The Yips

by Alan Swyer (January 2026)

The Friday night before her high school team's first preseason game, Rosie Ramirez found herself unable to sleep. That was nothing new. What started during her T-Ball days as a combination of excitement and jitters had come to include a third element: envisioning. Lying in bed, Rosie would imagine all sorts of game situations, then try to determine what her response could, or should, be.

That kind of preparation, Rosie believed, was just as important as the other facets of her training, which, thanks to funding from a travel ball coach named Gerald Pickens, had come to include a private pitching instructor, a trainer, and a nutritionist. Envisioning possibilities, Rosie was convinced, provided the edge that propelled her ascent in high school from being the only freshman on the varsity, to All-League as a sophomore, then the US Under-18 World Cup Team before her 17th birthday.

More than a passion for Rosie, softball was an opportunity. Being recruited by UCLA, Stanford, USC, and others meant that above and beyond soon becoming the first in her family to attend college, there was a chance of lifting them out of longstanding debt. NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) money had completely transformed collegiate athletics—first with men's sports, then with women's—to the point where it was no longer only quarterbacks or superstars like Caitlin Clark who benefited. Also making six figures—and in some cases seven—were tennis players, golfers, and an ever-increasing number of softball standouts.

If what Rosie was being promised by college coaches vying for her commitment proved to be true, she could do wonders not just for her dad, who worked as a handyman, and her mom, who waited on tables at a local taqueria, but also for her two younger sisters, her kid brother, and the great-aunt who shared their small apartment. Plus she could serve as an inspiration for other girls in East LA.

Knowing that recruiters were likely be coming to see her play, Rosie couldn’t wait for morning to arrive. She had to fight not to wolf her breakfast, then quickly donned her uniform, grabbed her gear, and stood outside until her teammate Lydia Ruiz pulled up in a clunky Toyota. They picked up two other players—Gina Norwood and Blanca Hernandez—then nearly got lost on their way to face their non-conference opponent at Lynwood High.

With the visiting team as always batting first, Lydia popped up, then Blanca grounded out. That brought up Rosie, who singled to left on the first pitch she faced, then wound up stranded when Gina struck out.

Filled with a sense of purpose, Rosie strode toward the pitcher’s mound, where she immediately felt at home. No matter what city, state, or softball field she was on, the mound was her special place, the one spot on earth where everything always seemed fine.

Pumped up, Rosie took her warm-ups, then readied herself as the leadoff hitter and umpire took their places. Drawing oohs from the stands, and cheers from her teammates, Rosie blew a fastball past her opponent for a strike. Her next pitch was even faster, but high. Then came another blazing fastball that forced the catcher to reach way outside. After a third fastball nearly decked the batter, Rosie threw a change-up that resulted in a weak comebacker, yielding the first out.

Taking a deep breath, Rosie paced as the next hitter stepped up. Her first pitch was a head-high fastball on which the Lynwood player bailed her out with an awkward swing. Following with another change-up, Rosie induced an easy ground-out to first. As the third batter stepped toward the plate, Rosie tried to steady herself, then uncorked a fastball that nailed her opponent in the butt, engendering a glare that Rosie

ignored. Facing the clean-up hitter, she threw a fastball well inside that resulted in a lame defensive swing. Finally, a change-up yielded another weak dribbler for out number three.

“Way to battle,” said head coach Linda Alvarado, greeting Rosie on the sidelines. “I’ve got you for two innings today so that others get to throw. If you’re up to it.”

Rosie sighed. “I just wish I could throw a fastball for a strike.”

“It’ll come,” assured the coach. “It always does.”

Except to Rosie’s dismay it didn’t. Again in the second inning she had to follow wild fastballs with change-ups so as to fight her way to three outs.

Though Rosie, who moved to shortstop after her time on the mound, drove in the winning run with a double, she was unable to share her teammates’ glee.

Pulling her aside, Coach Alvarado tried to provide comfort. “It was probably adrenaline,” she stated. “Let it go and enjoy the weekend. You kept your poise and your velocity was great, plus you carried us with your hitting. Remember, real winners make things happen even when not everything’s peachy. Right?”

Rosie nodded hopefully.

Until she discovered softball—and softball discovered her—in the eyes of others, and herself, Rosie was basically one more ordinary, nondescript kid. But at her first tryout, it became clear to the coaches drafting that she possessed excellent hand-to-eye coordination, plus a surprisingly powerful arm. Clearly the most talented player on the team that selected her, she immediately was put at shortstop and batted third in the lineup.

Once she reached the age where kids, rather than parents, were allowed to pitch, she quickly became a sensation on the mound.

With that success, Rosie inevitably gained both an identity and a direction. Bit by bit her shyness and insecurity gave way to confidence and a commitment. She was a someone with a passion and a purpose.

Even so, due to the size of her parents—Jose was 5'7" and Elena barely 5'2" —it was assumed by that Rosie would be too small to remain a force once she got to high school.

Surprising everyone, including herself, Rosie grew, and grew, then grew some more. She was her father's height by the time she reached her freshman year, an inch taller as a sophomore, then added yet another inch each of the next two years.

To the delight of her high school coaches, her arm strength kept pace. She was able to throw 58 miles per hour as a freshman—the equivalent of 85 MPH in baseball. That jumped to 60 MPH and a sophomore, then 61 as a junior, and 62 the summer before her senior year—roughly 90 miles per hour in hardball terms due to the mound being closer to home plate. That put Rosie on a par with the aces on the best Division 1 college teams.

Even better, she was blessed with excellent location, plus the ability to change speeds, and most importantly what insiders call *command*. That means knowing when to throw strikes and when not to, so as to get the batter to chase unhittable pitches, plus the ability to keep batters off balance.

Not surprisingly, her reputation spread, first in East LA, then throughout the county, and ultimately even nationally. Rosie was a phenom.

In her eyes, senior year in high school would be the payoff for all the hard work—a stepping stone to all she'd dreamed about.

Until suddenly that no longer felt so certain.

Happily, practice went well in the days that followed. On Monday and Tuesday Rosie worked out at shortstop and took batting practice, aware that on Wednesday she would add a bullpen session.

Any fears about control or command faded as she whizzed fastballs exactly where she wanted them to go.

The next preseason game, however, was a different story. Once more her fastball seemed uncontrollable, forcing Rosie to use it as a setup pitch for her change-up.

“Maybe you’re overthrowing,” offered Coach Alvarado in a quiet moment, suggesting that striving for added velocity might be taking a toll on Rosie’s command.

“Not that I know of,” countered Rosie. “No more than usual.”

Frustrated, Rosie spent that evening scouring the internet, where she came upon a term that was completely new to her: the Yips. That meant, if she understood it correctly, a sudden and inexplicable loss of the ability to execute certain familiar athletic skills. The symptoms, she learned, involved fine motor skills, plus possible psychological issues impacting both muscle memory and decision-making, leaving athletes unable to perform basic skills that always been second nature.

In baseball, she discovered, that meant ex-Dodger Steve Sax, or ex-Yankee Chuck Knoblach, each of whom suddenly found it almost impossible to make the easy toss from second base to first. Or old-time Pirate pitcher Steve Blass, who went from all-star to has-been due to a sudden inability to throw strikes. Or Mets catcher Mackey Sasser, who found himself almost unable to throw the ball back to the pitcher. Or

pitcher Jon Lester unable to make a pick-off throw to first base.

In golf, Rosie learned, the poster child was Tommy Armour, who abandoned tournament play because he could no longer make even routine putts—a condition that at times also took hold of Hall of Famers like Sam Snead and Ben Hogan.

In basketball, she came upon the name Markelle Fultz, the first player picked in the NBA draft the year he turned pro, who seemed like a future great until his jumpshot went from accurate to useless. Plus Mason Plumlee, who developed a mental block so strong that he had to learn to shoot free throws with his left hand.

Variations of that malady seem to arise periodically in tennis, cricket, football, darts, and even gymnastics, where the great Simone Wiles had to overcome what in her sport is known as “the twisties.”

Not knowing what to do, Rosie stewed for several days, wondering whether a shrink might help, or if it was time to give up on her softball dreams.

In desperation, she reached out to her travel ball coach, Gerald Pickens, who drove over and took her out for pizza.

“First,” Pickens stated after listening to Rosie pour out her heart, “it’s not the end of the world.”

“For me it is,” insisted Rosie.

“Not only are there loads of people who somehow get by without stardom— ” he said, only to be interrupted.

“But my scholarship,” protested Rosie. “And helping my family.”

“Can you still play shortstop?” asked Pickens.

That drew a reluctant nod.

“And hit?”

Another nod.

“There are schools that would want you just to do that.”

“UCLA? Stanford?”

“Maybe. But they’re not the only places on earth. So let me ask you something. Is softball fun?”

“It was until this started.”

“Sure about that?”

Perplexed, Rosie studied Pickens. “What do you mean?”

“I’m wondering—you know, with all the emphasis on scholarships, and NILs, and reputation—if maybe the fun’s gone out of it.”

Rosie sighed.

“It’s called *playing* softball, remember? Not *working* softball. Maybe it’s my fault, getting you that pitching coach, and trainer, and nutritionist. Maybe it’s important from time to time to drink a milkshake or chomp on a hot fudge sundae. Matter of fact, maybe we should devour a couple of hot fudge sundaes right now.”

Seeing Rosie giggle, Pickens smiled. “You’re too young to have to be so serious all the time. C’mon, I know a great ice cream place.”

“For real?”

“Unless you’re not interested.”

Rosie playfully sneered. “Says who?”

Silence reigned as the two of them dove into their hot fudge sundaes at an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, then again Pickens spoke. “Money’s screwed up everything,” he stated. “And I’m not saying that because I don’t have much. Kids used to be allowed to be kids. Sports were fun. People had the time—or maybe *took* the time—to live. Now everybody’s in a goddamn rush. Who were you named for?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” wondered Rosie.

“See? You’re in a rush. Tell me.”

“Partially for my great-grandma.”

“And the other part?”

Rosie laughed. “My mom’s favorite oldie has always been *Angel Baby* by Rosie & the Originals.”

Pickens chuckled. “Isn’t it nice to think about something other than softball from time to time?”

Rosie nodded.

“If it’s okay with you,” Pickens continued, “I’d like to have a chat with your high school coach.”

“About?”

“The sun, the moon, and that I’d like you to lay off pitching for a while.”

“Think she’ll listen to you?”

“Who do you think got her the job? Linda played for me when she was in high school.”

“I had no idea.”

“Do I have the go-ahead?”

Rosie nodded.

“And by the way, you’re 100 percent going to pull out of this. And I bet you’ll be better and stronger for it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because it happened to me in high school football. In addition to being a wide-out, I kicked extra points. Guess who was perfect sophomore and junior years. Comes senior time, for the first three games, disaster.”

“So what’d you do?”

“After talking myself out of jumping off a bridge? My baseball coach took me out for an ice cream sundae.”

“Like us now.”

“And he said that as special as I thought I was, I was just one tiny part of a whole big world. Nobody, he swore, would know in Kansas, Wyoming, or on the moon if I missed a kick. And besides, most of the extra points I was missing came because of touchdown catches I made. The lesson is that every day of playing ball is a blessing. That’s why when people grumble, ‘I *have* to go to practice,’ they oughta be saying ‘I *get* to go to practice.’ ‘Cause everybody’s one ankle, one knee, one elbow, one shoulder or one car accident away from it ending. I know because my big league dreams fell apart when I tore the hell out of my rotator cuff and labrum. But enough about me. For you, there are two things I can guarantee. Ready?”

“You bet.”

“Whether or not you pitch, the sun’s gonna come up.”

“And?”

“If you lay off pitching until the itch is so great you can’t

wait— ”

“Yeah?”

“You’re gonna throw two—no, make it three—no-hitters this season.”

“Think so?”

“Know so!”

Pickens was wrong. It wasn’t two or three no-hitters that Rosie wound up pitching once the real season began—it was four, plus a couple of one-hitters.

It was with more than a measure of trepidation that after a month without stepping onto the mound in a game situation she made her return. The wait had not been easy. For nearly a week, Rosie cried herself to sleep every night as she tried to figure out how and why she had hit rock bottom. Was she wrong to think that a girl like her from East LA could make a better life for herself and her family? Was it a mistake to stop going to church with her great-aunt on Sunday mornings? Was she destined for nothing but failure.

Gradually Rosie’s soul-searching and recriminations gave way to an acceptance that no one was promised a life without trials and tribulations. No matter how bad, how dire, how impossible things might seem, as Pickens promised, the sun would still come up the next morning.

Despite all her fears, Rosie was lucky. She had a family that loved her, and a roof over her head. Plus she had softball. It wasn’t simply a means to an end, and shouldn’t be seen that way. It was something she loved dearly, something that made her feel like someone, and gave her pleasure. It was that joy, Rosie realized that mattered most.

It was with a measure of trepidation, but also with a new-found appreciation, that Rosie returned to the pitcher's mound for the first game of the new season. Taking a deep breath, she took the catcher's sign, then blew a fastball past the hitter for a strike. Thinking of Pickens, she realized that nobody in Kansas, Wyoming, or on the moon would know or care. But that she had fought her way through fear and adversity gave her a sense of appreciation and an inner strength, which she hoped would make a difference not merely in softball, but in life.

Though flattered that top-ranking programs like Texas, Duke, and Florida reached out to her, Rosie accepted an offer from UCLA so that she could remain a role model for girls from the barrio.

More than ever, Rosie was ready to face the challenges ahead.

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Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions. His newest production is called "When Houston Had The Blues."

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