The Rookie

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KELLY stood hunched over the plate, his feet wide­spread, the bat bobbing freely above his right shoul­der. His knees were bent slightly and he rocked back and forth, digging his cleats into the dirt, trying to anchor himself firmly to get greater stability for the time when he would swing. His face, young looking for his twenty years, was as set and determined as he could make it, and his eyes barely showed under the sun-shielding bill of his cap.

He swung the bat slowly from above his shoulder, float­ing it across the plate waist high; a motion all ball players have to go through, for some reason or other. Satisfied that he'd test-swung enough, he again settled the bat over his right shoulder. It was never supposed to rest directly on the shoulder, the manager said; something about swinging faster if the stick wasn't resting on the shoulder.

Kelly squinted into the beating afternoon sun, his eyes boring into the pitcher's face. He's big, thought Kelly, and strong and fast. The batter glanced quickly at the infield, knowing how they always played him, but still doubting, hoping they would play him deep like they did for the power hitters, not up close like they did for the not-so-good hitters. Seems like the first baseman hates me, Kelly thought. At least he's making fun of me. The big first-sacker was smiling, cynically, Kelly thought. He's almost laughing, daring me to hit.

"Give him a nice soft one, Mike!" the first baseman yelled. "We don't want to hurt the little boy." He laughed.

Finally the Waterville pitcher started his wind-up. He whirled his arm around and up and down, and instantly a white, zooming ball was bearing down on Kelly. It's com­ing right at me, he thought. They're trying to get me! They're throwing at me! He ducked and backed away from the plate, expecting a hot burning feeling at any moment.

"Strike one!" the umpire yelled. Kelly couldn't believe
his ears. He looked at the man in black, question written on his face. "Strike one, I said," the umpire spit.

Boos came from the crowd. Kelly was ashamed, mad, and then scared. That guy must have a tremendous curve working today. Have to watch the next one closer.

The second pitch came hurtling out of the sun. Kelly swung, felt the stick connect faintly. Without conscious thought, he flung the bat away and galloped toward first base. Then he saw the ball. The pitcher had taken two steps left of the mound, scooped the dribbler in, and was casually cocking his arm for the throw to first. Still three steps from the bag, Kelly saw the umpire's thumb go up. Boos floated over the field.

"What a power hitter!" yelled a fat old lady from her box seat behind the plate. "Boo! You're nothin' like your old man!" she yelled.

Kelly walked dejectedly back to the dugout. The next two men flied out. Three to nothing and it's already the top of the sixth — have to get going, he muttered as he walked toward right field.

He finally reached his position — no man's land, he thought. I'll never be any good. Why did Dad have to be so good? Why do I have to be as good as Dad?

"Swing smoothly and evenly." He could hear the words ringing in his ears. "I'll make a ball player out of you yet."

"But I don't care that much about being a baseball player, dad. I just want to play for fun."

"C'mon son. You're gonna be just as good as your old man was. I'll see to that. Practice. That's what it takes. Practice. Every day. No goofing off. Someday the crowds will yell, 'That's old man Kelly's kid out there! Isn't he great? Just as good as his old man."

The thoughts of those torturous days on the sandlot burned in Kelly's mind. Mixed feelings of hatred and guilt clouded his thinking; hatred for his dad who had forced baseball on him, and guilt because he hadn't lived up to his father's expectations. He looked into the stands — dimly he could see his father in the third row. Never miss that old red baseball cap, he thought.

The innings dragged by. Finally the last Waterville bat-
ter grounded out. This is it, thought Kelly. The last of the ninth. We'll have to score three runs to tie the game. The thought scared him. The manager started his usual pep talk. The 'you can do its' bounced on deaf ears. "Just get on base, men," he growled. "Walk if you can. All right: Smith, Jones, Black. C'mon boys!"

Smith and Jones walked slowly back to the cave and sat down. "Good thing Black walked," somebody said.

Johnson and Harris had both gotten hits, weak singles that couldn't score Black.

"All right, Kelly." The manager's voice was honey. "The bags are full. Walk if you can. But take the first two pitches at any cost. Remember, take the first two."

Gotta take the first two pitches. Gotta remember that. Kelly's hands were shaking.

"Strike one!" the umpire boomed out. Kelly didn't swing. The second pitch came across high and outside.

"Ball one!" I've taken the two coach said to. Now it's my own problem. He glanced over to the stands. The red baseball cap was easily visible at the close distance. His father's face was frozen. The third pitch came across chest high, just catching the inside corner of the plate.

"Strike two!"

The next pitch was a ball, inside but missing the corner of the plate. The umpire dutifully sang out, "ball two." Kelly's hands were sweaty, and the bat seemed slippery in his hands. The Waterville pitcher again went into his windup. The ball came flying, dipping and darting toward the plate. Looks good, maybe a little outside. Dad used to swing at these pitches, even with two strikes on him. The infield had moved toward the plate, closing in on Kelly. He swung.

"Strike three! You're out!" came the fatal words.

Kelly could scarcely hear the boos as he looked over for the red baseball cap. The seat was empty.