

Meeting Timmy O'Malley

Ronn Munsterman

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Young Timmy O'Malley first showed up at our front door shortly after a baseball landed on our sofa. This was, of course, after it punched a sizable hole in our living room picture window. It was a bright, summer Saturday afternoon and Catherine was out shopping. This was a good thing, as my wife jumps sky-high at sudden noises. As for me, I was immersed in a new book. I admit I flinched, but I didn't drop the book.

I got up and padded over to the sofa. The ball was nestled up against Catherine's favorite throw pillow, the one with the roses embroidered on it. I picked up the dingy, tan ball. It had plenty of scuff marks, probably from playing on the asphalt street so much, and several stitches were badly frayed. Before long, the cover would fly off like a semi trailer's blowout.

Clutching the ball, I stepped close to the punctured window. Hot air invaded the house through the new, unwelcome opening. A gaggle of boys was milling about in the street. They were staring wide-eyed in my direction, their ball gloves dangling at their sides. I wondered whether they'd bolt. Their gazes shifted to a fellow I hadn't met, but I knew his family had recently moved into the house directly across from me. He took a deep breath and started toward my house. A couple of the others grabbed him trying to stop him, perhaps to talk sense into him, but he shrugged off their grip and continued toward me.

I stepped to the door and opened it. The boy's finger was poised over the doorbell button. Blue eyes peered up at me from under the bill of his red ball hat. "I'm sorry I broke your window. I'll pay for it."

I blinked. A boy who can pay for a broken window? He seemed to be about thirteen, but he might have been tall for his age. I handed him the ball. "You threw it?"

"Yeah. It sailed on me."

"Where were you standing?"

"By my porch."

I glanced over his shoulder, gauging the distance. “That’s quite a throw. You have a great arm.” I smiled.

Relieved, he grinned, flashing bright teeth, a John Elway grin. “Thanks.” His grin slid into a puzzled frown. “You’re not mad at me?”

I chuckled. “You have no idea how many windows I’ve replaced over the years. We have two sons.”

His face lit up at the prospect of more new friends. “They’re grown now.” I added quickly.

“Oh.” He gave me another toothy grin and stuck out his hand. “I’m Timmy O’Malley.”

I grasped it and said, “Paul Whittier.”

He glanced at the broken window. A worried expression settled on his face. “How much do you think it’ll cost?”

Ah, the truth. I had planned to call a glazier, but an idea crept forward. “I’ll tell you what, Timmy. Instead of paying for it, how about you come over and help me put it in?”

“Okay, Mr. Whittier, thanks! Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

He darted down the porch steps toward his friends who were shocked he had survived an encounter with a grown up.

At that moment, I had no idea how important this quick-to-grin young man would become to us. Our two boys were in their mid-twenties and, as yet, unmarried. Truth be known, I missed my sons’ childhood days. I was ready to have a young person in my life again. I just didn’t know it yet.

Timmy and I got the new window installed Sunday afternoon, only taking twice as long as usual. Not bad for a twelve year old (he was tall for his age) and a fifty-eight year old (bald for his age). We sat on the porch afterward and Catherine brought us a pitcher of lemonade.

He took a sip and sighed contentedly. “Thanks for the new ball, Mr. Whittier.”

I had bought one while out getting the glass. “You’re welcome. Want to play some catch?”

His eyebrows slid up, “Really?”

“Sure, why not?” I said, innocently.

He surely couldn’t say what he was thinking, so he offered, “I thought maybe your back would be sore, or something . . .”

“That’s okay, Timmy. I’ll be fine. Let me round up my old glove.”

I had to ask for Catherine’s help, because naturally, the glove wasn’t where I thought it was, being instead where I left it.

The ball smacking into my glove unleashed a wonderful flood of memories and the smell of a properly oiled glove was second only to that of a ballpark hot dog.

“You ever go to the ballgames, Timmy?”

He threw another hard one, straight overhand, like an outfielder, and my glove popped.

“Oh, sure, we go every now and then.”

“Do you think you can go to one next weekend with me?” I tossed the ball back. It didn’t pop. I sighed.

“I’m sure it’s okay, but I’ll ask. Did you ever catch a foul ball?”

I shook my head sadly.

“Maybe you’ll get one someday.”

I shrugged. Maybe.

After twenty minutes, my arm felt like it would snap off and follow the ball into Timmy’s glove. My lower back started making threats. I held up my hands in surrender. “Timmy, that’s all for me.” I slipped off the glove and inspected my palm, which was red.

Timmy wandered over and took a peek. “Oops, sorry. Dad puts in extra padding. I forgot to warn you.”

I laughed. “That’s okay. It’ll start working eventually.”

He grinned. “You’re pretty good for an, uh, well, you’re pretty good.”

My eyes crinkled at the near slip. “Thanks. Let me know about the ballgame.”

“I will. See ya.” With a quick wave, he sprinted off.

I stumbled into the house and hollered, “Catherine? Where’s the Icy Hot?”

Mr. O’Malley stopped by after dinner. As we sat on the porch, a cool breeze flowed over us.

“Timmy said you want to take him to a ballgame.”

“Yes. My sons are grown and Catherine’s not interested.”

“Oh.” He frowned.

“Is something wrong?”

“Timmy doesn’t have any grandparents. My wife’s and my parents passed away. He doesn’t talk about it much, but I know he wishes he had grandparents. I just wanted you to know that.” He paused, perhaps deciding whether to say it. “He might adopt you and your wife.”

“You have a fine son, Mr. O’Malley. We’d be honored to be adopted by Timmy.”

He grinned in relief.

I now knew where Timmy’s Elway grin came from.

That game was just the first of many over the years, but it wasn’t until after Timmy’s (Tim, if you don’t mind) senior year in high school that he finally caught a foul ball. It was a mid-August Friday night and, even at seven, was still hotter than the dickens. In the bottom of the second inning a high pop up drifted toward us. Not surprisingly, I lost it in the lights, but Tim leaned over me to catch it, saving my noggin.

In the next inning, he fiddled with the ball, rolling it in his long fingers with a thoughtful expression on his face. Suddenly, he grabbed my hand and flipped it over. The ball plopped into my palm.

“What’s that for?”

He draped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed a hug. “That’s for being there for me, Grandpa.”

Tim’s been away at college long enough for the trees to begin turning their yellows and oranges. Catherine and I miss him.

It’s a gorgeous Saturday afternoon and we sit on the front porch. Catherine spots the car a block away. We start down the steps before it pulls into our driveway. Our eldest

son hops out and runs around to his wife's side. She's too pregnant to get out without help.

Catherine and I share a smile.