BALK!

By John DiFelice

The Yankees tied the game in the bottom of the ninth. Bases loaded. No outs. If we win, we make the playoffs. If we don't, we go home for the season. One hit, walk, or hit batter, and it's over. The phone rings, and the bullpen coach answers it. He looks over at me and says nothing. He doesn't have to. They want to bring in the ROOGY. That's me on what has become the night of my major league debut.

Our closer—the guy they bring in to shut down the other team in the ninth—is usually money, but he's struggling, especially with right-handed batters. Maybe he drank too much last night. Maybe he misses his wife and kids; who knows? That's why they're going with me, a Righty One Out GuY, a pitcher you bring in to strike out one right-handed batter. In the Minors, sometimes they'd bring me in for one pitch, for one strike. Either way, I'd still have to throw forty pitches to warm up. Being a ROOGY is tough on the arm, especially since I don't log many innings, so they can keep using me night after night without rest. I have the shoulder surgery scars to prove it.

ROOGYs have a variation on a pitch that breaks away from a right-handed batter. It's easier to hit a ball that breaks toward you than one that breaks away, especially if the ball is moving at a high velocity and breaks abruptly. That's why I have mastered the cut-fastball, also called a cutter, which, if properly delivered, is unhittable. I learned it not too long ago when I played a summer in Mexico, back when I thought my career was over and selling tacos on a street corner seemed like a real option. That one pitch breathed new life into my career, and here I am.

I walk onto the field. I have no personalized music, so they play what the last pitcher walked out to. I hear an indistinct hum from the forty thousand fans here tonight. They don't know me, so they don't say anything. They didn't even heckle me as I was throwing in the bullpen, which disappointed me a little.

The mound is less than three hundred feet away, but that's not how it feels. It feels like forever away. I try not to look around, but my eyes can't help themselves. The announcers don't know who I am either, but they'll say things about me like they do. They won't mention how I've led every team I've been on to a championship victory: every Little League team, every summer tournament team, every high school team, every college team, every minor league team, or independent team. They won't mention that I was the best baseball player in my tristate region when I was eighteen. But they will mention my age and proclaim their admiration for how long I stuck it out in the Minors. They'll probably call me a journeyman, which sounds nice until you look up the definition.

The big toe on my right foot is numb—I'm guessing from nerves, which isn't good because I use the foot to push off the rubber.

My parents are here somewhere, sitting with my teammates' families. I have no other family besides them. No siblings, no wife, no kids. I can't see where my parents are. I wouldn't want to look at them anyway because they have a knack for taking me out of the zone.

When I got the call up to the Majors, they dropped everything and drove to where I'm playing, just like they'd always promised. They didn't even pack a bag. They hopped in the car and drove to New York. They're staying in a hotel room that costs a fortune. My father is already unhappy because I haven't gotten in yet, and he's really unhappy that I'm in the bullpen and not a starter. He's always unhappy, but I stopped taking it personally long ago. It's just

the way he is. He's a nervous wreck. He's been a nervous wreck ever since I was an eight-year-old kid in Little League.

My mother is the long-suffering wife. My father has dragged her around the country for twenty-three years to watch almost every one of my games. There were no real vacations for her, just sitting in a car for six or nine or fourteen hours to watch me pitch in some Podunk town. I wanted to apologize to her for that. I've wanted to apologize for being the reason she's never seen Paris. The thing is that I never asked them to do it. I doubt they know how unnecessary it all was, even now. I appreciated them being there, but they didn't have to be, not for every game. It was all Dad—it was his idea—but I can't blame him for that either. It was done out of love. I guess it's nobody's fault.

Part of my right foot and part of my left one are numb. I can still walk, but the feeling is gone.

The crowd is a blur, faces indistinct as those you'd see from a carnival ride. I can only make out different lengths of hair. The women are the long-haired ones who had all started to look the same to me anyway. When I say "the women," I mean the women who like ball players. My father warned me about them. "Don't go near them," he'd say to me. "You can't let them mess up the plan." He never explained the plan, but I think it had to do with him enjoying the fruits of my success, which he more than earned, seeing as how he had dedicated his life to me and my pitching career.

There had never been a shortage of women. They were a constant, something always there. My father called them gold diggers and said they were only out to land a Major Leaguer and that they would spend all my money. He said this to me when I was in high school. But the women I came to know were the opposite. They didn't care about any of that. They wanted

me to quit baseball. They wanted me to end my professional career, marry them, and have children. That was definitely not part of the plan.

I dig my cleats into the dirt of the mound. Both legs are numb. I don't know how I'm going to pitch. I don't know how I can even stand, but I do. Somehow, my mind has disconnected, and I rely purely on muscle memory.

The catcher jogs out to me, says a few words that I can't understand, pats me on the ass, and runs back behind the plate. My arm feels a little tight, but not too bad. I stare at the dirt. I pick up a handful and let it slip through my fingers. I need to touch the dirt to make it real. The grass is real. I can almost smell it.

This is the fulfillment of a dream, but what gets me is its routine and awful predictability. I sometimes think of all I could have done had I not pursued this one-in-a-million shot. And now that I am that one-in-a-million, it doesn't feel like I thought it would. I didn't expect it to feel like a job, like anything else.

But it isn't just a job. If I had a regular job, I could choose the company I work for, but I can't. They tell me what team to play for. They tell me where to live. They tell me what position to play. They tell me how much I'm allowed to earn. They own me. They own me the way I let my father's dreams own me. Dreams are funny things. After a while, they can turn on you and attack you and kill you, just like they did to John Odom. Odom. I haven't thought about him in years.

I throw some pitches to warm up, and the batter walks to the plate. He's one of the best hitters in the world and famous, but they all are. To me, he is just a strike zone and a right-handed swing. It doesn't matter who he is. He is faceless, and he won't be able to touch me.

The ump points at me. This is it. I'm about to deliver my first pitch as a Major League pitcher. I always expected to be able to see my parents at this moment, even though I now see how impossible that is. It doesn't matter. I also expected a rush of emotions, but all I feel is the ball heavy in my hand. All I see is the imaginary box telling me where to throw the pitch. It hangs on the outside corner of the plate. That's where the ball will present itself before it vanishes as if by magic—black magic learned in Mexico from a mentor who knew something about darkness.

The first pitch goes right where I want it to go. Sometimes it bores me how accurate I am. The batter swings with everything he has, and then I remember he is going for his 498th home run. Not today. I make him look silly. I can almost hear the announcers cracking jokes about how this journeyman made him look silly.

The catcher throws the ball back. I know how this will end. I'm going to strike him out in three pitches—maybe four—because there's no way he can hit my cutter, and there's no way he can lay off it when it presents as a cream puff right in his wheelhouse. He is also chasing fame, a weakness I will exploit. After I strike him out, I'll go to the dugout and get more slaps on the ass; the manager may say something to me or may not. Then my parents will take me out to dinner. My father will have a very odd look on his face. He'll tell me how I could've pitched better.

Thinking about my father, my thoughts have become strange. I started thinking about what would happen if I ended my career here and now. What would happen if I threw it away in plain view of everyone in the ballpark: the fans watching TV, my ex-girlfriends, my former coaches, and my parents. But how? Not that it matters because I don't have the nerve, but still, how would I do it?

It's crazy to even think about. I could hit the batter. That would do it, but that would look sloppy. I could walk him instead, but I can't do that for the same reason I can't hit him. I am known for my control. I can put a baseball anywhere I want at any time. If I walk the batter to lose the game that gets us into the playoffs, my father's heart would break into a million pieces. He would look at me with disgust. He wouldn't mean to, but he would be unable to hide his feelings.

I could throw the batter a cutter that doesn't break, a pitch he would surely take over the left field wall for a walk-off grand slam. That could be the kiss of death for me.

I could do any of these things, but my pride won't let me. Pride continues to waste precious years of my life. Pride is why I'm here now. It's what would not allow me to give up, no matter how many surgeries, no matter how many ruined relationships, and no matter how much frustration and hopelessness. I can't make myself look like I am not in control. I can't make myself look incompetent. If I throw away my career in front of forty thousand people and all the cameras, they would have to know it was intentional.

The catcher flashes me the sign, not that I need it. He's getting another cut fastball. It doesn't matter if the batter expects it or not.

The batter misses this one by a wider margin than the first one. He was nowhere near it. I half chuckle to myself at the look on his face. He can't believe this thirty-two-year-old journeyman is owning him. My arm feels great, better than it's felt in years.

The catcher tosses me the ball again and nods. I catch it and walk to the mound. I pick up the rosin even though I don't need it.

But how do I throw away my career with the drama that made baseball the national pastime? How do I do it so everyone knows I meant to do it? Just hypothetically.

I wish I had never started this line of thinking because the next idea floats down like a gift from God, and a mere mortal can't refuse such a gift. It would be a sin.

A balk. Of course. I don't know how many pitchers have committed a walk-off balk, but there can't be many. A balk is about fairness. In the Official Baseball Rules, three pages are dedicated to what a pitcher cannot do when a runner is on base. A pitcher cannot unnecessarily delay the game. A pitcher cannot step anywhere but directly toward the base he is throwing to. A pitcher cannot fake a pitch to the batter. Thirteen rules were created to guarantee the pitcher does not have an unfair advantage over the base runner. If a pitcher commits a balk, any runners on base advance to the next one. That would end this game. It's all about fairness. Fairness like John Odom.

I guess I never stopped thinking of him. Odom was a pitcher like me, someone who wasn't drafted in the top five rounds and was sentenced to an uphill slog. No big signing bonus, no big-shot agent to represent him, just like me. I don't know anything about his pitching stats because all I remember is how the Calgary Vipers traded him to the Laredo Broncos for ten baseball bats. They called him Batman in Laredo and played the Batman theme when he took the mound. He tried to laugh it off, but the heckling he received from his own fans was merciless. He quit and died of a drug overdose five months later. All those good Christians in the stands tortured him to death with pieces of a tree.

What am I worth? Five baseballs? Not even that much? My arm normally feels like it's hanging on by skin and frayed tendons. How much longer before the final snap? How much longer until I get the phone call? When will it end on my terms? Never. That's always the answer. Never quit. Throw until you can't. Throw until your arm rips from your body by the force of everything that has come to define you. Throw harder. Throw with everything you

have. Throw with more than you have. Throw for the memory of the game you used to love.

Then it happens. I see my parents. They look exhausted. I catch my father's eyes. I wonder if he knows how frightened he looks. They both do. I've been torturing them. Torturing them with their own dreams, with my dreams. How selfish I am.

This isn't going to end with a phone call, an injury, or a depressing story on a Wikipedia page. I'm not going to fade into the meaningless universe of numbers that baseball statisticians obsessively keep. My place is in folklore.

The ball feels lighter than air in my hand. I feel like I can throw it to the moon. I grip the ball lightly in my right palm, shielding it from view in my glove. I stand on the mound for a full windup, shoulders squared, and weight equally distributed between my legs, which I realize I can feel again. The fans look like they're on a TV set on mute. I hear nothing but my heart pounding in my ears and the soft squeak of my fingers gripping the leather cover of the ball. I step back off the rubber with my left foot like I've done countless times, a motion as natural as breathing. I turn my right foot and place it against the rubber. My left knee rises to meet my joined hands, the ball, the glove. I kick my left leg toward the plate and push off the rubber with my right. Perfect form. Perfect mechanics. My right arm traces an arc from the middle of my chest back and around. It rises, higher and higher, arcing over my head as my glove drops to my side. My right arm whips toward home plate with more force than I thought I had in me. It brushes the ground with the follow-through as I come to stand at the foot of the mound facing the batter.

A gasp rises from the forty thousand faces. It is one voice, and the resonance nearly knocks me to the ground. I look at my right hand and am almost as surprised as they are to see it still clutches the ball.

I hear the word ring out, one jarring syllable, like all of our most important words, fundamental words that bat us about and raise us up and cut us down: you, me, light, dark, yes, no, us, love, pain, hate, love—

"Baaaaaaaalk!"