



Lucky

It was the dream that got me excited and woke me up. I've had the dream before in one form or another. This time I'm seventeen and back in Birmingham trying to make the baseball team. The Bombers are the premier farm team in the Negro League and competition is difficult. The dream starts out with me on the grass doing inverted bicycles. On my back like that I look around at the beat-up old stadium. The pine bleachers are all faded and dusty. The yellowed woodgrain framework of the whitewashed stadium shows through the paint and the dirt and, as if in a dream within a dream, I watch the frolicking black ghosts of the legends who once played there. Their motions are efficient and independent from thought, almost exotic in their beauty.

I see the center-field signs in my dream, too. "Tucker's Hair Pomade—a quality gel with a jasmine smell"; "Get your daily number from High John the Conqueror—he sees inside your soul"; "Bentley's Dance Hall—from 10 until ____." Halfway up the center-field flagpole, there is a four-by-four-foot-square bull's-eye that says, "Hit it Here. Win \$250."

They say Luke Easter hit it the year he went up to the white league. By that time Jackie Robinson had been with Brooklyn for two years. The white league had been reaching down every now and then and drafting hot colored prospects. By 1949 every major-league team except the Phillies had a colored boy on its farm team or its major-league squad. I wanted more than anything to elevate my game and get noticed before the white league dried up for colored prospects.

This particular morning, my dream featured me doing sprints. I pulled a groin muscle and fell in slow motion onto the cinders. The trainer floated casually over to me.

"You hurt, Lucky?" he drawled.

They call me Lucky. William's my name. William Luck.

"Naw, boss," I groaned. "I'm OK."

I looked at my crotch. My inner thigh, where I had pulled the muscle, swelled up until it was the size of a basketball. Then it exploded with a gushing liquid roar. Blood sprayed everywhere, even on the "Hit it Here" sign two hundred feet away. That's how I missed the majors in my dream that morning. It was always the same—a physical injury—but always a different injury. My dreams never had me failing from mediocrity, and this morning was no different.

By Joseph Reynolds



When I jolted awake, my inner thigh was cramping from the long day's drill and I had sweated through the sheet. My eyes focused on the springs of the sagging bunk above me, traveling from one square to another, tracing geometric figures before I allowed my mind to accept two disturbing realities: that I

I accepted two disturbing realities: I'd never become a major-league baseball player, and I'd soon be going to war.

would never become a major-league baseball player, and that I would soon be going to war. My eyes welled up and salt stung my sun-scorched cheeks. In the musky darkness I relived my failure to make it in the big leagues.

The Bombers eventually cut me and sent me back home to Selma. When I went to get my old clothes-pressing job back, a girl from Georgia had taken the job—"until I get on my feet," she sniffed, as if clothes pressing wasn't good enough for her. I went to the Navy recruiter the next day. They promised me a job in a battleship kitchen as a cook's helper. I couldn't see myself helping a Navy cook, so I considered my options and showed up at the Army recruiting office that same afternoon.

When my platoon first came to Fort Benning, Georgia, in the early summer of 1950, we were all green and hostile. Most of the men were drafted and each had a story to tell that involved the injustice of his call to arms. Just me and Callahan were enlistees. Job Callahan was a huge, nut-brown boy of eighteen with a shy, pleasant smile. He and a big white boy named Hinshaw were from Arkansas and they were as different as a cat is from a dog. Hinshaw was brash and imposing and did not compromise. Callahan was unassuming, but had an air of self-confidence about him. Both were appointed squad leaders along with George Jelinek and a tough street kid from Brooklyn named Rizzo. They were all chosen because of their obvious size and strength. Jelinek, called "Jelly Neck" by the drill instructors, was mysterious. He didn't talk about himself. In fact, he didn't talk at all. He seemed stupid but he did everything easily.

The first few weeks of camp were little more than a continuation of the first few horrible days. We ran everywhere that we didn't march. The fort was hot in August and afforded no privacy. We showered and

shaved together and there was much striving for a pecking order. After a few weeks we began to accept our plight and resigned ourselves to the numbness of discomfort as a way of life.

Then, for a reason that I didn't understand until years later, the pressure eased. The drills were no less draining, the tedious cleanups of the already immaculate barracks were still demeaning, and the interminable berating and harassment by the drill instructors was just as humiliating. But the resilience of youth is the essence of adaptation: we saw equal suffering in our comrades and adjusted.

So there was a settling. We began to form into groups based on race, parts of the country, and common interests. We developed a wary tolerance for one another and in rare cases struck up friendships independent of our little groups. The squad leaders separated themselves from the main body of the troops. They enforced the will of the DIs and sought few outside friendships. Each squad leader controlled twenty or so men in the eighty-man platoon, and for the most part they were passive. Callahan and Rizzo were lax in reporting any but the most egregious violations of regulations. Jelinek wanted no part in any activity that involved controversy. His strength remained implied and he ended challenges to his authority with a long stare and a few slow shakes of his huge head. Hinshaw took immediately to the role, and as time passed he began to relish it.

Jelinek was mysterious. He didn't talk about himself. In fact, he didn't talk at all. He seemed stupid but did everything easily.

One day I was polishing my belt. The ammonia cleaner made me lightheaded and caused my eyes to tear. I ran outside for air, forgetting my open footlocker. In the Army an open footlocker attracts thieves, so there is a minor penalty for the infraction called an Article 15. The squad leaders were instructed to take an open footlocker to the DI's office for "safekeeping." Hinshaw took mine.

When I came back inside, still teary-eyed and gasping, there was a hush in the barracks. I missed my locker immediately and asked for it. There was a

short silence; then a boy called Rabbit stuttered, “H-H-Hinshaw t-t-took it to the office.”

The DI’s office was at the opposite end of the two-storied barracks. One group of forty men occupied the lower floor and forty the second.

“DI s-s-says the onliest person w-w-who can get the locker is the person who brought it in,” stammered Rabbit.

I turned to Hinshaw. “Get my locker, will you, man?”

We ran everywhere that we didn’t march. Fort Benning was hot in August and afforded no privacy. We showered and shaved together . . . and began to accept our plight.

“Can’t,” said Hinshaw. “DI says you got to come to the office.” Hinshaw lolled in his bunk, a hulk of a man in the fullness of his youth. His face was flat and ruddy; the corners of his thin-lipped mouth turned down. He was sullen and calculating. His slitlike eyes regarded me from under his cap brim.

I turned and took the long walk up the aisle past the frightened faces of the men, each of them knowing that any of them could be in my place. They sat on their lockers busily pretending to groom their areas. I knocked once hard on the office door. A harsh, deep, Southern voice sounded like a shot.

“Get in HERE!”

I entered two steps and stood at attention. Three white men, all in their late twenties, sat around a small table playing cards. The closest to me was silent while I was in the ten-foot-square room. The man who sat nearest the single window was angular and straw blond. His eyes were blue and cruel.

“Whaddayou want, *boy*?” The military requirement that one at attention must have his eyes straight ahead was a relief to me.

“I want my footlocker, sir.”

“You ain’t got no goddamn footlocker in here, boy!” he thundered. I knew voices. This one was from the Deep South, the hill country. The loathing for me was in his voice and his excited breathing.

“Yes, sir, I do,” I said. “It’s right there.” I pointed to it from attention, my eyes riveted to the wall. I

could feel the fear in my stomach and lower bowel.

The third man spoke. He was the head DI, Corporal Brescia.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Private Luck, sir.” My fear betrayed me and my voice cracked. I tightened my buttocks and my abdomen.

“Well, Private Luck,” he started in a singsong Southern drawl, “Private Hinshaw brought that locker in here for us to watch.” His eyes lit up and he regarded his associates with a smirk.

Corporal Brescia was short and muscled almost to deformity. His uniforms fit snugly and every muscle demonstrated itself independently. He was swarthy and obviously Italian. Italians were rare in the Deep South. He was only the third or fourth I’d met.

“But it’s my locker, sir.” I tried persuasion, sensing that I was going through some script that they had already written.

“*Hinshaw’s* locker!” exploded Corporal Brescia as he jumped to his feet. He came to within an inch of where my face would have been but for his lack of height, and screamed into my chest. “It’s Hinshaw’s locker and he’s the onliest son of a bitch that’s gonna take it outta here! You understand that, you pigheaded piece of whaleshit?” Flecks of spittle sprayed my face and for an instant my eyes dropped to his raging jaws, then shot back to the wall above his head.

I did understand. The script was unfolding.

“May I be excused, sir, to get Private Hinshaw to liberate my locker?”

Three white men, all in their late twenties, sat around a small table playing cards. One man was angular and straw blond, his eyes blue and cruel. “Whaddayou want, *boy*?”

Corporal Brescia stepped back a pace and grinned up at me. “Now how in the name of Jumpin’ Jack Shit are you gonna do *that*, boy?” he mocked, his face ominous and glistening through a thin film of sweat. The anticipation in his bearing was clear. His voice was husky and his breathing rapid.

“I’ll do it, sir,” I said without any idea as to *how* I

would do it. "May I be excused, sir?"

"Get your dumb aborigine ass outta here," he said in disgust, then pushed me backward out of the office and slammed the door. I could hear them laughing contentedly behind the door.

I slowly walked the eighty feet down the aisle to where the squad leaders sat by my bunk. They had heard every word and sat expressionless as if each had been asked a difficult question. They watched me expectantly as I moved toward them.

If anyone understood at all, it seemed Callahan did. He looked up at me sympathetically. I fought the temptation to ask him what to do. Rizzo regarded me from beneath lowered lashes. His lips were trembling. He looked down when I caught his eye. Jelinek was the only one standing, his arms folded across his chest. I got to the point.

"Hinshaw, get my locker."

He stood up to six-feet-five inches and grinned wryly.

"Sheeit!"

"Hinshaw," I said, "you get my locker out of the DI's office or I'm gonna kick your ass." I hoped my voice did not betray my doubts. I knew I could fight. I considered myself on the fringe of being a pro athlete. I had fought for every privilege or inch of turf that I'd gotten in my young life, but slim at six feet tall, I had real concerns about whether I or anyone

could dominate Hinshaw physically.

"Sheeit," he scoffed again.

"Let's go down to the latrine," I invited.

Hinshaw scratched his square jaw and leered from behind his hand at a small cadre of sycophants who raised their eyebrows and snickered. They feared him absolutely. The latrine was in the basement under the first-floor quarters and was the spotless shave and

I cowered in muddy foxholes. I slept in the snow. I watched a stateside-bound cargo plane shudder under the weight of Callahan's aluminum coffin.

shower room for eighty men. I turned and walked toward it. Every man in the platoon came with us. When I entered the huge bathroom with its thirty sinks lined in a row and ten toilets on the opposite wall, I waited at the door. Hinshaw strode in with a smirk of curious confidence. I closed the door behind us and heard the muffled scramble for viewing space at the transom above the door.

I moved to the center of the floor. Hinshaw, as if preparing to learn a dance, moved with me.

"Go get my locker, man," I said a final time. He looked at me dully, his arms bowed out to his sides, as if preparing to grapple.

"I ain't gettin' sheeit," he said as if surprised that I would repeat the demand.

My first blow was a stiff left jab that hit his forehead. His eyes crossed for an instant. He appeared disoriented and reached out his arms as if to get a hold on me. I backed up and, at arm's length, hit him with a second left to the forehead, crossing with a right to his jaw. His knees buckled as he lurched forward and supported his weight on a sink.

I realized at that moment that Hinshaw could not fight at all. He had probably never fought before. He was only in the latrine because I had challenged him, and he had only taken my footlocker into the DI's office because he wanted their approval. Still, I had to get my footlocker or suffer a summary court-martial for dereliction.

"Hinshaw," I tried again, "get my footlocker."

"I ain't gettin' squat, boy!" He touched his lip and looked curiously at the bright blood on his fingers.

I had no wish to hurt him, but I hated him for hating me. We were both puppets, dancing for the DIs. I prodded my normally gentle nature and started

1985

Open casket
gray swinger suit
skinny maroon tie.

Thin lips. spread like butter
against ivory face—
thicker. than real life
creamier than real skin.

Dead.

No longer watching,
resting,
makeup changing.

Reality blurring a child's last memory.

It was such. a long time ago.

—Jessica Koenig,
Twelfth grade, Iola-Scandinavia High School,
Iola, Wisconsin



my right fist toward his jaw. He turned and dropped his head, taking the blow on the nose. Blood gushed from it onto both of us, and Hinshaw fell into a sitting position, dazed and bewildered.

I walked on unsteady legs to the DI's office, but when I raised my hand to strike the door I saw the darkness of my fist and hesitated. Fear made my stomach convulse, and gastric fluid scalded my

"You ain't got no footlocker in here, boy!" he thundered. I knew voices. This one was from the Deep South. The loathing for me was in his voice and his excited breathing.

throat. Trembling, partly in rage at my trepidation and from fear itself, I knocked at the door.

"Who!?"

"Private Luck, sir."

"Goddamnit, boy! I tol' you Hinshaw got to get that footlocker!"

"He can't, sir." I could smell my sweat.

"Why the hell can't he . . ." The door opened and Corporal Brescia recoiled at the blood on my shirt. "Jesus," he gasped as if in prayer.

At that moment Hinshaw wobbled by us on the landing, a blood-soaked towel pressed to his face.

"Jesus," Brescia breathed again. He pulled me into the room and closed the door. All three looked at me through alternately wide and narrowed eyes. Quietly, Brescia said, "Get your footlocker outta here." He set his beefy hands on his hips. "You're the platoon leader now. You report directly to me. Understand?"

"Yessir," I answered, realizing that somehow I had blundered my way to the end of the script.

I walked the aisle to my bunk, past four dozen sets of awestruck eyes, to pack and move my equipment into the large room next to the DI's office. The irony of the situation caused me unspeakable ambivalence. Thereafter, the DIs and the other men treated me with quiet respect akin to reverence. Other young soldiers on the post who did not know me would turn to face me when I passed their little groups, and step aside and speak my name—"Hey, Lucky." His very size and appearance of brutal power had once given Hinshaw the same favored treatment. Stories of our confrontation passed from platoon to platoon and

were embellished and exaggerated. One version had Hinshaw hospitalized after a two-hour struggle.

The truth, of course, was known only to a few, the whole truth only to me—and I said nothing. Inwardly, though, my personal humiliation made me reflect on the nature of humanity so intensely that I developed a philosophy which, if not profound, was certainly mature. I began to look at all people as either decent, shallow, or striving. Those who were decent deserved my friendship and respect. Those who were striving toward decency, a decency which included gentleness and honesty, were on hold. Those who were shallow were encouraged to strive.

Strange that it comes as an afterthought, but I did go to Korea. I stood in the open hatch of a troop plane and I jumped when the loadmaster slammed his icy hand on my shoulder and screamed, "GO!" I cowered in muddy foxholes. I slept in the snow. I watched a stateside-bound cargo plane shudder on takeoff under the weight of Callahan's aluminum coffin.

And then one day it was over. The Chinese poured back over the Korean hills they so coveted, and we were packed up, all but a police force, flown to the Philippines, then home. My baseball dream was replaced by a dozen others, which I soften with yellow and green pills and therapy at one Veterans Administration hospital or another . . . It isn't really over.

Someday, when my head heals up, I'm going back home. Right about now, though, I feel like I've been beaten with barbed wire and left for dead. But I'm a survivor. There's something in me that just won't let me give up no matter how bad things get. I'm going to go home and get my baseball gear out of Momma's cellar. I'll be twenty-one next month and I'm going to take me another shot at the League. They don't call me Lucky for nothing. ★



**Find
Merlyn**
at the new
**Writer's
Block**

bn.com
BARNES & NOBLE

