

The \$64,000 Question

by Randall Stickrod

Stephen stood in one corner of the large assembly room, bracing himself stiffly against the wall. Everything around him seemed frighteningly alien, from the pungent smell of the paraffin floor wax to the iron grill that covered the ground floor windows. He was too nervous and shy to chance walking out into the melee of other boys who, for the most part, seemed to be bigger than him and filled with feral energy and the kind of reckless camaraderie that made him feel even more the outsider. The tiny, ancient nun who escorted him down to the Boys' Room from Mother Superior's office hadn't spoken a word to him and had simply ushered him into the room and turned away. Now he was doing everything he could to will himself invisible.

There was an abrupt halt to the noise and hubbub, as if a switch had been thrown. Sister Anne entered the room. Stephen had been introduced to her briefly when he had been admitted to St. Bartholomew's Orphanage earlier that day. He had never seen a woman so large as her in all of his ten years. Her black habit and starched white wimple only accentuated the impression of bulk, for Sister Anne was impressively large in every dimension. Stephen found himself staring at her mouth, at the fringe of hair that bordered her upper lip and seemed all the more prominent against very thin lips that didn't seem made for a friendly face. They were largely transparent, like dandelion floss, but a few stood out in coarse black against her chalky complexion, and he'd never seen anything quite like it.

She moved through the room, through the pack of boys, like an ocean liner parting the waves with its prow, and pulled a chair over to the middle of the room. She signaled with her hand for all to gather around her, then sat down. Stephen edged away from his

corner toward the center of the room, and following the other boys, sat down on the floor around where the nun was seated.

A calm descended over the room as she settled into the chair, a stillness so sudden and so thorough that Stephen was certain that no one else was breathing, that his heartbeat was surely audible to the rest of the room. She began to speak. Sitting down, she didn't seem quite so formidable, and her voice was almost gentle, almost pleasant. It was the speech she gave every year at this time to her charges, the boys' section of the orphanage which took in boarders during the school year from outlying ranches as well as orphans, and the annual refresher course in the do's and don'ts was always in order. There were a substantial number of each. On the do's: everyone had assigned chores, in the laundry, the grounds, the chapel. There was mass every morning at six. Work after mass. Breakfast. Then work. Then school. Then work. In the evenings there was an occasional benediction. And more work.

On the don'ts: Don't ever leave the grounds. Don't misbehave in school or church. Don't disobey a nun. Don't talk back. Don't, don't, don't.

All the while, Sister Anne was rubbing a large, dark red, delicious apple that had appeared somehow out of the folds of her habit. She rubbed it softly, her large, fleshy hands nearly enveloping it, and occasionally she would buff the shine on it on her lap. Stephen found himself watching the apple with fascination, almost tuning out her words. There was something about the movement of the hand and the apple, those subtleties against the black background of her habit, that was lulling him into the first unguarded state of relaxation he had felt since being delivered there earlier in the day.

Abruptly there was an edge in her voice, the volume notched up just a bit, and she began to explain the consequences of disobedience. "They say boys will be boys," she said, now glancing

about the room as if to make eye contact with each and every boy. "But here, you see, we cannot allow behaviors that are against our rules. The most important thing for each of you to understand is this. That misbehavior will not be tolerated, and punishment will be swift!" At this last, she raised the apple slightly and gave it a sudden twist with both hands, and the apple ripped apart with a loud *crack!* that sounded like a rifle shot in the room. Small boys burst into spontaneous tears and cried out, sobbing. Older boys shot up straight off the floor, like levitating yogis.

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Over the next few weeks, Stephen settled into what had become a mind-numbing routine. Roused at 5:30 each morning, mass in the chapel at 6:00, a half hour of work, usually scrubbing or waxing floors, then breakfast at 7:00. There seemed to be no variation at breakfast at all; a bowl of tart canned prunes, one slice of dry toast, and milk. It was not possible to ignore the polished carts being rolled down to the nun's dining room with its fragrances of waffles or pancakes, bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs. Another round of work after breakfast and then school. School was the best part. Sister Monica, his fifth grade teacher, was young, pretty, and kind. She seemed to intuit his intelligence and the breadth of his knowledge and liked to call on him when she knew he was the only one in the class likely to know the answer.

What she didn't know was that Stephen's precocity derived largely from the fact that his father had briefly been selling the Encyclopedia Britannica, and though, like everything else he tried, it failed to produce a stable income, it bequeathed the household a full set of the books. For the past five years Stephen had devoured them systematically from cover to cover, fascinated that virtually all the world's knowledge could be contained in these volumes, and he

determined to learn it all. From Aachen to Azerbaijan, from Zaragosa to Zygoté, there was hardly a page that hadn't captured him along the way.

His prowess in school was of little use for the social dynamics of the playground, though. He dreaded the recesses and the noon break, for it all seemed a barbaric chaos out on the sprawling expanse of cracked asphalt that was used as a play area. There were regular pick-up games of baseball, basketball, dodge ball, and since he had never played any of them, he kept at a distance. Not that he was likely to be asked to join in a game.

He avoided the hubbub around the playground equipment but noticed an old slide that had rusted out and that no one used any more. He found that if he climbed to the top of the slide he could see just far enough to make out the profile of Mt. Baldy in the distance, where his Uncle Walt worked as a wrangler and cowhand on a ranch, and where he had briefly lived after the accident that had taken his parents' lives.

In the aftermath of the calamity that had orphaned him, his only solace was in the six weeks he had shared a drafty bunkhouse with Uncle Walt, an experience so far removed from his normal life that it mitigated the reality of his parents' death and its consequences. The food was dreadful and the roof leaked during the late summer thunderstorms, and Uncle Walt was so taciturn he hardly knew how to carry on a conversation, especially with a child. Stephen wasn't looking for conversation, though. What he sought was something bigger than the hurt of his loss. He found it in the security of Uncle Walt's sturdiness, the camaraderie of the dogs and the horses, the lowing of the cattle that seemed musical to him, like a lullaby or a hymn against the backdrop of the constant wind. He didn't want to be comforted or consoled. He relished the harshness and hard-edged simplicity of his uncle's life, because when he was dragging hay bales under a scorching August sun or hanging onto a spirited

horse chasing cattle, he had no time to think about his loss. And he understood that it was alright for him to be alive.

One day over a hardscrabble dinner of gristly beef and lumpy mashed potatoes, his uncle looked up at him and said, "Kee-rist, boy, school's gonna start any day now. And winter ain't far behind. I can't keep you here. We gotta figure out something for you."

That something was St. Bartholomew's, and despite his anguished pleadings, Stephen had found himself scrubbed and dressed in his best clothes in front of the Mother Superior with his uncle gamely trying to explain the circumstances of Stephen's abandonment and his plea for the charity of the church to see to the boy's well-being and upbringing. His cowboy hat held respectfully over his belt buckle, wearing his pearl-button white shirt and his only polished boots, Uncle Walt told her of the car wreck that killed Stephen's mother and father and the fact that there was no other family that could take him in. He spared her the details of how Stephen's father had managed to stay chronically insolvent because of "a little gambling problem" and felt it was sufficient to let her know that there was simply no wherewithal for Stephen.

One day in late October, a haphazard baseball game was going on during the lunch break, despite a chill wind that was driving a blizzard of fallen leaves across the playground. Stephen was standing by himself as usual, when an errant ball came skidding his way and he heard his name shouted, the first time another kid had said his name out loud since he had been there. He looked over, startled, saw the ball coming toward him, and before he had a chance to think, simply reached out and grabbed the ball. It stung his hand, a shock like a slap on the face, but he held on to it and stood there, somewhat dazed, unsure of what to do next. Then he could hear the shouts again, his name called out with a note of urgency. "Hey, throw the ball! Stephen, throw the ball!"

There was a tumult of noise and motion that seemed incomprehensible to him, since he knew nothing of the game. His father had no interest in sports and was never around long enough to teach him or play ball of any kind with him. So he simply reared back and heaved the ball in the general direction of all that frenetic activity. To his surprise the ball flew on a low, tight arc directly into the mitt of the boy who had been yelling at him, who then turned and fired the ball to home plate.

Moments later, as he started to walk away, he heard his name again. "Hey Stephen! Come here. We need another batter."

Still dazed by the sudden turn of events, he found himself walking over behind the plate to a boy named Rich, who simply gave a perfunctory nod toward a bat on the ground and said, "Go ahead and bat. We're short a guy anyway. Hey, nice toss. I didn't know you could play baseball."

Stephen couldn't muster a reply. He picked up the bat, not quite sure how to hold it. It might as well have been a golf club or a tennis racket. "You're up!" Rich shouted, motioning toward the makeshift home plate. Stephen had barely gotten his feet into place alongside the plate when he looked up and saw Jerry, another classmate who was one of the popular clique and who had never said a word to him or acknowledged his existence up to this point. Jerry had a leg up in the air, twisting awkwardly and then unwinding in a flurry of motion and suddenly the ball was flying toward him in a blur. He swung the bat reflexively, thinking to defend himself against the oncoming ball, and to his amazement felt the shock of the ball against the bat. He stood watching for a moment as the ball shot out on a line just inside first base, and rolled sharply into deep right field.

"Run! Go!" Rich screamed, as Stephen stood watching the flight of the ball. He began to run toward first base, dimly aware that it was the likely destination, but didn't know to drop the bat. As he ran

down the line, his pulse pounding in his temples like a drumbeat, he could hear more yelling. "Get the ball! Get the ball!" Thinking the shouting was directed at him, he ran right past first base and out toward the ball. As he neared the ball, running as hard as he could, the fielder suddenly swooped in front of him, snagged the ball grinning, and tagged Stephen. "You're out, kid. What the hell are you doing?" he said, then lobbed the ball back into the infield.

Feeling his cheeks burning and his eyes starting to tear up, Stephen walked back toward home plate with his chin on his chest, aware that everyone was staring at him and more than a few were laughing. He handed the bat meekly to a glowering Rich, said "Sorry," and hurried away.

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On Christmas Eve, after a Benediction service, the boys who didn't have a home to go to during the holiday break were gathered around in the assembly room. Sister Anne came into the room followed by two very large uniformed policemen, each carrying a cardboard box. The boys were made to line up and the policeman passed down the line, reaching into the box and handing each boy something. They were donated toys and games for the most part, a token charity organized by the police department, and the two hulking men never smiled as they muttered "Merry Christmas" to each boy as they handed him whatever they felt like. The boys had been advised not to show any disappointment, but to smile, say "Thank you!" and to look pleased, no matter what.

When they came to Stephen, the policeman reached into the box and thrust a baseball mitt into Stephen's hands, and then quickly, if awkwardly, moved on to the next boy. It felt quite foreign to him. It was an old mitt, well used, as supple as the old moccasins that his uncle wore at night around the bunkhouse. It had surely been light

brown at one time but was now nearly black with age. But it still smelled of leather and he held it up to his face and pressed his nose into the pocket and found it oddly satisfying. It took him back to Uncle Walt's cabin, the comforting aroma of saddle leather and sweat and dirt. He tried it on, found it a bit big, but close enough to a fit that he could close his grip as if squeezing a caught ball. That night he slept with the mitt under his pillow.

Christmas Day dawned brutally cold, but there was no wind for a change, and after breakfast and chores, Stephen bundled up and went outside, even though none of the other boys cared to venture out. He climbed to the top of the broken slide and sat there, trying out his mitt. He tried to imagine a baseball coming at him, tried to visualize in slow motion the impact of a ball entering the mitt. With his right fist he simulated a baseball, and punched it into the middle of the mitt, noticing how his left hand reflexively curled to match the shape of the ball and secure it, how peculiarly satisfying it seemed to feel that 'smack' of impact into the leather over his palm.

Across the playground he noticed "Old Tony," the resident handyman who lived alone in a tiny cottage on the other side of the grounds, opposite the orphanage. He was shuffling across the perimeter but stopped to look at the solitary boy atop the slide, fiddling with a baseball mitt. He vanished from sight and then a few minutes later he appeared at the bottom of the slide ladder. "Hey boy," he said, looking up at Stephen. "A mitt's no good without a ball," and he lobbed a baseball up at Stephen. Stephen was so shocked to hear Old Tony speak that he nearly fell off his perch, but managed to reach out and catch the ball anyway. Before he could muster the presence of mind to say 'thank you' the old man had shuffled away. Stephen looked at the ball. Its smoothness fascinated him. He turned it over and over, following the sinuous ridges of the red stitching. It had been used, but was still distinctly white and only slightly scuffed.

Still too shy to approach any of the other boys about tossing a baseball around, but consumed with curiosity, Stephen wandered the grounds until he found a long narrow alcove off the laundry room that no longer seemed to serve any purpose. It was hidden from the playground and ended in a brick wall with no windows. Even though the winter chill was bitter, he began slipping off to this hidden alcove for a few minutes every day, where he found he could throw the ball against the brick wall and practice catching it on the rebound after it had bounced several times. After awhile he learned that he could throw it up high and catch the ball on the fly, and by varying the angle and how hard he threw it, he could surprise himself and have to chase the ball all over, as if someone were batting it to him.

Within a few days, though, the stitching began to wear through, and he realized that the ball couldn't take the punishment of brick wall and asphalt indefinitely. The weather had turned, anyway. It was January, after all, and the days were too cold to put his bare hand in the baseball glove, and blowing snow had drifted high into his secret alcove.

During school not long after, Sister Monica announced a field trip to the city library. It was an annual event and one of the few times the orphans had an opportunity to venture out into the community. Children would be allowed to check out books and bring them back. Stephen was ecstatic. After an orientation tour, they were given an hour to browse, and the class gravitated to the children's section. Stephen slipped away from the group and made his way back to the card catalog. He looked up 'baseball' and found the section, Dewey Decimal 796, where all the baseball books were. Nearly delirious with excitement he wandered into the stacks and found several shelves on baseball, literally scores of books. At some point he realized that someone was talking to him, a very worried looking Sister Monica, frantic that he had been missing for nearly an hour.

Stephen scooped up as many books as he could carry and struggled out behind the others. For the two weeks he had the books checked out, he read them all. There was an instructional book written by various celebrated players, how to play each position, how to hit, how to pitch, how to field. There were several biographies of the greats, including Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner, Babe Ruth, Walter Johnson, Christy Mathewson, Lefty Grove. There were collections of essays by sportswriters. And there was a thick Encyclopedia of Baseball with the detailed record of every player, every team, every statistic that had been compiled from the beginning of organized baseball up through the previous year. This latter became an obsession when he began to understand what all the statistics meant and how they painted an intricate and complex quantitative picture that added gravitas to this simple game.

Two weeks later, bristling with baseball lore, arcana and facts, he screwed up his courage and all but begged Sister Monica to let him come with her when she returned the class's books. She relented and he checked out another half dozen books and renewed the baseball encyclopedia for another two weeks.

In early March there was a brief let-up of winter. Over a period of several days a warm wind melted off virtually all the snow, and play periods saw the playground once again a melee of riotous children burning off the pent-up energy of a long winter spent mostly indoors. In two months' time, Stephen had consumed every book on baseball in the city library. Old Tony the handyman had begun slipping him the sports section of the newspaper when it contained anything about baseball, and wrapped his baseball in tape to extend its life. Play periods saw a resumption of his solitary baseball exercises in the hidden nook by the laundry room.

On a Saturday morning in late April, Stephen was told to report to the office of Mother Superior, that he had a visitor. It was Uncle Walt, all spiffed up in brand new jeans and a new shirt. He hadn't

seen him in months. "Happy birthday, kid," he said, cuffing him affectionately on the back of the head. Stephen had completely forgotten that it was his birthday.

"Come on," said his Uncle. "I'm going to take you out of here for awhile and get you a decent lunch. We got some stuff to talk about too."

Wrapping a gnarled, sun-baked hand around Stephen's shoulder, Uncle Walt escorted him out of the building and down the front walkway. "It's good to see you, son. But I've come to say goodbye. I'm making some big changes." He lifted his hand and pointed to the car they were approaching.

It was a brand new 1956 DeSoto, two-tone cream and black, gleaming at the curb. A dark haired woman sat in the passenger seat, smoking a cigarette. "What do you think?" Uncle Walt said, patting the roof of the car. Stephen shook his head, perplexed, wondering what it all meant.

He got in the back seat as his uncle introduced him to Mabel, his girlfriend, who acknowledged him in a raspy voice, and continued to smoke, looking distractedly out the window as they took off. Later, over hamburgers and milkshakes at a diner, Uncle Walt laid it out for him.

"I can't do it no more," he said. "Horse kicked in three ribs of mine in a blizzard right after Christmas and they ain't healing right. Hell, nothing's healing right on me anymore, and these winters ain't helping. So I cashed out, bought me this fine new car, got me a fine new gal, and we're headed for Yuma, Arizona. I'll probably end up shoveling horseshit for someone, but I gotta make a change."

Stephen looked up at him over his hamburger with questioning eyes. "Wish I could take you with me, son, but those nuns are doing

a hell of a better job bringing you up than I could. You and I both know that." Uncle Walt poked a finger around in one eye as if he had something in it, then looked away.

On the way back, Uncle Walt asked Stephen if there was anything he needed. They stopped at a newsstand and Stephen bought a load of baseball magazines, and then they stopped at a sporting goods store and got him a baseball, one with a rubber coating meant to take the abuses of hard surfaces.

"Wish I could do more," his uncle said, with a wry half-smile as he walked him back into St. Bartholomew's.

"You did plenty," Stephen said, then turned and ran into the building without looking back.

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As the boys were preparing for bed in the big, open dormitory, washing up and putting on their pajamas, but before prayers, Sister Anne called for everyone's attention.

"Have any of you heard about the quiz show on television, The \$64,000 question?"

A smattering of voices called out 'yes' but most boys simply looked at her or shook their heads. "They broadcast it on the radio too, and I'm going to let you listen to it tonight if you all hurry up and finish getting ready for bed. It's on in just a few minutes."

“Why do they call it that, sister?” piped up one of the older boys who had the nerve to ask her a question.

“You get on the show and pick a subject,” she said. “And then they ask you a question and if you get the first one right you get a thousand dollars. Then they ask you another question and if you get that one right, you get two thousand dollars. Every time you get one right, you get another chance for twice as much money. And so on until you get to sixty four thousand.”

There was a long whistle in the background at the mention of the sum, an unimaginable amount of wealth to the boys. “Anyway,” she went on, “I read in the paper that someone has gone all the way to the last question, and tonight is his sixty four thousand dollar question. Everyone in the country is going to be watching tonight.”

“Or listening to it,” she added as an afterthought, offering a hint of a rare smile to the boys.

“What's the subject?” called out a voice across the room.

“Baseball,” she said. “Now hurry so I can turn the lights out. Then I'll turn on the radio.”

Stephen felt his stomach contract and his heart shudder. Baseball. He was suddenly rigid with excitement and could hardly bear to get in his narrow bed and pull the blankets up.

Shortly the lights were out and Sister Anne turned on the big radio in her screened off sleeping area. There was a blare of music, the sponsor's theme song. Then a commercial for some medication Stephen had never heard of. Then finally the announcer's voice with its strained pitch of artificial cheeriness and excitement. The contestant was introduced and there was a discussion about his successes so far, five questions he had answered correctly to get to

this point, each one progressively more difficult. His name was Charles.

“And now, Charles,” the announcer said, “are you ready for the ultimate, the sixty four thousand dollar question?” Each of the last five words were punctuated with extra intonation.

“Yes I am,” replied the contestant, and though he tried to sound composed, there was a quaver to his voice, the slightest tremolo that suggested he was appropriately nervous.

“Charles, for \$64,000, here is the question. One man holds the record for highest batting average on a team, for three different teams. I want you to name the player. Then the teams. Then the year he set each record. And finally, his average for each of those years.”

With the briefest pause, the announcer went on, “Charles, you have thirty seconds to think about your answer.” Then a simple melody came up and the sound of the seconds ticking away on a metronome.

Sister Anne's voice came out of the dark. “Who knows the answer? Anyone have a guess?” The sarcasm in her voice was a Sister Ann trademark.

“Yes, Sister.” A clearing of a throat and then a timid voice from somewhere in the middle of the room. “It's Rogers Hornsby, Sister. The Cardinals, Cubs and the Braves. 1922, 1929 and, um, 1928. He hit .424 for St. Louis, .380 for the Cubs, and .387 for the Braves.”

“Stephen? Stephen! Is that you?” Her voice was a full octave higher than usual.

“Yes Sister.”

Then the music faded and the announcer came back solemnly.
"Charles, you've had time to consider the questions. Now I must ask for your answers. First, who is the player?"

"That would be Rogers Hornsby."

"You're right! Now the teams, the years, the averages, in any order you like."

"Okay. There was the Cardinals in 1922. He hit .424. That's the easy one."

"You're right! Two to go."

"He hit .387 for the Boston Braves in 1928. That has to be one of them."

"Congratulations! That's two out of the three. Now. For \$64,000, can you name the third team, the year, and the batting average?"

"It was either the Cubs or the Giants "

"Charles, I have to ask you to pick one."

"I'll say the Cubs."

"Correct! Can you tell us the year and the average?"

There was a long pause. The announcer finally said, "Charles?"

"The Cubs. 1929. I believe he hit .361."

"Is that your answer?"

"Yes. It is."

There was a momentary silence that was an abyss, dark and bottomless.

“Oh Charles. I'm so sorry. It was the Cubs, and in 1929. But he hit .380 that year, not .361.”

The broadcast devolved into a pandemonium of released tension, condolences, then congratulations for winning \$32,000. The radio was turned off. At the click of the radio switch, the dormitory was suddenly as silent as a vault. Not even the whoosh of a breath, as if every child and Sister Anne herself had forgotten to breathe again.

“Sixty four thousand dollars, Stephen.” Sister Anne's voice out of the stillness, the cavernous night, breathless and strained.

Stephen lay on his back, his head turned, gazing toward the windows and the streetlights beyond. He tried to imagine \$64,000 but couldn't. What could he possibly do with money like that? It seemed that it would have bought anything he might ever have dreamed of, an entire life, in fact. It came to him that life could be very different, starting from this very moment.

