

## BOTTOM OF THE SEVENTH

Another short story I wrote when I was in high school, and another Ridgewood tale of the macabre. In this story presented in 7 parts, love helps win a high school baseball game in the BOTTOM OF THE SEVENTH. Copyright © 1974 by me, Steven L. Campbell, writing as Steven Campbell, and renewed 2000 when I published it at my website. Cover art by S.L.Campbell Graphics and Books. This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this book either are products of the author's imagination or are fictitiously used. Any resemblance to actual persons—living or dead, locales, organizations, or events is purely coincidental.

~ 1 ~

### *Now*

My name is Tyler Lake. I'm a junior at Ridgewood High School. Today is the first Thursday in June and the last day of school. It is also the last regulation Varsity baseball game of the season.

It's the bottom of the seventh inning, the last chance my team has of scoring two runs and winning this game. Coach Walker is reminding us of that as I peek into the bleachers behind our dugout. The pretty blonde-haired girl, Julie Sommers, sits in the third row. The evening sun seems to spark her hair and I see a halo of white around her from the dress she wears. I avoid making eye contact.

"Do you really see her?" my friend Derek Hampton says next to me in the dugout as I twist and crane my head to get a better look at her.

"I do," I tell him, thankful he isn't questioning my sanity.

I look away and try to focus on the game. Coach Walker's pep talk is over and Danny Richards now watches the coach give him signals from the third base coach's box. Coach Walker is a short, heavy man who always has a pipe clamped between his teeth. He smokes his cherry tobacco only when our games are over. Never before and certainly never during our games. He's superstitious that way.

I steal another glance at Julie and shiver while Danny approaches the batter's box at home plate.

~ 2 ~

### *Then*

"I had my first chance to kiss her when we were in seventh grade," I said to Derek in the lunchroom at school almost a month ago, "Remember? It was three days before Halloween at my snooty cousin Lisa's house, during a party for her fourteenth birthday."

Derek and I sat across from each other, avoided eye contact, and kept our voices low. I reminded him how my Aunt Debbie had invited the neighborhood boys and girls over for cake and ice cream. Aunt Debbie was always generous to us kids, so it wasn't unusual to see twenty or thirty of us hanging around. And, she had a heated in-ground indoor swimming pool unlike the rest of us with above-ground outdoor pools, so it was possible to swim yearlong there. I loved to swim but couldn't stand my cousin, so I wasn't complaining too loudly when I was late for the party because my mom's fix-or-repair-daily automobile blew a back tire.

When we arrived, I tossed Lisa her present along with the card my mom bought and made me sign, gobbled down a big bowl of strawberry ice cream topped with chocolate syrup, and practically flew to the pool. There were almost twenty kids in there when I cannon-balled into their midst. I maneuvered around other kids and swam until I came to a circle of six girls playing Blind Man's Bluff. They were classmates from school, and they surrounded another girl wearing a white bikini and a red neckerchief blindfold. She tried tagging one of the girls who crouched low, while the others snuck up and yelled "Boo." I watched as the stunning "blind man" waded through waist-high water toward me.

A beach ball bounced off the back of my head and I turned partway around to see Derek and some of my other friends laughing. Just then, the "blind man" stumbled into me, fell, and accidentally pulled down the back of my trunks. I squirmed around to haul them back up as the two of us went underwater. My legs tangled with hers and for a moment her body was on mine and had me pinned to the pool floor, her stomach pressed into mine. When we stopped struggling, she and I floated into a gentle embrace. Then she took off the blindfold. It was Julie Sommers. Our faces were inches apart and I wanted to kiss her. But she disappeared from view and a strong arm pulled me up. Uncle John and Cousin Paul brought us to our feet and asked if we were okay. Julie said "yes" and I mumbled an affirmative. Julie returned to her game and I sat on the sidelines and daydreamed about what-ifs.

"You should have kissed her right then and there," Derek told me that day in the lunchroom.

He was right.

~ 3 ~

*Now*

The fans in the rickety metal and wood bleachers behind me jump to their feet as Danny laces a hit over the second baseman's head. The spectators on the Franklin High School's side of the diamond moan and then shout encouragement to their pitcher. The Franklin Yellow Jackets players do the same.

I glance again at Julie and forget about the game happening in front of me. I think of the past month when it became hard for me to stay focused on anything for long. It was when my grades took a turn for the worse, when my hitting slump started, when—

Players dodge and dive around me and bring me out of my reverie.

“Fire in the hole,” someone shouts as the foul ball skirts past me and ricochets off the bench, and then sails back onto the field. I sneak another glance at Julie. Her face and hair glow more luxurious as the evening sun reddens toward the horizon.

Never have I seen such beauty. I am stricken.

~ 4 ~

### *Then*

It was less than three months ago when I finally became less petrified talking to girls and asked Julie Sommers on a date. I tried so hard not to act like a jerk that I wound up acting like a jerk.

We met for pizza at the local pizza shop. We sat at a window seat with Derek and his girlfriend where the evening sun glowed against Julie’s perfect skin. She was like an artist’s finest creation. To be in her presence made me a nervous wreck. I tried to lighten my jitters by telling jokes, but I was late with some of the punch lines, and forgot them altogether and had to start over. The best I could do was fill my mouth with pizza and be quiet, but I even failed at that. Derek had to hammer me on the back to dislodge the pepperoni wedged against my windpipe.

When my breathing became regular again (although looking at Julie made inhaling difficult). I ended our date by reaching for a napkin and knocking over my cola, spilling it into the lap of Julie’s pretty dress.

After that horrible event, I entered a funk and spent some time at a safe distance, dreaming of Julie and achieving the perfect date with her.

Our next date went well. She came to a baseball game, I hit a home run, and I gave her the ball after the game. She kissed me on the cheek and made me forget my name for a moment.

“It was the perfect hit,” I said when mind returned to reality. “It’s such a wonderful feeling when a batter connects with the ball and hits the perfect hit.”

“What’s the perfect hit feel like?” she asked.

“The ball feels soft against the bat. Sometimes there is barely a feeling at all.”

“How soft? Like hitting butter?”

Yes. Like hitting butter. She was perfect.

~ 5 ~

### *Now*

Derek pokes me in the ribs with a bony elbow and tells me I'm on deck. I seem to float from my seat and up the steps. In foul territory, I almost hover above the on-deck circle where I swing a weighted bat, all the while dreaming of hitting another home run for beautiful Julie Sommers.

I put on a batter's helmet and observe the scoreboard telling me there are two outs. I wonder if Petey Wilson will be the final out, but he answers my question by placing a hot bouncing double between left field and center field. However, the centerfielder is quick to catch up with the ball and throw it to his shortstop, thereby keeping Danny Richards from rounding third base and scoring the tying run.

The Yellow Jackets' coach calls for a pitcher change and Coach Walker is at my side giving me a gut wrenching pep talk.

"Forget about those last two strikeouts," he says, which causes those last two strikeouts to loom large in my mind. "Just get a hit, Tyler. Just get a hit."

I steal a glance at Julie. Coach Walker tells me to get the crowd out of my mind, but their excitement fills my head and their noise drowns out Coach's words. He places a beefy hand on my thin shoulder and his touch brings the sight of him back in focus.

"You can do this, Tyler. All you need to do is empty your mind of everything around you and focus only on the ball. Can you do that?"

I nod and wonder if I can forget about the anxiety dancing across my back.

Coach Walker puts an arm around my shoulders. "Imagine yourself hitting the ball ... connecting," he says.

My mind is searching. I know what he means. Whenever I connect with the ball, it feels soft against the bat. Sometimes there is barely a feeling at all, like—

"Like hitting butter," I cry out.

"Sure. Butter. Why not?" He smiles. "Now you go to that plate and you imagine you're going to hit a stick of butter. See it in your mind. When that pitcher throws the ball, it's nothing but a stick of butter."

~ 6 ~

*Then*

"A loaf of bread, a container of milk, and a stick of butter!"

Derek and I laughed at my mom's shopping list for bread, milk and butter as we walked beneath the gentle May sun to the grocery store. We had my eight-year-old brother with us, and the three of us sang again the segment from television's Sesame Street.

“A loaf of bread... a container of milk... and a stick of butter!”

We carried on, two high school eleventh graders and a third grader sharing a wonderful moment together. Then Derek and I got into a serious conversation about school and classes and girlfriends.

“Julie and I have a date to the movies Friday night,” I told him. I’m sure my face beamed as bright as the high beams on headlights as we made plans to double date.

When we left the store, an ambulance screamed past us toward the hospital as we came to an accident scene three stores down. While we waited for the police to let us cross the street, someone—an elderly woman—told us a car had run a red light and hit another car broadside. The driver from the second car was okay, she said. However, a passenger in the car was in critical condition.

We stared at the dented cars and broken glass on the street. I’m sure I prayed for the injured passenger. Derek and I even reflected on our own mortality. It frightened me to think someday I would die and never play baseball again. When my little brother began to cry, we detoured the scene and took the long way home. The accident was soon out of mind.

“A loaf of bread,” Derek sang out.

“A container of milk,” sang my brother. He looked up at me and waited for me to finish.

~ 7 ~

*Now*

“A stick of butter,” I say.

“Whatever it takes.” Coach Walker nods and returns to his spot next to third base. I watch the pitcher throw bullets to his catcher until the home plate umpire tells him he’s thrown enough. The umpire beckons me to enter the batter’s box. A Yellow Jackets’ fan demands that the pitcher strike me out. My teammates plead for me to get a hit. Coach Walker gives me the take sign and then swings his arms to try to fool the other team into thinking I’m hitting away. My self-assurance teeters; my boosted spirit descends for a moment. I dig my cleats into the dirt anyway and swing my bat menacingly at the pitcher. He responds with a nod to his catcher, mimics a professional pitcher’s windup, and blows a letter high fastball past me.

“Stee-rike one!” the umpire bellows.

I try to shut out the voices around me as the catcher taunts me with “No batter no batter no batter.”

Coach Walker gives me the swing away sign.

This time I shut out the crowd until I only hear the sound of my heart thumping in my ears. I lace the next fastball pitch behind Coach Andrews standing foul of first base.

The umpire's voice is far away. "Foul ball," he says.

Coach Andrews gives me a nod and raises his thumbs. Coach Walker gives me another sign to swing away. I dig in at the plate and want to rip the cover off the ball if I should I hit it. I look at a fastball just below my kneecaps.

I stare at another swing-away sign, dig in, and see another low fastball.

After the same sign and a high fastball for a full count, Coach Walker calls time and hurries to my side. I meet him halfway. "Butter pitch," he says.

I gulp and nod and enter the batter's box with wobbly legs. Beyond the pitcher, Petey Wilson is dancing at second base. Over at third, Danny Walker is taking a big lead. The pitcher is eyeballing Danny as the third baseman leans toward third base and the second baseman charges second base. Nothing happens, so I step out of the batter's box and sniff at the dust in the air while my heart rate decreases. Danny and Petey return to their bases until I step back into the batter's box. Then the dances and my racing heart start again.

The pitcher nods to his catcher, mimics a professional pitcher's windup one more time, and sends the ball my way. I'm afraid to swing!

"Hit the ball!" Julie's voice breaks the barrier. It seems like she is standing behind me, reaching around me and grabbing my wrists, forcing me to swing at the pitch.

And she is.

I feel her embrace, smell her rosy perfume, and hear and feel the clunk of the baseball as it strikes a thin section of the ash bat directly above my right fist. The ball shoots high above the infield. It's a pop up heading between the third baseman and the shortstop, sending them into the outfield grass.

With my shoulders slumped in defeat and my face pasted with disappointment, I run to first base and never see the third baseman and shortstop collide or the ball fall safely to the ground. When I cross the bag and look back, Petey Wilson is on the heels of Danny Walker. The two of them race toward home. The rightfielder fumbles the ball that got away from the other fielders, and Danny and Petey score the tying and winning runs.

Our dugout and bleachers erupt with cheers. Coach Andrews hugs me and slaps my back. "Luck be a lady tonight," he says. As we leave the field, Coach Walker hands me the game ball. "It wasn't the prettiest of hits," he says, "But it got the job done."

My teammates mob me and a few of them remind me how lucky we were to win.

“An error is an error and two runs scored,” Coach Walker says as he fills his pipe and lights it. He parades us to the infield where we congratulate the other team with handshakes and hand slaps. When we return to the dugout, I see Julie leaving the bleachers with the rest of the crowd. Suddenly, I don’t care what others may think of me. I know I want to talk to her before she goes, so I run to her. Somewhere inside the mass of bodies, I lose her for a moment. Then I see her through the shifting mass. Her head turns and our gazes meet before she disappears again. A beefy hand touches my shoulder and a waft of cherry scented smoke warms my nose.

“That’s one pitch I would have tried harder to connect with,” Coach Walker says.

I nod. “I’ve missed a lot of good pitches,” I say.

I return to the dugout and retrieve my baseball glove. Derek and I walk down the left field foul line, following the others to the parking lot. Inside his car, I tell him what happened while he drives away from the school, past the football field, and toward the sun sinking to the gentle hills of Ridgewood Cemetery.

Derek stops and I get out. The cast shadows of daylight cover me. I say another prayer for the passenger who the ambulance rushed to the hospital a month ago. At a large and pink marble headstone, I place the game ball on her grave. A breeze stirs through the trees of Ridgewood Cemetery and I embrace its warmth. Julie whispers in an ear, “It didn’t feel like hitting butter.”

I laugh and share her warmth, and the two of us talk—boy and girl, mortal and spirit—until, in the final moments of twilight, a cooler breeze stirs through the trees of the cemetery and I embrace Julie’s love one last time.

~ *THE END* ~