

Baseball and Broncos and Zoos, Oh My!

by

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I stared at Cameron Baseball Field through the chain-link fence. I thought about how that place changed my perception of life and death. It was all because of a spooky moment I experienced there in 1980. My name is Joseph Turner, and this is my story:

Daddy and I didn't talk a lot as we drove along Hardy Street. That was normal though. Momma said Vietnam changed him. He was angry at the world for sending him to war instead of allowing him to pursue a professional baseball career. His anguish often caused friction in our relationship. Although it was hard to have a simple conversation with him, I still tried.

I turned the volume down when Michael Jackson's "Rock with You" blared from the radio. "Daddy, do you think I'll get to start at third?"

"Do you deserve to start?"

I sighed. "Well, yeah. I guess."

"Stop guessing all the time, son!"

I rolled my eyes. "Forget I even asked that question."

Daddy shook his head. "You need to stop being so sensitive! Work harder, son."

"But, Daddy—"

"I don't want to hear it. You have the talent to be a starter. Get down on the ball quicker. Shuffle those feet too. Understand?"

I nodded my head. "Yes, sir. I got it."

When we made it to Cameron Baseball Field, there were no other vehicles in the parking lot. We quickly exited the car and approached the field. A man and boy were already on it though. Their skin was darker than coal and very sweaty. Their dingy, matching uniforms had a throwback look.

We were near the first base dugout when the man shouted to Daddy, "Hey, you and your boy can join us out here!"

Daddy nodded his head, and we walked onto the field. Just as we made it to the mound, there was a loud roar. I moved closer to Daddy.

He sighed. "Joseph, stop being so scary."

"What made that noise?"

Before Daddy could respond, the man said, "That was a lion at the zoo over there. Ain't no need to worry. I'm Lester. Everybody calls me Les. This here is Junior."

Daddy shook Les' hand. "Nice to meet y'all. I'm Larry. This is Joseph. We came out here to do a little infield. When I didn't see in other vehicles out there, I figured we were the first ones here."

Les pointed to the parking lot. "My truck is out there. There she is. She's a beauty, huh?"

It was a brown and tan 1975 Ford Bronco, parked just a few feet from our station wagon. That truck wasn't there when we had first arrived. At least I didn't remember it being there.

Daddy grinned like a kid in a candy store. "Yeah, that sucker looks good!"

For nearly an hour, we ran bases, scooped grounders, and chased down pop-ups. Junior and I got along well, but I couldn't say the same for our fathers. They seemed to compete against each other to see who the better coach was. Despite the rain, they pushed us to give our all.

After a lightning bolt lit up the sky, I jogged towards the dugout. Daddy chased after me.

"Joseph, where are you going?"

I walked inside the dugout and sat on the bench. "It's lightning out here. We need to leave."

"Son, it ain't that bad. Stop fearing everything."

"I don't want to go back out there, Daddy."

He sighed. "I ain't going to force you to go back out there. We need to change clothes anyway so we can meet your momma at the church."

Daddy motioned at Les who was on the mound with Junior. "Les, we're done. The weather is bad. Y'all need to get off that field too."

He smirked. "A little rain ain't ever hurt nobody. Junior needs to stay out here until he learns how to throw a sinker. At his age, I was throwing sinkers and curves with my eyes closed. Do what y'all have to do. We'll be out here."

As we were about to exit the restroom, we heard a loud, explosive noise. It sounded like lightning had struck something. We quickly ran out to investigate. To our surprise, the sky was bright and sunny. It was as if it hadn't stormed at all. Even stranger was that Les and Junior were gone. So was their truck.

While we suspiciously looked around the complex, a young black woman ran over to us. Tears were trickling down her face. A little black girl was with her. They both seemed anxious and in despair.

The woman grabbed Daddy's arm and said, "Have you seen my husband and son?"

Daddy snatched away from her grip. "Ma'am, I don't know your husband and son."

"My name is Sandra, and this is my daughter, Jackie." The woman held up a picture. "This is my husband and son. Have you seen them?"

Daddy snatched the picture and examined it. "They look familiar. Joseph, look at this."

I glanced at the picture. "That's Mr. Les and Junior. We were just practicing with them on the field."

Sandra seemed erratic. "Where are they? Did someone take them to the hospital? Where are they?"

"Sit down for a minute," Daddy said to her. "Can we sit and talk?"

Sandra sat on the bleacher and nodded her head. "That's fine. We have to hurry though."

Daddy sat next to her. "What's going on, ma'am?"

"Coach Jimmy's wife called and told me lightning struck Lester and Junior. I got here as fast as I could. I can't find them though. We have to hurry and find them so we can all go to the—"

A male voice interrupted Sandra and said, "Y'all finished with the field?"

Daddy and I turned around to find a man approaching us.

Daddy nodded his head. "Yeah, we're finished."

The man stood near us and said, "I'm Jimmy. I coach out here. My team should be here soon for practice. I ain't ever seen y'all."

Daddy shook Jimmy's hand. "I'm Larry. This here is my boy, Joseph. We were just going over some things before he practices with his team next weekend."

Jimmy nodded his head. "I see."

“We won’t be in your way,” Daddy said. “We’re trying to help this woman and girl search for their folks.”

Jimmy seemed surprised. “Who?”

Daddy pointed at the bleacher. “I’m talking about them.”

No one was there though. Sandra and Jackie were gone. They had somehow disappeared. The only evidence to suggest that they were ever there was the picture on the bleacher.

Jimmy shook his head. “There ain’t no woman or girl.”

Daddy appeared confused. “There was a girl and her momma. The woman was holding that picture.”

Jimmy snatched the picture from the bleacher and looked at it. “Where did you get this?”

“That woman had that picture!” Daddy shouted. “You act like you know the people on that picture.”

Jimmy sat on the bleacher and looked at us. “I do. That’s Les, Sandra, and their kids, Junior and Jackie. Les used to coach with me when my oldest boy played here. We also coached the American Legion team that our boys played on.”

“That’s too much baseball,” I said.

Jimmy nodded his head. “We wanted our boys to get as much experience as they could. Les was over the top though. He wanted Junior to make it to the majors. I don’t think Junior even liked playing ball all that much.”

Daddy shook his head. “That’s a bunch of hogwash. That man ain’t a bad father. He was only doing what he needed to do to get his boy to the next level.”

Jimmy put the picture on the bleacher. “No, Les wasn’t a bad man. He tried to live his baseball dreams through Junior’s life though. Junior resented him for that. It was stressful on Sandra too. It’s a shame what happened to that family.”

“What happened?” Daddy asked.

Jimmy sighed. “It was a couple of years ago. Our team had just lost the championship game. Junior was the losing pitcher. The boy didn’t pitch badly that game. I think the rain bothered him a little. Les was still mad though. After that game, he and Junior worked on pitching out there in the rain.”

“In the rain?” I interrupted.

Jimmy nodded his head. “Yep. I tried to make Les get off the field. The rain fell harder and there was lightning. He wouldn’t listen though. I got into my van to leave. Before I could crank the darn thing, lightning struck that mound and hit Les and Junior. They didn’t survive.”

“Are you serious?” Daddy asked

Jimmy nodded his head. “Yeah, I’m serious. It was nothing I could do. When Sandra found out, she jumped in the car to get over here. She ran that traffic light over there though and hit that pole. Neither she nor Jackie survived.”

Daddy scratched his head. “That can’t be! You said two years ago?”

Jimmy nodded his head. “Yeah. That funeral was so sad, man. They buried all four of them that day. I hope they got to see each other again in heaven.”

Daddy and I could only stare at each other in disbelief.

I’ll never forget that haunting experience at Cameron Field. Now, neither will you. When driving by the facility, don’t be surprised to see a brown and tan 1975 Ford Bronco in the parking lot. You might even catch a glimpse of a peculiar-looking man and boy on the field, donning 1970s-style baseball attire. You might see a sobbing woman and grief-stricken little girl sitting in the bleachers. Don’t be scared though; just pull over and embrace America’s pastime with those lost souls. Maybe you can help them reconcile and go towards the light.