

Dream of broken home

Aaron called it "The Grunge," and it was the kind of place that you walked by quickly while cutting through the backstreets of Toronto on your way to the big city.

It was nothing more than a heap of rock; weather beaten and eroded, with broken-glass windows, an overgrown commons yard, and stone walls pockmarked from the countless assaults from the homeless radicals in the alley nearby.

Aaron's apartment was a cramped and dingy space wedged between that of a middle aged parolee, and a woman hoarder with her surly spouse.

Aaron heard many things in The Grunge; the crazed laughter of the drunk two doors down, the hacking coughs of the Tuberculosis victim from across the shaggy grass plot, and once, an eruption of resentment from the hoarder's husband as he threw his wife's most prized trash on the lawn. Much to her despair, out went the accumulating garbage that had cluttered their home for too long. The rusted bicycle rack, the newspapers from the last four decades, the useless shower chair, and the decaying baseball, signed by some all-star whose signature was now illegible from the nights it spent neglected in the rain.

And Aaron was doubtless that these dysfunctional dregs of humanity knew just how broken his family was too. Nobody could miss the roars of Douglas's anger and frustration, and the occasional crack of belt leather on flesh.

Aaron's back ached and stung as he moved. He walked stiffly, trying not to aggravate the bruises that had sprung from his step-father's belt, punishment for coming home late from school the previous night. Douglas was not afraid of The Grunge's resident's knowledge of his own brutality; these vagrants, wouldn't dare drag themselves up from their lowly homes to turn in one of their kind. Outcasts stick together. But Douglas *was* terrified that one day Aaron would one day summon the courage to alert the authorities of his mistreatment. So, Aaron was threatened into coming straight home from school and keeping his mouth shut around his teachers. Yesterday, when he had arrived almost twenty minutes later than usual, he was interrogated, then yelled at, then beaten into submission by his step-father, while his mother watched, too wasted to interfere.

All for nothing though, because Aaron was not, in fact, talking to the police, but slipping into the baseball park with the throng of the crowd, to watch the Toronto Blue Jays face off against the Red Sox in one of the last qualifier games for the playoffs. He had been doing this for months, sneaking in to watch a half an inning before sprinting home to cover the time difference. He was usually very diligent in keeping himself on schedule, but sometimes he got lost in the beauty of the game.

It may have just been the spurts of rebellion, but Aaron found that baseball was his greatest and only joy. He loved to imagine himself swinging the bat; he could almost taste the power of the player who muscled the tiny ball over the fence, just out of the reach of the centre-fielder's glove. But more than anything, he wished he could pitch. Feel the leather and stitches under his fingers, throw the ball with all his strength, but most of all, experience being in control.

Aaron paid for his blunder though, not just in the discomfort of his purple and blue shoulder-blades, but in the awkward stares from his neighbors as well. He was well known and even sympathized for in The

Grunge for being the violent thug's son. They watched him with compassion as he limped past, but he didn't want their sympathy. The fact that these hopeless wretches thought that they were above him enough to feel sorry for him made him sick. He seemed to be a prime example of the kind of person who lived in the grunge, but he had always felt separate from the others.

On one hand was a terrified little kid, resigned to a life of frightened impassiveness but somewhere buried under the ruins of his pride and dignity was another person entirely. Someone driven and angry, the voice of whom snarled in Aaron's head as the belt came down, "*Fight back!*"

"Hello," he was shaken from his thoughts by a deep voice behind him.

The man was at least seventy, very thin and wispy, with only a few patches left of white hair on the sides of his head. He leaned on a cane.

"Hi," said Aaron uncertainly; he had never met this man, yet something hidden beneath the lines and age spots of his face seemed familiar.

"I assume you will be my neighbor?" the man asked. "I'm Joseph Davies."

"Aaron Henley." *What's your damage?* He thought to himself. *How did you sink low enough to get here?*

Joseph Davies studied him with apparent interest. "You look like Bill Singer." He decided.

Aaron recalled reading something in an old Roger's centre program about Bill Singer, The starter for the Blue Jay's premier game in 1977. *Insane*. He thought.

Joseph Davies continued, "Yes, broad shoulders, strong knees...you'd make an excellent pitcher." *Maybe Savant syndrome*.

"You live here now?" Aaron asked abrasively.

"Yes," said Joseph Davies serenely, as though he thought he were moving somewhere nice. "I needed a refreshing change in scenery to write my book you know."

Aaron laughed grimly, "Must be a horror story."

The old man considered this. "In some ways, I suppose." He opened his door. "Well, I'll be seeing you." And before Aaron had a chance to react, he felt something grab him by the hair and yank him into his own apartment.

He was thrown bodily into the wall and Douglas' face became blurry

"Late again! What were you telling that man?" He shook Aaron by the shoulders. "WHAT DID YOU TELL HIM?"

"Nothing!" Aaron pleaded.

"DON'T LIE!"

Aaron watched his father's mind work furiously. An idea seemed to occur to him as a crazy smile played on his lips. "Get in the closet." He said.

"What?"

"*Get in the closet.*" And with that, Aaron was shoved head first into the hall closet. He heard the lock click. He threw himself against the door but it didn't budge. Trapped.

Days and days later, he decided he must be dying. He hadn't eaten, he was exhausted from trying to break out, and the screaming for someone, anyone to let him out. Now he was resigned to dehydration, suffocation, and hunger.

When he drifted off, he dreamed about a player profile in his 1977 baseball program. *Joe Davies ran away from home when he was 17 to become one of the best bat catchers of his generation.*

Aaron's dream shifted. He was standing on a pitcher's mound wearing a Blue Jays uniform, the old man from a few doors down was wearing catcher equipment and looking expectant.

Then a new reporter standing in front of the Grunge, 'young boy found dead in closet, traces of abuse.'

That's all he was, an abused kid, someone to be pitied, someone without any potential for the rest of the week, much less the rest of his life because he would be reduced to dying in a closet at the hands of his step-father, while his mother watched through a haze of drugs. Aaron snapped awake.

No

The voice in his head, his more courageous, barely existent alter-ego yelled at him.

I have to get out.

The voice was louder than usual. Strange.

I will not die like this. I HAVE TO GET OUT.

Looking back, he didn't know how he did it; but the next thing he knew, he was out. Douglas wasn't home.

Aaron ran outside, fresh air cleared his head, and he caught sight of Joseph Davies, the former all-star sitting on the abandoned shower chair in the middle of the lawn.

"I want to be a pitcher. Teach me."

The old man raised an eyebrow. He picked up the hoarder's weather beaten baseball. Now Aaron could just make out the signature: *Joe Davies*. "My boy, I thought you'd never ask."

It became Aaron's passion, He lived to pitch. He made curve balls and risers aimed at the crippled shower chair as Joe Davies watched.

He was always careful never to let Douglas see, but he kept improving, because it wasn't enough to get out of the closet, he longed to escape The Grunge forever.

He made good friends with Joe Davies, and one day, the old catcher had a surprise for him.

"Henley, meet my dear friend, Jim Beattie."

"Th-The scout?" stammered Aaron.

"Joe told me all about you." said Jim Beattie. "How would you like a 3-year contract to the Toronto farm-team?"

Aaron couldn't believe it. They shook hands and Joe smiled. "I think that will round off my autobiography nicely."

"Your--"

"Yes, Some people were interested to read about my rise to fame, coming from an abusive family and all."

"You--"

"Of course all earnings will go to the Child abuse foundation. We'll see if we can minimize the number of kids who think they don't have potential."