

When you've been around little league games long enough, you can spot the kid right off. He's on every team. He's half the size of everyone else. Maybe he wears glasses and maybe he doesn't. They don't make a batting helmet small enough to fit his tiny head so he wears his cap under it, but still if he turns his head too fast, he'll be looking out the ear hole. He comes in every game to play right field for the league mandated two innings every kid must play. He gets one at bat, maybe two. As sure as the sun rises, he's going to strike out. He's the kid that walks to the batter's box to cries of "Easy out. Eeeeeeasy out."

More often than not, he's resented by the rest of the team. Why do you have to suck so bad? We'd win every game if you didn't have to play! Sometimes, though, that kid becomes kind of a mascot for the team. Everyone roots for him in spite of themselves. The team rallies around him instead of excluding him. That was this kid. It was easy to see why as he dug in to the box. Nothing about his body language would lead you to believe he was oh for infinity lifetime as a hitter. He was all confidence as he held up his hand to the umpire and continued to dig in. Then he tapped the bat on the plate, windmilled it around a couple times and dropped into his stance. The umpire pointed at the pitcher and squatted, his hand lightly on the catcher's back.

The pitcher delivered. Halfway to the plate it was clear it was going to be a ball. It was going to be a good foot high of the strike zone. But the kid took a mighty cut through the middle of the zone. Not even close. Strike one. Groans leaked out from the left side of the bleachers; cheers from the stands to the right. A lone voice cut through the noise, in defiance of all the evidence, "You can do it, baby!"

His coached hollered, "Make sure it's a strike! Make him pitch to you!"

The kid hadn't left the box, but he went through his digging in and bat windmilling routine: right hand up, kick, kick, kick, tap, tap, tap, windmill, crouch. The pitch came in right down the

middle. The kid swung right over the top of it. At no time was the ball in danger from anything other than wind chill. Now there were only groans, no cheers. “That’s okay, baby! You got this!”

His coach got his attention and said, “Alright, pal, two strikes! Gotta protect the plate!” The kid nodded like he was accepting a solemn charge. Whether it was from a marginal pitch or a team of ninja assassins, he would protect the plate. No mother bear has ever felt as protective toward her cub as this kid clearly felt toward home plate in that moment. As he dug in a third time, he joined the pantheon of the Alamo defenders and the 300 Spartans. He was going to defend that plate to the death. As the umpire squatted a third time, everyone in attendance could already see it: swing and a miss. Strike three. In the grand scheme of things it didn’t really matter. He was the only hole in the lineup. His team was so far ahead they had almost invoked the mercy rule. It was the top of the last inning. He was the second out. Life would go on.

But the majesty of sports lies in its capacity to surprise us all. The pitcher delivered. The ball was a laser right through the heart of the strike zone. The kid swung as hard as he could. And he fouled it off. The bat grazed the ball ever so slightly, changing its trajectory almost imperceptibly, but it was enough to cause it to skip off the top of the catcher’s mitt and into his mask. The umpire was so surprised by what he’d seen, he almost didn’t see it. So certain was he in the inevitable, he started to signal an out before freezing. After too long a pause, he brushed his right hand across the back of his left as if swiping at a fly and yelled “FOUL BALL!” Both sides of the bleachers erupted into cheers. Everyone was rooting for this kid now.

The kid looked at the umpire as if he didn’t understand. Then a huge grin spread across his face like the sun breaking through clouds after a storm. He was in rarified air now. He was going to—for the first time ever—see a fourth pitch.

This time the pre-pitch ritual was double time. Kickkickkicktaptaptapwindmillcrouch His impatience was palpable. That fourth pitch couldn't come soon enough. For everyone else in attendance, however, the inexorable pull of his impending doom returned. His coach was already planning his post-game speech to include the mighty swing that was almost a hit. His mother was going to do her best to convince him that the swing through Dairy Queen for blizzards after the game was a reward for how well he had done rather than the perennial "because he had tried so hard." The pitcher chalked it up to blind luck and got ready to deal the next pitch. He set, rocked, and fired.

If you've been around baseball long enough, some sounds are unmistakable. The pop of a fastball hitting a catcher's mitt is one of those. Or the sound of teams lined up high fiving each other after the game: slapping hands and the steady drone of "goodgamegoodgamegoodgame." In major league stadiums, it's the crack when a hitter really gets a hold of one. In the pros, swinging lumber, it's a sound like a two hundred year old oak tree being split in half by a bolt of lightning.

A metal bat doesn't make that cracking sound. It's a solid thunk and a metallic tink at the same time. It's not nearly as majestic but no less unmistakable. There's another sound under those two wrapped together sounds that you almost never hear. It's a hum like tuning fork that's usually cut off as the bat hits the ground, dropped by the hitter as he leaves the box on the way to first base and glory beyond. If the batter doesn't drop the bat, you still can't hear that hum because the cheers drown it out.

I've only ever heard that hum once. On this day that bat hummed like all the angels in heaven were lifting their voices as one, rejoicing to witness one of God's own miracles. The limits of human physiology and the laws of physics had been briefly set aside as the ball flew down the third base line, rising, rising, rising. No one cheered. No one made a sound. The hitter stood in the box holding that

humming bat and watched it go. Behind him stood the catcher and behind him the ump in a perfect line. The left fielder, practically playing on the dirt, turned to watch. No one else moved.

The ball was still rising when it went over the fence. It was higher than the top of the foul pole. Staring into the setting sun it was hard to tell which side of the line it was on. The hum of the bat faded and all eyes moved from where they'd last seen the ball—it had leveled off at cruising altitude and the seatbelt sign had been turned off—to the umpire, silently waiting for the call. The moment stretched out as the umpire just stood there, staring into the sun. Seasons changed. The kids playing t-ball on the next field over grew up, had kids of their own, coached their t-ball teams and still the umpire stood staring. Then, slowly, his hand rose level with his head, his index finger extended and started making slow circles.

Sound returned to the universe in a shockwave of cheers. The kid went into his home run trot like he went yard every day. He got a high five from his first base coach and the first baseman. He got high fives from all the infielders as he went by. He got mobbed by his team at third base and they all hopped and cheered their way down to home plate. They continued hopping and cheering their way back to the dugout. It was a good thing the kid was wearing his helmet for all the pounding he was taking to the head and shoulders. The t-ball players from the next field over witnessed the births of their grandchildren and still the team hopped and cheered outside the dugout.

The opposing team's head coach walked over to the umpire. They stood next to each other at home plate watching the celebration. The coach took off his hat, wiped his brow and said quietly, "Hey, Blue, I'm pretty sure that ball was foul."

I took off my mask, looked over at him, nodded and said, "You want to tell him?"