

## City Boy

If Richie Doherty had one thing that set him apart in Gideon Garatdjian's mind, it was his ability to make the balls he hit go farther and higher than those that came off the bats of the other boys. A casual swing would send a ball to the deepest part of the outfield on the baseball diamonds of Manhattan. It was a gift only baseball gods like Musial and Mays and Snider and Mantle possessed.

Despite his prowess with a bat, Richie's social standing wasn't any greater than Gideon's in the fourth grade class at St. Andrew's Episcopal School. Going through the day in their wrinkled white oxford shirts, they were not within that inner circle that regularly attended birthday parties for classmates with more well-to-do parents. If the Yorkville block of rundown tenements and wild, frightening kids on the far east side of the island where Richie lived was a shock to Gideon, that shock was no more than his own shamefully messy apartment was to the classmate who got a glimpse of it one morning and spread the word throughout the school that Gideon Garatdjian lived in a pigsty.

But life changed for Richie the summer following fourth grade. His family relocated to the far reaches of Queens, and in the fall he would be attending a school closer to home. The change was one that left Gideon feeling shaken and sad.

It was a different time in the life of the city, when it was nothing for kids to travel alone on the subway, or at least relatively unsupervised kids such as Gideon. Often he would leave the apartment in the morning and not return before nightfall, and when he did he would be filthy from exploring the alleyways of the neighborhood with his friends. Even so, this was not the usual ride from the Upper West Side, where Gideon lived, to Penn Station, for Sunday school, or even the familiar route over the Manhattan Bridge on the BMT to Coney Island. Queens was unknown territory, and his unease grew as he stood in the front car watching the Flushing-bound train arrive at and depart from one unfamiliar station after another along the el. It was the kind of weak-in-the-knees fear he could experience when, at the beach, his father would swim far out toward the horizon, prompting the lifeguard to blow his whistle.

The peaceful, tree-lined street he came to was one of private houses, not teeming tenements. On the top floor of one of these homes Richie and his family now lived. In the way of children, Gideon saw the grownups assembled over drinks in their new home as a kind of blur, a loud blur, to be sure, for they were noisy and plentiful and drinking a lot, and he was relieved when Richie and he were dispatched to go out and play.

They had a field to themselves in which to hit fly balls to each other, Richie adjusting his swing to keep the ball from reaching the street. Gideon had brought along his Rawlings outfielder's glove, with a distinctive red label on the hand strap, which he had purchased down at Davega's on Forty-Second Street, a wonderland of Adirondack bats and gloves and baseballs made of genuine rawhide, just like Mickey Mantle caught in centerfield and sent soaring into the stands at Yankee Stadium when he was at the plate

in that coiled stance. Gideon had carefully treated the glove with linseed oil, which turned the leather a dark brown. That afternoon he would drift back lazily, following the sweet arc of a long fly and positioning himself for the catch, or race back and attempt over-the-shoulder catches a la Willie Mays. But he was aware that he couldn't do quite the same for Richie. He lacked the bat control and the strength to do much more than hit pop flies that would barely have made it out of the infield on a real diamond.

There was, throughout their time together, a feeling of dislocation, the sense that he was seeing Richie out of the school context in which he had known him and of being already a quasi-stranger. Sadness overcame him on the train back to the city that he would never see Richie again and that by leaving Manhattan and the school Richie had fallen to a lesser place. But his concern receded as the city skyline came in view on the other side of the East River and the sweet smell of baking reached him from the SilverCup bread factory, a feeling of pride and joy coming over him that he had wandered far and now was being reunited with the familiar.

In the Times Square station, a man approached. He said he needed Gideon's help. He would explain, he said, but now they must hurry. "I'll give you a dollar," the man said. "We have no time to lose," he added, his words in line with the urgency in his voice. All Gideon could think was that he had to help the man, he had to, the man's anxiety quickly becoming his own.

In this time the subways had rattan seats and overhead fans, and to the steel supports on station platforms were attached vending machines that dispensed, for a penny, peanuts and gum. And, of course, there were phone booths you could enter. It was

into one of these that the man led Gideon, closing the door behind them, so they could be among and yet apart from the many riders crisscrossing the station.

The space was tight, and Gideon noticed that the man's breathing was heavy and his face had beaded with sweat. "Just do what I tell you to do and I won't hurt you," the man said, holding the receiver to his ear and unzipping himself. "Now put your hand on it and move your hand back and forth," he went on, using a pronoun to identify the stiff member he had exposed. Numbly, Gideon did as he was told, and after a few tentative strokes, an explosion of white, gloppy fluid splattered against the rotary dial and black metal housing of the telephone. The man zipped himself, then reached into his pocket for a few coins. They clattered on the counter, some of them bouncing onto the floor. "They're for you," he said. "Stay here for five minutes. I'll be watching. If you leave before then, I will have to find you and hurt you."

With each second the sight of the desecrated phone grew more horrible and astonishing to Gideon, that such an emission could come from a man's penis. He reached down to the floor not for the coins but for his glove and recoiled, seeing that some of the fluid had dripped onto it. Within a minute he was flying through the station, holding the glove gingerly away from him. Every few steps he looked back, fearing the man was in full pursuit. It did not matter that the station was far from desolate. In his mind, the man had a power the presence of people could not save him from.

It wouldn't have done to tell his mother. She understood things in her own way. A while back he had come to her with a concern about Sven, the rug man, with his mottled red

nose, who had startled him with a suggestion that Gideon allow the old man “to put it” in his mouth. No one would have to know, Sven said. Gideon had backed away and later told his mother of Sven’s strange request (right away Gideon had understood what “it” meant). “Oh, go on. Do not say anything more,” his mother had said, making Gideon feel foolish, as if he were simply coming to her for attention, and making him further to understand that these were things that were not to be discussed. She seemed to be saying that it was a part of Sven’s nature, his loneliness, to make such a request, that Sven was a good man and she wasn’t about to see him tarnished, even if, thereafter, Gideon could never see him solely as the solemn man who, with needle and thread, sat patiently repairing his mother’s rugs draped across his lap. It seemed to him that his mother had taken Sven’s side.

And she was probably right. If he thought about it, these sorts of things were happening all around him. There was the old man on the park bench who, with a fevered smile, said things like “How’s your little dickie?” causing Gideon to scamper away. And there were the hundreds of men who took seats opposite him on the subway, their legs slightly spread, better to reveal the conspicuous bulges in their pants. How many of these men had he encountered, with their strange, intrusively penetrating smiles that sought to reach right down to the core of him?

Some months later he was in that same Times Square station where the man had led him into the phone booth, only now he was browsing old copies of *Sport* in a used magazine store. When he looked up a man was staring at him just outside the area sectioned off for

adults only. His head, which seemed to rise right out of the full-length black wool coat he wore, featured a pair of dark eyes that shone with an intimate communication meant only for Gideon, as if no one else in the store existed. His eyes seemed to Gideon to be those of a giant insect in a human body—cold and mocking. Gideon’s senses were on alert. There could be no mistaking that look.

As the man was blocking the entrance, Gideon turned back to his magazine. The convulsion within him was akin to terror, causing the pages to blur. The fact that he was in a store and that people were all around was of negligible comfort. It was as if the man had some strange power—that smile conveyed as much—to do whatever he wanted with him, the same power that the telephone man had possessed.

When next Gideon looked, the man was gone. Even so, he took no chances. He sped through the turnstile and onto the first train headed uptown. All the way home he was in dread that the man had an implacable will, and was following, unseen, close behind.

Because she had a building to manage and was old when he was born and careworn and married to a man who had absent ways, Gideon’s mother entrusted him to the church. “Let no one take you away from Jesus, my son. No one. You know he will come as a thief in the night, do you not? Tell me that you do. Tell me,” she would say, provoking him to reply, “Leave me alone. You have had your life. Let me have mine.” It was not right to threaten him with Jesus, even if understood her to mean well. But his anger could not last long. Her love was soft like a pillow and easy for him to surrender to.

Sunday was a day to be at the table for the lunch that was really a dinner, a roast with baked potato and Birds-eye frozen peas or carrots. It was a day for his father to be present before he went where he went on his solitary path. His father worked downtown at Jack Dempsey's restaurant as a cashier, which meant to Gideon that he counted other people's money and had less for himself than the fathers of the kids at his school, who seemed to be doctors and lawyers and businessmen. Gideon sat with his father as he would with a wolf, waiting for him to bite. But he didn't. "My good son," Gideon's father said, as if there were another son he was comparing him with.

Then it was Sunday school. As it was warm, he wore his white sailor suit. Down Broadway he went, past the store that smelled so good, its vent filling the air with the scent of pastrami and corned beef, and into the subway for the ride to Penn Station—two stops on the local and three on the express. Maybe it was the heaviness of the food he had eaten, or the moist and salty pretzel he had bought on the way, or maybe it was the story of Daniel and the lion's den that Miss Judson spoke about in the Sunday school class, but he fell asleep, as he often did.

His mother arrived for the afternoon service. She wore her brown dress with white polka dots and carried her red purse. The white linen gloves with ribbing covered her rough hands. Though she was not one to criticize, Pastor Lunt was not his mother's favorite, she had said, in so many words. She missed Brother Dargan, the previous pastor, who had died before Gideon's time. Still, Pastor Lunt fed her with what he could provide. The pastor's torrent of words, as they reached Gideon's ears were like a long up and down ride on the roller coaster but with no thrill attached. "For Jesus saith that no man—

no man—cometh to the father—but through me. Brethren, I say to you that to bathe in worship of the world is to bathe in iniquity. For to take the eye off salvation is to take the eye off life everlasting. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.” Words that, over the course of the endless sermon, appeared and disappeared. And yet his mother heard them differently. At some point they brought her to her feet. With her eyes closed and a great cry, words in an unintelligible language flew from her mouth and time stopped. There was nothing to do but wait out the spell until she came back to him. She always did, he told himself. Even so, it was cause for fear that this might be the time that she wouldn’t. It seemed a frightening thing for God to do, to hold her and turmoil her in this way, but God was to be feared, Pastor Lunt said, feared and obeyed, if sinners were to avoid the flames that burned hotter than gasoline and gnashing of teeth throughout eternity.

But she did come back. Like a shuddering engine brought to quiet she became, and sat within herself, softly sobbing in the afternoon of some sweet sadness, as Jesus was experiencing in the mural, created in pastel hues, behind Pastor Lunt and the baptismal font. There Jesus stood, in his white robe and a woman’s long brown hair, in the Garden of Gethsemane with dark clouds above.

Now, as she settled into this state of quiet, he began to feel his own agitation. There was something calling to him, not the disappearing words of Pastor Lunt but something he had no name for, just an agitation in his loins and in his blood that sent him into an internal frenzy. He had to go away; he could not tarry a moment longer. And though it pained him to abandon his mother in this way and defied all norms of propriety and order that had been established in his mind, he had to go and be in that world Pastor



Lunt was continually denouncing and his mother had turned her back on. (“The world has nothing that I want. Nothing. Do you hear me?” his mother saying, as if begging him for his understanding.)

It was strange to be in sunlight at that hour on that day, outside the folds of the church. Down the long block he ran, past the small single-room occupancy buildings and the parking lot next door to the Horn and Hardart Automat. As he descended the steep stairs into Penn Station, the fever of excitement was mitigated only by anxiety as to what his absence was doing to his mother.

Within five minutes, he had traversed the long concourse of the station, caught an uptown local and rode it one stop, and now was standing in a same store below street level that sold used magazines, Once again he was flipping through old issues of *Sport* magazine, only now he was not praying that the man would go away but that he would come. He envisioned a room with a private bath, in which the man would soap him over all the parts of his body. The man would bathe him as no one had ever done, and the longing, the desire was almost too much, as if it could leap right out of his body and announce itself to one and all and turn his skin the same bright red as the flame within.

But the man didn't come, though Gideon waited and waited until he could wait no more.

When he returned, his mother was standing all alone outside the church, staring down the long block in his direction. She did not go toward him. It was for him to come to her.

“Did you go somewhere, my son?” Her voice was full of meaning, as it sometimes could be. As if it could contain him by its very sound.

“No,” he said, hearing her as she tried to listen to his mind.

“Let us go for some normal food at the Horn and Hardart. Would you like that, my son?” Normal food. She spoke that way.

He thought of his favorites—baked macaroni in a green oval dish; baked beans with bits of bacon in a small brown pot. And then there was cherry pie, a blend of the sweet and the tart. And there was the iced tea, in which the sugar always settled to the bottom no matter how much you stirred.

On the way, she began to sing. “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross...”

He took his mother’s hand. They were almost there.