

A Blaze of Glory

A short story

E.E. Blake



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“The only mortal sin is giving up.”  
– Stephen King

## One

Explosions, blinding flashes, erupt around me. They light up the night sky almost as well as the area lamps. Everything's slowed down, and with it, a growing tidal wave of audible bliss and excitement serves no purpose but to stroke my ego and blow out my ear drums. There it is. I see it: the ball arcs high up above the diamond with impact smoke tailing right behind it.

This is it.

The golden ticket.

My bat's been splintered from the hit. The stump slips from my fingers. The one and only Brad "The Basher" Ecklefield pounds dirt. No thinking now. The legs take over.

No way in hell that ball is comin' down.

Tiny land mines explode under my feet all the way to first. I turn hard in the run and make my way to second.

Fifty-two home runs.

Second's so close I can taste the plate's sand-stained fabric.

The sound of the crowd is sneaking into my ears, they're getting rowdy.

I inhale sharply and completely slaughter second base. Two down, two to go.

Fifty-two home runs.

I can't block the crowd out. They're getting rowdier and that can only mean one thing:

The enemy has landed.

I look back.

No! Don't worry about that damn ball. Focus on third base.

Kill third base.

The crowd's getting louder and it's freaking me the hell out.

WHOMP!

I conquer third. I can't celebrate yet, but it's hard not to get caught up in the crowd's thunder.

Fifty-two home runs.

The enemy is behind me. I dunno where it is, but it's coming up fast.

Home plate is just around the bend. I can't come this far only to let that ball make a turkey outta me.

Fifty-two home runs.

Heather's smile. Open arms.

I dive. With arms out-stretched, I soar through the air and do a sort of acrobatic spiral, only to land hard on my side and blast a giant cloud of orange up around me.

"SAFE!"

I love that word. I can barely hear it through the crashing waves of screaming fans, but at that moment, the proclamation was a faint light in a world of pitch darkness.

Oh, thank you, Jesus!

The crowd's going wild – I can't even hear myself howling as hot agony shoots across my lower back like a sonuvabitch.

My teammates scoop me up and hoist my broken body into the air. I look up and there it is, pasted in big, blocky yellow letters against the black screen of the jumbotron:

ECKLEFIELD 52!!!

The screen flicks away to her face. She's leaning over the railing with a huge grin on her face.

Heather's smile. Open arms.

I'm in so much pain, but it doesn't even matter; my fiancé is proud of me.

It's pure chance that I look over and see my bat laying off to the side of home plate. It's cracked nearly clean in half.

No wonder they call me "The Basher".

The year is 1982, and I'm a Shorebrooke Jackal.

**THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!**

There's the sound of the crowd banging their fists with excitement against the seats below them.

**THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!**

"Brad!"

**THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!**

"Brad, unlock the door, I'm getting soaked out here!"

## Two

It was a rude, but well-needed reinsertion into the present – into reality. I blinked away the dust of fantasy from my mind, and it took a couple seconds before I realized that I wasn't back in the field, fighting the good fight – I was waiting in my good ol' '93 Buick, surrounded by the assaulting pitter-patter of rain outside the windows.

“Brad! Door!”

I looked up, and there she was, banging her fist against the window, hair tangled and matted like a drowned rat.

I leaned over and opened the door for her.

“Sorry, Heath.”

Heather dived into the car and gave me a quick peck on the cheek, before she gave her laptop bag the ol' heave-ho into the back seat. “Thanks for picking me up.”

“How was work?”

“Eh.” Heather made a sour face.

“‘Eh’? What’s ‘Eh’?” I threw my beloved Buick into drive and rolled away from the curb.

“We had that staff meeting, and it went about as well as Pompeii’s resilience,” Heather announced with sarcasm. “Macy is hell-bent on cutting costs, and of course that means anything not related to running and goal-sinking something is under fire. He wants to completely obliterate beginner band and tech club in favour of flag football!”

“Nothing wrong with flag football.”

“There is when there’s already ... already indoor hockey, senior girls volleyball, track meet, rugby, of all things – and now because flag football is suddenly so trendy, kids who don’t like sports or have other interests have to suffer? Where’s the diversity in this system? It’s corrupt, I tell you!”

“Honey—”

“When Connie tried to get that art club going, parents had a *fit* because somebody in the PTA spread rumours that there’d be nude models! Can you believe that?! She nearly lost her job! I mean, there’s more to life than just – just – why not get rid of indoor hockey, or volleyball? Why do we even need a flag football team? I’ve never even heard of the stupid thing before today! God, I hate living in a sports town.”

“It’s not the town, babe, it’s the people. It’s everywhere. Folks live and die for sports – you know that.”

Heather sighed. “Yeah, I know. It’s just ... it’s not right. Arts are so important, too.”

“Yeah, well, what are you gonna do?”

“Crack open that bottle of wine from Christmas, that’s what.” I felt her fingers slide over my knuckles as I gripped the shift and curl into a gentle embrace around my hand.

“Salmon Casserole for dinner,” I announced. “Meatless Friday, you know.”

“Yeah,” she whispered, “I know, baby. It’s good to see you. Thanks for letting me vent. How was your day?”

“Eh.”

It had been a rough day. Shit, most days since the injury were rough ones. Heather knew it without even having to ask. I guess shitty moods in ex-sports players are pretty obvious. No, that’s not it. Fact is, I always thought I’d go back one day – I wanted to believe I would. The passion and the desire were in my blood: I was born to play ball.

But, you know, some things just aren't in the cards, I guess. It's hard on the mind, makes a man replay scenarios over and over – *what if I twisted the other way ... what if I wasn't in such a hurry to get that home run.* And that ain't even the kicker. My dreams of playing ball went down along with the Jackals, soon a bankrupt team with our stadium demolished a few years back for residential development.

All just a memory.

Fifteen years' dedication to this town, and all I got to show for it are a couple medals and a warped spinal disc.

The year is 1994, and I'm an unemployed cripple.

### Three

“Maybe it’s time,” Heather said mid-way through dinner. “To start the job-hunt again, I mean.”

“There’s nothing in Shorebrooke but greasy spoons, Heath,” I muttered, poking at my plate like a picky ten-year-old. “My back isn’t good enough for a commute, and there’s no way I’m gonna work at a greasy spoon. I’d kill everyone before the first week was out.”

“I’m not talking about greasy spoons or retail jobs,” Heather said. “Brad, you forget that you hit fifty-two homeruns for the Shorebrooke Jackals – you’re a history-maker in the major league...”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Aw, come on. So that’s it? You screw your back up and your life’s over?”

This was typical of my girl. Most every night it was the same topic of conversation at dinner. I love her to the ends of the earth but man, the level of persistence in her could outmatch a cheetah on the hunt – if that makes any sense.

“What do you want me to do, Heather? What do you want me to say?”

Heather stared at me for a good while. The look in her eye was different tonight, like she was searching for something deep inside my eyes. “Brad. Your past doesn’t define you. Letting your injury take over your life like this – letting the memory of the Jackals run you into the ground ... baby, those were good times. They were amazing times, but God’s got something different in store for you now. It’s time to move on and grow.”

“Grow? I’m a grown ass man, Heather, what do you want me to do? You want me to pick up the phone and call Eggy’s Pizzaria right now? Go down to the temp agency and—”

“Listen to me!” she said. “Brad, that’s not what I mean. You just ... I want you to be happy again. I want to see you smile again. To be fulfilled.”

Then without another word, she pushed away from the table and left me alone with my cold salmon. I watched her storm out of the dining room – and I wanted to call out, but something just held me back.

Shame, maybe?

I was surprised when Heather came back a couple minutes later, toting her work laptop under one arm. She set it down on the table and hooked the phone line into the computer’s internet jack. Sinking to my side, Heather logged onto the Internet and did a quick search for Dave Moore, a record-breaker boxer from New York.

“Look,” she murmured and clicked on one of the links in the search results. A web page sprang up, and there was a bust-shot picture of ol’ Dave with his 1967 Champion’s Trophy belt. “When Dave Moore retired in the eighties, he penned a decent-selling trilogy in the height of the sci-fi/fantasy boom.”

I laughed. “Yeah, so?”

Heather clicked off the page and typed in another sports hero – this time a name I was very familiar with: Ray Barnaby – a famous left-fielder for Toronto back in the sixties.

“Ray Barnaby *wrecked his shoulder* during a mid-season game in seventy-one,” my wife read from the webpage. “...It says here that he wrote an autobiography a couple years after the accident. You own a copy of it, don’t cha?”

“You sayin’ I should write a book?” I furrowed my eyebrows. “I’m no writer.”

“Yeah, but it’s at least something.” Heather touched my shoulder with concerned affection. “I’m not saying you should write – what I’m trying to say is you gotta do something other than wallow all day. Writing is just one thing – you could do carpentry, or go fishing, or – hell – open

your own sports bar, like Sam Malone! We got the money to do whatever we want, and watching you sink deeper and deeper every day is killing me almost as much as it's killing you, baby..."

After a while, I reached out and squeezed Heather's hand.

"You don't have to hurl yourself at a super-big project." Her voice tickled my ear. "...Just something to keep you mentally up-and-up. You could try an article for the newspaper, you know? You're one of the few Jackals left in Shorebrooke – The community would eat up anything you'd have to say."

"Lemme think on it," I said, and then turned to kiss her. "I love you."

Heather smiled against my lips.

"Love ya back."

## Four

It was past midnight and I was still wide-awake in bed. The ceiling stared back at me as Heather's quiet, rhythmic breaths filled my ears. She was curled up right against my side, with her cheek and arm locked across my chest.

Maybe she was right about the whole newspaper thing.

But even so, how many people actually remembered me? Sure, all the hardcore baseball gurus and older folk stopped me in the street to shake my hand – they did that all the time – but that didn't make up the whole of Shorebrooke; it'd been growing a lot over the past few years, raking in a slew of city-folk. The Jackals were small time, compared to the Jays.

In any case, would anyone actually *want* to read what I had to say, regardless if I was remembered or not?

Thinking about it was too much. I had to get up.

Stumbling about in the darkness somehow wound me up downstairs in the living room, thankfully without killing myself. I painfully sank down on the couch, and stared out our large bay window for a good while, more lost in my own thought and not paying attention to the speeding headlights of the late-night cruisers.

Something caught my attention on the end table of the opposite couch. With some effort, I forced myself up and trudged over to check the thing out.

It was Heather's laptop.

A strong and sudden compulsion sparked in my chest. I sat back down with the computer in tow and opened it. The screen immediately registered, temporarily blinding my night-sensitive eyes. When my sight got used to the brightness, I found a word document staring back at me; it was something of Heather's – a mock up test for her grade 11 English class. I'm not at all used to computers, so it took a while to work the touch-pad. After some time, awkward precision, and a few under-breath swears, a fresh document appeared before me.

"Okay," I muttered, "now what?"

Heather's words from dinner echoed in the back of my mind.

*You don't have to hurl yourself at a super-big project ... You could try an article for the newspaper, you know?*

"...All right, let's get cracking then."

I stared out the window again for a minute to gather my thoughts, then turned my head back to the little laptop screen and started hunt and peck away at the keyboard, clacking away into the living room semidarkness with the screen my only source of light.

*A Blaze of Glory*

*By Brad "The Basher" Ecklefield*

*It all went down in a blaze of glory. I was a hard-hitter, and this time, it'd be  
My fifty-second homerun...*

## Five

Heather came down at around 6:30 to find me still typing away, like a lunatic. “Honey, what are you doing?”

“Writing,” I said and finished up my fifth attempt at the craft.

“Writing?” Heather said behind a yawn. She plopped down beside me, and ground her knuckles into her dopey eye sockets like she was eight again.

“Wanna read it?” I asked.

“Lemme wake up first. Is the coffee ready?”

“Oh yeah. I put a pot on about an hour ago.”

Heather blinked. “How long have you been up?”

“All night.” I got up with the laptop and headed into the den so I could print off my masterpiece.

“Brad!” I heard Heather gasp.

I smirked back at her. “Hey, who’s the one who gave the pep talk last night? Get your coffee so you can read my thing.”

We met up in the kitchen and drank a couple mugfuls together in the silence of our own thoughts. When Heather was awake enough, with some toast in her belly, she got out her reading glasses from the junk drawer.

“Honey, this is wonderful! Good job!” Heather beamed at me over the top of my single-paged article from counter space she had sidled up against to read.

“You think so?” I wrinkled my brow.

“Oh yeah,” she said, lifting her coffee to her lips. “Mm. I mean, you don’t write, it shows—”

“Hey...”

“—but it’s still good.” She found her way into my arms and pecked me on the lips. “I’m really proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I said, and kissed her back with a lingering deepness that had been absent from us for so long. It felt good. Felt *right*, like we were kids again.

Heather nestled her cheek against my chest. “Whatcha gonna do with it?” she asked.

I kissed the top of her head and started to cradle our bodies together. The dull ache in my lower back was there, too, shared our little standing snuggle. I took a deep breath and put it out of my mind. “Send it into the paper, just like you said. We’ll see what happens.”

Heather looked up at me. A wide grin spread across her face. “A few tweaks here and there and it’ll be perfect. I can help you with that.”

“I love you so much,” I said. “Thanks for the kick in the pants.”

She smiled, took my big, grizzly hands in hers. “Sometimes we all need a kick in the pants. Come on, Basher, the sun’s about to come up.”

We shared another deep kiss – longer, and passionate with the fire of a homerun ball soaring, and then went out onto the back porch with our coffees to watch the sun rise. And in that moment, as the new day brought forth a haze of orange and red across the horizon of suburban rooftops, a fullness bloomed in my chest that hadn’t been present in well over the twelve years since my “retirement”.

A smile broke across my lips. I found Heather’s hand and squeezed it tight in mine.

The year is 1994, and in my heart I know that no matter where I am, or what I do, it’ll never be too late to pick up a bat and swing. No matter what, I will always be a Shorebrooke Jackal.

The End

E.E. Blake has backgrounds in journalism, psychology, and pop-culture analysis. In addition, she is an honours graduate of journalism from Humber College in Toronto. E.E. encourages readers to connect via Twitter @EEBlake.