

Honorable Mention

Double Play

By Joe Potts

I learned quickly that the Angel of Death doesn't like being called the Grim Reaper. Okay, fine, I told him. Anyone who can toss me out of the game, I'll call him anything he wants. Angel? Death? He said Death would do. Fine, Death it is. Playing in the big leagues had taught me treating the ump kosher can go a long way.

"Now, Death, can we talk about this? I can call for a pinch hitter here," I said. "Someone who's a bigger prospect than me and would make a nifty notch in your belt, or however you keep track of these things. Let me go, and you can take him instead."

"That would be irregular," croaked Death. Then he hissed and wheezed, making odd noises like I guess you'd expect from Death. I waited for him to continue, but I'd already caught on that Death chewed more tobacco than he spat.

"My brother Sluggo, see, he's the guy you want," I said. "He's a big name, in the Hall of Fame and all that crap. You heard of him? Sluggo Slater? Hero of two World Series, .325 lifetime average?"

"The bell tolls for thee," said Death.

"Listen, listen," I said, getting more worried. This was starting to remind me of Game 6 of the divisional playoffs. I was hauling my creaking knees around third as fast as I could—which was about as fast as a lazy bunt down the first-base line—when I saw the throw from Rodriguez in right whistling past first on its deadly trajectory to the plate. And yes, it ended deadly, as I was dead at home.

Unless I pulled out a spitball for the ages, I was going to be dead here, too. "He's my brother, see, my twin brother. Who'll know the difference?"

A long pause. Wheezing. Then Death gurgled, "Peter."

"What? Peter? Oh! You mean St. Peter will know. Nah, I'm not buying it. He's been dead for what, over two thousand years? How good can his eyes be? I'm telling you, take Sluggo, he's the big wheel. Who would want Gimpy Slater when they could have Sluggo? He's famous, I tell you. I'm a nobody, just Sluggo's brother who barely made the bigs."

Death stood silent. Truth be told, he was starting to bug me, but I wasn't in a position to squawk. Just like my brother always bugged me. He was the big man; I was his chump twin brother. He got all the talent, all the fame. He even got the better name.

People thought he was called Sluggo because he was a big slugger. But no, it was because when he was a toddler, he was chubby and moved like a slug. Me, on the other hand, I got stuck my whole life with "Gimpy." See, when we were small my brother couldn't say my real name, Gilbert. It came out Gimpy, and curse the little brat, it stuck.

Time for the final swing. It was the bottom of the ninth, my last stand in the batter's box. My throat tightened. It felt like someone was choking me. "How often do you get to—uh, reap—

big names like him? Oh, you'd feel great afterward. Like you hit a grand slam. Yessir, a good job well done is the best feeling. The other angels would be really jealous. Yessir, you'd be big angel on campus, or wherever you and your fellow angels hang out. You could strut right by them, swinging that sickle thing or whatever it is, around and around while all them cherubs and such were green with envy. Yep, that's a box score that could put you in the angel hall of fame."

Hissing, wheezing, sickening sucking sounds. Finally, something resembling speech lurched out of him. "I have considered it." And with that, he turned and receded, vanishing in a curl of vapors that put me in mind of a fine cigar I had smoked once when we won the league title.

I sagged to the floor in exhausted relief. I did it! My poor sap of a brother was going in my place. Served him right, the pompous blowhard. I barely had time to get back up, though, when I saw him returning. The smoke, looking darker and more menacing, slowly gathered and became the now familiar form.

Wait a minute—what was wrong with him? He was bigger, and a lot uglier. When I saw his face, I felt a chill. He looked angry. Had he changed his mind? Why had he come back so soon?

"Your time is at hand," he said, sounding wheezier than before. He raised his weapon over me. Its blade was ragged and wicked. Had he exchanged it at the bat rack?

"Wait!" I screamed. "What about our deal?"

"Our deal?" he hissed. "We had no deal. Your deal was with the Angel of Death. You should have let him do as he wanted. He escorts those souls destined to an easy death. But now, thanks to your bargain, you've been traded. He was to dispatch you, and I was to take care of your brother."

"Y-you? Who are you, then? What do you have to do with death?"

"Everything. I'm the Angel of Death's twin brother."

When I could move again, I struggled to get out the word. "Brother?"

"Yes. Thanks to your machinations, you get me. I handle the nasty deaths. The long ones. The grotesque ones. As you are your brother's evil twin, so I am my brother's. I am the Demon of Death.

And my brother and I are about to execute a double play."

Joe Potts has had humor articles published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Tribune Review. His SF/fantasy fiction can be heard on the WAOB Audio Theatre website and YouTube channel. Joe's humor blog is at www.joepottszone.com. He lives in Unity Township with his wife, Susan.