


Jeff and  think they see championship potential in Ngo Huynh, but it seems that this Vietnamese student can't maintain his concentration for very long. Will Ngo Huynh live up to his name?

NO WIN PHUONG
Alden R. Carter

Ngo Huynh Phuong. Mr. Kenally wrote the name on the board. "Kids, I want you to welcome a new classmate. He is Vietnamese, and you pronounce his name 'No Win Fong.' Did I come close?" He smiled at the lanky kid standing near his desk. "Close enough," the kid said.

"Good. Now, class, it's been explained to me that Vietnamese family names come first and given names last. So if the Bull over here were Vietnamese, he would be Larsen Peter, not Peter Larsen." I stood and made a bow just to make sure everyone remembered me, although at six feet and two-oh-five, I'm pretty hard to forget. "Thank you, Bull." Mr. Kenally said. "You can sit down. So, class, you call our new friend Phuong, not Ngo." He smiled at the kid. "Right?" Phuong nodded without changing expression.

Mr. Kenally rattled on, telling us that Phuong's dad had been teaching at the University of Wisconsin medical school for the last few years and had recently taken a job at the clinic here in Shipley. Phuong had two older sisters and a little brother. And a mother, too, I guess, although I didn't hear much about her,

since Jeff poked me about then. "Will you look at that k... he whispered. "I thought all Vietnamese were short."

I measured Phuong against Mr. Kenally's six-two or -three. "They must come in all sizes. He's five-ten, maybe a little better."

"And look at those arms."
I looked at Phuong's long, sinewy arms and big hands. "Big hooks, too," I said.

"You bet. That guy's our new pitcher."
"How do you know he even plays?"

"God, don't you watch the news, Bull? All those Asian kids are killer baseball players. Betcha he can hit, too." Jeff rubbed his hands. "This is the guy we've been waiting for."

Phuong took a seat on the far side of the room, and Mr. Kenally told us to get out our algebra books. I glanced at Jeff. He was already busy juggling the lineup card.

Jeff's an optimist. I guess you've got to be when you're not only the captain but the best pitcher, shortstop, and hitter on a team that's just a tad short of other talent. Take me, for example. I'm a good catcher and I can hit a lick, but people in the stands have been known to knock off a large soda and a bag of peanuts, take a leisurely trip to the can, and be back in their seats in the time it takes me to run out a routine grounder. And that's with Jeff screaming at me all the way down the line.

At lunch, we tried to get seats next to Phuong, but three girls beat us to it. In a town where we don't see minorities very often, Phuong was exotic and you could already see the girls maneuvering for a chance at him. Phuong seemed embarrassed by the attention. He smiled and answered their questions, but his voice was so soft that we couldn't hear him. Fifteen minutes before the end of the hour, he excused himself, dumped his tray, and headed for the door.

"This is our chance," Jeff said. "Come on."
"I'm not done eating yet."

"Move it, Bull! You weigh too much already."

"Don't either," I said. But I followed along, balancing my tray in one hand while I tried to eat my pie.

Jeff glared at me. "God, you're slow. Give me that." He grabbed my tray, and I was able to slam-dunk the rest of my pie before we headed up the hall to the classroom wing. Phuong was nowhere in sight.

We didn't find him until it was nearly time for fifth period. He was standing in the biology room talking to Ms. Heaton. She glanced up, saw us, and clutched at her heart. "My lord, I'm having hallucinations. Bull Catcher and Captain Jock coming early to class." She turned to Phuong. "Are they really there?" Phuong studied us without cracking a smile. "They seem to be."

"Are you sure? All the formaldehyde fumes around here can do strange things to your head."

Jeff grunted sourly, but I grinned at her. "We're here, Ms. H. Just thought we'd make your day."

"And you have, Bull. You definitely have. See that lab table? It's got to go to the art room, and you two look like just the guys to get it there." She gave us the dazzling smile that along with some pretty amazing chest development make her the favorite teacher of every boy in junior high. The girls hate her.

Jeff groused at her. "Why do they need a lab table in the art room?"

She shrugged. "Lord knows. I just follow directions. *Directions*. They're sort of like orders. Like, don't smash the door-jamb on your way out." She gave us that dazzling smile again. I melted, Jeff grumped. She went back to talking to Phuong while we wrestled the table through the door and lugged it down the hall to the art room.

One of the school counselors grabbed Phuong right after biology, so we weren't able to catch him until after the last bell. He

was headed for the door with about eight books under his long arm. "Crap," Jeff said, as he dug frantically for the extra glove in the bottom of his locker. "You don't suppose he's some kind of brain, do you?"

I grinned. "Don't you watch the news? All those Asian kids are killer students."

"Don't make jokes—this is important. You know what they say, 'On the seventh day—'"

"God made baseball. Ya, you've said that before."

"It's true. Come on, we've got to get this kid's priorities straight."

He jogged to catch up. Phuong glanced at him coolly. "Phuong, I'm Jeff Hanson." He stuck out a hand. "Saw you around today. How do you like Wisconsin?"

Phuong raised his eyebrows a millimeter. "It's all right. I've been in Madison for the last three years."

"Oh, ya. Right. Well, I meant central Wisconsin."

"It's okay."

"Good. Glad to hear you're enjoying it. . . . So it must be tough starting at a new school in the spring."

"I can handle it."

"Well, good. So . . ." Jeff hesitated. "So anyway, how'd you like to play some ball?"

Phuong stared at Jeff, and I noticed for the first time how dark and cold his eyes were. For a long second, I thought he was going to tell Jeff to buzz off, but then he said quietly, "Which kind?"

"Well, baseball, of course. We're getting geared up for summer league. Practice starts in three weeks. So, uh—what do you say?"

"I imagine I could give it a try."

"That's great. I think you're just the guy we've been looking for." Jeff waved a hand at me. "Oh, by the way, this is the Bull."

He's my catcher, and he's a good one. Can't run worth a damn, but he makes a real good target."

"Hi," I said. Phuong said hi back.

"Bull, scrounge us some gear from Kenally, would ya? We'll be at the field." He draped an arm around Phuong and almost dragged him toward the outside door.

I got the storeroom key from Mr. Kenally, who's officially our coach but doesn't do much except show up at the games, where he spends most of his time swatting mosquitoes. Jeff's the one who really calls the shots, and that's fine with Mr. Kenally.

Outdoors it was your typical early April day in Wisconsin—cold and dreary. But the snow was gone, and the ball field had dried out pretty well. I slung the equipment bag over my shoulder and headed for the field.

Jeff and Phuong were flipping a ball back and forth while Jeff talked nonstop. "You see, the problem is that I'm the only guy on the team who can pitch, but I'm also the best shortstop, and I can't play two positions. Anyway, what we need is another pitcher. When I saw those long arms of yours, I said, 'Whoa, talk about power. That kid's got it.' Now if you can play some short, too, and hit a lick now and then, we are going to be in fat city." He scooped up a low throw from Phuong. "So what do you think of the plan?"

"In theory or in practice?"

Jeff hesitated. "Well, in both, I guess. Hey, you speak pretty good English."

"I don't see why not—I was born in Los Angeles. And by the way, I haven't played much baseball."

"No problem. I can tell you've got the skills. We'll just smooth out the rough spots. Bull, you ready?"

"Just about." I buckled my left shin guard, pulled my mask down, and squatted behind the plate. "Let 'er rip."

For a couple of minutes, it looked like Jeff had picked us a winner. Phuong wound up, and I could see that he'd played

enough baseball to get the motion down. And speed? Ya, and that all right. His first pitch came in like a BB and hit so hard that my palm stung through the padding of my mitt. His fastball had a natural tail to it, dropping just short of the plate and making it a little hard to judge. When I muffed his third pitch, it caromed off my right shin guard, and I began wishing that I'd taken time to put on my nut cup. I mean, Jeff's fastball is bad enough, but one of this guy's could make a steer out of the ol' Bull real quick. Jeff yelled, "Come on, Bull! The rest of you is slow, but those hands are supposed to be like lightning."

I grinned, jogged after the ball, and flipped it back to Phuong. "It's got a nasty bite to it, partner. Give me another right down the middle."

While Phuong hurled and I tried to keep my Bullhood intact, Jeff stood on the first-base line, grinning as if he'd discovered the reincarnation of Nolan Ryan. But then Phuong lost it. His next pitch sailed about four feet over my head, buzzing like an angry hornet. The one after that hit three feet short of the plate, splattering me with dirt. For ten minutes, I leaped and dove for his pitches, but Phuong never came close to the plate again. He still had enough stuff to throw the ball through a barn wall—but only if he were aiming at a pretty good-size barn.

Jeff stood with his arms hanging and his mouth gaping, as his dreams of a summer-league championship went through nuclear meltdown right before his eyes. Finally, he set his jaw and marched to the mound. "Look, you're way overthrowing, Phuong. At the start, you just let the motion do it for you. Now you're forcing the ball. Let me show you." He snatched the ball from Phuong and sent five fastballs blazing across the plate, to thunk into my mitt. He turned to Phuong. "That's how you do it. Nice and easy. Now try it again."

Phuong got the next couple of pitches close to the plate, but then everything went haywire again. I signaled for time and started jogging to the mound. But my lack of speed got me again,

and Jeff was already laying it on Phuong by the time I got there. "Damn it, Phuong! Stop trying to blow a hole in the backstop. Just pick your spot and let the motion flow. The follow-through will give you the speed." Jeff pushed him away from the rubber and pantomimed a half-dozen deliveries. He let the ball go on the last one, and it zinged across the plate to rattle the chain-link backstop. Jeff wrenched the glove from his hand and shoved it into Phuong's stomach. "Now try it again."

Phuong's hands didn't move. He fixed a cold stare on Jeff. "No, thanks. I've learned all that I want to from this experiment."

"This isn't some science class! This is baseball. Now, come on, try to get one across the plate."

Phuong gave him a thin smile. "As I said, no thanks. I'll let you know if I'm interested in trying baseball again." He sauntered off to pick up his stack of books, leaving Jeff in a sort of paralyzed shock.

Jeff couldn't believe that anyone could walk away from baseball, and I had to give him a hard nudge to break the paralysis. We returned the gear to the storeroom and started for home. For a while, Jeff slumped along in silence, then he did some groaning, followed that with some cursing and five minutes of incoherent bitching, and finally fell to muttering to himself. He was still in that stage when we parted at the corner of Hayes and Grant.

I wanted that championship, too, but I could shrug off the disappointment of losing Phuong. Not Jeff. To him, winning that championship would mark a fitting finale to all the years our gang had played ball together. Next year, we'd be in high school, and only Jeff would make the varsity the first season. I'd settle in for a year or two as JV catcher, while Billy Collins, our center fielder, scrapped for a place in the outfield. But the rest of the guys just wouldn't have the size, speed, talent, or ambition to make it. This was our last chance as a team, and Jeff was damned if he'd let it slip past.

I guess I make Jeff sound like some kind of muscle-headed jock. He's not. For all the razzing Ms. Heaton gives us, he's a decent student. And he's a nice guy and a good leader. Sure he gets pushy sometimes. Winning, particularly at baseball, makes a lot of difference to him. But it doesn't mean everything. Back when we were in grade school, junior high kids were always asking him to join their teams. But he'd never do it. Instead, he stuck with us, even though that meant losing nearly every time we played kids two or three years older. When I got big early, I followed his example, sticking with our gang even when I could hit a ball farther than anyone in school.

By now, our gang has played together for three or four summers. None of us has Jeff's talent, but we all know that we're a whole lot better with him leading us. So we let it slide when he gets ornery and forgets that winning isn't everything. And despite the fact that I'm slow and nobody can play short or pitch worth a damn except Jeff, we're not that far away from being a pretty good ball club. With Phuong throwing like he had those first few minutes, we'd have a real shot at taking the league championship.

But Phuong wasn't interested in trying again. Jeff approached him at lunch the next day and again the day after that. But even though Jeff apologized for getting grouchy, Phuong just shook him off. When Jeff came back to our table after failing the third time, he snapped at me: "You ask him, Bull."

"What difference would that make? He doesn't want to play. Leave him alone."

"He's just holding out."

"For what? A bigger signing bonus?"

"I don't know what he wants. But he's got to play."

"No, he doesn't. Only you've got to play. Most of the rest of us have another life now and then."

Jeff glared at me, and I grinned back. He took a deep breath. "Look, Bull, if we can get Phuong straightened out, we can win

that championship. Without him, my arm's going to fall off before we make it to the quarter finals. Now maybe I didn't play this right. Maybe I broke some Oriental custom, and now the guy's not going to play until I do something to show I'm really sorry. Just go find out what he wants. If I've got to walk over hot coals or let him stick bamboo splinters under my toenails, no problem. Just as long as it gets him to pitch."

"Uh, Jeff, don't you think it's just possible he doesn't want to pitch?"

"No! Nobody with a fastball like that doesn't want to pitch. It's got to be something else."

"I doubt it," I said, but—as usual—I did what I was told. Phuong glanced up from his book when I sat down across from him. "Biology?" I asked. He nodded and went back to studying a diagram. "Uh, Jeff really wants you to give us another chance. He said you can even stick bamboo splinters under his toenails if that'll help."

Phuong's head jerked up, and if his eyes had been cold before, this time they were black-ice. He stared at me for a long moment and then leaned back in his chair. "Doesn't that strike you as a racist stereotype, Bull? Something out of the Rambo movies, where Stallone's always blasting evil little yellow men?"

Relaxed. Yep, the ol' Bull had gotten one right between the eyes. And he deserved it. I gave him a rueful grin. "Ya, I guess it does. Hey, I'm sorry, Phuong. Jeff was just trying to make a joke."

"But you repeated it. And I thought you were the one with brains."

"Not this time, I guess." I shrugged. "I'm sorry. I got taken stupid." I hesitated. "I'll tell Jeff. I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it, either."

Phuong studied me for another long moment and then nodded. "Fair enough. But it's still no on the baseball."

"Phuong, I don't get it. The other day I could see by your

motion that you'd done some pitching. Why don't you want to do any now?"

"All the pitching I ever did was in my backyard in Madison. I don't like teams."

"Why not?"

He hesitated, and for a second I thought he was going to tell me something. But he decided against it. "Because I don't. Period. Now excuse me." He leaned forward, hunching over the biology text again.

"Okay," I said, got up, and went back to our table to give the bad news to Jeff.

Jeff stewed for a week, while the spring warmed, the ball field dried out, and the grass started showing signs that it had survived another winter of subarctic cold. Time for some serious practice. But no matter how Jeff shuffled and reshuffled the lineup card, we just didn't stack up as a championship team. We needed Phuong, and Phuong didn't need us.

Phuong stayed to himself around school—not unfriendly, just quiet. The girls got frustrated trying to get his interest, and he usually sat by himself in the cafeteria, a book open beside his tray. We'd found out quick enough that he was one heck of a student—a speed merchant at algebra and an ace at biology. But when it came to phys ed, he was a disaster. That was weird, because you could see that he had a ton of talent. It just never came together for very long. He'd make a couple of great plays in a volleyball or a basketball game, then mess up every time after that. It made Jeff mad as hell, particularly when Coach Renkins developed the habit of sticking Phuong on our team.

Somewhere along the line, Jeff's frustration took over. He started getting on Phuong, yelling at him and trying to shame him into getting all that talent going at once. I didn't like it, and most of the other guys didn't either. But Jeff's always been our leader, so no one stood up for Phuong. When I tried to get Jeff to

ease up, he got mad. "I don't settle for second best! I use everything I've got, and I do it for the team. The trouble with Phuong is that he just doesn't give a damn about teams. Everything's an experiment to him. He tries something, does it well, and then he lets his mind wander. To hell with the team; Phuong's off looking for another experiment. And that makes him a selfish jerk."

"That's not really your business, you know. He's got a right to be any way he wants to be."

"Not when Renkins keeps putting him on my team!"

A couple of days later, we had phys ed outside for the first time that spring. Some juniors from the high school down the street were on the volleyball courts, just itching for a chance to stomp some kids a couple years younger. And Jeff, of course, wasn't about to back away from a challenge. We gathered around him. "Look, we can take these jerks. We'll hull 'em a little, then rotate the tallest guys to the net and really stick it to 'em." He glanced at me and Phuong. "And, Phuong, for God's sake, keep your head in the game."

It worked—almost. With Jeff serving, Phuong and I came to the net and started putting some lethal spikes on the juniors. We were within a point of winning when Phuong messed up. Jeff set up the final point a foot above the net, but instead of spiking it, Phuong swung wildly and missed completely. It was just like he'd suddenly forgotten how to play the game. The juniors came roaring back, and we never got another chance at the serve. When they laid down the winning point right in front of Phuong, Jeff was mad enough to chew razor blades. While the juniors cheered and high-fived, he grabbed the ball and whipped it at Phuong. For once, his aim was off, and the ball went bouncing across the blacktop. Their stares locked—Jeff's blazing, Phuong's freezing—and I took a step forward to get between them. "Cool it, Jeff," I said. He glared at me, then stalked off toward the locker room.

He was still mad when we stopped by our lockers on the way

to lunch. Phuong came past, his usual stack of books under an arm. Jeff glared after him. "God, just look at him. Study, study, read, read. His eyeballs are gonna fall out."

I shrugged. "Maybe he enjoys it. I think I saw you with a book once."

"Knock off the jokes, Bull. You haven't been funny in weeks."

The ol' Bull takes some pride in the wisdom he subtly disguises as wit, so I shot back, "You haven't had a sense of humor in weeks. Not since Phuong decided that being Jeff Hanson's pitching machine wasn't the ticket to fame, glory, and happiness. Yours, especially."

Jeff's face got red. "Is that what you really think?"

"That's what I think," I snapped, and walked away.

In the cafeteria, I sat down a couple of places from Phuong. He glanced up and then went back to reading. I chewed my food, for once not tasting it. I was pissed at Jeff, pissed at Phuong, and not real happy with myself for letting the whole thing get to me.

Jeff slapped his tray down on the table across from Phuong and sat down so hard that the dishes jumped. Conversation around us died, as kids turned to see what was happening. Jeff ignored them. He leaned in toward Phuong. "Hey, what's with you, man? Can't you keep your mind on anything? I set up that ball perfectly, and you blew it. So we lose again, just because you can't remember to concentrate for one damned second. *No win*—that's a good name for you. Just when we're about to put the other team away, you space out and we get creamed. Aren't you good at anything, Phuong?"

Phuong leveled that cool stare at Jeff. "I'm good at some things. Better than you, I imagine."

"Ya, like what? And don't give me any garbage about math or science. I mean sports and games."

Phuong studied him for a long moment. "I'll play a game with you. I'll stare you down."

Jeff snickered. "What are we going to do? Sit here looking at each other until somebody falls asleep?"

"No, we stare. No blinking allowed. The first one who blinks, loses."

"Well, no problem, friend. I've got more willpower in my little finger than you've got in your whole body."

"We'll see," Phuong said. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a bag of sunflower seeds. "Ready?"

"Ready." Jeff leaned on his elbows and stared into Phuong's eyes. Phuong popped a seed between his front teeth and chewed the kernel slowly.

I kept time, while maybe two dozen kids gathered around. It wasn't much of a spectator sport for the first couple of minutes, but by the time the second hand on the wall clock hit three minutes, I could see sweat starting to glisten on Jeff's forehead. Phuong seemed unfazed by the passing seconds, his dark, cold eyes never breaking with Jeff's burning blue stare.

At four minutes, Jeff's eyelids were twitching, and I could see him starting to breathe a little faster with the effort of not blinking. Phuong popped another sunflower seed. "Soon," he said softly. "We'll start seeing who's got willpower." That made Jeff mad, and he stared even harder.

Two more minutes edged slowly off the clock. Jeff's eyes flamed, then started to tear. Phuong's eyes began to well too. He smiled slightly. "The hardest part is letting a tear fall without blinking. I don't think you can do it. You'll crack first. Just like one of these seeds."

Jeff sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. "Not a chance, No Win. You're going to lose again."

Phuong cracked a seed between his teeth and smiled. "Just wait and see."

Minute seven must have been torture, but minute eight was agony. Jeff fought with everything he had, teardrops hanging on the lower eyelashes of both eyes. A tear slid slowly down

Phuong's cheek. He didn't blink, only reached for another flower seed.

At eight minutes forty-three seconds, Jeff cracked. He dropped his face into his palms and rubbed his eyes furiously. Phuong sighed, straightened, and dabbed at his eyes with a napkin. Jeff got up and stomped out, not looking back.

The crowd of spectators drifted off. "You won," I said to Phuong.

"Yes, I won," Phuong said. He didn't seem very happy about it.

"Jeff will want to try again tomorrow. He'll practice in front of the mirror tonight." Phuong shrugged. I hesitated, then asked, "What's the deal, Phuong? How come you can't concentrate like that on volleyball or baseball?"

He looked at me, and his eyes weren't cold but pained. "I concentrate too hard, that's the problem. When I start learning something, I do okay for a while. Then I start wanting to win, and I concentrate so hard, I mess up." He paused. "Then I make like I didn't care to begin with. That way people can't see how bad I feel."

I knew exactly what he meant. More than once, I'd stood at the plate with the crowd noise and the chatter from the benches pressing in on me and the whole game weighing me down like a load of bricks. And the pitcher winds up, and the ball comes in big and fat, but I'm so tight that I can't get the bat off my shoulder to save my butt. Then it's strike three and I'm out of there, walking back to the bench with my head hanging, trying not to show just how bad I feel about letting the team down. It took me a lot of called third strikes before I learned that I'm better off going up there with nothing on my mind except trying to see the ball leave the pitcher's hand. But how could I explain to Phuong that sometimes it doesn't pay to think too much? I tried. "But that's, uh, kind of a matter of practice. You know—"

getting comfortable with something. Then you don't have to concentrate so hard."

He shook his head. "I used to spend hours in the backyard throwing a baseball through a tire. I can put a fastball just about anywhere I want to, anytime I want to. Just as long as nobody's watching. That's why I'm no good in a real game. I care too much about winning."

I hesitated. "Is this something about trying to . . . you know, make it in a white world?"

He stared at me, then slowly shook his head. "Sometimes I can't believe you hicks. It's not a white world. It isn't even close. Yellow people, brown people, black people—we aren't minorities; we've got you outnumbered. Why don't you worry about making it in *our* world?"

I hunched my shoulders and stared at my hands. "I'm sorry. I never thought about it like that before." I looked at him. "You're good to have around, Phuong. I'm sorry Jeff's being such a jerk. He's not a bad guy; most of the time. It's just . . . Oh, hell, I don't understand it anymore. It's more than winning, it's about the team. He really believes in belonging to a team, in working together to do something." I shrugged. "And you don't, so I guess we're all stuck."

Then he floored me. "Oh, I believe in teamwork, all right. It's just that I'm no damned good at it. I'd love to be part of a team, but nobody ever puts up with me very long." He shrugged. "So I go my own way. I don't have any other choice." He picked up his tray. "I think you'd better go look after your buddy. But do me a favor, huh? Don't tell him what I told you. I don't need any more of his crap."

"Well, maybe if you explained things to him. Told him that you just need some extra time to get comfortable—"

Phuong shook his head. "Not a chance. I'm No Win Phuong. I'm stuck with that."

I found Jeff down on the ball field. He was sitting in the first-base coaching box, throwing pebbles at the rubber at the center of the pitcher's mound. He glanced up. "Hiya, Bull."

"How you doing?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess." I sat down beside him, picked up a pebble, and tossed it at the pitcher's mound. It bounced high off the rubber. Jeff snorted. "Hell, I've been trying to do that for fifteen minutes, and you get it on the first shot. This is definitely not my day for competitive sports."

"You don't have a lot riding on this one."

"No. We don't have any ego thing."

"Ya, I already know I'm better," I said, hoping to get a rise out of him.

But he was thinking about something else. "You know, I'm not sure I could stare down Phuong if I tried every day for a year. God, he wasn't even sweating."

"But you're going to try anyway."

He shrugged again. "Maybe, I'm not sure. . . . God, what I wouldn't do to harness all that guy's willpower and talent. Those eyes would scare half the batters so bad, they'd piss in their pants and never take a swing. But what can I do? Phuong just doesn't care enough."

By now, I knew different, but I couldn't think how to tell him. Finally, I said, "Jeff, I think you might try asking him one more time. But take it slow and easy. Don't expect him to be a star right off the bat."

"He'd never do it. He hates my guts, and I probably deserve it."

"I'm not sure, Jeff. I think you might be surprised."

At lunch the next day, Jeff sat down across from Phuong again. Neither of them said a word all through the meal. Talk had gotten

around about the starting contest, and I could feel the kids at the nearby tables getting ready to crowd in to watch. Jeff timed it so that they both finished eating at the same time, then he leaned down and pulled his two gloves out of a paper bag at his feet. He tossed one on the table in front of Phuong. "We've still got fifteen minutes. Let's go play some catch." He got up and walked toward the kitchen to dump his tray.

Phuong looked at me. "Do it!" I mouthed at him. He hesitated another second, then got up and followed Jeff toward the door and the spring afternoon.

They threw the ball back and forth until it was time for fifth period, then did it again for nearly an hour after school. That was their routine for the next three days. They didn't talk, just tossed the ball back and forth. I watched from the sidelines, chewing on a blade of new grass and doing as much homework as I felt like.

On Friday, Jeff said only one line: "Want to pitch some?"

Phuong shrugged. "I imagine I could give it a try."
Jeff shouted, "Bull, get some gear on! And try to hurry, Bull—we've only got four hours until dark." I bestirred myself but didn't make any rush of it. Let 'em sweat.

Phuong was fine for ten minutes, then lost it. But Jeff didn't say a word, and after I'd dodged a few nut-busters and scalp-shavers, Phuong got it back. He was fine from then on until we quit for the day.

The next Monday, the team had its first official practice. Mr. Kenally showed up for about ten minutes, just to be polite, then left so we could get down to business. My job was to get Phuong ready, while Jeff concentrated on knocking the rest of the team into shape by the end of the school year. I worked Phuong's pitch count up until he was throwing the equivalent of three or four innings every day. He had his wild streaks, but you could see him getting more comfortable and more fluid all the time. It developed that he could cut the fastball to give us a second-out pitch, and he started experimenting with a little lollipop change-

up that was going to drive hitters nuts once he got it under control. And then there was my suggestion for a fourth pitch: the Ryne Duren. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Every afternoon, we'd work in the bullpen during fielding practice and through most of batting practice before knocking off to get in a few swings against Jeff. As usual, Jeff came in tight and fast on me, but I could see him cutting his speed against Phuong. When I grouse once, he grinned. "Temper, temper, Bull. You're just sore because I struck you out and then let Phuong hit a couple of easy ones." He slapped me on the arm. "Come on. We'll worry about his hitting and fielding later. Right now, all I'm worried about is his pitching. And that's your department." I gave a bad-tempered grunt, picked up my gear, and lugged it over to the bullpen, where Phuong was itching to work a little more on his change-up. (I mean, hell—Jeff could throw me one of those lollipop pitches once in a while.)

The next Wednesday, Jeff had the guys chasing fungoes in the outfield, so Phuong and I moved from the bullpen onto the field. And I swear Phuong could have drilled a Dixie cup. Jeff and the other guys drifted in to watch. After a few minutes, Billy Collins—who's got more guts than sense—picked up a bat and headed for the batter's box. Jeff stopped him. "Not yet. Phuong's not ready, and neither are you. Wait a few days."

He was right. The next day, I needed a net to catch Phuong. Finally, after about twelve sprawls in the dirt, a half kilometer of chasing wild pitches, and three or four good dings on the shins, I signaled for time and trudged out to the mound without the vaguest idea of what I was going to say. Jeff, who'd been watching us between hitting fungoes, tossed the bat to one of the other guys and joined us. Phuong stood there steaming, so mad that he wouldn't even look at us. Jeff said quietly, "You just haven't got it today, Phuong. That'll happen. Come on, we'll hit some fungoes." Phuong didn't move. Jeff hesitated, then reached out

and gently took the ball out of Phuong's glove. "Tomorrow you'll have your control back. Don't worry about it now."

"He's right," I said. "It happens to every pitcher. Even Jeff." Phuong stared for a long moment into the distance. Then he sighed. "Ya, okay. Tomorrow." He turned to follow Jeff, while I went to shed my gear and to examine the bruises on my legs.

As soon as I'd finished warming up Phuong the next day, Jeff yelled, "Positions, everybody!" He waved to us. "You, too."

I stood and tipped my mask back. Somehow I'd expected this. I grinned at Phuong. "I guess you're throwing batting practice, partner. Ready?"

He gave me half a smile. "I imagine I could give it a try."

"Okay," I said. "One is a fastball, two is a cut fastball, three is a change, and four is the Ryne Duren."

"This time he grinned. "Gonna use number four, huh?"

"Yep, and you know who's going to see it first."

For those of you who may not have heard of Ryne Duren, the great Yankee reliever of the fifties, let me give you two clues about pitch number four. First, Duren was fast as hell. Second, most batters firmly believed that he was at least two-thirds blind. You guess the rest.

Jeff picked up a bat and stepped into the box. I said out of the corner of my mouth, "You'd better hope he's not wild."

"Don't I know it," he said. He took a couple of practice swings, then shouted to Phuong, "Okay, hotshot, let's see what you've got."

"Get ready to duck," I said. I wagged one finger, and Phuong nodded.

Phuong's fastball came in belt high, and I swear it hummed when it dropped just before it crossed the plate. Jeff's swing was two seconds late and a foot high. Or thereabouts. "Jeez, does that fastball have a bite," he muttered. "Not bad!" he yelled. "But I've got you timed, sucker!" He didn't—not by a long shot—and

it took him five more swings before he managed to send a weak bouncer to first. He stepped out while the guys fired the ball around the horn. "Nasty," he said. "Real nasty." He grinned like a wolf, and I knew that he was thinking about some unsuspecting sheep in a certain summer baseball league.

"Give him some time," I said. "He's not ready for the real thing yet." Jeff nodded and stepped back in. I let him see another fastball, then wagged four fingers. Phuong nodded, wound up, and sent the Ryne Duren screaming two feet over Jeff's head. Naturally, Jeff bailed out with an audible yelp of terror. From his backside, he stared first at me and then at Phuong, who was doubled over laughing on the mound.

I grinned. "That's our new pitch. We call it the Ryne Duren. Like it?"

"Why you son of a—"

"Tut, tut," I said. "Temper, temper."

Phuong started the season in right field. Jeff pitched, bringing Phuong in for two or three innings late in a game if we had a decent lead. Phuong gave up a few runs on walks and wild pitches, but Jeff let him work through his problems, and you could see him getting better with every inning. He made his first start in the middle of June and lasted four innings. He finished his second start for his first win, although that was largely thanks to some superb catching and two homers by yours truly. (Ya, Jeff and a couple of the other guys had pretty good games, too.)

Four days later, we played the defending champs in a game Jeff had been dreaming about all winter. His arm was fresh, so I figured he'd take the load, but he paused before stepping into the box at batting practice. "How's Phuong look?"

"Okay," I said, "but I haven't let him uncork one yet."

"Well, now's the time." He took a couple of practice cuts. I waved to Phuong. "Let him see the real thing, partner."

Phuong nodded and blazed a fastball across the plate well

ahead of Jeff's swing. Jeff winced, tightened his stance, and came up empty a second time. He stepped out and stared for a long moment at Phuong, who gave him a slight smile. "You working a ladder on me, Bull?"

"Step at a time," I said. "The next one's coming in belt high." "And it's going right back where it came from—Phuong needs his fielding practice."

I grinned and set up belt high, dead center with the plate. Phuong wound up, and the ball came in like a white bolt out of the background of green trees and blue sky. And even knowing where it was going, Jeff couldn't catch up to it. "Where do you want the next one?" I asked.

"I don't. He's ready, and those bums have seen enough." I looked over at the opposing bench, where several guys had stopped talking and were staring nervously at Phuong. I stood and stretched. "So you're going to let him pitch?"

"Yep. You see any reason why not?"

"No, except I figured you wanted this game so bad that you wouldn't trust him."

Jeff gazed for a long moment at the mound, where Phuong had knelt to adjust a shoelace, and then he said quietly, "He's better than I am. That's what counts. And by the way, it hurts like hell to admit it."

"Well, you said it, all those Asian kids are killer baseball players."

"I don't know about all, but this one is. Just as long as he doesn't start thinking too much."

"You figured that out, huh?"

"Ya, I figured out a lot of things about him. And me, too, I guess. . . . Come on, we've got a ball game to win. Tell Phuong to relax and pitch his own game. I've got to tell Ned that he's playing right."

"Can we throw a Ryne Duren?"

"If there's nobody on, you can throw it the first time that fat

first baseman comes up. He hit two homers on us last time, and it might get him thinking. Otherwise, stick to the fastball."

"Gotcha."

For the first five innings, Phuong was something to behold. Except for the single Ryne Duren—which produced a satisfying chalkiness on one fat first baseman's face—I called nothing but fastballs. Except for one blooper to right, the champs didn't hit diddly. But in the sixth, with us ahead three-zip, their lead-off man bounced a single into center, and their next batter stepped into a Phuong fastball while trying to bunt. (Luckily, it took him on the thigh and he managed to stagger down to first.) That was enough to shake up Phuong. His next pitch was a yard outside, and I retrieved it just in time to see their lead-off guy sliding into third.

I called time and jogged out toward the mound. Jeff started in from short, but I waved him back. On our bench, Mr. Kenally roused himself long enough to give me an inquisitive look. I let him have a reassuring grin.

Phuong was glaring at his shoes, glove on hip. Before I could say anything, he muttered, "It's going to happen again."

"Bull crap." I snapped, jolting him into looking at me. I grinned and drawled it out slow: "Bullll crappp. I'm going to put up my mitt, and you're going to hit it. That's all I'm going to do, and that's all you have to worry about."

"And you seriously think that's going to work?"

"Guaranteed, partner. We're just gonna play catch."

He took a deep breath, still not believing me. "Okay. Just a game of catch."

I gave him a swat on the butt and jogged back to the plate. I grinned at the next batter. "Seen any good emergency rooms lately? My boy's gone just a tad wild." He didn't think it was funny. Nor did the next guy or the guy after him, as Phuong struck out the side.

The last three innings were a breeze. Every now and then, I'd

glance out at Jeff, who was nervously kicking the dirt at short between hitters. I knew that he was dying to call time for a quick visit to the mound, but he managed to control himself. In the ninth, Ned muffed a fly ball in right to give the champs a runner at second, but Phuong didn't so much as bat an eye. He mowed down the last three batters like they were little kids swinging sponge bats.

With the final strikeout, Jeff's self-control broke and he charged for the mound. When I got there a minute or two later—my speed hasn't improved any since spring—Jeff was thumping Phuong on the back and yelling: "No Win Phuong! That's what everybody's going to call you now, because nobody's ever gonna win against you again."

About that time, all the other guys got to the mound, and there was a lot of backslapping and high-fiving. In the middle of it all, Phuong just grinned. And for once his eyes weren't a bit cold. I winked at him. "You've got yourself a team," I said, and handed him the ball. "Have 'em autograph it."

For a second, I thought he was actually going to cry, but then he grinned and flipped it back to me. "Not this time. This one's yours, partner."

Alden R. Carter

"I'm afraid my ethnic roots were peeled and tossed into the stew pot two or three generations ago," says Alden Carter. He and his wife recently calculated that their children are five-sixteenths English, one-fourth Lithuanian, one-eighth Irish, one-eighth Swedish, one-sixteenth Dutch, and one-eighth unknown (but probably English or French). He concludes: "Quite simply, we are white Americans from central Wisconsin. Nothing more." Having no readily definable ethnic heritage to pass on to their children, Carter's family now celebrates *every* festival day on the calendar, no matter whose culture it honors.

All of Mr. Carter's first four novels—*Growing Season*, *Wart*, *Son of Tad*, *Sheila's Dying*, and *Up Country*—were selected as Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association. His most recent novel for teenagers, *RoboDad*, was named Best Young Adult Novel of 1990 by the Society of Midland Authors. He is also the author of twenty nonfiction books on a wide variety of scientific and historical subjects. His most recent nonfiction titles are *Battle of the Ironclads: The Monitor and the Merrimack* and *China Past—China Future*, an overview of Chinese history and culture.

The idea for "No Win Phuong" came to Carter while he was doing research on Vietnamese names as part of another writing project, teaching his athletic nine-year-old son some rudimentary baseball skills, and thinking about the nature of teamwork. "For some time," he says, "I had been musing on the concept of team sports and the problem of acceptance for those who are awkward in expressing a desperate desire to participate." As a teenage player, he confesses, "I, like Phuong, often squandered what ability I had by thinking too much and reacting too late." Perfect background for this story.

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