

A Bunch of Buddys

Jimmy would remember thinking, *What is everybody looking at?* As they walked through the airport in Paris and later through the streets of Lourdes—Buddy in his wheelchair, Jimmy behind it, pushing it through the tangle of pedestrians—it occurred to him how very far they were from home. It seemed like ages ago that they were back in Warminster, the two of them preparing for this big adventure that would carry them from JFK Airport, across the Atlantic Ocean, and to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, where legions of incurables have come in search of divine healing. Other than the cup of orange juice Jimmy spilled on Buddy, it had been an uneventful trip, albeit both of them were now tired and hungry. Jimmy had eaten some passable lasagna on the plane, and Buddy a beef-and-bean dish so inedible that he had to spit it out.

As they sat in their room at the Imperial Hotel, Jimmy flipped on the tape recorder he had carried along with him. They were always fooling around with recording stuff in those days; Jimmy used to drive around back home and describe whatever he happened to see,

just so Buddy could get a feel for what was going on out in the world. Jimmy began the chronicle of their journey to France as soon as they had landed at Charles de Gaulle Airport: The rain has stopped and the sun is beginning to break through . . . the Frenchwomen are not “too enthusiastic about us . . . I think we’d do better in Warminster” . . . and the room at the hotel has “a puny bed and no pillows.” Inside that room, they laugh over how they just got stuck in the elevator.

JIMMY: What is it? Eight P.M.?

BUDDY: Close.

JIMMY: Yeah, I’m having peanut-butter bread for dinner.

Buddy’s having peanut-butter bread with a little jam. We have about ten pieces of bread left.

BUDDY: Thanks, Mom, for getting jam.

JIMMY: Yeah, you got us jam instead of jelly.

BUDDY: I sent Jimmy out on the town and he was out buying the groceries, a bottle of Coke and a bottle of orange soda.

JIMMY: I’m going to drink my warm Coke that cost seven and a half francs. Nobody ripped us off yet.

BUDDY: I’ll have a sip of that.

JIMMY: This soda is like Alka-Seltzer.

BUDDY: Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. You drink the orange stuff.

JIMMY: We’ll take you to Lourdes tomorrow.

BUDDY: We’ll report back later.

JIMMY: *Bon voyage. Oui! Oui!*

A banner had been draped across the front of the house when Jimmy returned from Florida five months before: WELCOME HOME! Groggy from his evening of beer drinking with his former teammates, Jimmy packed up the following day and was driven to the air-

port by one of the coaches, who had his girlfriend with him in the front seat. The woman seemed irritated, Jimmy sensed as he looked at the back of her head, as if it pissed her off that she had to spend part of her day off taking “some punk kid” to the airport. Seeing the sign on the house cheered him up, but he was even better seeing Buddy and the others again, even if his father just looked on in stony silence. But Bert no longer annoyed Jimmy as he once had, not since Jimmy had come home from a game a few years before and told him he had gone three for four at the plate—and Bert had asked why he had not gone four for four. Jimmy began to shrug off such asides as “the same old shit,” just as Buddy had and even Bob. Nothing was ever good enough. Impassively, Bert looked on from the head of the table as Jimmy regaled everyone at dinner with the handful of Spanish words he had learned in Florida. Grinning, he said, “*Baseball is beisbol. And dammit is caramba.*” Outwardly, he seemed unshaken by how his career had gone so off course, yet deep down he could not help but feel he had disappointed everyone.

Summer unfolded at a leisurely pace. With Buddy upstairs in his bed by the window, Jimmy moved back down in the basement, which he would come to call “the dungeon.” During the day, he drove a delivery van for Delcrest Medical Services and Supplies and dropped off oxygen, walkers, wheelchairs, and such to customers. To stay in shape, he played baseball three or four evenings a week for Cedarbook in the Pen-Del League, where he hoped to attract the eye of a scout and get another opportunity to play pro ball. The Eagles’ general manager, Jim Murray, had some baseball contacts and, as a favor to Buddy, had said that he would look into helping Jimmy get lined up somewhere. On the weekends, Jimmy would kick back and enjoy himself, drink beer with friends or go on dates. His high school girlfriend, Andrea, had gone off with someone else by then, but he had not had any intention of settling down. He was still only twenty, young

enough to get his baseball career back on track. He told himself he would be better prepared when his chance came around again.

Until that happened, Jimmy was perfectly happy to be back home. Seeing Buddy again each day and helping out with his care gave him purpose, and Jimmy always enjoyed the repartee they shared. While Buddy had been disappointed that Jimmy had been cut by the Dodgers—at one point telling his neighbor George Bushman, “Can you believe he went down there and blew it?”—he could not help but be amused by some of the exploits his brother had related. Buddy would shake his head and dissolve into laughter over something Jimmy had done, and that always gave Jimmy a feeling of accomplishment. Of course, the two had disagreements, when Jimmy would dig his heels in over something and Buddy would shout, “Mom, get him out of here!” But calm would soon descend upon the house again, and Jimmy would reemerge from his basement hideaway and he and Buddy would have a laugh. From what Jimmy would remember, Buddy was in especially good spirits that summer, in part because he had that business he was starting and because Alan Ameche had told him he would underwrite a trip for him to Lourdes. In the parlance of the sport that had placed him in his predicament, Buddy looked upon it as the ultimate Hail Mary pass.

Miracles had abounded in the catechism books of his youth, none of which would have played larger in his consideration than John 5:1–18, in which Jesus heals a lame man by the pool of Bethesda: *Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been in that condition a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your bed, and walk.” And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked.*

Biblical passages such as this gave Buddy hope, even if only the belief in some slender possibility for recovery that existed beyond what the doctors had told him. Oh, but how he had prayed for it to be so, that even if he could not get up and walk again, he would be relieved of the unendurable pain that he was in, which became harder and harder to cope with as the years passed! What he would have given for the electrical shocks to cease shooting through him!

No option would be left unexplored, even if it seemed beyond the realm of the orthodox. From the beginning, he welcomed spiritual intervention. When he had been at Sacred Heart Hospital, he found that he had no appetite, which caused his weight to drop and his mother to worry. But one day Ed Cherosky stopped in his room with one of the blood-soaked gloves that had belonged to Pio of Pietrelcina—or Padre Pio, as he became popularly known. The glove had been worn by the Capuchin priest and later Roman Catholic saint to cover up his stigmata. Blood flowed from penny-size holes in his hands and his feet in the approximate location of the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ. Of enduring belief in the healing powers that the glove possessed, Cherosky roamed the area hospitals with it. He had heard what had happened to Buddy and showed up with the glove, which he placed on Buddy in his bed. Incredibly—or so the story is told by Rosemarie—later that same day Buddy yelled out to the nursing staff, “What does a guy got to do to get some food around here?” Whenever Cherosky came back with the glove through the years, Buddy would say that he experienced “a warmth inside of him,” a phenomenon that his friend Joanne Johnston said was “not a physical healing but gave him the strength to go on.”

No one ever heard Buddy ask, “Why did this happen to me?” Yet he had to wonder why he had been asked to bear this cross, if some unknowable plan was behind his affliction. Early on, he recounted an odd scene to his sister Rose. Lying in his parents’ bedroom when

he'd just gotten home from the hospital, he looked up at the wall and saw a vision of a crucifix, upon which Christ unmoored his arm of the cross and pointed a finger at him. Concerned that people would think he was just hallucinating, or had perhaps even gone crazy, he asked Rose not to share this with anyone. Nor did he himself ever bring it up—not with his mother or any of his other siblings, and apparently not with the clergy who came to his house each Sunday and gave him Communion. The visiting priests and later Johnston would say in their blessing, “May God the Father bless you. . . . May God the Son heal you. . . . May God the Holy Spirit enlighten you. . . . May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Given even the longest shot of walking again, Buddy would give it a look, always hopeful but never overly so. Within a few years of his injury, he attended an event at the George Washington Motor Lodge in Willow Grove, where thousands of people with assorted physical and other concerns showed up to hear televangelist Pat Robertson. With Buddy that day were his parents and Jimmy, who still was just thirteen or so and had been having problems with his throat. Breathing in cool air caused it to close up. Mesmerized, Jimmy remembers how Robertson strode across the stage, waded into the crowd, and shouted, “Someone has a money problem. That has been taken care of. . . . Someone has a hole in their heart. That has been taken care of. . . . Someone has a throat problem. That has been taken care of.” Immediately, Jimmy held up his arms and exclaimed that Robertson was speaking of him. Sighing, his mother looked at him and said, “Stop that carrying on.” But Jimmy says with a chuckle, “Believe it or not, I never had a problem with my throat again.” And he remembers that Buddy told him, “You were always barging in on my miracles.”

But eight or so years later Buddy would go to Lourdes, and Jimmy

would take him. Jimmy was chosen because, as their mother would say, “We always said, ‘If you have a job to do, give it to Jimmy, he’ll do it.’” It was always said in jest, but it was true. Physically, Jimmy was big and strong enough to handle Buddy, who was not just heavy but unfolded into jutting angles of elbows and knees. But Jimmy had also developed considerable patience, which was especially useful whenever he and Buddy had to go somewhere. On their journey to France in October 1982, Jimmy carried Buddy on and off planes and on and off buses, careful to cradle him in his arms as he moved him in and out of his wheelchair. In the air and again at the hotel, he would feed Buddy, give him something to drink, and attend to his catheter bag. To begin that Saturday in Lourdes, he dressed Buddy and combed his hair. But before Jimmy did any of that, he turned on the tape recorder.

JIMMY: Day two. Held hostage.

BUDDY: Just getting up. Gonna go eat peanut butter and jelly
for breakfast again. And get some Coke.

JIMMY: This town blows!

But Jimmy would not think that years later when he looked back on it. Steeped in vivid fall colors, Lourdes was picturesque, with a river curling through it and an old bridge that led to the shrine. It was near the end of the season, which runs from April to October, yet it was teeming with visitors—or, as they are called, pilgrims. Millions of ailing people have gone there each year since 1860, the place where two years before Bernadette Soubirous, a fourteen-year-old girl, had witnessed the apparition of a white-robed woman in a grotto called Massabielle. From February to July 1858, Bernadette had seen eighteen such apparitions. On the day of the sixteenth—March 25—she began digging until there was a small puddle, which

grew into a pool, and then what has become the hallowed spring. Only a relative handful of people had been recognized by the Church as having been cured by immersing themselves in it—sixty-five, as of the fall of 1982—and yet as Jimmy wheeled Buddy into the grotto, both of them were overcome by the powerful imagery of the scene before them: Hanging from the walls were discarded canes, crutches, and wheelchairs.

Jimmy handed off Buddy to an attendant, who guided his wheelchair behind a curtain. Jimmy stood outside.

Buddy could be heard: “No, get Jimmy! Get my brother!”

The attendant slid back the curtain and waved for Jimmy.

Jimmy stepped inside, where Buddy sat in his wheelchair by a tub. Jimmy helped him disrobe, picked him up, and lowered his paralyzed body into the water. It was cold, so very cold—53.6 degrees Fahrenheit. The attendant crossed himself and offered in French an invocation to Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Bernadette.

Quickly, Jimmy then withdrew Buddy from the tub. Buddy was shivering.

Jimmy grabbed a towel and began drying him. But the attendant stepped between them and said, “No! No! No!” Jimmy understood that he was trying to say that he was supposed to allow the air to dry Buddy.

Neither of them knew how this whole thing worked, when or if Buddy was supposed to walk. So they laughed and went on their way, Jimmy pushing the frail body of his brother up a street as Buddy observed into the tape recorder, “Here come a parade of wheelchairs.” To which Jimmy added sorrowfully, “A bunch of Buddys.” They attended mass (Buddy said, “You would love it, Mom”), stopped by some souvenir shops, and headed back to the hotel. There, they had a ham-and-cheese sandwich for dinner, then stayed up well into the evening, laughing so hard that the occupant in the neighboring room

pounded on the wall and shouted, "Keep it down in there!" The following day, they found their way back to the airport, where Jimmy hoisted Buddy out of his wheelchair on the tarmac and carried him up the steep stairwell to the plane. Jimmy could feel his grip loosen. Buddy looked down and said, "My pants are falling down!" But Jimmy eyed the cabin door up ahead and continued to climb, breathing hard as he replied, "Too bad!"

Gone just four days, they were ecstatic to be back, even if the trip seemed to have been for naught. Immediately, Jimmy stopped off for a can of Pringles and a gallon of milk. With the baseball season over, he worked during the week and cut loose on the weekend. Something was always going on. Two weeks or so later—on October 29—he joined some friends at a bar in Lambertville, New Jersey, where the drinking age then was only eighteen. In the back of his used Ford Pinto, the car he had gotten with his small bonus from the Dodgers, he had with him a case of beer, which he and a friend had worked down to a six-pack by the time they got to the bar at 10:00 P.M. or so. There, they drank rum-and-Cokes for another four hours and, shooed out the door at closing, piled in the car and headed off in search of a party.

Two girls they had met that evening were in a car behind them. They would see the whole thing: With his friend in the passenger seat, Jimmy was driving along, not erratically or fast, when he failed to negotiate a left curve in the road. The Pinto crashed into a tree. When the police arrived on the scene, they found the dazed passenger inside the wreck but not Jimmy. One of them asked, "Where is the driver?" The passenger, who had an injured back that would eventually heal, pointed to a concrete wall some seventy-five yards away. At the base of it, Jimmy lay unconscious, blood spilling from a head wound. The police ascertained that Jimmy had been hurled from his car door upon impact and hit the wall headfirst. They also

discovered that he had a blood alcohol level of .24, or three times the legal limit.

Sleepily, Bert Miley answered the phone call that came in at 6:00 A.M. from Temple University Hospital. When the family convened there later that day, they were told by a worried doctor that Jimmy was in critical condition. He had fractures to his skull, nose, and shoulder, along with assorted facial lacerations. Surgeons performed a left frontal craniotomy. With his head wrapped in bandages, he was scarcely recognizable. His mother sat in the waiting room and quietly prayed, *Hail Mary, full of grace* . . . just as she had done nine years before. It seemed unbelievable to her that here she was again, in another hospital with another son near death. But when she went home that evening, the phone rang quite late. On the line was the doctor, who said in an animated voice, "I never call like this but I wanted you to know that Jimmy regained consciousness and was able to remember his phone number when I asked for it." Everyone would say for years to come that it was a miracle that he survived. Even Buddy, who would always add with the laugh, "Yeah, the one *I* was supposed to get."