**The Jollys**

**War is Wet**

**by Bob Byrne**

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CHAPTER 1

All’s Quiet on the Watery Front

Everyone that took part in the war would remember it for the rest of their lives, but they would never talk about it. If anyone asked any of the veterans a question about the war, they would just stare into the distance and then change the subject. It’s not that they were damaged by what happened. It was merely that unless you were there, you wouldn't understand.

I was there, and I have decided that the story must be told so that other generations will learn from our mistakes and never allow them to be repeated.

I was there right until the end when all the weapons were laid down, and we went home to face what came next. I was there when it started. What started as spoken words on a baseball field escalated out of control, until it seemed that there was no choice but war. I was there when the consequences of our conflict started to sink in, and I was there at the finish. Please read and learn from our mistakes.

It all started one beautiful sunny day like any other. When you live in Los Angeles, California, most of your days are beautiful and sunny, but this particular day just seemed so much better than the rest. It seemed almost special. I should have known it was just the quiet before the storm.

My name is Tom Jolly.

I have a twin brother, though not identical, named Alan. Alan and I don’t agree on much, but one of the big things that we do agree on is how much we love baseball. Alan had organized a Saturday baseball game at the park, and we were both super psyched to play. There were eighteen of us that day; we were all so young and innocent, totally unaware of what was about to occur. I remember when we packed up all of our stuff and headed out to the car. We arrived at the park and met up with everyone. Addison ran over to us from the direction of the baseball field. When she got to us, she was out of breath.

“Somebody is on the field right now. They won’t leave,” Addison told us breathlessly.

Alan took off running, and I followed him. Sure enough, when we got to the baseball field, there were eighteen kids in the middle of a game. Alan walked to the edge of the field and yelled out, “Hey! This is our field! It’s two o’clock, and it’s our turn. So, go away!”

Someone ran towards us, and with a sinking feeling, I realized it was Jacob. He was the school troublemaker, and he always liked to start fights with Alan.

“Why don’t you go away? We were here first, *Jokely*,” Jacob sneered.

I tensed up; Alan hated that stupid, insulting nickname.

“It doesn’t matter if you were here first. We signed up for the baseball field. We get it at two o’clock, and it’s two o’clock,” Alan said through gritted teeth.

Jacob laughed, "And what are you going to do if we don't leave, huh? Tell the park custodian. Good luck even finding him.”

Jacob was right. The park custodian was really old, and by the time we found him, and by the time he got around to doing anything, we would have to go home. That is when I said the words I would live to regret.

“Water gun war. If we win, then you can only use the baseball field if we aren’t here, and you have to leave anytime, we show up. How about that?” I asked.

“No one even has their water gun stuff with them, Tom,” Jacob pointed out.

“Okay, so we come back tomorrow with all our stuff, and then we will watch you lose,” I reasoned.

“How do we know that you won’t cheat, Jacob?” Alan asked quietly.

“We can get a red drink mix and add it to the water. Anyone who gets shot with the red water will then be out. Everyone agree?" Jacob asked.

Around me, everyone started talking. I could hear the excitement in their voices—if only we had known.

Jacob stuck out his hand. Alan shook it. I could see the determination in both of their eyes, but I saw something different in my brother, and what I saw worried me. Alan got stubborn when he was mad, and he looked really mad. I realized that this would be no game.

Alan got everyone together to scout out the park. It was huge, with trees and enormous sandboxes. It had a place that was just all slides. Alan divided us up into squads and then started coming up with a plan to beat Jacob. I was right there with him, and everyone couldn’t wait for the water to start flying. All that was left was to go home and get ready, because tomorrow, the water war would start.

CHAPTER 2

The Red Balloon of Courage

“But why do you have to go? I don’t understand,” my sister Anne was near tears.

She had heard about the upcoming battle, and she had cornered me in my room. She was trying to understand why we were doing this, and I was trying to explain something that I barely understood myself.

“Because they took the field and broke the rules, Anne. No one else is going to do anything, so we must stand for what is right! Look, it will be fine, I promise," I tried to reassure her.

“Then why can’t I go? I can shoot pretty good,” Anne begged.

“You are too young, don’t you see? Plus we already have a plan. The teams have been picked," I reached out to hug her. She resisted at first, but then she gave in.

After a bit, she pushed away and ran to her room. She came back with a folded piece of paper. She gave it to me, and I opened it up. She must have made it in kindergarten. It was a finger painted picture of Anne, me, and Alan. We seemed so happy together. I folded it up and put it in my pocket.

“Thanks, Anne. I will keep it close,” I assured her.

We piled into the van around eleven o'clock. It had a hole in the tailpipe that Dad hadn’t fixed yet, and it made a whump, whump, whump sound that matched the beating of my heart. I turned around and watched Anne waving at us; the sunlight was in her hair. She even tried to chase the car to see us off, but soon, too soon, she was out of sight, and there was nothing left but to listen to Alan going over the plan.

We arrived at the grounds within a half-hour, and we could see everyone in the parking lot. They all had their water guns slung on their shoulders, and some people had even brought water balloons. There were several enormous water-jugs that we could use to fill up our weapons. Kids were saying good-bye to their parents, but I didn’t have much to say. The parents would sit around the benches and have lunch together. For them, the war was far away; it was like a whole other world. They didn’t understand.

Alan called us all together, and we set off. Alan had gotten a map of the park and had found a spot on the western edge that would be our starting point and headquarters. It was an excellent spot to defend with lots of stuff to hide behind. Jacob’s group would start far to the east, up near the trees. We would have to go in and hunt them down while they would have to attack us at our base. We got there and started to set up.

Alan pulled out the drink mix and added it to the jugs. Red started to stain the water, and after we shook the jug, we had our ammo. While they were setting up, I looked at our forces. Most of the kids were from school, but there were some kids from the neighborhood. I saw Billy Nelson, our neighbor, who loved to read and was super smart. Next to him talking about how many kids they were going to shoot were the Foster’s. They were the neighborhood wild children; both were fearless. I almost dropped my gun when I saw Piper Hill. I stomped over to Alan and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Can I speak to you?” I nearly growled out the question.

“Sure Tom,”

“What is Piper Hill doing here?” I asked.

“What’s the problem, Tom?” Alan returned.

“She’s five, Alan. She’s just a little kid,”

“So is Curt Foster,” Alan retorted.

“That’s different. First of all, the Fosters are crazy, and second, Curt lives and breathes this kind of stuff. Piper Hill hasn’t even had a water balloon fight,” I huffed.

“Well, she can hold a water pistol, can't she?" And with that, he walked away, leaving me conflicted.

I walked over to the jugs and started to fill my water gun. It was a multi-pump model. The more you pump. The better the range you could get. Most of the kids here had them, but some had a bunch of water pistols and water balloons instead. As I put the stopper back into my water rifle, I looked at my hand. It was stained red. I didn’t think much of it at the time. I wish that I had put it all together. It might have all turned out different.

CHAPTER 3

The Wettest Day

I wasn’t there for the opening soakings, but I was there when those who had been hit made their way back. We lost two people in that first hour. They came walking back with red all over their shirts and pants. Nobody asked them what happened. You couldn’t talk to the *dead*. They walked over and grabbed the clear water that we had brought and poured a bit out on their clothes to clean the drink mix off, but it didn’t come off.

They scrubbed harder and harder, but nothing happened. We all looked on with a growing realization. If their clothes were permanently stained, then we were all going to get in so much trouble. The war almost ended right then. No kid wanted to get grounded for getting their clothes dirty. The grumbling started, and kids began to leave, but Alan rallied them together.

“Saturday, yesterday, is a day that will live in infamy. We signed up for the baseball field—we followed the rules! But they knowingly surprised us and took our playtime away! They took the pitcher’s mound; they took first base. I ask you, are we going to let that stand? I say, no! I say that we are going to fight them on the playgrounds. We’re going to fight them on the basketball courts. We are going to fight them on the monkey bars, so that weeks from now, when we are all not grounded, and the baseball field is free for everyone again, they will say, never have so many kids, owed so much, to so few,” he bellowed across the lines.

To this day, I don’t know if it was the words he spoke or just how excited he got, but, at that moment, we were Alan’s army.

Alan sent out teams of kids, and when those who were still dry came back and reported, Alan made new teams and sent them where they were most needed. My brother was brilliant, and soon we knew that the time had come to finish it. We knew that there were at least seven of them remaining, so Alan decided it was time to send my squad out. Addison was our squad leader. The rest of the team consisted of me, the Fosters, and little Piper Hill. Alan led the other three out personally and headed to the woods while we went for the playground.

There were signs of battle everywhere. The grass had been stained a bright strawberry red, and we were careful to avoid the muddy patches all around us. We had just gotten to the double sandbox when we heard the *whipping* sounds of incoming water. We all ran to the hole that someone had dug out in the sandbox and jumped down. I peeked over the top and saw that behind the slides were four kids, all armed with water pistols and balloons. I sunk back down into the hole.

“Okay, it looks like there are only four, which means we outnumber them….”

I trailed off as I heard the cry. Young Curt Foster was still standing in the open, pulling at his shirt, his hands covered in drink mix. It was starting to sink in how much trouble he was going to be in. His older sister began to go to him, but I stopped her.

“You can’t go out there, Nickie. I know he’s your brother, but there is nothing you can do for him. If you go out there, then they will get you next,” I pleaded with her. I poked out my bottom lip and begged, shaking my hands. She finally agreed.

“Curt,” Nickie called out. “Curt, it’s going to be okay, man. We’re going to get you a new shirt and then we will go for ice cream. Do you hear me? It’s going to be fine.”

“Nickie, I’m cold. Nickie!” Curt yelled out.

It was getting late, and a slight wind had picked up.

“Just ignore it, Curt. Head back in. Everything will be fine—you’ll see,” Nickie lied.

Curt’s footsteps got lighter and lighter, and soon we couldn’t hear anything from him at all. Watching someone get soaked like that affected us all. We sat there quietly. The kids behind the slide were quiet as well. They were waiting for us to make a move. We had reached a stalemate. We all had good cover, so it became all about whose nerve would break first. We settled down to wait and pulled out our bag lunches.

“Bleh, Tuna fish again. Why do I always get tuna fish? Anyone want to trade?” Nickie offered.

I looked and saw that I had chicken salad, so I happily traded with her. Piper pulled out this little phone and started giggling to herself.

“Hey, kid. What ya got there?” I asked.

“It’s a picture of my dog. She just had puppies. When this is all over, I am going to go and play with them. Maybe you can all come over and play with them too. There is one for every---” Piper was cut off as a scream tore through our conversation. I pulled myself up and saw a kid charging as fast as he could at our hole. He had a water balloon in each hand. We all scrambled for our guns and fired, covering him in the drink mix, but it was too late. One of the balloons sailed over and landed directly in the middle of the hole. It didn't explode at first, but I saw the tear at the top, and I started to move, but Piper was quicker. She jumped on the balloon, and with a massive whooshing sound, her little white dress was covered in red. She had saved us all but at a tremendous cost to herself. That dress was ruined. Nickie snarled, and looked at us, and yelled, “Come on, you apes—do you want to stay dry forever?”

Nickie jumped out of the hole and sprinted straight at the slide. She zigged and zagged firing the whole way. Within seconds two of the other team members were soaked and dripping red, and that is when her weapon ran out of ammo. Addison and I ran after her. I pumped my rifle, but I knew that there was no way that I was going to get close enough in time, and I watched helplessly as red-water stained Nickie’s clothes. I got some revenge when my shot, fired just a few seconds too late, stained my enemy’s pants. Nickie looked at the stains on herself and shrugged.

“At least I can go be with my brother. Good luck, guys,” Nickie said and then walked away.

Addison and I were alone.

“So where to now Addison?” I asked.

“Well, this was Allan’s plan, he thought that there were going to be some kids here and in the forest, so if we got the kids here than maybe Alan’s team got the ones in the forest?”

I nodded in agreement, seemed like as good a plan as any. We headed over, and soon we hit the outskirts of the little forest of trees that the city had planted. We heard some rustling, and we both fell flat and pointed our guns at the noise. It seemed like forever until from out of the bushes came Billy Nelson, holding up another kid that was hobbling. We ran over to help and were able to get him down on the ground.

“What happened? Where’s Alan?” I asked frantically.

“I think they got him. It all happened so fast. They came out of the trees, and Billy got hit. I tripped and sprained my ankle. I think they got your brother Tom. I’m sorry,”

“Stop talking. We’re not allowed to talk to the *dead*, Tom," Addison commanded.

That’s when I exploded.

“Do you think the rules matter anymore? I mean, when a guy gets hurt, and they just leave him, what does that say about them?” I angrily responded.

“But we aren’t them, Tom. We have to be better than them, or else this is all pointless,” Addison pleaded.

I nodded my head and mumbled a “you’re right,” but I didn’t know whether I believed it. The image of Piper in her stained dress and Curt’s cries echoed in my head. I pulled out the picture that Anne had given me. It had so much sand stuck to it, but I could still see the three of us together. It seemed like hours ago that she had given this to me.

We grabbed our stuff and left Billy to get his friend back to the base. I looked back and saw stains on both of them. They had shot him even when he was down. What was this game coming to?

We searched the forest, but there was no sign of anyone. Eventually, Addison had an idea.

“I think they took him to the baseball field. Jacob will want to make a big showing about Alan’s soaking. He will do it where everyone can see. I mean, that is where anyone who is hit is supposed to go, so he will have the audience he wants to watch him win. It would be like Jacob to make a big show of it," Addison said.

“You’re right. So, they have maybe three people left? We can get them if we sneak up on them,” I said.

Addison agreed, and that’s what we did. Sure enough, we saw Jacob and the other two remaining players in the middle of the field. Alan stood in front of Jacob, weaponless. We low crawled up, and when we were close enough, we rose up to charge, and that is when I stepped on a stick. It was so loud everyone heard it, and suddenly water was flying everywhere.

We hit the last two enemies, but they got us as well. I looked down at the slowly spreading stain on my shirt, and I knew that for me, the war had ended. However, for the two kids that had started this whole mess, it was far from over. Alan dived for a water gun, and Jacob followed him shooting wildly at the moving target. Alan spun around on the ground and fired up at Jacob. Both kids remained dry and were out of ammo.

There was silence for a long time, and Alan stood up. He looked over at all the wet and stained kids, and I think for the first time, he really saw what had happened. He saw Piper’s dress and the boy with the sprained ankle. He saw how red Curt's eyes were from crying, and it all sunk in. He looked over, and he saw that same realization of just how much trouble everyone would be in mirrored on Jacob’s face.

“I think we made a mistake here. I think we made a huge mistake here,” Alan said.

“I think you’re right. I shouldn’t have taken your field. It’s just that our game ran long, and we were in the ninth inning. There was only one strikeout left. I should have explained that,” Jacob admitted.

“I am at fault too. I just let it get out of control. I, I. . . I. . . I wanted to win so much I didn’t care about the cost.”

Alan stuck out his hand, and Jacob shook it. At first, we all cheered. It was over, and we could all be friends again. But as we stood there watching our leaders shaking hands in clean clothes, not a smudge on their smiling faces, the cheering died down. Because you see, the two guys who had gotten us into this mess weren't going to get in trouble at all. They were going to walk away scot-free, without punishment, and after all we sacrificed—we couldn’t let that happen. Too often, those who start the wars never have to feel the consequences. So, as one, we all raised our water guns, and I counted off, “Three. Two. One. Fire!”