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The Rocket That Fell to Earth

Jeff Pearlman

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Roger Clemens
and the
Rage
for
Baseball Immortality

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*For my beloved sisters,
Leah Guggenheimer and Jessica Guggenheimer
Long live Kelsey Crouch and The Doctor...*

“What would I be without baseball? I could think of nothing.”

—PAT JORDAN, *A False Spring*

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High Heat

The candle is lit. It shouldn't be, but it is.

We are, after all, human. We walk out of the supermarket without remembering to pay for a mango. We jaywalk and run reds and bum cigarettes when we're six months into quitting.

We forget to extinguish candles.

It happens. In fact, it's literally happening, right here by the bedside of Jonathan Benoit, a 14-year-old Seekonk, Massachusetts, resident and one of the world's biggest Red Sox fans. It is a warm May night in 1996, and as he drifts off to sleep, young Jonathan takes one last glance at the walls covered with images of his hero, Roger Clemens. Along with a few pictures of a half-naked Pamela Anderson, there are eight full-sized posters of Clemens—each one depicting the Boston ace in a different phase of his windup and release. You can't count the ways this boy loves Roger Clemens. His snarl. His intensity. His blue Red Sox cap pulled down over his eyes just so. His 97-mph fastball that causes opposing hitters to instinctively flinch. Clemens is the reason Jonathan wears uniform number 21 in youth ball, the reason he relishes brushing batters back. "The Rocket," he tells anyone who will listen, "is the man."

As the boy's eyelids grow heavy, the candle falls onto his blanket, and fire and smoke engulf Jonathan and those eight Roger Clemens posters. Jonathan's door is shut, so his parents don't hear the crackling of wood. But his dog, a husky named Tasha, wakes everyone up. As Jonathan's father rushes for the nearest fire extinguisher, his mother begs for the boy to stay alive. "I don't want to die!" he screams. "I don't want to die!"

He never loses consciousness, even though burns cover more than 60 percent of his body. The paramedics arrive and strap him to a stretcher. Tasha barks wildly. His parents clasp hands. His walls once covered by images of his idol, are now black.

"I eventually returned to my body," Jonathan says, "and fought to live."

WHEN THE EIGHTH-GRADERS AT Seekonk Intermediate School learned of their classmate's accident, they were devastated. The details were sketchy: Jonathan was in a fire. Jonathan had been taken to the Shriners Burns Institute. Jonathan might live. Jonathan might die. "It was very hard," says Kathryn Dunlap, Jonathan's teacher. "As an educator, you're fairly powerless in that situation. But we came up with a plan."

One hundred and sixty-three of Jonathan's classmates wrote to Roger Clemens, telling him that his biggest fan was on the verge of death. "To be honest," says Dunlap, "I had no expectations. It was just something to do. I hoped he would see them." Two weeks after the fire, Clemens saw them. The Red Sox were in Seattle to play the Mariners when, before the fourth game of the series, a thick FedE

bundle was placed atop his clubhouse chair. In the midst of recovering from a knockout fever that sapped most of his strength, Clemens leaned back on a table in the trainer's room and started to read. Tears streamed down his cheeks. The man known as a cold, heartless baseball killer was speechless.

Within a month, Clemens was standing in the auditorium at Seekonk Intermediate School, addressing the eighth-graders as their classmate was swaddled in bandages, lying in a hospital bed. The baseball star insisted that no media be admitted, so the next day's newspapers carried no stories. "When Jon recovers—and he *will* recover—he'll need your love and strength and support," Clemens told the children. "There's nothing more powerful than friendship. Use that power."

Five weeks later, Clemens walked into Room 325 at Shriners Burns Institute wearing a blue Boston Red Sox jersey and cap and white pants, and armed with a slew of autographed items. It was Jonathan's 54th day in the hospital, and his hope had long ago been replaced by despair. Yet when Clemens arrived, everything changed. "I knew at that very moment that I would be OK," says Jonathan. "He represented something very powerful to me."

The pitcher took a long look at his young fan—arms layered in bandages, hands wrapped in blue gauze, neck coated with reddened scabs and scars—and asked that everyone leave the room. For the next one and a half hours, Clemens forcefully told Jonathan he would again wear number 21 and throw inside fastballs. "We all face obstacles in life—some harder than others," he said. "This is your big one."

One year to the day after the fire, Jonathan was back on the baseball field. He would go on to play two years of junior varsity baseball at Seekonk High before—late in his junior year—being called up to varsity. "That was a big day for me," he says. "Most of the people I knew thought I'd never play again, and I made it. I owed that to a lot of friends—beginning with Roger Clemens. He had a fan for life."

THE YEARS HAVE PASSED. The photographs and memories have faded. The Roger Clemens who visited Jonathan Benoit on that July afternoon was a 33-year-old 185-game winner who hoped to finish his career with the Boston Red Sox. The Roger Clemens who exists today is a 46-year-old 354-game winner who turned himself into a baseball mercenary. The Roger Clemens who visited Shriners Burns Institute that day was known as a happily married father of three who refused to go more than a handful of days without seeing his wife, Debbie. The Roger Clemens who exists today is still battling bad press over his 10-year affair with a country singer named Mindy McCready—a woman he allegedly first had sex with when she was 17. She was only one of many women with whom he committed adultery over the past 15 years.

The Roger Clemens who motivated Jonathan that day was baseball's hardest worker—one of the first pitchers to regularly lift weights, to run outfield sprints between spring training innings and to conduct rigorous off-season regimens that would cause some Green Berets to vomit. "I've never met anybody who was driven like Roger," says Mike Greenwell, the longtime Red Sox outfielder. "When they told him not to lift weights, he did it anyway. When they told him not to run, he said, 'Screw you,' and went running. The man would throw nine innings, come in early the next morning, toss on his running shoes and spend an hour running the streets of Boston. There was nobody like him."

The Roger Clemens who exists today is scorned by many as a cheater who used performance-enhancing drugs, broke the law to do so and then lied about it before Congress. He is a man who lives in shame.

Like his hero, Jonathan Benoit has changed, too. Now 26 years old, married and the father of two boys, he works distributing electronic components near his home in Kingstown, Rhode Island. To thi

day, Jonathan thinks of Clemens nearly every time he rubs his fingers over the scars he bears from that fiery night. ~~He recalls the baseball player who, in a sense, helped bring him back to life.~~ “I’ve been defending Roger for years,” he says. “If you come to the office in my house, you’ll see his jersey, his hat, the signed baseball cards and the signed pictures. The man is an idol to me, and when I needed him—when I really needed him—he was there. He stepped up.”

Yet, something has changed for Jonathan. Of all the bromides Clemens spouted that day at the Shriners Burns Institute, the one that stuck with that young boy lying in the hospital bed was to do things the right way. You bust your tail. You maintain conviction. You tell the truth. *You always tell the truth.*

“I still love Roger, and the 14-year-old inside of me still defends Roger,” Jonathan says. “But I can assure you there are hundreds of little kids, just like me, who believed in everything Roger Clemens stood for. When he told me not to do drugs, he looked me in the eyes and said it with conviction. When he told me to live the right way, he meant it. He really, really meant it.”

He pauses.

“I’ve learned a hard lesson. Our heroes aren’t always heroes after all.”

Fat Boy from Ohio

He is out there.

Somewhere, the former cocaine addict exists, living a life of—well, uh...nobody seems quite sure. Through the years, he has bounced around like one of those pink Spalden balls, moving from Troy, Ohio, to Houston to Katy, Texas, to Georgetown, Texas. If he has an e-mail address, no one knows it. If he has a phone number, it is hard to come by. Friends shrug their shoulders. Relatives plead ignorance. After his ex-wife was murdered by drug dealers, he vanished. Moved to Louisiana to work as a chef. Dwelled under a bridge in Jackson, Mississippi, trolling for that next hit. “Randy Clemens?” says Larry South, once his closest friend. “Randy is a ghost.”

But he is out there.

He is definitely out there.

When it comes to the revisionist history that William Roger Clemens often tells of his long road from the Houston suburbs to seven-time Cy Young Award winner, there are plot points that flow with a too-good-to-be-true ease.

Roger Clemens never knew his deadbeat father.

Roger Clemens was raised by a tough single mother and a tough single grandmother.

Roger Clemens was born to play baseball.

Roger Clemens is a rugged, snarling Texan.

The truth, like Clemens’ nasty split-fingered fastball, often seems to be right in front of us, only to drop off the table at the last possible second.

One thing, however, is indisputable: It all comes back to the broken older brother. To the ghost.

His name is Gary Randall Clemens, and while Roger usually praises his mother, Bess, and his grandmother Myrtle Lee, it was Randy—nine years Roger’s senior—whom he strove to emulate. Roger did not merely admire Randy—he wanted to *be* Randy.

To tell Roger’s story, a few lies need to be pushed aside. For example, despite decades of selling the world a different tale, Roger Clemens wasn’t born in Texas, wasn’t raised in Texas, wasn’t taught how to grip a baseball in Texas. No, the story of the Rocket begins in Dayton, Ohio, where he was born on the afternoon of August 4, 1962, the youngest of Bill and Bess Clemens’ five children. Through the years, Clemens has told various magazine and newspaper writers just enough about his parents to make certain everyone loathes the father and loves the mother. Bill Clemens, according to his son, was a loser. “He was anti-sports and discouraged my oldest brother, Rick, from playing basketball, which he loved,” Clemens wrote in his 1987 autobiography, *Rocket Man*. “I was three and a half months old when my mother picked up and left him. And as usual, she made the right decision.”

Bill Clemens, who died in 1981, is no longer here to defend himself. A blue-collar Ohioan without much of an education or family life as a child, Bill enlisted in the U.S. Navy on January 12,

1942, and served as a coxswain during World War II. Before his honorable discharge in 1946, he was awarded the prestigious Asiatic Pacific Area Campaign and American Area Campaign medals. When at age 24 he married 17-year-old Bess Lee in 1947, he was working as a truck driver for a chemical plant, on the road for weeks as his wife raised the children. Though Bill was, by all accounts, an absentee parent, it was conceivably not by choice.

In fact, though Roger Clemens has publicly blamed his father for ditching the family, it was Bess who packed up her children and left Bill while he was on a lengthy road trip. They had been married for 15 years. “It was one of those impossible things,” Bess once said of her marriage. “You couldn’t live with him.” In the ensuing years she rarely mentioned Bill to the children, though Roger occasionally tells the story of the one subsequent conversation he had with Bill, when he was 10. “My father had called my mother and was irritating her,” he said. “So I got on the phone and said, ‘There’s no need for you to call here anymore.’”

The two never spoke again.

Less than two years after Bill Clemens vanished, an embarrassed Bess informed her family that she was pregnant with the child of the lumpy, wrinkled, gray-haired 48-year-old mechanic who serviced her car. When Elwood “Woody” Booher learned of his impending fatherhood, he let out a euphoric “*Whooo-hoo!*” and immediately proposed to Bess. For the next six years, Roger, his two brothers (Richard and Randy) and his three sisters (Brenda, Janet, and Bonnie, the new baby) were embraced by a man who, upon popping the question, told Bess, “I love you, but I’ll always look after your children first, you second. They’re my priority.”

Booher moved Bess and her offspring to his hometown, Butler Township, a tiny suburb (population: 8,212) 10 miles outside Dayton known—if at all—as the onetime home of the Grand American Trap-shoot Championship. Butler Township featured the usual small-town clichés: safe streets, grassy fields, unlocked doors and trustworthy neighbors. The town had one traffic light, a handful of police officers, a gas station and “The Little Store” that sold ice pops, Coca-Cola and three pieces of Bazooka gum for a quarter. Booher installed his new family in a small brick house near the corner of Little York Road and Peters Pike with a miniature basketball court in the driveway. As her husband worked long hours for minimal pay as a tool-and-die man, Bess spent her days as a janitor at a nearby hospital, cleaning beds, sweeping hallways, counting the hours until she could rush home to prepare dinner. A smallish woman with curly brown hair and a room-filling cackle, Bess smoked two packs of cigarettes per day and often had the sagging cheeks and wrinkled forehead of someone twice her age. “Bess was the type of woman who would do anything for anybody,” says South, Randy Clemens’ longtime friend. “She sacrificed her life for those kids without ever thinking twice about doing so. You’d never hear her complain about her place in the world.”

Though the family was poor, with the thrift-store shirts and patch-sealed dungarees to prove it, the children never noticed. They played tag and kick the can in the street, rode bicycles to their friends’ houses, somehow always had plenty of presents beneath the Christmas trees. “I had a tremendous amount of fun playing sports,” Clemens once said. “My mother made sure I had all the right equipment and plenty of it. People would be having a little softball game in their yards a few streets down and next thing you know, me and my friends, we’d be in the game.” Woody would take Roger on long rides on his black BMW motorcycle, let the boy help him repair broken appliances, tuck him in at night and wake him in the morning. When Roger was upset, Woody would sing to him croaking out old country-and-western tunes that would quickly have his stepson laughing. He would bring home a gallon of Blue Bell ice cream after work, inviting all the kids to grab a spoon and dig in. Woody was an even-tempered man who refused to raise his voice even when Brenda decided to light fire on a frigid winter day and wound up burning down the garage. “We would watch *Bonanza* on TV every week, just me and him,” Clemens said. “He really enjoyed that show. I remember, during

commercials, he'd hold me down and tickle me with his whiskers."

~~Everything changed for the Clemens-Booher family on the evening of October 4, 1970. With Bess at work, Woody cooked up steak and potatoes and sat down at the kitchen table with five of the children, Randy, Roger, Brenda, Janet and Bonnie (Richard, the oldest, was a member of the U.S. Army and serving in Vietnam), as well as Randy's friend Larry South. Midway through the meal, Woody excused himself. He was breathing awkwardly and grimacing.~~

Upon reaching the bathroom, Woody—who was overweight and a heavy smoker—clutched his heart and collapsed into the bathtub with a thud. Randy ran toward his stepfather, screaming for someone to call an ambulance. South, meanwhile, ushered the younger kids to the basement bedroom Woody had recently built for Randy.

As the ambulance pulled into the driveway. Roger climbed atop a milk crate and peered through the basement window; he saw the man he considered to be his real father loaded into the back of the ambulance. Woody's arms and legs were motionless. An oxygen mask covered his face.

Roughly 45 minutes later, the phone rang in the Clemens household. Bess, who had rushed home to be with her children, answered.

Woody Booher, age 54, was dead of a heart attack.

Roger Clemens had lost his second dad.

YOU ARE EIGHT YEARS OLD.

You have gone through not one but two fathers.

Your family is poor and about to become significantly poorer.

What do you do?

In the case of Roger Clemens, you look for someone new to lead the way.

You look for Randy Clemens.

With Woody's sudden passing, where else was there for young Roger to turn than to his 17-year-old brother? "I'm a Christian," Clemens once said. "As a boy we were solid churchgoers. After my stepfather died I had doubts that God was fair. Why did God take him away? Why?"

If we are to go back in time and pinpoint the exact moment when Roger Clemens began to become, well, *the* Roger Clemens, it is here, in the aftermath of Woody's death, when the older brother emerged as the father. Or at least the father figure. Not that Randy wasn't up to the task. In the smallish world of Butler Township, where everyone knew everyone, Randy Clemens was as admired and revered as Benjamin Wilhelm, the town's first mayor. Maybe even more so.

At Vandalia-Butler High School, where he was a senior, Randy cruised the hallways with the regal elegance of a kid who knew where he was headed. He was handsome, with a Robert Redford grin and a confidence that announced itself with each step. He was the shortstop on varsity baseball and the star shooting guard for the varsity basketball team, a fearless slasher nicknamed "Radar" by Coach Ray Zawadzki for his ability to nail long jumpers. With the five-foot-ten, 180-pound Randy Clemens guiding the way and averaging 20 points per game, the Aviators went 18-2 his senior year. Joe B. Hall, the legendary Kentucky coach, sent a recruiter to see him play. "Randy wasn't on our football team, but I remember one day he came out to one of our practices, just goofing around," recalls George Toman, a classmate. "He picked up the ball and just started launching it as far as humanly possible. It all came so naturally to him."

In a class of 280 students, Randy was voted king of the "Southern Nights"—themed senior prom. The queen was his girlfriend, Kathy Huston, who was—naturally—captain of the cheerleading squad. "Randy just had it all going on," says Mark Vennerholm, Roger's childhood friend. "He was good-

looking, smart, a great athlete, well known, popular. If you were Roger, you couldn't help but watch him across the dinner table and think, 'I want to be just like him.' And Roger did. He absolutely idolized his brother."

If Randy was a new Jaguar XJ6, sleek and smooth and powerful, Roger was a Dodge Dart with some chipped paint and a dangling muffler. In the years leading up to puberty, Roger was—physically and athletically—unremarkable. He had a double-chinned, doughy face, with a pear-shaped body and way of walking that reminded one of a slug. He even struggled with occasional asthma attacks and a bowl-styled haircut straight out of *My Three Sons*. "Roger was short and fat," says Walter Peck, who coached him in Little League. "I had him on an all-star team, and he didn't even start. He simply wasn't good enough."

"Roger wasn't a great hitter, and he didn't throw very hard," says Glen Burchfield, his closest childhood pal. "And he wasn't fast afoot. But he tried really hard."

With Woody's passing, Bess had to work two and three jobs to keep the family afloat. She cleaned offices in a nearby building at night and picked up extra shifts at a local dive. Thanks to some funds Woody had left in a trust, Bess was able to move the family—first to a larger home on Little York Road with a pool in the backyard, then to an even nicer four-bedroom spread in the nearby Imperial Hills subdivision. "They were not well off," says Jean Crutcher, a family friend. "But Bess was committed to treating her children well."

With his mother usually at work, Roger spent a lot of the time with his grandmother Myrtle Lee who considered the boy to be her own son. "I can remember [Grandma] twisting off a chicken's neck," Roger recalled. "I didn't know it was dying as it ran after me. I cut left, it cut left. A chicken can run for two or three minutes with its head off. My grandfather was watching, laughing, calling me 'Rooster Peck.' They were very tough on us. That's why I am the way I am."

When he wasn't with family, Roger could usually be located down the street at the Burchfields' house, where he and Glen would while away the afternoons and evenings. The boys shared a passion for chocolate ice cream, the James Caan film *Rollerball* and sports. Alongside other neighborhood kids, Roger and Glen competed in backyard home-run derbies, smear the queer, and dunk contests. Roger would often eat dinner with Glen's family, then be dropped off at home come 9 P.M. Sometime his mother would be there. Oftentimes she wouldn't. "He was a normal little boy in a tough situation," says Emily Burchfield, Glen's mother. "If he didn't have a way to or from a ball game, we took care of it. One thing I recall is that Roger was always very proud of his house. He'd say, 'Come in! Come see my house!' It meant a lot to him."

Roger found sports to be the perfect balm for an imperfect life. Millie Donathan, a secretary at John E. Smith Junior High, recalls a roly-poly boy with a hangdog expression who would arrive to school in hand-me-downs. "Every time he'd come into the office, he'd have a snotty nose," says Donathan. "I mean, every time. And I'd say, 'Roger, get around here and blow that nose right now!' He'd come in and say, 'Ms. Donathan, I forgot my lunch money again,' and I'd take him back to the cafeteria and tell the girls to give him his lunch. They probably could have qualified for free lunches, but Bessie refused to fill out the form. She was just that proud."

With the family's struggles, Randy deemed it his duty to instill in his brother a simple philosophy: Either you're a winner or you're a failure. That was Randy's approach to sports, one that resulted in on-court tantrums and browbeatings of opponents and referees. Basketball teammates still speak of the game against Brookville when Randy pushed an official and was placed on probation by the school. Roger, who served as a batboy for the high school baseball team and attended nearly all his brother's home basketball games, watched closely. He even wore the same uniform number as his brother: 21. "Randy was very arrogant, very pushy, very abrasive," recalls Mike Lawson, Randy's former basketball teammate. "He wanted to play every minute of every game, and he wouldn't let yo

forget it. He lacked a certain perspective; an acknowledgment that, at the end of the day, it's just a game."

Before long, Roger came to lack this perspective, too. Although Randy was no longer living at home, having graduated from high school in 1971 and accepted a basketball scholarship to Division III Bethel College in Mishawaka, Indiana, his influence on his brother remained profound. As he advanced from elementary school to junior high to high school, Roger turned increasingly combative. Though he was still a chunky kid through his early teens, on the courts and fields Roger carried himself like a scowling, trash-talking 20-game winner. He even promised those around him that one day he would start the All-Star Game, win the final game of the World Series and wind up on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. In football he was a stout defensive and offensive lineman. In basketball, he was a physical power forward and center. And in baseball he was a gap-hitting third baseman and soft-tossing control artist.

Yes, Roger Clemens was a soft-tossing control artist.

Though Roger was usually one of the better pitchers in the various leagues in which he participated, intimidation was not his game. While playing in the Vandalia Recreational League as a 12-year-old, an opposing pitcher named Ken Mann told Roger he was going to plunk him with a pitch in order to have him leave the game. "That's fine," Roger replied. "But if you hit me, I hit you."

Just moments later, Mann—knowing full well there would be retribution—nailed Clemens in the shoulder. Shortly thereafter, the favor was returned. Clemens wound up, unleashed his best fastball and—*poof!*—watched as Mann barely flinched as the ball brushed against his leg. "Roger was a big kid, but he didn't throw hard," says Mann. "So I wasn't too scared."

If one person in particular felt the brunt of the bullying attitude Randy had instilled in his younger brother, it was Kelly Krzan, Roger's teammate on the Murlin Heights Class E Little League baseball team in 1977.

Four years earlier, to much ridicule and a *Dayton Daily News* feature titled "Cute Batter Up," Krzan had been the first girl in the state of Ohio to participate in boys' Little League, going 1-for-2 for the Lions Club at Vandalia's Edgewood Field. Now well established as a local baseball phenom, Krzan joined the Murlin Heights team and found herself part of Coach Mike Kessler's fascinating two-person pitching rotation—the fat kid and the girl. "I don't want to say anything bad about Roger, because he had a good side to him," says Krzan. "But when push came to shove, Roger was very arrogant when he pitched. He had to be the star, and if we lost it was always somebody else's fault. He was the kid who'd yell, 'Catch the ball!' and 'You blew it for us!'"

Clemens dreaded splitting starts with a girl. "Whenever Kelly was pitching, Roger made it real clear that he disapproved," says Patricia Krzan, Kelly's mother. "He'd get mad and throw things. He'd stomp around and tell people that a girl shouldn't be pitching. It hurt me to watch, because that was my daughter. She deserved more respect than that."

Behind the Clemens-Krzan one-two punch ("Actually," says Tony Kessler, the team's assistant coach, "they were equal pitchers. Roger was no better than Kelly"), Murlin Heights went 13-0 and won the league championship. But for most involved, it was a relatively joyless experience. Clemens, who fancied himself as Randy's heir to athletic greatness, was humiliated by having to split time with a kid in pigtails. And Krzan heard the jeers of parents urging Kessler to "get that girl out of there," as well as the taunts from opposing players.

"When I got up to bat, I learned to duck quite often," she says. "I loved the game, but, to be honest, after a while I got tired of the attitudes."

Come season's end, Krzan hung up her cleats. She never played organized baseball again.

FROM AFAR, RANDY CLEMENS kept tabs on his brother, urging him to work harder, to accept nothing less than excellence, to ignore those not named Gary Randall Clemens who tried to guide his athletic career.

Yet if anyone was in need of guidance, it was Randy Clemens.

Though he was known in Butler Township as a relatively clean-living kid, his two years at Bethel College had brought a disconcerting metamorphosis. No longer the prep superstar, Randy struggled to adjust to being merely another good college basketball player performing in a gymnasium, Goodman Auditorium, that seated a mere 1,200 spectators. “Back in the 1970s, the high school athletes in Ohio were held up as role models for the community,” says Jon LeCrone, Randy’s prep teammate. “We were the hope for the generation, because we all appeared to be polite, clean-cut, athletic, hardworking. The community invested in us. They came to our football games, to our basketball games, to our baseball games. It was a source of pride for the town, and there was the expectation we’d go on and do great things. Nobody exemplified that more at our school than Randy Clemens. And clearly he had some demons nobody cared to notice.” It was the all-too-familiar tale of a local phenom coming to the realization that he is not so phenomenal after all. It was also the all-too-familiar tale of a kid who spent 18 years trying to do everything absolutely right finally being set free to indulge. He no longer had to look after his brothers and sisters, no longer had to concern himself with his mother’s work schedule.

“Randy changed,” says Lawson. “He went to Bethel and never adjusted. I think we were all naive in high school when it came to drugs. But Randy went away and started smoking marijuana at Bethel. For those of us who had played with him in Ohio, it was very surprising news.”

Despite Randy’s troubles, he was a solid guard who could handle the ball and shoot from long range. When Bethel coach Doug Hines was hired by Division II Mississippi College before the 1973–74 season, he took four of his players along with him to Clinton, Mississippi—including Randy. In his two years at the small Baptist school, Randy performed well, notching a school record that still stands with 17 assists in a game against Troy State. “You had to be a little cocky to be a point guard, and Randy was certainly confident,” says Buck French, Mississippi College’s starting shooting guard. “But he was a good guy. We liked him.”

Unfortunately, the drug usage that began at Bethel only increased in Mississippi. As a senior Randy was caught with marijuana on a road trip, and Hines—who had great affection for his court leader—had to kick him off the team. Randy told friends back home that he had been set up. “I loved Randy,” says South, “but I found that unbelievable.”

Over the next two years, Randy struggled to overcome the humiliation of his fall from grace. There was a failed tryout with the fledgling American Basketball Association, a gig with a lawn service company, a brief tenure as an assistant coach at Houston Baptist College, and finally a return to Mississippi College, where Hines agreed to take Randy on as an assistant so that he could earn his degree.

On December 21, 1975, Randy married Kathy Huston, his high school girlfriend and prom queen in a ceremony at St. Rita’s Church in Dayton. In Butler Township, the union was hailed as two high school sweethearts meant to be together. To Roger, who looked to Kathy as a big sister–mother, it meant the addition of a beloved family member. To Bess Clemens, it meant the addition of the daughter-in-law she always wanted. Kathy was smart, pretty, savvy—an elementary school teacher with a joyful disposition.

Kathy’s family, however, viewed the union with skepticism. Her parents and two siblings looked at Randy and saw a used-car salesman. He would pour on the charm in their presence, then talk trash as soon as everyone was out of earshot. There was a lot of Eddie Haskell in the kid.

“Randy was involved in this secret world—that much we knew,” says Carolyn Gray, Kathy’s

older sister. “I knew he was delving into a bunch of drugs; at least I started getting that feeling. But Kathy was very protective of Randy. If she was fully aware of how bad he was, she wasn’t saying.”

Shortly after the wedding, Randy and Kathy moved to Houston, where he worked with his older brother, Richard, in the tool-and-die industry, and she found employment as an elementary school teacher. Randy continued to play an important role in the life of Roger, who in the fall of 1976 made his debut with the freshman baseball team at Smith Junior High. Roger didn’t exactly stand out. Alongside his picture on the 1976–77 school yearbook, he is identified as “Roger Clemmens.” The football team went 4-2-1 with Clemmens contributing as a defensive lineman, and basketball compiled an 0-6 mark before, according to the yearbook, “the freshman team was unable to complete its season due to the energy shut down.” A stiff, burly post player, Clemmens averaged around eight points per contest.

Unlike Randy, who had all but emerged from the womb bursting with athleticism, Roger struggled. Even as a freshman, by which time most boys have traded in their baby fat, Roger’s body was similarly proportioned to that of a popular childhood toy from the time period, the Weeble. He was now six feet tall but lumpy. Away from the fields, his confidence befitted his frame. Shy and awkward, through his freshman year Clemmens had neither kissed a girl nor taken one on a date. “Roger was a nice kid,” says Bob Costello, the Vandalia-Butler High junior varsity baseball coach. “But there was nothing to make you think he’d be anything more than above average.”

From his home in Houston, Randy Clemmens couldn’t believe what he was hearing. How could his brother, blessed with the same blood and DNA, be so forgettable? Why wasn’t he the hottest young ballplayer in town? Why weren’t the girls swooning at his side? Maybe Roger would never be as good as his older brother, but he certainly could do better than...*this*.

Early in Roger’s sophomore year at Vandalia-Butler High School, Randy convinced Bess that it would be in the boy’s best interest to relocate to Houston and live with him and Kathy. They would feed him, nurture him, mold him into the athlete he could—and should—become. Living 1,120 miles away from her second-oldest son, Bess knew nothing of the drugs that had seeped into his life. “OK,” Bess said, finally relenting. “But take good care of him.”

Roger played JV football and basketball, then one day informed his close friend Glen Burchfield that he would be leaving for Texas. “I thought it would be sort of gradual,” says Burchfield. “Well, it was right after basketball season had ended. Roger told us he’d be moving soon, and one day he didn’t make baseball practice. That’s how I found out my friend had left—he just never showed up. We had a lot of history with Roger—my family and I. I never understood how he could just vanish like that.

“But,” adds Burchfield, “that’s exactly what he did. He just vanished.”

Houston Bound

For the typical American tenth-grader, a mid-high school relocation can elicit varying emotions: Anger for being dragged away from longtime friends. Fear for having to face a new situation. Despair for the shedding of comfort and the headfirst plunge into the unknown.

For Roger Clemens, age 15, it was a cause for joy.

As Clemens later told the *Dayton Daily News*, his favorite part of growing up in Ohio was “seeing it in my rearview mirror.” For the many friends and neighbors who took offense at the remark (and, indeed, *many* took offense), an important bit of context is missed. When Clemens reflected upon his one and a half decades in Ohio, he didn’t think about riding his bicycle through warm summer breezes or pretending to be Dr. J outside the Burchfields’ house. No, to Clemens, Ohio was the place where he had lost both his fathers, where he had lived in relative poverty, where his mom had worked three jobs to pay the bills and where he had been the dumpy fat kid who never kissed a girl.

Ohio? To bleeping hell with Ohio.

On February 25, 1978, Roger arrived for his first day as a sophomore at Dulles High School. With a student body of approximately 4,500 students, Dulles was the state’s largest high school—a place in which a newcomer could easily lose himself. Yet young Roger understood exactly where to go. Because of state transfer rules, he was ineligible to play varsity baseball for the Vikings. So immediately following his first full day of classes, Roger donned sweat pants and a T-shirt, grabbed his beige Rawlings glove and headed out to a side field, where Coach Gary Thiebaud was holding junior varsity tryouts.

At Vandalia-Butler, 30 kids might turn out for baseball; here more than 70 freshmen and sophomores lined the field, stretching and tossing before the workout began. Roger found himself paired with Brett Bozeman, the team’s third baseman. “It was a windy, cold day, and Roger told me he was a pitcher,” recalls Bozeman. “So I found a mitt, squatted down and caught some of his stuff.” Two things grabbed Bozeman’s attention. First, Clemens’ fastball wouldn’t snap a saltine cracker. And second, “I didn’t have to move my mitt more than an inch or two. Everything he threw was precise and right to the spot.”

Clemens made the Vikings JV, joining the rotation as the number three starter. The ace, a hard-throwing right-hander named Johnny Jones, dazzled teammates with a fastball that reached the low 80s. The number two starter, Scott Wooley, possessed equal velocity, but his lanky frame broke down in a matter of weeks. “Both those guys threw significantly harder than Roger,” says Bozeman. “But, man, could he locate his pitches.”

As was often the case in Ohio, Clemens was initially dismissed by teammates as the fat kid. The people saw that the fat kid could pitch a little. Clemens went 12-1 with an ERA below 3.00 as Dulles High finished 18-3 and captured the district title over archrival Galveston. In the championship game

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