

Ambush

Roger Woodward

Here comes Joey Bacon, clanking up the hill on his rusty old Schwinn. A perfect target for my brand-new squirt gun. I scramble up the big green bench beside our tall stockade fence, and take up a sniper's position between two slats.

Joey slowly pedals into range. Red haired, sallow, freckled. He lives on the only farm left in our neighborhood. There are cows in his driveway. None of us has ever played there. But sometimes, Joey will join our work-up baseball games on the vacant lot. He can hit a little, not much of an arm.

From my hidden perch, I watch the enemy approach. Almost, almost, almost, fire! I arc the stream of water just ahead of my target, leading him like a quarterback leads a receiver. Joey rides directly into my perfectly descending stream.

"Hey! What?" He yells, and puts his bike down, wiping water from his eyes.

I'm done hiding now, laughing over the top of the fence. "Gotcha!" I taunt. Joey gives me a considered look, and picks up a rock from the shoulder of the road.

The last thing I remember thinking is how pitiful his throws from right field had always been. I come to in the car, my weeping mother driving with one hand while holding a blood-soaked dishtowel to my forehead. Eighteen stitches and a mild concussion. My dad never could get the blood out of the car seats.

Three weeks later, the local sheriff rings our doorbell. When my mother answers, I linger just behind her, eavesdropping.

"Hi, Carol. I'm just checking around with some parents today. Seems like we got some kid who's selling fireworks at the park, the big kind, y'know, M-80s, cherry bombs. I'd sure like to take him off the street, whoever it is."

Officer Sullivan smiles at me. As one of the local Good Kids, I'm not a suspect. "I'm not worried about Roger getting tangled up with that stuff. But if you hear anything, either of you." Gently checking the scar that I will carry for the rest of my life, I lean out from behind my mother and suggest:

"Maybe Joey Bacon?"

Seven years later, another man in uniform pays a visit to our neighborhood. He rings the Bacons' doorbell and tells Joey's mom that her son died in an ambush near Khe Sanh. If I remember correctly, I was drinking a beer in my freshman dorm at the time.