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SAFE AT HOME

It was only 4 p.m., but the old man liked to be early. So he sat outside his seniors' home in his big blue Lincoln, his ancient eyes drifting to the dashboard clock. He'd been asleep for a while, his head bobbing in the afternoon breeze. But now he was awake. He was ready to go.

He'd already upholstered himself in his outfit for the day. It was a shiny purple suit, with wide lapels and narrow stripes and a candy metallic glint that turned it different colors when the light hit it right. His socks were light blue, speckled with little bleach stains. His shoes were cream-and-black two-tones with tassels and square tips. On his head, perched like a crown, sat a baseball cap stitched with a big letter D.

The people he would see tonight would be considerably less dressed. They'd come in their T-shirts and sneakers, their jeans and shorts. That was all right. He dressed nice because he didn't know any other way. It never occurred to him not to, even now, at age 98.

He glanced at the clock again. Four thirty. It was time. He heaved himself up on arthritic arms. His breath came in tiny gasps and whistles.

The first pitch was three hours away, but he didn't care. He was going to the game, and he wanted to see it all: the players leaning on the batting cage, the rolling chalk laying the first crisp lines, the banks of lights flaring to life.

It was more than mere prelude. For him, this was the opening hymn, the choir's first chords, the welcoming prayer.

For Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, the oldest living baseball player, this was church.

Now, behind the wheel of his Lincoln, he turned the keys with his gnarled catcher's fingers. He pulled the stick into drive, and headed out past the South Side projects.

For 40 years, he had gone to Comiskey to watch these games, after 36 years of being a star himself in the Negro Leagues.

Some tonight might mistake him for just another old man, see his cane and wheelchair and wonder why he came. Others will see the granite dignity, the broad shoulders under the purple jacket, the bent and broken hands. And they will know.

Either way was fine by him.

He wasn't doing it for more glory. He'd had plenty. He was going because he had to. Because deep down, as the last days of summer again dwindled to a precious few, he knew the season was almost done.

He is a sight, driving down 38th Street, slumped low in his recliner seat, left-handing the wheel, brows pinched into a frown.

He still drives because he still can, and because when there is a baseball game he does not want to be late, and he doesn't give two slaps about why you are dragging behind. He is just ready.

"Now what's that son of a gun doing?" he says, his voice a growl as a car blocks his path. "C'mon!"

Past liquor stores and broken glass, low-slung project buildings and sulking teenagers, he makes his journey.

An empty can of Nehi orange pop sits on the dash. An old cigar tilts in the tray. A few glossies of him as a player spill across the back seat and on the floor.

Now he turns onto 35th and the stadium rises before him.

It is a perfect night for a game.

Traffic already crawls near the ballpark, but Duty guides his car like a baserunner slipping a tag.

When a parking attendant holds up a hand for him to stop, Duty merely nods and a grin spreads across the man's face. "Hey Duty!" he says. "C'mon in."

Duty docks his car in a handicapped space a few feet from the entrance and struggles out of the Lincoln. Shoes first, then a flash of purple jacket, then the cane.

A small stroke and a bleeding ulcer have sapped him, slowed his speech and drained his energy.

He once had chattered nonstop, his stories as lively as a game of pepper, with him always holding the bat.

The words come haltingly now from a voice rough as a box of gravel. But they still come.

James Baldwin, the White Sox' pitching ace this season, knows.

Awhile back, when Duty could still get around, Baldwin would watch the old Negro Leaguer shuffle into the Sox' locker room. He would sit with him in the dugout and chat -- with Duty doing the talking.

There were the stories, of course. Like the time Duty twice caught Ty Cobb stealing during an exhibition in Cuba.

Legend had it that Cobb told Duty "No (black man) is going to throw me out." Duty tugged at a chest protector emblazoned with the words, "Thou shalt not steal," and replied, "Well, you ain't gonna run no more."

There were the days against barnstorming major leaguers including Babe Ruth. And the decades that he caught Satchel Paige, years that left him with 13 fractures and hands that still bear the scars. ("Satchel'll make you say your prayers," he'd chuckle.)

There was the racism he and all Negro League players endured, like when he had to go to the back of a store to get a bologna sandwich or when he had to stay in hotels where blacks weren't allowed to bathe or the signs along the East St. Louis railways that warned "No niggers allowed."

And, of course, how he got his nickname. It came in 1932 at the Negro World Series. Damon Runyon had watched the young Pittsburgh Crawfords player catch the first game of a doubleheader and pitch the second. "It's worth the price of admission to see 'Double Duty' in action," the famous author wrote.

There were all the old pitches -- the fadeaway and the scratchball and the snakeball ("shimmies like a belly dancer," he'd say.)

And there was advice. "You got to just take it easy," Duty would tell Baldwin. "You're putting too much pressure on yourself. Just keep the ball low. Don't go up there picking corns."

Baldwin, known to talk a little himself, simply took it in. "I didn't say nothing at all," he said. "I just listened."

But Duty wouldn't be finished. On his way out, he would pull manager Jerry Manuel aside for a few parting words, tell him what pitchers he liked, what catchers he admired, what the team needed.

Manuel would listen and nod and smile, especially when Duty would lean in, as he always did, with a twinkle, and say: " 'Cause you know I know."

The manager would laugh, but Manuel did know. He knew what Duty had done. That he'd played with more than 15 teams in his career. That Duty himself had managed many years.

He knew to treat the old man with reverence, as did Frank Thomas and all of those who recognized Duty when he would show up for another game on another perfect night in the twilight of the old man's own final seasons.

He sits alone. He can't make it to the field anymore. He simply takes his customary place, on the concourse. And watches. A few people recognize him, but mostly he's by himself.

It is just before dusk. The ballpark is beautiful. The field unfolds in a broad swath against the brownish-red of raked dirt. The wedges of steep upper deck curl in from the sides like cupped palms. The scoreboard rises mammoth and brilliant with its colored pinwheels and its jumbo screen and the swirls of its Coca-Cola logo.

Duty looks out across home plate and beyond, past the hump of the pitcher's mound, to the far-off bleachers that stand gray and empty. Silhouetted against the big bright bowl, he gazes.

His expression doesn't change, but his shoulders relax a little. He drapes a hand over the rail of his wheelchair. His eyes are suddenly alert.

The stands begin to fill. The chatter of the vendors rises. The first chords of the national anthem boom into the night.

Then, a roar. The Sox sprint onto the field. Paul Konerko warms up the infield. Pitcher Sean Lowe cracks the mitt with warm-up tosses.

As a boy Duty only dreamed of such parks. In those days, back in the early part of the last century, he played on dirt lots near his Mobile, Ala., home, the ball a bundle of rags tied with tape.

He caught pitches thrown by his friend, a kid named Satchel, and played with his kid brother, Funny.

When he was 15 he pulled on an old Gabby Hartnett glove and began to play organized ball. Winners got pop and pecans and lemonade.

But Mobile grew small and as he got older he began to feel the lure of his older brother's beckonings to the big city, Chicago.

So in 1919, when he was 17 years old, he scooped up $ 18 in craps winnings and hopped a train north -- "hoboed it," he says. In time, his family followed. The Radcliffes settled in at 3511 S. Wentworth, four blocks from the old White Sox Park.

He played catch in the Comiskey parking lot. Years later, when he joined the Chicago American Giants and the White Sox were out of town, he played inside, at Comiskey, a proud man, a player, hauling in $ 750 a week -- enough to support his wife, the most he would ever make, the best time of his life.

They come one by one. Autograph seekers. Fans. Kids. The curious.

Some have no idea who he is.

A few ask and Duty tells them.

"I'm Double Duty," he says. "I'm 98 years old. The oldest living ballplayer."

Then he puts out his hand. Gives a gentle shake and a smile.

"I think you could still get out there and pitch," says one man, crouching by his chair.

Duty chuckles, leans over a little. "I'd do better than some of 'em," he says. "Some of 'em are pitiful."

The man grins.

A dark-haired kid walks up, punching his glove.

"How long did you play?" he asks.

"I played 36 years and managed 20. I played with them all."

"What was your greatest moment?" asks someone else, a crowd now gathering.

"In 1940 we were playing at Comiskey. I caught two men on base in the seventh inning, then hit one in the upper deck.

"I played in 12 All-Star games, pitched in four."

"Well. It was a pleasure meeting you," yet another says. "Thank you for your autograph."

And once again, he's alone.

He settles back, fishes into a coat pocket and produces a cigar -- an El Producto Puritano -- and a pack of matches. He twists the cigar into his mouth, precisely and deliberately. The flame leaps up and flickers around his uplifted hands.

They are famous hands, beautiful hands. They are badges and they are relics. Deep wrinkles cut the knuckles and a million fine lines spread and branch like filigree. The fingers are short and thick and gnarled, stubby, as if his arm was a trunk and the fingers were roots that had been ripped from the earth. They are battle worn and weary. When he holds up the right, the fingers stay spread, the knuckles fat as cigars, the tips bent at crazy angles like the petals of a broken flower. When in repose they hang loose and low between his knees, a pair of old hounds that have served their master and are now allowed a rest.

His biggest vice, he'll happily tell you, has not been the cigars they hold, but the ladies. Never drank. Took good care of himself. But even now, when he catches a glimpse of a pretty girl, he'll wink, and say, "How about that!"

It's all play now, though.

These days he has but one love and it isn't a vision in a summer dress.

It's the green panorama that stretches before him, more beautiful than any woman, more beautiful than anything.

He signs a ball. A picture. A cap.

An usher bends over, asks how he's doing.

"Pretty good," he says. "For 98."

A man hands him a ball and a pen and Duty rolls it in his hands. He scribbles neatly, as always, Double Duty.

He sometimes makes a little extra money selling autographed pictures and a biography written about him years ago. Sometimes he goes to card shows.

He still makes appearances, once in a while. He's hurled the first pitch at both Comiskey and Wrigley Field.

Last year, he put on a uniform and took to the mound as the starting pitcher for the Schaumburg Flyers, making him the oldest active ballplayer ever.

The few dollars have helped. But he still lives very modestly. For years he lived in the Ida B. Wells projects, where he was robbed three times.

After a newspaper column awhile back, he was able to move across the street into a seniors' home. He now gets $ 850 a month from a special fund for retired players.

Most the people who see him don't know any of that. Which is fine by him.

He gets by. What's left to him isn't a fat bank account or a fancy house, but his two-bedroom place with pictures of the old ballplayer and a closet of suits to wear to the games.

What's left are the ballgames, these ballgames. All the innings. This night.

It is almost time to go.

The seventh inning comes. He's ready.

A staffer returns, rolls him in his wheelchair back to the elevator.

A roar goes up. Another Sox run. It's 8-4.

Duty doesn't look back.

"Good night, Duty," someone calls, as he heads into the night.

He is nearly home. A friend has driven him.

He's stubborn, but not foolish. At night, headlights begin to swirl like fireflies on a sandlot. So he gives in.

He steps out of his Lincoln, heaves himself up with his cane.

He pulls off his purple coat. It shines under the yellow street lights.

He sits in the lobby for a while, then goes up to his apartment.

This very night, he learns, another Negro League player from his era who also lived in the building, has died of a heart attack.

Duty shakes his head. "He played in Birmingham," he says.

He turns the key to his place, trudges to his chair.

He kicks off his two-tone shoes.

A few blocks away, the game is over. The Sox have won.

Tomorrow they play again.

He must sleep.

He doesn't like to be late.