

A TRUE STORY

Darin Strauss

THIS IS A story about what one chooses to believe.

My grandmother's father played for the Brooklyn Kings before the team found the name by which you know them: the Dodgers. He was their first baseman. That was the legend I grew up on, anyway.

It was the crack of the twentieth century. Manny Joseph, the only Jewish King, got razed during away games. Catchers would mutter "kike" and worse when my great-grandfather stood to bat; fans yelled all the old insults.

A different Brooklyn yeshiva boy, Sandy Koufax, arguably the best lefty ever to pitch (or, *inarguably* if you're a Jew of a certain age, a certain intensity of allegiance), won with the Dodgers half a century later. A pious Jew with ears like handles on a loving-cup trophy—old-world ears; Franz Kafka ears—Sandy Koufax skipped out on a desperate World Series opener to worship in synagogue; the game had fallen on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. This act of steep piety made him a hero—better yet, a *mensch*—in Hebrew school circles.

My great-grandfather held different priorities. On another Yom Kippur—at the start of my great-grandfather's career and the twentieth century—the Brooklyn Kings' Jewish first baseman sneaked from temple to sit for a team photo. I cherish a copy of that picture. Dapper in his straw hat and intricate necktie, Manny Joseph is the only player not wearing cleats, a Kings cap, or the old-fashioned leather mitt that looked like a cartoon-swollen hand—the habiliments of Brooklyn baseball, circa 1900.

And if he's not exactly handsome among his scruffier teammates, his black-and-white face is lighted by one of those rakish half smiles so beneficial to a good boy's looks when he's acting naughty, or thinks he is. Holidays he never cared for, he didn't like his wife, but baseball was my great-grandfather's delight.

Or so the story goes.

LIKE the D. H. Lawrence character, his daughter (my grandmother) was beautiful and had been given all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love blew away.

By the time I popped into the world, she was an alcoholic, a hermit who wouldn't quit referring to my grandfather as her husband, though by then he'd already left her for the woman who'd become his wife in every sense but the legal one. She lived alone for the next three musty

decades in the big Long Island house that my grandfather had built for her and then abandoned her to.

I always dreaded going over to see my drunken grandmother. She often got fantastically cruel; once, she told me that I hadn't been as smart as my dad was, or as good an athlete. I *was* an unathletic, wistful kid—thin as soup-kitchen consommé. With a hunter's precision my grandmother targeted the little rifts in the sides of her relatives' confidence. (My father was a star high-school basketball player and eventually became the NCAA's Mason-Dixon hurdling champion in 1960; I never even *watched* sports.)

When I was a teenager my grandmother sobered up (broken hip; the cold turkey of a hospital stay). After that, she had a much nicer vibe. Her new gentleness clipped the wings of my animosity. She lived four towns over from me, a seven-mile bike ride. I'd go over and we'd talk a lot, sometimes about her father's baseball career. That's probably what got me into the game; now, I watch the Yankees probably a hundred times a year.

She was a grand lady, even in her hermit years. She had fine china, a maid she couldn't afford, and a large house in constant disrepair. She was vain of her move from a Flatbush apartment to that big Long Island house. She died in 2000, and one of the last things she said to me was: "Why would you move back to Brooklyn, when all we wanted to do growing up was get out of there?" But that struck me as

a pose, a shielding posture she'd put on like a catcher's mask. Brooklyn, her past—as mythic to her as Greece and Rome—was all she had. She talked about it with the glassy face of someone watching a favorite movie. The stickball games that neighborhood boys played, the schoolgirls watching them and giggling, their long skirts flapping as they ran from the immodest home-run hitters when they asked for kisses; Prospect Park, crowded and carefree, elated with sunlight; the Italian boys whistling as my young grandmother passed; the Jewish boys who averted their eyes, but not quickly enough. And, of course, the night pilgrimages into Manhattan, to see Sinatra, to see Benny Goodman. In the end, the past was her whole life: old scenes, dissolve cuts, fade-outs. She died talking about her husband—who, eighteen months earlier, had himself died in the arms of his live-in girlfriend of twenty-seven years, near his Manhattan apartment.

MY own dad knew his baseball-playing grandfather only when he was very young and the ex-player was very old. Bald, tired Manny Joseph would talk reluctantly about his sports years, his life before the insurance job, before my grandmother was born. He'd lean his hands on his kitchen table, his peanut head a little dropped. "It was great thing," he'd say, huffing to stand. "But it's over now, so . . ."

Besides the team photo of him, the only other image left of Manny Joseph shows a man stooped under his eighty-

odd years, with the body—five-four, slim hips, a big belly—of a schoolgirl eight months into a mistake.

To find out more about his playing days, I schlepped last year to the library at Cooperstown's Baseball Hall of Fame. And this is where the story, like all family stories, gets complicated.

"There is no Manny Joseph here," said the impartial librarian, her eyes creeping like snails over a fat book of names listing anyone who has ever played professional baseball in America. It was as impressively bound as you'd imagine, this Saint Peter's roll of all who'd made their way past the exalted gates and into the major leagues.

"And," this woman said, with a voice seemingly practiced at killing the already slain, "the Brooklyn Dodgers came from a team called the Superbas, not the Kings."

I went home dejected, of course; doing research online, I couldn't find the Brooklyn Kings anywhere, let alone Manny Joseph. I decided not to tell my dad or his siblings. Why ruin the one good memory we have of my grandmother's family?

And yet, in writing this piece, I figured I'd give it one more shot. I found, online, a site called "Major League Baseball Franchise Information." It reads that the Brooklyn Dodgers *were* called the Hanlon's Superbas from 1899–1910, but also that one of their "nicknames"—whatever that means—was the Brooklyn Kings, in the 1880s. I don't think Manny Joseph would have been old enough to play in the 1880s, but I don't know. Also, had I

asked about Emmanuel Joseph? I think so, but I can never be sure when it comes to my own spaciness. Also, I *do* have that photograph: the team with "Kings" inscribed on their chests, and the one young Jew with them, wearing a smile and his Yom Kippur best.

One thing I do know: he loved talking baseball. The last day of his last season, a Sabbath night, my great-grandfather Manny Joseph played his best game. He went five-for-five and squibbed out the game winner, a wounded little pop-up that barely dodged the shortstop's glove.

"Thanks God he didn't catch it," my great-grandfather said, for years afterward.

UNDERWOOD PARK: THE FIRST 12,000 YEARS

Susan Choi

ICE

BY THE TIME Dexter and I reach the park, in the earliest years of the twenty-first century, all the ice has melted. Silty water has streamed forth, making Flatbush and Coney Island, and joined up with the sea. Foreign rocks with no documentation have dropped out of the slush and settled here, far south of where they used to be. The ground on which we stand has accumulated enough soil and rubble and sand to be some of the highest in Brooklyn, and has even accumulated the name Brooklyn, and more specifically, the apt name Clinton Hill.

True, hills in Brooklyn are measured in tens and not hundreds of feet above sea level. But Clinton Hill's very subtlety lets it insinuate itself into our thoughts in the stealthiest ways. Dexter and I, on our way to the park, pause at the corner of Lafayette and Vanderbilt avenues, Dexter riding in the stroller before me: we look north up Vanderbilt, toward where the ice by degrees shrank away, and see