Searching for Harrison Pierce

a novel by

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Stories are an effective means of transmitting wisdom from one generation to the next. However, what if those stories are more myth than fact? Should the lessons contained in the tales be dismissed as unreliable, the storyteller a fraud and his wisdom false? That is the dilemma facing Bud Pulaski when he finds a shoebox containing memorabilia that suggest the anecdotes told him by his deceased father were only half-truths.

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HARRISON PIERCE

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PART ONE: ACEY-DEUCY

I.
DEUCE PULASKI'S SHOE BOX

In the afternoon following Dad's funeral, Mom and I moved about the house without speaking. Everything that needed to be said had been said, and there was no reason to poke at a wound that hadn't yet begun to heal. After a while, Mom walked out to the garage. When she returned with three large cardboard boxes and some plastic garbage bags, I knew we were about to clear the house of Deuce Pulaski's personal effects. I helped carry the trash bags and boxes upstairs to the master bedroom.

Deuce, my father, had built a chest of drawers there. It ran along a wall from the edge of a walk-in closet to the bedroom's doorway. While my mother cleaned out the chest of drawers, I went into the closet and began hauling out pants, suit coats, and casual wear. There wasn't as much as I thought Dad would have accumulated over the years, but then he never saved old clothes. He gave things he thought he might never wear again to the St. Vincent de Paul store.

I started placing clothes in the largest of the three boxes. When it was full, a shiny red baseball warm-up jacket with the St. Louis Cardinal logo across the front and Dad's red and green plaid Irish flat cap lay on top. I closed the flaps of the box.

In time, all the boxes and bags were full, and there was nothing of Dad's left but a shoe box that rested on a high shelf in the walk-in. I could feel my mother watching me as I pulled the box down and sat on the bed to examine its contents.

There were newspaper clippings turned yellow with age. A baseball, whose cover time had painted a cream color, lay on top of the clippings. I ignored the two tickets–glossy and new

looking–that lay along one of the short sides of the box. The ball demanded my attention.

Tony Lazzeri, Babe Ruth, and Lou Gherig had all autographed the baseball; there was a caption in bold lettering: *South Bend All-Stars 2-NY Yankees 0, 1932*. I held history in my hand and wondered aloud how much that ball must be worth in 1974. Mom shrugged. I had another question.

"Why didn't Dad ever show me this ball? He told me all kinds of stories about baseball in South Bend in the twenties and thirties."

"Oh, he wanted to; he really did. But he said he just didn't know how to do it–said something about being afraid the ball would just confuse you. I don't know what he meant by that."

"There has to be a great story behind this ball."

"Oh, there is," Mom said. "And at first your dad was always showing that ball around and telling its story, his story, to anyone who would listen. Then one day–it wasn't an awful long time before we were married–he came over to my parents' house for dinner after a social meeting with Ace Pierce. As I recall, Harrison was on leave from the Army just before going overseas; it was in 1942. They had gotten together at the Oliver Park Tavern.

"When he arrived, your dad was wearing his Studebaker Bearcats baseball jacket as he always did when he met with Harrison. I knew he had this baseball in one of the pockets because he always took it with him when he joined his friends at the tavern. It was a nice spring day, and my father and mother and I were sipping lemonade while we sat in lawn chairs in the front yard.

"Deuce seemed preoccupied while he and my parents made small talk. Then my dad asked him if he had the baseball with him. I think your Grandpa Ryan was as proud of that ball as your dad was. Your father kind of shrugged, and after pulling the ball

out of a jacket pocket, he just stared at it for a time as if he were confused by its meaning. That was strange because up until then he was always eager to show off the ball. Then he and Dad had a conversation that I remember exactly because it seemed so peculiar then and even now."

My mother then went on to describe a scene that took place before I was born but which still haunts my memory. I can retell Mom's narrative pretty much the way she told it that day:

"It's just like any other baseball, Mr. Ryan," Deuce said as he handed the ball to Grandpa Ryan. "Except it's got a little writing on it. Personally, I'm getting kind of tired carrying the thing around. It's getting heavy if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do," was Grandpa Ryan's reply.

"Well, Ace could tell you; that's for sure. You take the ball. I know you collect souvenirs like this, and I don't have any place to put it."

"I couldn't do that, Deuce. It wouldn't be right."

"Sure you can. Think of it as a hostess gift for Mrs. Ryan."

Deuce smiled at my mom then, but, according to her, there was bitterness in the smile that scared her a little. Grandpa Ryan repeated that the ball rightly belonged to Deuce and nobody should take the ball and the memory it celebrated away from him.

"Maybe not, but I can sure as hell get rid of the damn thing if I want to," was my father's response to that. He threw the ball into a vacant lot across the street from the Ryan place. My mother said that made everybody uncomfortable. Deuce tried to make a joke of it and suggested that he and Grandpa Ryan go inside for beers. They did, and by the end of the evening, everyone had forgotten all about the baseball incident. I think that was all Mom intended to tell me of the ball's history, but I had to ask how the ball wound up in Dad's shoebox after he had thrown it away.

Mom said, "Grandpa Ryan went out the next day and looked all over that lot until he found the ball. He cleaned it up and gave it back to your dad after we were married. Does something about this sound a little familiar?"

I knew the incident my mother was referring to. At the age of twenty-five–seven years removed from the event–I could laugh at the adolescent impetuousness that had inspired a foolish gesture.

"That's all right, Bud. I guess the Pulaski boys just like to throw souvenir baseballs into vacant lots. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree you know. And with you and your dad, that's a good thing, I think."

I supposed she was right. If I was my father's son in the way Mom meant, I could be proud of that. However, the baseball and my father's evident ambivalence about its meaning and value suggested a secret–possibly dark–that he had purposely kept from me. I was already confused as to how best to remember my father–what memories were as truthful as they seemed to be with no hidden nuances, sinister or otherwise, and which ones hid truths I might not want to know.

Mom and I sat in silence while sunshine streaming through one of the room's two windows filled the bedroom with warmth and light. Motes of dust danced along one edge of the beam. For a while, the only sound was the buzzing of a fly and the soft thumps it made as it repeatedly bumped against a window pane. After a bit, the fly's efforts at escape were lost in the sound of my mother's voice.

"Incidentally, your dad never made a trophy or anything out of the baseball; he kept it in this box with all his other special baseball things. Whenever my parents came over, he would bring the ball down and put it on the mantle in the living room out of respect for your grandfather. Then, as soon as they were gone, he would put the ball back in the box. I think it hurt him to bring the

ball out. I couldn't figure out why, though I'm sure it had something to do with him and Harrison Pierce because after that day he threw the ball into the vacant lot, he and Harrison never saw one another.

"After you were born, he didn't bother bringing the ball down anymore. He figured that you were the center of attention for your grandparents; they wouldn't even notice that the baseball wasn't around. There was another thing. A while after we were married, he took his Bearcat jacket down to the St. Vincent de Paul store. When I asked him why he gave away the jacket–he practically slept in it for as long as I knew him–he announced that he didn't see himself ever playing semi-pro baseball again, even if they did start a new league up after the war. It was in the fall of 1943 when he decided that.

"I didn't ask him for an explanation for the decision. Remember, I was five years younger than your dad. For the first few years of our marriage, I never questioned him when he did or said something I thought out of character. I guess the look on my face gave away my puzzlement though, because your dad tried to explain his actions by saying something about his being thirty-two years old and married and it was time to get serious about things.

"He backed up his decision with a quote from St. Paul: 'When I was a child, I reasoned like a child, but as a man I put aside childish things.' I think that's pretty close; I never had your father's gift for remembering passages. He said it with a very serious look on his face as if the quote pretty much explained everything. I never bothered him after that about the baseball or his giving away the jacket he loved so much, but I have always thought there was more to that business than he told me."

Mom got quiet then. Her eyes told me she was savoring a moment precious because of its intimacy but sad because its locus in space-time was now forever beyond her reach. In the moment

of silence, I let all the chaotic feelings for my father and memories of him tumble over me. I knew the question I wanted to ask but was fearful of the answer. My mother, innocent of the many private interactions between my father and me, would recite the facts sought by the question without filtering out possible dark implications.

She couldn't know that until that lonely night–the night he didn't come back from Chicago in time to see the best thing I had ever done on a baseball diamond–my father was, for me, an uncomplicated giant, a hero willing to give me the secrets of his legend. He wasn't altogether diminished in my eyes after that first betrayal or even after some of the other things. He just wasn't the dad I knew before.

When my mother looked up from her reflections and smiled, I knew I had permission to ask my question, but I'm getting ahead of myself. To know about my dad and me and the mystery of Harrison Pierce, you need to know about earlier things.

II.
THE STORYTELLER

My father, Deuce Pulaski, stood six feet tall and, until the confusing times came, tolerated no extra flesh on his frame. He had been an accomplished left-handed pitcher for the semi-pro Studebaker Bearcats of the Michiana Men's Baseball League during the 1930s. I sometimes wondered if that history ever had him speculate about how he could have sired an undersized male with a dead arm. If he felt any frustration on that score, he never showed it. He treated me as if there were genius hiding beneath the unimposing exterior, and it was his duty—one he carried out with enthusiastic determination—to bring that potential to fruition.

In the year when, at the at the age of twelve, I finally made a Little League baseball team after two failed attempts—and that only after the South Bend Little League had expanded from four to six teams—Dad spent the spring and summer evenings after his shift at the Studebaker factory teaching me how to pitch a baseball in ways that would frustrate batters despite my inability to throw the ball with great velocity. He did it by teaching me the importance of *location*. *Location* was different from just getting the ball in the strike zone. His counsel was that pitching was all about throwing the ball in the strike zone but in a location that made it difficult for the hitter to strike the ball with any power, if he made contact with it at all.

One evening he brought a home plate that he had constructed from plywood out to the vacant lot where we practiced across the alley from our house. The greater part of the plate, its middle section, had been painted black. Only narrow longitudinal strips lying along the lateral borders of the plate were white. My dad had me practice throwing the ball through those narrow corridors until

I did it with such instinctive ease I sometimes thought I couldn't throw the ball down the middle of the plate if I wanted to.

The craft of pitching wasn't the only sort of wisdom Dad passed on to me. The more important lessons he taught through anecdotes about the legendary baseball players of the game's earlier days. He told the same four or five stories over and over, though with such dramatic intensity and variation in detail I never tired of hearing them.

I must have heard the tale of Grover Cleveland Alexander coming in from the St. Louis Cardinal bullpen and striking out New York Yankee shortstop Tony Lazerri with the bases loaded to preserve a seventh game victory and World Series Championship for the Cardinals about a hundred times. However, every time Dad told the story the two foul balls Lazerri hit out of the park got longer and closer to staying inside the foul pole. I was never sure at each retelling that Lazerri wouldn't, *this time*, win the game for the Yankees.

Though it has taken me the longest time to realize it, Dad's embellishing and, in some instances, reshaping historical facts were just plot devices a good storyteller uses to keep his listener's attention so that the auditor won't miss the story behind the plot. In the case of the Alexander anecdote, a detail Dad never failed to emphasize was that the pitcher was not feeling well when Cardinal Manager Rogers Hornsby summoned him from the bullpen. Dad explained Alexander's feeling under par as due to his age—he was 39 at the time, old for a ballplayer—and a mysterious ailment. He never let on that the great man was suffering from a hangover—and not his first one either—after celebrating his two earlier wins in the Series with a night of serious drinking. I would discover later that it wasn't the only time Dad left out facts that were inconvenient and substituted his own version of reality during the description of an historical event.

The most important detail of the Alexander legend, for my father anyway, was that the man ignored his "ailment" and fought through it to give his best effort. Whether out of loyalty to his team, respect for the game, or just stubborn pride, Old Pete—as Alexander was called—brought everything he had to the table that fall afternoon in 1926. The result was a performance that has delighted and inspired fans, ballplayers, and boys aspiring to be ballplayers for decades.

Similarly, he played down the sadness in the tale of New York Yankee pitcher Bill Bevins losing what would have been the first no-hit game in World Series history when a Brooklyn pinch-hitter named Cookie Lavagetto hit a ninth inning two out double that scored the two runners Bevins had walked. That base hit, the only one surrendered by Bevins, gave the Dodgers a 2-1 win in the final game of the 1947 World Series. That was a tragedy certainly for Bevins, and Dad always recounted the game in such a way, building on the crowd's anticipation of a great feat about to be accomplished, that, at the drama's denouement, I felt the same oppressive disappointment any fan sitting in the stands or listening in on the radio that day must have felt. But that wasn't the end of the story, or even the most telling item in the story for my father.

His take away point was that neither Bevins nor Lavagetto played in another World Series, and Lavagetto's hit was his last one in the major leagues. "Sic transit gloria mundi," my dad would intone after apprising me once again of those two facts. Once, when he saw the lack of comprehension on my face, he explained, "Thus passes the world's glory, Bud. You'll understand all about that someday, sooner rather than later, I hope."

A flicker of comprehension would rattle across my brain later after my greatest triumph as a Little League baseball player didn't result in the celebration I was expecting. More complete

understanding of the truism only came after reflecting on the history of Harrison Pierce decades after the advice had been given.

III.
SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI

Like my father, Harrison Pierce also pitched for the Studebaker Bearcats team, and Dad told me a lot of stories about himself and Harrison. "We were a tough combination to beat," he told me. "The two best pitchers in the Michiana Baseball League. That's not a brag; that's a fact. He was called *Ace* because he had that big fastball. My curve was unhittable on most days so I was *Deuce*. We palled around together so much people referred to us as *Acey-Deucey*. 'No problem with this Sunday's doubleheader,' our team captain always said, 'we got the old Acey-Deucey going for us.' What do you think of that, Bud?"

I thought it was pretty cool, but I was only ten or eleven the time he first told me that stuff about him and Ace Pierce. Dad told me a lot of stories about their exploits as teammates and friends. I suppose most of them were true. I wanted to believe all of them, especially the one about Harrison Pierce's breaking into professional baseball. My father related that tale so many times and with such theatrical flair that I can retell it pretty much verbatim.

According to Dad, Harrison Pierce walked into the South Bend Twins' dugout for a tryout on a Sunday afternoon when the Twins were playing the Grand Rapids Rattlers. The reason for his being there at all was that a coach for the Twins had seen him pitch in a Bearcats game and liked what he saw. He told Pierce to come down to Lippincott Park for the Sunday doubleheader with the Rattlers. He would see to it that Harrison got a chance to pitch an inning or two against an authentic Double-A minor league baseball team.

Harrison Pierce arrived at the park for his professional debut in the fifth inning of the first game. The explanation for his tardiness was that his father's tractor had broken down, and he and his dad had spent the entire morning and a little of the afternoon getting the machine up and running again.

The Twins manager, Scooter Morgan, looked Harrison up and down and straight in the eyes, decided the boy was telling the truth about the tractor incident and— having a farm of his own— understood where a man's priorities had to be, especially in the 1930s. He told Harrison to go into the locker room beneath the bleachers and put on a uniform.

When Pierce returned to the dugout in the top of the seventh inning, he sat down at a far end of the bench and watched the Twins starting pitcher give up a single and two walks to load the bases. The heart of the Grand Rapids batting order was coming to the plate. Ace decided that it was time to have a talk with Scooter Morgan about his, Harrison Pierce's, future with the Twins.

Morgan had never seen Harrison Pierce before that day, and it was only through hearsay that he knew Pierce played baseball at all. But, on a day that saw the Twins with a one run lead late in a game they had to win to stay in contention for the league title (and the bonus money that went along with it) and the other team having a runner at every base with none out, he found himself listening to a farm boy tell him he was pretty sure he could get those Michigan fellows out with a minimum of effort.

So, once again, Scooter looked deep into Harrison's eyes and saw truth staring back at him. He walked out to the pitcher's mound and patted Lefty Gheringer on the backside, taking the baseball from him in the same motion. As Lefty plodded toward the clubhouse—visibly upset about being replaced by an untried rookie from the semi-pro leagues—Morgan waved in his new

relief pitcher. Harrison Pierce came out of the dugout and walked to the mound, windmilling his right arm to get it loose.

Scooter told Harrison, "no walks and keep the ball low."

When I was old enough to express doubt about my dad's knowing exactly what the Twins Manager said to Ace since he wasn't present at that conference on the mound, he looked at me with disappointment apparent in his gaze. He then advised me that he knew because that's exactly what any manager would tell his reliever in that situation.

"Batters hitting pitches coming in low usually hit the ball on the ground, giving the infielders a chance for the double play. I thought I told you that before," was my dad's answer to the skeptical query. He probably had. Dad told me a lot of things I should have remembered and didn't.

After that digression, my father related how Harrison took his eight warm-up pitches and then threw a slow curve to the Grand Rapids clean-up hitter. The result was a fly ball down the left field line that exited the stadium on its way to landfall in Fort Wayne. (That was Dad's estimate of the ball's trajectory.) The umpire called the ball foul, and Scooter Morgan exhaled while the players sitting behind him smirked and poked one another in the ribs.

Harrison Pierce just nodded toward the Twins dugout with a look meant to reassure his new teammates that he had the Rattlers hitter right where he wanted him. After that, he threw two consecutive ninety-five mile per hour fastballs that the batter waved at before sitting down in the Rattlers dugout. Later, the Twins catcher told a reporter that Ace's fastball came in "like a runaway locomotive—hissing and hopping and scary as hell to see coming at you." Harrison threw six more of those runaway locomotives, and the inning was over. True to his word, he had struck out the side on nine pitches.

Ace pitched the eighth and ninth innings with the Grand Rapids batters managing only a few foul tips. The box score at the end of the game would show that he threw a total of thirty pitches in three innings and recorded nine strike-outs without allowing a hit. He came on for an encore in the seventh inning of the evening game with similar results. Harrison Pierce was on his way to becoming a minor league legend, but that was all.

He played in the bush leagues through the thirties, moving up to Triple-A ball after a season and provoking everyone who saw him pitch and especially everyone who ever batted against him to wonder why in the world he wasn't pitching in the majors. My dad could never explain Pierce's failure to advance to the grand stage. There are some questions that have no good answers, I guess. When Pearl Harbor and WWII came along, Ace was one of the first to volunteer for the Army, and that was pretty much the end of his baseball career.

He was still young enough to give professional baseball another try after the war, but maybe—Dad opined—he had seen some things that made him forget about baseball as a serious endeavor. When Ace returned from Europe, his father had passed on, and the family farm was a mess. He did his best to return it to profitability I was told much later by people who had contact with him during that time, but things never turned out the way he wanted them to. When his mother died, he sold the farm and all the equipment on it and moved on. If Ace told anyone in South Bend where he was going, Dad had never heard about it.

His exploits on the diamond weren't entirely forgotten. It was just that after the Depression and the war, people had a lot of other things on their minds. By the time the next generation of baseball fans grew up, the legend of Harrison Pierce had become arcane mythology living on only in the memories of tribal elders nobody paid attention to anymore.

Stories are an effective means of transmitting wisdom from one generation to the next. However, what if those stories are more myth than fact? Should the lessons contained in the tales be dismissed as unreliable, the storyteller a fraud and his wisdom false? That is the dilemma facing Bud Pulaski when he finds a shoebox containing memorabilia that suggest the anecdotes told him by his deceased father were only half-truths.

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