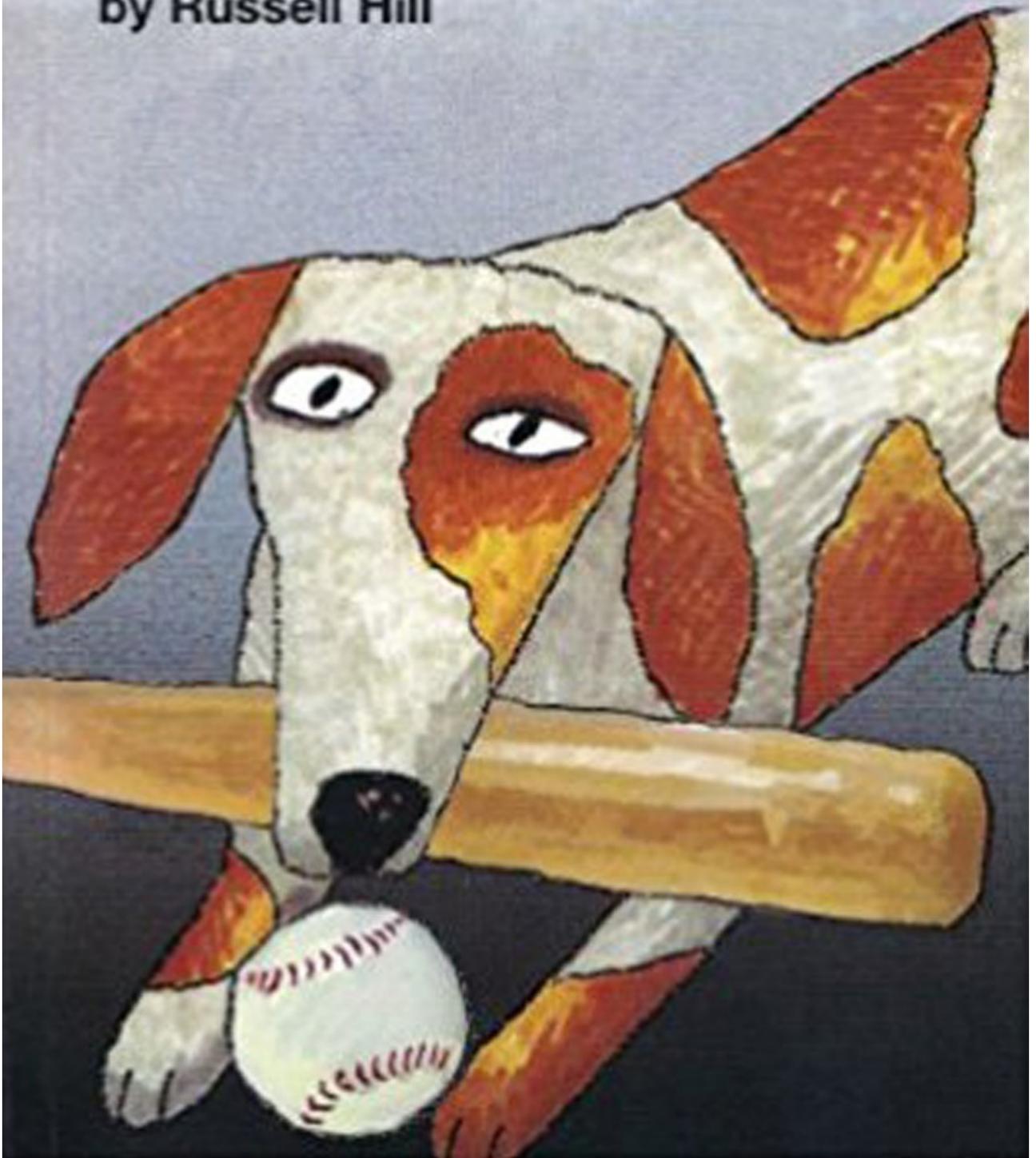


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THE DOG SOX

by Russell Hill



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Chapter 1

They were called The Dog Sox. Not the White Sox or the Black Sox or the Red Sox, but the Dog Sox. Because the guy who bought the team liked dogs and he had dogs embroidered on his shorts and a dog following him around and he had a pair of socks given to him by a beautiful woman who, in the heat of the moment, thought they would look good on his naked feet that had tiny dogs on them. On the socks, not his feet. So he gave the woman the team. She liked baseball and she liked sitting in the owner's box which wasn't actually a box. It was a folding chair behind home plate, behind the netting that kept foul balls from ricocheting off the crowd. Which wasn't much of a crowd. Still, on a soft summer night in Knight's Landing, under the dim glow of the lights from the three outfield poles, it had the feel of real baseball, and she drove two hours from San Francisco to sit in that folding chair and have a Trout Slayer beer.

When Ray Adams bought the Knights Landing Dredgers he renamed them the Dog Sox. There was a black lab on the cap of each player and he hired a kid from Yuba City High School to climb into a costume and prance around the field. It was a black dog costume and if you squinted your eyes you could imagine that it was a big dog and not a kid in a dog suit. The head was pretty realistic and the big moment was when the dog went over to the backstop net and pawed his way around it to the folding chair and laid down next to the woman who owned the team so she could pat him on his head. And then he would whip off the dog's head and sit up and she would lean forward and kiss him on the forehead and the crowd, all eighty-five of them, would erupt in a cheer.

Of course, what she didn't realize was that the kid cherished that moment more than the crowd did, because when she bent forward to kiss him on the forehead he got to look down her blouse at her tits, and sometimes she had on this black bra that didn't really cover them all that well and then he put the dog head back on and went wild. The crowd, such as it was, cheered again and the woman clapped her hands but what nobody else knew was that he was trying not to come inside the dog suit.

Chapter 2

The guy who bought the team didn't sit in the owner's box. He worked the hot dog booth and sold beer and chased baseballs that got hit out of the park because the budget didn't allow for unlimited balls. Grade school kids who found a ball and brought it back got a free Coke. He suspected that the kid in the dog suit was trying to work off a hard-on after the ceremonial kiss, but he didn't mention it to the woman. She had spiky auburn hair with a hint of red in it and green eyes and sometimes she wore a silk blouse to the games and sometimes it was a cashmere vee-neck sweater and always she wore Levis and often she kicked off her shoes and went barefoot, walking back after the game to the dirt parking lot next to the river carrying her shoes in one hand and the beer bottle in the other.

Some nights they didn't drive back to San Francisco, staying at an old motel in Knight's Landing in unit #6, a room that had a single table, a bed next to the wall with a window facing the river and a narrow kitchen where, in the morning, he made coffee and omelets and watched her stir in her sleep, her arms outstretched, her shoulders moving gently to the rhythm of her breathing.

When she woke she lay for a while, watching him as he made the coffee and when he brought her a cup she sat up, naked, cradling the white mug with both hands and he wanted to leap into the bed, spread her legs, bury his face between her thighs, but he stood at the edge of the bed and she sipped at the coffee and said, "Last night. Billy Collins."

"The pitcher."

"We got anybody else on the team named Billy Collins?"

"I'll give you a pass on that because you just woke up."

"You ever see anybody pitch like that?"

"Like what?"

"A sidearm that comes off the mound and damn near touches the ground? It comes up off his feet and it looks like some kind of softball pitch but it's 90 miles an hour and nobody could hit him. I mean fucking nobody." She put the coffee cup on the table next to her.

"You'd like to fuck me again, wouldn't you?" she said. "You ever get enough?"

"No."

"I thought not." She put her legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

"I'm going to take a shower and when I come out I want you to tell me everything you know about Billy Collins." She went into the little bathroom that was scabbed onto the side of the unit and he heard the shower go on and he thought about taking his clothes off and joining her in the shower but he thought better of it. Don't push it, some little voice in his lizard brain was saying. Make her that omelet and make her another cup of coffee and try to remember where Billy Collins comes from.

When he heard the shower stop he cracked the eggs and dropped them into a bowl, whipping them with a fork. She appeared in the doorway of the kitchen wearing a white

shirt of his, unbuttoned. That was all she was wearing and he thought, Jesus, if I could afford the New York Yankees, I would buy them for her.

“Billy Collins,” she said. “Where did Dutch find him?”

He dropped the eggs into the pan, tipping it so that they covered the surface.

“He pitched high school ball up on the North Coast. Fortuna, I think. Then he did a season for College of the Redwoods. Dutch saw him one night pitching for the Humboldt Crabs, a semi-pro team in Arcata. He told me it was like watching a freak show.”

“And it’s OK to pitch like that? There’s no rule that you can’t throw that way?”

“You can throw the ball any way you want as long as you put one foot on the rubber.” He pulled the edge of the egg into the center of the pan with the fork, tipping the pan again so that the uncooked egg slid into onto the hot surface. He dropped some cheese into the pan, added a few pieces of Canadian bacon, folding the egg over with the fork. Turning the pan, he slid the omelet onto a warm plate.

“Your breakfast, O princess of the fastball.”

She took the plate into the room with the bed, setting it on the table.

“When I finish,” she said, sipping the hot coffee he had set next to her plate, “you get to pitch again. We’ll see what kind of stuff you’ve got.” She took his hand, raising it to cup her breast. “Maybe you ought to warm up,” she said. “I wouldn’t want you to pull a muscle or anything.”

Chapter 3

Dutch Goltz wasn't Dutch. He was a Jewish boy who had been called that when he was a kid because he was in and out of trouble all the time, and his father's brother used an expression, "That kid is always in dutch," and it stuck. By the time he was eighteen he was a left-handed power hitter and he got drafted by the Oakland A's and played several seasons for the Stockton Ports. He got called up once, late in the season, but he couldn't hit a big league curve ball. He took a job coaching a semi-pro team in San Jose and Dutch discovered that he could handle young ballplayers, bring them along, make a team out of cast-offs, and he hung around the fringes of baseball for the next thirty-five years, working off-season as a carpenter or a truck driver and finding a team to coach during the summer months. Once it was a single-A club in the Texas panhandle and now that he had passed seventy, it was the Knight's Landing Dog Sox. He didn't hide his distaste for the team name, but he had managed to assemble a roster of players that could go nine innings without embarrassing him or the fans.

Of the nine starters, three were paid a salary: \$2500 a month to three kids who were hoping that a scout would come to a game and they would leave a league that played sheetrockers and high school dropouts. Pumpsey Brown, the shortstop, had played college ball for USC. He was the only black player on the team, and he said he was the reincarnation of Ricky Henderson. Dutch had to sit on him to keep him from trying to steal every time he got on base. Darryl Anger, the catcher, played for the Sonoma Crushers for two seasons before the team folded, and he was steady, a good hitter, a bulk of a target behind the plate, with a quiet demeanor that some would have called withdrawn, but Dutch knew that Darryl kept a book on every batter they faced and the wheels were turning inside his square head all the time. Four games into the season, Dutch took Billy Collins out of the rainy North Coast where he worked for Marconi's Fish Products during the day and played for Marconi's Humboldt Crabs at night. Dutch had never seen a motion like that and at first he thought it was just a freak thing, but the more he watched, the more he liked what he saw. For three or four innings the kid was unhittable. Then he turned wild but Dutch figured that he could tame the kid, get seven innings out of him, and he offered him a contract. When Dutch told Billy he would never again smell like fish guts and he would actually get paid to play ball, he was packed and on the road. Billy and Darryl and Pumpsey lived in a rented house in Woodland, twenty miles from Knight's Landing, ate off the dollar menu at MacDonaldis and were the heart of Dutch's team.

The others were part-time ballplayers who got fifty bucks a game. Some of them harbored illusions that a scout would see them and they would suddenly be in Triple-A ball, while others just wanted to play baseball, knew they were also-rans, but liked the idea that they could put on a uniform and stand under the lights on a Friday or a Saturday night and hear the crack of the bat.

Chapter 4

“The thing is,” Dutch said, “the ball comes at you from an angle you just don’t like. Look at it this way. Ninety-five percent of all pitchers, lefties or right, makes no difference, release the ball shoulder-high. So it comes down at the plate. The other five percent bring their motion off to the side a bit and release chest high. The ball comes in at you pretty much on the level. But this freaking kid brings that ball up off the ground and when he releases it, it’s not much more than ankle-high and it rises toward the plate and nobody, and I mean nobody, has spent a career hitting pitches that come up like that. There’s maybe a dozen sidearmers in the majors because it puts a helluva strain on your shoulder and sidearmers come apart at the seams. Very few owners want to take a chance on a pitcher who’s going to throw his arm out of the socket. And they never have anything on the off speed pitches. Which means most sidearmers have maybe one or two pitches, but this kid has a curve ball, and it doesn’t just break right or left, it breaks right and up or left and up. You’ve spent years watching a curve drop away or down and now the frigging ball comes up and you swing and you thought it was in the sweet spot and no, it’s inside on the letters. And his change up looks like smoke, but all of a sudden it just isn’t there yet. Not because it’s such a frigging good change-up, but because it’s rising like some space ship taking off. I swear, with a motion like that, he should tear his shoulder right out of the socket. You watch him, and it’s this roundhouse that swoops down and then it’s David’s slingshot. He doesn’t look like any sidearmer or submariner I ever saw, and I been watching pitchers for forty years. He gets tired after maybe four innings, so I’m working on his arm strength, but right now, I got a pitcher who goes four innings and faces twelve batters, and all they do is swing at empty air.”

Chapter 5

Ray bought the Dog Sox for Ava as a birthday present. It was a rainy January day when he met her at the Stockton Garage in San Francisco. She came out of the elevator wearing a black sweater, black silk scarf, black slacks and black cowboy boots. She wore silver earrings and her hair was tucked under a black baseball cap. A shiny black raincoat was thrown over her shoulders.

“Mysterious woman in black,” Ray said.

“You got that right,” she said. “So where are we going?”

“Tiffany’s.”

“Breakfast at Tiffany’s?” Her face lit up. “I like the sound of that.”

At eleven o’clock there was no one else in Tiffany’s except the clerks and a heavy-set man at the doorway who, Ray suspected, was armed. He smiled at them and a man in a dark suit and an impeccably knotted red tie greeted them.

“We’d like to look at necklaces,” Ray said.

Ava took the scarf from around her neck and pointed to one in the case. “I like emeralds,” she said. The clerk unlocked the case, brought out the necklace and stepped behind Ava so he could drape it around her neck and fix the clasp. When he stepped back she looked into the mirror. “Too many diamonds,” she said. “It’s not subtle enough.”

Another necklace materialized. Ray casually looked at the price tag on the first necklace as the clerk laid it on a tray behind the counter. It was more than a hundred grand.

They continued for another half an hour until Ava turned to Ray and said, “What I need is a dress to go with this one.” She reached up and unclasped it and handed it back to the clerk. “We’ll go up the street to Saks,” she said. She smiled at the clerk and Ray suppressed a grin. Her smile was that of a rich woman who knows she can have anything she wants and the man next to her is good for it. Suddenly, Ray felt rich.

As they went out the door the heavy-set guard nodded amiably. Outside, Ava turned to him.

“Nothing? Not even a charm bracelet? What the fuck was that all about?”

“It was about being rich enough to buy you a necklace that costs a fortune.”

“You don’t have a fucking fortune, Ray. I thought I was going to get a birthday present!”

“You are,” he said. “That was the teaser.” He reached out and turned her toward Stockton Street. “First we have a glass of champagne.”

They turned at the corner, went up the hill to Campton Place and went past the doorman, through the gold and glass doors into the quietly rich lobby. A few steps down into the small bar and they were alone.

The champagne wasn't cheap. Two glasses of Veuve Cliquot set Ray back thirty dollars. He raised his flute, touched hers, and laid the envelope on the bar.

"What's this?" she said.

"Open it and see."

She unclasped the brown manila envelope and took out the papers. She examined them and then turned to him. "This says I own a baseball team," she said. "When did that happen?"

"Last week. I bought you the Knight's Landing Dredgers. Only now they're named the Dog Sox."

She burst into laughter.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"You love baseball. I love dogs. You are the owner of a baseball team. Named the Dog Sox. The mascot is a black lab."

"Jesus, Ray, what did this set you back?"

"Not that much."

"No, that won't do. You don't have a lot of money, Ray. You're a general contractor and you do things like remodel a kitchen, which you did for me, so I want to know what you did."

"Less than your kitchen."

"That's no answer."

"I bought the name and the right to play ball in a rickety stadium in a little town in the Central Valley and the first month's contracts on three ball players, the manager's salary and enough hot dogs and Cokes for five games. After that we depend on tickets and hot dogs and luck. You're the owner. You get to sit in the owner's box and act like a rich woman. You carry yourself like one. You looked so fucking rich in Tiffany's I thought that salesman was going to have an orgasm. I bought you a baseball club for your birthday, Ava."

She fingered the paper, raised her champagne to her lips and took a sip.

"You are full of surprises, Ray Adams. You take me to Tiffany's, let me try on diamonds and emeralds, and then you give me a baseball team. So what do we do now?"

"We finish this." He raised his glass to touch hers again. "And then we go upstairs in this fancy hotel and the owner of the Knight's Landing Dog Sox and the general manager who also is the hot dog cooker, will have their first strategy meeting."

"Is there an agenda?" she asked.

"Mostly it involves you wearing a lot less than what you have on now."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Reasonably sure. It's not every day I get to bed the owner of a baseball team. I want

to make the most of it.”

“So what will it cost you for a late-morning fuck with this baseball owner?”

“If you count the ball club and the champagne and the room, maybe a couple of thousand an hour.”

“You think I’m worth that much?”

“Worth every penny,” he said.

Chapter 6

They traveled to Oroville to play the Steelhead. The ballpark was better than the Knight's Landing park. There were not only light poles in the outfield, but two along each baseline, and there were nearly 500 people in the stands. Word had gotten out that there was a freak pitcher for the Dog Sox that nobody could hit. The home team got to keep seventy-five percent of the gate and all of the concession stand take, but five hundred tickets at four bucks apiece meant that the Sox went home with enough to cover the payroll for the night.

Pumpsey led off the first inning with a walk, stole second even though there was no sign and the pitcher was rattled enough to walk the second batter, a right fielder named Pete Lubinski who was, during the day, a back-hoe operator for a construction company. Darryl Anger crushed the next pitch over the left field fence into a rice field and Billy Collins had a three run lead in the bottom of the first. Watching Billy pitch was like watching somebody eat fireworks. He stood there on the mound and looked intently at Darryl and when he got the sign he nodded and then he rose, his skinny body like some kind of an egret or a heron, up on his toes, his long neck stretched, chin up, looking down his beak at the batter and then his right arm went out above his head and it came down in a roundhouse curve behind his back, his body rolling into the motion, left foot as high as the top of his head and the arm came down at the same time as the leg and his hand swept the ground, only inches from the dirt, and he released the ball, striding forward, following through with so much power that the ball seemed to skip, and then there was the pop! as it hit Darryl's mitt and the batter adjusted himself. Pretending that he hadn't liked that pitch, but the fact was he had no idea where or when it had crossed the plate. Three batters. If they swung at a pitch it was a half-hearted swing and with the third out, Billy punched his fist into his mitt, an exclamation point as he went back to the dugout, and Dutch thought, *Oy vey!* I've got a Golem here. Some kind of thing made by the rabbi out of dust in the attic of the synagogue and if I can learn the secret words I've got the magic that I have been looking for all my life.

Chapter 7

Ray stopped in Yuba City and bought fireworks from a roadside stand the week before the 4th of July. He bought two hundred dollars worth of rockets and brought them back to Knight's Landing. He asked Maria Lopez at the Taqueria if she knew a couple of guys who would light them for him during the seventh inning stretch of the Friday night game. He would pay them twenty bucks apiece and Maria said her husband and his brother would do it. So Friday night on the 4th of July weekend Jose and Escobar Lopez showed up and carried the boxes of fireworks out beyond the left field fence to the parking lot next to the rice silos.

“Remember,” Ray told them. “Don't start until you hear the music.”

The Dog Sox were ahead by two runs in the top of the seventh, and Barney McChesney, the plumber from Chico who had played a season of single-A ball in the Arizona League right out of high school had taken over after Billy began to fall apart in the fifth inning. Barney put them down in order in the top of the seventh, and Ray put the disc in the player at the back of the snack shop and turned the loudspeakers all the way up. The speakers crackled and then the 1812 Overture blasted out, fuzzy and distorted and Ray looked out toward the rice silos. There was nothing and he thought that Jose and Escobar had flaked on him when suddenly the sky lit up. Somehow they had fused all of the rockets together and they went up in a constant stream, filling the night sky with gun shots and fiery bursts and instead of a fireworks display that should have lasted fifteen minutes, the whole show was over in less than a minute, a blitzkrieg of explosion and sparks trailing down. And then the rocket that had lodged in the eucalyptus trees at the edge of the river exploded and in short order the tree exploded in a column of fire, and then the next tree, and the one after that.

Holy shit! Ray thought, and the crowd cheered. He heard the volunteer fire department siren go off and then came the siren of the town's single pumper truck, mixed with Tchaikovsky's cannons and trumpets. The wall of trees was a mass of red and orange and black smoke towering above the river and then they flared and died and he could see the stream of water from the pumper playing on the trees but it was no more than an exercise for the volunteers. The stand of trees turned black and the crowd settled back for the finish of the game.

“Fucking A, Mr. Adams, that was the best fireworks I ever saw.” It was the kid who had taken off his dog suit, collected his ten dollars and was drinking a free Coke.

Ray left the snack shop and found Ava sipping her beer in her folding chair.

“You are out of your mind,” she said.

“I planned it that way.”

“Bullshit!”

“No need to get vulgar. That was for you.”

“I suppose you want to spend the night here.”

“It crossed my mind.”

“Will there be any more fireworks?”

“You never know,” he said.

When she came, there was an explosion in her body, and she cried out and then she was still, until she shuddered, as if she were trying to shake off something. It was the kind of involuntary movement his grandmother would have explained with “someone walked over your grave.”

And she was asleep, one arm stretched above her head, her face resting on her arm, hair a wild spikiness, the other arm limp across her thigh. Her breath slowed and he watched the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her back. He came closer to her until their bodies touched, reached across to rest his hand on her breast, felt her heart beating, and waited.

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