

Rick Campbell

Forgiving Ty Cobb in Royston, Georgia

How sharp were his spikes? Why does this seem like it has to be about forgiveness? How do we get forgiven? Be heartily sorry for our sins? Do good deeds? Buy it like Carnegie using his fortune to build libraries after his first life crushing competition and workers? Cobb came back home and built everything a poor Southern town could need. How great were his sins? Did he just play hard, make enemies, get a bad rep? Did Ty Cobb need forgiveness more than most of us?

I have to admit I'm a little bored, stir crazy maybe. I'm spending a couple of weeks being a writer, living in this great old house in a small North Georgia town that can best be described as just a notch or two above abandoned. There's a Dollar General store, two gas stations, three churches at the same intersection with the flashing caution light, and little else. Being a writer with nothing to do but write is great — until I can't stand it anymore. I need distraction and Ty Cobb will be mine.

Royston, Georgia, just a few miles down the road, is Cobb's home town and the site of the Ty Cobb Museum. You can't think of Cobb without getting caught up in the idea of how mean he was, so as I drive there I'm wondering how much of Cobb's an asshole is true.

Maybe this is also about redefining — the American tradition of making ourselves anew. Vonnegut put a positive spin on it when he wrote *we are who we pretend to be so pretend to be someone good*. But most of the time when this redefining of self or reputation occurs it is in either the tradition of the Con Man or the sinner becoming a Saint. What was Cobb? It turns out, as in most stories, there are at least two sides to the tale. People around Royston want a good Ty Cobb. Baseball writers and historians have a lot of stories of a man who was violent, racist, egomaniacal, driven, mean, competitive beyond any accepted sporting definition of the word. We sometimes say, but probably don't really believe it, that it's only a game, but it wasn't only a game for Cobb; baseball was his whole sense of self-worth, his measure of being a man, being a success and not a failure. Being a great baseball player was in the end and maybe always, all Cobb

had to show for himself.

I suppose only sociopaths don't want to be forgiven. Even God wanted forgiveness. No more floods, he said, no destroying the earth, my children, just because you get a little randy and put some false idols up in lights on the big scoreboard. We all say we're sorry, won't do it again. Was Cobb that different? Was Cobb ever sorry and what for?

Cobb said, "The base paths belonged to me, the runner. The rules gave me the right. I always went into a bag full speed, feet first. I had sharp spikes on my shoes. If the baseman stood where he had no business to be and got hurt, that was his fault."

This is often said about him: he was mean, the meanest man in baseball. It's a narrative that followed him through his baseball career and the rest of his life as well. Did he hone those spikes to razors each night or was one good slash enough? Maybe he was like the falcon trained to rid the city of pestful birds — he knew he could scare the shit out of a whole flight of pigeons by just killing one or two. Cobb spikes a couple of infielders and the rest back off the next time and the next time he comes sliding in. Just the idea of sharp spikes, the memory of another guy's bleeding calf, can make a fielder give away too much of the bag when Cobb only needs a little. A smart player wants to stay in the game, play tomorrow, and not risk losing his job to the rookie who is always waiting.

Let's say those spikes were too sharp and they opened more calves than they should have: how evil was that? How much forgiveness for playing too hard, for relying on intimidation, does Cobb deserve? Playing baseball hard, playing well, was Cobb's ticket to fame; it was his and other players' roads out of coal mines, factories, small town jobs and poverty. Baseball's been very good to a lot of men with very singularly amazing skills. So if Cobb needed a town full of forgiveness, I'm guessing it had to be for more than the way he played the game.

Cobb's good deeds included helping down and out ballplayers, building schools, clinics, hospitals, endowing scholarships. There are a bundle of good works in his name. Ty Cobb Hospital, Ty Cobb High School. Ty Cobb Nursing Home, Ty Cobb, Ty Cobb, Ty Cobb, all over town. Ty Cobb Street. Ty Cobb painted on the sides of old buildings like *See Rock City*. This town made Ty Cobb and then Ty remade the town. Then he left for a nicer place.

2.

Cobb is a prick. But he sure can hit. God almighty that man can hit.

— Babe Ruth

Cobb by the numbers that don't lie — his lifetime batting average, 366, the best ever. Hits 4189, runs 2246, stolen bases 897. In 1911, Cobb hit 420; he had 248 hits, 44 walks, 83 stolen bases, 147 runs scored. For his career, he's first in almost everything that counts but homeruns; he dropped to second in hits when Pete Rose broke that record. Cobb hit over 400 three times, hit over 380 six times. If there can be more remarkable stats than these it would be that Cobb almost never struck out. In 1922 when he hit 401, he only struck out 24 times in 667 at bats, that's fewer than four strike outs every 100 at bats. In 1923, when his average "fell" to 340, he struck out only 14 times in 703 at bats (I'm counting walks here); 14 strike outs in 145 games. He must have hit a hell of a lot of line drives right at someone. You could watch Cobb play a ten game home stand and maybe not see him strike out at all. There are superstars now, sure tickets to the hall of fame, who go down swinging or watching more in one week than Cobb did in a season.

Those of us who labored through our baseball dreams without homerun power think a hitter like Cobb hits the way a man should. Make contact. Get up each morning and work hard. Do the most with what you have. We know we can't hit tape measure homeruns, but we think we ought to be able to put the bat on the ball. Cobb was 36 years old in his 17th major league season in 1922 when he hit 401. Cobb was a worker, and in a sport that the working class used to worship, Cobb could have been a saint. Could have been.

Cobb's numbers were good enough to get into the Hall of Fame for sure. When he entered it, the first player elected to such an honor, morals weren't high on the list of attributes to be considered during the voting. If they were, maybe Ruth, Hack Wilson and few others would have been in trouble too. Then, and maybe now, no one seems to doubt that Cobb ought to be in the Hall of Fame. During his career he gave the people more than an honest day's labor, though it was in a game. He hit, he ran, he hit and hit and hit. But there's a lot more violence in the Cobb story

than a baseball game called for. There's a photo of Cobb "sliding" into a catcher who isn't blocking the plate as much as trying to protect his genitals. Cobb is in mid-air; he looks like an oddly dressed UFC fighter drop kicking his hapless opponent. Cobb's spikes, however sharp, are about to plunge into the catcher's thigh and the catcher looks scared shitless. So maybe Cobb's unnecessarily violent, but these are baseball sins by a man who, let's admit, played the game too hard. If the story of Cobb's transgressions ended here, then maybe he would not have needed to buy all that forgiveness. But Cobb had a litany of other sins too.

I don't know if he thought he needed to buy forgiveness, but I am sure he knew he was not liked by very many people — players, fans, umpires, and especially black people. If he had ever behaved as a good man, then the fact that he spread his wealth around (and by the end of his career he had no small stash) might not need to be so skeptically examined. But Cobb was not a good man.

It must be admitted here that there's very little agreement about how mean or racist Tyrus Raymond Cobb actually was. There are two camps in the Ty Cobb argument. Some writers and the historical record show that Cobb was a man with a really bad temper and a racist too. He makes Billy Martin kicking dirt at umpires, Sambrano smashing innocent water coolers, look like guys with some minor anger management issues. Cobb beat up players on other teams, beat players on own his team, fans, thugs and, especially, black people. Cobb beat a black groundskeeper during a Spring Training season. Beat up a black construction worker and beat up a black elevator operator in Cleveland. Then Cobb stabbed the black hotel security guard who tried to come to his comrade's aid. Cobb was not arrested for any of these things, though he was banned for a year from the state of Ohio. Had this banning actually kept him from playing ball, maybe it could be seen as punishment, but it did not. Cobb was forced to go to Canada and more or less sneak into Cleveland, though since he was there in the outfield and the line-up card said Ty Cobb, no one was really serious about being sneaky or keeping Cobb from playing. He was banned from entering Ohio, but not being in Ohio.

The list goes on. A fan, admittedly a rude, asshole of a fan, in New York was heckling Cobb, saying nasty things about Cobb's wife. Finally, Cobb broke and went into the stands. As he was beating the crap out of the guy, the fans yelled "stop, he has no

hands.” Various sources say the man had either no hands, no fingers, or a piece of a hand, but when the fans yelled out, Cobb supposedly said, “I don’t care if he has no feet” and went on beating the crippled man until other players pulled Cobb off the heckler.

In three or four reported incidents Cobb also beat up thugs who tried to mug him, and though it’s unproven, might have left one of them bleeding and unconscious on a city sidewalk where he died. Cobb told Al Stump, his biographer, that “In 1912 — and you can write this down — I killed a man in Detroit.” This confession would hold more water if Stump hadn’t been so obviously out to make his fame and some money. No one knows what to believe in Stump’s book. But it’s also been reported that Cobb walked around tough neighborhoods flashing money and jewelry, sorting of baiting thugs to come after him, and then leaving them bleeding on the curb.

And there are writers who say little of this really happened. Cobb is on record as giving generous praise about black players such as Roy Campanella and Willie Mays and also stating that there’s no reason black players should not be in the major leagues. This was many years after Cobb retired from the game.

I don’t support the Cobb-is-a-good-guy group, but I am sure there’s some doubt surrounding his misdeeds too. It’s complicated, as is the story of most legends, and the story of race in America.

Say we add up our sins — venial, mortal — like notches on a barrel. Forgive me, Father, it’s been 50 years since my last confession. There’s a lifetime of penance for a decent man. But for my Ty Cobb, it was hard slides, sharp spikes, beating up black folks, a little bloodletting here and there and then you build a hospital. It’s the man without a fat wallet who must work for redemption.

3.

They say every man needs protection

They say every man might fall

— Dylan

How? When? Where?

Ty Cobb’s little museum in Royston is humble — despite all

the Ty Cobb signs and the street with his name on it, his museum is hard to find. I can't be the only pilgrim that drove around the block twice, drove right past it, and then on the second pass noticed the little sign and drove into the medical clinic parking lot thinking *this is really weird*. I expected Cobb to at least have his own building, his own entrance, his own special door, but here I am slowly, tentatively, walking down a sidewalk under a blue sheet metal awning toward blue steel double doors and entering a clinic where three black families and a white one are filling out forms, waiting to be seen by doctors or nurses. No one's dying — not obviously bleeding out, gut shot. It's a Walk-In Clinic. I walk in and feel sort of guilty that I'm pretty healthy — at least for today. I don't need my heart checked; my cancer seems to be gone. I'm not limping, and I don't even have a cold. My supply of cholesterol and blood pressure pills is full and doing, I guess, their work well. So I sheepishly skirt around the sick people and cross to the other side of the room. The light's different; there's a lot of glass, blond wood, display cases and a sign that says *Ty Cobb Museum. For admission go to the Admissions Desk*. It's so simple. I rub the blond wood — nearly the same color as a Louisville Slugger and I walk toward the admissions desk, still intent on apologizing for not being sick. It's not how I imagine Ty would do it. My spikes are dull. I am apologetic though I am sure I have done nothing wrong to anyone here. There's a gift shop behind the admissions desk, but both seem unattended. I make some shuffling noises, and in a moment a woman calls in a sweet tea voice, "Just a moment." Then she appears, smiling, motherly, cherubic. "Yes," she says, "can I help you?"

"I want to go into the museum," I say.

"Sure honey." She takes my five dollars.

A bargain, I think, to see Ty. She walks through the clinic waiting area, not at all sheepish about the sick people sitting there, and unlocks the museum doors. Lights slowly go on — maybe sensing our presence, our body heat, my desire. The first stop is a little theatre, about as big as the alcoves that vendors sell gyros out of on New York streets, or a McMansion's walk-in closets.

"Sorry," she says, "but the fancy DVD big screen thing's broken and so we have to use this old TV and the VCR. Good thing we didn't get rid of it."

"That's fine," I say. I don't tell her that I never sit and watch these things, but this time there's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. It's just me and the Sweet Tea lady and she's trying so hard.

I sit. The lights go down and the film begins to roll; as she walks away she says, “if you have any questions, come see me.” I have a lot of questions.

This is pretty good. Cool and dark. It’s late June in Georgia outside. Hot and bright. And I drove around and around missing the museum so much that I built up, if not a hard sweat, a sort of anxiety tic. How can I get lost in this little town I kept asking myself as I drove, turned left and left, back to the sign, the arrow, and then just sort of gave up and drove into the clinic parking lot. I figured if this was not the Ty Cobb museum surely someone here would know where it was. So now I sit, relaxed, ready to enjoy, to learn something or at least regroup.

The film’s good. I learn about Cobb, relearn things I’d forgotten. I’m amazed at how great he was. Twelve batting titles in 13 years. I’m a little stunned, here in the dark, by Cobb’s numbers. I know enough about base running to understand Cobb’s greatness there; you try to make the infielder think you’re going left, then you fade right. Then the next time he thinks last time you went right and this time you slide left and catch the bag with your trailing hand. Then the guy doesn’t know anything for sure anymore. The more he thinks the deeper in trouble he gets. After a few games, or a few years, he starts telling you which way to slide. You read his body, his eyes. They say the ball’s here; it’s high, wide, it’s not going to get me. Or they say, my God, it’s close. Then the sharp spikes come up high and glint in the afternoon sun. They are fabled, dangerous, a rattler in a red clay cotton field, and the fielder moves a half step off the bag. Gives away the bag and hopes that the swipe tag won’t look like the desperate gesture it so often is. Cobb knows what he can do and he does it. He knows how to kick the ball out of a glove, how to spike the soft flesh on the inside of a shortstop’s wrist, when to cut that fat calf muscle to shreds. When those fangs strike, most men let the ball roll out of their glove into the pocked, cleated dirt, and then Cobb reaches back and tags the bag again, just to make sure. His eyes, his disdainful grin, say remember this next time.

I think damn, this man invented the baseball I know — base-running, bunting, sliding — the hook, fade away, feint, give, take, glide. I learned all of this too, all but the honed spikes; I’ve taken out a few infielders, even hit a runner between the eyes with the ball when I was turning two because he would not duck. But I was no Ty Cobb.

I learn a lot there, sitting in the dark. I'm amazed at how rewarded I have been here in this little museum in the Ty Cobb Medical Center, across from the Ty Cobb Hospital, just off Ty Cobb Street, just a few blocks from the Ty Cobb mural where the 17 and U.S. 29 intersect. The holdings here are modest, but they have made their mark on me. Most of the Cobb artifacts are in Cooperstown, but there's enough of Cobb here: his bats, gloves, uniforms, his Coca-Cola ads, his glasses, pictures of Ty duck hunting, Ty addressing the U.S. Congress, Ty sad when his children die, Ty old and posing with a bull dog.

There's a lot that's not here too. None of the stories about Cobb beating up black people that look like the black people sitting only a few feet away in the Ty Cobb clinic. The Cobb baseball stories here are mostly good ones, and accounts by those from around here who knew Cobb ignore and even refute those more public stories of his fights with teammates, of the claims that he was, mostly, hated by everyone in baseball.

There's another big story that's largely missing too. Ty Cobb's mother killed his father. It ought to be a pretty big deal, but here it's largely ignored. When Mrs. Cobb was on trial, it was just up the road in Lavonia. When the killing happened, it dominated the local papers, possibly regional and state too. It did not get much national attention because Cobb had not yet made the big leagues, but he was very close. It was just a couple of weeks before he got called up to the Detroit Tigers that Cobb's mother shot his father with either a pistol or a shotgun. Again there are conflicting stories: Amanda Cobb and the court transcripts say the weapon that killed W.H. Cobb was pistol; Ty Cobb and almost everyone who has written about this say the weapon was the family shotgun, a gun that Ty Cobb kept around his house despite the fact that he supposedly thought that shotgun and his mother killed his father. More conflicting versions — Cobb's supporters, almost all locals, say Cobb's father was trying to sneak back into his house after a night of drinking. Of course, being a pillar of the community, he did not want his wife and others to know. Others, some local, some not, not everyone liked the Cobb family, say he suspected his wife was having an affair and W.H. wanted to catch her, or someone, with their pants down. Local gossip claimed that Amanda might have been pretty bored with her married life and was looking for a younger lover. W.H. Cobb married Amanda when she was only 14 (she was his student) and he was the only

man she'd ever been with.

If that's what old man Cobb was worried about, it got him killed. If he was really trying to sneak into his own house, and he thought sneaking into the bedroom where his wife was sleeping was a good way to do it, then he was not as smart as most people gave him credit for. Friendly gossip said that there was another man in her bedroom that night and that man killed W.H. Evidence never turned up another lover, and in a town as small as Royston the fact that no other lover was ever confirmed would seem to prove that one never existed. And, maybe more telling, Amanda Cobb never remarried, never ran off with a lover. She did get arrested, charged with killing her husband, and put on trial, but she was acquitted. Ty Cobb sat in the courtroom and watched the trial, but again, gossip and his biographies say that he was never again very close to his mother. He said, in a rare moment of candor, near the end of his life, "My father had his head blown off with a shotgun when I was 18 years old — by a member of my own family. I didn't get over that." Though he never publicly accused his mother of murdering his father, when Amanda Cobb died in 1936, her son did not go to the funeral.

4.

I had to fight all my life to survive. They were all against me, but I beat the bastards and left them in the ditch.

— Ty Cobb

There's some first-class paranoia in that statement. Some of it's true. A lot of people in the baseball world did not like Cobb because he was such a jerk. A few fought him, either in anger or self-defense. Certainly, everyone who played against Cobb wanted to beat him and no small number would have enjoyed seeing him crash and burn, but that rarely happened in Cobb's long career. Cobb's claim that "all" his life he had to fight is either exaggerated or false. He certainly had it better than many of those around him. His father was a college educated teacher who became the superintendent of schools and later a State Senator. The Cobb family was respected in the community and had some money, but money can't buy love. Ty Cobb was not a happy man and probably not a happy child either.

Cobb speaks often of how he dedicated himself to becoming a great baseball player because his father never got to see him play. He does not mention that his father did not want him to play; Cobb's father wanted him to be a doctor and he disapproved of Cobb's de-

sire to be a ball player. One version of the story says Cobb's father told Ty to "not come home if he did not succeed." It was sort of a "with your shield or on it" farewell.

So, maybe Cobb needed to forgive as much as he needed forgiveness. Maybe he suspected his mother killed his father on purpose. Maybe he never knew if there was another man in the bedroom or not. He might have known that making a saint of his father and dedicating his tough, dirty and violent baseball career to a man who probably would not have cared about baseball success lacked the ring of truth and maybe that made him even more angry. Maybe he played as dirty as he did to teach his cold, hard to please, domineering father a lesson. Something made Cobb mean.

Ty Cobb did not die well. At the end of his life he had cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, an enlarged prostate, and Bright's disease, a degenerative kidney disorder. I don't know what, if anything, can be ascribed to Karma, but Cobb seems to have died miserably after not living well and not enjoying his great career either. He certainly reaped what he had sown.

I drove into Royston assuming Cobb needed forgiveness. I'd been told and I'd read that he was mean, the meanest, dirtiest player baseball ever saw. After I left the Ty Cobb museum, for a few minutes I wanted to like Ty Cobb the baseball player. I wanted to separate him from the rest of his life and marvel at a player with his stats, at a base runner who stole home 54 times. I wanted to forgive him his sharp spikes and hard slides, but the more I thought about him, the more the life of Cobb that was not portrayed in the museum came to light, the harder it was to forgive him. I wanted to measure Ty Cobb by his statistics, contain him within his humble museum and whitewashed museum life, but I couldn't do it.

It appears that Cobb was forgiven in Royston. If he needed to forgive his father, his mother or himself, then I don't think he did. My first questions — did Cobb desire forgiveness? did he deserve to be forgiven? — probably can't be answered. The unasked question, unasked unless readers will ask it, or can read my mind, is why do I care so much whether Cobb's among the forgiven or the cursed. I'm not talking heaven or hell here, not wondering or worrying if Cobb got into, or will get into, heaven. Shit, no way. Let's be honest. It ought to be harder for Ty Cobb to get into heaven than it is for a fat, rich camel to pass through the eye of a needle. This isn't about that. I know less about heaven's admission standards than almost anything else in or out of this world. But I do think about forgiveness a whole lot. I never forgave my father for his transgressions. I am terribly, obsessive-

ly worried that I will not be forgiven for mine. I don't know. If Royston wants to forgive Cobb, let them. It won't hurt them too much because hardly anyone ever comes here to see the signs, to visit the museum. Few will think it's wrong for Royston to forgive Cobb his sins, few people will even know that it has. I can't forgive him, but what does that matter to Cobb, to Royston, to the Hall of Fame, to anyone? I don't think that my not forgiving him will hurt my chances of forgiveness. We have far different sins.

A Coda, of sorts.

Ruth could run ok, for a fat man.
— Cobb

A year later I was still revising this essay. I drove to Royston again, not to go to the Cobb Museum, just to get something to eat. But Cobb had been on my mind, of course. There's a sign, crudely drawn and painted, "Royston: Home of the Immortal Ty Cobb." I say to myself, having been alone for twelve days, I don't know about immortal. Sure, it's just a saying, a figure of speech that implies Cobb's immortal because we will never forget him. But though he's not forgotten, he's almost completely absent from the public's, and baseball's consciousness. When was the last time the baseball news mentioned Cobb? Probably when Pete Rose broke his record hits in a career. And then Rose, maybe cursed by being a part of the Cobb legacy, got caught gambling, kicked out of baseball, banned from the Hall of Fame, and has become a pathetic figure, a bit of a buffoon, in the story of baseball heroes.

Cobb's baseball story isn't as sad as Rose's. Cobb's in the Hall. His records, all but the one Rose broke, remain his. Cobb's personal life was sad, but his baseball story, if we leave out the murder, his estranged relationship with his mother, his drinking and drug addictions, the way he treated his wives, the ugly things he said about women and blacks in print, all of that "little" stuff, Cobb's legacy remains intact. Intact, as in he still holds all those records and he might be, arguably, the best baseball player ever. But immortal? Cobb's nemesis, the Babe, is far more legend, icon, and by those standards more immortal than Cobb. He hit home runs and we love home runs. He had great nick names: The Babe, The Bambino. There was the House that Ruth Built, and though that house has been demolished, it's still there in Yankee fans and

many fans' minds. It's immortal too.

Cobb was "the Georgia Peach." This just doesn't work. It's rural, regional, Southern. It's like local color Southern writers battling the New York crowd for attention and only coming away with the label Regionalists. It's a backhanded compliment. Today, when I drove to Royston, not particularly thinking of Ty Cobb, I accidentally ended up on Ty Cobb Street. I saw a boring little brick house for sale there, a hair salon and an auto detail shop. The Ty Cobb Museum, which I drove by again with my deli dinner in my seat (including a peach cobbler, further irony, maybe a further indignity for Ty Cobb) I noticed that the museum is in the Joe A. Adams Professional Building. Joe's name is three times as large as Cobb's. Cobb can't like this. Even his charity efforts seem to have fallen short.

Whether Cobb's being forgotten because he was a mean and despicable man or because time and baseball are just moving away from him, I don't know. If I were a sports writer doing some short spot on ESPN, I wouldn't pick Cobb because I'd either have to ignore his despicable behavior or dwell on them and never really get to the baseball story I was looking for.

If I am Major League Baseball, I've already been hit hard by scandal in the last few years: Pete Rose, Denny McClain, the steroid boys of summer — Canseco, McGuire, Sosa, Clemens, Bonds. I'm worried already about the debates and the news coverage when those guys are eligible for the Hall. Maybe the last thing I want is to dredge up Ty Cobb, a man who makes Pete Rose and Denny McClain look like saints. Maybe we'd even have to look closely at that lovable drunk, the Babe, who shared a mistress with Ty Cobb. Apparently, whoever's road schedule took them closest to Baltimore slept with her. (I can't believe Cobb knew, though: it does not seem his style to share.)

After all this research and speculation, after driving around this fading little town and following slow moving farm equipment through the countryside, I am tired of thinking about Cobb. It's 96 degrees this afternoon. I want to put Cobb on some back shelf, but because I do not drive the straight path, I find myself in Cairo, GA, on the next to last leg home. I turn on GA 93 and see that it's called the Jackie Robinson Memorial Highway. I tell my creative nonfiction students that they need to pay attention to the gifts that writers are given — that when we find this synchronicity, when this closure comes our way, we need to recognize the significance of our experience. If I had invented driving home

on the Jackie Robinson Highway, a memorial to a great player and a man who was morally everything that Cobb was not, if this were fiction it would be over the top, too easy. But this is nonfiction and I'm driving this road. And just to make sure that I know I'm getting some sort of writer's blessing, Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" is playing on my IPOD. I drove into Royston thinking about forgiveness, and I'm driving into my hometown singing of redemption. I will, based on all I know now, say that Cobb needed forgiveness and did not deserve redemption. I know too that I'm not the man to offer it.