

Joe v. Ty

Can't say as I've seen many a day like this – wet, foggy and cold all at the same time. Ain't but one word I can think to describe it: nasty. Just plain nasty. Reminds me of my days in Philly. Best sort of day to get some inventorin' done... soon as I drink this here coke-cola and study this here sports page, that is.

What in heaven's name? Now I've seen some limousines in my day, but that black beauty takes the prize. Well would you look at that, she's dockin' at my doorstep... Is that? Danged if it ain't. Even behind them hoot-owl spectacles, I'd recognize that beady-eyed buzzard anywhere –

Tyrus Raymond Cobb... Watch me have some fun with the old boy.

I let Cobb in, all the way in, before I even look up. I give him a polite “How do,” but nothing more. Lord he looks soft. Is that what folks think when they look at me? That I'm soft? Washed-up? Pathetic? Damn I hate gettin' old. Athletes should never get old. They should just shoot every damned one of us the day we turn forty. Leave the business of growin' old to normal folk.

“Don't you remember me, brother Joe?” he says. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was begging for me to recognize him. Yep. Pathetic. What's the matter, Ty – too long since you made a headline yourself? I play the humble card with the old blowhard – “Course I remember you, Ty,” I says as I haul my six-foot carcass out of the rocker, bones poppin' like dry kindlin'...

We shake. Lee at Appomattox it ain't, but I get an inklin' as to how the General felt.

“Just didn’t think nobody from up there would care to remember me,” I add, layin’ it on thicker than sweet sorghum.

“Damned hard to forget the greatest natural hitter that ever lived,” he says without missin’ a beat.

Didn’t see that one coming... Maybe he has gone soft. I serve up a meatball right in his wheelhouse, just to be sure.

“I thought you was the greatest?”

“I was, but I come by my swing through study and diligence,” he points out, grinnin’ right at me as he takes me yard. “You got a *gift* from the Man upstairs.”

Nope, same ol’ Ty. Only person I’d know could pay a man his greatest compliment and his worst insult all in the same breath. I see the next one coming, but as any infielder from our day’d tell you – there ain’t nothin’ I can do about it.

“I hear Cleveland’s lettin’ you in their hall.”

This isn’t as fun as I thought it’d be. He’s settin’ me up – got me fightin’ off inside heat just to stay alive.

“That’s what they tell me.”

I imagine I catch a glint of sunlight off his spikes just before they tear into my thigh.

“Better than nothin’, I reckon.”

Ouch. Now who’s the pathetic one? Damn you, Tyrus Cobb. You bested me again. I should know better. You were born hard and I reckon you’ll go to your grave that way. Maybe some men weren’t meant to know no other way... I get a consolation prize when he grabs my bottle of coke-cola and takes a big-ol’ sip.

“What the hell is that?” he spits.

“Coke-cola,” I says as I watch him pull a flask from his coat pocket and wash his mouth out with what I’m sure is hard whiskey. “Well, coke-cola with a bit a lime,” I add with a smile.

“Lime?” He rinses again for good measure or a good snootful, one. “Hell, I was ready to phone the boys down in Atlanta and tell ‘em somebody was pissin’ in my pop!” I look past those stooped shoulders of his and take notice of what I hadn’t taken notice of before – a colored man sittin’ at the wheel of that big limo. The old blowhard prattles on. “You know I own a goodly share of that company,” he says.

“So I read,” I says as a matter of fact. A fact I know won’t get by him.

“You read now? Well hells-bells, will wonders never cease!”

He’s across the store and rummaging through my best sippin’ whiskey before I remember the driver. I’m sure Cobb gave the ol’ boy strict orders not to start that engine, so I beckon him inside where it’s warm... At least I pray that’s why I call the man in.

The door jingle sets to jinglin’ but Cobb doesn’t look up, least not till he’s found two quartz-sized bottles of the most expensive sippin’ whiskey I own.

“How bout you ring--” Now he sees him. “I thought I told you to stay in the car, boy?” Cobb spews in a tone every bit as nasty as the weather outside.

The colored man’s feet start towards the door, “But, sir --”

Cobb cuts the man off mid stammer. “Unless I’m mistaken, socializing was not part of our --”

I return the favor. “I asked him in. A body could catch his death in this mess.” Cobb finds me standin’ directly in front of him. Lordy! I’d forgotten how pitch-black those eyes could be. Me and the colored fellow wait for much worse than we get.

“What the hell do you care? You can throw a rock in any direction and hit ten more just like him.” Cobb takes another swig of his whiskey before he hoists my bottles onto the counter in front of him, ordering me to “Ring me up,” as if I was on his payroll, too.

“Fraid I can’t do that, Ty.” I point to the “CLOSED” sign on the door he never bothered to read. “State law – no liquor sales on Sunday,” I says with the straightest face I can hold.

“I reckon I remember how to speak your language,” he says.

I spot that pearl-handled friend of his as I watch him take somethin’ out of his breast pocket. He’d better not be going where I think he is.

“So, how much is it gonna cost me, Joe? Ten... Twenty...” He peels a hundred-dollar bill from a fancy money clip and offers it to me. “A c-note?” he finishes.

Now I’m mad. “I said: no.”

I reach past the crazy bastard to pluck the bottles off the counter and place them deliberately back on the shelf, turning my back on him in the process. Now some folk might think it a mistake to turn your back on a man like Cobb, but I knowed better: Tyrus Raymond Cobb always wanted you to see it comin’— just so’s he could see the look on your face before it got there. Besides, I got my eye on him in the mirror.

“What the hell are you grinnin’ at, Sambo?”

Shitfire! Didn't count on – before I can finish my thought, Cobb has drawn that damned Luger, but instead of firin', he's got it by the barrel and is about to bring it down across the colored man's skull.

I whip around – my body reactin' with a speed and confidence that I thought had abandoned me long ago – and grab for the nearest thing of use.

“Cobb!”

Cobb's head swivels and his eyes train on me like a hawk: two warriors twenty-five years removed from our chosen field of battle. I snarl out loud what we're both thinking.

“You'd better be sure.”

I feel the stare of those coal black eyes study me, study my soul like they've studied every opponent that's dared cross his demon's path. No, sir. Not this time... His eyes drop first, darting down to focus on what I've taken hold of.

“Is that her?” Cobb asks, knowin' damn-good-and-well what I've set to tappin' against the palm of my right hand: a 48 ounce ebony cut of hickory best known around these parts as Black Betsy.

“Yep.” I says, already feelin' better about my situation. I sidearm some inside junk that I know'll keep him on his heels: “Betsy and me batted .382 our last season up – led the league in triples, too.”

Long as I knowed him, Cobb never backed an inch off the plate for any hurler, so I'm a might surprised when the old buzzard takes a step back now.

“Hell, I don’t do business with nigger-lovers, no how.” He spits some whiskey down across the tops of the colored man’s shoes for show, but there’s no denying it, now: Cobb’s gone soft.

As he turns his back on us to leave, I think to point out something that’s been stuck in my craw for more than thirty years.

“Hey, Ty!”

The miserable son-of-a-gun don’t wanna turn around, but he can’t help himself. I make sure I’m staring into his soul – or what’s left of it – on this one. “The fact that our daddies sowed their seed on the same side of the Mason-Dixon line does not afford you the right to call me brother.”

Cobb mumbles something I don’t care to make out; and then turns tail and leaves – his shoulders stooped so low, you’d swear he’d just got called out on strikes...

“You alright?” I ask, as I prop ol’ Betsy back agin the door jamb.

The man nods, takes a deep breathe as if it’s the first one he’s taken all day.

Outside, Cobb’s limo peels away – tires spinnin’ a hundred-miles-a-minute across the rain-soaked tar... The car doesn’t get very far before it stops – squalls back to the curb just as loud and angry as when it left.

The driver’s window opens and a big, brown paper poke flies out of the limo – landing on the curb with a SPLASH – shirts, ties and a fancy, gold lame cummerbund all spill out into the muddy-red water.

The limo drops into gear and peels away, disappearing into the fog...

“Don’t worry, none,” I says as I step outside, gathering up the muddy clothes and stuffing them back into what’s left of the bag, “what Kate can’t get clean, I’ll send over to my dry clean—“

“Don’t bother,” he says, joining me outside.

“How’s that?”

“Ain’t mine,” the man tells me as he retrieves a black leather duffle bag form just inside the entranceway of the haberdashery next door. “My clothes is in here.”

“Is that Cobb’s bag?”

“Sure enough is. I didn’t figure I’d make it this far with that fancy peckerwood, so’s I stuffed his dandy shit in that poke-sack over yonder whilst I put my stuff in this fine satchel of his,” he says as he slings the bag over his shoulder, tryin’ it on for size.

Personally, I ain’t never gotten over on Cobb. To witness him bested twice in the same day has me a bit at a loss for words... I grab a couple of bottles of coke-cola from the fridge, pop the tops, and hand one over to my newfound friend.

“Lime?” I asks.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he says with a smile.

I walk over and pluck the one thing from the muddy gutter that neither of us can continue to ignore: the gold cummerbund. I wipe it shiny with my sleeve before I drape it around my waist.

“You reckon he’ll miss this?” I asks as I sashay around the store.

We both laugh. We both laugh louder and longer than anyone has a right to on such a nasty day.