

THE SHATTERED SLUGGER AND OTHER STORIES

斷棒

Finding his dreams of playing professional baseball on the rocks, the author of The Shattered Slugger and Other Stories switched course from playing to writing about baseball. Chen Shang-Chi's eight baseball-themed stories in this book touch on the beauty and warmth that thrive both despite and because of life's imperfections.

Chen Shang-Chi's dream since childhood of a career in major league baseball is scuttled by an onset of the yips and injuries suffered while at university. Hoping to turn lemons into lemonade, he explores other career opportunities that will still keep him "in the game". The short story collection *The Shattered Slugger and Other Stories*, Chen's maiden literary effort, revolves around the joys, sorrows, discouragements, and hope wrapped up in this sport off the diamond.

Protagonists in the five short stories set in Taiwan include a retired ball player who in his retirement handmakes furniture from broken baseball bats; a cash-strapped trainer who dreams of training kids to play ball; a man who in dedicating his life to the game loses his mother, wife and child in the process; two Americans who leave their minor league careers for better money as pro ball players in Taiwan; and the last remaining employee of a Taiwan-based baseball glove manufacturer. Of the three stories set outside of Taiwan, one narrates the experiences of a Taiwanese serving in the Japanese Army during the Pacific War, one follows the spiritual journey of the son of a professional MLB player, and the last weaves a sad tale centered around a Taiwanese who left home and country for the United States, where he ends up playing the mascot for an MLB team. These stories and their characters shed light on the game of baseball beyond the



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floodlights and on the everyday lives and turmoils of those in baseball's orbit.

None who have played the game have not tasted the bitter flavors of defeat. In the playing fields conjured up in *The Shattered Slugger and Other Stories*, Chen, rather than explaining his protagonists' regrets away, shows how they have learned to accept and coexist with them. This, after all, may be this former-ball-player-turned-author's greatest gift to his readers.

Chen Shang-Chi 陳尚季

Born in 1996, Chen holds a bachelor's in Sinophone Literature and master's in Creative Writing from National Dong Hwa University. With the exception of three years during junior high school, Chen played league baseball from elementary school through university, with his eyes set on going pro. Since abandoning his dreams of a career in baseball, he has refocused his passions on writing. *The Shattered Slugger and Other Stories* is his first short story collection.

THE SHATTERED SLUGGER AND OTHER STORIES

By Chen Shang-Chi

Translated by Joel Martinson

Story #1

In the community near the Hakka settlement – at least in my childhood recollection – the narrow, winding cement road leading up the hill was where I played with my friends. I lived in the first house at the foot of the hill. It was just me and Grandad and, of course, poor little Ba, who would have died in a recycling bin if Grandad hadn't heard its cries one day and taken it home.

Most afternoons, my classmates' grandparents would wait for them at home, sitting outside chatting, drinking or occasionally straightening up. My grandad was a little different. He did carpentry at home, sometimes spending the entire day at it. He also occasionally took construction work at the behest of friends or did odd jobs at the village center.

Before starting elementary school, I would play together with the older neighbor girls and boys. We'd hit paper balls with sticks we found along the stream and splash around in the water, leaving me absolutely filthy every day. Once I started going to school, the rules said I had to wear a skirt, and a pink one at that. I didn't like pink and I didn't like skirts. I told Grandad it felt weird with nothing between my thighs, so he had me talk to an older neighbor girl, who took me to buy undershorts. Once I had grown a bit older, Grandad moved two cabinets between our beds, and I no longer let him wash my clothes.

In my early years in elementary school, Grandad took me to school on a white Dio scooter that belched black smoke. He'd help me with my yellow helmet but didn't wear one himself. When school let out, I'd find him parked under a palm tree to the left of the main gate, smoking a cigarette and watching sparrows take to flight. My school wasn't far from our street so, once I was in the fourth grade and began walking to school with my classmates, he stopped shuttling me back and forth.

To this day, I haven't seen my mom or dad in person. Even photos are hard to come by. In the one picture of them that Grandad stuck to the fridge, their faces look like two glossy eggs. Once, when Grandad opened the wardrobe to get a coat, I saw a rusty metal box that subsequently lingered on my mind. So one day when he went out to see a friend, I dug it out of wardrobe and went over to the window to open it. The force with which I opened it sent the contents scattering across the floor like popcorn – postcards, photographs, and objects I didn't recognize. I picked up a few black and white photos, which were definitely of Grandad as a young man dressed in a black baseball jersey and spotless white baseball trousers, with two big words, "Black Tide", emblazoned across his chest. His teeth gleamed as he stood, hands on hips, smiling at the camera.

The contrast with Grandad's now-wrinkled face was hard to wrap my mind around. The one thing that hadn't changed from the photo was his eyes, which were as round and bright as little Ba's.

A month or so earlier, Grandad had suddenly collapsed at a meeting. Fortunately they were able to rush him to the hospital. I hurried over as soon as I got the news, my mind a blank. "What happened, Grandad?" He was conscious when I arrive at his side, but he just smiled, patted my arm, and told me not to worry... "Just a dizzy spell, that's all." That day marked a turning point in my life: every Saturday morning I got up first thing to take daily essentials to the hospital. Time moved slowly there...so slowly that all of Grandad's ailments came to light. The doctors told me he might gradually lose track of time and that he should regularly work to recall certain key memories to delay the onset of that condition.

Would Grandad eventually forget even his name? In the village, everyone called him Suming, which meant "charcoal" in the Amis language. His Chinese name was Huang Chiang-sen, but few people called him that. To help delay the inevitable, I decided to put the house in order and bring out a few mementos.

Once I started straightening up, new odds and ends sprang up like weeds. Although I had no idea where I'd put them all, I knew I had to finish it all before Grandad's discharge to make it a comfortable place to convalesce. Growing up, I had never done much housework. Whenever I returned home, everything I had moved was back in its original location. I donned a mask and the work gloves Grandad usually wore and hauled dust-covered belongings from what seemed like a cave.

I emptied the big wardrobe of all of Grandad's clothes and sorted through them, putting everything he rarely wore into see-through plastic storage crates. Aunts and uncles in the village graciously helped me assemble the new wardrobe when it arrived, and also helped haul the old one to the roadside for pick up and disposal. Then came the heavy plastic crates, which I opened one by one. They held trophies and medals and yellowed certificates – all for pitching. As far back as I could remember, I had never seen Grandad play baseball for real, although the village head once said he had been the village's best pitcher in his younger days. That was no lie, it turned out. Judging from those trophies and certificates, he really was an ace. I just never saw him pitch, and probably would never have the chance. I decided to put the unnecessary items into wheeled plastic suitcases for storage in Grandad's shed, keeping just a few still-legible trophies and medals, which I had polished till they gleamed and then set out on the cabinet top to display.

I opened the shed door with effort, and the light streaming in through the gap in the doorframe to the left gave me a momentary, clear glimpse of broken baseball bats. I pushed all of the well-organized plastic crates and black plastic bags stuffed with clothes far back into the deepest reaches of the shed. Those broken bats had come home with Grandad after he and the village head went off to play ball. He had amassed quite a collection without meaning to.

I have a memory from when I was about five years old of eating breakfast in the yard and watching Grandad emerge from the shed with a few bats that he then took to his workshop. To be fair, it wasn't much of a workshop, just a section of moss-green metal roofing where he had his carpentry tools laid out...woodcutting equipment, chisels, a workbench, and tools for smoothing.

When he wasn't off working jobs, carpentry was Grandad's primary activity. He gazed at that piece of wood in his hands as if it were translucent jade. By the time the sky turned purple, he handed me a little chair as a birthday gift. I could sit on it to eat or do homework, I learned how to lean back on two legs, and could drag it around like I was taking Ba for a walk. The chair was constructed from several unvarnished wooden baseball bats, squared off and cut down into regular rectangles that were then smoothed and nailed together to make a seat. Holes had been sunk into each corner, and four short, red-barreled bats...handles down...had been repurposed as legs. After the chair, Grandad had made a low bookshelf and a round table. The last piece he made before his illness, a rocking chair, had consumed even more of his broken bats. That rocking chair was great for relaxing, and he tended to nap on it regularly after lunch on Saturdays. When the cool wind blew, I'd cover him with a light blanket.

Straightening up took me more than a week, and I didn't finish until Friday, the day I brought Grandad home from the hospital.

He stood rooted in place looking over the rearranged house until the wall calendar, fridge, tail-wagging Ba, and the little wooden chair on the floor confirmed it was indeed his house.

Except on Mondays, I'd turn the TV on everyday so that Grandad could eat dinner while watching a baseball game. Watching baseball was the only time his eyes had a spark. Moreover, he'd leave lots of dinner leftovers on non-game days. After a week, his speech started to return, albeit haltingly at times. Whenever his expression let slip he was having a hard time answering, I'd write down what I wanted to say and let him read it over slowly as if contemplating a philosophical problem.

"Grandad, can you tell me about when you were a pitcher?"

"A pitcher..." Grandad's eyes remained on the TV.

"Yeah. I want to hear your pitching stories."

"Back then when I played in the Provincial Games, I was the best left-handed pitcher in Hualien. The Thumb." He stuck up his thumb.

"Really? That's awesome!"

"Few people were better than me. Even fewer lefties."

"How fast could you throw back then, Grandad?"

"I don't know. But everyone said I was really fast. Like a..."

He paused for a long time, seemingly unable to find the word he was looking for. I said, "Grandad, I've always wanted to ask...Why did you collect all those broken bats? They're no good for hitting. Did you really bring them back for woodworking?"

"Those can't be thrown out. Some things stay important even after they break. Can't throw them out."

"No, I mean - I don't want to throw them out. I'm just asking why you brought them all home."

Like a machine stopped in its tracks upon being unplugged, Grandad went slack, his face a picture of incomprehension, and then fell into a lengthy meditation.

Evidently those bats were very important to him, almost as if losing them would mean he too would disappear. As he watched TV, he made sounds like he was talking in his sleep.

The slack corners of Grandad's mouth drooped under the weight of his saliva and he drooled onto his clothes. A post-stroke symptom, said the doctor. The hippocampus, which governs memories, had been injured so, little by little, Grandad was losing so much of his past and sometimes couldn't even remember whether he'd eaten dinner. Whenever I said, "You've already eaten your fill. You still want more?" he'd say, "Yes." On those occasions, I'd give him a little cracker, but it wouldn't be long before he was asking again.

I brought out the collated photographs and, sitting at his bedside with his right hand clasped in mine, I showed him the pictures in hopes they would spark conversation and awaken memories.

Now Grandad's manner of speaking changed again. He started saying, "I don't know" or "I don't remember," as if parts of his world were oxidizing and crumbling apart.

"Grandad, do you still remember what happened in these pictures?" He said he didn't, but then his attention was grabbed by the light-vented bulbul outside the window and he watched as it alighted on the branch and flew off again. His remaining memories were like a broken water bottle that constantly leaked; once the silence had stretched passed five minutes, I would figure again that he had fallen asleep. Sometimes he would remember, and then launch into a string of past events. When I brought out the photo with the Black Tide jersey, he said it was from the first time he played baseball after returning to Hualien.

"So where did you go before returning to Hualien, Grandad?"

"Japan. And then some other place. Far away. I don't remember."

"Wow! Was it America?"

"I think it was America. I went to play baseball. I was a great pitcher."

"Sounds like you were pretty good."

"I used to have a dream. I went to pitch. Oh, how I could pitch."

Grandad was probably around my age when he went to play in America. I really wanted to ask why he went so far away for baseball, but it was hard to hold his attention. When I asked him again for the story of the photo, he said he couldn't remember.

Grandad's memories were hidden in every corner of his house. I found a few old uniforms in the wardrobe, plastic crates, and bedside tables. The highest concentration of his memories centered on an old Adidas shoe box chock full of photos and letters.

The cardboard lid was bent out of shape from all the letters and photos and other small objects stuffed inside. Unlike the metal box I had found in the wardrobe, this one held mostly photos and letters from Grandad's time in the army, plus badges and armbands, matchbooks, a Coke bottle cap, and what fascinated me the most: a letter with a photo.

A black man holding a broken bat stood next to Grandad on a baseball field. The letter was written in English cursive. The man's teeth hadn't yellowed with time and still reflected the sunlight from that bygone day. They were wearing different uniforms. The black man's shirt was

emblazoned with “Indians #10”, while Grandad’s read “Phoenix #15”. When I learned his was the uniform of a Triple-A affiliate of the Cincinnati Reds, I couldn’t help but wonder whether that was where Grandad had gone to play. Written on the back of the black-and-white photo was a date, March 15, 1973. From reference materials, I learned this was part of Major League Baseball’s minor league.

The minor league was divided into classes. Starting from the Rookie League, the ranks ascended from Single-A to Double-A to Triple-A, and then to the majors. Each level was home to hundreds of players. Grandad was just one of these hundreds, a migratory salmon dodging danger as it sought an opportunity to spawn. Maybe that was also the case for the black man. I didn’t know who he was. The hundreds of other players would have come from all over the world, and those white teeth and bushy eyebrows gave me no clue to his name.

Hey, man. I think about our days in the minors all the time. Not long after you left the US, the Reds called me up. I thought I’d see you here, and the next time we met, we’d find out if my batting was faster than your pitching. I got the news you’d left and it was like my mind was hit by a pitch. I was a wreck for days. Now it’s been three years. I’ve tallied 420 hits but none of them have been off of you. You were always so icy cool. With that pitching, you could totally have made the majors. I have yet to meet your equal.

My friend, you’re the reason I know there are lots of great pitchers out there that I’ve never even seen. Will I ever get a chance to see you again? Maybe when you’ve recovered, we can have another matchup.

Ken Griffey

November 23, 1976

“So that black man is Ken Griffey? And this is a letter he wrote to Grandad?” I asked the village head, showing him the photo.

“That is indeed Ken Griffey.”

“Who is he?”

“Ken Griffey. Over 2,000 hits in the majors. His son Ken Griffey, Jr. is even more famous.”

“Really?”

“They once hit home runs in the same game. Griffey hit one, and his son hit another right after him.”

“And Grandad played against him?”

“Do you know why your Grandad has all those broken bats in his storage shed?”

“I thought he just collects them.”

“Some of them. But most of them he broke himself.”

“He broke them? How?”

“A baseball. He used a baseball. Your Grandad’s pitches were so fast that catching them used to make my thumb swell up.”

“So he broke Ken Griffey’s bat?”

“That’s probably one of the ones in the shed.”

I used a library computer to search online for Ken Griffey’s games and found the game the village head was probably referring to. He had been moved to the Seattle Mariners in 1990, and that particular game was against the California Angels. He and his son Ken Griffey, Jr. hit back-to-back home runs over the wall. Griffey cut an impressive figure, with solid muscles that strained against his uniform and stocky arms that made the bat look like a bamboo pole by comparison. Next to him, Grandad seemed hardly out of high school.

I took a cake home. Today was Grandad’s birthday, but he seemed to have forgotten and did not wake from his sound slumber.

During Grandad’s convalescence, I often went to bed imagining he’d wake up the next morning doing better, even if only for a short time. People in the village took turns coming to look after him so I wouldn’t have to worry about his condition while away at school. Grandad’s life with me was all I knew. His past and what he used to be like I tried to piece together from yellowed documents, assembling him piece by piece like I was building with Legos.

The doctor said Grandad had been suffering from early stage Alzheimer’s even before his stroke. It was an illness that would eventually erase his personal history. He would gradually forget who he was and would ultimately take his life. Looking into his face, I wondered if the day might come when he would wake up and no longer recognize me, and then walk out the door on his own. Truth be told, I was reaching the point where I didn’t much care whether or not he remembered the past. For him to smile each time he saw me was enough. His room had a window that was once blocked by an old wardrobe, but now let the afternoon sun in to creep slowly up his napping face. Watching him snoring away made me feel less sad for a little while.

One day, I made my way to our school library’s sports section, which had everything from *Sports Illustrated* to the CPBL’s third-year stats. Beyond Taiwan publications, there were also baseball-related books from Japan and the US on the bottom shelf. I took a few volumes to the sofa and, with time to spare until my 2:00 class, began flipping through them to pass the time.

It was in one of them, the translated memoir of an American baseball commentator entitled *Foul Ball*, that I thought I caught a glimpse of Grandad amongst the author’s cascade of memorable stories about the game.

California. Under the shining sun, the stadium gates are wide open to welcome fans of the game.