

My dad wasn't a ballplayer. In his teens he did some boxing, but he spent his adult life in the straight world, inspecting aircraft welds at the McDonnell Douglas plant in Long Beach. He told me that if I wanted to make easy money—and he always believed this was the best kind of money to make—I should look into relief pitching. I remember one afternoon we were sitting in the den, watching the Dodgers get clobbered by the Cincinnati Reds on TV. A left-handed reliever named Matt Young had just bounced a curveball off the plate, walking home a run. “Look at this fool,” Dad said. “Guy couldn't find the strike zone with a pebble. He works ten minutes a day, and he's making a killing. I bet his kids will never have to work a day in their lives.”

Dad was almost correct. This was 1987, a few years before the agents grabbed the owners by the balls and journeymen like Matt Young started buying vacation homes with cash. I did some research, and in 1987 the Dodgers paid Matt Young \$350,000. He appeared in forty-seven games, pitched fifty-four innings, and posted an earned-run average of 4.47. Believe it or not, those are decent numbers. I put up a similar line last year. But times have changed. Last year I made a million five.

My name is Johnny Adcock. I am a thirty-five-year-old

American man, six feet two inches tall, 190 pounds, with a cholesterol count on the high end of normal. Women have told me I'm handsome, but I know not to listen. Even ugly ballplayers get compliments. Here are the facts: I have gray eyes, a straight nose, and one slightly pronounced canine tooth. I wear a uniform to work. I travel the country on a chartered jet. I'm divorced, with a thirteen-year-old daughter who lives with her mother in Los Angeles. For now they live well—a house in Santa Monica, private school, organic groceries—but let's be realistic, I am one torn ligament away from permanent unemployment. Ginny, my ex, knows that. She sends me vitamins to prevent injuries. That's her idea of work.

In an average week, I spend approximately two hours throwing a baseball, including warm-ups. Roughly every other night I get called upon late in the game to face a single batter, always a lefty. Conventional wisdom says that it is better to have a left-handed pitcher face a left-handed batter, because the curveball will break down and away, out of the batter's reach. I don't throw a curve, but baseball is an orthodox religion, and orthodoxy resists exceptions. I can count on one hand the number of right-handed batters I have faced this season.

Here is a typical night's work: I walk in from the bullpen, throw my eight warm-up pitches. The batter, too, takes his time to get ready. He says a prayer, checks his grip, maybe does a little baton flip with his bat. If he's at home, he might check out the crowd. Then he steps into the box and we go at it. I throw my strikes and he takes his cuts. The whole dance lasts ten minutes, tops. If I get him, they pull me and put in the closer. If I don't, they probably pull me anyway. Ten minutes a night, seventy-plus nights a year, plus the playoffs if we're lucky.

If you look at this backward, you'll notice that I have a lot of free time. Enough to stun an average man. The best relief

pitchers are ruminants, men who desire nothing more than a seat on a bench, a game to watch, and a half-pound bag of David Sunflower Seeds. In college I read a poem about a man who measured out his life in coffee spoons. Good relievers measure theirs in seeds. But I am not a good reliever, because I'm restless. Maybe if I had been a position player—a shortstop, let's say—things might have been different for me. I might have taken extra batting practice in the cages under the stands. I have that option. I carry in my wallet a magnetic card that gets me into the clubhouse twenty-four hours a day. But relievers don't bat enough to make extra batting practice worthwhile. The last time I batted was four years ago. Nightcap of a doubleheader, the starter got in trouble early, and Skipper gave me the ball in the second inning. I went four frames, batted twice, and struck out both times, once on a foul bunt.

You might imagine that ballplayers go out and party after games. Some do, but there are lots of games, and the next is usually tomorrow. After a game, the next day's starting pitcher goes directly to sleep. Most guys go back to the hotel and watch TV, maybe Skype with their kids. But hotel television has never been enough for me. I need something more stimulating—especially after those hours waiting on the bench. I could have taken graduate courses through the mail, studied for life after baseball. Lots of guys talk about doing that. This is my thirteenth year in the bigs; I probably could have had a Ph.D. by now. I could have read every book ever written. But reading requires a still mind. Mine darts around like a knuckleball. I suppose I could have written books like Jim Bouton, great tell-all books about baseball and America, but again there is the problem of stillness, and also the question of why readers would want to peek inside my head.

Luckily, I found something better to do with my free time.

Ten years ago, my teammate Charley DeAngelo took me aside and told me his wife was fooling around. He had no evidence, but there were plenty of hints—jewelry he didn't remember giving her, strange numbers on the caller ID. He was going to follow her around for a day, see what he came up with. Could be boring, he said, so did I want to keep him company? I was recently divorced and had nothing better to do in the endless mornings before reporting to the stadium. So I rented a car and drove to the rendezvous spot. But DeAngelo never showed. There I was, parked across the street from the wife's gym, waiting for her to finish Tae Bo or whatever. What the hell, I said, I'm here, I will follow her, and, lo and behold, I discovered she was cheating—and not even hiding it. She went to an Italian restaurant for lunch, where she was joined by a gentleman in a business suit. They ordered Prosecco and oysters. Afterward they went to a hotel. I remember that I debated whether to tell DeAngelo. In the end I did, but only on the condition that he pass my name around to anyone else who needed this kind of help. DeAngelo thanked me for my effort and said he would put the word out.

An hour later, the phone rang. Word spreads fast in the major leagues.

A decade in, this sideline has earned me lovers and haters. The former are the guys who have required my services, at this point a cast of several hundred. The latter are those—managers, front-office folks, team PR personnel—who would prefer to ignore the ugly side of baseball. My detractors think the investigations represent a conflict of interest, even though I would never do anything to affect the outcome on the field. Mostly I think they're scared. They know sometimes I find dirt that implicates the wrong people. We're a tight group, baseball people, and our lives tend to touch like paper dolls. To some of us, that is frightening.

The appeal for me is the same as it ever was. Playing a child's game for money can be hard on your self-respect. Even now, I'm still not a doctor or a diplomat, but I'm more than I was. I'm more than a guy on a bench cracking seeds, waiting for a lefty to bat in the eighth.

God help me if a man's not entitled to that.

We are in Denver, last game of a road trip that started two weeks ago in Houston. The Bay Dogs of San José (that's my club) have been playing surprisingly well; if we win tonight we will be seven and five on the trip, but we're still buried in the standings thanks to a shit-poor first half of the season. Tonight's contest starts at 7:05 p.m., which means the bus leaves the hotel at three. I don't even think about these things anymore, I just feel them like tides. At two-forty-five, I am pulled magnetically to the lobby. The clubhouse guys are scurrying around, tagging our luggage. After the game we will go directly from the park to the airport. I am early, as usual; most of the other guys are still upstairs packing. I spent the morning and early afternoon down on the Sixteenth Street Mall, looking for a birthday present for my daughter, Isabel. She wants a certain kind of jeans, a brand called Miss Slinky. I did not find them.

Let me rephrase that: I spent the early afternoon looking for jeans. I spent the morning in bed with a young woman named Constance O'Connell. Connie is the cousin of my buddy Jerry Simmons, who pitches for Detroit. Three or four years ago, when Jerry was still with the Bay Dogs, a bunch of us were drinking beer by the pool after a day game. It was this very

same hotel, now that I think about it. Anyway, this group of half a dozen girls shows up, college-aged but well dressed. Jerry waves them over and buys their drinks. We assume that he has ordered in some talent, but it turns out the girls are strictly volunteers. Jerry introduces us around, and right away I'm drawn to Connie. She has these inky black eyes, a perfect little upturned nose. She laughs easily and often. We talk about northern California—she has just graduated from Sonoma State, where she ran track and earned a degree in library science, whatever that is. I ask if she does experiments with books. She says she does, and gives me her number. She tells me to call her next time we are in Denver. I do call, but it isn't until the Division Championship Series in October that we actually meet for drinks. The Bay Dogs lost that series, but I gained a friend. Life is funny that way. Did I mention her hair smells like a pine forest? I love Denver.

Our backup catcher, Frankie Herrera, takes the seat next to me on the bus. Frankie's about twenty-five, in his second year in the bigs. Like me, he grew up in L.A., but on the opposite side of town. It might as well have been another country. He tells me about gang fights and cockfights and cat fights—basically, his whole neighborhood was fighting all the time. He may have become a catcher just for the protective equipment. But Frankie is about as clean-cut as they come. In this era of gaudy tattoos, of Matt Kemp and Yadier Molina racing Mike Tyson to the last unmarked patch of hide, Frankie has just one decoration: the word “Granma,” misspelled just like that, across his right hip. It was a casualty of high school, he says—a friend was practicing to be a tattooist and Frankie volunteered his ass. He never told his grandma about the tattoo, but he did donate money to build a new baseball diamond in her village in Sonora. He strikes me as uncommonly generous for such a young kid, and it's obvious he values his family. He

and his wife have twin sons, a big house in San Diego near her folks. He's just genuinely nice, no drama.

"What's the good word, Adcock?"

I exhale. "Not 'cutter.' But I've been working with Phil, and I think we found the problem."

Phil Sutcliffe is our pitching coach. After I gave up the go-ahead run our first night in Houston, he watched me throw and said I was snapping the wrist too early when I released the cutter. A cutter, or cut fastball, is a pitch thrown more or less like a fastball, but with most of the pressure on the middle finger. I have made the adjustment suggested by Sutcliffe, and we'll see what happens. The body forgets, so you have to remind it. The problem is that it forgets again.

"Bad night," Frankie says. "Don't worry about it. Actually, I need to talk to you about something else. Something besides baseball, if you know what I'm saying."

Even though everybody on the team knows what I do in my spare time, they speak about it only in whispers.

I slide in closer to Frankie.

"What's on your mind?"

"That's it? I just tell you?"

"How did you think it worked?"

"I thought we'd meet in an alley or something."

"An alley, Frankie?"

"I don't know—"

"This isn't Boyle Heights. I'm not selling drugs."

Herrera pulls a phone from his jacket pocket, checks for new messages, puts it back.

"It's my wife," he says. "I got a problem with my wife."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He looks at me sideways. "Why are you sorry? I haven't even told you the problem."

"Listen, buddy, you're not the first, and you won't be the last.

We're on the road a lot. Everybody knows how it goes. Sixty to seventy-five percent of my work is guys who think their wife is fooling around."

"And are they?"

"Most of the time."

"Well, that's not the problem."

"Lucky you."

He checks his phone again. When he looks up, his expression is suddenly paranoid. He grabs my arm with surprising force and says, "This has to stay on the down low, Adcock. You can't tell nobody. I need your word."

"You have it," I say. "That's what I'm here to do."

He releases the grip and just looks at me, giving himself one last chance to bail out. Everyone does this the first time. A problem isn't a problem until you tell it to me. After that, it's a straight line to the solution. Not everybody wants their problems fixed.

"When I met my wife," he says, "she wasn't, you know, such a good girl."

"How do you mean?"

"She worked in clubs."

"Okay."

"You know the kind of clubs I mean?"

"I think so."

"And also, a couple of times, she needed money at the end of the month. For rent and bills. So she made some movies."

I could have told Frankie the rest of the story myself, I've heard it that many times, but I let him finish. A guy wants to be heard first of all. I sometimes think that is half the service I provide.

"Of course, now she's different. She is a different person since she had the twins."

"Sure, I bet."

“I thought everybody forgot about the videos. But then, the day before yesterday, I got this message on my phone.”

“What kind of message?”

“A text message with a link to a Web site. One of those free porn sites.”

“And the video was hers?”

Frankie nods.

“Do you know who sent it?” I say.

“The number was blocked.”

“There are ways to get around that.”

“I was hoping.”

“On the other hand,” I say, “anyone can buy a prepaid SIM card. She’s not still in touch with the photographer, is she?”

“He told me he’d never do anything with the files. Maria doesn’t know this, but I paid him a nice chunk to just sit on them. But I swear to God, Johnny, if I ever find that motherfucker . . .”

“Easy, Frank. You have a lot to lose.”

“I know. Maria tells me the same thing.”

“Good woman.”

“Tell you the truth, all I want to do is find the files and erase them. I don’t need revenge or nothing. I just don’t want my boys to grow up and find out their mom was, you know, that kind of actress.”

“How old are they now?”

“Gonna be five in October.”

“Time flies, huh?”

“That’s what everybody says.”

“So it was just the link, no message with it? Normally, you get a demand—not necessarily in the same package, maybe by mail, or a phone call?”

“You’ve seen this kind of thing before, huh?”

“Unfortunately.”

This seems to make the kid feel better. He pulls out his phone again but doesn't even look at the screen before putting it back in his jacket.

"Nah, there's no demand. You think they want money?"

"Maybe. I'm going to need the phone."

Frankie's face drops. "For real?"

"Sorry, Frank, but I need to see the video. You can transfer the number to another phone, but I need the message, in its original form."

"Promise you'll keep your hands by your sides?"

"Come on—"

"She's my wife, Adcock."

"I know she is, and I promise to give her video the respect it deserves, regardless of how effective it may be."

"I appreciate that. So—how does this work? Do you charge by the hour?"

"We can talk about that later."

"Okay. I'll have my agent call yours. You're with IMG, right?"

"It doesn't work like that, Frank."

"Oh. Right."

"Don't worry about it. Just get me the phone. Call Verizon or whoever, tell them you lost your handset."

"Yeah, okay. I can do that."

"The sooner the better," I say. "You know where to find me."