, names, and places I desperately tried to remember. After every practice he'd bring me in close to his thigh playfully—he smelt like old cigars I remember—and dig his hand into my head imperceptibly whispering, “Good game son...” as if trying to mask it from our neighborhood, just in case anyone was listening. Maybe he didn't want them to know he actually cared which was fine, since I hardly knew he did.

