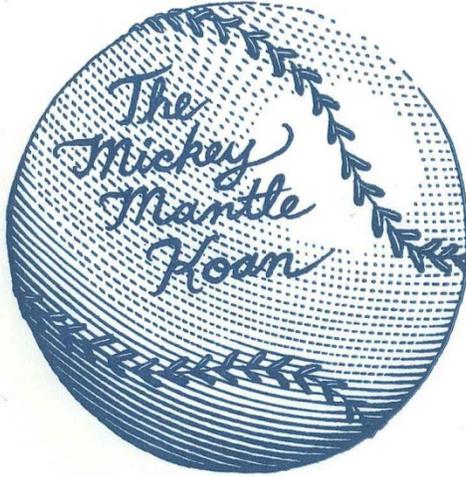


From *The Mickey Mantle Koan*
By David James Duncan



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On April 6, 1965, my brother, Nicholas John Duncan, died of what his surgeons called “complications” after three unsuccessful open-heart operations. He was seventeen at the time—four years my elder to the day. He’d been the fastest sprinter in his high school class till the valve in his heart began to close, but he was so bonkers about baseball that he’d preferred playing a mediocre JV shortstop to starring at varsity track. As a ballplayer he was a competent fielder, had a strong and fairly accurate arm, and stole bases with ease—when he reached them. But no matter how much he practiced or what stances, grips, or self-hypnotic tricks he tried, he lacked the hand-eye magic that consistently lays bat-fat against the ball, and remained one of the weakest hitters on his team.

John lived his entire life on the outskirts of Portland, Oregon—650 miles from the nearest Major League team—and in franchiseless cities in the fifties and sixties there were really just two types of fans: those who thought the Yankees stood for everything right with America, and those who thought they stood for everything wrong with it. My brother was an extreme example of the former type. He maintained – all statistical evidence to the contrary—that Clete Boyer was a better third baseman than his brother, Ken, simply because Clete was a Yankee. He combed the high school every October for fools willing to bet against Whitey Ford in the World Series, and if he couldn’t find one there he knew he’d find one at home: me. He may not have been the only kid on the block who considered Casey Stengel to be the greatest sage since Solomon, but I’m sure he was the only one who considered Yogi Berra the second greatest. And though he would concede that Ted Williams, and later Willie Mays, had slightly more productive careers than Mickey Mantle, even this was for a pro-Yankee reason: Mantle was his absolute hero, but his tragic hero. The Mick, my brother maintained, was the greatest raw talent of all time. He was one to whom great gifts had been given, from whom great gifts had been ripped away. The more scarred his knees became, the more frequently he fanned, the more flagrant his limp and apologetic his smile, the more John revered him. And toward this single Yankee I too was able to feel a touch of reverence, if only because, on the subject of scars, I considered my brother an unimpeachable authority: he’d worn one from the time he was eight, compliments of the Mayo Clinic, that wrapped clear around his chest in a wavy line, like stitching round a clean white baseball.

Yankees aside, John and I had more in common than a birthday. We bickered regularly with our middle brother and little sister but almost never with each other. We were both bored, occasionally to insurrection, by school-going, church-going, and any game or sport that didn’t involve a ball. We both preferred, as a mere matter of style, Indians to cowboys, knights of the road to Knights of Columbus, Buster Keaton to Charlie Chaplin, Gary Cooper to John Wayne, deadbeats to brown-nosers, and even brown-nosers to Elvis Presley. We shared a single devil’s food cake on our joint birthday, invariably annihilating the candle flames with a tandem blowing effort, only to realize that we’d once again forgotten to make a wish. And when the

parties were over, the house felt stuffy, or the TV shows were insufferably dumb, whenever we were restless or punchy or feeling the “nuthin’-to-do” feeling, catch—with a hardball—was the nuthin’ John and I loved to do.

Our father, middle brother, and an occasional friend would join us now and then. But something in other people’s brains sent them bustling off to more quantifiable endeavors before the real rhythm of catch ever took hold. True catch-playing takes place in a double limbo between busyness and idleness, and between the imaginary and the real. As with any contemplative pursuit, it takes time, and the ability to forget time, to slip into this dual limbo and discover (i.e. lose) oneself in the music of the game.

It helps to have a special spot to play. Ours was a shaded, ninety-foot corridor between our northern neighbor’s apple orchard and our southern neighbor’s stand of old-growth Douglas fir, atop a stretch of lawn so lush and mossy it sucked the heat out of even the hottest grounders. I always stood in the north, John in the south. When I chased his wild throws into the orchard I’d often hide the ball in my shirt and fire back a Gravenstein, leaving John to judge in mid-air whether it was fit to catch and eat, or an overripe rotter about to explode in his mitt. When he chased my dud pegs into the firs, he would give me an innocent, uncomplaining smile as he trotted back into position—then rifle a palmed dirt clod or rock at my head.

But such antics were the exception. Our corridor’s deep shade, gigantic firs, and mossy footing made it more conducive to mental vacationing than to boisterousness. A vigorous serenity was the rule. We might call balls and strikes for an imaginary inning or two, throw each other a few pop-ups and grounders, or maybe count consecutive errorless catches and throws (three-hundreds were common, and our record was high in the eights-). But as our movements grew fluid and our throws brisk and accurate, the pretense of practice inevitably faded and we’d just aim for the chest and fire, *hisssss pop! hisssss pop!*, till a meal, a duty, or total darkness forced us to recall that this is the world in which even timeless pursuits come to an end.

Our talk must have seemed addled to eavesdroppers. We lived in our bodies during catch; our minds and mouths, though still operative, were just along for the ride. Most of the noise I made was with the four or five pieces of Bazooka I was invariably working over, though once the gum lost its sugar I’d sometimes narrate our efforts in a stream-of-doggerel, nonsensical play-by-play. John’s speech was more coherent but of no greater didactic intent: he usually poured out litanies of idle Yankee worship, or even idler braggadocio a la Dizzy Dean, all of it artfully spiced with spat sunflower seed husks.

Dan Jenkins defined catch-players perfectly when he spoke of athletes who “mostly like to stand around, chew things, spit, and scratch their nuts.” Not too

complimentary a definition, perhaps, yet from the catch-playing point of view, what are the alternatives? Why run around wrecking the world for pay when you could be standing in one place transcending time? Why chew Roloids, swallow your spit, and feel too inhibited to scratch where it itches when you could be chewing Day's Work or Double Bubble, thooting out end-over-enders, easing the itch, and firing off hisses and pops? Whatever he really meant, Yogi Berra defended catch-players best the time he said, "If ya can't copy 'em, don't imitate 'em."