

A story:

Safe at Home

KARL LINDHOLM

H E'S A TOUGH KID, David. The kind of kid you want nine of. Dependable, works hard, listens. He's my catcher. Likes to get dirty. I told him once that a catcher is like a hockey goalie—nothing gets by—and now he's death on low pitches. Sometimes he practices on the other side of the backstop during BP. "Throw me some pitches in the dirt," he yells to a pitcher hanging around shooting the shit as pitchers always do when they should be working out. Half the time he doesn't even put the gear on. He's a beauty. He'll catch the whole batting practice if you give him extra raps at the end. Stays back there for an hour, all sweaty and grimy. Takes personal offense at every ball that gets by him, jumps on rollers in front of the plate, chases fouls, and fires bullets at anybody sleeping in the field—"Get in the game," he yells.

I think there are two kids in the league about as good as he is, but no one who plays as hard. I can't tell yet if he's got a future in the game or not. The bozos in the stands got him in the big leagues already, but I'd like it if he went to college. I played four years in the minors and know how tough it is. All the pitchers are good in pro ball.

Actually, I think David may be out of position. His mechanics are pretty good behind the plate, he's got a real gun, but he doesn't have the personality. He's so quiet. I have to get on him just to yell the out situation in a game. Last summer, I moved him to third for a couple of games. He was terrific, but he didn't like it. Not enough action, he said! I think he hates to play even an inning with a clean uniform. He came up to me in the middle of one game during this experiment and said, "Coach, I'm a catcher." That's all. I said, "You're right, get back there next inning." It helped that the kid behind the plate was a disaster. So now I have the world's quietest catcher.

Asking him to "handle" pitchers is a joke. He just puts down one or two fingers. Pitchers pitch. David catches—and throws out runners stealing, and blocks the plate, and grabs everything that comes his way.

So David doesn't have a great "feel" for the game, but oh my God can he hit! Swings hard at everything and hates to strike out. About the only time I have to get on him is when he flings the bat after he strikes out. I told him that Babe Ruth struck out over a thousand times and David said, "And I bet he was pissed off every time." He bats first for me because we only play seven inning games. He should bat third. Never walks. Never saw a pitch he didn't like. I sometimes make him take the first pitch because he's so anxious up there, and he glares at me every time it's a strike. I first got him three years ago when he was fifteen (he told me he was sixteen) and I turned him around, made him bat lefty, so now he's a switcher. I'm teaching him to bunt for a hit—and he's already got three this summer. He can really run. They tell me he plays football in school, and the coaches love him. Stupid game, football. It'll probably screw up his knees.

What I like to do with David is get him on base in the first inning and have him steal second and third on consecutive pitches. Nobody throws him out stealing at this level. It's a great way to start a game. He even loves to steal home. Once last year the batter, a righty, screwed up and didn't get out of the way when David was stealing home. You should have seen the collision. Even the ump hit the dirt. They called him out for bowling over the catcher (that's a rule). You can bet I protested. "This ain't

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pool," I said to the ump. "He knocked his own guy down first!" We all laughed like hell on the bench.

We're in first. Last year we won the league in a great championship game. We beat a team we lost to twice with three runs in the last inning. David's double was the big shot. I like coaching these kids—and I think they're getting to like me. Some of the other teams have college kids coaching them who are their "pals" and buy them illegal beer—and our guys have this old fart. But I think they've seen me win some games for them. I try to explain everything I'm doing—why he's playing and you're not and all that. The days when you just pointed and gave orders, like when I played, are long gone. These kids will quit and go to the beach. I try to play everybody. The good players play more. Kids should learn that too. They've also learned that I'm not going to yell at them when they make a mistake. Also, if they don't hustle, they sit. Regardless.

I love the "inside game" of baseball. Maybe more than I should. I love teaching pick-off plays and delayed steals and stuff like that. Our guys can all bunt and we have hundreds of plays off the bunt. We always take the extra base. I'm trying to get David to take the wide turn at a base to draw the throw behind him so he can advance, but that's hard for him. Too subtle. Not many tricks in this kid.

We've already won a game this year on a "double suicide." The kid from second scored standing up! The bench went wild. I think I'm beginning to get some players because of the kind of ball we play. High school coaches call me up about kids on their teams who want to play summer ball. The other night we're playing the Aces, a good team, score's 1-1 in the sixth and they have the bases loaded with two outs. We run this beauty of a timed pickoff and nail the kid at second by a mile. We go on to win the game. There isn't another team in the league that would have tried that pickoff. We're having some fun.

David lives in New Jersey during the school year with his mother and a bunch of brothers and sisters. Dad's dead. He's been coming up here summers to live with his grandmother for a long time. That's the cure for the New Jersey blues—a summer in Maine. Great lady, his grandmother, Mrs. Lynch. Came to all the games, didn't know a thing about baseball. She once cheered after he lined into a double play and he had all he could do not to tell her to shut up. She always thanked me for being "so good to the boys." Kept me in line.

David has a lot of friends. He hangs out with three or four kids he's known for a long time. I don't think he's an "enigma" like some people think—just quiet. Again this summer, he's got a job in Morin's Brickyard. He works with a pretty tough crew and likes his job—"builds me up for sports," he says. His friends are all lifeguards and busboys. They all think he's crazy for working so hard, though you can tell they admire him, think he's John Henry. He is a throwback, this kid. When he's not working

or playing ball, you see him sometimes at the rec park playing hoops. He's a bricklayer there too. Mostly he rebounds. He's not a big kid—5'10", 5'11", maybe 170 pounds, but he'll fill out more. Looks good behind the plate. Athletic, like Fisk.

Basically he's a good kid. He sometimes gets into scrapes because he doesn't take any crap and because his friends are impressed with how tough he is and put him in difficult situations. When he's cleaned up, he always wears the same clothes—high Chuck Taylors (he's got three pairs, different colors), blue jeans, and an immaculate white t-shirt. Looks like the young Brando. And the girls—they ask *him* out. But he's tongue-tied and stammers one-word responses, and they giggle and flirt, and love it. He'll marry the first girl who takes her clothes off and tells him she loves him.

That's just about what happened to me. I met my wife in Utica, when I was in the New York-Penn League. She was home from college. She knocked me out, different from the other girls who came to the park. We had a great summer and got married the following winter. Make a great movie: "The Ball Player and the College Girl." Sad ending though. Inevitable. She left me seven years ago. Smartest thing she ever did. She married just about the first guy to come along after me. I think she did it to keep me from coming back begging for another chance all the time. Drunk. Drunk all the time in those days. She moved to Illinois, 1000 miles away. We have two kids, a girl sixteen and a boy thirteen. With her. I hardly ever see them they're so far away. I've got lousy visitation rights. I was such a jerk around the time we split.

I go out there once or twice a year and we try to do things together. They're polite and tell me about school and other things. I'm pretty much a stranger to them. They came up here to Maine last summer for a week but it didn't work. My apartment is small and there wasn't much for them to do. They don't like sports and I was a little embarrassed that I was so absorbed. I think their mother has them down on me. I don't blame her—I was lousy to her for a long time. They mostly wanted to get the visit over and get back to their friends in Illinois. I can't blame them. Still it stinks when you don't know your own kids. I write them regularly and get some nice letters back—but it feels a little like they're writing to sick Aunt Ruth "who appreciates their letters so much." An obligation. "He is your *real* father after all." I try now to go out there when there's some special occasion, a birthday or something. Maybe they'll come to college in the East.

I know they and their mother think my sports stuff is juvenile and pathetic. They don't know. Baseball saved my life. Baseball and AA. I haven't had a drink, even a beer, in four and a half years. The first year I went to an AA meeting just about every night. I still go about once a week. I have some good friends there. I started drinking at sixteen and I think I was an alcoholic by the time I was eighteen. What do you do in the minors after a game in

Winston-Salem? Have a few beers with the guys, talk about the game, and chase girls. The coaches and managers do the same thing—it's a tradition. Half the managers are alcoholics. I was the guy with the great capacity. Drank all night, never got drunk. I drove the guys home who were lucky enough to throw up or pass out. I just kept upping my tolerance levels. I was drunk for fifteen years. And screwed up everything that was ever important to me. 'Til now.

David's grandmother died this summer. She had a stroke. It's been hard for everybody. That's how I got him. David lives with me now, believe it or not. The Odd Couple, Mutt 'n' Jeff, you name it. We're only a couple of weeks into it and it's going all right.

It went like this. We had this game in Biddeford about twenty miles away and we're all waiting in our cars to go down there. David's late. Absolutely uncharacteristic. But I've got a five minute rule, so five after five we hit the road. David shows up at gametime, an hour later. "Sorry I'm late," he says. "We'll talk about it after the game," I say. Hardass, right? You can tell he never sat out a game in his life. He was going nuts. He chased foul balls, warmed up pitchers, played batboy, even coached some first though he could hardly say "get back!" when the pitcher threw over. At the end of the game he walks up to me and says, "It won't happen again, Coach." I say, "What's the story," but he just loads the gear in my car and catches a ride with the O'Sullivans.

The next day O'Sullivan gives me a call at work and tells me that David's grandmother is very sick and in the hospital—and that's why David was late last night. I hang up and I'm really wild with myself and the kid. Why didn't I get him to tell me what the problem was? He's never late—I should have known something was up. I'm thinking "Who knows what happened yesterday, who knows what's going on inside the kid—and I bench him." I had plenty of chances to sit down with him or take him aside and ask him what was up. It's not like the game was life or death. On the other hand, I'm sore at him for not telling me. Who's he think I am, John McGraw? Finally, I can't stand it so I go talk to him at work. I know Morin pretty well so it's okay.

He comes toward me, he's all filthy and sweaty, looks like one of those WPA pictures.

"Your Grandma's sick, huh?" I say. "How bad?"

"Pretty bad, I think.

It turns out he was the one who found his grandmother, collapsed, when he came home from work at three. He had to call the ambulance, go to the hospital, call his mother in New Jersey, and all that stuff. Then he puts on his baseball stuff and hitches to Biddeford—and I sit him down! Getting him to tell me this is like playing "What's My Line."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

"I didn't feel like talking about it."

"It's not fair to me," I said. "I like your Grandma. A lot.

You know that. Besides, I feel like a jerk for not letting you play."

"I shoulda told you," he said. "I'm sorry. But Joey deserved to play. I was late and he was there for pregame and everything. I know I'll play. I just wanted to be with you and the guys." Heavy. I felt like putting my arms around this smelly kid. We talk a little bit more. He tells me he's staying at the O'Sullivans. I make sure he promises to keep me informed. Then he says "Thanks for coming, Coach," and he reaches out and shakes my hand. He turns around, puts on his work gloves and walks back into the brickyard.

His grandmother dies about two weeks later. During the time she's sick we have three or four games. David plays well but everyone is feeling kind of sorry for him and you can tell he hates that. His mother's in town and David is trying to work, play ball, go to the hospital, and be with his mother who was pretty much a wreck. He was just quieter and fiercer than ever in those games. I liked his mother; we had a couple of good talks.

After one practice about the time of the funeral, David asked to speak to me. That was progress. "Can I live with you?" he asks straight out. I was surprised to say the least.

"What's wrong with the O'Sullivans?" I ask.

"I just don't like it there that much."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. All the fuss. It just seems like a big deal all the time."

He had only been there a short time so I said I'd think about it and talk to him after the next game. I figured the O'Sullivans' was a good place for David. They got all kinds of money. Big house. Five kids, mother at home, a real Father Knows Best scene. The son Joey plays outfield for us and backup catcher. I like the dad. He was good to me in my first summer with the team when there was a little stink about my past. I appreciated that.

I called him. I asked him how David was doing. He said he thought David seemed "uncomfortable." He said that David and Joey were doing pretty well but that David didn't seem very happy. Then I got right to the point and told him that David had asked to move in with me. "What's the story?" I asked him.

"You know David," he said. "He's a very private boy. He just doesn't like being the center of attention. My little girls think he's fabulous and pester him whenever he's around. This really may not be the best place for him. It gets pretty zooey around here. Three girls with friends. We like him and are happy to have him but we might drive him crazy."

So I told David he could live with me. But first we had to convince his mother that it was a good idea. I didn't have the greatest references. Would you let your seventeen-year-old stay for six weeks with his baseball coach in a three room apartment?

I took David and his mother to the Gaslight, a classy restaurant in the Old Port area. He sat there uncomfortably in his "formal" attire, a shirt with a collar. I hadn't

noticed particularly what a good looking woman his mother was. She had on a beautiful blue summer dress. Enough of that. I was nervous, didn't eat a thing. David ate everything in sight, ordered one of the most expensive meals on the menu. Thanks a lot. Before dessert, his mother looked at me and said, "Would you excuse us? David, let's go for a short walk." I nodded and they split. God, it seemed like they were gone forever. If I ever wanted a drink, it was then. I had about four cups of coffee instead.

When they came back she made this wonderful little speech. "David has made it very clear to me that he wants to live with you this summer. I appreciate your willingness to take him in with you. So I am entrusting my son to you for the rest of the summer." She went on and talked a bit about David and their life and how it had been hard and so on. She implied that his father had not been awfully good to David and her—and that they didn't have much money. I figured "alcohol" with the dad and that was hard for me. *Déjà vu*.

When she finished I made my speech. "Mrs. Preston," I said, "I like your son. He'll have a place to stay with me and some rules. But he is seventeen and pretty self-sufficient, so I won't watch him like a hawk. I'm not his father. Only his coach." I figured I might as well tell her everything. "I'll be honest with you. I'm an alcoholic. I ruined my life with alcohol and now I'm putting it back together. I haven't had a drink in years. I'm forty-two years old and I have very modest goals. I want to go to work every day clear-headed, and I want to win the Legion championship again."

David of course about died during this exchange. He looked at his lap, at the ceiling, played with his knife, drank all the water on the table. Two grownups talking about him was almost more than he could bear. When I finished talking, Mrs. Preston touched my arm and said, "I think he'll be fine with you." Emotional stuff. I then took them to my apartment which I had spent three days cleaning so that I hardly recognized it myself. I walked her back to her car and she gave me a little hug. When I came back upstairs David already had the ballgame on the tube and had found the potato chips. He told me later that he had let his mother know on their walk that there was no way he was going back to New Jersey for the summer. He would've slept in the brickyard if he had to. Still, I liked her speech. "I'm entrusting my son to you." Good line.

So here we are, the two of us. I like it. The nights we haven't had a game or practice we've gone down to watch the Maine Guides, the local AAA entry. I try to get David interested in situations: "Think they'll hit and run here?" "Think he'll bring in a new pitcher?" David is more into the physical parts of the game: watching the hitters, evaluating the catcher—how he releases the ball to second and so on. Last weekend, I told him to come in at midnight—and he came in at 10:30 on both nights. On Sunday he was looking over some books I have, mostly

biographies and military history, so I gave him a book on World War II I liked. He actually read it. Some of it anyway. I asked him about it and he said, "It's okay. I can see why you liked it. It's just like sports. All these generals and admirals trying to figure out ways to win."

At one of the Guides' games he told me that he had been talking to the Portland High football coach who had suggested that he stay in the area for his senior year and play football and be with his friends. He asked me what I thought. I told him to think about it some more—and to write his mother. Then he said, "I'd want to live here with you, you know. I checked it out. I'd need a legal guardian—and that'd be you. That's all there is to it."

That's David. You're talking about baseball and all of a sudden, when you're least prepared for it, he hits you with this serious stuff.

"Write your mother," I said, "and I'll think about it. I've got to see if I can stand you for just the summer. In another week we might be throwing things at each other."

Meanwhile we're playing some great baseball. Winning games and having fun. The other night we're hooked up in a beauty, 4-4 in the last inning, against South Portland, a good team. Kind of an obnoxious coach, so we like to beat them. They made a racket on the bench, pretty bush stuff. Anyway, David's up with two down, and hits a rope in the gap in right center—and he takes off. He's running the bases like Jackie Robinson, the fans are going wild, the two outfielders are sprinting to chase the ball down, and I'm windmilling my arms at third like a goddam maniac. He hits third going a hundred miles an hour just about as the throw reaches the relay man in short right. It's going to be close—the kid makes a good throw to the plate. The next batter yells "Hit it!" and David does this great slide away from the tag . . . SAFE! The kid never applied the tag, missed him by a foot. But there's the umpire doing his Ron Luciano double pump OUT sign. Unbelievable. I'm running in from third as fast as I can because David is right in the ump's face, screaming. I get between them and order David to the bench—he goes muttering and kicking dirt. Then this Ray Charles in blue says to me, "Don't say a word, Coach. The way I saw it he tagged him before his foot crossed the plate." So I say, "You're the only guy in the place that saw it that way," and walk back to the bench. David is strapping on the gear, still cursing under his breath and carrying on. "Take it easy," I say, "we'll get 'em next inning."

I can see David's jaw working behind the mask as South Portland bats in the top of the inning. He's really giving it to the ump. Finally, the ump calls time, takes off his mask and motion me over. "Coach," he says, "You get your kid to shut up or I'm going to sit him down." So I call David over, to the on-deck circle, put my arms on his shoulders, and look him right in the eye through his mask. "David," I say. "Were you out or safe on that home run?"

"He never tagged me. I was safe. You saw it. We got screwed."

"I guess you didn't hear me. Were you out or safe?"

"Safe."

"Well, what are we doing out here if you were safe? You should be taking a shower right now."

"The ump blew the call, Coach," he insisted.

"I know that, you know that, and everyone in the stands knows it too. The ump himself knows he blew it. But you were *not* safe, you were out. It's history. We've got to play the game." And I told him to go out there and apologize to the umpire and "get in the game." He walks up to the umpire, takes off his mask, tells him he's sorry, and

shakes his hand. I hear him say, "I know you're just doing your job."

We set them down, one-two-three, and get set to rattle some bats and go home with a "W." David comes over to me as I start out to the third base box and says, "I'm sorry, Coach. You're right. I got a bad temper and need to work on it. I don't help anybody ragging on the ump." Then he adds with a smile, "You know, I think he does know he missed it. He gave us the low pitch that whole inning."

God, I like this kid.