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Mighty Casey

FRANK watched the pitcher peel off his cap and wipe the sweat from his forehead.

It was warm all right, warmer than usual for May in North Dakota. Certainly warmer than a year ago, when five inches of needed rain fell during the month. For most farmers and their families, May of 1892 brought hope. For Frank, it brought despair, thanks to the accident. He remembered every grim detail as if it happened yesterday: the wobbly seat of the plow underneath him; the shot from down the road, piercing the crisp morning air; the front legs of the horses, rising and kicking in unison; the terrifying seconds in flight waiting for his body to slam into the hard, rough wheat field; and

finally, the bone-crushing pain in his left leg.

Frank shook his leg now. Even after a year, it hurt. It would always hurt.

“Batter up!” called the pitcher.

Frank pulled out his pocket watch and wiped the dust off its scratched face. Supper would be served in twenty minutes. If he left the baseball field now, he wouldn’t be late. He had told Ma he wouldn’t be late today. She’d made him promise before he walked out the door.

The problem was, he couldn’t leave. Not yet. He hadn’t accomplished what he came here for—to catch a home run ball. And time was running out. Next week he’d be down on Front Street, working at Pa’s hotel, the Bradley.

Frank had been coming to the baseball field every day after school lately, hoping to find the Fargo ball club at practice. Yesterday and today, he’d been lucky. The players were getting ready for their game in Valley City. As he watched the men dash from base to base, he imagined himself in their place, moving as fast as a scared jackrabbit. It was the closest he’d ever get to running the bases again. Nothing short of a miracle would change that.

He came face-to-face with the truth a month ago, when the boys from his new school asked him to join their baseball team. More than any-

thing, Frank wanted to play with them. And he had almost succeeded. At bat behind the Third Ward School building, he'd clobbered the ball like a pro. But then came the groans and snickers he had feared. As soon as he dropped the bat and headed for first base, his secret was out: Frank Cummings couldn't run. Who wanted a player with a bad leg on their team?

At least he could still catch.

Frank slid his hand into his baseball glove and fixed his eyes on home plate. Casey, mighty Casey, was at bat! Casey wasn't his real name. He just reminded Frank of the baseball player from the poem "Casey at the Bat." Tough, powerful, and determined. Only this Casey never struck out.

Yesterday Frank stood behind left field, waiting with a dozen other onlookers for Casey's hit. "If any of you catches the ball," the outfielder had reminded them, "it's yours to keep!"

On the second pitch, Casey had smacked the ball and sent it swerving to the right of Frank's outstretched arm, just inches from his glove. Frank had turned around in time to see a red-bearded man stuff the captured ball in his pocket.

Today Frank was positioned just right. He could feel it. Today he wouldn't miss Casey's ball.

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Bending his knees, he was careful to put most of his weight on his right leg, the good one. With his hands resting on his thighs, he waited.

Behind him, someone yelled. Frank glanced back. Only a few spectators were gathered at the field today. Among them, a boy half a finger taller than him, with brown hair a shade darker, shouted to Casey again. "Over here! Hit it over here!"

Discreetly, Frank studied the boy. He looked like one of the big city folk who rolled into town on the Great Northern or the Northern Pacific Railroads. Most of them stayed at the Columbia Hotel. It was more luxurious than Pa's Bradley—and a whole lot more expensive.

The boy wore knee pants and a crisp white shirt with a fancy collar, though the sleeves were rolled up. His hands were bare and clean, and on his feet were shiny black shoes with buttons. Even his voice had a different sound to it. *Definitely not from around here*, Frank thought. He adjusted the strap of his overalls and concentrated on the batter.

The pitcher threw the first ball. It whisked toward Casey, nearly hitting his jaw. Casey jumped backward just in time to dodge the bad pitch.

“Ball one!” shouted another player acting as umpire.

The city boy cheered.

The second pitch was low and fast. Would it be called a ball? Casey seemed to think so. He didn’t even attempt a swing.

“Strike one!”

“Aw, come on!” moaned the city boy.

Wishing he would disappear, Frank dug his heels into the ground and waited for the third pitch. It was as fast as the others, but this one was waist-high and down the middle . . . *perfect!* Before Frank could blink, he heard the familiar crack of Casey’s bat.

When the ball flew over the head of the left fielder, he yelled to the spectators, “That one’s yours!”

Frank’s heart pounded louder as the ball soared toward him. It whistled through the air, practically screaming his name. He straightened up and raised his right arm.

“I’ve got it!” the city boy called. “It’s mine!”

No! Frank wanted to turn around and protest. *It’s mine!* But he couldn’t take his eyes off the ball, not for one second. He had to catch it. He just had to!

The ball was coming at him a little high. He would have to jump for it, even if it hurt a little.

At just the right second, he sprang into the air with as much strength as his legs could muster. The ball brushed over the top of Frank's glove, nudging it slightly before dropping into an open fist behind him.

"Ha! Ha! I caught it!"

Gritting his teeth, Frank turned around. The city boy was holding the ball up like a trophy, beaming. His brown eyes caught Frank's blue ones and held them. "Did you see that? I wasn't even wearing a glove! Some day I'll be playing in the National League!"

Frank rubbed his left leg and frowned.

"Better luck next time!" the city boy gloated.

"Right," Frank grumbled, walking away.

"Wait a minute!"

Frank looked back. The city boy was following him!

"Did you really want the ball that bad?"

"Never mind," Frank said, picking up speed.

He didn't get very far before the city boy caught up. He held the ball out to Frank. "Here. If it means that much to you, take it."

Frank shook his head. What good was a ball he hadn't caught himself? "Don't want it."

"Sure you do. Here. Take it!"

The city boy was getting downright annoying. "I *said* I don't want it!" Frank repeated.

“Okay, okay.” The city boy backed off. “I’m new around here and plan to stay awhile. Don’t need any enemies.”

Frank crossed his arms. He was curious about where the city boy was from, but he didn’t want to ask. That might lead to conversation.

“I’m from Gotham!” the city boy announced anyway.

New York City. That figured.

“Came on the train with my father,” he continued. “He’s got some business in town.” He hesitated, looking around. “Can’t imagine why a fur merchant from New York would need to come *here*.”

Frank tensed at the insult, but the city boy kept right on talking. “Someone told us how the town ball club practices near the park. Thought I’d come see for myself. They’re not bad—for amateurs, that is.” He extended his right hand, offering the ball again in exchange for a handshake. “I’m William, by the way. You can call me Will.”

Frank kept his arms folded. “Keep it. You caught it.”

“Suit yourself, then,” Will said, pocketing the ball. “Anyhow, I won’t be coming back to the ball field any time soon. Got myself a job, starting tomorrow.”

Good, Frank thought.

“But in my spare time, I wouldn’t mind tearing up the bases. Is there a team around here that I could join?”

Frank wasn’t about to tell him about the boys from the Third Ward School. “Don’t know of any,” he lied, walking away.

“Well, then, maybe someone ought to start one,” Will called out after him. “How about it? You interested?”

Frank’s strut turned into a fast hobble. “I’m late for supper!” If he hurried up and cut through the park, he might make up some time.

“Wait! I didn’t get your name!”

Frank pretended not to hear. For once, he was glad to leave the baseball field. Will could find someone else to pester. Frank didn’t need a high-falutin show-off from New York City in his life.

He didn’t need that at all.