

# Left Field

by [Jeff Plude](#) (March 2019)



*Interior Bar Scene*, Harry McCormick, 1972

I was driving up from Albany to visit Ma one Saturday and as I was going down Main Street in the village, and was only a couple of blocks from the house, I saw him on the corner outside Archie's Bar & Grill. You couldn't miss him. He was a big guy and his beard was as wild as a bush, all steel colored and grown up near his eye sockets and down all around his

neck, his hair was thick and wild too, and he had on a ratty red T-shirt and khakis that were fringed on the bottom. He was walking around outside the bar and had a pizza box in one hand and the box was open and he had a slice in his other hand and was eating it.

Then it hit me. I knew this guy. It was Nelson Hyatt, my first Little League coach. I always thought his name sounded like a pro player's name. Nobody had a name like that in this town.

I told Ma about him. Archie's was only a couple of blocks from her house, the same house I'd grown up in, and she'd seen him too, on her way to the Senior Citizens Center on the little bus that picked her up and dropped her off at her doorstep. But she seemed to barely remember him coaching me in Little League.

"He's an awful lookin' thing," she said, backing her short round babushka body up to the armchair and falling the short distance into it. She leaned forward in her armchair and shook her head of tight white curls. "He looks like a wild man from Borneo. He doesn't know whether he's comin' or goin'. He's an awful lookin' thing."

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"Maybe he had some trouble," I said.

"Well that's no way to act."

Ma went back to watching her Yankees game, they were playing the Angels on the West Coast so the game hadn't come on until four. She used to come to my Little League games by herself because my father was working and she was a homemaker, as they used to say in those days. But she didn't start watching the Yankees on TV until after my father died. Now she never missed a game. She was talking about Mattingly—even he hadn't been hitting well this season. "They'll never make it to the World Series like this," she said. I said yeah. But I'd stopped watching baseball on TV a long time ago.

I decided to change the subject and said, "So what are you having for supper?"

"Maybe we could order something from Tarny's. I was gonna make us some meat loaf but it's been too hot." There were a couple of box fans going in the living room and one in the kitchen too. People already had their woodstoves going in the Adirondacks, but my mother was always hot right through September and October.

"I don't feel like a sub tonight." Ma didn't like pizza, she hated cheese. She was the only person I ever knew who didn't like pizza.

“Why don’t you get a small pizza for yourself and I’ll get a sub? You can bring whatever you don’t eat home with you and eat it later.”

“The last time we got a pizza from there it sucked.” My wife and I had ordered a large pizza from Tarny’s when we were up for Christmas and it was all sauce and not enough cheese.

“Bertha says the small pizzas are a lot better than the large pizzas. She got a large pizza when her grandson stayed overnight—what a little sh\*\* he is—and it was terrible. But then she got a small one with a coupon and it was pretty good she said.”

Bertha Howe was the last of Ma’s old friends on the street. Most of her neighbors had lived on the street for forty years, just like us. Millie Gregory, who lived across from Ma’s house, had just died. My father and Mr. Gregory had died around the same time and Ma and Mrs. Gregory started watching baseball together after that, I’d come over and they’d be sitting in Ma’s living room watching the Yankees game.

“How can the large pizzas be that different from the smalls?”

“I don’t know, but Bertha says they are.”

So Ma called up Tarny’s and ordered a small sausage pizza

for me and a ham and turkey sub for herself—she always ordered a ham and turkey sub, never just ham or just turkey. It was almost an hour before the delivery guy knocked on the screen door. I set up the metal TV trays, which had been around since I was a kid, in front of our armchairs, and my mother put her sub and a couple slices of pizza on two sets of doubled-up paper plates and put them on the trays along with a paper towel napkin for each of us.

“How’s your pizza?” she said while chewing the last of a bite from her sub, mayo in the corners of her mouth.

“Not too good,” I said. “It’s still too saucy, the cheese slides right off it.”

“You want some of my sub?”

“Nah, I’m not that hungry anyway.”

I drove back down Main Street on my way home but at the last second I decided to go to Archie’s for a beer. I parked on Main in front of Archie’s and waited until Coach Hyatt was down the sidewalk on Notre Dame Street and then I quickly walked in the front door. I walked by the pool table and took a stool on the corner of the square bar near the big window that faced Notre Dame and ordered a Bud.

Just a couple of other thirsty souls and I were in there. I turned around on my stool and watched Coach Hyatt through

the window as he walked down the sidewalk on Notre Dame toward the corner, then I lost sight of him and turned back around, but then I saw him again through the window in the front door on my left as he walked down Main toward Tarny's, which was just down the block near the corner. It used to be a small grocery store where I bought my baseball cards as a kid. Back then it was called Dino's, named for the guy who owned it, his three sons were football stars in high school and one of them was big in college too. That was before the Stewart's and Cumberland Farms convenience stores started popping up all over the place.

I said to Don Archambault behind the bar, "What's up with him?" nodding at Coach Hyatt as he passed the front door again on his way back to the corner.

Archie kind of looked at me funny, like he didn't remember me. I used to come in here once in a while when I was first old enough to drink even though it was an old man's bar mostly.

"He's cuckoo, that's what's up with him. A couple months ago he started walking up and down the sidewalk outside the bar all day talking to himself and eating pizza. I called the cops and they brought him to MHU, but they couldn't keep him, I guess."

"What's MHU?"

"The Mental Health Unit at the hospital," he said, like

he was annoyed he had to tell me.

“He used to be my Little League coach,” I said, trying to get him back on my side.

“Well he’s out in left field now,” Archie said, and his pudgy face lit up for a second under his wispy white hair.

“He must’ve done something for a living.” I didn’t remember what kind of job Coach Hyatt had when I was a kid.

“Somebody said he used to be a real estate agent. You oughta see where he lives. Just down the street in this dump.”

“Where?”

“This side of Main just before you turn to go to the high school. You can’t miss it.”

Archie went to wait on somebody. I leaned back on my stool a little and sipped the ice cold memories. I was eight years old and was just starting Little League. I rode my bike over to the Little League field, which was near the high school and just a few blocks from my house. Coach Hyatt was the coach of my team, the K of C. He was the only coach that didn’t have a kid of his own playing on the team. He was a big guy with black muttonchops, black frame glasses, and a deep

baritone voice that made him seem like the Abominable Snowman (we'd just had one of those winters with snowbanks into April, which is when we started practice). He put us at positions that seemed to suit us. I was the smallest guy on the team—"a little bit of a thing," as my mother always said—but quick, so I went to shortstop. Coach Hyatt barked out orders as he hit the ball to us during fielding practice, told me when I was supposed to cover second, how to brush my foot across the bag for a double play instead of stepping on it, how I was supposed to be the cutoff man when the ball was hit to left field... But the most important thing he told me was to always stay in front of the ball. Put your body in front of it and let it hit you if you have to, he commanded. Still I was scared. The ball was hard. One time when I let a ball hop over my glove and go into the outfield, Coach Hyatt came up to me in the dugout. "Stand here," he said. He stood a few feet away from me and told me to put my hands down by my side and keep them there. He tossed the ball at my chest. "Did that hurt?" he said. I don't remember if it did or not, but it wasn't really a question. "Next time get in front of it." A couple of games later a hard grounder was hit to me at short. I scooted over in front of it and planted myself in the baseline near the infield grass, and just as I expected it to thump into my glove it landed on the seam where the grass met the dirt and the ball took a vicious hop and hit me right in the eye. The ball dropped in front of me and the hitter was safe at first, but the runner at second stayed at third instead of scoring. Coach Hyatt ran out and looked at my eye. He wanted me to come out of the game, but I told him I wanted to stay in. I had a black eye and I played the next game with it and Coach Hyatt bragged to the other coach: "That's my shortstop. Pound for pound he's the best player I got."

I waited till he was down the sidewalk on Notre Dame and I walked out the front door and down to Tarny's. I asked Mark



Tarantino, who was behind the counter, about him. Mark was a year or two older than his brother Dave but smaller, built like a little bull.

“He used to write checks for his pizzas but they started bouncing,” Mark said, “so it’s cash on the barrel now.”

“All he does is walk up and down the sidewalk all day and eat pizza,” Dave said.

He’d walked out from the back where they made the pizzas. He was as fat as ever. One time we were on the same team the year after Tee-ball and Dave was almost late for a game and he told me it was because he’d eaten three bowls of chili for supper. He was like a baby elephant even back then.

“I heard his mother died and left him some money,” Mark said. “He musta pissed it all away on the ponies. A guy who hangs out at O’Leary’s said he used to see him in there all the time and he used to go back and forth from the bar to OTB next door all night.”

“He’s f\*\*\*\*n’ out there,” Dave said.

“Maybe your pizza pushed him over the edge,” I said, not knowing what to say. I was only half joking.

"Maybe he just jumped," Mark said, and he and Dave laughed. I kind of smiled without wanting to.

When I walked out of Tarny's, it was dark out and Coach Hyatt wasn't around anymore. So I walked down Main toward the high school.

There was no mailbox or anything but I knew it was his house, just like Archie said. It was set back three times as far from the sidewalk as the other houses. It was a small house. The grass was grown up a foot all around it.

I remembered Coach Hyatt's house when I was a kid, it was small but new and modern looking. He had a wife and a couple of little kids, a boy and a girl maybe. Our team went over there for a party after the season. He wasn't my coach anymore after that first season, but he always came to the games and umped too—I remember one time when he jumped in the air and swung his arms wide like a giant bird when there was a close play in a big game and the player was safe at third. One time he and this other coach who also was a baseball nut but yelled at his players and the umps all the time took me and that coach's son to a couple of All-Star games down near Albany to scout the other teams. The other coach told me that day that Coach Hyatt used to be a star in basketball and, of course, baseball, at the high school, which was across from our Little League diamonds.

I stepped through the unmowed grass, which was more like a meadow than a front yard. The two lawns next to it on either side had just been cut, which reminded me of the crewcuts we

used to get in the summer when I first started Little League, before all the hippie stuff made its way up to the hinterlands. I could hear crickets all around me. There were no lights on in the house. Was he home? If he was, what was I going to say to him? Even if he was in his right mind it'd been almost twenty years since he'd coached me.

I walked up onto the porch like it was the house of somebody I wanted something from. The porch floorboards were warped. The paint was peeling off the siding. The door was beat up and half open. I knocked on the casing, trying not to look inside. I knocked again and looked inside. It was dark but there didn't seem to be any furniture. It was as if somebody was moving in or out and all the bags and boxes had been ripped apart. Moonlight shined bright through the windows, which had no shades or curtains.

I walked inside slowly, carefully. What was I doing? Why was I here? What was I looking for? I tripped over something. I looked down. It was a box. I knelt down and looked in, the flaps were open. There were a bunch of half-eaten slices of pizza in there. I heard something scratching in the box. I quickly closed the flaps. I heard something bouncing off the inside of the flaps. This was really freaking me out. There was another room past the one I was in, a doorway. I was in the middle of the room by now. I'd already gone too far.

But just as I turned to leave something slammed into me!—something or somebody was bear-hugging me from behind!—I pushed back and we hit the wall hard!—and I was sprung free. I scrambled up to my feet. And there was Coach Hyatt, like a wild bear I'd suddenly come across in the woods. I was all excited and tried to catch my breath.

“I’m sorry I came in your house,” I blurted. Then I said, not knowing what to say, “I was on your Little League team. You used to be my Little League coach.”

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He was sitting against the wall we’d hit, in the middle of all this trash. He just mumbled to himself, nothing I could understand. Then after a few moments he put his head in his hands and he started to wail, and soon he was crying like I’d never heard a grown man cry before. I didn’t know what to do. I was going to say something, but all of a sudden he jumped to his feet and I ran out of that house—if you can call it that, it was more like a cave I’d stumbled into and couldn’t find my way out of—as fast as I could, hopped in my car, and got out of there.

I never went back. I never should’ve gone in there to begin with.

One Saturday later that fall, I drove by Archie’s on my way to Ma’s and Coach Hyatt was gone. I stopped in for a beer and Archie told me that he’d attacked somebody who’d said something to him on the corner and the cops came and took him away.

“He’s cuckoo,” Archie said.

On another Saturday the next spring I drove by Coach Hyatt’s house but it wasn’t there anymore, it’d been torn down. The grass had been cut too. All that was left was the foundation.

Not too long after that I drove by and Archie’s was no longer Archie’s, though it was still there. It seems that one of the guys got so drunk that he fell off the stool and died right there and the place closed up right after that. At least that’s what Ma told me. It was now a soup kitchen.

“I never thought I’d see the day when this village had a soup kitchen,” Ma said.

A year or two later Tarny’s closed up too. A Domino’s had opened up on Main Street just past the canal going toward downtown, and that was the end of the Tarantino brothers and their slow, saucy pizzas.

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