

# FLAGSTAFF

BY LEWIS SHINER

IT WAS NOT YET NOON when they pulled into the motel. Rain in the early morning had rinsed the air and left it fresh and cool, tasting of the fall to come. Lee's father set the handbrake but left the engine running as he got out, boots crunching in the gravel.

Lee crawled halfway over the front seat to look at the dashboard clock. He crossed the fingers on both hands, daring to hope that the day's driving was already over, that they would not have to try motel after motel. Lee had a good feeling about this one. Its wooden siding was the color of milk chocolate, and the air through his open window tickled his nose with the green scent of pines and junipers. There was even a pool, though in truth it was too cold to think about swimming.

A white-haired lady opened cabin seven for Lee's father, and a few seconds later Lee heard a toilet flush, followed by a repeated clacking as his father tested the lock on the front door. Finally he came out nodding and then stood for a moment in the watery sunshine, long-sleeved khaki shirt buttoned to the throat, hands in the pockets of his pleated trousers, looking into the distance.

Lee tried to smile at his mother, who seemed oblivious.

They locked their suitcases in the room and drove back into town. Lee's father was whistling now, his right arm up on the seat back, his left elbow propped in the window, as if he were another man entirely from the one who'd been driving with fierce concentration since dawn. "So," he said to Lee's mother, "what do you think? Nice place, huh?"

She smiled bravely. "Very nice."

"There's a Rexall," Lee said. "With a fountain. Can we? Can we?"

His father sighed. "I suppose so."

They parked and Lee ran ahead. Hand-lettered signs in the drug store window advertised typing taper, Alka-Seltzer, cold cream. The sweet smell of frying meat hung in the air inside. Lee spun himself around and around on his chrome and red vinyl stool while his father read the menu. "Stop that," his father said, and Lee faced the counter, sitting on his hands to help himself keep still. When it was his turn Lee ordered a hamburger and a chocolate milkshake and then asked, "Can I look around?"

His father seemed to be studying himself in the long mirror behind the fountain. "Go," he said.

On a wire spin rack Lee found a Jules Verne he'd never seen before, a movie tie-in edition of *Master of the World* with Vincent Price on the cover. He stashed the book behind a stack of *Moonrakers* and moved on to the toy aisle. The cramped space was filled with Duncan yo-yos, Whammo Slip'N'Slides, and Mattel cap pistols. On the bottom shelf Lee found a Wiffle Ball and orange plastic bat that filled him with a longing he thought might overwhelm him.

He went back to the lunch counter and wolfed his food, then sat with his arms wrapped around his narrow chest, trying to gauge his father's mood while

struggling with his own impatience, hope, and fear. His father ate slowly, drank a second cup of coffee, and smoked a cigarette while Lee's mother applied a fresh coat of lipstick. Finally Lee's father stood up with the check and started for the register by the front door. Lee tugged at his father's pants leg and showed him the book. His father glanced at it and nodded. "Okay."

He seemed distracted in a mild, pleasant way, so Lee pressed his advantage. "Look," he said, and showed his father the bat and ball.

"I thought you wanted the book."

He didn't seem angry so Lee said, "Can I have this and the book too?"

"What would you do with it? If I get this job, I'm not going to have time to play with you." Lee knew his father wouldn't have time to play with him in any case, but he was caught by something in his father's voice. His father was thinking about the job in the same way that Lee was thinking about the bat and ball. And though Lee knew, even at ten years old, that the job would not work out, the hope itself was contagious.

"Please?" he said.

In the car Lee's father said, "Roger Maris back there is going to teach himself baseball and become a sports hero and the envy of all his friends. If he had any."

The bat and ball were attached with wire to a long red piece of cardboard that read "Junior Slugger." It made Lee happy to just to hold it in his lap—the newness of it, the hard perfection of the plastic. The possibilities.

They got back to the motel with the entire afternoon still in front of them. Lee begged his father to play with him and eventually his father relented. They stood under the sharp-smelling trees and Lee swung at three pitches and missed them all, having to chase the ball after each one. "Not so hard!" he said.

His father, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, grunted and tossed him an easy, underhanded pitch. Lee connected and the ball sailed past his father's outstretched hand, through the trees, to land near the swimming pool.

"Don't look at *me*," his father said.

Lee ran after it, and by the time he got back his father was gone.

Lee tried to toss the ball up with one hand and hit it as it dropped. It was harder than it looked, and after a while he went back inside.

His father was teaching his mother a game he'd just learned. He had five small dice that he kept in a prescription vial. It was like poker, he told her, and he showed her how to draw up a score sheet on a piece of scratch paper.

Lee's bed smelled like clean ironing, and he made a pile of pillows to lean against while he read. His new book was about a man named Robur who was brilliant but had no use for the world. He built a flying platform and circled the earth in it, refusing to come down. As he read, Lee was distantly aware of the patter of the dice and his mother's nervous laughter.

Finally Lee's father said to him, "Why don't you get your nose out of that goddamned book and go outside for a while?"

As Lee closed the door, carrying his new bat and ball, he heard the lock turn behind him. Ahead of him was the new city and the rest of the world.

He sat for a while in a green wooden chair at the edge of the swimming pool. The water had the pale color of a hot summer day, while the sky was a deep, artificial blue, the color of swimming pools and plastic cars. It was like the world was upside down.

Nearly four decades later, with a happy marriage, an elegant North Carolina home, a secure job, Lee has everything his father always dreamed of. But

somehow one day has become like the next. That afternoon in Flagstaff haunts him, and the thing he least understands is how his memory of it could be suffused with such a quiet glow of happiness.

And in 1961 Lee raises the plastic bat to his shoulder, tosses the ball high above his head once more, and swings.

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