

“OK, batter up. You ready Hobby?”

The Jeep was hauling up Route 42, an out-of-the-way country road that was probably once an important byway. It did stretch to the next town, though still a seldom-used route that passed by homes that had also seen better days.

Hobby was in the passenger seat of the old Jeep convertible. He had a bat in his hand, the same 32-ounce aluminum one he used when he played ball for the high school, until he was kicked off the team. It seems the coach was kind of particular about his players drinking and getting into fights every weekend. Ernest Hobson Jr., or Hobby to anyone who didn't want to get their teeth knocked out, was five-ten, one-eighty, and muscular as hell. And he liked to show it off, “gun show” as they say, wearing sleeveless T's or tank tops most of the time, even in the winter. Hobby could crush the ball when he made contact, which did happen occasionally, but not enough for the coach to give him preferential treatment and look past Hobby's violent behavior. He figured it was just a matter of time until Hobby took it to the next level. And jail.

Jed was driving and egging him on. As he always did. The faded red Jeep, crappy though it was, remained Jed's pride and joy. Hundreds of hours flipping burgers and fry baskets at Mickey D's the past few years gave him the money to buy the junker. Then he got Tommy to work on it with his older brother, to get it actually moving. It still ran, but barely if the coughing sound of the engine or the occasional belch of smoke from the exhaust pipe mattered. Which it did. Tommy sat in the back seat, quiet as usual but still smiling and laughing and ready to take part. But he was no match for Hobby in the muscles or batting category.

They were just finishing the stretch of road that was basically dead, in their opinion. No houses, no businesses, just some fields and tree-filled areas. But a quarter-mile up ahead began a stretch of houses, probably twenty on the right side and maybe just as many on the left. And most importantly, mailboxes on posts along the roadside.

“Here we go big boy. Let's see what you've got. I wanna see some homers here bitch. No singles, swing for the fucking fences!”

Tommy finally spoke up. “Let's go H. Youdaman!”

And with that Hobby turned in his seat. No seat belt, of course. He had the bat resting on his right shoulder, just as he did in the batter's box, relaxed, until the pitcher went into his windup. Then the bat would rise, Hobby would crouch his ass down a bit and bend his knees, rear back with the bat, lift his left foot slightly and take a half-step forward as he started his swing, the bat beginning its arc to meet the ball.

As the Jeep approached the first house, he did the same routine. The bat rose, he leaned forward out of the car a little, and he torqued his mid-section as he pulled the bat through its arc. He made prefect contact with the metal rectangular box, exploding it off the post and sending it about ten feet forward. A pile of letters and circulars flew in the air, and were strewn over the lawn and into the street.

“Bam!” Jeb yelled. “That ball is outta here! But here comes the next pitch. The Jeep quickly approached the next box. Hobby was ready, bat back in position on his muscular shoulder. Again, a perfect swing, and an explosive finish.

All-in-all, when they reached the end of that row of houses, Hobby had dislodged 16 mailboxes. He spared several, taking a break every four or five houses to rest. Looking back, the carnage took

the form of empty wooden posts and paper everywhere, blanketing the ground like the winter snow had come early.

Bob and Ellie Becker couldn't stop smiling, despite the heat, despite the touch of exhaustion they were both feeling. They were now on the second half of the hike, having reached the peak of McCormick Mountain and now on their way down.

It was a beautiful summer day, high seventies and sunny. But none of that is why Bob and Ellie were really smiling. Today was their 30th wedding anniversary. And 30 years ago yesterday they did the same hike up McCormick Mountain with friends and a few willing extended family members. It was a beautiful day back then as well. And 30 amazing years, and two beautiful daughters, later, it was a great way to come full circle. Who knows, maybe 30 years from now they'll have the energy to do it again, Bob mused. No, probably not. 87. That won't happen. But they weren't focused on that.

They made their way down single file nearly the entire stretch since it was a narrow trail. It took about forty-five minutes to get up the mountain, not bad, they were both in good shape for a couple of mid-to-late fifties folks. Would probably take about thirty to thirty-five to get down. Bob watched Ellie maneuver over the rocks and flats with ease, and took immense pride that he could call her his wife. She stuck by him literally through thick and thin, just like those old vows intended. Job discontinuance, out of work for nearly a year. Drinking too much during that time, some really bad nights and days, until he quit cold turkey. And then the break-in, when they lost thousands of dollars' worth of stuff. He wanted to find the jerks and kill 'em. It was just after he had gotten back on his feet, working and sober. He didn't need another blow to his mid-section, which is what it felt like. But Ellie stood by his side through all of it. More than that. She picked up extra hours to make sure they could pay the bills, and not use up all their savings. She got him off the sauce, and not with anger or threats, but with compassion. And she talked down his anger when he wanted to go out and try to find the guys that broke into their house. He wasn't sure he deserved that, or was even worthy of her. So yeah, he looked at that woman hiking in front of him with an amount of love and appreciation nobody could possibly know.

Jed pulled into the lot, and the three of them exited the Jeep. Which was by hurtling themselves over the sides. The small Jeep doors may have worked, or may have been stuck closed, or may have fallen off the hinges if they actually tried to open them. But those doors hadn't been opened in a long time. That was fine. They all preferred hopping in and out anyway. Much more badass.

They made their way across the parking lot towards the trailhead. The hike was actually Tommy's idea. A rarity. He wasn't the one who usually spoke up or initiated. But he said his brother Mikey had climbed McCormick the other day and said there was something cool at the top. Jed and Hobby wanted to know what it was, but all Tommy knew was that Mikey said it was really cool, they had to see it for themselves. They all respected Mikey, he could fix any engine, he had a badass dirtbike he could fly over any jump, and he had a smokin' hot girlfriend. So here they were at McCormick Mountain. Hobby downed his Red Bull, his second that day. He tossed it into the woods to the right, and the three of them made their way onto the trail.

Hobby was feeling amped up so he took the lead. He would run ahead at times, Jed and Tommy then stepping up to keep pace. Whenever they came up to other hikers, they passed on the left, usually without saying anything. And with a narrow trail, contact was usually made. When the other hikers would say something, like "Excuse me!" or "What the hell?", Hobby would raise his right arm

high, middle finger extended. Jed and Tommy would then crack up, sometimes joining in the bird flip parade.

Jed then had an idea, brilliant in his mind. They had passed occasional hikers making their way down, coming in the opposite direction. Jed said to Hobby, "I dare you to hockey check one of them off the trail." He was kind of kidding. But he also knew Hobby, about as well as anyone knew Hobby, even his parents. Eleven years of close friendship will do that. He knew that Hobby would never ever turn down a dare. Or, in his words, "pussy out". So, of course, Hobby said "you're on!"

Jed then added to his challenge. "Ok, whoever comes down next. Except kids."

"Done," replied Hobby.

Bob and Ellie were about halfway down the mountain. They reached a shady spot and stopped. Bob handed Ellie the water bottle he was carrying and she gladly opened it and took a healthy gulp. She handed it back to Bob and he did the same. They decided to share a bottle since it wasn't a particularly difficult hike, and it wasn't overly hot. And they were correct in their decision, they were both doing well, easy-peasy as they liked to say.

They started back down, this section of the hike mostly flat ground with occasional rocks or small step-drops with larger rocks. The upper portion of the mountain trail has more step-up sections and uneven terrain. Bob looked ahead down the trail. He saw three guys approaching, moving at a good pace. The front one had a cut-off t-shirt and was pretty pumped up, like the guys at the gym who seem to live there and look like they take HGH at every meal. Ellie must have noticed as well because she slowed and moved to the side of the trail as much as she could, given its narrowness. Bob noticed the guys picking up their pace even more, and the one in front had a bit of a crazed look on his face. As they neared Ellie, Bob saw too late that the lead guy was making a beeline for Ellie. Next thing he saw was Ellie rise up in the air about a foot and a half and get catapulted off the trail about six feet into the woods. Bob's eyes went wide with shock. He froze, looking at Ellie, then turning his head to Hobby. What he saw was the savage glare of a boxer standing over his knockout victim, but with a malevolent smile as he stared back at Bob. The two guys behind him were already howling, like they had just witnessed a game-winning touchdown. All three then tore off up the trail, leaving Bob standing there bewildered. He shook it off, turned and rushed over to Ellie, who was moaning in agony. Luckily she landed in vegetation, not rocks and branches. But Bob could see she was scratched up everywhere – face, arms, legs. And she was now curling up, grabbing at her midsection. Where the guy had rammed into her. It was like those hockey checks that send guys into the boards or flying across the ice. With broken ribs often following.

"Ellie, are you ok honey?"

"No. Owwww....owwww." that second one louder than the first. "Why did he do that? Ow. My ribs, I think he broke my ribs." She said all of that in a quiet voice, slowly.

"How is your breathing? Does it hurt to breathe in?"

"Yes....a lot." The tears were flowing heavy. Ellie didn't wear makeup, she didn't need it, she had natural beauty. If she did her face would be covered in black right now. But instead it was covered in pain and anguish. "Ow...hurts."

"Oh my god, is she okay?" A woman asked from the trail a few feet away. "What happened? I saw three guys yelling about how one of them *trucked* a woman. I didn't know what they were talking about."

Bob replied. "Yeah, the guy with the cutoff t-shirt body checked her off the trail. No reason. Just a violent asshole."

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry. Do you want me to call the police. Or an ambulance?"

"Yes, can you. That would be great."

A few minutes later.

"They want to know if she can make it down to the bottom, or if they have to have the EMT's come up here."

Bob turned to Ellie. "What do you think El, can you walk? I can hold you."

"I don't know. Help me up, let me see." One thing about Ellie, besides being in good shape and exercising regularly. She was stubborn.

She got to her feet, but not easily, favoring her ribs and not being able to fully straighten out. And moaning though trying not to. She then took a moment to assess. She beathed in, holding her arms against her ribs as Bob held her steady.

"Yeah, I think I can make it down. It'll be slow though.

"No problem love, it's not a race. I'll hold you."

The Good Samaritan replied to the person on the phone. "She'll come down to the bottom." After a pause, "Okay great, thank you." She pushed the button on her screen and looked up at Bob and Ellie.

"The police should be at the base of the trail in less than ten minutes. The ambulance maybe five minutes later."

"Ok thanks. That's great. It'll probably take us about fifteen. We've got, what, another quarter-mile?"

"Yeah, about that. Can I do anything else? Want me to grab the water bottle?"

"That would be great, thank you. And thanks again for stopping and calling. That was really nice of you."

Ellie added, painfully, "Yes, thank you."

"Oh please, it was nothing. Those bastards did a horrible thing to you. Least I could do."

"What's your name, by the way?"

"Jeannette."

"Bob and Ellie. Really nice to meet you Jeannette."

"You too. Wish it was under better circumstances."

"So three males, approximate age eighteen or nineteen?" asked Officer Secord.

"Yeah, that would be my guess. Maybe twenty, hard to say. But the guy who hit Ellie was really muscular. Like he spends a ton of time in the gym."

"And you say he body checked your wife?" Secord said that not like he was doubting it, but that he couldn't believe someone would actually do it. His black eyebrows, which matched his jet black hair, didn't exactly belie that impression, the right one far higher on his forehead than the left.

"Yup. I know, unbelievable. The asshole went at her and drove his left shoulder into her mid-section. He lowered himself and drove forward", Bob then sort of demonstrated by dropping down and angling his shoulder, "like a football player making a tackle. Or a hockey player body checking a guy."

“Wow, that’s unbelievable. Going after a defenseless woman, that’s just brutal.” Secord was shaking his head, looking down now, the breath that left through his nose emphasizing his disgust. “I’m so sorry.”

He looked over at the ambulance, where he could see the EMT taking care of Ellie. They were going to take her to the ER to get X-rays, see if anything was broken. But she was breathing better than earlier, and was considered stable. Bob also noted her breathing sounded way better than when it happened. Ellie agreed to wait a little while hoping the bastards came back down, Bob convincing her they should help get these guys arrested. The trailhead was the only way out, assuming they didn’t go through the woods. But the officers were also assuming they were parked here in the lot. Specifically, the Jeep that was sitting about sixty feet away.

They had previously gotten an APB for three individuals driving in a faded red Jeep; those individuals had decided to play mailbox baseball about an hour and a half ago. The woman who reported it had seen them go by and smash her mailbox and then the next one. When she ran outside she saw the Jeep in the distance and was pretty sure there were three or four guys in it. She reported it looked like an old Jeep model, or at least one in rough condition, and that it was a faded red color. She added that when she turned around and saw the extent of the damage, that prompted her to call the police.

The police would look for the Jeep, but mailbox baseball had become such a common occurrence around those parts that they might not look so diligently. Sure it was a crime, but it was really was just a nuisance. Property damage was replaceable, fixable. Usually high school punks, underage, and if they got caught it was a monetary fine plus damages, nothing more. So they didn’t exactly bust their asses trying to find the punks. There were bigger issues out there. However this time they would find them. It would be a two-for-one.

Secord directed the ambulance to move to the left edge of the parking lot, away from the view coming out of the trailhead. Officer Mackovic, Secord’s partner, moved their squad car a bit to the side as well. Mackovic was now positioned to the left side of the trailhead, with the big trail map structure blocking anyone coming out from seeing him.

Bob and Secord were opposite Mackovic, on the other side of the trailhead, partially blocked by some trees, but with a view up the trail.

Bob then saw the three punks coming. Frankly, he probably could have heard them just as quickly. Carrying on about something. Probably another assault.

Bob pointed them out to Secord, who then directed Bob to move back about twenty feet, out of the way. Secord signaled to Mackovic. Both of them drew their guns out of their holsters. Just as the three punks exited the trail onto the pavement, the officers rushed forward, guns pointed straight at them. Secord was barking commands as he moved.

“You three, on the ground, now! On your knees, hands behind your head.”

The three punks looked shellshocked, but the police were behind them, to the sides, so they couldn’t see who was yelling at them. They didn’t move. Mouths agape, eyes showing their confusion. Maybe some fear.

“Down, now!” Secord barked even louder, moving to where they could see him as he spoke. Mackovic also moved forward into their visual field, to their right.

With that, all three punks hit the ground. Jed actually fell face-first, picking himself back up to his knees, evidence of pavement and some blood on his chin.

Secord moved behind Hobby, who was closest to him, grabbed Hobby's left wrist behind his back and placed a handcuff on it. He then grabbed his right wrist and did the same. Mackovic then cuffed Jed and Tommy.

Hobby was first to speak, as the cuffs were being placed.

"What the hell? Why you cuffin' me. I didn't do nothin'."

"Yeah you did," Secord responded. "You did a bunch of things. You're under arrest for assault. And the three of you are also being charged with extensive property damage."

He then read all three of them their Miranda rights. Tommy had his head down the entire time. He was crying, but he didn't want his buddies to see it. They'd call him a pussy.

Secord had Mackovic go call it into the station. And to order a tow truck to impound the Jeep. Meanwhile, he walked over to Bob, who was still standing off to the right.

"So you're going to press the assault charges, correct?" he asked.

"Yes, definitely." He said the second word with angry conviction.

Secord acknowledged it, nodding. "Ok, good. Well, we have your testimony, as well as your wife's. And the witness statement from Ms. Willingham, the woman who called it in. So this should be pretty open-and-shut. But I do have to tell you. I took a look at his license. He's a minor, he's only seventeen." He paused as Bob closed his eyes and shook his head. "He doesn't look it, that's for sure. So unless they decide to charge him as an adult, the penalty certainly won't fit the crime. Sorry to have to tell you this."

Bob had re-opened his eyes and looked at Secord, but then folded in his lips and closed his eyes again as he nodded with his head angled down. He turned his glance over towards Hobby. The kid wasn't looking remorseful. He was looking angry, like why are they wasting his time. Bob didn't know if a remorseful look would've changed anything.

"That's a sad joke," he replied. "That punk should be locked up."

"I agree. Maybe he will be. Like I said, they could charge him as an adult. Or he could end up in juvenile detention. But I can't guarantee it. Sorry again. One other thing though, these guys were involved in some serious property damage a couple hours ago. We ID'd the car over there and the driver, that kid in the middle. So the additional charges might help."

Bob nodded and raised his eyebrows a bit, lips folded together, and uttered a simple "Hmm."

With that Secord excused himself and walked over to the squad car to talk to Mackovic.

Bob walked a few feet over to the edge of the pavement, to spit into the woods. He looked over to the ambulance. The EMT's were still talking with Ellie, he could see that, but it looked calm in there. He figured they saw the officers cuff the guys, and that Ellie knew the situation. That gave him some comfort. But not enough. Not nearly. He turned his gaze back to the three punks. He wanted to believe justice would get done, but he knew better. Dejected, he dropped his head and looked into the brush of grass and woods in front of him. He noticed a Red Bull can, didn't look like it had been there long. He shook his head as he glared five feet to the left where the garbage can sat. Looked like something these assholes would do, he thought. Looking back down at the brush, he saw an old rusted tire iron a few feet away from the can. It blended into the brush, having turned a combination of rust, gray and the original black. He stared at it, thinking.

Bob looked again to his left at the three punks, still on their knees with their hands cuffed behind them. He looked out to the parking lot at the officers, who were talking, but Mackovic's back was to the three punks and therefore also at least partially blocking Secord's view.

Bob took a step into the brush, crouched down and grabbed the tire iron.

He kept it in his right hand as he walked along the woods toward the trailhead. Bob was about ten feet behind the punks, with Hobby closest. He stopped at the edge of trailhead, and took a look. There was nobody coming down the trail. He looked over to the officers and couldn't see either of their faces.

He proceeded forward, walking a few feet around Hobby, and turned to face him, the tire iron still in his right hand behind his leg. Hobby looked up at him, and just glared like it was a test of wills. Bob reared back his right arm as he twisted his torso, bent his left knee, then swung the tire iron in a perfect semicircle arc into Hobby's left side before he could move himself. The blow was significant, Bob thought he heard more than just metal on skin. Hobby went down hard, wincing in pain but knowing his own code wouldn't let him cry out. Bob stood over Hobby for a moment, the feeling of retribution unmistakable. He glanced at the other two punks, who had a look of fear in their eyes, probably sensing they were next. They weren't Bob's concern.

Bob opened his eyes. He looked down, the tire iron still in his right hand. He took a deep breath, shook his head, and tossed it far back into the woods. He's not worth it, Bob thought. More importantly, he knew Ellie wouldn't want him to do it.

He turned and started walking towards the ambulance. To go be with the person who meant everything to him. And made him a better person than he could possibly be without her.

He looked left as he walked. He made eye contact with Secord, who just nodded.