

Bitter_{is}
the Wind

a novel by
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TROUBLE

DURING HIS FIRST SUSPENSION FROM NETHERWOOD Junior High School in rural upstate New York for throwing ice cubes down a girl's shirt, George Johnson Jr passed the time at home by himself. The thirteen-year-old boy played catch with a pitchback, an elastic net framed with aluminum poles. His Brittany spaniel, Buddy, watched the baseball rhythmically fly into the net and snap back into his waiting glove.

George remembered that three years earlier the 1969 New York Mets won thirty-eight of their final forty-eight games to capture the National League Eastern Division title. The Mets swept the Atlanta Braves in the playoffs and beat the Baltimore Orioles in five games to become world champions. George's mind focused on game three of the World Series. Tommie Agee made two spectacular catches in center field, robbing the Orioles of at least five runs.

Then he imagined himself, a scrawny baby-faced kid with predatory green eyes and long brown hair wearing a baggy uniform, step up to the plate. He belted a home run and was mugged by his teammates at home plate. Next he appeared on the mound, striking out batters with a blazing fastball and a sweeping curve. He made diving catches in the field, playing all nine positions.

George released the ball too early and it sailed over the pitchback. Buddy obediently returned it. George threw once more. The pitchback returned a hard grounder that he fielded in the webbing of his glove. He tried again to imagine the sold-out major league stadium, but couldn't. All that came to him was a dark, empty field. He took a deep breath and walked over to the well in the back of his house and filled his mug with water and sat on the cinderblocks bordering the well. Buddy meandered over and lay down. George drank half the water and let Buddy lap up the rest.

"Hey, Buddy," he said, patting the dog's head. "You think I'll ever get to the big leagues?"

The boy rose and walked into the house. Buddy followed behind him. George opened the upstairs hall closet. From a shoebox stuffed with baseball cards he pulled out a yellowed newspaper, *The Hudson Valley Watch*, and went into his bedroom, where he lay down on his bed before reading.

Mother and Daughter Killed in Car Wreck

Salt Point, NY, Feb 12, 1966—Mary Johnson and her two-year-old daughter, Susan, were killed yesterday by a tractor-trailer. They were pronounced dead at the scene. Mrs Johnson was driving north on Creek Lane in her Volkswagen Beetle. An eighteen-wheeler driven by Gregory O. Dodson of the Bronx jackknifed and slid through the Salt Point Road intersection, crushing Mrs Johnson's Beetle into a tree. Dodson was unharmed.

Mrs Johnson is survived by her husband, George Johnson Sr, and a seven-year old son, George Johnson Jr. A funeral will be held at 2 PM this Monday in Salt Point Cemetery.

George meticulously re-folded the newspaper and pictured his mother's and sister's names carved into their gravestone. He rubbed his hands over his closed eyes, moving them downward past his thin nose and mouth. With both hands resting on his chin, he recalled a scene from six years earlier. In the morgue his father quietly kissed his mother's and sister's lifeless bodies. His father signed whatever papers needed signing. At home his father packed his mother's and sister's belongings into separate black garbage bags – clothes, shoes, Susan's toys.

George listened to the steady bursts of air leaving his dog's nostrils. Years of companionship remained with his Brittany spaniel, George told himself. Unless, of course, Buddy ended up in the way of a truck. George rolled off the bed and lay down on the rug next to Buddy, enveloping the dog in his arms and chest. After a minute, he kissed the top of Buddy's head, rose, and returned the folded newspaper to the shoebox.