

ONE



Gingerly wiping tears of exhaustion from his bloodshot eyes, fifty two year old author Richard Russell finally had enough. Dropping his trembling hands back on to the table before him where he sat at a local library in Memphis, he realized his painstaking research into a sixty year old tragedy had finally taken its toll. Too much heartache had accumulated within him, as misery and torment finally singed his soul.

These same tears of sorrow and distress that plagued *his* life, *also* consumed the energy of his Uncle Joe, a seventy nine year old retired ball player, *and* the source of all his anguish. The details of this traumatic event finally zapped Richard of his final second wind...as he almost collapsed onto the table.

Although he sat in the library since eight o'clock in the morning, it suddenly became nine in the evening and lights were starting to flicker. His lightheadedness and mentally drained state of fatigue had caused him to be unaware if the flickering lights were imaginary, or it was time for the librarian to go home. He carefully reorganized all the scraps of paper,

notes, and newspaper clippings strewn throughout the table... then glanced at some of the headlines once again.

Headlines he'd seen a hundred times of a story he heard a thousand times before. Yet he still couldn't believe he had finally thrust himself physically *and* emotionally into, what *he* felt was the story of the century...*the tragic death of an entire minor league baseball team.*

Suddenly, a carefully placed hand on his shoulder followed by a whimpering voice uttered, "Mr. Russell, I can't wait to read your next best seller, but I *do* need to get home. The library is closing. By the way, did you ever find out who dropped off that odd looking package to you last week," as the librarian went about her evening chores.

"No I didn't."

The librarian continued, "It was sitting at the counter when we arrived in the morning. Not even security knew who dropped it off, or how? It was kind of strange. I'll never forget the way it looked. It was a banged up dusty old box in brown wrapping paper...*yet it seemed to have a certain luster about it.* Since it only had your first name of Richard on it, and all that was listed as the sender, were *your* initials R.R., we assumed either you or a friend may have dropped it off and you were expecting it."

"No, I still have no idea who sent it. It was nothing but scraps of paper with tons of odd notes scribbled on them. I couldn't make anything of it. Yes it *was* strange, very strange. More odd was that it disappeared just before I left to go home. I assumed a janitor thought it was trash and threw it out. In fact, I had forgotten all about it until you just brought it up." From the tone in Richard's voice, it was obvious to the librarian he was hiding something.

As best he could, he tried getting his thoughts together. What bothered him most was what this ordeal had done to his uncle, Joseph King...the inspiration for his newest project.

His thoughts of great fondness for this man reminded him of the strong sense of morality he'd been taught by him over the years. This being his steadfast dilemma, he wondered why such an awful tragedy had to strike such a good man. He collected his papers and headed for the library's main exit. He paused for a brief moment to say, "So long," to the ever so patient librarian.

Only five blocks from home, he looked forward to the fresh air and vigorous brisk walk, which usually gave him the renewed strength he needed, *but not this time*. He consumed himself so thoroughly into this mess that he was looking forward to nothing more than getting home and falling into a much anticipated sleep. Mentally drained, thoughts of taking his car may have been a better idea. His mind continued to race. He reflected on his research into the tragedy...and the strange contents of the mysterious box.

Puzzled, yet curious about the *cryptic messages* contained within the foreboding looking package...*made him wonder*. Its *mystical feel* was so stupefying, Richard wondered if there were any other stages, *or dimensions*, in Joe's life only *Joe* knew of that laid hidden all these years.

It were these incomplete fable-like fantasies that continually fueled Richard's anxiety to learn the *real* truth behind his uncle's lifelong ordeal. There were too many odd occurrences with strange and complex details that didn't make *any* sense at all.

Unfortunately for Richard, he would never find out their true meaning *or* origin. He only wished the extraordinary box never disappeared, giving him more time to unravel its mysteries.

These fantastic accounts, *scribbled on small pieces of paper*, Richard felt, may be what his uncle had been harboring all these years - that haunted him to this day. It was not his posi-

tion to ever bring them up, as he felt it was his *uncle's* place to approach that side of his dilemma. Richard could only wait for his uncle to deliver the answers, and wait he did...as his uncle *hadn't* a clue, or ever had *any* encounter with them.

Yet an even bigger dilemma, unforeseen by Richard, was the fact that this odd box...ultimately causes *his own* untimely demise!

As if these thoughts and concerns weren't enough, he continued to find *other things* to agonize about. Other questions consumed Richard's consciousness as he wallowed through the sidewalks and streets. *Questions like...*

How different would his uncle's life have turned out if his fiancée hadn't been tragically killed? Why did Uncle Joe's dad *have* to die while he was such a young man? Why were the lives of an entire baseball team taken so horribly and prematurely? And where would his uncle be *now* if he hadn't decided to take care of him in his later years? All Richard could go by is what was told to his uncle years ago, which was sketchy at best.

Joe's dad was a Barnstormer in 1925. 'Barnstormer' was another name for daredevil stunt pilots who put on air shows. They were known for doing dangerous maneuvers in mid-air, when flight was in its infancy. It was quite a spectacle, and very dangerous. During this time he was friends with, and worked along side with the then unknown 'Beans' Lindbergh, later known as the famous Charles Lindbergh. All of this took place at Lincoln Standard Aircraft in Nebraska.

Soon afterward, his dad moved the family to a military base when he joined the Army Air Corps. There he quickly became a distinguished test pilot. Unfortunately in 1928, when Joe was only 4, his dad was killed during an altitude test when his plane broke apart. He died a hero. His mother then moved them to Memphis where she had some friends and family. They remained there ever since. Joe was always proud of his dad be-

cause of his heroism and relationship with Lindbergh. It was only natural he wanted to be a pilot as well.

Throughout Richard's life, his Uncle Joe was always there for him and played the role of dad, a situation that worked very well for both of them. Richard's dad left their family when he was just a child, and Joe never married. Instead, Joe carried a torch his whole life for his one love and fiancée, Marie, who was tragically killed one day before their wedding in 1943.

She was on the same bus that tragically ended the lives of the opposing baseball team. They were on their way to play the last game of the championship series scheduled the following day. Also on the bus that met a tragic end was his best friend when growing up, Randy, the team's pitcher. Joe could never live this down.

Richard divorced five years ago; has no children, and although constantly consumed in his work, his uncle's presence was always welcome.

As Richard sluggishly worked his way past the first two blocks, he wondered how his uncle's feelings may have dealt with all the blows. Blows that were delivered to him when his team, The Atlanta All Stars won the championship by default when their rivals, The Memphis Maulers, were tragically killed on the way to the game. Both of these teams were an integral part of a minor baseball league called The Southern Association; a league that, even in the best of times, had trouble keeping its head above the water.

The tragedy that took the life of The Maulers, his fiancée and best friend...in time, was taking his.

It gnawed at him every second of every day of his seventy nine years. To Richard, it seemed Joe's pains were to be eternal, and seeing him take all of this to the grave would hurt *him* just as much as it did Joe. Richard felt the penning of these tragic

events may prove to be therapeutic for his uncle, and might be the last thing he could ever do for him.

Sitting thirteen hours a day in the library can reveal just so much, and Richard knew that in order to get the feel and actual detail of how everything *really* transpired, his uncle would eventually be his one major source. Only his uncle could reveal the true meaning behind the words in print...the story of what *really* happened, the secrets that have been hidden all these years.

Soon these integral passages for his book will finally be revealed.

The tragedy *alone* was not only a lethal blow for Joe, but it was combined with a lifelong battle of being known as a ball player who capitalized on other's misfortune...winning a championship through a horrible default—the tragic and untimely death of the opposing team.

Having to deal with cold-hearted remarks for the past sixty years, and harsh words from critics and Mauler fans, only made things more intolerable.

And though he may have taken things further than they really were, it was a burden that truly ruined his life. These were Richard's thoughts as he made his way past the fifth and final block. He drew a sigh of relief as he took his first step onto the walkway that lead to his home. From the porch and through the lace curtains he could see the dim light beside Uncle Joe's favorite chair. Joe would be waiting for him. Richard could practically see the living room before he got there. Joe would be reading the newspaper and wouldn't even look up. Joe pretended to be uninterested in what Richard had been doing all day and casually turned the pages for the hundredth time.

The ancient feet that had stolen more than 157 bases in their prime would be wrapped in equally ancient worn slippers, propped on the old ottoman. As Richard walked by the living

room, he hoped his uncle was as tired as he looked, as tired as he was pretending to be, as tired as Richard was himself.

“Find out anything interesting,” blurted his uncle’s voice - rising above the newsprint aimed at no one in particular...but finding Richard specifically.

“Not much,” Richard regretted the words as soon as they came from his mouth. This was his uncle’s favorite topic of discussion, his moment in life; the subject around which all things revolved. And Richard had just reduced it all to, “Not much.”

Joe lowered the newspaper, disbelieving both the source and content of the insult. “Boy, what you’ve got here is the story of the century. I must have told you that a hundred times. It’s an event that goes beyond believing, beyond imagining, and beyond all logic. And all you can say is, not much? Richard, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. I can’t tell you how proud I was when you told me you were going to write it down. When you told me you were going to research it and get to the bottom of this injustice, my heart nearly burst with pride. I couldn’t think of a better man, a better mind, a better person to take up the challenge.”

Dumbfounded, Richard stood motionless. Uncle Joe continued. “Richard, all my life I’ve wanted only one thing; to set the record straight. And now that chance has finally come to me, through you! And all you’ve got to say is, ‘Not much?’”

Richard’s head hurt. He wanted to lie down for an hour or more, or maybe for the evening. The numbers, the statistics, the inconsistencies, the almost fairy tale facts, all swirled in his head and made his body ache. The last thing he wanted to do was to get into it with his uncle. But just as the story had always drawn him in, his uncle was always able to draw him in as well. Call it a discussion or a debate, it always ended with their two faces, six inches apart, sometimes yelling and sometimes laughing.

“Tell me, uncle, what record do you want to set straight?”

“The record’s there. It’s down in black and white. It’s a little freakish, but it’s clear.”

“Then what isn’t straight?”

“What isn’t straight is everything you learned through your research. Everything you read in those books and journals,” said Joe quietly.

Richard expected the usual outburst. The same rendition of the story he’d heard countless times before. But this was different. Joe was peaceful and was saying something off the beaten path. Richard had never heard this low level of intensity in the old man’s voice before.

Joe continued, “What isn’t straight is the ridicule we got from the columnists and Mauler fans. Saying there was no way we could have beaten their boys. That maybe we did something to fix the outcome. Something they couldn’t prove, but were just as sure of.”

His uncle’s sudden change of approach put things in a totally new perspective, and everything seemed fresh. Just moments earlier Richard felt as if he had been run over by a bus and ready to retire to his room for a week, but now in a moment’s notice, he was up with pad in hand and ready to go. He suddenly had a barrage of questions Joe wasn’t expecting.

“When did you first realize you were up against all odds? Did anyone have any idea how far you were going to take it?” The questions were thrown out fast and furious, so fast it caught Joe off guard. Joe became overwhelmed and started to mumble incoherently. Richard was relentless, but suddenly caught himself and quickly asked, “Joe, how about a cup of coffee? I think we both need one because it’s going to be a long night?”

Joe replied, “I think you’ve said it right, a long night, a very long night. And I will tell you the *whole* story...and much more than that. Something unrelated. I’ve got to tell you something you may not be expecting,” and took a long pause.

Richard looked at him rather perplexed, not knowing where his uncle was going with this. Especially since his whole demeanor had changed in a way he'd never seen before. He seemed to be holding something back, something that was bothering him greatly. When he started to speak, his actions were unlike anything he had ever known him for.

His uncle pulled out a small bottle of pills from his pocket and revealed, "I was diagnosed this afternoon with a terminal illness, and I don't have too much longer. Maybe three months at best and the pain had already started. Today I've made an important decision. A decision I will tell you now, *then* we will go into the story you need for your book."

Richard looked on and listened carefully. He started to experience a feeling of emptiness, a sinking feeling, something that was telling him he was about to hear something he was not going to like.

Joe continued, "I've never told this to *anyone* before, and I need to tell it to you *now*. During my entire life I've had very strong suicidal tendencies, I couldn't handle anything. And *this* news today put me over the edge. This bottle of pills I'm holding is not medicine...its cyanide!"

Richard gasped.

Joe continued, "You almost came home this evening to find your uncle dead. But I waited to see you. I wanted to tell you about this, and when this evening is over, I will go upstairs and lie down for the last time. I'm old, I have no other family, and the pain is getting worse. That's my decision and I hope you can live with it."

Richard replied, "I've always respected everything you've always done, and everything you've ever taught me, but this is totally different. You caught me off guard, and for the first time I may actually be disappointed in you. I don't know what else to say."

“Then don’t say anything! I’m sorry you feel that way, but this is how it is. It can’t be changed. Now get your pen ready because I will finally tell the story you want to hear for your book. It’s the first time I will be telling it to anyone. And it will also be the last!”

“You can’t be serious about this.”

“I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life. Now do you want the story, or will it be lost forever? This is what I’ve been waiting for, to finally get it all out. Then you can do what you want with it.”

Richard remarked, “If that’s the way you want it, I guess there’s nothing I can do about it. Just relax a bit while I go and make a fresh pot of coffee. Then we’ll start at the beginning.”

This was not how Richard wanted things to go, but short of having the man committed, what else could he do. To write a book predicated on the words of a suicidal uncle was the last thing he intended the project to be. It was supposed to be *helping* his uncle, something he would revel in during his twilight years. Not a bunch of words blurted out before doing himself in. Nothing seemed right anymore.

Ten minutes later, Richard emerged from the kitchen with a pot of coffee and laid it on the table before them. He went back to retrieve two cups. Upon his arrival, as he poured the brew into the oversized mugs, he asked Joe, “Just start with the parts you feel are most important and relevant to that fateful day.”

Joe exclaimed, “Well, I guess it would only make sense to start at the beginning.” They both took a cautious sip from their mugs and Joe started his story. Richard sat wide-eyed with his pen and pad in hand.

In a jittery pace, Joe started his story, “It was the height of The Great Depression when my best friend Randy Jensen and I went to a NY Yankee game. The year was 1931. I was just a kid. To say the least, this was not only a dream of Randy and mine,

but probably every kid of that time. And like most kids living in and around our area, we knew this could never happen. We lived in a very poor suburb of Memphis, and New York was only something we read about in the paper, or heard about on radio.” Joe’s voice finally started to level itself and his breathing became less erratic.

He continued, “Most families I knew were on the verge of being homeless, and it was quite a horrible time for everyone. I remember standing on soup lines seeing several of my friend’s dads. I remember seeing some of these dads fighting over blocks of cheese the government trucks were giving away. I remember so vividly many of those dads standing on street corners with signs around their necks looking for any kind of work they could get. It was terrible.” Joe put his cup of coffee down and continued.

“It’s more depressing now looking back at it. Being just a kid at the time, I guess I didn’t fully realize how serious the whole thing really was. I was lucky with what little my family had, and somehow we were able to survive through the terrible times. One thing that helped us escape from all the hell were the movies. For a few hours a week we were able to forget everything. This is what led Randy and me to the NY Yankee game!”

Joe was finally at ease. He reminisced about certain times he hadn’t spoken about, nor thought about, in a very long time. Richard noticed the calmness that took hold of Joe and hoped this was the therapeutic effect he was looking for.

Richard kicked back in his chair and asked, “How did going to the movies get you and your friend Randy to New York?”

Joe went on, “The National Newsreel Company was holding a contest. It was a very famous contest. It was being held in all the theaters across the country. The winner would get to go to Yankee Stadium in New York to see a game and also meet

Babe Ruth. It was one of many different campaigns that were put together by several advertising companies in the hope of increasing attendance in the theaters. Because of the uncertain times, movie houses were hurting, and this was one of many ways they used to help increase their revenue. They did everything! From giving away cars to safe deposit boxes filled with silver certificates. Since we were just kids, and Ruth was our idol, *this* contest meant the world to us.”

Richard, engulfed in this story filled with nostalgia and childhood dreams strung throughout the toughest time in American history, was mesmerized to say the least. He was so strongly drawn into this tale, a moment in his uncle’s life he had never heard before, that when he reached for another cup of coffee, he realized it was already gone.

Not to break the moment, he put his empty cup back on to the table and asked, “Did you enter the contest?”

Joe replied, “Of course! We must have filled out dozens of applications. In order to get one, you had to pay to see a movie, hand your stub to one of the ushers who then handed you an application, only one per ticket. The contest ran for six months, and for those six months we never missed a Saturday matinee. The matinee always opened with a newsreel that was followed with a short that detailed the contest. Although it was only a short, it was done in the usual Hollywood style, totally over the top with the loud orchestra, crashing symbols, and an unbelievably articulate and pompous announcer. There were always many showings that day and we must have stayed after our movie a hundred times just to watch the contest film start again then leave.

“The film always ended with the announcer pointing his finger at the audience stating firmly, ‘Will *you* be the one on your way to New York to meet Babe Ruth?’ It was very exciting!

We figured between the two of us, we must have entered almost fifty times!”

Richard, now entranced in this almost childlike fantasy asked, “So what happened?”

“Well sure enough, one Saturday morning I received a phone call telling me the great news. I’ll never forget it. My mom answered and said it was for me. She said it was a man, and for some strange reason I knew immediately what it was all about simply because she said it was a man. I got on the phone and he asked if he was speaking to Joseph King, and I said yes! He then informed me that I was the winner of the National Newsreel Company’s Chance to Meet Babe Ruth Contest! I jumped up and down and I could hardly believe it. It was truly the greatest day in my life!”

Richard enjoyed the childlike enthusiasm in his seventy nine year old uncle’s voice, a carefree demeanor he had never seen previously. It was as if he was reliving the whole experience and hoped it would somehow help his state of depression, derauling his thoughts of suicide...but knew it was a long shot.

Fidgeting with the bottle of cyanide in his hands, Joe continued, “I ran all the way to Randy’s house to tell him the good news. On the way over I passed several friends who asked me what happened and I told them that I won the contest! None of them said much as I continued my dash to Randy’s. When I got there, oh boy, all hell broke loose! Randy and I ran all over the place telling everyone.

“Finally his mom got on the phone to confirm this with *my* mom who verified she was there to get the call. In no time it was all arranged. Randy and I with our moms would all go together on the trip. It all seemed too good to be true. The trip wasn’t going to happen for another eight weeks. It was the longest eight weeks of my life. But the day finally arrived. All four of us boarded the train and we were off. All we talked about was

what we were going to say to The Babe when we met him. Our moms did nothing but chatter about their usual gossip and try to get us to look at the scenery, which we were not at all interested in. But finally we heard it, the announcement we'd been waiting to hear, 'Next stop New York,' as our moms kept telling us to calm down."

Richard finally got up to make another pot of coffee and asked Joe to take a breather for a moment. As he poured water into the pot, he heard Joe continuing his story. He was totally ignoring Richard's request to take a break. He seemed almost to be in a trance, regaling in his past with no one but himself, recounting days almost seventy years before as if they were yesterday.

Richard, always in earshot, didn't want to break the spell his uncle seemed to be under, so he continued to make the coffee while he listened, eventually bringing the pot back and pouring them both another cup.

Joe continued, "When we finally arrived at Yankee Stadium we were greeted by a little man wearing a double-breasted suit, a hat, and smoking a big cigar. He asked if we were ready to meet The Babe. We were speechless and all we were able to do was shake our heads up and down."

He said, 'Follow me,' and we did.

"The four of us walked through what seemed to be miles of passages beneath the giant structure, and continued walking deeper and deeper into the recesses of this colossal stadium in The Bronx. As we walked through the corridors along the smooth concrete pavement, our footsteps almost echoed in time with our pounding hearts, which were ready to burst from excitement. We walked, and continued to walk, through these dimly lit hallways, until we finally arrived at an eerie looking banged up door. The man finally paused.

“We couldn’t imagine *this* would be the door that would finally lead us to the great Babe Ruth. Were we duped by this odd looking fellow? I could see the distressed look in my mother’s eyes. Here we were...two kids and their moms, a totally defenseless group of innocent people from out of town with a strange man in a dungeon-like atmosphere. We were terrified. Suddenly I felt that *I* was responsible for getting my mom involved in something awful, something terrible.

“Horrible thoughts were flying through my head, as I was certain these same thoughts were bothering all of us. We were *all* scared half to death. The little man in the double-breasted suit, with his yellowed teeth that clenched tightly into his large cigar, suddenly had a devilish look on his face; a frown that was eerily compounded by the swaying oversized light bulb dangling from the ceiling...as it bounced its murky lighting off his wrinkled sardonic looking face. We were sure we’d never see home again.”