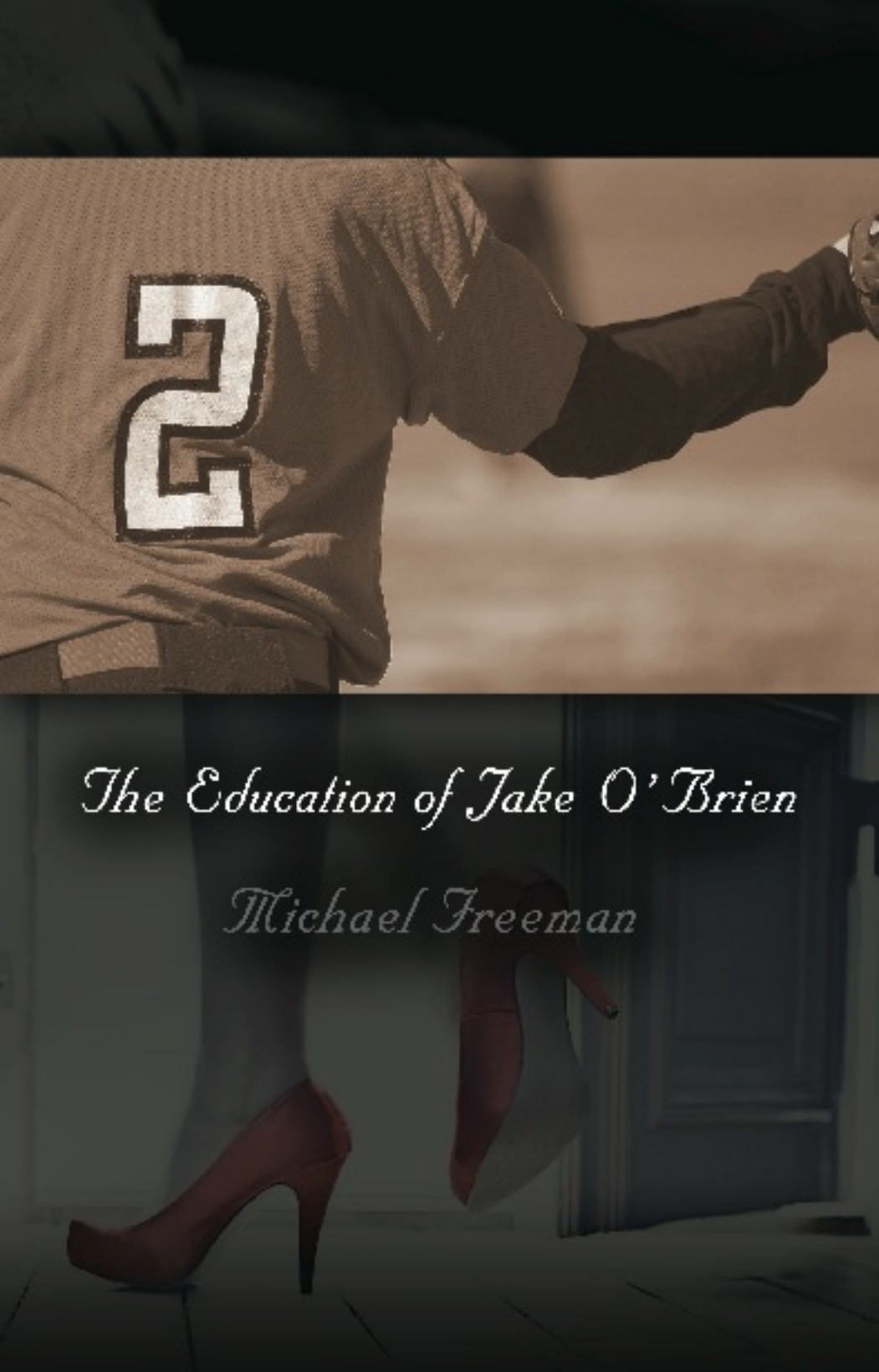
The Education of Jake O'Brien
Michael Freeman

Career minor league baseball player Jake O'Brien is called up to join the Cleveland Indians at the age of 37. His success with the Indians, however, doesn't free O'Brien from the implications of tragic events in his past life. The novel is a celebration of baseball as national mythology, the history of a passionate love affair, and a coming of age story of a heroic figure trying to find his humanity.

The Education of Jake O'Brien

THE EDUCATION OF JAKE O'BRIEN

ISBN 978-1-61434-513-8

Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

PROLOGUE

The first lights of dawn filtered through the windows of the Leaning Tower Restaurant and Lounge; tables and chairs emerged from the shadows and began to assume their daytime forms. The magical night was finished, and so was Jake O'Brien's narrative. In a totally unexpected performance from a man well-known for guarding his private thoughts, O'Brien had talked non-stop for nearly eight hours. During the telling of his history his face had gone through a series of changes: reflecting at different times anger, despair, sadness, mirth, and satisfaction too.

Now he sat back in the chair and rested his elbows on its arms. In the hesitant light from the small lamp in the center of the table that separated us, O'Brien's smile questioned whether I appreciated the ironic trajectories his life had taken. There was a long silence. I clicked the *off* switch on the tape recorder.

"I'll toss this thing if you want." I pointed to the machine. O'Brien appeared to consider the offer before responding.

"Nope. You wanted the story, and I kind of enjoyed telling it. Just don't print it until the right time."

He didn't elaborate on that curious request but rose from his chair and stretched. We shook hands. "Chico knows where to find me if you have any questions," he said and motioned toward the restaurant's proprietor, who, at that moment, was sleeping on a makeshift bed he had fashioned atop one of the tables.

O'Brien walked over and opened the door of the restaurant. As he departed, unspoiled morning air rushed in and struggled with the smells of stale cigarette smoke and spilled whiskey that had escaped from the lounge into the dining area during the night. I watched Chico Robustelli stir and then roll of his table-bed to stand upright.

"Where's Jake?"

"He just left."

"You get your story?"

"I did."

"Good. I'd like to read it some time. Jake's my best friend, but sometimes I'm not sure I know who he really is."

"I'm not certain he's got a handle on that himself."

"I can make you some eggs and coffee."

"No thanks. I need to take a walk and clear my head. I appreciate your setting up the meeting. He's a tough guy to corner."

"That he is."

I picked up the recorder and stuffed it into a side pocket of an old baseball bomber jacket. Then I followed the path Jake had taken to the front door. After giving Chico a brief salute, I stepped into the foggy air of a fall morning in San Francisco.

Walking through North Beach on the way back to my apartment, I reflected on the opinion, held by some, that Jake O'Brien was a very fortunate human being. Knowing what I knew about his life and career, I could never understand their argument. I suppose they might have been referring to his being the sole survivor of the automobile accident that took the lives of both parents and his maternal grandmother when he was seven years old. There was also the fact of his being the last man standing after a firefight outside of Salerno in WWII wiped out the rest of his squad. For his actions in that skirmish, he received a bronze star for valor and a hero's welcome when he returned home.

But there's a down side to that kind of good fortune: being the only survivor of two tragic events begs existential questions that can haunt a man for a long time. They certainly haunted O'Brien. Moreover, Jake was orphaned a second time when the grandfather who raised him and taught him to play the game he loved died while Jake was overseas.

As I recalled his history, he was too frequently in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing he had told me in the interview just completed altered that view. He had a great spring training in 1941 and would have made the Cleveland Indians roster but for the fact that the Indians were, for once, loaded with power-hitting, left-handed outfielders. The Cleveland management banished him to the obscurity of the Pacific Coast League.

Nine months later a world war stole even that flimsy hold on a career in baseball. He was away from the game for four years. When he returned from Europe, nobody remembered his baseball skills.

As a sportswriter for the San Francisco Chronicle I followed O'Brien's career from the time he landed back in the Pacific Coast League in 1946 right on through his too short time in the majors. After Jake disappeared from the stage following the 1958 season, I had ample opportunity, as the writer covering Oakland's major league franchise, to speak at length with just about everyone who had had contact with him during his time with the Indians, including casual fans. They all spoke well of Jake—even Helen Simopoulis, his not so casual girlfriend. I don't remember many who thought he was lucky.

Those who knew him well agreed with me: if Jake O'Brien had any luck at all, it was mostly bad, all except for that big break he caught in the second half of the 1957 season.

J.P.K.
March, 2001
San Francisco

PART ONE: JAKE ALMIGHTY

I

Jake O'Brien sat on a folding chair in front of his locker and tried to enjoy the moment without bitterness and without thinking of all the "what-ifs." His long history of success playing triple-A baseball in the Pacific Coast League had just about made him forget his resentment. And since one "what-if" led to another and to yet another until there was a confusing and frightening chaos of "what-ifs" to deal with, he resolutely squelched those questions at the first whisper of their presence. So, having cleared his mind again of doubt and darkness, he took a sip from a can of beer that had spent the previous two hours in a tub of ice with forty-seven of its fellows.

O'Brien had been a minor league ballplayer for his entire career in baseball. Now, in 1957 at the age of thirty-seven, he was in his twelfth year with the Sacramento Solons of the Pacific Coast League. Thirty minutes before this pleasant moment—one of many the fates teased him with—he had deposited a ninth inning fastball from San Francisco Seals pitcher Billy Babe into the right field bleachers for a game-winning home run.

At the same time Jake was savoring his small triumph, Mr. Babe—a middle age, ex-major league pitcher whose fastball lay irretrievably lost in a stadium somewhere between Chicago and New York—might have seen the end of his career as a professional baseball player staring out at him from the shadowy gloom of a cubicle in the visitors' locker room.

Jake didn't have the kind of problem Billy Babe had—at least not yet. So he could sit with his spikes off, still wearing his uniform pants and stockings and long-sleeved baseball undershirt and—with one beer on board—he could stretch like a contented cat and luxuriate in the faint glory of the moment.

The clubhouse was starting to clear out of the twenty-five players, two coaches, a trainer, and the team's manager; all of whom were able to accommodate themselves—all at once when they needed to—in the relatively close quarters of the building. They could jostle up against each other and exchange barbs and the sounds of indelicate bodily functions without rancor. In recent times, Jake had become the last to leave, taking that duty over from Joe Martinson, who had retired two years before.

Now it was his turn to sit and enjoy an extra can of brew and the conflicting odors of sweat-soaked laundry, oil of wintergreen, cigarette smoke, and stale beer, which, once they had established themselves in their chosen spots in the clubhouse, resisted all attempts at removal.

Jake sat and let himself be entertained by vague dreams, unaware that his world was about to be altered forever. The senior bat boy tapped him on the shoulder.

"Skip wants to see you in his office, Jake."

"Skip" was Gordon Johnson, the Solons' manager. Jake could see that Johnson was deep in thought when he entered the manager's office. He tapped the doorjamb with the knuckles of his left hand.

"What are you doing, Skip?"

"Trying to figure out who to start in right tomorrow." Johnson barely looked up from his players roster. He motioned toward the receiver lying on his desk. "You got a phone call."

Jake picked up the phone and listened. That's when he learned that he, a left-handed power hitter who could also hit for average and who played the outfield with a grace that recalled Tris Speaker and Joe DiMaggio, was going to the big leagues at the age of thirty-seven. The Indians had already made him plane reservations out of San Francisco International for the following morning.

He placed the receiver back into its cradle and smiled at Johnson. The manager nodded and gave Jake a short salute with his right hand before lowering his eyes to the roster again.

When Jake returned to his locker, he saw the team's other elder statesman, Chico Robustelli, rummaging around in his own cubicle. O'Brien guessed that his best friend, already in street clothes, was looking for cigarettes. He pulled a package of Camels from his locker, gave one to Robustelli, lit it, and then lit one for himself. The two men squinted at each other through the smoke, and each took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled before Chico spoke.

"You going to the Bigs, Slugger?"

"Looks that way." Jake shook his head and threw his hands up in a gesture of helplessness.

"I figured that might be in the works."

"How so?"

"Betancourt, their right fielder, broke his ankle yesterday. That's gonna put a dent in their left-handed power."

"I didn't know that. That's too bad...about Betancourt I mean." Jake dragged again on his cigarette. "You know, this game can be a real asshole sometimes."

"Yeah, I guess." Robustelli shrugged. "It was in the newspaper this morning."

"I don't read the sports pages."

"I know. Maybe you should. You'd be surprised at how good you are." Chico extinguished his cigarette and stood up. "This is your chance, Slugger. Want another brew?"

"Yeah, sure." Jake put his own smoke into the beer can he had left on the chair in front of his locker and watched it drown in the film of moisture at the bottom. He sat down and gazed into the locker. "It's just a cup of coffee, Chico. I'll be back. No big deal."

"Don't talk like that. It's always a big deal when a guy gets his first shot at the Bigs."

Chico handed a cold can of beer to Jake, and Jake rubbed the can over each cheek the way he always did to feel the coolness from the condensation on the sides of the aluminum cylinder. Then he grabbed a beer can opener form his locker and punched two, triangular holes in the top of the can before giving the opener to

Chico. Robustelli positioned the claw of the opener against the top surface of the can he held. There was a pop and a hiss of spray from the can as sweet and cool as an unexpected first-date kiss. Both men took a sip of beer before resuming their conversation.

"You've been there, Chico. What's it like?" Jake said.

"No different from down here really. Clubhouses are a little bigger...the food's better. Most of the players wear a suit coat to the games. But hell, they're just ballplayers like you … most not even as good as you in my opinion."

"Well, my opinion is that it would have been nice if this happened about ten years ago when I had younger legs and quicker reflexes. I never understood why it didn't happen in '41. I had the club made then, you know."

Chico looked at his friend and took a swallow of beer. He had no answer to Jake's comment or the enigma it implied. The statement was about as bitter as Jake ever got over what just about everybody Chico knew in the game thought was a raw deal.

Older ballplayers, though, know that no good comes from dwelling on the caprice of fate. If a ballplayer wanted to stay in that happy time suspended between adolescence and full adulthood, it was best to ignore the unpredictable twists of fortune. Chico knew that, and so did Jake. That's why, most of the time, O'Brien ignored the "what-ifs" mentioned before.

So Chico and Jake just went about their business, playing their game, and ignoring the ironies inherent in the human situation. Both, however, had reason to be bitter: Chico because undeserved arm problems cut short a promising major league pitching career, and Jake because he only just now, much too late, was getting a chance to showcase his considerable talents.

However, in the glow of this moment, neither man wanted to dwell on the past and its inequities. The two sailed along in beery euphoria, becoming more and more upbeat about Jake's future in the majors as their conversation continued until finally Chico advised

Jake to keep his senses alert to every nuance of his major league experience. That way he could savor those moments fully not just this summer but for every summer or anytime for that matter, whenever he wanted to recall them, for the rest of his life.

"Because understand, Slugger, it's over before you know it," Chico said. "And that's a sad thing because too many don't know when it's over. But you, you sly old dog, won't fall into that trap. I know that."

Jake nodded at this piece of wisdom, and Chico continued, "Oh, and one more thing, and as a pitcher—a member of the tribe of pitchers—I shouldn't be telling you this, but I will anyway. Pitchers ahead in the count in the majors will challenge with high fastballs out of the strike zone. Don't chase 'em. Okay, Slugger?"

At that, Chico tossed his empty beer can into an open receptacle near the tub of ice and stood up. Jake knew their visit was over, and so he also stood and extended his right hand. Chico shook it with a firm grip, wished his friend "good luck," and sauntered out of the clubhouse holding a gray sports jacket over his right shoulder.

With Chico's exit, the only people left in the locker room were Jake and a batboy, who just then flipped off all the lights except the row over the shower area. Twilight made a sudden appearance in the clubhouse and settled in like a guest who doesn't know when to go home.

Jake, now out of his uniform and underwear, walked to the showers wondering why, in this season, he was always the last player to leave the locker room—always showering in the near dark, listening to the spattering of water against tile and the indifferent sounds of the batboy cleaning up without even having taken part in the boisterous socializing of his teammates. There was a time when he enjoyed that sort of horseplay, but not anymore.

II

Frank Puffy Dotson (from here forward to be referred to only as "Puffy" because that's the only name the people who knew him best were aware of) always had more flesh than his height required or wanted. It wasn't so much that he was fat; it was just that he was big, part of a clan of big people, all of them—men and women—large, moving through life slowly and carefully, aware of all that was going on around them and of the irritations and angers that sometimes arose within them.

When a large family of large people gets together, every member knows without being told that strong feelings are to be capped and kept inside, or better, just blown away, because any animosities that escalate to actual physical confrontation can result in disastrous consequences for those involved as well as for the surrounding furniture. So, members of the Dotson clan moved about in their space with an air of wary calm.

Puffy never let the instant dislike for his smaller schoolmates, which took root within him even before the first barb directed at his bigness was thrown down, come to the surface. He tolerated the small intentions and activities of the small people around him the way a horse or other noble animal tolerates the peskiness of flies in summer, sweeping them away without letting on that he was taking any notice of them at all.

He kept a mental log of the strengths and weaknesses of his fellows and maintained a running tally of who was friend and who was not. This habit of impassive observation became a part of him that was as much a part of his makeup as his bones, blood, or any internal organ.

As he grew he stayed the same in this respect: there was always more of him than was needed for his height. That extra stuff poked

out here and there, so that sometime in high school a baseball coach, with unintended cruelty, bestowed upon him the sobriquet "Puffy." He was "Puffy" from then on and always. And as always, if that bothered him he didn't let on.

His strength and power grew as he did, and he had a remarkable ability from early on to hit a baseball—approaching the plate with great velocity and movement—hard and far. He put bat on ball out in front of him with his arms extended and his hips rotated square to the pitcher so that the power based in his lower body could flow upward easily and naturally and be transmitted by his arms to the bat as it made contact with the ball. No coach in his right mind would tamper with that wonderful swing.

It might seem that the limitations in foot speed resulting from his bulk would preclude the realization of a major league career. However, Puffy had extraordinarily quick feet, and his hands were also quick and sure. Within a small space he was graceful and agile.

He had all the physical gifts to be a catcher; some might say he was genetically ordained to the position. Puffy could block or snare errant pitches with ease and just as importantly protect home plate with such intimidating presence that a throw from the outfield intended to snuff out an attempted score needed only to be accurate, not necessarily to arrive before the runner. Rare was the man who wouldn't find it impossible to get around that massive left leg planted firmly in front of the plate, no matter by how far he had beaten the throw. Puffy was a human barricade shutting off the critical highway between third and home. Few dared to challenge him once he had set himself up to guard the dish.

Moreover, the impenetrable calm with which he carried himself and with which he calculated pitchers' strengths and batters' weaknesses, physical and mental, made him a formidable presence in that pitcher-versus-batter game within the game. Hitting gave him a visceral pleasure, but setting up behind the plate—shielded with protective gear and armed with mental toughness—gave him a

feeling of power experienced in a legendary past by kings and emperors.

What his Chicago White Sox teammates saw when he first strode into their clubhouse five years after his graduation from high school was a man, six foot, five inches tall; weighing two hundred and sixty pounds; with a round face that was home to a flat, wide nose, bulging, dark brown eyes, and ears too small for his head—all in all a physiognomy that would have inspired derisive laughter if it weren't for the quiet menace of his size and demeanor.

***

On a late March day in 1941, in St. Petersburg, Florida, Puffy took the last of several warm-up pitches from Lefty Watson, who had come on to pitch the fourth inning of a spring training game between the Sox and the Cleveland Indians. Standing just outside the left hand batter's box, casually swinging two bats to get loose, Jake O'Brien was completely innocent of Puffy's animus toward all opposing batters, rookies especially.

Jake tossed aside the extra bat and stepped up to the plate. With his right foot he scraped the dirt along the inside line of the batter's box after Watson's last warm-up pitch but before Puffy had thrown the ball back to his pitcher. This was a breach of protocol, small and forgivable by most, but Puffy apparently took offense.

As the catcher threw the ball back to Watson, his right arm brushed across Jake's chest with enough force to push O'Brien backward. Jake looked at the catcher, thinking the contact might have been accidental.

"Stay off the plate, asshole," Puffy said.

"I'm in the box." Jake tapped the inside chalk line of the batter's box with his bat, all the while looking out at the mound.

"I decide where the box is up here, busher. And you've got one foot too close to the plate."

Jake dug in the way he always did—slightly closed stance with the front foot planted solidly just a little inside the box. Four years in the minor leagues, pulverizing bush league pitching wherever he played, had planted a conviction within him that he belonged in the major leagues, and he had a furious hunger to make that conviction a reality. No amount of needling from some overweight chump wearing shin guards and a chest protector was going to make him back off now.

Puffy took note of the rookie's defiant actions, and he didn't hesitate for a second to call for a brush-back pitch that would start O'Brien's spikes dancing around on the dirt instead of digging in for traction and power. Puffy was usually above premeditated mayhem, but the pitch he called for was not the customary polite brush-back thrown somewhere between the belt and the knees where it wouldn't do much damage if the batter didn't get out of the way in time. Nope, this pitch was going to be a malicious, chin-high duster that would loosen all sphincters and send the hitter sprawling backwards in the dirt.

There it was, and O'Brien sprawled, got up, and brushed himself off. Puffy was quick to notice that the rookie dug in again just as before.

"Quit fooling around, Lefty. Stick it in his ear." Puffy pounded his glove right next to O'Brien's left ear. It sounded like a rifle shot to the sportswriters in the low seats behind home plate.

If the umpire hadn't been derelict in his duties, he would have stepped in and stopped the nonsense right then and maybe prevented the incident that followed. But that fellow was evidently preoccupied, perhaps trying to decide whether to order the prime rib or the lobster tail back at the dining room of the Bay View Grand later that evening. He said nothing. Jake stepped out of the batter's box.

"That ball comes anywhere near me and I'll wrap this bat around your fat head. You got that?" Jake stared right at Puffy when he made that declaration.

Puffy didn't like the rookie's attitude or his lip at all now. He especially didn't like that part about his fat head, but in keeping with lifelong habit he didn't acknowledge the insult directly. He just rolled his eyes for a second toward the rookie and, in a brief instant, took his measure in full. Puffy's irritation grew to dislike bordering on personal hatred.

He pounded his glove again, and the next pitch came in right where he called it, right at Jake's front foot. Jake dance-stepped backward to avoid getting hit.

Some people might think that getting hit in the foot is no big deal, but that's not correct. A broken foot can be a career ending injury for a ballplayer, who depends on his feet to carry him around the outfield and the base paths as well as to anchor his torso as he uncoils his body to bring power into the contact of bat with ball.

It was the career-ending thing more than anything else that triggered Jake's retaliation. He ripped the face mask off Puffy's head and would have walloped the catcher with his own protective gear if the umpire hadn't finally stepped in and got between the two adversaries.

By doing so, he not only prevented an explosion of violence at the plate but Jake's suspension as well. As it was, O'Brien was allowed to stay in the game, and he hit the next pitch—a curve breaking from inside to the middle of the plate—three hundred and forty feet down the right field line for a home run.

The home run alone might have gotten Jake some serious consideration from the Cleveland front office, but, in the end, it was the aggressiveness with which he defended his space that convinced management as well as the other Cleveland players that this O'Brien kid could survive and flourish in the major leagues. Unfortunately for Jake, however, the Indians were already five-deep with good-hitting, experienced outfielders. Their thinking was: 'let's bring the kid up to triple-A for a little more seasoning and maybe in a year or two we can call him up to the majors if any of our outfielders falters or injures himself.'

That reasoning by itself would have been a major disappointment to Jake, but the decision to send him to Sacramento, the Indians' Pacific Coast League franchise, rather than Rochester, the team's much more visible triple-A team in the International League, was a source of real despair. Any misgivings Jake had about his assignment to Sacramento, however, were made irrelevant by the events of December 7th, 1941.

About four months after that, Jake reported for basic training at Fort Ord and impressed so much with his marksmanship using an M-1 carbine that he was assigned to General Mark Clarks' Fifth Army as a sniper. He was in that unit when it landed on the west coast of Italy to take part in Operation Avalanche.

O'Brien was part of a forward reconnaissance team whose mission was to gauge the level of resistance from the Axis forces. In the early morning hours of the ninth of September, he found himself in one of two squads of US infantrymen on a road just west of Salerno.

The morning had the dark, claustrophobic quality of a confessional before the priest slides open the window to hear the penitent's pleas. Mist twisted and streamed low along the ground and could have been the exhalations of a resentful subterranean god. The machinations the landscape promised came to fruition when simultaneous bursts from two Bretta-37 machine guns sent the American soldiers scurrying for cover.

The small corridor of Italian countryside erupted in an inferno of tracer flashes that sliced the world into frozen tableaux of terror like a cosmic strobe; the din from automatic weapons fired bludgeoned the soul of any man not yet numb to the brutality of war. Jake grabbed a corporal, frozen by the pandemonium, and dragged him to a shallow gully. The other seven members of the squad tumbled into the same refuge and huddled around Jake.

Above the noise, Jake heard himself yell for the others to spread out along the trench. He low-crawled to a position well away from the road and saw six remnant soldiers of Mussolini's army gathered

behind a sandbagged redoubt where the road curved to the east. Four of them were occupied with arming and firing the two machine guns while another launched rockets from a bazooka. The last one squeezed off rounds with a carbine.

Jake took aim at the closest machine gunner and fired. The man fell, but before Jake could take aim again, the other gunner turned his fury on the trench where Jake's squad was. Automatic weapons fire from the other US squad resulted in some respite from the hail of rounds meant for Jake's team. He eased up the slope of the berm again and took out the remaining gunner and his mate.

The sounds of rifle fire became sporadic, and after a while there was quiet. Two Italian soldiers, waving a white bandana while they dragged along a wounded comrade, walked into the road. Jake rose up a little more and saw four Italian soldiers lying motionless behind the sandbags. A team of four US soldiers walked toward the three ambulatory enemy combatantss—M-1's at the ready.

Jake stood and looked back along the gully. Eight soldiers—boys he had known for only a few weeks—lay in the grotesque postures arranged by sudden death. Their intentions and dreams would be forever unknown to him, though in bad times he would speculate about those yearnings in spite of the council of his better judgment. O'Brien walked around the bodies until he reached the side of the road; he looked back once more at the carnage he would spend the rest of his life trying to lock away in a closet he never wanted opened.

"Let's go, O'Brien. There's nothing you can do about those guys now," a sergeant yelled.

Jake looked at the sergeant and thought he was moving, but he wasn't. The sergeant grabbed his arm.

"C'mon, kid. Move out. We've got people to take care of them."

O'Brien followed the NCO up the road, wondering why fate had chosen to cast a kind eye on him a second time. Then the probability that he and the others hadn't been chosen at all for their respective ends insinuated itself into his thoughts. He and the sergeant passed

around the wall of sandbags and stopped where the four dead Italian soldiers lay.

"Those guys could have saved themselves a lot of trouble. You know that?"

Jake wasn't sure the sergeant was talking to him or anyone in particular, but he managed a neutral smile. The sergeant looked at him.

"The Italians surrendered a week ago."

That news only confused Jake more. He walked behind the sergeant to where the other members of the recon team were gathered in the road. For the first time in his life he reflected on the premonition that his life was a path twisting in unpredictable turns and without meaningful destination. He willed the thought from his mind and resolved never to think on such things as purpose and destiny again.

He decided that if he ever got back to the states alive, he would put on a baseball uniform and play his game for the rest of his life, or at least until the world went crazy again. And that's what he did.

Jake didn't listen to people who admonished that he was twenty-five years old, back from a war, and life is serious so he should forget about playing a game for boys. So one world war, several Indian outfielders, and twelve years in the Pacific Coast League later Jake was in a locker room in Sacramento when he received the call that fortune had forgotten to give him at a more propitious time.

***

What about Puffy, the other actor in that 1941 dust-up in St. Petersburg? For the first time that he could remember, Puffy had been caught off guard by the actions of another. He hadn't expected Jake's violent eruption and might have been seriously injured if the umpire hadn't stepped in. Or nearly as bad he might have gotten into an unseemly scuffle with the rookie after Jake's original blow.

None of that happened, however, and, as it turned out, Puffy was so surprised at O'Brien's impulsive fury and suddenly so conflicted about his opinion of Jake that he called the exactly wrong pitch after the confrontation. He realized later that even a rookie would anticipate an inside breaking ball after two brush-back pitches. O'Brien smacked just that kind of pitch out of the yard.

So Puffy found himself over the next few weeks and occasionally at unexpected times thereafter wondering about this Jake O'Brien. Whenever Jake escaped from the periphery of Puffy's inner vision and moved to the center, he stood large. The disturbing thought that he, Puffy, had underestimated the power of another human being haunted his more reflective moments for years afterwards.

The individuals inhabiting the rest of the world had no such ruminations however. All they remembered was a hot-headed aspirant to the majors hitting a lucky home run.

After that microscopic moment in Puffy's crowded history, he continued on as before, exhibiting uncanny command of his position as well as formidable prowess as a batsman. For several years, whenever lesser men gathered to discuss the great ones, Puffy's name always came up even long after he had retired from active play. Even then and without his knowing it, when it seemed as if he had exited the grand stage for good, he really was waiting in the wings for a chance to confront Jake O'Brien again at a later time.

Career minor league baseball player Jake O'Brien is called up to join the Cleveland Indians at the age of 37. His success with the Indians, however, doesn't free O'Brien from the implications of tragic events in his past life. The novel is a celebration of baseball as national mythology, the history of a passionate love affair, and a coming of age story of a heroic figure trying to find his humanity.

The Education of Jake O'Brien