



JACKIE, A BOY, AND A PUP

A Warm Cold War Story

How a 10-year-old son of a Baptist preacher, made friends with the President's wife, and got a dog.





CHAPTER ONE: THE SUMMER OF 1963

I squinted in the sunshine, the weight of smooth wood in my hands. Squinting back at me from his mound, the pitcher stood ready to hurl the next ball. Under an azure-blue sky, playing with my friends in my backyard, how could summer vacation get any better than this? I adjusted my feet in an attempt to match the stance of my baseball hero, Stan “The Man” Musial. Hunching over the plate just a bit, I waited for the slow, pudgy duck of a pitch to arc toward me. As it approached—belt high, right in my wheelhouse—I was determined not to whiff. My Louisville slugger shot forward, slicing the air with all the force my ten-year-old arms could muster.

Little did I know that one swing would lead to a heartbreaking tragedy, a connection with a First Lady, and

an understanding that our God in heaven has control, even in the midst of chaos.

A PLACE OF SAFETY

It was the summer of 1963. Trouble in the world filled news reports on the television and the cloud of the Cold War¹ hung over our heads. The Bay of Pigs incident in the spring of 1961 had tarnished America's blue-chip image. The existential threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 had frightened the nation. Civil unrest had grown with riots in Birmingham, Alabama, that May. Martin Luther King Jr., had emerged as a respected leader, one who would continue to have an impact on the whole nation and even the world, well into the future.

I had an awareness of all of this. I sensed a lingering fear that catastrophe on an unimaginable scale lurked just around the corner, ready to envelop us. Even as a young boy, I perceived a certain sense of foreboding, feeling it in the adults around me—my parents, my teachers at school, and all those I looked up to. Hope for the future had dimmed.

At least, it had for much of the nation. While I was aware of these things, the everyday held far too many distractions and pleasures to allow me too much trepidation. In fact, for a ten-year-old boy growing up in Middle America, life was sublime. As a part of a whole generation of baby boomers,

1 See appendix 1.

growing up amidst a life of post World War II prosperity, I didn't spend a lot of time dwelling on the mayhem. I believed in a bright future.

The college town of Columbia, Missouri, served as a perfect backdrop to an idyllic childhood. In my quiet suburban neighborhood, I could ride my bike to my friend's house, explore Bear Creek with its frogs and crawdads, and play baseball with my friends. We felt safe and secure—what was crime?

My brothers and I attended Parkade Elementary School, only five blocks away from our home. Dad was a Baptist minister, and both of my parents earned the respect of the community. As pastor's kids, my brothers and I had the run of Memorial Baptist. I can still picture the redbrick church with white pillars that we attended every Wednesday night and twice on Sundays. Though the world outside may have been fraught with danger and uncertainty, safety and security seemed to wrap around our town like a blanket. It seemed a peace that nothing could disturb.

A HERO AT HOME PLATE

Of all the distractions available to me, I especially loved baseball—in particular, the St. Louis Cardinals. That summer of 1963 proved to be the last in the illustrious career of Stan “The Man” Musial, the star player for the Cardinals. At forty-two, he still hit an average of .251 and

closed out his 22-year career with a lifetime batting average of .331, having set National League records in career hits (3,630), runs batted in (1,951), games played (3,026), at bats (10,972), runs scored (1,949), and doubles (725). A seven-time batting champion, Musial was named the National League's MVP three times and led the Cardinals to three World Series Championships.

As a kid, I didn't memorize statistics. But my head was filled with the fantasy of being Stan the Man every time I went up to bat. Like him, I "swung for the fences." Musial's baseball career was ending as my life was just beginning. Unbeknownst to him, he would impact me in a most profound way on that summer day.

Baseball consumed summer life on our street. My family had the biggest yard on the block, so it became the neighborhood gathering place for baseball games. Because our backyard backed up against a major highway, a six-foot chain-link fence stood where our lot ended. It took a solid hit to clear that fence, so any hit that made it that far became an automatic home run. The highway was located on an elevated embankment, so we never hit any vehicles.

When the weather warmed, almost every day included a baseball game. My brothers and I had chores to do, but after we finished them, it was game on. A few neighborhood kids always joined up with the three Bruce boys for exciting baseball play. We had no real home plate, just a worn spot

on the field. No one pitched to strike the batter out. That would just waste time as choosy batters would wait for their pitch. Balls and strikes didn't much matter. Bunts? No way. Everyone wanted to hit—and hit as hard as they could.

A FRIEND AT PLAY

Even more than baseball, I loved dogs. I came out of the womb of a dog lover. I think my first sentence was, “Can I have a dog?” I can't explain this natural canine affinity, other than to say that God made me that way. Dog lovers know what I mean. Our family had other pets, mostly cats, but they never seemed to capture my heart the way dogs did.

As parents of active boys, my mom and dad constantly looked for wholesome activities for their children. So when the 4-H program started up in the part of Columbia where we lived, I think they thought it might help me stay out of trouble. 4-H offered a lot of ways to get involved, and I was especially excited about the dog care program that taught kids grooming, feeding, obedience training, and general responsibility for a dog. I figured that if I got into the 4-H Dog Care Program, I would have to get a dog—and it worked! So, at age nine, I acquired a mutt named Midget. Through a 4-H leader's network, I received Midget free of charge (very important to us, since we didn't have a lot of money). This energetic, super-fast canine fulfilled my dog longings and became my loyal companion.

Baseball and Midget filled that summer of 1963. She loved to play ball as much as I did. I hardly had to teach her to fetch, and she could play catch with a baseball with remarkable finesse. If it was Mom and Dad's intent to keep me out of trouble, it worked. We spent hours after school playing.

A TRAGEDY AT BAT

On that fateful day, I found myself at bat, with a fantasy of Stan the Man whirling in my head. Fantasy has been the failing of many a man, and this time it would cost me greatly. I can still smell the scent of freshly cut grass and feel the humidity of that hot June day in central Missouri. It was perfect baseball weather. When my turn at bat arrived, I stood at the "plate," rubbed some dirt on my hands, dug in my PF Flyers, and choked up on the bat just enough to copy my hero. Stan the Man would be retiring soon, so he would be swinging for the fences even more than usual... and so would I. When I saw the pitch, I knew it would get me a home run. I swung with all my might.

But, instead of the satisfying crack of my bat against the ball, I heard a sickening thud. I had assumed Midget was in the house. She wasn't. My best canine friend and expert ball catcher had been standing dutifully behind me. When she saw the baseball approaching home plate, she thought it was meant for her. With a horror of synchrony, she leapt to catch the ball just as I made my perfect "Stan the Man" cut.

1963: Ten-year old Mark Bruce is involved in a 4H dog-care project with his puppy Midget. Mark was playing baseball one day. It was his turn at bat . . .



In so many aspects of life, timing is everything. How I wish my timing had been off that day. If only I had been more like Mighty Casey at bat instead of Stan the Man. I hit Midget squarely in the head, and she died instantly, not making a sound. I screamed in anguish. Hot tears mixed with sweat and humidity as I stood over her lifeless body, flooded with both grief and disbelief at what had just happened. I had destroyed the very one I loved.

I continued to cry for a week, constantly wracked with guilt and loneliness. Inconsolable, I came out of the bedroom I shared with my brother only to eat and use the restroom. The instant replay of my swinging bat and leaping dog went through my mind again and again. I couldn't think of anything but Midget and that surreal moment. The marathon of grief warped time. What had happened in a second took an eternity to endure.

Had the incident happened today, I would have been in counseling, but those resources were unheard of then. Although my parents attempted to comfort me and my friends tried to console me, nothing quenched my sorrow. My love for Midget hurt. My love for baseball stung as aftershocks of bitter grief and remorse ebbed and flowed.

Even if I had not been fully aware of the mayhem of the world in the 1960s, I now faced my own personal tragedy.

Life is bigger than ourselves, for we live in a world where there is a God, and He often intervenes in the most

unexpected of ways. But on that day, He didn't seem to intervene, leaving me heartbroken and in despair. Later, I learned that He knew my pain and would choose His time to act. He opened my eyes to the world around me, a world far bigger than my life in Columbia, Missouri.