

# McDuff on the Mound

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It wasn't much, a feeble blooper over second, call it luck, but it was enough to shake McDuff. He stepped weakly off the left side of the pitcher's mound, relieved to see his catcher Gus take the job of moving down behind the slow runner to back up the throw in to first. Fat Flynn galloped around the bag toward second, crouched apelike on the basepath, waggled his arms, then bounded back to first as the throw came in from short center. McDuff felt lightheaded. Flynn's soft blooper had provoked a total vision that iced his blood. Because the next batter up now was Blake: oh yes, man, it was all too clear. "Today's my day," McDuff told himself, as though taking on the cares of the world. He tucked his glove in his armpit briefly, wiped the sweat from his brow, resettled his cap, thrust his hand back into his glove.

Gus jogged over to the mound before going back behind the plate, running splaylegged around the catcher's guard that padded his belly. McDuff took the toss from first, over Gus's head, stood staring dismally at Flynn, now edging flat-footed away from the bag, his hands making floppy loosewristed swirls at the cuffs of his Mudville knickers. Gus spat, glanced back over his shoulder at first, then squinted up at McDuff. "Whatsa matter, kid?"

McDuff shrugged, licked his dry lips. "I don't know, Gus. I tried to get him." He watched Flynn taunt, flapping his hands like donkey ears, thumbing his nose. The hoodoo. Rubbing it in. Did he know? He must. "I really tried." He remembered this nightmare, running around basepaths, unable to stop.

Gus grinned, though, ignoring the obvious: "Nuts, the bum was lucky. C'mon, kid, ya got this game in ya back pocket!" He punched McDuff lightly in the ribs with his stiff platter of a mitt, spat in encouragement, and joggled away in a widelegged trot toward home plate, head cocked warily toward first, where Flynn bounced insolently and made insulting noises. Settling then into his crouch, and before pulling his mask down, Gus jerked his head at the approaching batter and winked out at McDuff. Turkey Blake. Blake the cake. Nothing to it. A joke. Maybe Gus is innocent, McDuff thought. Maybe not.

Now, in truth, McDuff was not, by any standard but his own, in real trouble. Here it was, the bottom of the ninth, two away, one more out and the game was over, and he had a fat two-run lead going for him. A lot of the hometown Mudville fans had even given it up for lost and had started shuffling indifferently toward the exits. Or was their shuffle a studied shuffle and itself a cunning

taunt? a mocking rite like Flynn's buffoonery at first? Had they shuffled back there in the shadows just to make Flynn's fluke hit sting more? It was more than McDuff could grasp, so he scratched his armpits and tried to get his mind off it. Now, anyway, they were all shuffling back. And did they grin as they shuffled? Too far away to tell. But they probably did, goddamn them. You're making it all up, he said. But he didn't convince himself. And there was Blake. Blake the Turkey. Of course.

Blake was the league clown, the butt. Slope-shouldered, potbellied, broad-rumped, bandy-legged. And a long goiter-studded neck with a small flat head on top, overlarge cap down around the ears. They called him "Turkey," Blake the Turkey. The fans cheered him with a gobbling noise. And that's just what they did now as he stepped up: gobbled and gobbled. McDuff could hardly believe he had been brought to this end, that it was happening to him, even though he had known that sooner or later it must. Blake had three bats. He gave them a swing and went right off his feet. Gobble gobble gobble. Then he got up, picked out two bats, chose one, tossed the other one away, but as though by mistake, hung on to it, went sailing with it into the bat racks. Splintering crash. Mess of broken bats. Gobble gobble. McDuff, in desperation, pegged the ball to first, but Flynn was sitting on the bag, holding his quaking paunch, didn't even run when the ball got away from the first baseman, just made gobbling noises.

Vaguely, McDuff had seen it coming, but he'd figured on trouble from Cooney and Burroughs right off. A four-to-two lead, last inning, four batters between him and Casey, two tough ones and two fools, it was all falling into place: get the two tying runs on base, then two outs, and bring Casey up. So he'd worked like a bastard on those two guys, trying to head it off. Should've known better, should've seen that would have been too easy, too pat, too painless. McDuff, a practical man with both feet on the ground, had always tried to figure the odds, and that's where he'd gone wrong. But would things have been different if Cooney and Burroughs had hit him? Not substantially maybe, there'd still be much the same situation and Casey yet to face. But the stage wouldn't have been just right, and maybe, because of that, somehow, he'd have got out of it.

Cooney, tall, lean, one of the best percentage hitters in the business: by all odds, see, it should have been him. That's what McDuff had thought, so when he'd sucked old Cooney into pulling into an inside curve and grounding out, third to first, he was really convinced he'd got himself over the hump. Even if Burroughs should hit him, it was only a matter of getting Flynn and Blake out, and they never gave anybody any trouble. And Burroughs *didn't* hit him! Big barrel-chested man with a bat no one else in the league could even lift—some said it weighed half a ton—and he'd wasted all that power on a cheap floater, sent it dribbling to the mound and McDuff himself had tossed him out. Hot damn! he'd cried. Waiting for fat Flynn to enter the batter's box, he'd even caught himself giggling. And then that unbelievable blooper. And—*bling!*—the light.

McDuff glared now at Blake, wincing painfully as though to say: get serious, man! Blake was trying to knock the dirt out of his cleats. But each time he lifted his foot, he lost his balance and toppled over. Gobble gobble gobble. Finally, there on the ground, teetering on his broad rump, he took a healthy swing with

the bat at his foot. There was a bang like a firecracker going off, smoke, and the shoe sailed into the stands. Turkey Blake hobbled around in mock pain (or real pain: who could tell and what did it matter? McDuff's pain was real), trying to grasp his stockinged foot, now smoking faintly, but he was too round in the midriff, too short in the arms, to reach it. Gobble gobble gobble. Someone tossed the shoe back and it hit him in the head: bonk! Blake toppled stiffly backwards, his short bandy legs up in the air as though he were dead. Gobble gob—

McDuff, impatient, even embittered, for he felt the injury of it, went into his stretch. Blake leaped up, grabbed a bat from the mad heap, came hopping, waddling, bounding, however the hell it was he moved, up to the plate to take his place. It turned out that the bat he'd picked up was one he'd broken in his earlier act. It was only about six inches long, the rest hanging from it as though by a thread. McDuff felt himself at the edge of tears. The crowd gobbled on, obscenely, delightedly. Blake took a preparatory backswing, and the dangling end of the bat arched around and hit him on the back of the head with a hollow exaggerated clunk. He fell across the plate. Even the umpire now was emitting frantic gobbling sounds and holding his trembling sides. Flynn the fat baserunner called time-out and came huffing and puffing in from first to resuscitate his teammate. McDuff, feeling all the strength go out of him, slumped despairingly off the mound. He picked up the resin bag and played with it, an old nervous habit that now did not relieve him.

His catcher Gus came out. "Gobble gobble," he said.

McDuff winced in hurt. "Gus, for God's sake, cut that out!" he cried. Jesus, they were all against him!

Gus laughed. "Whatsa matter, kid? These guys buggin' ya?" He glanced back toward the plate, where Flynn was practicing artificial respiration on Blake's ass-end, sitting on Blake's small head. "It's all in the game, buddy. Don't forget: gobble and the world gobbles with ya! Yak yak!" McDuff bit his lip. Past happy Gus, he could see Flynn listening to Blake's butt for a breath of life.

"Play baseball and you play with yourself," McDuff said sourly, completing Gus's impromptu aphorism.

"Yeah, you *got* it, kid!" howled Gus, jabbing McDuff in the ribs with his mitt, then rolling back onto the grass in front of the mound, holding his sides, giddy tears springing from his eyes, tobacco juice oozing out his cheeks.

There was a loud moist sound at the plate, like air escaping a toy balloon, and it was greeted by huzzahs and imitative noises from the stands. Flynn jumped up, lifted one of Blake's feet high in the air in triumph, and planted his fallen baseball cap in the clown's crotch, making Blake a parody of Blake, were such a thing absurdly possible. Cheers and courteous gobbling. Blake popped up out of the dust, swung at Flynn, hit the ump instead.

"Why don't they knock it off?" McDuff complained.

"Whaddaya mean?" asked Gus, now sober at his side.

"Why don't they just bring on Casey now and let me get it over with? Why do they have to push my nose in it first?"

"Casey!" Gus laughed loosely. "Never happen, kid. Blake puts on a big show, but he'd never hit you, baby, take it from old Gus. You'll get him and the game's

over. Nothin' to it." Gus winked reassuringly, but McDuff didn't believe it. He no longer believed Gus was so goddamn innocent either.

Flynn was bounding now, in his apelike fashion, toward firstbase, but Blake had a grip on his suspenders. Flynn's short fat legs kept churning away and the dust rose, but he was getting nowhere. Then Blake let go—*whap!*—and Flynn blimped nonstop out to deep rightfield. Gobble gobble gobble. While Flynn was cavorting back in toward first, Blake, unable to find his own hat, stole the umpire's. It completely covered his small flat head, down to the goiter, and Blake staggered around blind, bumping into things. Gobble. The ump grabbed up Blake's cap from where it had fallen and planted it defiantly on his own head. A couple gallons of water flooded out and drenched him. Gobble. Blake tripped over home plate and crashed facefirst to the dirt again. The hat fell off. Gobble. The umpire took off his shoes and poured the water out. A fish jumped out of one of them. Gobble. Blake spied his own hat on the umpire's soggy head and went for it. Gobble. The ump relinquished it willingly, in exchange for his own. The ump was wary now, however, and inspected the hat carefully before putting it back on his head. He turned it inside out, thumped it, ran his finger around the lining. Satisfied at last, he put the hat on his head and a couple gallons of water flooded out on him. Gobble boggle, said the crowd, and the umpire said: "PLAY BALL!"

Flynn was more or less on first, Blake in the box, the broken bat over his shoulder. McDuff glanced over toward the empty batter-up circle, then toward the Mudville dugout. Casey had not come out. Casey's style. And why should he? After all, Blake hadn't had a hit all season. Maybe in all history. He was a joke. McDuff considered walking Blake and getting it over with. Or was there any hope of that: of "getting it over with"? Anyway, maybe that's just what they wanted him to do, maybe it was how they meant to break him. No, he was a man meant to play this game, McDuff was, and play it, by God, he would. He stretched, glanced at first, studied Gus's signal, glared at Turkey Blake. The broken end of the bat hung down Blake's sunken back and tapped his bulbous rump. He twitched as though shooing a fly, finally turned around to see who or what was back there, feigned great surprise at finding no one. Gobble gobble. He resumed his batter's stance. McDuff protested the broken bat on the grounds it was a distraction and a danger to the other players. The umpire grumbled, consulted his rulebook. Gus showed shock. He came out to the mound and asked: "Why make it any easier for him, kid?"

"I'm not, Gus. I'm making it easier for myself." That seemed true, but McDuff knew Gus wouldn't like it.

"You are nuts, kid. Lemme tell ya. Plain nuts. I don't folla ya at all!" Blake was still trying to find out who or what was behind him. He poised very still, then spun around—the bat swung and cracked his nose: loud honking noise, chirping of birds, as Blake staggered around behind home plate holding his nose and splattering catsup all around. Gobble gobble gobble. Gus watched and grinned.

"I mean a guy who can't hit with a good bat might get lucky with a broken one," McDuff said. He didn't mean that at all, but he knew Gus would like it better.

"Oh, I getcha." Gus spat pensively. "Yeah, ya right." The old catcher went back to the plate, showed the ump the proper ruling, and the umpire ordered Blake to get a new bat. Gus was effective like that when he wanted to be. Why not all the time then? It made McDuff wonder.

Blake returned to the plate dragging Burrough's half-ton bat behind him. He tried to get it on his shoulder, grunted, strained, but he couldn't even get the end of it off the ground. He sat down under it, then tried to stand. Steam whistled out his nose and ears and a great wrenching sound was heard, but the bat stayed where it was. While the happy crowd once more lifted its humiliating chorus, Flynn called time-out and came waddling in from first to help. The umpire, too, lent a hand. Together, they got it up about as high as Blake's knees, then had to drop it. Exaggerated thud. Blake yelped, hobbled around grotesquely, pointing down at the one foot still shoed. The toe of it began to swell. The seams of the shoe split. A red bubble emerged, expanded threateningly: the size of a plum, a crimson baseball, grapefruit, volleyball, a red pumpkin. Larger and larger it grew. Soon it was nearly as big as Blake himself. Everyone held his ears. The umpire crawled down behind Flynn and then Flynn tried to crawl behind the umpire. It stretched, quivered. Strained. Flynn dashed over, and reaching into Blake's behind, seemed to pull something out. Sound of a cork popping from a bottle. The red balloon-like thing collapsed with a sigh. Laughter and relieved gobbling. Blake bent over to inspect his toe. Enormous explosion, blackening Blake's face. Screams and laughter.

Then Burroughs himself came out and lifted the half-ton bat onto Blake's shoulder for him. What shoulder he had collapsed and the bat slid off, upending Blake momentarily, so Burroughs next set it on Blake's head. The head was flat and, though precariously, held it. Burroughs lifted Blake up and set him, bat on head, in the batter's box. Blake under his burden could not turn his head to see McDuff's pitch. He just crossed his eyes and looked up at the bat. Gus crouched and signaled. McDuff, through bitter sweaty tears, saw that Flynn was still not back on first, but he didn't care. He stretched, kicked, pitched. Blake leaned forward. McDuff couldn't tell if he hit the ball with the bat or his head. But hit it he did, as McDuff knew he would. It looked like an easy pop-up to the mound, and McDuff, almost unbelieving, waited for it. But what he caught was only the cover of the ball. The ball itself was out of sight far beyond the mowed grass of left-center field, way back in the high weeds of the neighboring acreage.

McDuff, watching then for Casey to emerge from the Mudville dugout, failed at first to notice the hubbub going on around the plate. It seemed that the ump had called the hit a homerun, and Gus was arguing that there were no official limits to the Mudville outfield and thus no automatic homers. "You mean," the umpire cried, "if someone knocked the ball clean to Gehenny, it still wouldn't be considered outa the park? I can't believe that!" Gus and the umpire fought over the rulebook, trying to find the right page. The three outfielders were all out there in the next acreage, nearly out of sight, hunting for the ball in the tall grass. "I can't believe that!" the umpire bellowed, and tore pages from the rulebook in his haste. Flynn and Blake now clowned with chocolate pies and waterpistols.

"Listen," said McDuff irritably, "whether it's an automatic homerun or not,

they still have to run the bases, so why don't they just do that, and then it won't matter."

Gus's head snapped up from his search in the rulebook like he'd been stabbed. He glared fiercely at McDuff, grabbed his arm, pushed him roughly back toward the mound. "Whatsa matter with you?" he growled.

"Lissen! I ain't runnin' off nowheres I ain't got to!" Flynn hollered, sitting down on a three-legged stool which Blake was pulling out from under him. "If it's automatic, I'll by gum walk my last mile at my own dadblame ease, thank ya, ma'am!" He sprawled.

"Of *course* it ain't automatic," Gus was whispering to McDuff. "You know that as well as I do, Mac. If we can just get that ball in from the outfield while they're screwin' around, we'll tag *both* of 'em for good measure and get outa this friggin' game!"

McDuff knew this was impossible, he even believed that Gus was pulling his leg, yet, goddamn it, he couldn't help but share Gus's hopes. Why not? Anyway, he had to try. He turned to the shortstop and sent him out there with orders: "*Go bring that ball in!*"

The rulebook was shot. Pages everywhere, some tumbling along the ground, others blowing in the wind like confetti. The umpire, on hands and knees, was trying to put it all back together again. Gus held up a page, winked at McDuff, stuffed the page in his back pocket. Flynn and Blake used other pages to light cigars that kept blowing up in their faces. That does it, thought McDuff.

He looked out onto the horizon and saw the shortstop and the outfielders jumping up and down, holding something aloft. And then the shortstop started running in. Yet, so distant was he, he seemed not to be moving.

At home plate, the umpire had somehow discovered the page in Gus's back pocket, and he was saying: "I just can't believe it!" He read it aloud: "'Mudville's field is open-ended. Nothing is automatic here, in spite of appearances. A ball driven even unto Gehenna is not necessarily a homerun. In short, anything can happen in Mudville, even though most things are highly improbable. Blake, for example, has never had a hit, nor has Casey yet struck out.' And et cetera!" The crowd dutifully applauded the reading of the rulebook. The umpire shook his head. "All the way to Gehenny!" he muttered.

The baserunners, meanwhile, had taken off, and Turkey Blake was flapping around third on his way home, when he suddenly noticed that fat Flynn, who should be preceding him, was still grunting and groaning down the basepath toward first.

The shortstop was running in from the next acreage with the ball.

Blake galloped around the bases in reverse, meeting Flynn head-on with a re-sounding thud at first. Dazed, Flynn headed back toward home, but Blake set him aright on the route to second, pushed him on with kicks and swats, threw firecrackers at his feet. The fans chanted: "*Go! Go! Go!*"

The shortstop had reached the mowed edge of the outfield. McDuff hustled back off the mound, moved toward short to receive the throw, excitement grabbing at him in spite of himself.

Flynn fell in front of second, and Blake rolled over him. Blake jumped up and

stood on Flynn's head. Honking noise. Flynn somersaulted and kicked Blake in the teeth. Musical chimes.

The shortstop was running in from deep left-center. "Throw it!" McDuff screamed, but the shortstop didn't seem to hear him. He ran, holding the ball high like a torch.

Flynn had Blake in a crushing bear-hug at secondbase, while Blake was clipping Flynn's suspenders. Blake stamped on Flynn's feet—sound of wood being crushed to pulp—and Flynn yowled, let go. Blake produced an enormous rocket. Flynn in a funk fled toward third, but his pants fell down, and he tripped.

The shortstop was still running in from the outfield. McDuff was shouting himself hoarse, but the guy wouldn't throw the goddamn ball. McDuff's heart was pounding and he was angry at finding himself so caught up in it all.

Flynn had pulled up his pants and Blake was chasing him with the rocket. They crashed into McDuff. He felt trampled and heard hooting and gobbling sounds. When the dust had cleared, McDuff found himself wearing Flynn's pants, ten sizes too large for him, and Blake's cap, ten sizes too small, and holding a gigantic rocket whose fuse was lit. Flynn, in the confusion, had gone to second and Blake to third. The fuse burned to the end, there was a little pop, the end of the rocket opened, and a little bird flew out.

The shortstop was running in, eyes rolled back, tongue lolling, drenched in sweat, holding the ball aloft.

Flynn and Blake discovered their error, that they'd ended up on the wrong bases, came running toward each other again. McDuff, foreseeing the inevitable, stepped aside to allow them to collide. Instead, they pulled up short and exchanged niceties.

"After *you*," said Blake, bowing deeply.

"No, no, dear fellow," insisted Flynn with an answering bow, "after *you*!"

The shortstop stumbled and fell, crawled ahead.

Flynn and Blake were waltzing around and around, saying things like "Age before beauty!" and "Be my guest!" and "Hope springs eternal in the human breast!", wound up with a chorus of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame!" with all the fans in the stands joining in.

The shortstop staggered to his feet, plunged, gasping, forward.

The umpire came out and made McDuff give Flynn his pants back. He took Blake's cap off McDuff's head, looked at it suspiciously, held it over his own head, and was promptly drenched by a couple gallons of water that came flooding out.

McDuff felt someone hanging limply on his elbow. It was the shortstop. Feebly, but proudly, he held up the baseball. Blake, of course, was safe on second, and Flynn was hugging third. The trouble is, thought McDuff, you mustn't get taken in. You mustn't think you've got a chance. That's when they really kill you. "All right," he said to Blake and Flynn, his voice choking up and sounding all too much like a turkey's squawk, "screw you guys!" They grinned blankly and there was a last dying ripple of mocking gobbling in the stands. Then: silence. Into it, McDuff dropped Blake's giant rocket. No matter what he might have hoped, it didn't go off. Then he turned to face the Man.

And now, it was true about the holler that came from the maddened thousands, true about how it thundered on the mountaintop and recoiled upon the flat, and so on. And it was true about Casey's manner, the maddening composure with which he came out to take his turn at bat. Or was that so, was it true at that? McDuff, mouth dry, mind awhirl, could not pin down his doubt. "Quit!" he said, but he couldn't, he knew, not till the side was out.

And Casey: who *was* Casey? A Hero, to be sure. A Giant. A figure of grace and power, yes, but wasn't he more than that? He was tall and mighty (omnipotent, some claimed, though perhaps, like all fans, they'd got a bit carried away), with a great moustache and a merry knowing twinkle in his eye. Was he, as had been suggested, the One True Thing? McDuff shook to watch him. He was ageless, older than Mudville certainly, though Mudville claimed him as their own. Some believed that "Casey" was a transliteration of the initials "K. C." and stood for King Christ. Others, of a similar but simpler school, opted for King Corn, while another group believed it to be a barbarism for Krishna. Some, rightly observing that "case" meant "event," pursued this reasoning back to its primitive root, "to fall," and thus saw in Casey (for a case was also a container) the whole history and condition of man, a history perhaps as yet incomplete. On the other hand, a case was also an oddity, was it not, and a medical patient, and maybe, said some, mighty Casey was the sickest of them all. Yet a case was an example, argued others, plight, the actual state of things, thus a metaphysical example, they cried—while a good many thought all such mystification was so much crap, and Casey was simply a good ballplayer. Certainly, it was true, he could belt the hell out of a baseball. All the way to Gehenny, as the umpire liked to put it. Anyway, McDuff knew none of this. He only knew that here he was, that here was Casey, and the stage was set. He didn't need to know the rest. Just that was enough to shake any man.

Gus walked out to talk to McDuff, while the first baseman covered home plate. Gus kept a nervous eye on Flynn and Blake. "How the hell'd you let that bum hit ya, Mac?"

"Listen, I'm gonna walk Casey," McDuff said. Gus looked pained. "Firstbase is open, Gus. It's playing percentages."

"You and ya goddamn percentages!" snorted Gus. "Ya dumb or somethin', kid? Dontcha know this guy's secret?" Gus wasn't innocent, after all. Maybe nobody was.

"Yeah, I know it, Gus." McDuff sighed, swallowed. Knew all along he'd never walk him. Just stalling.

"Well, then, *kill* him, kid! You can do it! It's the only way!" Gus punctuated his peptalk with stiff jabs to McDuff's ribs. At the plate, Casey, responding to the thunderous ovation, lightly doffed his hat. They were tearing the stands down.

"But all these people, Gus—"

"Don't let the noise fool ya. It's the way they want it, kid."

Casey reached down, bat in his armpit, picked up a handfull of dust, rubbed it on his hands, then wiped his hands on his shirt. Every motion brought on a new burst of enraptured veneration.

McDuff licked his dry lips, ground the baseball into his hip. "Do you really think—?"



"Take it from old Gus," said his catcher gently. "They're all leanin' on ya." Gus clapped him on the shoulder, cast a professional glance over toward third, then jogged splaylegged back to the plate, motioning the man there back to first.

Gus crouched, spat, lowered his mask; Casey swung his bat in short choppy cuts to loosen up; the umpire hovered. McDuff stretched, looked back at Blake on second, Flynn on third. Must be getting dark. Couldn't see their faces. They stood on the bags like totems. Okay, thought McDuff, I'll leave it up to Casey. I'm just not gonna sweat it (though in fact he had not stopped sweating, and even now it was cold in his armpits and trickling down his back). What's another ball-game? Let him take it or leave it. And without further wind-up, he served Casey a nice fat pitch gently down the slot, a little outside to give Casey plenty of room to swing.

Casey ignored it, stepped back out of the box, flicked a gnat off his bat.

"*Strike one!*" the umpire said.

Bottles and pillows flew and angry voices stirred the troubled air. The masses rose within the shadows of the stands, and maybe they'd have leapt the fences, had not Casey raised his hand. A charitable smile, a tip of the cap, a twirl of the great moustache. For the people, a pacifying gesture with a couple mighty fingers; for the umpire, an apologetic nod. And for McDuff: a strange sly smile and flick of the bat, as though to say . . . everything. McDuff read whole books into it, and knew he wasn't far from wrong.

This is it, Case, said McDuff to himself. We're here. And he fingered the resin bag and wiped the sweat and pretended he gave a damn about the runners on second and third and stretched and lifted his left leg, then came down on it easily and offered Casey the sweetest, fattest, purest pitch he'd ever shown a man. Not even in batting practice had he ever given a hitter more to swing at.

Casey only smiled.

And the umpire said: "*Strike two!*"

The crowd let loose a terrible wrathful roar, and the umpire cowed as gunfire cracked and whined, and a great darkness rose up and all the faces fell in shadows, and even Gus had lost his smile, nor did he wink at McDuff.

But Casey drew himself up with a mighty intake of breath, turned on the crowd as fierce as a tiger, ordered the umpire to stand like a man, and then even, with the sudden hush that fell, the sun came out again. And Casey's muscles rippled as he exercised the bat, and Casey's teeth were clenched as he tugged upon his hat, and Casey's brows were darkened as he gazed out on McDuff, and now the fun was done because Casey'd had enough.

McDuff, on the other hand, hadn't felt better all day. Now that the preliminaries were over, now that he'd done all he could do and it was on him, now that everybody else had got serious, McDuff suddenly found it was all just a gas and he couldn't give a damn. You're getting delirious, he cautioned himself, but his caution did no good. He giggled furtively: there's always something richly ludicrous about extremity, he decided. He stepped up on the rubber, went right into his stretch. Didn't bother looking at second and third: irrelevant now. And it was so ironically simple: all he had to do was put it down the middle. With a lot of stuff, of course, but he had the stuff. He nearly laughed out loud. He reared

back, kicking high with his left, then hurtled forward, sent the ball humming like a shot right down the middle.

Casey's mighty cut split the air in two—*WHEEEEEP!*—and when the vacuum filled, there was a terrible thunderclap, and some saw light, and some screamed, and rain fell on the world.

Casey, in the dirt, stared in openjawed wonderment at his bat.

Gus plucked the ball gingerly out of his mitt, fingered it unbelievably.

Flynn and Blake stood as though forever rooted at third and second, static parts of a final fieldwide tableau.

And forget what Gus said. No one cheered McDuff in Mudville when he struck Casey out.