

The Fields of Obscurity

His wife was the first up that morning. She looked at him asleep and said, "Oh Rocco, my sweet man, if you don't go after what you want, you're never going to get past first base."

On the field, waking or sleepless, picking his nose under cover of glove, he would hear or remember it, the same touchingly useless advice.

"Okay," he said or he said nothing.

"You don't mean it," she said. "If you wanted to be successful, you would be."

"Yes," he said. "Okay."

He had married a thin pretty woman who kept the world from moving too quickly by having a theory for everything. "You get what you want," she would say when he complained about not getting what he wanted, "and if you don't get it then you don't really want it."

He had difficulty, which kept him from rising to the top of his profession, making contact with the low curve ball on the outside quarter of the plate.

She would not make love to him, she said, perhaps implied rather than said, unless he demonstrably wanted what he said he wanted. She had come from two generations of failed perfectionists and had no patience with anything more or less.

Her love denied him, the fast ball also tended to elude his stroke. That's the way it was.

And when he didn't get good wood on the fast ball, he either warmed the bench or was sent to the minor leagues for what the management called seasoning. He had had, to the point where this account begins, an up and down career. It was written about him in *The Sporting News* that Lawrence Rocco Kidd spent his early years toiling in the fields of obscurity.

Some days he thought, *Is it that I'm not good enough?* But when he was going good he was hard pressed to imagine anyone being better.

"You see," she said, "you *can* hit the curve ball when you want to hit the curve ball."

"They just didn't get it on the outside corner today," he said, too pleased with himself to admit his pleasure.

"You don't want to succeed, do you? You just want to be right. That's why you'll never be first rate at what you do."

He had wanted to marry a woman smarter than himself and he had, although not without occasional regret for having wanted what he had gotten.

Sometimes he thought (whenever he gave himself to thinking) that it wasn't that she was really smarter but that her intelligence, unlike his, presented itself in words.

She occasionally went to see him play, liking the game in the abstract but considering it dull to watch. Whenever she went, she took a book with her to read or something else (like knitting if she knitted which she didn't) so as not to be without occupation. It embarrassed her, she said, when he struck out and the fans booed and he lost his temper and flung his bat. She closed her eyes when that happened and pretended to be somewhere else.

One time, misconceiving the distance of a long fly ball, he made a leaping catch, somersaulting over backward with the ball sticking delicately like a pocket handkerchief out of the corner of his glove. The crowd stood up and screamed its admiration, almost everyone on his feet screaming and clapping and slapping each other. When he came home that night and asked her what she had thought of it she said she had been reading her book (something called *The Golden Notebook*) and hadn't noticed until she heard the man in back of her mention his name.

If she wasn't going to watch, he said, he didn't want her there not watching. It was to please her that he devised his heroics. If she wasn't there, if he knew that she wasn't, he would have just run back and caught the ball in its course.

"I think you know me better than that," she said. "I prefer substance to style, except in films and literature. That's the way I was brought up and that's the way I am."

After that she stopped coming to the games except for those times when she did. It used to be the exception when she wasn't there. Now it was the exception when she was, although in terms of actual appearances at the ball park things remained about the same.

Before the game, the manager called Rocco into his office and asked him if he had any problems that were getting in the way of his ball playing. Pop, or Boss as the players called him, liked to talk to the men about their problems.

For a while Rocco couldn't think of any problems he had, which was one of the problems he had when anyone asked him. The only thing, he said, which he didn't want to make anything of since it wasn't *much* of a thing, was that he was not getting enough playing time. His was the kind of game that thrived on hard work.

"I like a man who wants to play," Pop said angrily. "The only place I can think of you getting more playing time, Rocco, to be frank is at our farm club, Vestal, in the Postum League. You don't hit for average and you don't hit consistently for power. What else can I tell you? On no team that I managed has there ever been any problems with the way I do things."

The next day, without prior warning, Rocco found himself in the starting

lineup at left field. What did it mean? He tried to catch Pop's eye during batting practice to say thanks or something else, but the doughty little manager seemed whenever Rocco looked at him to be looking on the ground for something he had dropped.

A telegram came for him as he was stepping into the batter's cage to take his swings.

Last chance It's make or break Hang loose
—An Admirer

It was only the third telegram he'd ever had in his life. The fourth was delivered to him by the bat boy at his position in left field. *Far out*, he thought, after getting two telegrams the first thirty years of his life to get two more on the same day.

This one, it was clear, was from his wife (the signature blurred by tears), with whom he had had a falling out before coming to the ball park.

Have had offer to go off with another. Will make decision by nightfall.
Love etc.

He had had enough messages for one day. Worried about losing concentration, once lost it could take years to recover, he thought about a movie he had seen the other night at Venestra's urging, rehearsed the plot line to himself. In the movie, which was in French, this man and woman were living together when this woman's former boyfriend showed up. The guy she's living with gets jealous and then it's only a matter of time before she runs off with the old boyfriend. After she leaves the old boyfriend—or he leaves her—the two men move in together.

The game was being played miles away from the mind's resting point as if he were on a hill looking down at the lights of a city in the distance.

The first pitch he looked at was called a strike, to which he had no valid objection, a fastball or slider on the inside corner of the plate. He had been anticipating a breaking ball on the outside, so he had been unable to take advantage of a pitch he usually liked to stroke. What was the pitch most likely to come next? If he were the pitcher, putting himself in the other's place, he would throw himself a curve or slider on the outside of the plate or, the deception of the obvious, the same pitch in the same place.

He guessed the same pitch and was right, though the second was not quite as far inside as the first and was, at quick estimation, three inches higher. Rocco triggered the bat, his anticipation a fraction of a second ahead of an ideal meeting, exhilaration frightening him as the ball jumped from the bat. All was ruined, he let himself think, his best hopes shot to hell, but the ball danced along the foul line crashing the wall inches fair.

The applause sung to him as he stood on second base regretting his failure to do more. He wondered if there was anyone in the stands who really liked him for himself as opposed to the disguises of accomplishment.

In the fourth inning moments after he had dropped an unimaginative fly ball hit directly at his glove, he got a Special Delivery letter from an anonymous fan, which read (in its entirety), "You have disappointed our best hopes." There was nothing you could do to please them, he thought.

He struck out swinging in the fifth and got hit in the face by a tomato. That didn't seem right.

In the eighth inning, after hitting a home run with two men on to put his team in the lead, he received in the mail several offers of marriage from grateful fans of both sexes.

After the game the television announcer asked him what was the pitch he had hit so prodigiously and he said he thought it was a fastball on the inside of the plate or a slider right down the middle, one or the other. When they watched the replay on television the pitch looked like a low curve on the outside corner.

"How does it feel to be a hero?" the announcer asked him.

"I can take it or leave it," he said. "Tomorrow if I do something wrong, they'll be booing me again. I mean, you can't live with people like that."

"They're the ones that pay our salaries," said the announcer.

"You know where they can stick their salaries," said the player.

Whatever his public reputation, he envisioned himself as a credit to the game.

"That's no way to make friends," his wife said to him when he came home. "That was a very destructive thing to do."

"That's the way I am."

Pop called him on the phone that night. "I don't know how to tell you this, Kidd, because I know how much it means to you, but you're going to have to give back that home run you hit yesterday."

"How come?"

"That thing you said on the television. The commissioner made a ruling on it last night after the mail went twenty to one against you. They're giving the game-winning home run to Hatchmeyer whose place you took. It's a real good break for the rookie who I understand is your best buddy on the club."

Rocco was almost too disturbed to complain, the news fulfilling the worst of his life's prophecies. "It doesn't seem fair," he said.

"You have the right to file a petition of appeal to the commissioner's office, which is the league rule."

"The commissioner was the one, you said, that took my home run away. What would be the good of appealing to him?"

"No good. No way. I'm just telling you what your rights are in case you want to make use of them. Okay, son?"

"Okay, Pop."

The next day he wasn't in the lineup, nor was he the day after. On the third day it rained.

"You have only yourself to blame," his wife said, holding out her arms to him in comfort. "What did you do it for?"

Why did he do it? It did itself. He kissed his wife's neck, lifted her off the floor and carried her into the bedroom. "I prefer substance to style," he said.

Stripped of his home run, his name not in the lineup for a whole week, Rocco fell into a severe depression, began to drink heavily, became the bloated substance of his former shadow, gave way to greater and greater distraction.

One day he was on the bench watching a game and he daydreamed that he was in the clubhouse watching a movie of a game played the day before. It might even have been an old game, the cinematic representation of former glories. When you weren't playing, and even sometimes when you were, one game could seem very much like another.

He was trying to remember whether he had gotten into the game he was watching when Pop said to him, "Rocco, get up and swing a couple of bats, why don't you?"

Had he done it already or was it something he still had to do?

On the third pitch he swung under the ball and hit a major league foul that the squat catcher caught between first and home, staggering jelly-assed under his burden. When Rocco went back to the bench he asked the manager what he had to do to get that taken from his record.

Pop said, "Do you know what the trouble with you is, Kidd, the trouble with you is you think you're too good for this game."

Always the curve ball sliding away from the bat, sliding obliquely down and away almost as if it were insubstantial, the faded recollection of a pitch. Always in his dreams the snake-like pitch eluded the expectation of his club.

"If you admit to him you were wrong," his wife said to him over the phone, "maybe he'll let you play again."

"What did I do that was wrong?"

"Just tell him that you sincerely regret what you did and that you won't do it again."

"Won't do what again?"

"You know. Why do you always pretend you don't know when you do?"

It may even have been a replay of an earlier conversation, the filmed highlights, his non-playing time given over to a study of the real and imag-

ined past. Untouched by education, Rocco had never lost his faith in it.

He used to consider Slaughter Hatchmeyer, whom he roomed with on the road, his best friend on the team, but since the other had acquired Rocco's home run it made him angry just to look at the long-haired rookie. When Hatchmeyer came into the room, Rocco would find some excuse for leaving it.

"Cool," said Hatchmeyer, an easy-going type oblivious to slight. "What do you say later, man, we go out for a couple of steaks and catch a flick?"

When Rocco came back from the road trip he found Hatchmeyer in his apartment having dinner with his wife.

"What's he doing here?" he asked.

"I thought you invited him," said his wife. "We've been talking about you. Slaughter thinks you have an extraordinary natural talent."

"I'd like you to clear out," he said to Hatchmeyer. "I'd like a little time alone with my old lady if you don't mind."

"I'd like to oblige you, man," said the imperturbable Hatchmeyer, who in the off-season studied self-oblivion in an Adult Education Program in his home town, "but I've already asked Mrs. Kidd, I mean Venestra, to run away with me."

All eyes, including in a manner of speaking her own, were on Venestra.

"I have nothing to say," she said, opening the second and third buttons of her blouse.

"Man, I was seeing the ball good today," said Slaughter. "Some days you see it big as a balloon, Venestra, and some days it's like a pimple on a cow's ass. Right, Rocco?"

Rocco wasn't hungry and he didn't want to talk, particularly not to his roommate and former friend, so he sat in the living room and collected himself while they ate.

The phone rang.

"How you doing?" a familiar voice asked. "Your arm still hurting?"

"Nothing wrong with my arm," said Rocco. "Anyone tells you there's something wrong with my arm is in the pay of a foreign power."

"Sure. What I called to say was that I want you to think of yourself as the regular left-fielder until I tell you different."

"Yeah?" He had the impression that someone was playing a joke on him, although he couldn't imagine who or why.

"I want a man to know a job is his so he can have the confidence to go out and do a good job. You really made good contact out there today, which is what I like to see."

"Look, I didn't get in the game today. *Who* is this?"

"This is Pop. Who is *this*?"

Rocco announced his name in a fierce whisper though not before hang-

ing up to protect himself from the embarrassment of being discovered an imposter in his own house.

He returned to the dining room, swinging a weighted bat he kept in the closet for training purposes, to catch his wife and Hatchmeyer like a commercial between bits of movie finishing up their salad.

"Who was it, dear?" she asked her husband. There were four buttons open now on her blouse.

"It wasn't anybody."

Hatchmeyer was eating wheat thins with brie, stuffing them into his jaw three at a time. His large face diminished, though swollen, by a crossing thought.

After a moment Rocco said what he had planned not to say. "Why the hell don't you get out of here, Slaughter? Take as many crackers as you like."

"I think it's good that you can express your anger," said his wife. "You usually just deny what you're feeling."

"Cool," said Hatchmeyer, nodding benignly.

It was his own place no matter what was going on in it. He could swing his practice bat any place he liked in his own house. He could even, if that's the way he felt about things, bring it down like a sledgehammer on the dining room table inches from Hatchmeyer's plate, precipitating a shift in the balance of objects and some broken wooden boards.

"This time you've gone too far," said Venestra. "Expressing your anger is one thing, dumping it on others something else altogether."

Hatchmeyer collected his double-breasted red jacket from the closet and looked around the room for a way out. "One of us is going to have to be traded," he said. "I mean that sincerely, man."

The deposed left-fielder took a practice swing and caught his replacement in the side of the knee with the weighted end of the bat. Now he had gone too far.

"I'm sorry as hell, Slaughter," he said, the suspicion of a smile emerging in the teeth of his regret.

They put him to bed, the crippled starting left-fielder, in the room they had set aside for the children they had never had.

His wife explained herself when they were alone. "Slaughter and I experience an attraction for each other which is hard to explain."

"Cool," said Rocco.

The next day, wearing the rookie's uniform, which was a little tight in the waist, he took Hatchmeyer's place as the temporary regular left-fielder. Rocco thought to fail—it was his game plan—as a means of winning back his job under his own name. His second time up, the first pitch looked so sweet he hated to pass it by so he laid his stick on it as lightly as a kiss

just to prove to himself that he could make contact if he had to. Somehow the ball got between the outfielders and Rocco wound up on third, running as slowly as he could.

The more he didn't try—he also didn't not try—the more success he seemed to have. It was the uniform, he thought, or the number or the dumb luck of the former tenant of that uniform. After getting three triples in one game, he went up with his eyes closed and knocked the ball over the fence.

It went on for days, his not trying—his not not trying—with disturbing, really crazy success.

Rocco wore a false mustache and a long-haired wig doing Hatchmeyer, which he took off when he played himself. In his own right, under his own name and number, the old bad luck continued to plague him.

For the first few days he came home to his own apartment where his wife and Hatchmeyer were now living, but after a while it was simpler to stay in Hatchmeyer's hotel room as if he were in fact the very man he pretended to be.

One day his wife called and asked him over for lunch, the other Hatchmeyer being away at a doctor's appointment.

Wherever he went reporters followed him, asking impertinent questions. Rocco did everything he could think of to elude them, disguising himself once as a woman, and another time as a black man, several times going in the wrong direction, but no matter what you did you could only fool them on essentials.

Venestra, who had her blouse buttoned to the neck when he came in, kissed him on the forehead. It was all she had to do. He undressed her like a baby. In bed, under the gun, she said, "Lover, what do you call yourself these days? Is it Slaughter or Rocco?"

He had to check his uniform number, which was on the floor next to the bed, to make an accurate determination.

"What name has *he* been using?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I mostly call him Teddy Bear."

"Teddy Bear?"

"Sometimes Pooh-Pooh with an *h*. He's really very sweet in his pea-brained way. Why is it, honey, that all your friends are so stupid? Do you have any idea?"

He thought about it until he got distracted then thought about something else. "Search me," he said.

"Do you know the kind of thing he does? Rocco reads to me from the paper about you hitting a grand slammer or something as if it were about himself."

"I'm Rocco," he said.

"I mean Slaughter," she said, "though he calls himself Rocco for the sake of the neighbors. I kept telling him that it's pea-brained to identify

with the achievements of someone else. And he says, 'they use my name so it must be about me.' He actually believes, though he can barely walk on his banged-up leg, that he's the one that's been doing all the exploits he reads about in the paper. Anyway, we're both proud that you're doing so well."

"The crazy thing is, I haven't even been trying."

She nodded sympathetically the way she used to before they were married. "I can understand that," she said.

They were still in bed when the original Hatchmeyer let himself in with his key. He had brought some steaks home which he thought to chicken fry, he said, ignoring his replacement who was lying there with his eyes closed and his hands behind his head.

"Anything you want to do, Rocco, is all right with me," she said.

While they were making dinner plans, the other Rocco, the original of that name, got himself out of bed and dressed. "I have to get to the stadium for batting practice," he announced. "If you're late, the manager fines you."

"Have a good game, honey," Venestra said.

He got a hero's welcome at the ball park, American Legion bands, fan clubs, Shriners, confetti, baton twirlers, a twenty-one gun salute, singing prisoners of war, a religious leader to throw out the first ball. He was awarded a slightly used Plymouth Duster and had to listen to four or five speeches lauding Slaughter Hatchmeyer as a fine athlete and a credit to the game.

His first time at bat he received a standing ovation and heard the fans chant . . . Hatchmeyer . . .

The chant made him slightly sick, an experience comparable to watching a movie made with a hand-held camera. "I'm not Hatchmeyer," he called back, though nothing was made of it. His protests were taken as modesty. Suddenly, he dropped the bat he had been swinging and pulled off his false mustache and wig in full view of the thirty-eight thousand home fans and countless numbers of television viewers, although on television the camera immediately cut to a commercial.

A groan from the great crowd and then what he thought of, hard to define otherwise, as a stunned silence.

In the next moment they were applauding madly again, tears on everyone's face who had eyes to cry.

It was like a movie he had once seen or had had described to him by a parent in exceptional detail. Perhaps he was watching that movie on television at this very moment.

Taking a few practice swings, he stepped into the box to face the opposing pitcher. It looked like the same pitcher he had faced yesterday, a curve ball artist who had the look of a lonely man perpetually in mourning. He

remembered the first pitch as it came breaking toward him, watching it as he had the day before, not trying to hit it, watching himself watch it. The crowd as always was full of itself.

As the bat comes around, repeating the past, he could see his wife Venestra in the stands behind a book called *What Comes Next*.

The fans scream his name as Hatchmeyer punishes the curve ball with his long-handled bat for all the bad times it had given him.

POETRY / JOHNSON, VAN DEMARR, HILLMAN

The White Fires of Venus / Denis Johnson

We mourn this senseless planet of regret,
drougts, rust, rain, cadavers
that can't tell us, but I promise
you one day the white fires
of Venus shall rage, the dead,
feeling that power, shall be lifted, and each
of us will have his resurrected one to tell him,
"Greetings; you will recover
or die. The simple cure
for everything is to destroy
all the stethoscopes that will transmit
silence occasionally. The remedy for loneliness
is in learning to admit
solitude as one admits
the bayonet: gracefully,
now that already
it pierces the heart.
Living one; you move among many
dancers and don't know which
you are the shadow of,
you want to kiss your own face in the mirror
but do not approach,
knowing you must not touch
one who is like that. Living
one; while Venus flares
O set the cereal afire,
O the refrigerator harboring things
that live on into death unchanged."

They know all about us on Andromeda,