

The Minors

By Matthew Fries

When asked “What is the best way to catch a knuckleball?” (Also known as a butterfly ball.) Bob Uecker, then catching infamous knuckleballer, Joe Niekro, said: “Wait till it stops rolling. Then go pick it up.”

“What is it? You hung-over again?” Bock asked as he jogged up to the mound.

“Fuck off.”

“Drugs? Another eight ball?”

“Fuck off,” B.J. spat and backed off the rubber, turning away from Bock’s face.

Facing centerfield, B.J. took a deep breath. The scoreboard was the ugliest thing he’d ever seen.

VISITORS: Runs 8. Hits 9. Errors 0.

HOME: Runs 0. Hits 0. Errors 0

Top of the first.

He’d shit the bed. Completely.

B.J. rested on his haunches, picked up the rosin bag. The fielders had joined together in centerfield, chit-chatting like women at a salon. The shortstop was whispering to the third baseman, hiding their mouths with their gloves. They were staring at him.

Bases loaded. No outs.

B.J. hung his head.

The crowd showered him with their disgust.

He stood up.

“Get a fucking day job, B.J...”

“You fucking suck!”

“Hey Princess! You pitch like a FAGGOT!”

“Money, my ass.”

“My sister throws harder than you! YOU SUCK!”

The last one from the loudest cocksucker in the park. He came to every home game, always sitting four rows up behind home plate. Then as he got drunker, he roamed throughout the stands. One inning he’d be down to the bullpen, and the next he’d be behind the dugout. A consummate heckler and complete asshole, drunk as fuck every game.

B.J. flopped the rosin bag around in his hand. Palmed it, whacked it to the infield, and watched the white dust rise up as it smacked the grass. He checked his fingers: still long, no cuts, fingernails trimmed. He wondered how his E.R.A. jumped from 2.34 to over 5.00 in the six games he pitched after the All-Star break.

“Just get back behind the plate, Bock. We’ll work the first third.” B.J. said to his catcher.

“With what?” Bock said. “You got a eighty mile two-seamer and a butterfly ball. And that’s not doing what it’s supposed to be doing. You know? All that up down, sideways shit, wherever the fucking wind pushes it, this-a-way, fucking that-a-way,

uncatchable, unhittable, and all it's doing is floating straight over the plate and getting the leather knocked off of it. So you're fucked. What does it matter where you throw it? It's batting practice. They're killing you."

"Hey, Money, I fucked your girlfriend!" The heckler who sat behind home plate belched.

Bock laughed. "Hey, B.J., that guy fucked your old lady too!"

"You pitch like a homo! You take it in the ass? FUCKING PRINCESS! I FUCKED YOUR OLD LADY!"

"I'm going to kill that guy," B.J. said as he heard the crowd whoop and jeer. He didn't have to turn to see what was going on.

He hung his head and started walking towards the dugout. Coach Oldford waddled passed him, taking the baseball from B.J.'s outstretched glove as he passed, like he was a much-hated stepdaddy stripping a troublesome four-year old of his teddy.

"See me in my office after the game," was all Oldford said.

B.J.'s stomach flipped upside down and back again. It could only mean one thing: Down to Double-A. He was turning thirty in November. It was a death sentence. He'd never pitch in a major league game.

B.J. swivelled his head. The crowd cheered as Oldford motioned towards the bullpen.

Cheered as if it were the second coming of Christ when the bullpen doors opened and the stadium speaker crackled, "Now pitching for the Bisons... Number 16! Sean Springer!" and Springer, a twenty-year-old middle reliever from Louisville, burst from the pen and came charging out towards the mound.

"Hate that guy," B.J. cursed as the crowd started to chant:

"SPRINGER SPINGER SPRINGER SPINGER"

Firing his glove onto the bench, B.J. slunk into the shadows of the dugout.

No one spoke to him for a while.

A couple of the second string players were gathered around the stairs, leaning on the fence watching the game, speaking Spanish. One of them turned and caught B.J.'s eye.

"Can't you get those fucking assholes to speak English!" B.J. hollered at Coach Oldford.

Oldford ignored him.

So did everyone else on the bench.

"FUCK!"

Honeycut, sat down beside B.J.

Honeycut had started two days ago. He was third in the rotation. Threw a six-hit shutout through seven innings, but the bullpen (Johnston and Roloson) blew it. Honeycut was the kind of player who didn't care though. Only cared about his own E.R.A. and the scouts. He was still young - twenty-two - and idealistic.

"Riding the pine again, eh?" Honeycut said.

"Go fuck yourself, Honeycut."

"Cut. It's Honeycut...actually."

"You'd never fucking guess it."

"You'd think you'd know my name is all. We do play on the same ball club."

"Beat it, Doctor Phil," B.J. moaned and buried his head in his arms.

“So is it true?” Honeycut asked as he sat down beside B.J.

“What?” B.J. rubbed his hands over his face. He wanted to scream, to punch the shit out of somebody.

“What the papers say?”

“What the fuck do you care, Honeycut?”

“Cut. Honeycut...actually. Curious, is all.”

“I don’t know,” B.J. said.

“...” Silence.

“No,” B.J. responded. “It ain’t true. Where’s my bag?”

Honeycut looked under the bench. Left and right. “Guess you got that going for you,” he said, as he reached to his left and pulled a bag out from under the bench and tossed it on B.J.’s lap. Together they watched as Springer tossed a slider for a strike.

“Kid’s not bad, eh?” Honeycut said.

B.J. growled.

Honeycut took the hint and moved down the bench to work on his Spanish with the backup catcher, Hector Alvarez.

B.J. fumbled through his bag and watched as Springer struck out the first batter he faced with a fastball. The crowd cheered. They cheered louder when the scoreboard lit up 95mph. B.J. could see the determination on the kid’s face. He didn’t even step off the rubber when Bock tossed him the ball back.

Resolve, it was cut there in the young shithead’s face like it was cut in stone. Born with a permanent scowl on his lip and a mean hatred for every living thing that challenged him, Springer was as good as they came. He just made the jump from Single-A ten games ago. Coach Oldford started him in middle relief, but it was obvious as hell that Springer had everything it took to be a starter. He was a workhorse. Already he had thrown fifteen complete shutout innings as a reliever. His combined E.R.A. from Single-A to Triple-A was 1.30.

Astounding.

His cutter danced. His sinker dropped out of the strike zone as if it loathed the touch of wood, a king to a leper. His strikeout to walk ratio was five to one. Remarkable. The worst was his change. At twenty-years old, a kid who threw 90mph in warm-ups shouldn’t be able to throw a 70mph change with virtually no recognizable shift in his arm motion. He was the shit. He was truly money. Even B.J. couldn’t deny it.

“There’s no room for finesse anymore,” B.J. said. “Fuckers like that take the fun out of the game.”

“Fugit,” Honeycut said from his spot down the bench. “Cójalo?” he turned to ask Hector.

Hector didn’t say fuck all.

“Now batting, third baseman, Devon Sharp,” the stadium loud speaker boomed.

Good luck with this one, kid; B.J. thought. Sharp was the DH for the Tigers, back in Triple-A for a month to hone his swing and get the feel for the ball after minor knee surgery. He’d already hit a three-run homer off of B.J.

B.J. reached into his bag and took his cell-phone out. He flipped it open. His heart sped up as he checked his text messages.

The messages list. His dad. The header: *FOCUS...*

Skip.

Warren, his agent: *Call me!*

Skip.

Finally, he got to the message from his fiancé, Treena Swanson.

It was a response to his earlier text message to her: *Is it true?*

B.J. had been waiting for her to answer the text since he read the sports page in The Buffalo News earlier that morning.

Treena's return text only contained two words. *Yes. Sorry.*

B.J. fired the cell phone against the dugout wall. It hit flush and clattered to the ground. Everyone turned to look at him. His cheeks were burning, his breath labored and whistling through his clenched jaw.

Coach Oldford picked up the phone, examined it. He laughed and tossed it back into B.J.'s lap. "Didn't even bust," he said.

B.J. took a breath and downed a bottle of Gatorade.

Springer challenged Sharp with a fastball on the inside top third of the plate. The crowd cheered as Sharp whiffed. B.J. checked the scoreboard. It lit up 97mph. It was another fastball K. Just what the big league teams wanted to see.

B.J. watched, meditating on his hatred, reciting his new mantra: "Fucking bitch. Fucking slut bitch. Fucking bitch."

He finally couldn't take it anymore. "Who the fuck is this guy? Nolan Ryan?" B.J. said as he stood and walked towards the dressing room and his locker.

"My office after the game," Coach Oldford said as B.J. passed him.

B.J.'s mood, like a dog with a stone tied around its neck, sunk.

This was it.

B.J. opened the door to the dressing room, and quickly found his locker. Inside was the crumpled sports page he had been carrying around since morning. He could make out the headline:

Bisons Love Triangle

He smoothed it out to read the first few lines, just to see if it had somehow magically changed in the past few hours and this had all been a shitty dream:

While the Bisons sink further into mediocrity, their single outstanding prospect, leftie rookie sensation, Jay Springer, seems to be making more than just a play for the bigs. In this photo, snapped by North Tonawanda shutterbug, Don Cahill, we can see Springer leaving a local nightclub arm-in-arm with Treena Swanson, fiancé of Bisons' aging knuckleballer, B.J. Raw, AKA "MONEY.

(More like spare change if you ask this reporter.)

Springer and Swanson are rumored to be much more than just close friends. Both Springer and Swanson have declined comment.

Cheers suddenly erupted, followed by the thunder of stomping feet above. The voice of the echoing announcer filled the dressing room: "Springer strikes out the side. Three men left stranded."

B.J. balled up the section of newspaper and fired it to the floor.

"Piece of shit," B.J. cursed, reaching inside the locker again. He moved aside an old glove, lifted some scouting reports on batters. He felt in the darkness there till his

hand touched iron. He pulled out the gun. A little Charter Arms Bulldog, a double-action revolver, .44 caliber. The same weapon used by The Son of Sam. If he was going to go out, he was going to do it with style.

He tucked it neatly in the front of his pants, fitted it beneath his jock, and loosened his belt slightly. Fixing the barrel of the gun so he was a little more comfortable, B.J. took his coat from the locker, set it on the bench, and went to the freezer to get an ice pack for his shoulder.

He sat down with the iced sling over his shoulder and elbow.

“They’re not sending me down,” he said to himself.

B.J. sat quietly on the bench for a few minutes, thinking about baseball, the green infield, the sun on his back as he worked the mound, the glory and burden of the pitcher, and he concluded that somebody needed to die.

“They’re not sending me down,” B.J. said as he reached for the mickey of vodka in his locker. He put on his nylon Bisons coat, stuffing the mickey in the pocket, buttoned it up and walked back to the dugout.

He listened as the echo of the crowd thundered in the tunnel. A solo shot. Prezelinsky, the second baseman, the Bisons’ lead off man, had gone yard. The Bisons were back in the game.

Top of the Fifth

B.J. filled a Gatorade bottle mostly full of vodka and drank it as he listened to the game. He held his head down, staring at his spikes and the concrete floor. He could feel the pace of the game by the way the crowd reacted. He could hear the smack of the ball in Bock’s glove. Springer was money again. B.J. only lifted his head to check the score sheet on the dugout wall. Springer’s pitch count in three innings was 34. No walks. Four strikeouts. Money. Money. Money. Money. Allowing the Bisons to scratch their way back into the game with a few hits.

VISITORS: Runs 8. Hits 9. Errors 0.

HOME: Runs 5. Hits 7. Errors 0

The PA crackled with the voice of the announcer, “And Springer strikes out the side...again.... As we head into the bottom of the fifth it’s Bisons 5, Chiefs 8.”

The typical cheers and hoots followed.

The Bisons nine came clattering into the dugout with their cleats scraping and their mouths running: “Let’s go boys. Let’s get em back here. “

B.J. downed the rest of his Gatorade and vodka, and stood up to mix another. He swerved a bit as he noticed Coach Oldford leaning against the dugout railing. B.J. pointed his head and sort of let booze gravity take him that way.

He stood behind Oldford, waiting.

Oldford clapped. “Go get him, Molson,” he said to the DH, Gary Molson.

Molson took the fist pitch inside.

“Way to have an eye, boy.”

B.J. moved a half a step closer to Coach Oldford. He couldn’t believe that Oldford hadn’t noticed him yet.

The pitcher stepped into his windup, tossed a change.

Molson got around on it.

Oldford stepped up on the dugout and watched the ball sail down the first base line. His entire body tensing till the ball curved....

"Foul ball!" the ump bellowed.

"FUCK!" Oldford stepped back down into the dugout. He shouted some encouragement at Molson, "Way to sit on it, boy. Pick yours. Pick yours. He's not tossing that shit again."

B.J. felt the gun. The Bulldog shifted against his jock. The back of Oldford's head was tempting, the hollow of the brain stem. It was almost as if the barrel of that Bulldog was made to rest right there. The trickle of sweat escaping from the back of Oldford's fitted hat and pooling there, the black barrel of the bulldog...right there...BANG!

"YOU CALL THAT A FUCKING STRIKE!" Oldford leapt up on the edge of the dugout nearly vaulting over the railing. "Get some fucking glasses, blue. You fucking crooked sonofabitch! You should be wearing a mask. Fucking thief." He came down, nearly backed right into B.J.

"What the fuck do you want?" Oldford said, heading to the water jug. "I can't take this shit."

"I don't wanna be sent back down," B.J. said.

Oldford stopped before he got his water. "You can't be drunk."

"What do you mean?"

"Just fuck off. I don't have time for this shit, B.J."

"You're not sending me down."

"That's not my decision. Talk to Ron. He's the GM."

B.J. stumbled as Oldford went to fill his water glass.

Oldford downed the water, his jowly, poorly shaven face and wrinkled skin waving as he gulped it down. The world of baseball had not been kind to Coach Oldford. Too many days in the sun. Too many lost games. Too much Triple-A heartache. Too many nights away from home and his wife. Too many whores and booze-soaked nights on the road.

"You're fucking pissed," Oldford said, tossing the paper cup to the floor. "Now get out of my dugout or I'll get security."

"Who do I gotta kill to stay here?" B.J. said. "I'm not going back down."

"Git!"

"My contract's still valid. I just talked to my agent," B.J. lied. "You haven't dealt me yet. I'll sleep here if I want to."

Molson's bat suddenly cracked. Oldford whizzed around to face the field. Everyone in the dugout stood up to watch. The crowd noise surged and pitched as they watched the ball arc and head towards the stands, just clearing the centerfield fence. Yard. Molson pranced around the bases like some show horse.

Everyone except B.J. walked out of the dugout to congratulate Molson as he came in. B.J. went and dumped out another half bottle of Gatorade and filled the rest with vodka.

Bottom of the Eighth

“Gimme back those binoculars.” Honeycut reached out to snatch the binoculars away from B.J. “I swear that’s the stripper I banged the other night.”

B.J. held tight, drunkenly weaving away from Honeycut. “Fuck off,” he groaned.

“She’s not here, dude,” Honeycut said. “What are you so hung up on anyway? It’s only a broad. Go out tonight and crunch some puss. Get drunk... Drunker than you are.”

B.J. said, ‘go fuck yourself,’ but he didn’t know if he’d said it out loud or not.

VISITORS: Runs 8. Hits 9. Errors 2.

HOME: Runs 8. Hits 11. Errors 0

B.J. began looking through the seats for Treena again. Where the fuck was she? He had been through the seats with the binoculars four times. He couldn’t see her. He figured she had to be behind the dugout. He set the binoculars on Honeycut’s lap, and picked up his cell phone, dialing her number again. It rang. Rang. Rang. Finally, a voice: “Quit calling me!”

“Where are you sitting?” B.J. asked.

“I told you Brian, I’m sorry.”

“You never told me shit. I read it in the fucking paper.”

“...” No response.

“So what?” B.J. asked. “You just bang that kid...that fucking child...and I’m supposed to forgive you?”

“Nobody said anything about you forgiving anyone.”

“How can we go on if I can’t forgive you?”

“That’s just it. We’re not going on. We’re through. That’s the point.”

“Where are you sitting?” B.J. demanded to know. “You behind the dugout? I wanna talk to you.”

“Brian John!” She only called him by his full name when she was really pissed. “Listen to me. I spent the last three years of my life waiting for you. Waiting for you to make some money, waiting for you to come home from spring training, waiting for you when you’re on the road, waiting for you to marry me, waiting for you to throw strikes. Waiting for you to do something with your goddamn life. I’m sick to death of it. At least if I’m going to waste my life with a ballplayer, it’s going to be one who is going to make it to the majors. You’re a loser. I can’t take it.”

“So what? Has he got a big cock? Is that it? Has he got a bigger cock than mine?”

“You should know. You shower with him.”

“You goddamn slut! Where are you sit..?”

The crowd roared. Rios knocked a triple with Juarez on third to score the go-ahead run for the Bisons.

Through the roar of the crowd, all B.J. heard was Treena shouting, “I don’t have to put up with this shit.”

His phone went dead.

B.J. stood up out of the dugout as everyone came out to whoop and slap Juarez on the ass. B.J. looked for Treena in the rows leading up from first base. The crowd started doing the wave. Or it just might have been the vodka. B.J. couldn’t decide. He tried to focus.

“You fucking suck, Raw!” through the distorted mummings of excitement and bristling crowd noise.

Not him. Not now, B.J. thought.

“My four year old throws better than you. And she’s a girl!”

Raucous laughter.

B.J. saw him sitting on the stairs, a cup of beer in his hand - the heckler from behind home plate. His beefy face and green golf shirt stretched tight around his fat beer belly. He was close enough that B.J. could make out the dents in his forehead.

“Fucking come here and say that, asshole!” B.J. shouted.

“Hey, Blow Job! Blow Job Raw. I fucked your old lady too. Everybody did!”

B.J. jerked his hand down the front of his pants, grabbing the handle of the Bulldog. “I’ll blow your fucking head off, motherfuck...”

There were some pounding feet.

The crowd looked up.

B.J. watched their eyes.

He turned around.

The Syracuse Chiefs first baseman was coming right at him.

B.J. scrambled towards the dugout, falling down the stairs as the ball was snagged.

The crowd booed.

That was the third out for the Bisons.

B.J. picked his crumpled self off the dugout floor as the parade of heroes took their weapons of war and headed into the twilight of the game. Dark now. The diamond lights attracting bugs.

Top of the Ninth

They’d have to hold off the heart of the Syracuse order.

The last man to pass B.J. was Springer. He snapped his hat on his crewcut and looked down at B.J.

Didn’t say a word.

If Springer felt bad about screwing Treena there was no sign of it. He fixed his glove on his hand. Pounded a ball into it.

B.J. licked his lips. They were dry, sticky with Gatorade. He felt the gun in his pants. Felt it like a hard-on. Plug this kid in the face once and be done with it. Kill him. Why not?

Springer raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

“What?” B.J. said.

“You’re in the way.”

B.J. hadn’t realized it, but it was true.

“Well?” Springer said.

“Well what?”

“What do you want?”

B.J. rubbed the waistband of his pants. “Eight shutout innings,” he said. “Pretty impressive. Think you got another one in you?”

“Yeah.”

The kid's mouth said, 'yeah,' but there was something in his body language that told B.J. he didn't have it. Maybe it was the trickle of sweat B.J. noticed on the kid's nose, or it could have been the wide wet eyes, or the slight trembling of his top lip.

"Baseball's all guts," B.J. said. "You know that, eh?"

"I got a game to throw here, dude," Springer started to step around B.J.

B.J. grabbed his elbow as he did. "Lay off your slider. They're onto it," he said and stepped aside.

Springer trotted out of the dugout.

B.J. sat back down on the bench and wiped his face with a towel.

Honeycut sidled up to him. "What the fuck was that about?"

"He's going to blow it. You watch."

VISITORS: Runs 8. Hits 9. Errors 2

HOME: Runs 9. Hits 15. Errors 0

Springer went to work.

Dealt. Ball one.

His pitches digging in the dirt. Biting around home. The slider off. The fastball high. The splitter barely getting to the plate.

Walking the first two batters.

B.J. cracked his knuckles and a smile.

Springer huffed off the mound. Picked up the rosin bag and went back to pitch to the third man in the lineup. It was the first time he had pitched from the stretch the entire game.

The first pitch came inside. Low. Ball one.

The second pitch was a fastball outside. Ball two.

The slider came in at knee height. Bock made a good call. The batter swung.

Count: Two and one.

Third pitch was a fastball over the plate. The batter drove it hard into right field. A single. The third base coach held the runners.

Bases loaded.

The loud speaker crackled. Now batting for the Chiefs: Number 8, the DH, Devon Sharp.

B.J. leaned against the wall. He didn't even want to blink. Couldn't miss a second of it.

"Hey, Oldford." B.J. called.

What?"

"You gonna pull him? Your great white hope's finally got some big league pressure. Bet you four more starts that he cracks."

"Yeah, and what the hell do I get out of it?" Oldford barked as he spat a glob of chewing tobacco.

B.J. thought a second. "I'll tell my agent to tear up my contract. I'll quit ball forever. You pull him though and I get my starts."

"You got a deal, asshole. That's a real ballplayer out there. Hope you fucking choke on it."

Springer went into his wind up. Dealt. A splitter. Low and outside. Ball one.

"It's all about nerves, kid," B.J. said to everyone in the dugout who could possibly hear him. "You can have five first-rate pitches. If you haven't got the guts, you're never

going to make it. Get ahead in the count and pull the trigger. My dad always told me that.

Springer went back into his wind-up. Bock dove to his left to catch a wild pitch. The runners held.

Two balls. No strikes.

Springer came off the mound.

“He’s falling apart, Coach,” B.J. said. “What you gonna do? You gonna let him go through this? You gonna pull him?”

Oldford set a foot on the dugout step, but thought better of it and drew it back.

“He’ll pull through,” he said.

The crowd was suddenly silent. Springer was off the mound, staring above the dugout into the audience. Springer backed onto the mound. Finally took his eyes off of whatever he was watching in the stands.

He threw high heat.

Sharp fanned.

Strike one.

Bock pointed Springer’s way.

“What the fuck is he looking at?” B.J. asked, as Springer stepped off of the mound again and gazed into the stands.

Back on the mound, Springer dealt. Heat. Again. Right on the inside corner. The scoreboard lit up 102mph.

Oldford clapped his hands and stood up to lean on the dugout fence. “That’s a ballplayer, boys.”

Springer came around the mound and again stared up above the Bison dugout before he walked to the mound.

B.J. sat up. “What the fuck is he looking at?” he said as he walked along the dugout to the steps and peered over the dugout roof to see what Springer was looking at. The entire side of the stadium was sitting, all except for one woman. Her black hair hung down in ringlets. She was wearing jeans and a tube top with her flat stomach showing. She was smiling, standing with her arms on her hips. It was Treena. Her eyes focused on one man: Springer.

Back to the mound. Springer dealt the slider inside-out, moving it from one side of the plate to the other. It was the nastiest pitch B.J. had ever seen. Sharp went down on strikes.

“*Ohhhh.*” The crowd was in awe.

B.J. sat on the dugout steps watching the rest, watching his life spiral down the toilet in six pitches. The crowd was up, standing with Treena Swanson, standing for every pitch. Watching as Springer threw six more strikes to conclude his perfect game.

The gloves flew up in the air. The crowd went wild, chanting, “*SPRINGER SPRINGER SPRINGER.*” The team rushed the mound and hoisted Springer up on their shoulders. Treena was weeping and holding out her arms in the stands.

B.J. Raw could take no more. From the shadowy wall of the Bisons’ dugout he took the little Charter Arms Bulldog from his pants and aimed it at Springer’s head.

And pulled the trigger.

The impact of the explosion nearly knocked B.J. onto his ass. He gathered himself up. Springer was still riding the wave of teammates. No man had fallen. Nothing had changed. The chants still rang out, “*SPRINGER. SPRINGER. SPRINGER.*”

B.J. felt sick. There was something wet on his face. He brought his hand to wipe it away and noticed that where there were once four fingers and a thumb, only the pinky remained.

“What the..? “B.J. said.

On the ground by the ball bag and some tossed bats he saw the bloody remains of his hand alongside the Bulldog lying in bent hot little pieces.

B.J. knelt slowly and began sweeping his fingers into a pile, careful to push the bits of exploded gun out of the way. The pain hadn’t struck him yet. He was in deep shock. “Fucking cheap piece of shit gun!” he muttered as he used his left hand to gently place his fingers inside the bowl of his upturned Bison’s cap.

“What the fuck did you do?”

B.J. looked up at Honeycut who was peering from field level over into the dugout. The crowd was still changing, “*SPRINGER SPRINGER SPRINGER.*”

Holding his dismembered index finger aloft, B.J. smiled meekly at Honeycut. “They’ll sew them back on, right?” he asked, as everything started to spin.

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