

The Rookie

Ranny Grady

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“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Hebrews 12:1, NIV

This book is dedicated to my father, Paul Leo Grady. He was a simple, poorly educated man, yet he gave me the three most important bits of wisdom any father might give a son: Love Jesus Christ; a man’s integrity can never be taken, only given away; and if a man loves his wife and children as Christ loved the church, he will be a successful man.

He also taught me about his love of baseball. We often joked about the passage of scripture above, and how one day we would both play baseball in heaven. We speculated about how much greener the grass or how much whiter the bases in heaven could be than the grass in Wrigley or the bases in Yankee Stadium. In heaven, would we have the privilege of being struck out by the Christian Hall-of-Fame pitcher Christy Mathewson?

We had one baseball goal: attend a World Series game. “Pop” died before either one of us had the financial means to make that dream come true. Perhaps this baseball story will suffice as a little make-up for missing the fulfillment of our dream.

I like to think the big first-sacker will know I tried my best to honor him with my words from his baseball position in heaven. All I am or ever hope to be as a man, I owe to my father. My fervent prayer for every boy in the world is that he might know the love of a father like mine.

Dedication

Striking Out With Your Bat on Your Shoulders

The old, midnight blue Buick stopped at the entrance to the cemetery. The elderly man parked his car on the incline, put the emergency brake on, and picked up his Cubs hat. With a deep sense of dread flooding his bones, he scanned the horizon and slowly moved to where the headstone rested. Small twitches, more

like tremors, flitted his eyes, and his forehead glistened. Each heavy footstep heightened the mixed emotions jangling inside him. The squeak of the cemetery gate, in desperate need of oil, grated his nerves as he envisioned fingernails scraping down a chalkboard. Reverie engulfed him as he drew near the gravestone.

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The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee awoke Elijah, and he grinned, for he knew his wife had been up earlier and made coffee, just to please him. The cool morning mountain air chilled his arms as he checked the thermostat on the electric blanket: it was on 3, the number Daisy and he liked for sleeping. Drowsily, he snuck a peak at his wife lying next to him.

“Are you awake?”

When she didn’t answer, he turned and pulled the covers up around his chin. Her coming and going left a chill in the bed. She pretended to be asleep; then she moved her backside into his front-side and nestled.

“Woman!” he yelled. “You’re as cold as ice. Have a little pity and warm up before you come a’calling.”

She moved closer and laughed at his distress. “Okay, okay.” She moved away.

“Mmm, coffee smells so good. Why didn’t you bring us a cup?”

“It wasn’t finished brewing.”

He reached and touched her back; she turned toward him. He smiled at her and lost himself in her big brown eyes.

Nearly fifty years of marriage and she still makes my blood boil, he thought. He drew her in close, tenderly, and let his hand caress her breasts, graze her navel, and slowly brush her hip. She emitted a soft sigh, eyes glassy and smoky. Their passion rose and they made love.

“This must be Saturday,” she said, lovingly touching his face. “Come rain or sunshine, my Elijah has to have his ‘willy’ exercised, isn’t that right, old man?”

“Fifty-two times a year. That ain’t bad for an old man of my age,” he replied, pulling her closer, breathing in the clean scent of her hair. “Stay right here,” he whispered.

Elijah whistled a favorite hymn—“In the Garden”—as he poured

coffee into two mugs. As he made his way to the bedroom, his whistle became humming, then singing.

“I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses...” he sang, walking gingerly down the hall. “And the voice I hear...falling on my ear...the son of God discloses...”

He paused as he entered the bedroom, careful not to drip the hot liquid down the side of the cup.

“And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there...” His eyes twinkled as he glanced at Daisy, expecting her to reach for the mug.

“None other...has ever...known... Daisy? Coffee?”

His hand shook, freeing splatters of liquid from the confines of the mug, spoiling the delicate lace on her favorite gown.

“Daisy?” his voice quaked.

Her eyes stared at the ceiling above, vacant and expired. She was dead.

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It was late spring, and the mid-morning sun bathed the wildflowers that covered a slope on the south region of the cemetery in a blanket of delicate pink, rusty orange, and buttery yellow. An elegant willow tree, its trailing branches grazing the ground below, created a majestic setting for Elijah Satchel Johnson’s beloved wife’s final resting place. His somber mood fit his demeanor; he was on his knees.

Proverbs 31:28, “Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her,” was etched in the marble of the grave marker that guarded Daisy’s earthly body. “Born 1922, died 1987,” completed the epitaph.

Elijah, tall and gangly, reverently removed his baseball cap and held it in both hands. His white hair, worn in a flattop with wings since his youth, framed strong features: a Romanesque nose, high cheekbones, and a square jaw. Tears pooled in his bright blues eyes, and a single tear escaped, trickling down tanned skin, and dripped down to the ground.

“Knees’re giving me trouble, Daisy. ’Course, you know

that,” he said, adjusting his position to relieve his arthritic knees.

In a soft, hardly audible voice, he mouthed the words on her grave marker and gave off a sigh that nearly whistled. Tenderly, he patted the dark brown earth surrounding Daisy’s grave. He wiped away the moisture on his cheek with the back of his hand and pushed his spectacles up and off the bridge of his nose.

“Daisy, my love,” he said, “oh, how I missed you this morning.” He rubbed his itchy right eye. “I touched your pillow, and my poor old heart ached just to hear your breathing again. Did you know how often I’d lie awake next to you, especially early in the morning, and listen to you breathe?” He laughed. “Sounds kind of silly...doesn’t it?”

Faint rustling sounded in the dense woods to his right, and he was distracted. Two deer, a mother and fawn, emerged from the shadows.

“Can you see that?” he whispered. “Suppose they came to say hello,” he said, turning his back to Daisy’s gravesite. “The sun gives those deer a shine. Do you see it?”

“Guess you know what happened.” His voice cracked. “Oh, I saw it coming...” He touched her grave. “Just didn’t think it would arrive so soon, well, with you leaving me so sudden and all. The coroner’s report said you had a brain aneurism. Said it was the ‘silent killer.’ Nothing could be done about it.

“That old biddy, Mrs. Lynx, asked how I was doing. I know she means well, but honey... The weather, for late spring, was mighty cold last night. I wanted to cuddle...that’s all. I told her I’m getting along as best I can. I wanted to scream. *I feel like I’m dying every time I breathe!*

“I felt your hand on mine on the phone receiver when that call came. Were you there?”

Elijah closed his eyes, choking back tears. He looked to the heavens and into the bright sun, reminiscing.

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“Preacher, this is Conway Bengé. Hope your day is one the good Lord

will bless," the chairman of the elders said. "We've set a special meeting for Thursday at seven, and the elders would like for you to attend."

"Conway! I know what you're up to," Elijah said excitedly. "You and the men have decided to throw caution to the wind and you're going to build a new building."

"We are going to make some bold decisions for the Lord in order to meet the needs of our growing congregation."

"Who are you going to hire to build the family-life center? I've got some suggestions."

"Seven o'clock," Conway said; his voice had a catch in it.

"See you then," Elijah said, hanging up.

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"Do you remember, Daisy? I visited you that very afternoon. I spent the next couple of days whistling up a storm.

"I recall you telling the womenfolk, 'I can always tell when Elijah is feeling especially good about something; he whistles hymns.'

"Did you see me on my old knees? How they hurt, but I wasn't going to use a lame excuse to stop me from being humble before my gracious, great, almighty God.

"Daisy, my dear, do you recall how I spent time in sweet reverie? We were lovesick kids just starting out, and neither of us knew what the Lord had in store.

"Do you remember why we came to this mountain valley? We served several smaller churches, and then we received the call to Indiana. And then...oh my...the call from a big-city church; for the first time in our lives, we had some financial security." He chuckled.

"Remember," he whispered intimately, "we danced around our bed like deranged people and made passionate love on the spot." Elijah closed his eyes, a hint of a smile pulling at the corners of his lips.

As his breathing slowed, his voice lowered, almost to a whisper. "How miserably we failed." Embarrassed, he looked

down. "No...how miserably I failed trying to serve that church. We left with our tails between our legs.

"After all those years, I still fight the urge to keep the guile from filling me like the bilge in a sea-going vessel.

"Mr. Johnson.' You always addressed me as Mr. Johnson to get my attention. 'Mr. Johnson, perhaps the good Lord needed to teach you an important spiritual lesson,' you said one morning. 'Forgiving those who harm your soul is easier than forgetting.'

"My love, I confess, your words came like a whirlwind, exposing everything that wasn't tied down, and ripped my guts. My hardened heart was sliced up properly, and I was left for dead. Did I ever tell you it was your words of encouragement versus my spiritual demons that gave me courage to endure the fire?

"I'd like to think we had a lot to do with the church finally recognizing it had to embrace the new century it had chosen to ignore... forever. Remember what a mess it was when we arrived, physically and spiritually? I wasn't equipped to solve the problems, because my spiritual wounds hadn't healed. I know I wasn't worth much." Elijah chuckled. "Do you recall the church vote? 'He ain't much, but he's tall enough he just might scare the hell out of some of them sinners. His wife's good-looking enough that she can charm snakes.'" Elijah heard the din of snickering, chuckling, and a few amens as though it were happening all over again.

"A fat man wearing a pair of overalls stood up and said, 'Sound's like we just hired ourselves a preacher.' Everyone laughed. I turned beet red, you said.

"I'm not sure any preacher has ever been hired using those specific qualifiers. Didn't we learn that walking with the Lord in the footsteps of his children isn't any easier than Ole Moses had it when he chauffeured the children of Israel around the wilderness for forty years?

"Darling, I knew the second I stepped into the room and spied Tim sitting with the elders at the conference table, old Elijah's days were numbered.

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“Parson, glad to see you,” Conway said as I took my seat next to him, as was our custom. “We asked Tim to join us. It’s an important time for our church.” Conway’s eyes had a strange look. I saw his sheepish countenance.

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“Daisy, I looked into Tim’s eyes, trying to read him, but he looked away, as though I were a leper at the gate. It was like a bell’s echo in the mountains relaying a secret message to me...before I actually received it from the elders. ‘You have been weighed in the balances and have been found wanting. Elijah Satchel Johnson...your ministry has ended.’

“When you’re going to hang someone, why beat around the bush?”

“Conway and the elders carried on the charade by showing the blueprints of the proposed building. I have to admit, there was genuine excitement in the room regarding the decision to build and move the church forward to where it should have been a number of years ago.”

“In the midst of all the exultations, my heart became weary, for I recognized the die had been cast, and the road was filled with spiritual potholes I couldn’t repair. I played along with their game.

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“Tim, can you imagine how great this new family-life center will be for your youth program?”

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“Timothy Franklin was a ruggedly handsome young man. His long burr haircut, dark tan, and ebony eyes accompanied quick wit and an easy smile that helped him make an entrance all the time. He was a bright, well-educated seminarian from one of our finest colleges. When he came to the church for an interview, those fine assets were quickly recognized. We felt that we were fortunate to hire such a talented man.

“Honey, do you recall how we laughed when we talked about the need for the good Lord to get busy and do his part? We

needed some strategic funerals to wash away some of the ill-gotten stubbornness in the hearts of some of the people.

“I don’t know what the good Lord is going to do with them,’ you said. ‘They were nothing but stumbling blocks to spiritual prosperity. He, above all others, knows how worthless they were while they were on earth.’

“Tim and his bride, Elvira, an attractive woman with curves in all the right places, pitched right in; his zeal and energy put a spark in my engine. We made giant strides. Elvira may have been too ‘citized’; nevertheless, the kids never minded. She was a mom for many of the community’s kids who had never had a mother to speak of. She sure took a load off you, didn’t she?

“I really liked that young man. He was teachable and eager to learn. Have to give the devil his due, you know. He is a mighty fine preacher. The boy knows how to take off in that spiritual plane; he knows how to entertain the crowd with the wisdom and humor of God’s Word as applied to their lives. Most importantly, he knows how to land that sucker.”

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“You’re probably wondering why we have asked your associate to attend the meeting we normally hold only with you,” Conway said.

“I figured you’d get around to telling me when the time was ripe,” I replied, scanning the room. As my eyes locked in on each man’s face, he turned away from my gaze.

Several fits of coughing immediately followed, the anxiety so heavy it poisoned the room.

“It’s a very exciting time for our church,” Conway said. “The dream of building this family-life center...” He glanced at me. “...In particular, the one project Elijah has been urging, cajoling us to build for the past decade or so, would never have become a reality had it not been for Elijah.”

Several of the men offered amens, and most of them politely glanced at me for a second.

“Elijah, when you and your beloved Daisy came to our little church,” Conway continued, “we were a pretty sorry lot. Many of us were just teenage boys

in the church, but we could detect things weren't spiritually right. The leaders back then were afflicted with a 'spiritual crawdad philosophy.' His eyes shifted, avoiding Elijah's piercing stare. "Wasn't that what you told us from time to time?" The room erupted in laughter.

"Moving ahead by backing into the future? I do recall that I said that a time or two," I said, spurring more laughter.

"And you helped us boys become men," he said, his voice breaking a little. "Which we'll be forever grateful for." He choked up. "I...I don't know if I can do this," he said, dropping his head.

An eerie silence filled the room.

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"Daisy, honey, it was like the awkward atmosphere that suddenly appears in a room full of mourners; something had to be said...but no one wanted to say it."

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Elijah put his hand on Conway's. "Is this where God tells Moses that he will not lead the children into the Promised Land?"

"Yes." He warmed to the task. "Elijah, I'm sure you are going to be hurt—devastated is probably a better word." He paused. "We just aren't comfortable moving forward unless we know we have the right man for this job and for the future of our church." His declaration ended in a whisper.

Edward Jones, the oldest of the elders, a man who had been a prickly sort of guy ever since the Johnsons had come to the church, added, "What Conway is trying to say is that we have decided we are going to build, but we are going to build with Tim as our spiritual leader."

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"His elementary explanation frosted me, and boy, my gills were up."

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"But we want—we need—you to stay on and mentor Tim for the next year," Conway quickly added.

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"Daisy, I cleared my throat and fought back heated emotions. Thought you'd be proud of me," he whispered.

"I'm sure Tim will do a fine job," I think I muttered. Devilish spirits were flooding my brain. I'm not sure what else was said. "I need to give this some time to sink in. Stay and be his mentor...is that right?" I recall asking just before we adjourned."

Elijah stood in silence before Daisy's grave.

"Feel like I've been 'rode hard and put away wet,'" he mumbled. "They shoot old horses...don't they? I suppose it's a young whippersnapper's world now." He slowly put his Cubs cap on. "Maybe that professor was right. He said, 'A lot of men misread God's call. GPG doesn't necessarily mean *Go Preach the Gospel*. It could mean *Go Plow Corn*.' I'm too darn old to look for another mountain to climb!"

He walked a few feet from Daisy's gravesite...then turned back. "Been thinking about coming home soon. I know you can see what I can't. But from this old parson's vantage, I'm getting to understand Solomon's wisdom more and more.

"Remember Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes, 'Before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the teacher. 'Everything is meaningless!'"

"After all of our hard work, shepherding this stubborn flock for nearly a quarter of a century, now we're being sent out to pasture. Some legacy, huh? Maybe it's all an illusion. May we make a rightful claim that our work here accomplished anything good?" Elijah put his right hand to his lips and blew her a kiss. "See you soon, my love."

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In a matter of days, the entire mountain valley community knew that Elijah had been sacked by the church. He was forced to field questions and phone calls concerning the decision, much to his chagrin. He was unfailingly polite to the probing and often rude questions people from both inside and outside the church asked.

He decided he would give them all one of two answers to their inquisition: “Still mulling over how long I’ll stay,” or “I’ve decided to move to a warmer climate, so I can be closer to my sons’ children.”

Having to live with this great disappointment unsettled his countenance and he was ever brooding. Though it brought a sense of calm to him, more sinister than comforting, it distorted his thinking. Soon, when he was alone, his disappointment and constant loneliness ushered in fits of anger and rage. At night, as he was preparing to go to bed, he often moaned and cried out to Daisy in shouts of near delusion.

His one comfort was his dog.

“Come here, boy. Come here, Zeus,” Elijah called to his beloved black Labrador retriever. Zeus had been his buddy for a decade. He detected that there had been a change in his master, and he was reluctant to spend time with him. Zeus normally chose to sit close to Elijah’s easy chair, allowing his master to reach down and gently rub his fur, making both of them feel better. The change in Elijah’s demeanor made Zeus seek distance, as if he were somehow aware that his master was struggling with difficult decisions. Wagging his tail, he cautiously approached Elijah.

“There you are,” Elijah said, grabbing him by his collar and holding his face directly before him with both hands. “How’s my big boy?” Elijah looked into Zeus’s big eyes. “Do you know something is in the air? Do you miss her as much as I do? She told me she felt safe when you were by her side, did you know that?”

Elijah let Zeus go and got up to fix himself a cup of coffee.

“I think our neighbors up the road, you know, the Grinder family with the three small kids...well, they’re not too small.” He turned to Zeus. “Old enough to roughhouse and give you a good workout.” He put cream in his coffee and sat down at the table. “We’ll make a trip up there in a few minutes and see if we can’t find you a new home,” he mumbled, tears pooling in his eyes.

Zeus read Elijah’s troubled emotions and came close; he

rested his head in his lap and whimpered.

“I...I know it isn’t going to be easy.” He gazed at Zeus as he lightly stroked the soft place between his ears. “You’ll be much better off if we do it this way.” He wiped away a tear from his nose. Zeus moved his head as if he were trying to dig in and draw closer to him, so he might comfort him in some manner. “Now...don’t go making this any harder than it is. You can’t go where I’m going; that’s final.”

The sun was disappearing rapidly as darkness settled on the valley, a heavy chill resting on the land. Elijah grabbed his spring jacket and put a leash on Zeus, and they made their way to the Grinders’ house. Jack and Millie Grinder, kind people and proud parents, and their rambunctious three children had recently joined the church.

“Just plant the seed, tend the soil a bit, and wait for the Lord to bring in the harvest,” Elijah would say often, giving his spiritual counsel concerning the evangelistic work of the people in the church.

With Zeus in the heel position, they walked toward the house. His mind soon reflected back to when he met the family.

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“Have you met the new neighbors?” Daisy asked.

“I saw the moving truck and a number of people carrying in their goods and furniture in the house.”

“Get your hat. We’re going to pay them a visit.” She motioned for him to carry the warm peach cobbler she had pulled bubbling from the oven only moments ago. They covered the short distance quickly.

“Yoo-hoo?” Daisy called. “Anybody home?”

“We are hip-deep in boxes.” A woman with too much weight for her height peeked around the door. “Millie...Millie Grinder,” she said kindly, sticking out her hand, her smile quickly disarming them. “My husband, Jack, is back there someplace.” She waved her hand behind her. “Peach cobbler, Jack’s favorite,” she said, spying the cobbler in Elijah’s hands.

Daisy took it from Elijah and gave it to her, saying, “Thought you

might like to have a little dessert when you take a break.”

“Jack, come meet the neighbors!” Millie yelled.

Jack Grinder was as thin as Millie was fat, and, when standing side by side, they made for an odd-looking couple.

“Howdy,” he said sheepishly, politely shaking hands.

“He’s a bit of a wallflower,” Millie said softly, as though he were not standing beside her, “but I love him to death!”

“Do you folks have a church to attend?” Elijah asked.

“Yes, we’d like to invite your family to our church if you don’t already have one,” Daisy added.

Silence filled the air for a few seconds; then Millie looked at her husband.

“We are good folk who don’t see the need to go traipsing off to a church filled with hypocrites,” Jack blurted accusingly, creating a frosty atmosphere where once there was warm cordiality.

“Well, we just wanted to welcome you all to the neighborhood,” Elijah said, cueing Daisy that it was time to leave, never mentioning that he was the preacher at Valley Church.

“Don’t pay my husband much attention,” Millie whispered, walking the Johnsons out a way. “Church just sets his teeth on edge; he had a bad experience when he was a boy.”

They remained friendly, and they were able to get them to be C & E—Christmas and Easter—attendees. A year later, Jack was hurt on the job and couldn’t work for a few months. Very quickly, financial burdens strapped the family. Daisy had been privy to the information because she had stopped to check on Millie on one of her daily morning walks. Millie broke down and told her their plight.

“Elijah, we have to do something to help,” she insisted. She marshaled the women of the church, and they soon had put together a list of who would provide a hot meal once a day for the family. Jack fussed about the charity, but he was grateful. Their children were too small to do any work around the house, so Tim’s youth group came out and mowed the yard and policed the area. Payment was offered, but it was refused, much to Jack’s relief, as what little they had was hardly enough.

Soon, Jack and Millie became faithful in attendance to the small church.

“They touched our hearts. They showed us a living Jesus,” Millie said, sharing some of the reasons why they came to make their good confession and be baptized into Jesus Christ.

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As Elijah and Zeus approach the Grinder house, they could see Millie sweeping the porch.

“Good morning, Millie. I hope we aren’t interrupting anything,” Elijah said.

“Parson Johnson, what a nice surprise. And you brought your faithful companion with you, I see,” she said, ruffling Zeus’ ears. “The house is a mess, but come on in anyway. I’ll just be a minute. How about a hot cup of coffee?” she called, disappearing into the kitchen, squashing any opportunity for response. “Had to get that dryer a’hummin’. Two creams, right?” She soon reappeared, coffee in hand, and handed Elijah a cup. She harrumphed into the chair directly across from him and looked expectantly, waiting for him to speak.

“Millie, the reason I came—”

“It’s a crying shame what they did to you,” she interrupted. “I’m sorry. Please, go on,” she said, chuckling.

“I do appreciate your thoughts, Millie.” He glanced at her, and his mind seemed to falter for a second. “Who am I fooling? It was time they put the old dog down,” he tried to joke.

“Just isn’t right...that’s all,” she said, wringing her hands as tears filled her eyes.

“I guess you heard about my plans?” he asked, questioning with his eyes. “If you didn’t, you’re the only one in the valley who hasn’t.”

The two chuckled, breaking the tension.

“So you’re going to move down south and be with your sons?”

“Closer, not *with* them...if you know what I mean,” he

said. "A fancy retirement place where they don't allow pets."

"What are you going to do with Zeus?" As she asked, she knew the answer. "You need a home for him."

"Your kids love him and..."

"...And you want us to take him and give him a good home?" she ended his sentence. "We'd love to."

"I'm mighty glad to hear you say that." Elijah's tension drained away. "I'll bring up his food; he's partial to a certain brand." He pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket. "It's not much, but it'll help defray the expenses some." He handed it to her. It was the title to his seven-year-old Buick. "I figure I'll buy me a new one when I get settled," he said in response to the look of surprise written on her face.

"We don't expect pay for taking Zeus. This is much too generous. Besides, your kids would benefit from this."

"My kids," Elijah said, chuckling, "wouldn't be caught dead in it. They have fancy cars that give you more room."

She reached across the table and touched his arm. "We'll take real good care of him...I promise," she said. "Please, don't bother bringing up that dog food."

She walked Elijah to the door, and Zeus followed him, expecting to leave. Elijah bent down and stroked Zeus across the back a few times. "You can't come with me this time, old boy," he whispered shakily.

The tearful parting was more than Millie could stand; she clutched her breast and turned her head away, her tears running more heavily than his.

Elijah opened the door and stepped out, taking one last look at the loyal dog he'd raised from a puppy; he pulled the door shut behind him and began the walk back to his house, alone. Looking back several times, Elijah's heart ached. Several times he nearly ran back to Zeus, but he didn't.

"The second most painful thing I've ever done," he said, mumbling. "Daisy, my dear, love hurts like hell...doesn't it?"

A Step into the Abyss

Elijah slept the sleep of the damned that night. His dreams were filled with a constant back and forth with Daisy. He wanted one thing; she wouldn't hear of it.

It's going to be my way!

He was jolted awake. *It was like Jacob wrestling with the angel all night, and he had his hip put out of joint. He suffered a limp from that night on,* he reflected. Sleep wasn't possible, so he fixed a cup of coffee and sat in his recliner. Sometime later he awoke, and the sun's morning light shone in his eyes.

Feeling groggy, he took a shower, flossed and brushed his teeth, shaved, and used some aftershave lotion. He fixed himself a hearty breakfast of his momma's recipe for buttermilk pancakes. Daisy learned to make them early in their marriage, and it was a treat she gave him from time to time.

He heard her voice.

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"Elijah Satchel Johnson, you can sure leave a mess," Daisy said. It was the first time he'd made her those pancakes and surprised her with breakfast in bed on their third anniversary. When she saw the kitchen, she was appalled.

"I sure did, didn't I," he mumbled.

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He went to his closet and picked out his "marrying and

burying” suit, a navy blue three-button suit. He put on a white, heavily starched long-sleeved shirt; Daisy had embroidered his initials, *ESJ*, on the cuff. Then he put on ruby cufflinks that matched his tie. “*When you are supposed to make an entrance, make one,*” his grandmother had always told him. He put on Cordovan-colored wingtip shoes and dress socks, which came up over the calf, then looked into the mirror of Daisy’s vanity dresser. “Elijah, you’re fit company to take anywhere.”

He pulled out the captain’s chair—his customary seat—from the large oak dining table. He removed the white linen tablecloth from the table, folding it gently and placing it in one of the empty chairs. He turned to the locked gun cabinet and retrieved a shotgun. It had been a couple of years since he had held the shotgun in his hand, let alone shot it.

I must be getting weaker. This weighs a ton, he thought. He cracked it open and checked the bullet chamber; it was empty. He reached into the shell box, took out two shells, and put them in his suit-coat pocket, then closed the chamber. He placed it on the table. He retrieved a .38 pistol from its hook and aimed it swiftly, as if he were trying to hit an imaginary target.

You’ve got to squeeze the trigger very slowly if you expect to hit the target, he told Daisy the first time he had tried to teach her how to shoot the gun.

He spun the pistol around his finger. Again, Daisy’s voice came to him.

Think you’re the Durango Kid, don’t you? Daisy had teased him the first time she saw him do that. Even before they were married, he had told her his favorite cowboy had been the Durango Kid. “*I like him best because he never sang like a sissy or mooned over the girls,*” he’d told her.

The pistol felt cool to the touch. The scent of the gunpowder’s residue penetrated his nostrils, and his face flushed as a wave of embarrassment rushed through him. He put five bullets into the pistol’s chamber.

I always wanted to know what it would feel like to play Russian Roulette, he thought. He gently placed the pistol next to the shotgun, then lowered himself in the chair before him. With trembling hands, he picked up the pistol.

The gun, though heavy, felt comforting in his hand. He shut his eyes slowly, and flashes of Daisy and the life he knew flashed before them, like stills from an old picture movie.

He spun the chamber; time seemed to freeze as the bullets whirred, blurring, just as reality did with the thoughts coursing through his mind in desperation.

“I...just need...a break,” he said, calming his hand and breathing shallowly. “I just need—”

Elijah, don’t do this! Daisy’s voice rang through the silence, the image of her face paralyzing him momentarily.

His hand shook badly, forcing him to use two hands to steady the gun. Sweat poured out of his pores, droplets of sweat inching down his face and splattering onto the tabletop. Abruptly, as though interrupted, he put the pistol down and picked up the shotgun. He struggled to retrieve the shells weighing heavy against his heart from their place in his suit pocket. His fingers were clumsy, and he became frustrated. He ripped the pocket in anger, shells falling loose, and grappled to rescue them before they hit the floor. He managed to do it, and, grasping them with a stranglehold grip, he shakily loaded two shells into the chamber.

The addition of the bullets added heaviness to the gun, but it was nothing compared to the weight he carried on his shoulder, weight that he would be relieved of in only a matter of moments. He turned the shotgun around and pointed it at his throat.

Again, he saw the moments that made up his life flash before him. He saw himself back in his Christian Ethics class at the seminary. His professor started telling the class a story.

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“There was a godly traveling salesman who had been away from his wife and family for three weeks. He was an elder in his church and filled in as

a Sunday school teacher when needed. He missed his wife's warm and eager body. He was used to having sex three or four times a week. Three weeks seemed like an eternity. Temptation continued to gnaw at him. He couldn't help but notice the curvaceous hips and sensual legs of the many women he encountered in the offices he visited or passed on the street.

"Happily married for fifteen years, he had never seriously been tempted to be unfaithful. He took the apostle's advice: He protected his environment and didn't consider himself to be bulletproof. One particular night, his boss and some friends went out to a restaurant for food and drinks. He usually chose not to join in since he rarely had a drink. Reluctantly, he decided to go. In a while, he was really enjoying himself, and he had succumbed to a couple of drinks. At the party was a lovely blonde who was unafraid to flirt. Her sensuality drowned out the warning sounds of the devil in 1 Peter: '...He roars around just looking for someone to devour.'

"The salesman woke up with her on the pillow next to him. He had drunk too much, and the liquor dulled and distorted the intimate details of the one-night stand. His conscience was pricked so badly that he quickly dressed, offered his apologies, and left. Evidently, he was filled with remorse; he probably wasn't thinking straight. He gunned his car onto the road. A city street sweeper hit him, and he was killed instantly.

"The theological and ethical question for the test is, did that man spend an eternity with Jesus?"

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That is the theological question of all the ages, Elijah thought. "Daisy, what do you think is the right biblical answer?"

Elijah slowly placed his finger on the shotgun's trigger.

Ding...dong...ding...dong. The doorbell shattered the tension and panicked his heart over being found out. As the gun fell awkwardly on the table, it thudded loudly, and Elijah braced himself for a blast, uncertain as to whether it would discharge upon contact.

Who in the world? he thought, turning reluctantly toward the door.

He peeked out and saw an extra-long van parked in front

of his house, and standing on his front porch were two strangers: a man and a woman.

What do these people want? He cracked the door. "I'm really not interested in what you're peddling. I'm sure you are well intentioned, but it isn't a convenient time."

The strangers appeared pleasant enough and were dressed in uniforms he'd not seen before.

The man's kind eyes peered at Elijah; his smile was barely detectable through a heavy beard. His hair brushed the shoulders of a heavily starched white shirt that looked to be from another decade: the collar was long with pointed ends tipped in camel-colored cloth. His tie, cut from the same material, was plain, with the exception of an unusual tie-dyed star along the bottom edge. In his left hand, he carried a small leather Bible, worn from heavy use.

The woman, similar in appearance, wore a long, conservative skirt cinched with a belt, accentuating curvaceous hips. Her blouse was white, heavily starched, and her collar was like his but constructed of twill cloth. She wore a tie like his; it too had a bizarre tie-dyed star. She wore no makeup, and half of her hair had been twisted into a neat bun, while the rest flowed down her back and down to her waist.

"Really," Elijah said, moving to shut the door in their faces, "this isn't a good time. Besides, I'm a Christian minister, and we would just end up in a hot debate about Joseph Smith—"

"I'm Priscilla, and this is Aquila. We're the Darks," the man said. "We're not here to evangelize thee."

"Oh no, sir. Thee are too busy saving the lost to waste his time on such tomfoolery," she said, smiling.

"Why are you here?"

"Aquila heard what happened to thee." He looked at Elijah. "She heard it from a lady she knows at the local beauty parlor."

"If an alien from Mars should happen to show up at my

door, more than likely he knows what happened to me.” Elijah smiled; they all laughed.

“Thee are not of our flock, but we have heard of thee’s good works. We felt the need to come and convey our best wishes for thee’s *forced* retirement,” Priscilla said.

“Yes, our Father has asked us to pay thee a visit and to pray with thee,” Aquila said.

Elijah turned his head back to the dining room table, where the shotgun and the pistol rested. *I can’t let them see what I was doing*, Elijah thought. *Why are they here? Do they suspect me?*

“Well, since you have been so kind to consider my spiritual needs, I would consider it an honor to have you pray with me.”

He quickly guided them past the dining room table and into the den.

“How soon were thee planning on taking that trip?” Aquila asked, her eyes tracing back to the dining room table.

How could she know? he thought. “I...I was planning,” he stuttered. “After I cleaned them.” He motioned to the weapons on the table. “I was going to take off soon.”

“Father is always ready and willing to give his children all of the encouragement and comfort he can when thee are *ready* to take that trip,” Priscilla said, looking into Elijah’s eyes.

“It is said, ‘Thou art truly blessed in an instant.’” Aquila slowly fluttered her long eyelashes at Elijah.

Do they really know what I was in the midst of doing?

Aquila walked over to where Elijah was sitting. She put her right hand on his left forearm. “Thee could show mighty courage.” Once again, her gaze went back to the table.

“Perhaps you will see her beautiful face today?” Aquila smiled at him. She looked at Priscilla. “Perhaps we had better pray with Elijah and leave him to his spiritual work.”

“Yes, Mother, that would be best,” Priscilla said. He motioned for Elijah and the woman to gather in a circle. They held

hands. “Father, we are all comforted by your presence. Brother Elijah is becoming a warrior, and we are proud to stand with him. We ask thee to provide for him in his grave hour of need. If you deem it proper, fit him with the armor so he can do the deed that will give you all of the glory. Amen and amen.”

A strange darkness clouded Elijah’s eyes.

“It seems to be getting rather dark. Perhaps a storm is brewing,” Elijah said. “I thank you for the prayer.”

Priscilla looked at Aquila, and they nodded at each other. “Yes, it’s getting ready to storm.” He shook Elijah’s hand.

Aquila reached out and took Elijah’s left hand, and she kissed it. “Thou brother has shown a kindness to thee. When you are in our neck of the woods, come and let us break bread with thee,” she said, smiling demurely.

Elijah’s face grew flushed. “Yes, if I find myself in your *neck of the woods*, I’ll pay you a visit.”

Elijah walked them to the door. He stood in the doorway and meekly waved to them as they reached the van.

As Priscilla opened the door, he said, “I’m sure it will be sooner than we both know,” and as quickly as they’d arrived, they were gone.

A Fastball You Can't See

The Theophany's Appearance

Elijah shut the door and returned to his seat at the dining room table. A great spirit of discouragement penetrated his heart. Pent-up rage and anger seethed inside him, and the very sinew and marrow of his bones were cheerless. He felt dizzy and struggled to keep from hyperventilating as his muscles hardened and threatened to cramp. His frustrations tore into his guts, and he slammed his fist into the table with such force it cracked the end piece.

In a swift move, he picked up the revolver and studied it. With shaking hands, he closed his eyes and lifted the pistol, resting its tip against his sweat-covered temple. His finger, trigger-ready,

trembled. He took a deep, quaking breath and exhaled.

"You're going to get blood all over your suit...and Daisy's oak table." A strange voice broke the tension, startling Elijah. "They're not suggestions, you know. 'Thou shall not murder' is a holy commandment," the voice said. A cinnamon-colored cat appeared, standing on his hind legs; a dark blue baseball cap was cocked to one side of his head, an embroidered red cross and two initials on either side of the logo—J. C.—and a tiny guitar was strapped across his shoulder and hung across his belly.

"I AM gave them to Moses to keep his wandering flock on the straight and narrow. Right there on that old stone tablet, sixth one from the top, in the book of Exodus... 'Thou shall not kill.' Actually, the best root word definition is 'murder.'"

Elijah gripped the .38 pistol, his finger on the trigger. The sight of the apparition unsettled him; he pushed back on the chair so hard he lost his balance. As the chair tumbled backwards, his hand jerked, and he inadvertently pulled the trigger. He shot into the air, putting a hole through the roof of his house.

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God, has God made man," says Genesis 9:6," the cat said, taking cover underneath the table. "Now you've gone and put a hole in your roof!" He came out from under the table and jumped on top of it. He pushed the shotgun off the table, and it landed next to Elijah.

"What? Huh? What is happening?" he asked dizzily.

"Well, it's certain that you're not happening."

"Where did you come from?" Elijah rolled over to get to his feet but lost his balance and fell again.

"For someone who doesn't drink, you do a pretty good imitation of a drunk." The cat, obviously amused by his humor, slapped the table with his paw and laughed. "Are we having a pity party? There weren't enough teats to go around?"

"Who are you?" Elijah, irritated, demanded to know.

"Ernie comes out on the field every day, come rain or

shine, and he declares to the whole baseball world: ‘Let’s play two today,’ and you are looking for an easy out,” the cat sneered.

“What in tarnation are you muttering about? ‘Let’s play two’ mumbo-jumbo stuff?” Elijah asked.

“And you call yourself a Cubs fan, wearing that fancy hat when you are out and about! They ought to kick you out of the fan club. Ernie Banks, just about the greatest Cub of all time, and you can’t recall his famous line?”

“How did you get into my house?”

“Hold onto your Cubs cap, old man...I’m a theophany. To be absolutely precise—”

“An angelic, archaeological messenger sent by God to earth for a spiritual mission?” Elijah said in an awe-filled voice.

“Well, thank the good Lord, at least you’re intelligent enough to know what a theophany is and why it is sent by God.”

“Why are you here?”

The cat nudged the .38. “Evidently, I AM has a purpose.”

Elijah looked at him in utter disbelief. “I...uh...I don’t understand,” he muttered.

“I know, I know. Of all the churches in the world, fancy meeting you,” the cat mimicked the famous actor Humphrey Bogart in the movie *Casa Blanca*.

“He sent me a comedian too.” Elijah frowned. He finally found the energy to take a seat. “My legs are shaky.”

“If you ask me, everything about you is shaky,” the cat said, eyeballing him. “To answer your question, my name is Scooter.”

Elijah chuckled as he looked into the cat’s face.

“Scooter...huh? Why not just ‘Cat?’”

“I AM chose this assignment just for me. He said you were a baseball fanatic. And since I’m the greatest baseball historian, right away I had more than just a morsel of hope that this mission was going to be one of baseball repartee: Expect and give no quarter. I’ve got to tell you, Satchel, you have already disappointed me.”

“Why did you call me ‘Satchel?’”

“That is your middle name, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but hardly anyone knows that. How did you know?”

“Satchel, old boy, there isn’t anything, and I mean *anything*, I don’t know about you. Would you like for me to pull your dossier?”

“I don’t like that name,” Elijah replied.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Well, yes, I do. When I was a kid, everybody teased me about it.”

“About the famous—”

“Famous nothing!” Elijah said. “They called me ‘baggage-head,’ ‘suitcase Eli,’ you know...Satchel.”

“How’d you get that middle name? Is it some family name from back in your tree?”

“For some lame-brained reason, my grandmother talked my mom into the horrible name.”

“So your momma never told you why your grandma insisted on giving you that name?”

“Never did.”

“Satchel, my man, you’re in for a surprise.” Surprisingly, the cat broke into song: *“Take me out to the ball game; take me out to the crowd. Buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks; I don’t care if I never get back. Let me root, root, root for the Cubbies, if they don’t win it’s a shame. But it’s one, two, three strikes you’re out at the old ballgame.”* Scooter sounded just like Harry Cary, the famous baseball announcer of the St. Louis Cardinals and Chicago Cubs.

Elijah’s eyes bugged out with shock, and he laughed so hard he put his head down and pounded his hand upon the cracked table.

“How long are you staying?” he asked. “I’m quite positive you could turn into a real pain in the...you-know-where. So, let me get this right, you are a theophany, sent by the Father—”

“For all future references, while I’m with you, he will be known as I AM. He actually prefers it that way,” Scooter interrupted Elijah.

“Okay, I AM sent you to earth to carry out his mission. And of all the earthly creatures you could have chosen to manifest as, you chose a mangy, cinnamon-colored cat?”

“This may be the opportune time to say that the good book warns about ‘casting one’s pearls before swine.’”

Elijah gave him a look of scorn. “That was a good one. Scooter...is that right? So why come as a cat?”

“Eli, that is a good question, one I have cogitated a bit on, especially on my trip down. I surmised that I needed to be some form of a small, domesticated animal; it boiled down to either a cat or a dog.”

“I’d have chosen a dog.”

“That’s why you are a Cub fan and I’m a Yankee fan. Whenever they have been given a choice, one has been a perennial loser and the other a ‘four-leaf clover’ winner. Need I delineate who is whom? Not to speak disparagingly of your present companion, but take old Zeus for example. In your lame attempt to give him a bit of dignity, which, I might add, failed miserably, you gave him the name of the supreme god of the Greeks. Here you are, a godly man, bringing a heathen name into your home, and by choice.”

“You know about my dog, Zeus?”

“Since we are going to be joined at the hip for quite a spell, it will behoove us both if you get it through your thick noggin that I’m a theophany. I have total recall to all known knowledge, past, present, and future, which I AM sees fit for me to possess. Now, back to Zeus. He is like a mother with an ugly child. No matter what the camera shows, hers is beautiful. Your old Lab is of the same ilk. Now, now, before you get a little hot under the collar, preening a bit and overprotective of your beloved mutt, answer me one question: Does he have any regal breeding, any regal bearing?”

“He’s a man’s dog.” Elijah lifted up his chin and thrust it out.

“He eats other dogs’ poop!”

“He does not.”

“Tut-tut, must not lie. I’ve seen him, so I know you have. He slobbers all over his food and—if you let him—all over you. For goodness’ sake, his favorite game is to chase a stick that you throw continuously.”

“But every dog needs exercise.”

“And that ‘heel’ stuff? Walking in place behind you? What does that do for his self-respect?”

“I AM put dogs on earth and gave man dominion over them,” Elijah replied. “He wrote in Genesis, ‘Then God said, ‘Let’s make man in our image, in our likeness, and let him rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’”

“You are so right, Elijah. And that’s why I chose to be a cat. A cat understands I AM’s plan for him, yet it can create an illusion for man that he is the master. We don’t come when we are called. We don’t give you unmerited favor and slavishly seek to do your beckoning, unless it is in our best interest. For pity’s sake, we keep a proper decorum in the relationship because we have the good sense to know how to hand out just enough treats to the master’s poor psyche to keep in his good graces; yet we frustrate his or her vanity to no end. Cats just buy into that yin yang thing.” He snickered.

“You’re not a very humble servant for I AM, are you?”

“Funny you would say that. I AM tells me that every time he sends me off on a new mission. When you were bound and determined to off yourself, were you thinking Russian Roulette?”

“Why did you pick that name...Scooter?”

Scooter put down his guitar, and, as he touched it, it morphed into a bat.

“How do you like my specially crafted Louisville Slugger? By the way, Satch, do you know how the Louisville Slugger bat got into the Majors? Of course you don’t! In 1884, Pete Browning, the great slugger for the Louisville Eclipse team broke his bat in anger. A fan in the stands, Bud Hillerich—Hillerich Louisville Slugger—made one for him. He had over two hundred bats made, and he gave each one a name from the Bible.” Scooter swung it a few times, as if he were trying to hit a pitched ball. He put his bat down on the table, and it once again became a guitar. He jumped up and down on the table, followed by a quick three-sixty spin; suddenly, he bent down into an athletic stance as if he were about to field a ground ball. He pretended he caught it and whirled to throw it to first base.

“The Scooter...duh.” In frustration, he threw up his paws and heaved a deep sigh of disappointment because of Elijah’s blank stare. “The Scooter!” he emphasized. “The great Yankee shortstop Phil Rizzuto! I AM, help me out here. This is going to be a bigger job than I bargained for.” He looked to the heavens.

“What’s this theophany mission stuff?”

“Let me see if I can dumb down this information for your tiny bird brain,” he said rudely. “Many years ago I AM spoke to the prophet Ezekiel. It was in reference to restoring the nation of Israel back into the good graces of the bosom of I AM after it had been unfaithful to him and had chosen other gods to serve. I AM referenced dead bones to signify Israel.

“‘Son of man,’—he referred to Ezekiel as Son of man—‘can these bones live?’... ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’

“Satan’s been busy having a field day on Earth, using all his evil, spiritual magic tricks to keep mankind discouraged,

discomforted, and dejected. Humans often feel lost, rejected, and forgotten, to the point of coming to the same apprised opinion the Psalmist did: ‘I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord, and my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint. You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak. I thought about the former days, the years of long ago; I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired. Will the Lord reject us forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?’

“Doesn’t that sound like a suicide watch? For whatever reason, and certainly only I AM knows, he has sent me to rescue your mangy hide from a nefarious end. It is one that would be too horrible to contemplate.”

Elijah’s hands lightly touched the weapons nearby. “You mean...?”

“Yes, I mean. What were you thinking?”

“I changed my mind, really! Then those strangers appeared...” Elijah mumbled in his defense.

“That’s what Judas said. He told the Sanhedrin something to the effect: ‘I changed my mind. Here...take back the thirty pieces of silver,’ when he realized all of his plans had gone for naught; he hanged himself.

“I AM has commissioned me to take you on a spiritual journey to find a spiritual sage: Methuselah. I don’t know all of the details. I was instructed to come and rescue a pitiful example of a Christian, a parson, no less, by the name of Elijah Satchel Johnson, and teach him about the love of I AM, so he will be equipped to do his will.”

“To do his will?”

“I don’t make this stuff up. When I AM sends me to complete a mission, I don’t argue the merits of the trip; I just go. My mission is to dig up your past so that, by exposing it to the

spiritual light of day, you will be ready to serve I AM. Right now, you're a sorry mess of spiritual confusion who isn't fit to serve as a good waiter in a belly-bomber restaurant," Scooter said, adding sarcasm to his scolding.

"I'm sixty-five and have just been put out to pasture..."

"Perhaps, I AM's numerical counting machine doesn't calculate the way man's does. It's possible he sees you as a mere pup instead of an old geezer slipping on a banana peel with one foot in the grave."

"Scooter, I live in a throw-away society. A man can't find a decent job if he's over fifty. Just look what they've gone and done to me."

"Perhaps I AM will forge you into something he will find new use for. Maybe he will mold you into some type of earthly, spiritual archaeologist. Now wouldn't that be something? You're over sixty-five? Whoopee! Perhaps it is time you found a new career."

"Doing what? Preaching in the town square during lunch? Providing counsel to the damned and lost during a coffee break?"

"Oh no! Who would expect that? Of course, the Apostle Paul made a pretty fine spiritual living doing it, didn't he?"

Scooter's insightful truth struck Elijah in the heart. His face flushed; he was embarrassed by his foolish remarks.

"Perhaps I should spin the chamber again." He used deprecating humor, and they both laughed. "A cat that talks, wears a Yankees baseball cap, and carries his own guitar around! What other gems has I AM sent my way?"

Scooter picked up his guitar and began to play. "*Mommas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys. Don't let 'em pick guitars and drive them old trucks. Make 'em be doctors and lawyers and such. Mommas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys...*"

He twisted his whiskers and wiggled his nose to flaunt his talent before Elijah, whose puzzlement was etched in his face.

"Willie Nelson! Isn't he just about the best you ever heard?"

Would you like to hear the complete song?"

Elijah gave off a howl to mock his effort. "A singing cat who sounds just like Willie!" He lifted his head to the heavens. "What's next, the Rolling Stones?"

"If you don't care for my singing..." He put down his guitar, quickly picked it up, and, as though magic, it was his bat again. "...Maybe you'd like a little game of pepper?" He went through the motions of hitting ground balls to Elijah.

"Pepper?"

"Sure! A tall, lanky guy like you must have a first-sacker's mitt around here someplace. You did play first base, didn't you?"

Pop! Skin against skin echoed in the room as Elijah struck his fist into his hand and frightened Scooter so that he jumped high off the table.

"I was a dancing dandy in my day," Elijah bragged.

"You probably had two, sometimes three left feet," the cat teased.

"I can't prove it now, but in my playing days I could execute a complete split to save an errant throw."

"A regular Lou Gehrig, huh?"

"He was my idol growing up. My, how he could hit those opposite-field doubles and triples! He really was a better player than Ruth, you know."

"I thought you'd be a Billy Williams fan since you're one of those *dinky-donk* Cubs fans," Scooter chided.

"Oh, I liked him too, but he wasn't in Lou's league."

"So you like baseball trivia?"

"When I was boy, I ate, breathed, and slept baseball. I thought I was going to be in the Majors one day."

"You and ten million other little boys," Scooter said. "Let's see how smart you are. I'll give you one any chump could get: Who was the first Yankee to have his number retired?"

"Who doesn't know that one? The house that Ruth built," Elijah replied cockily. "The answer, none other than Babe Ruth."

“If you asked that question to a million fans, that’s the answer they’d give. Wrong!” Scooter snickered.

“Who is it then?” Elijah pressed.

“Today, I feel like the luckiest man...” Scooter quoted.

“...On the face of the earth,” Elijah finished his sentence. “Lou Gehrig! How could I have missed that?”

“Okay, I’ll give you a smidgen of Gilead’s balm. What number was retired?”

Elijah’s eyes lit up. “I know that one, number four.”

Scooter lifted up his paws to the heavens. “Thank you,” he mouthed.

“So what can a theophany do? More importantly, what can’t he do?”

“I argued vehemently with I AM; well, that’s not exactly true. I pleaded, fussed, and almost cried big tears to get him to allow me to look like a cat but not actually be a cat. It was to no avail.” Scooter heaved a sigh.

“You mean that you are I AM’s sent messenger, but you are earthbound to behave like a regular cat?” Elijah laughed at Scooter’s look of distress.

“While on Earth, sad to say, but true; I’m nothing more than a flea-bitten cat. My only solace is that on our journey, there will be times when you will need to look to me for counsel and direction. But most of the time, I will just be your baseball-knowing, guitar-picking, singing cat companion.”

“Zeus will love terrorizing you.” Elijah’s eyes opened wide, and he nodded with a ghoulish grin.

“Zeus won’t be making the trip.”

“I’m not going without him.”

“You gave him away; have you forgotten already?”

“How did you know?”

“How many times do I—”

“I know. I know. You know everything,” Elijah finished his sentence again. “I’m not having any messy litter box. You’ll just

have to use the great outdoors...that’s what I AM created it for.”

Scooter jumped off the table and walked to the front door.

“That won’t be a problem,” he said with an air of triumph and banged into the door. “Ow!” he yelped, finding himself on his backside.

“Where’s the theophany’s magic now?” Elijah asked, overtaken by a fit of laughter.

Rubbing his nose, Scooter said, “I may need that litter box after all.”

“Maybe I AM thought you needed a little comeuppance.” Elijah opened the door. “Out you go, and watch out for that striped kitty.”

“Funny...very funny,” he countered as he ran for the woods.

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“I feel as though I’m eating some dog’s ‘leavings,’” Scooter said, munching on a bowl of Zeus’s canned dog food.

“Zeus won’t eat that stuff. He only eats dried dog food. Daisy bought that a long time back because she wanted to give him a special treat. I thought I’d never get rid of it.” He gave Scooter an ornery glance.

Scooter finished the food and then licked his paws and cleaned his face.

“I AM could have sent me a cat with better lines. You know, something much prettier with better fur, more muscular.”

“Since I AM knows you more intimately than anyone, perhaps he wanted your companion to closely match its master.” Elijah realized that Scooter gave as well as he got.

“Your wit is worse than your singing.”

Scooter yawned and stretched slowly. “We’d better get some shuteye; we must start our journey early in the morning.”

Elijah nodded his head and headed back to his bedroom, leaving Scooter to paw and prod the crumpled blanket on the couch into a suitable bed.

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“Daisy, I must be ready for the people with the white coats to come and get me,” Elijah said as he readied himself for bed. Just before he turned out the light, he looked out the door; Scooter had moved from the couch and was curled up on the hooked rug in front of the fireplace.

What does I AM want with me? He thought. He shut the door and climbed into bed. The feel of the mattress and cool sheets gave him a sense of comfort; he sighed and welcomed escape into sleep.

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“So tell me, who invented baseball?” the now-familiar voice startled Elijah. He jumped out of bed. “Relax, will you. Who invented baseball?”

“How did you get in here?”

“Sometimes solid surfaces don’t faze me,”

“Abner Doubleday,” Elijah replied.

Scooter made a buzzer sound. “Wrong.”

“What do you mean, wrong! Everyone knows Doubleday invented baseball.”

“He didn’t.”

“He did too.”

“He has been erroneously credited for inventing baseball. Actually, it is believed the game came from England. A game called ‘Rounders,’ where the offensive player could be hit with a thrown ball and it counted for an out, was the genesis of the American form of baseball.”

“Hogwash! Doubleday invented the game.”

“Did you know that a special commission was convened to discover who really invented baseball? Doubleday was given the credit because a man, Abner Graves, claimed he was a classmate of Doubleday when he invented the game in Cooperstown in 1839. The only problem with that information? Doubleday was at West Point and Graves was five years old at the time.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“The Hall of Fame at Cooperstown credits Alexander J. Cartwright, founder of the New York Nickerbockers, as the modern father of baseball.”

Elijah whistled. “I’ll be hornswaggled.”

“Satchel, my man, that’s a bona fide winner in any trivia contest.

“Don’t call me Satchel. You aren’t planning on sleeping in my bed, are you?”

“Too soft!”

“Where are we going on this trip?” Elijah asked.

The room was silent. He reached out, feeling for Scooter, but he was gone.