

“Blubba” Kowalski

This is the story of a young man whose unfathomable size was both a blessing and a curse; an incredible advantage and a tremendous obstacle; his best friend and his biggest enemy. He was named Walter Stanislaus Kowalski the third after his father and his grandfather before him, and he would grow to become a skyscraper among buildings, a sequoia among smaller trees, and a man among children. It is also a story about a young boy whose heart was as big as the body that carried it.

Part I – The Early Years

There was an unusual level of unrest in the Stork Community. Rumor had it that in the history of record keeping as it related to babies, the largest newborn on record was about to be born. The reason the storks were so concerned was, as everyone knows, because storks deliver babies.

The storks had been hearing these rumblings for the past few weeks as the time grew closer for this “blessed event.” As a policy, stork baby carriers were chosen strictly at random. If your name and number came up, the delivery job was yours. Anticipating this, some storks were hitting the gym in an attempt to build some last minute muscle to help carry this large package. Others were resorting to another time-tested strategy—calling in sick. But the fact remained, even the largest and strongest members of the team doubted that this particular delivery was achievable. It was simply a matter of physics. Despite their large wingspans and strong necks, if the latest rumor were true, just getting all of that weight off the ground and then flying for any distance with that immense wriggling “bundle of joy” would be almost impossible. Perhaps several storks flying in tandem might work, but no stork in memory remembered that tactic ever working without issues. Maybe they needed to turn this one over to the “Triplet Delivery Group.” Never in the long history of the Baby Delivery Division were they asked to deliver an infant that large. So the story went.



Walter and Martha Kowalski were about to become parents for the first time. To say that they were *big* people might be an understatement. Walter stood at six foot seven and tipped the scales at the “north end” of three hundred pounds. Martha herself was almost six-feet tall in her bare feet (which was her usual indoor choice of foot attire), and putting it in politically correct terms, weighed “substantially” more than the average woman. Living on a farm in eastern Iowa, their hefty bodies were products of a lifestyle that consisted of working long hours, usually from sunrise to sunset, and eating whatever it took to maintain their strength and stamina for all of that activity. The

Kowalskis believed that nothing in life was given to them. They had to earn it. They worked hard for everything they owned which included their house and barn, a John Deere tractor, an inventory of farming equipment, and an Ford pickup truck that was beginning to show signs of rust. Being farmers, their very essence came from the land they worked, and they worked it hard. They were God-fearing, third generation farmers who personified the mid-western American work ethic, and not much had changed in their lifestyles since they were children.

Martha's pregnancy was welcome news. The Kowalskis had always wanted a child, and since their marriage four years earlier, they hoped their prayers would be answered. Now, in just a few months, they would hear the "pitter-patter" of small . . . well . . . make that rather large feet, as their new baby grew and took his first steps. Yes, they knew the baby was going to be a boy and that was fine. He would grow up big and strong, and eventually become a great help around the house and the farm. After all, that's how Walter and his father before him grew up. What would make anyone think that his son's life would be different?

But it would be.

Clinton, Iowa

On a hot and humid summer afternoon in Clinton, word of the birth of the town's newest resident spread quickly. Walter Stanislaus Kowalski III entered this world amid local fanfare and with an unusually high degree of media hype because there were several newsworthy facts relating to this birth—the most obvious of which was his size. He appeared to be more than twice as large as the other babies the storks "delivered" to the hospital's nursery wing. Reports had him tipping the scales at over twenty-one pounds!

"He's really going to be a big boy" said one of the attending nurses amid a slew of photographers and news reporters touting cameras and recording devices.

"He looks like he can just get up and walk right out of that nursery," said another hospital employee. "I wouldn't want to get stuck with his grocery bills for the next eighteen years." And so the stories went. In fact, he was less than one day old when he made the front page of the local newspaper, *The Clinton Herald*.



Early Childhood

The next six years went by quickly. The early fanfare and publicity slowly faded away, and that was a blessing for the Kowalskis. Raising a child in today's world is difficult enough without being under the microscope that constant media attention brings. Martha and Walter (who everyone including his wife called Bubba) did everything in their power to see that their son had a normal and productive childhood.

Despite being astonishingly large for his age, young Walter was a healthy and physically strong child. What was noteworthy regarding his physical attributes was the fact that while his body was large, he was not fat. His father noticed that he was able to move and even pick up heavy objects without much effort as he helped around the house and the farm. In fact, some teenagers would have trouble moving or lifting things that six year-old Walter moved with ease. He also noticed that his son possessed a superior degree of physical dexterity that included exceptional hand-eye coordination.

"I'm telling you, Martha, that boy is strong!" Bubba would often say."

"Well, he's got your genes, and soon he'll be as big as you!" Martha would playfully say.

"And your side of the family had nothing to do with any of this?"

"Well, maybe a little," she said with an innocent smile. "You know, he'll be starting school next month and I'm sure gonna miss having him around here during the day. That boy is real helpful."

Bubba responded, "Now, Martha, this will give him a chance to make some new friends and maybe, just maybe, get himself a ticket out of here some day."

After a brief moment of contemplated silence, Martha responded. "You know, Bubba, I've been thinking about that a lot lately. That boy is special. So big, and yet so kind . . . and he's smart too. He's gonna make us proud. I just know it."

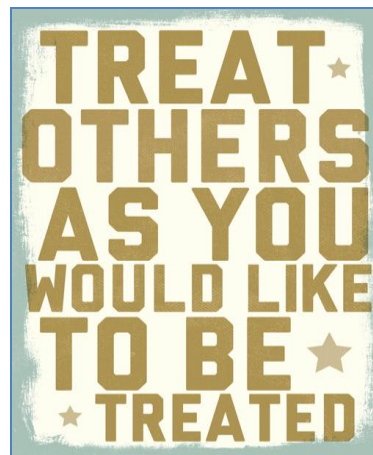
"If you remember, you used to say that about me."

"You know, Bubba Sweet Cakes, I still do."

Frankly, neither Bubba nor Martha wanted their son to carry on what up to now had been a family tradition and grow up to be a farmer.

They both experienced several generations of that hard-working and thankless life. What they really wanted was for their son to get a good education. That would be the key. With a college degree he would be able to move into a line of work that no one in the Kowalski family had yet to attain. But he was only six years old, and there was plenty of time and undoubtedly lots of hard work ahead. For the first five and a half years of young Walter's life, they did their jobs as parents to the best of their ability. Television time was strictly regulated and monitored. They constantly read to their son and encouraged him to do the same until he could actually

read aloud from books and newspapers. He also knew many verses from the Bible, and he had already learned the most important lesson life has to teach—Treat others as you would like to be treated, otherwise known as the "Golden Rule."



Starting School

When children get together to play, especially young boys, rarely do they call each other by their given names. Whether it is the formality of the name itself that calls for that change or the fact boys possess a built-in sense of childish humor that requires them to call their friends names that are both humorous and a somewhat unbecoming. If your name is Walter, you can pretty much guarantee that your friends will call you something else. Often those names can be flattering, but other times they can be disheartening and humiliating. There is a fine line between bullying and humor. Yes, children can be cruel, and it would take an exceptional person to overcome the childhood insensitivity that would soon occur. But who would have the nerve or the courage to make fun of a child that was twice as big as they were? Neither Bubba nor Martha had anticipated something like that as they prepared their son for the start of school.

In small Midwestern communities, local residents usually know everyone, but that wasn't necessarily the case in Clinton, Iowa, a small town located about thirty miles north of Davenport, its closest large city. The mighty Mississippi River flowed along the town's eastern perimeter and framed the border between Iowa and Illinois. West Bluff Elementary School was a little more than two miles from the Kowalski property. It was a fairly modern school on the southwestern outskirts of Clinton, and it was there that young Walter Kowalski would begin his formal education.



It had been six years since Walter's birth, and the local media fanfare that surrounded that event was suddenly resurrected as Martha Kowalski accompanied her son to the West Bluff Elementary student registration. Most Clinton residents had not given that event much thought since then. Out of sight . . . out of mind, but at five foot six and one hundred and fifty pounds, young Walter was bigger than most of the mothers present as they stood in line waiting to sign up their future first graders. Heads turned and the customary buzz that is commonplace in rooms that hold simultaneous conversations came to a stop as Martha and Walter made their way to the registration table.

A cheerful and enthusiastic woman in her early thirties was in charge of directing parents and their children to the proper line for the registration process. Being barely five feet tall, she had to look up to see not only Martha but also her son. "Can I help you?" she said with more of a look of curiosity than the usual formality of someone in her position.

"I think so," said Martha. "I have these forms I need to complete so I can register my son for first grade."



“That’s what we’re here for. See that lady in the beige outfit at the front table? Her name is Nancy and she will take it from there.” She turned and looked up at Martha and said, “Is your new first grader here with you today?”

Somewhat taken back by the question, Martha looked at Nancy and slowly turned towards her son who stood by her side and nodded her head in his direction. “Yes . . . this *is* my son, and *he* will be starting school here.”

Slowly, everyone in the room began putting the pieces together. This had to be the young boy they had read about in the newspaper six years ago. He had to be “The Largest Baby Born in Clinton.” That was when the “buzz” returned to the room and the new subject of the backdrop conversations was now centered on the largest first grader anyone in Clinton, Iowa had ever seen.

One Week Later

The first day of school is always an adventure. There isn’t a mother who hasn’t gone through some degree of concern and nervousness, much of which proves to be unwarranted relating to that event. Mothers instinctively know that there is a good chance that their child will cry shortly after being dropped off at school. This condition is a form of separation anxiety, and it can be present to some degree in both parents and children. It is defined as a display of fear and/or distress when faced with situations of separation from the home or from a certain individual. What made the Kowalski anxiety separation so strange particularly to outsiders was the fact that young Walter was bigger than Ms.



Mullen, who would be his first grade teacher. Casual observers did not have to look hard to find the residue of a tear or two still moist in each of the young boy’s eyes as he waived goodbye to his mother. But despite his size, he was still a six year-old boy with all the feelings and emotions that go along with that stage of his young life.

First grade classrooms are set up to accommodate first graders, but in this case, simple ergonomics would become a problem. In a typical first grade schoolroom, the



tables and chairs are small compared to those of a junior high school classroom and rightly so. First graders are small. There is no need to have children sit on booster chairs to reach their tables or desks. That would prove to be counterproductive to the type of environment schools strive to achieve during those formative years in child development. The manufacturers that provide this style of furniture for elementary schools know that the average first grade boy is just over four foot tall and weighs

about sixty pounds, and that first grade girls are slightly smaller. If you were five foot six and one hundred and fifty pounds, you simply weren't going to fit into those little chairs or feel comfortable in that tiny environment even though you just celebrated your sixth birthday a month earlier.

Ms. Mullen

Margaret Ann Mullen had moved to Clinton after her graduation from the University of Iowa five years ago where she had received her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and followed that up with her Master's in Education. During her time in college, she was a well-rounded student-athlete who starred on the university's gymnastics team earning All-American honors for three straight years. She also received awards for academic excellence and was named to the Big Ten Academic All-American team as a senior. She had completed her student teaching requirement in Iowa City at a local elementary school that was less than two miles from the University's main campus. It was shortly after that she had answered an online posting for the School Board of Clinton County, which was ninety miles to the east. Her resume and credentials were reviewed and she was granted an interview. Her interviews with the principal and the department heads went extremely well, and she was offered a position as a first grade teacher at West Bluff Elementary School.

In Ms. Mullen's first four years at West Bluff Elementary, she received praise from both the school's staff and the parents of her students. Her classroom was well organized and always depicted cheerful themes. Some of those subject matters were seasonal while others displayed a form of historical significance. Despite her petite size, she had a big heart that was capable of showing tremendous empathy when the need arose. Instinctively, she became aware of the different levels of comprehension of her students and used that ability to dedicate special time to those who were a bit slower in picking up certain points while managing to keep the more advanced children occupied and challenged. She could also communicate across the barriers of age and gender, whether it was with students, parents, or other teachers. These are gifts that many teachers simply do not have and rarely achieve even after years of teaching. She was the perfect first grade teacher for Walter "Blubba" Kowalski.

When school started that last week of August, Ms. Mullen did what she always did on the first day. She assembled her latest group of first graders in the cafeteria and marched them down the hall to her classroom. This year, her first grade class numbered



seventeen . . . nine girls and eight boys. Each student held another student's hand as they walked forming a single-file line that resembled more of slow moving and meandering "S" than a straight line. Upon arriving at her classroom, she directed the children to sit on a series of colorful floor mats that she had previously arranged to form a semi-circle. She found that this method was an excellent "ice breaker"

when it came to introductions. It also gave her the opportunity to obtain quite a bit of information about each child quickly that would usually take much longer in a more traditional environment. There she could see who had social skills, which children were shy or outgoing, and how many were polite and knew basic etiquette. As was her practice, she alternated the seating arrangements . . . boy, girl, boy, girl.

What made this class different was the boy at the end of the line, and therefore was the last to enter the room and be seated with the others on the floor. She had noticed him the week before during registration and had commented to the other teachers about how large he was for a six year-old. He was taller than she, but despite his size, she sensed shyness and a degree of insecurity. Her instincts also told her that there was much more to that child too. Mental note number one . . . she would probably need to help him in those areas.

In the hall outside her classroom, a small group of older students began to gather. Since grades four and five were located across the hall from Ms. Mullen's first grade classroom, muted chatter and whispers of a few curious children quickly grew into a small crowd of inquisitive onlookers as they saw the largest first grader anyone had ever seen walk through the door and sit on the floor with other first graders who were quickly dwarfed by his presence. The crowd was quickly dispersed as teachers ushered their students into their respective classrooms. But the "buzz" would continue, and their questions persisted throughout the rest of the day. Who was that enormous boy?

"Blubber" or "Blubba"

Young children are innocent, and for the most part, first graders still fit into that category. Most are too young to have learned how to gossip or make fun of others, but fifth graders aren't. As lunch time approached on that first day of school, the "buzz" would pick up again as the younger students were guided to their respective places in the school cafeteria. Heads turned and all side conversations stopped as Ms. Mullen walked her first grade class through the hall. The sight of young Walter holding a classmate's hand as they walked single-file through the hallway attracted everyone's attention.

"Woha" said a fifth grader to the girl standing next to him, "that kid is bigger than the teacher!" It didn't take long for the rest of the group to chime in.

"Who is that . . . that . . . blubber-boy? Is he really in the first grade?"

"Noooo way" said another fifth grader. "That kid's so big his shadow weighs forty pounds." Laughter ensued as the fifth graders started competing in an impromptu contest of seeing who could come up with the best insult.

When another fifth grader added, "We better hide our lunches today," the entire group started to laugh. That prompted Ms. Mullen to stop, almost in mid stride and glare at the group of older students. The look she gave to the offending children was stern and each student knew that she meant business. But that episode would prove to be just the beginning.

News in small circles travels fast. Somehow the name "Blubber Boy" caught on despite its basically cruel and derogatory connotation. From that point, Walter Kowalski

would be referred to as “Blubber Boy” or “Blubber.” Before the end of the first day of school, just about everyone at West Bluff Elementary knew that name referred to young Walter Kowalski.

Shortly before lunch, Ms. Mullen was in the process of organizing a new project for her first graders when she overheard the following conversation between a shy young girl with bright red glasses named Cynthia Dudley and Walter Kowalski. What she heard made her stop what she was doing and marvel at the process of those two young minds.

“How come you’re so big and everybody calls you Blubber?” said Cynthia as she looked up to Walter through her red glasses that seemed a bit too big for her diminutive persona.

Walter quickly replied, “I guess ‘cause I’m big, but not as big as my dad or my grandpa. They’re really big—and strong too.”

“But Blubber isn’t a nice name. I think they’re making fun of you.”

“It’s not a bad name. I think I like it. Everyone calls my dad and grandpa Bubba. Maybe they are trying to call me that name too . . . only they haven’t gotten it right yet,” he said with a degree of confidence accompanied by a nod of his head and the beginning of a smile. “They’re not making fun of me. Besides, my mom said that words could never hurt me. They’re only words.”

“You think so?”

“Yep. I think so.”

Ms. Mullen tucked away this bit of information from that enlightening conversation in her mind knowing that it might come in handy. Only she didn’t know how soon that would be.

Jonathan Dudley

Being the middle child of the three Dudley siblings, Jonathan had constant reminders that he was in fact in the middle. His brother who was almost six years older was entering his senior year of high school and was “practically an adult” if you asked him. His younger sister, Cynthia was a first grader at West Bluff Elementary, the same school he attended. As an eleven year-old fifth grader, he was now saddled with the socially “un-cool” responsibility of making sure his younger sister was with him at the student pickup area at the end of the day. His mother’s words still echoed in his head from this morning’s conversation.

“Jonathan, don’t forget that you are now the ‘big brother’ and need to make sure your sister is with you when I get back here at 3:15 this afternoon” she said.

“Do I have to? I mean, won’t her teacher take her there? First graders aren’t allowed to do anything by themselves at school. They’re still babies!”



Mrs. Dudley reacted as most mothers would. “Jonathan, your sister is *not* a baby, and I remember your brother helping you out the same way when you were her age.”

From the back seat, Cynthia exclaimed, “I’m not a baby. I was a baby last year in kindergarten. I graduated to the first grade.”

First graders are capable of diffusing the mood and intensity of just about any conversation with seemingly out of nowhere remarks. Her mother stopped what she was about to say to her son and remarked with a smile, “That’s right Cynthia, *you* are not a baby. Just be sure to be with your brother when I come back to pick you up this afternoon.”

Once Mrs. Dudley made sure Cynthia was checked in at Ms. Mullen’s room, she waived goodbye to Jonathan as he weaved his way through the horde of students and eventually across the hall to his fifth grade classroom. Jonathan was a strong and athletic child who was very popular among his classmates and friends. He excelled in soccer and was also the shortstop on Clinton’s Little League all-star baseball team that came close to winning the District Championship the summer before. Other West Bluff Elementary students considered Jonathan a leader and looked up to him. To them he was “cool.” Among fifth grade students, and young children in general, there is an incredible amount of peer pressure, and this can be both good and bad. In the case of those who considered Jonathan a leader, it would be a good thing.

Lunch Time

Because West Bluff Elementary was home to slightly more than four hundred students this year, lunch periods in the cafeteria were split into three forty-five minute sessions in order to accommodate everyone. While the school’s administrators tried to keep the age groups similar, there were instances in which younger schoolchildren had to share their lunch hour in the cafeteria with older students. This was not an ideal scenario, but despite the age differences, order was maintained because there were always teachers and aides present. There was also assigned seating.

Lunch period is always a good time to catch up with your classmates and all of the cool new stuff that kids weren’t allowed to talk about during class, and that’s exactly what Jonathan intended to do. He remembered that during the summer, several of his friends went away to camp and others traveled on family vacations. He wanted to hear about those experiences first hand and also relate some of his own adventures. He secretly hoped that his assigned cafeteria seat wasn’t in the middle of “Nerdville.” When his teacher directed him to his seat, he was surprised to see that his younger sister, Cynthia, was seated just two tables away with her new first grade class. He also noticed that she was sitting next to that incredibly big kid. Both youngsters were facing Jonathan, and Cynthia waived enthusiastically upon recognizing her older brother. This created a somewhat embarrassing moment for him when the boys at his table saw this and began imitating her waive and saying, “Hi Jonathan!” in unison using high-pitched voices.

“Cut it out, guys” he exclaimed through partially clenched teeth as he lowered his eyes to the table and resumed eating his lunch.

“Is that your sister’s new boyfriend?” asked Jeremy, one of Jonathan’s teammates on his club soccer team. “If he is, you better save some of your lunch for her. That kid will probably eat hers and everyone else’s.”

With that remark, others started to laugh, but when Jonathan spoke this time, everyone’s attention moved directly to him.

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend. She’s only six,” replied Jonathan emphatically and with a tone indicating that he was strictly business. “Leave her alone!”

When Jonathan’s words settled in, that table quickly shifted its conversation away from the “big kid” and the little girl with the bright red glasses and back to the purpose of that assemblage . . . lunch. But that wasn’t the case with the other table of fifth graders to Jonathan’s left.

Some teachers have exceptional class control and are better at discipline than others. But all of us have had teachers who weren’t true disciplinarians, and as students we were able to get away with much more silliness and clowning around than we would with a strict teacher. Mr. Moran’s fifth grade class would fall into the second category.

It didn’t take that group more than a few minutes before they noticed the “largest first grader ever” sitting at the next table and stated slinging verbal jabs, even with Mr. Moran nearby.

“Oh no . . . I feel the ground shaking!” said the tallest and most vocal of that group, Jeremy Radcliffe.

“No, that’s just Blubber Boy walking,” his best friend, Richie added without missing a beat. “We better not talk too loud. If we get him mad, he might eat one of us.”

“Yeah, I heard he had a younger brother but he ate him!” mocked Mike Preston, the third member of the lunch group who were also close friends outside of school.

Mr. Moran, who was within hearing distance of those remarks as he patrolled his section of the cafeteria walked towards them and said, “You boys need to stop that” as he lingered momentarily. “Understood?”

The fifth graders nodded in unison and stopped their taunts upon hearing their teacher’s words. Perhaps because Mr. Moran kept walking and did not pause long enough to let those words sink in or direct that “killer” stare in their direction that they had seen from Ms. Mullen earlier in the day, they continued their taunting once their teacher was out of earshot.

Slowly, audible taunts of “Blubber! Blubber!” began between bites of sandwiches, sips of juice, and a variety of giggles. It didn’t take long before Ms. Mullen became aware of what was going on from the fifth graders sitting two tables away. Also caught in her peripheral vision was the sight of young Walter Kowalski apparently ignoring those insults and simply eating his lunch. Before anyone knew it, she had scurried her 5’ 1” frame across the room and was now standing directly in front of the offending students. Her presence summoned the attention of everyone in that section of the cafeteria. Placing her palms on the table and leaning forward with a determined sense of purpose, she took control of a potentially unruly situation.

“What is going on here?” she said as she made direct and purposeful eye contact with each of the boys she had seen making those cruel and insensitive insults. “I know each and every one of you. Did you forget that a few years ago, you were *my* first grade students? Jeremy, I’m really disappointed in you. I can remember you crying when

someone called you names. I guess you forgot what *that* felt like didn't you? And Richard . . . apparently you forgot about the day you wouldn't come out of the coatroom after you sat down too quickly and ripped the seat of your pants. Wasn't that the same day one of your classmates said that you were fat? And now you are doing the same thing to a poor first grader who hasn't done a thing to any of you! Yes, you should be ashamed. Apparently you don't care if anyone gets hurt by your words and cruel jokes, do you?" She continued to make eye contact with each of the offenders, shifting from one to another until they eventually broke that contact and looked down at the table. "All of you should at least try to give others a chance. Why can't you just try to see the good in people you don't know instead of making fun of them and hurting them with words?"

Silence followed. Not only at the table of students receiving that reprimand, but the rest of the cafeteria as well. Perhaps it was because Ms. Mullen continued staring into each offending fifth grader's eyes until they totally got her message. Slowly, heads nodded and apologies were mouthed quietly. Normal lunchtime conversations gradually resumed. It also seemed that the bell signaling the end of lunch and the beginning of the next period took forever to ring.

A day of surprises . . .

Cynthia Dudley wasn't sure if she liked wearing her new red glasses. Several months ago, her mother had noticed a problem as she and her three children were in line at a fast food restaurant. The boys had their orders placed when she noticed that her daughter seemed to hesitate.

"Come on, Cynthia, that menu hasn't changed in like forever," Jonathan said impatiently.

Her mother chimed in, "Just pick something, sweetheart, we're holding up the line."

It was then that her mother noticed Cynthia squinting.

"Cynthia, are you having problems seeing the menu?"

"No, mom, I can see it, but it looks . . . it looks blurry today."

The next day Cynthia and her mother were at the optometrist where the eye doctor determined that she did have a slight condition of myopia—more commonly known as nearsightedness. She would need glasses to see objects in the distance clearly.



During class, Cynthia would frequently remove her glasses and place them with her school supplies when she was working on things up close and felt that she didn't need them. Ms. Mullen had noticed this, and for the second time that day reminded her to "put on those pretty red glasses so you can see what everyone else in class sees."

When the bell rang at 3:00 pm signaling the end of school for the day, Ms. Mullen gathered her students and did a quick check to see that all seventeen were accounted for and ready to leave. At that point, she formed her single file line and led the way to

the student pickup area. That walk barely took one minute because her classroom was one of the closest to that end of the day destination.

Since it was late August in Clinton, Iowa, and the temperature was in the low eighties, the school's doors were propped open to facilitate the pickup of students by their parents at the two designated pickup areas. This allowed a pleasant summer breeze to find its way inside the school and travel through the hallways and classrooms. But besides providing a welcome supply of fresh air, it also created the potential for certain undesirable "outdoor" critters that do not belong in a school building to also have that same freedom of movement.

"Ms. Mullen," cried Cynthia, "I forgot my glasses. I think they're back in the room."

Experience taught Ms. Mullen that this would be an almost daily occurrence with first graders. Usually objects left behind by young students were not important and they could remain where they were until the next day, but in the case of Cynthia Dudley's glasses, she would have to make an exception. Knowing that there were other teachers in the student pickup area to monitor her students, she could take Cynthia by the hand and go back to her classroom to retrieve her glasses.

Her classroom was at the end of the hall next to the school's open recess area. The outside doors were propped open allowing her to get a glimpse of the field of newly mowed grass as she walked hand-in-hand with Cynthia.

"Do you remember where you put your glasses?" Ms. Mullen asked Cynthia.

Cynthia paused briefly before replying, "I think they are with the pictures we drew."

"Oh, you mean the pictures and supplies we all put away in the plastic bins that have our names on them?"

Hesitating, Cynthia slowly responded, "I . . . I think so."

"You think so. I guess we'll find out. You really shouldn't take off those pretty red glasses during school. They look very nice on you."

Seemingly contemplating her next words, Cynthia replied, "Everybody tells me that, but I'm not sure I like the way I look with them on. You don't wear glasses, Ms. Mullen."

"Not everybody needs glasses, sweetie. But if I had to wear glasses, I'd certainly pick red ones just like yours!"

Those words brought a smile to both as they approached the open door to the First grade classroom.

Once inside, Ms. Mullen walked directly to the plastic storage bins that were neatly stacked three high along the wall that ran adjacent to the room's entrance and looked for the one marked Cynthia Dudley. There it was, the second from the left, and of course at the bottom. There were two other bins stacked on top of it. With Cynthia standing just behind her, Ms. Mullen began removing the bins until she reached Cynthia's.

But that wasn't the only thing she discovered.

An act of heroism . . . or just another day

It had been five full minutes since Ms. Mullen and Cynthia rushed back to their first grade classroom. Jonathan Dudley had arrived at the parent pickup area with his classmates just in time to see his sister and her teacher walking quickly down the hall in the opposite direction. While he didn't give it much thought, he found it strange that they still had not returned when he saw his mother's car pull up to the curb.

"Where is your sister?" said Mrs. Dudley to her son.

"I don't know, mom. I saw her and her teacher walking down the hall a few minutes ago," he replied as he turned and hurriedly scanned the group of students. "They're still not back."

Mrs. Dudley, who couldn't leave her car in the pickup lane unattended, said to her son, "Well, go find her! I knew something like this would happen. She's just a first grader."

With a resigned look, knowing that he had shirked his responsibility of making sure his sister was with him, he answered, "OK, mom, I'll go and get her."

With that, Jonathan started down the hall towards Ms. Mullen's first grade classroom.

"Stop! Don't come in here" cried Ms. Mullen in a stern and somewhat fearful voice as she spotted Jonathan at the door and about to enter.

Jonathan stopped in mid step and froze upon hearing his former teacher's words.

"There's a s-s-s-snake . . . Can you *please* get help?" she said in a trembling and fearful voice.

Jonathan stood confused and bewildered at the door. He couldn't help but see the terror in Ms. Mullen's eyes as she held his younger sister, shielding her from the apparent source of panic and danger. She stood defensively with her back against the wall in the far corner of the room, and whatever was causing that fear and panic was evidently between her and the door blocking her escape. It was hidden from his sight by stacks of plastic tubs that housed student's supplies. A second later he heard it . . . that distinctive hiss and rattle. He knew enough about snakes to recognize the sound. That was when he knew for sure that the threat was very real.

"Ok, I'll get help. Just . . . just stay where you are," he said, quickly realizing just how senseless that statement actually sounded. Where were they going to go? He turned and began to run towards the group of students and teachers that were in sight and just down the hall.

"There's a snake in Ms. Mullen's room!" he shouted, hoping someone, a maintenance man or somebody with a net could get to the snake and capture it before it bit anyone. Breathlessly he said, "It's got her cornered and she can't get out. My sister's in there too!"

Many of the girls shrieked and there was a genuine look of panic on the faces of some of the teachers.

"We've got to call someone!" an adult voice from the crowd cried.

"What kind of snake? Is it poisonous?" said another anonymous voice.

"Let's move these kids outside," proclaimed another teacher, "Now!"

Amid the confusion, the teachers ushered students out of the building while other curiosity seekers rushed down the hall to Ms. Mullen's room to catch a glimpse what was really happening.

Seemingly unnoticed by the newly formed crowd, young Walter Kowalski walked back to his classroom to see if it really was a snake, and if it were, what kind of snake it was. Since his early childhood, he knew about vermin. His father had taught him well regarding which snakes were harmless and which ones could be dangerous, especially if provoked. He could name most of the native species and really didn't understand why people were afraid of them. He waited his turn by the door and then poked his head in the classroom. It was then that he saw Ms. Mullen protectively hugging his new friend Cynthia as they huddled in the room's far corner. He just knew that he had to go inside.

"Walter, get back! There's a snake!" said Ms. Mullen as she pointed to a spot directly in front of her.

For a six year-old, Walter Kowalski responded to his teacher with a degree of maturity that belied his age. He stepped into the room to the amazement of the others.

"What kind of snake is it, Ms. Mullen?" he asked calmly. "If you don't move and show it you aren't afraid, it won't hurt you."

As he slowly approached his teacher and his new friend, he heard the distinctive clatter of a Timber Rattlesnake, a somewhat rare but poisonous snake found in that part of the country.

Walter knew that he had to approach a Timber Rattlesnake from behind because if the snake saw him, it would be almost impossible to capture because of its quickness. He had seen his father do this once and hoped that he could do the same thing. This particular snake was over three feet long meaning meant that it was almost fully grown. He also knew that this species of snake was dangerous when threatened, so he would need to move slowly and quietly so he would not attract its attention.

As he approached the coiled snake from behind, he could hear Cynthia



whimpering with fear as she burrowed herself deeper into her teacher's arms. Slowly . . . step by quiet step he advanced until he was directly behind the snake and facing Ms. Mullen. He then got a chance to see the vermin clearly and to assess the situation. To do this the right way, he would need to crouch down and slowly separate his hands. Since he was left handed, he knew that he stood his best chance of success if he could initially grip the snake by its neck with his left hand. Squatting perfectly still with his eyes concentrating on the area directly below the back of the snake's head, he struck with a series of

lightning-quick movements. His left hand grabbed the snake. As he did this, he increased the force of his grip and raised the snake above his head at the same time using his right hand to grip its lower body. Holding the squirming and writhing snake, he then said to his teacher, "It's Ok, Ms. Mullen. He didn't mean any harm. I'm taking him out by the field so he can go back to his family."

As Walter walked out of the classroom with the snake writhing and fighting his grip in an attempt to get free, the throng of awe-struck and wide-eyed students parted to make way for him as he carried the almost four-foot long Timber Rattlesnake out of the building to the adjacent field.

“Did you see that?” remarked Jennifer, a fourth grade student.

“That was awesome!” cried another wide-eyed young girl.

“That kid isn’t afraid of anything. He just picked up that rattlesnake and walked away with it like it was nothing,” said Mr. Moran to another teacher. “I can’t believe how quick his hands were.”

For the rest of that afternoon, and well into the evening, talk of “the kid who saved his teacher and a little girl from a ‘deadly poisonous’ rattlesnake” resonated everywhere.

Perhaps the person who was the most impressed by young Walter’s actions (aside from his grateful teacher, Ms. Mullen) was Jonathan Dudley. Maybe it was the great big hug of gratitude he received from his sister as she raced into his arms still shaking from the ordeal that did it for him. That’s when all the events of what had just happened seemed to come together.

“Blubba saved us,” said Cynthia to her brother.

“Who is Blubba?” remarked Jonathan. By this time, Ms. Mullen was standing next to Jonathan and his sister and also heard Cynthia’s remark.

Cynthia responded, “Blubba . . . that’s his name. He almost told me that. His father and grandfather are called Bubba but he’s different.”

Ms. Mullen interjected, “His name is Walter. And how did he ‘almost tell’ you about his name?”

“He told me he likes it when the kids call him Blubba. He said they’re really not making fun of him. I think he wants everyone to call him Blubba.” Her smile and enthusiasm let them know that there was probably some substance to that crazy story.

Sometimes life provides extraordinary tools to ordinary people

After releasing the snake into the field adjacent to West Bluff Elementary, Walter “Blubba” Kowalski made his way inside the school building. Students and teachers cheered and attempted to slap his hand with “high fives” as he walked past them. A level of shyness materialized, because he was not used to that kind of attention. He was simply focused on seeing that his teacher and his new friend were OK. When he saw them standing in the hall outside his first grade classroom, he immediately headed towards them. The first one to speak was Cynthia.

“Blubba, you saved our lives!” she exclaimed with a childlike innocence that amused Ms. Mullen and other bystanders. Mrs. Dudley was also present waiting to personally thank her daughter’s new hero along with Martha Kowalski who had also joined the group after hearing what her son had just done.

Cynthia’s words took him by surprise. He was basically a shy young boy, but there was something about the way Cynthia said the name “Blubba” that made him smile.

“Thanks. It was no big deal,” he sheepishly said.

His mother gave him a big hug and then pushed him away slightly so she could look at him. Smiling, she said, “Blubba? Is that your new name? When did that happen?”

“Yep, that’s my new name. If dad and grandpa are Bubba, why can’t I be Blubba?”

She half smiled as her eyes briefly met Ms. Mullen’s and the other teachers with quizzical gazes. “Sure, if you want us to call you Blubba, we’ll call you Blubba. But remember, at school, you have to write your name as Walter. Got it?”

“Sure, mom, I got it.”

“You know, son, I’m really proud of what you did today, and so is everybody else.”

Ms. Mullen then chimed in, “Thank you Walter . . . oh, excuse me . . . Blubba.”

With that, everyone had a good laugh, which turned out to be a great way to ease all of the tension and drama that had just occurred.

An Anomaly

Living a totally normal life for the average person is difficult at best, but it can be more of a challenge if you are considered an anomaly. While his parents did their best to raise young Blubba the right way, there was always the obvious when it came to social interaction—his size. They had done a remarkable job keeping his life values balanced, and to his real friends, he had gained genuine acceptance. But he still harbored moments of self-doubt stemming from questions such as, *Why am I so different?* His mother always managed to put positive spins on those questions, but despite her best efforts, those periods of “self-doubt” and “why me” references never completely went away. There were evenings when his parents would go into his room to say good night only to see their son sitting on the edge of his bed and staring out his window apparently immersed in thought.

“Son, you look deep in thought,” his father would say.

“Oh, dad, Sorry. I didn’t hear you come in. I was just thinking . . .”

The tone of his son’s voice along with his body language indicated to his father that whatever his son was about to say was something important—at least to him.

“Thinking about what, son?”

Taking a deep breath, Blubba contemplated his next words. “I was thinking that maybe because I’m big I can do things other kids can’t do. You know . . . things that can be really good. But I don’t want people to be afraid of me.”

Somewhat surprised by his son’s statement, but not wanting to show that his remark might have caught him off guard, he nodded his head supportively and said, “Well, you can. And you do. Just look at what you did at school with that snake. Everybody was really thankful for that, even the teachers. And I’ll bet none of them



could have done what you did. In fact, they *were* afraid, but you made all of that go away.”

“Sure, dad, I guess you’re right, but I’m so much bigger than any of my friends. How come they aren’t afraid of me?”

“Afraid? Why would they be afraid of you?” his dad said with a curious look. People are only afraid of things that are bad that they think might hurt them.”

“But dad, people aren’t afraid of little things . . . just big things. People can step on a small bug and squish it. It’s no big deal. But if it’s a really big bug, nobody wants to go near it. They’re afraid it will do something bad to them.”

“But you haven’t done anything to make people afraid of you. Only a cruel or hateful person would use how big he is to make somebody afraid. You wouldn’t do anything like that, would you?” Bubba said to his son with an inquisitive tone.

Standing up and facing his father, he said, “No, dad, I’d never do anything like that. I know it would be wrong.”

Knowing that these types of dialog sessions in the past produced positive results, Bubba walked to his son and put his hand on his shoulder. He paused and then said, “There are certain traits God puts in each of us. You, me, and your grandfather are all big. He made us that way. There’s no escaping who or what we are, and it’s really a gift. But we have to use our gift the right way, and I’m sure you’ll figure out lots of ways to do that.”

Looking back at his dad, Blubba nodded his head and said, “Don’t worry, dad, I will.”

Five years later

The crop yields in Eastern Iowa were noticeably smaller. That part of the country had been experiencing drought conditions for the past two years, and those who relied on farm income for their livelihood were already feeling the pinch. Crop production was down, and if that was the sole source of your income, you now needed to explore other options. Sometimes, opportunity simply falls into your lap.

“I was speaking to Mr. King yesterday and they might have a side job for me,” Bubba said to his wife, Martha at dinner that evening. Dinner time at the Kowalski house was always a time for both good food and meaningful conversation.

Martha paused, nodded her head slowly and replied as she passed a large portion of baked chicken to her husband, “What kind of a side job would that be?”

“Well, when I had the John Deere in town for maintenance, he was also there. You know, he is one of the owners of the Clinton Lumber Kings. Well, he has been having a problem keeping the grass at the stadium green and trimmed and asked me if I could help. He got a warning from the league at the end of last season.”



Young Blubba interrupted, “The Lumber Kings! Dad, that would be awesome if you worked there.”

“Not so fast, son. I don’t have all the details about the job yet, but I did tell him that I could get that

grass looking like his favorite golf course.”

Martha chimed in, “Bubba, you certainly do have that gift. That stadium is just down the road too.”

Bubba took another baked potato off the plate and said, “With the John Deere, I’ve got all the equipment and attachments I need to do it right. They have wells, so watering the field shouldn’t be a problem. I’d just have to get their schedule and work out a plan.”

Martha asked, “Why has a job like this suddenly become available?”

“Well, the company that had the contract for the past two years screwed up. They took too many shortcuts and the Lumber Kings weren’t happy with their field conditions. Sometimes the outfield wasn’t mowed before weekend games and there were weeds sprouting up all over the place. Players complained, and it got the attention of the Midwest League officials. Mr. King has been looking, but as he said, he’d rather hire someone local who was reliable.”

“So, when will you know?” asked Martha.

“Well, I’m going to the stadium offices tomorrow to meet with him. I guess I can tell him yes. We can sure use the money.”

A Big Fifth Grader

The “largest baby born in Clinton” was now eleven years old and his remarkable growth spurt continued. He now stood at 6’ 4” and weighed in at a surprisingly solid 240 pounds. He was almost eye-to-eye with his father! But in Blubba’s case, not much else had changed. He was still a shy, modest young boy with that great big heart. As a fifth grader, he would be entering middle school the following year. He was a good student who loved to read. Credit that to his mother who started reading to him when he was barely a year old. He also loved history. Chats with his grandfather on Saturday mornings became the highlight of his week. He would ask questions like, “Grandpa, what was it like when . . .?” Those stories always made him smile, and more importantly, always made him think.

Breakfast on Saturday morning was always a treat for young Blubba. That was the day his grandparents drove to the Kowalski house for a “real” country breakfast. His mother and grandmother made sure that there was plenty of good food at the table. But besides the food, the conversation was the true bond that kept this family strong and together.

This particular Saturday, the subject turned to baseball, and it wasn’t limited to the men. Both Martha and her mother-in-law, Bess could speak with some degree of authority on the sport supposedly invented by Abner Doubleday in the 1800s.

“Grandpa, grandma, did you know that my dad is going to work for the Lumber Kings?” said an enthusiastic Blubba.

Bess was the first to answer, “I did hear that somewhere,” she said smiling.

Bubba replied, “I’ll be taking the John Deere there this afternoon. You know, their season starts in two weeks and I’ve got some work to do to get that place in shape.”

“Did you know that your grandfather played baseball?” said Bess to young Walter.

“Really?” said Blubba. Was he good?”



“Really,” said his grandmother. “Yes, he was good. They still talk about how far he hit some of those baseballs. In fact when I heard about your dad and the Lumber Kings, I searched through our family album and found this.” She then reached into her purse and pulled out a large envelope containing a single sepia-toned glossy picture of Walter Kowalski, Sr. taken as he stood in the batter’s box. The backdrop was a dusty baseball diamond surrounded by an old weather-beaten wooden fence. There was a hand-written inscription done in black ink that was beginning to fade on the photograph’s back that said “Bubba, 1953.” She handed the old photograph to her grandson.

“Wow, grandpa, that’s so cool! But your bat . . . It looks really small.”

“No, son,” his dad replied as he turned and winked at his father, “The bat wasn’t small. Your grandfather was really big!”

The Stadium

“Hey, son, do you want to ride with me to the stadium. You can help offload the John Deere,” said Bubba as he grabbed his work gloves and his Clinton Lumber Kings baseball cap.

“Sure, dad, I’d like that.”

“OK, but I’m ready to go now. If you’re coming, you better go inside and say goodbye to your mother. Tell her that we’ll be back in a few hours.”

Less than a minute later, young Blubba ran out of the house and was already seated in the passenger seat of his father’s truck. When his father opened the door and saw his son sitting there, he lightheartedly remarked, “Son, you do know this is going to be a work day for us; about four hours worth. Are you sure you still want to come?”

Blubba replied, “Sure, dad, all we’re going to do is cut grass, right?”

“Yep, just cutting some grass. A whole infield of grass . . . and a whole outfield of grass,” he said with a playful smile.

The ride only took ten minutes. They took a side road that wound its way along the river and almost dead-ended at the maintenance entrance to Ashford University Field, the home stadium for the Clinton Lumber Kings.

The stadium itself has undergone several renovations, and today it can seat 4,000 fans comfortably. It’s a great place to watch Class A Minor League baseball.

Many Big League ballplayers played there on their way up to the Majors, and it is the hope of the local team management that there will be many more.

Bubba saw that the gate was open, so he wouldn't need to use the key that was issued to him the day before. There were several cars parked in the restricted area, so apparently other employees would also be working that Saturday. The Kowalskis got out of their truck and immediately began to offload the John Deere tractor and its mowing attachments. Once everything was affixed and ready to go, Bubba noticed two men slowly walking towards them. When they arrived, the taller of the two spoke first.



“Good afternoon. You must be our new field maintenance man. Hi, I'm Coach Dick Fitzsimmons of the Lumber Kings, and this is Coach Frankie Rodriguez.”

“Good afternoon to you. I'm Bubba Kowalski and this is my son, Blubba,” he said as he extended his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

After that brief formality, Dick walked over to the John Deere, looked it over, and placed his hand on its hood almost as one would do when contemplating buying a car at a dealership.

“Nice equipment. I'm sure you'll do a good job here. Frankie and I have been coaches for the Lumber Kings for a few years, and recently, we've had a number of issues with poor field conditions. Mr. King assured us that you wouldn't let that happen this year,” he said eyeing Bubba with a skeptical look.

“Yes, I'm aware of that. Weeds, grass that was too high in spots, and even brown patches. Give me a week and I'll get this field in shape.”

Frankie then said, “We just got back from Arizona and have some players coming in for a workout today; nothing big, just some pitchers, catchers, and infielders. We'll need that portion of the field done first . . . that is if you have no objections.”

Bubba replied, “Hey, I work for you guys. If you need the infield done first, then that's where I'll start.”



As soon as Dick and Frankie left to go back to the clubhouse, Bubba cranked up the John Deere and drove it along side the infield. He had studied the exact cut pattern he would follow in order to give the field that cross-hatch or checkerboard effect that was now the norm in professional baseball stadiums. Several days before, he purchased a roller attachment that would mount just behind the reel mower blades. It would bend the cut grass at whatever angle he wanted. An hour later they were done with the infield and the areas in foul territory. The massive outfield was next, and

Bubba estimated that it would take him another two hours to complete the job. In the mean time, players dressed in warm up shirts and shorts began arriving.

While Blubba didn't actually drive the John Deere, he assisted his father by emptying the baskets of cut grass once they were full. This way, his father could make the most of his time. But that chore didn't keep Blubba busy all the time his father was working. There were times when his dad was mowing that he had absolutely nothing to do. So, he took a seat in the dugout.

One by one, players entered the dugout as they paused to adjust their spikes and picked up baseballs from the bucket and placed them in their gloves before starting their pre-workout stretching routines. Blubba didn't recognize any of the players, but he remembered his grandfather telling him that some of them would eventually get to the Major Leagues. That fact alone kept his attention as he looked at each player and wondered . . . *Maybe he's the one!*

His daydream turned quickly back to reality at the sound of his father's voice. "The outfield's next, son. Let's move those mulch baskets out there!"

Once Blubba moved two of the lightweight screen baskets to the outfield, he knew that his father wouldn't need him for a while. He noticed that the gate along the outfield wall was open, and from where he was standing, he could see the riverbank. So, he decided to take a short walk knowing that he would still be within earshot of his father.

The Mississippi River was only about a quarter of a mile wide where it passed by the ballpark. From his vantage point on its west bank, he could see across the water and on into Illinois. It was a peaceful day. As he walked towards the river, his steps interrupted a flock of geese that also seemed to be enjoying the pleasant early spring weather. He noted that the riverbank was strewn with rocks and grass. He stooped down and picked up one of those small rocks and heaved it towards the river. It landed about ten feet short of the water.

"I'm not warmed up yet," he said to himself as he picked another, only this one was a bit rounder. Gripping it in his left hand, he started his throwing motion and let it fly. This time, he heard a distinctive splash as the rock hit the water. That brought a smile. He continued walking a bit further until he saw a large stick. There was something about that stick that jogged his memory. Yes, as he and his dad drove into the stadium, he remembered seeing the Clinton Lumber Kings logo . . . a man wearing a crown and swinging a big stick . . . or was it a board with a nail sticking out of the end? Well, maybe he could imitate that "Lumber King" and do the same thing to rocks by hitting them with that stick.

Blubba rounded up about a dozen stones and placed them by his feet. Then he picked up the big stick and assumed his left-handed batting stance in an imaginary batter's box as he faced an imaginary pitcher. Holding one of the stones in his right hand, he threw it two feet in the air and swung the stick



fungo style. The distinctive crack of stick hitting rock produced a sound much like a small caliber rifle shot as the stone soared outward and landed in the river, producing a series of concentric ripples as it landed. He thought to himself *that felt pretty good*, as he picked up another stone and did the same thing; only this one went even farther into the waters of the Mighty Mississippi.

Rifle Shots

Bubba Kowalski had just finished the last section in the outfield and cut the engine of the John Deere. Without that engine noise, the sounds of a traditional ballpark practice quickly took over. Players were done stretching and were now loosening up their arms on the sidelines under the watchful eyes of their coaches. The constant popping of ball meeting leather became the dominant sound.

Coach Fitzsimmons was talking to a young pitcher, commenting on his follow-through when he heard it. Others nearby also stopped what they were doing and listened. Then it happened again.

Crack!

“What was that?” an infielder asked Coach Rodriguez.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say it sounded like a gun shot. It sort of reminds me of my days with the ‘Department’ back in the Bronx,” he said.

“It’s coming from out there—down by the river,” another player said as he pointed to the open outfield gate. “It sure sounds like someone is shooting a rifle.”

Coach Fitzsimmons turned to his group and said, “Guys, wait here. If those are really gunshots, we’ll need to call someone. You never know where a stray bullet might land. Clear the field until you hear from us.” With that, he and Coach Rodriguez jogged quickly towards the open gate.

Crack!

Once they were out of the stadium, they got a chance to see what was really causing that sound. “That’s no rifle; it’s just the lawn maintenance guy’s kid hitting rocks with a big stick,” said Frankie.

Crack!

“Yeah, but look at how far he’s hitting those rocks!” said Dick. “How old do you think that kid is? Eighteen?”

Crack!

“Probably,” said Frankie. “But the kid’s got pretty good hitting mechanics and his bat . . . or should I say stick speed is incredible!”

“So, what are you waiting for? Sign him up!” Dick countered with a wink and a slight hint of sarcasm.

This playful bantering was interrupted by the sound of Bubba Kowalski calling his son. Upon hearing his father’s voice, young Blubba dropped the stick and started jogging towards the stadium’s maintenance gate, passing Coaches Fitzsimmons and Rodriguez in the process.

“Hey, kid, that was some nice hitting you did out there. How far do you think some of those rocks went?” said Frankie.

Stopping briefly to answer, Blubba said, "I dunno. Maybe a thousand feet," he said with an innocent look.

"A thousand feet! Then maybe Coach Dick should sign you up to play for the Lumber Kings right now. How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven?" Frankie turned and looked at Dick in a state of disbelief. Then he directed his attention back to the youngster. "You're bigger than me . . . and you're only eleven?"

Dick couldn't help it. "Frankie, you're five foot eight. Almost everyone is bigger than you," he said laughing.

Team practice that afternoon

After that rather amusing "false alarm," the coaches called the players together and organized their practice. Bubba had removed his tractor and equipment off to the side and it was now parked just past the right field wall near the stadium's maintenance entrance. Since Bubba had finished cutting and trimming the grass ahead of schedule, he asked his son if he wanted to watch some of the Lumber Kings practice.

Blubba answered enthusiastically, "Sure, dad. That would be awesome!" Then he began to run along the clay warning-track towards the dugout.

By the time his father joined him at that ideal vantage point at the edge of the first base dugout, they were invited by Coach Fitzsimmons to have a seat.

"You mean we can sit here . . . where the real players sit for games?" exclaimed Blubba.

"Sure, and after seeing you hit those rocks out there, I've got something for you." He held up his index finger indicating that he wanted him to wait for a minute because he would be right back. Fitzsimmons disappeared into the clubhouse below and reappeared less than thirty seconds later. When he returned, he handed a brand new Clinton Lumber Kings hat to Blubba.



"Wow, is that for me?" cried the youngster.

"It sure is. And I made sure I got you a large. Try it on to see if it fits."

Bubba replied, "Coach, you really didn't have to do that. I work for the team now, and me and my son will be seeing a lot of you guys this season."

Both adults looked over at young Blubba wearing his new Lumber Kings cap as he stood at the top step of the dugout. They then nodded silently to each other as their gaze moved back to the young boy enjoying his moment.

Dick spoke first, "So, your boy is only eleven. Does he play ball?"

"Not really. He has a glove and we play catch now and then, but Blubba . . . well, he's such a help around the farm that we never signed him up to play sports."

"Well, that's a shame. From my perspective, he sure looks like he's got some talent. Youngsters his age don't have the kind of hand-eye coordination I saw out there.

And believe me, I've seen a lot of young and talented ballplayers in my career. Hey, do you mind if I see what the kid's got?"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I'd like to see him hit and throw some actual baseballs. What do you say, dad?"

Bubba seemed to dwell on that thought before answering. "But coach, you have a practice going on. He'd just be in the way."

Dick surveyed the field and saw that Frankie had just set up the L-screen and was about to start batting practice. Frankie Rodriguez was an exceptional coach and teacher. The general consensus was that he threw the best batting practice sessions of anyone in the organization. From forty-five feet, he rarely threw a pitch that wasn't a hittable strike. The players loved taking their cuts whenever Coach Rodriguez was throwing.

Dick turned to Blubba and said, "Hey kid, did you bring your glove today?"

Blubba turned his eyes from the field and looked back at Coach Fitzsimmons and politely said, "No sir, I didn't."

"Then I'm sure I can dig one up from somewhere around here. Oh, you're a lefty — just like me. I've got a spare one you can use." He then reached into his equipment bag and pulled out a well broken-in left-handed baseball glove that was probably older than the youngster who would be using it.

"Grab a ball out of that bucket and let's warm up."

Despite young Blubba's lack of formal baseball training, he looked surprisingly smooth as he warmed up with Fitzsimmons. The first few throws were only at a distance of 40 feet, but as their arms loosened up, Coach Fitz moved back with each subsequent throw until they were covering a distance close to 120 feet. What Dick and many of the others noticed was that the youngster was throwing from that distance with hardly any effort at all. As an added plus, he also caught every ball thrown back to him.

"Are you loose?" cried the coach to his new student.

"I think so," Blubba said pausing to look at the vintage glove on his right hand. "Coach, I like this glove. The throws don't hurt my hand and it fits better than mine at home."

"That's good. Maybe I just found it a new home. Now how would you like to take some cuts up there?"

Blubba hesitated. "You mean hit some real baseballs in a real baseball stadium with the Lumber Kings?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Are you ready?"

Again some hesitation. "I don't really have a nice bat. Mine is at home, and I don't think it's any good now. I use it to hit rocks in the fields behind our barn and it's pretty banged up."

Coach Fitz looked into the dugout to make sure that the equipment manager had brought out the bats for this afternoon's batting practice session. Seeing them stacked neatly in the bat rack he



turned to Blubba and said, "Come with me. I'm sure we have one you can use. Let's go pick one out."

Minor league ballplayers (and most major leaguers) use bats that range in length from thirty-two to thirty-five inches and weigh between thirty and thirty-six ounces. That reflected the current inventory of bats in the dugout's bat rack that day. Coach Fitz picked up a well-used bat with a disproportionate amount of pine tar just above its handle. Handing it to the youngster who stood patiently at his side he said, "Do you think you can swing this?" he said as he passed it to young Blubba Kowalski. "It's probably the only thirty-two we have here."

Blubba gripped the bat and took a few practice cuts before saying, "Coach, I think this one is too small. I need something bigger . . . and maybe heavier."

"Heavier? Well, come on back here and pick out something you like."

Blubba pawed through the bat rack for a while, picking up several "pieces of lumber" that Coach Fitz initially thought were way too big to swing effectively until he finally settled on a bat.

"Coach, I like this one," he said as he held a thick-handled thirty-five inch ash Louisville Slugger and handed it to Dick.

Taking the bat from the youngster, he held it arms length examining it and said, "Do you think you can get this one around? I think I'd have trouble hitting those slow BP pitches with it."

Blubba answered confidently, "Sure Coach, I can swing it."

With that, they ascended the dugout steps and walked towards the batting cage that was already set up for that afternoon's practice.

"Hey, kid, you gotta put on a helmet before you step in," said Coach Frankie to young Blubba while at the same time pointing to his own head. "I promise I won't bean you, but we're not taking any chances."

As Blubba stood next to the batting cage taking practice swings and waiting to hit, Dick slowly walked up to Frankie and said in a low voice, "Did you happen to notice the kid's bat speed? And another thing . . . do you know that he's swinging a 35 inch ash bat?"

"Really?" said Frankie. "This should be interesting. But he seems like a good kid. I'll just serve up some meatballs that even someone like *you* could hit."

With a look of mock surprise, Dick answered, "I'll have you know that back in 'the day,' I'd take you deep so many times that your neck would have whiplash."

Dick then summoned his group together and told some of them to take up their positions on the field in preparation for batting practice. Frankie gathered a few balls from the bucket and stopped briefly to put this scenario into perspective. Standing there looking at the youngster he thought . . . *Here is an eleven-year old boy who is physically bigger than most of the ballplayers on our current roster, swinging a bat that all but the strongest Major Leaguers would have trouble getting around on a fastball. Well, it's only for a few swings, and if it will make the kid happy that he took batting practice in the Lumber Kings' ballpark, then it's worth it. At least he could go home and tell his friends that he actually hit a ball that landed in the outfield grass in a real baseball stadium.*

That is if he can get that tree trunk of a bat he's swinging around quickly enough to make any kind of contact.

Batting Practice

"Batter up!" said Coach Rodriguez in a voice that could be heard by everyone as it echoed throughout the virtually empty ballpark. In reality, there was only one person ready to hit, and that individual wasn't even on his team. That person was a very nervous Blubba Kowalski. Frankie then stepped behind the L-screen and held up a baseball.

"Are you ready, kid?" he said to Blubba.

"I guess so, coach. I'm kind-a nervous," the youngster replied.

Coach Fitzsimmons, who was standing near the cage, assured young Blubba that he had nothing to worry about. "Coach Frankie is just going to lob some baseballs over the plate. He's really good, so you don't have to worry about getting hit."

With that, Frankie lobbed a ball over the plate. It was a strike. Blubba swung his bat and was almost a second too early.

"Maybe you should speed 'em up a bit, or was that your fastball?" Dick joked to his fellow coach. "Looks like 'the Kid' is sitting on one of your famous fifty mile-per-hour heaters."

Frankie shook his head indicating mock aggravation and delivered another pitch; this one was a bit faster. Blubba swung and made contact, topping the ball and sending a weak ground ball towards first base.

"Nice hit, kid," said Dick. "You might try starting with your hands a little farther back like this . . ." With that, Coach Dick took the bat from Blubba and showed him the batting stance he had just described. "Got it?"

"Got it," said Blubba who took the bat and stepped back into the left-handed batters box, assuming the exact stance he was just shown.



it was not nearly as solid as the next one.

The next four pitches were approached with more and more confidence as Blubba swung and connected on each. When he hit the last pitch on a line into the gap in right center field, the attention of the Lumber Kings players shifted in unison to the youngster with the "Ruthian" bat.

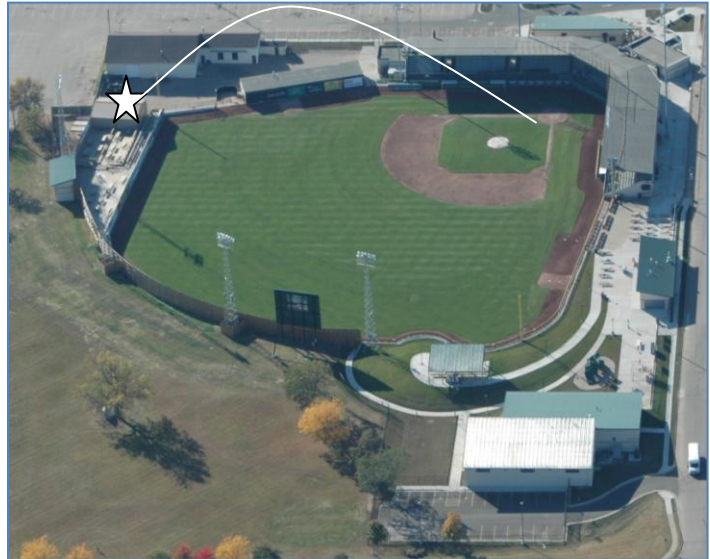
One player said to his teammate who was also in the outfield shagging fly balls, "That one sounded pretty solid!" But

Blubba swung, and with a resounding crack, the ball rocketed upward and outward towards the right field wall. The sound of the bat hitting the ball indicated to everyone that it would be a while before this one came down. It cleared the wall with

ease as it headed towards the aluminum utility shed that was located in the back of the maintenance area. With a resounding *bang*, it hit the roof of the shed on the fly.

Both Fitzsimmons and Rodriguez quickly turned their heads in amazement as they watched the flight of the ball.

Frankie was the first to speak. “It’s 325 down the line in right and that shed is at least 80 feet past the fence! He hit that ball close to . . . close to 400 feet!” Shaking his head in a gesture of astonishment, he said, “I can’t believe how far he crushed that one. An *eleven* year-old kid just took me deep!”



Dick paused, still staring at the maintenance shed where just seconds earlier the ball landed. He then quoted Hall of Fame broadcaster Jack Buck’s legendary call of Kirk Gibson’s game winning home run off Dennis Eckersley in the 1988 World Series. Pausing for almost a second between words, he said, “I don’t believe what I just saw.”

Somehow those who were present that day and witnessed that phenomenon all knew they had seen something special.

The legend of Blubba Kowalski was born!

Maybe some of those rocks really did go “about a thousand feet.”

The story *Blubba Kowalski*, and the *Blubba Kowalski Series*, are works of fiction. All characters appearing in these stories are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

© Robert P. Guise - Creative Writer