

SAM

and the

SWAMP RATS

by

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First published by Live Wire Press in 2010.

Live Wire

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Jamestown RI 02835 USA

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www.livewirepress.com

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Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Live Wire.

www.livewirepress.com

To Sam

and
all the
Swamp Rats

The First Game



1

SEEMED LIKE ANY OTHER TUESDAY, at least at first. Sam met his friends at the ball park after school, and they hit a few balls until enough kids showed up to start a real game. Freddy's little sister really wanted to pitch, but they had an odd number of people so she kept score instead.

It was a perfect October day, warm enough to break a sweat with a few hard swings. Blue sky arched overhead, and a few puffy clouds had gathered over Buzzards Bay to the west. But Sam didn't notice the view—at least not until his second time at bat, when he lobbed a



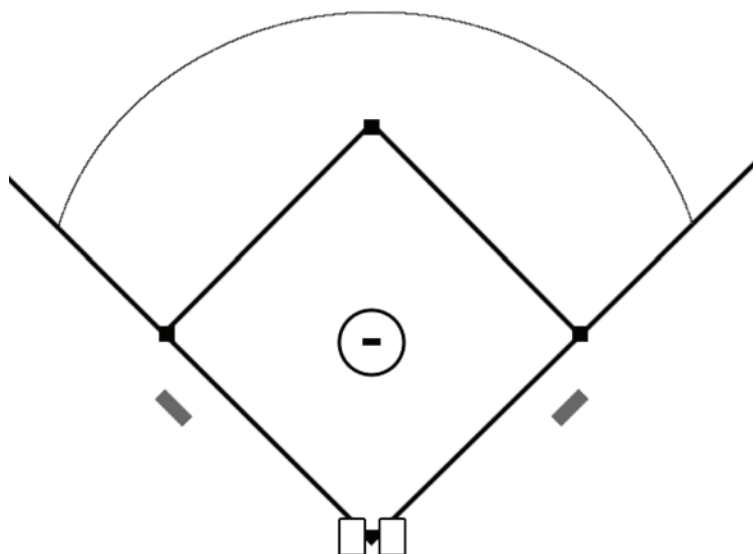
home run out into that blue sky.

“Nice hit, Sam!” his best friend Chris yelled.

It was a great hit, a home run. The ball dropped into the tall marsh grasses way, way out past left field. Yeah!

Pumping his right arm in the air, Sam circled the bases. Back at home plate, he thumped both feet onto the white rubber right in front of Freddy, the catcher.

“Think you’re so great, do you? Now we’ve got no ball to play with.” Freddy tossed down his mitt. “Might as well go home.”



What's Out There 2

“I’LL GO GET THE BALL,” Sam told Freddy.

Mom had told him to come home as soon as the game was over, and it was way too early for that—supper was still hours away.

Punching his left hand into the oversized catcher’s mitt, Freddy shook his head. “You can’t go out there—that’s where all the swamp rats live.”

“Rats?” Sam shivered.

“That’s what my dad calls ‘em.” Freddy’s father was some sort of famous biologist. “He says there’s all sorts of weird creatures out there. Evolved from things that got loose in the



swamp. He wants to study ‘em, but he can’t get a grant because then everyone would find out what was actually in there.”

Sam tossed his bat toward the bench. “Can’t be that bad,” he replied. “And if I don’t come back, your dad can go in and find me and call it research.”

As he trotted out across the short grass of left field, Jeff the third baseman called over. “I’ve heard there’s snakes so big they can swallow you whole.”

“My mom says there’s coyotes,” added the shortstop. Sam didn’t know her name.

Even Francie, his second closest friend after Chris, chimed in. “Sam! I heard there’s this ginormous alligator that some kid flushed down his toilet, and now he lives back there. His jaw’s so big he could snap you in half!”

“And you’ll be the first one he eats,” Sam retorted. “You’re the closest.”

“Not if you really go into the swamp.” Her eyes were huge. “I dare ya.”

“You don’t have to dare me—I’m already going.”

Chris ran over from center field to whisper, “Don’t do it, man. I’ve heard there’s creatures in there so weird not even the bughunters know what they are.”

“Don’t do it, Sam!” An eerie echo came from

second base.

“I have to—it’s our only ball.” He smiled back over his shoulder at Chris and Francie. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.”

But once he turned toward the waving grasses, his smile faded. He’d heard the stories, too. What really lived out there, anyway?



Finding First Base 3

SAM ALMOST TURNED BACK ONCE his new sneakers squished into the mud. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all. Every step kicked up a stink like low tide at the beach, only with a few dead animals mixed in.

Better not be rats.

And how would he ever find the ball? The grasses were almost as tall as he was—he couldn't even see his feet.

He'd just keep moving, hope he didn't step on anything that would consider him an after-school delicacy.

The reeds had closed all around him when



he first heard the whispering.

It sounded like “Swing, batta batta.”

He stopped to listen hard.

The noise stopped too, as if waiting for him.

As soon as he took another step, it started up again. As loud as his sneakers squishing into the mud. As quiet as his little sister sharing secrets with her friends.

Definitely not an alligator, or a snake. So what was it? Anyway, it didn't sound like anything that was going to—

His toe stubbed against something that moved, something hard and round. Shoot, what was that? He peered down into the weeds.

Hah—he'd stumbled right onto their baseball! He could just barely make it out a few yards ahead, the far side of a path of flattened grasses. He kept his eyes locked on it so he didn't kick it again.

Leaning down to pick it up with his bare hand, Sam wiped the worst of the mud onto his shorts and tucked the ball into his glove. There! That wasn't so hard. And he could tell everyone there was nothing out here besides thick stinky mud.

He turned to head back to his team—and tripped, sprawling face first into the reeds.

Tripped over a log. Not a log, a—

He scrambled back to his feet before he

touched anything too slimy. Was it the alligator?

Too smooth, and too square.

It was a base. Brown and wrinkled and muddy,
but a base.



Samborghini



4

BEFORE HE COULD FIGURE OUT what a base was doing in the middle of the swamp, he heard the crack of a bat. Something whizzed by his head so close it knocked his baseball cap sideways.

Twisting his hat back to straight with his right hand, Sam turned to see where the ball had come from. Something was scurrying toward him, setting the grass moving—

Bang! A hard blue shell whacked into his glove. Some kind of metal animal?

“Scusi,” it said.

A car.



A very curvy blue car that was now charging away again to Sam's right. Across the tailfin ran elegant script that read Samborghini. Cool! Really?

Wasn't there an old Italian car company named Lamborghini?

The ball whizzed back over Sam's head. Through the marsh grasses he saw the car's outline turn left again, like he was running toward third base. Don't do it! his baseball instincts cried. Safe at second, out at third—

A squeal of brakes was followed by a yell of "out." Then a deep engine growled, and the grasses parted as the car shuffled off toward the dugout.



Samborghini

A Ball Whizzes By 5

SO IF SECOND BASE WAS to his right, home plate must be in front of him. How incredibly weird to find a whole other baseball diamond, out here in the swamp! With cars running the bases...

Another ball whizzed by his left shoulder, outside the base line.

“Foul!”

Must be the umpire. But how could the guy see anything through this thick grass?

And was Sam supposed to be playing first? No one else was, and he still had his glove on his left hand—with the ball safely stashed inside. He moved it to his jacket pocket, in

case he had to make a play.

“Strike two!”

This would be a whole lot more fun if he could see the batter. Or the ball. Or the pitcher.

“Stee-rike three, out three!” Sam couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw a few grasses move as the umpire’s arm rammed across his body.

Without thinking, Sam ran toward home base. Beyond the baseline the grasses ended, and benches stood on either side just like a normal field. The home team bench was empty.

The visitor’s area looked like the mall parking lot on the Saturday before Christmas.

Warped and dented cars jostled for space and revved their engines to move out onto the field. They were mostly trucks and vans and SUV’s, all towering over Samborghini. But it was obvious the small blue car was in charge. He winked his headlights at Sam before taking the ball from the umpire and idling out into the weeds.

The pitcher?

Each car flattened the grass as it rolled onto the field, but then the reeds instantly sprung up again. And between the cars, the home team was running in off the field. Or rather slithering, crawling, and galumphing.

What an odd bunch of creatures.

Meet the Animals 6

FROM THIRD CAME A CHAMELEON, changing from tan to brown as he crawled into the muddy dugout. He was walking on three legs because on the fourth (right front) was a huge tan baseball mitt.

The second baseman looked like an oversized cartoon hamster, with bright red spots all over his fur.



Hal

The catcher sat down to peel off his shin guards. Seemed like he hardly needed any, since





he was a turtle.

A purple turtle.

And from the
outfield came a
spotted snake,
and a coyote

that looked like he was part German
Shepherd!

Everything his teammates had told him about,
except the alli—

The weeds around the pitcher's mound
parted, revealing a small camouflage-colored
alligator.

“Way to go, Aggie!” the hamster clapped his
tiny paws together. “That’s four strike outs!”

“Give it a rest, Hal.” The alligator flicked his
tail and slithered to a stop in front of the
bench. “We’re still losing.”

Sam counted up the players—seven, besides
himself.

“Is someone missing?” he asked the hamster—
Hal, who had crawled up onto the railing at
the end of the bench. He looked like he had
chicken pox, or some other weird disease.

“Chuck couldn’t make it today,” Hal replied.
“He p-plays center field. We’re hoping the Cars
haven’t noticed.”

A blue troll with ears as big as Dumbo’s
and black-framed glasses strode forward and

reached down to dust off home plate with a frond of grass. All that did was add streaks to the mud, but apparently the umpire was satisfied.



Hank

“Batter up!” he called in a deep voice.

Not knowing what else to do and fascinated by this odd collection of teammates, Sam sat down on the bench next to his new friend.

“Go on, Sybil!” Hal stood on his hind legs to clap. “You can do it—pop one into left just like last time!”

The snake slithered up to home plate.

How did a snake hold a bat?

In its teeth! Good to see those expandable jaws were good for something besides swallowing boys.

Hal the hamster curled his front paws underneath himself. “Sybil’s really good,” he told Sam out of the side of his mouth. “We’ll probably lose her to the farm team soon.” He turned his head, boring small red eyes into Sam. “You too. That was a great snag, you know. The weeds are so thick now, I don’t think anyone else n-noticed. But I saw the way you t-tagged out that first batter.”

“I wasn’t—” Sam stopped. He’d better just



Aggie



play along, pretend he'd been on first the whole time.

"I b-bet the guys vote to make you pitcher for our next g-game." Every time he stuttered, Hal's teeth clicked together. "Even old Aggie's g-gotta admit you're better than him."

The hamster leaned in closer, so Sam leaned away—he didn't want the chickenpox again.

"I'm not sure Aggie can see so good anymore, not after he ran into that parked car out hunting the other—"

"Careful, Hal." The alligator flicked his tail against the bench support, making the whole thing shudder. "My ears are still working."

"Pitchers don't need ears," Hal grumbled, but he turned his attention back to home plate.

Smiling at the alligator, Sam tucked his muddy sneakers farther under the bench—hopefully out of reach of those big sharp teeth.

Sybil's Home Run



7

CRACK!

Sam turned back to the game in time to watch Sybil whack one out beyond left field, up into the blue sky, out toward the distant beach.

“Way to go, Sybil!” Cheers rang out. “Keep goin’, girl—bring it home!”

For a change, Hal wasn’t cheering.

“Game’s over,” he told Sam. “That was our last ball.”

“I’ve got one,” Sam pulled the baseball out of his pocket. “I—ah—found it next to first base.”

“C-cool!” Hal reached out to stroke the leathered seams. “Wow, this one’s pretty new



too. M-must be from that other field.” He cocked his head back toward the ball field. “D-drop it right there and I’ll take it out to Hank.”

“Who’s Hank?”

“The ump.” Hal looked at him so strangely that Sam didn’t dare ask his next question; how a hamster would possibly carry a baseball.



Sybil

Beat the Cars



BY THE TIME SAM HAD dropped the ball in front of the bench, Hal had scurried off the railing. Pushing the ball along with his nose, he maneuvered it out to Hank.

The ump raised the ball high before tossing it to the mound.

“Play ball!”

A groan came from the other bench.

Hal scurried back and climbed up next to Sam again. “Of c-course the Cars want it to be over, they’re up 4-1! And we’ve never b-beat ‘em before. But now we have a chance.”

Sam wasn’t sure one more ball would be enough to beat such a powerful team. A Hummer that



looked like it had won a few collisions loomed over first base. A white Land Rover stood at third. The outfield had a weird Jeep sedan, a Sprinter, and a huge truck, all revving their engines for some reason. And even though they were huge, they were mostly out of sight—the grasses must be even taller out there.

The only small car was a Morris minor playing second base.

“But can they catch?” Sam wondered.

Apparently he’d spoken out loud, because Hal answered.

“Oh yeah, they can catch. That Jeep in left field has gull wing doors. Hard to miss when he opens those big honk—”

Thwack! The sound of bat on ball interrupted.

“Go Carmine!” The coyote had a hit to right. The white tip of his tail was all that showed as he loped around to second.

“Safe!” called the ump.

“How can Hank see whether anyone’s safe or not?” Sam asked. “He’s shorter than I am.”

“He can see through the weeds,” Hal explained,



scratching behind one ear with a tiny front paw. “Special glasses—only the umps are allowed to wear ‘em.”

Carmine

Sam On Deck



9

AGGIE THE ALLIGATOR WAS UP next, and he walked. Then the chameleon crawled up to the plate. His front legs turned tan to match the bat he was gripping, while the back two legs stayed brown like the mud.

“Go Leon!” Hal shrieked. He leaned over toward Sam again. “You’re up n-next, you know.”

“I am? But where are the bats? And where’s the on deck circle? Jeez, I can’t even see the bases!”

Hal smiled. “The bat’s over there.” He pointed to the far end of the bench. “Just remember—



crouch down a little, so you can see the pitch coming under the grass.”

Sam hustled over to find one lone bat lying in the dirt.

“Where are the rest?” he asked Sybil the snake.

“That’s all we have, besides the one Leon’s using.” The snake stuck out a forked tongue and pointed it toward home plate.

The bat at Sam’s feet was way too small for him, and it had splinters where it started to get fat. He’d use Leon’s bat, but at least he could warm up with this one.

A few practice swings told him what he already knew—it would be hard to hit anything with enough power to get it past the Cars. Hopefully Leon’s bat was—

Thwack!

Cheers rose up around him, and he turned to see the grasses part as Leon ran to first. Carmine scored, claws scratching across home plate. Aggie stopped at third.

That made it 4-2, with two on.



Batter Up 10

SAM DROPPED THE SMALL BAT and walked up to the plate. His stomach fluttered, which was familiar. What felt strange was not wearing a helmet.

Leon's bat felt more like one he could hit something with.

"You're a tall one," the catcher—an orange old-fashioned VW Bug—told him. The hood had lots of ball-sized pockmarks. "Sambo takes the tall ones down quick."

Something whizzed by Sam and whacked the catcher's mitt.

"Strike one!"

Shoot, he hadn't even seen that pitch. Where was the mound, anyway?

Remembering what Hal had said, Sam widened his stance so he could see through the stems, beneath the waving fronds.

Wow. Samborghini looked as tall as Randy Johnson out there. And he had gull wings, too.

This time he saw the wind up and was ready for the pitch. He swung—and missed.

“Strike two!”

It would be really embarrassing to strike out his first time up.

“Sambo’s got ya right where he wants ya,” the catcher muttered. “Now watch this.”

Samborghini had lowered his headlights and pulled them together. Probably going to throw

Bug Catcher



something outside, see if Sam would chase.

Sure enough, the next pitch missed the catcher’s glove and thunked against his open passenger door.

“Ball one!” the ump called.

Huh! That Big Blue Sambo wasn’t so hard to read after all.

Now that he could see the pitcher, it wasn't so different from a normal game. Ball, batter, bat. And he was getting used to the car's strange sidearm delivery, which would help.

He waited out another ball, and then a third. Full count.

Crrrack! He caught a piece of the next pitch, just enough to foul it off to the right—and break the bat.

Carmine trotted over with the smaller bat in his teeth.

“Don't hit too hard, okay?” the coyote whispered. “That one's all we have left.”

Sam rested the bat on his right shoulder. It felt like a toothpick compared to the last one. Squaring his body to the plate, he eyed Samborghini. The rim of silver along the front of his hood seemed to be smiling, like he knew he had Sam right where he wanted him.

Not so fast, Sambo, Sam thought to himself. He could feel the silent concentration of his team behind him, could even smell the leaded breath of the catcher.

He fouled off another pitch. Wow, this small bat was quick! Careful not to let his smile show, Sam squared up again. He could do this.

The pitcher wound up.

The next one came right down the middle, belt-high, right where he liked it. He could



almost close his eyes and still connect.

Th-wack! What a sweet feeling, even if he had broken the bat. Dropping the skinny splintered handle, he ran.



Bases You Can't See



11

KEEPING HIS HEAD DOWN, SAM ran for a base he couldn't see. The reeds were trampled down so as long as he followed the path he'd get there. He could hear Hal and the rest of his team cheering, but he couldn't see the ball either. No wonder Samborghini had over-run to third his last time up.

Sam knew he'd hit at least a double, so he rounded first to head for second. Just before he reached the base he raised his head above the weeds. Out in left field, the center fielder (a battered Sprinter) had plowed into the side of that weird-looking green Jeep. Hazard





lights were flashing, and it didn't look like any fielding would happen anytime soon. Tucking his head down again, Sam turned toward third.

His eyes were able to pick out shapes from the waving reeds, and just beyond third base he could see Aggie's tail waving him home. He turned one more corner and headed into home plate, where his whole team waited to congratulate him.

Hal quickly crawled up onto his shoulder and giggled in his ear. "We w-won, Sam! Thanks to you! We're out of bats, out of b-balls, and it's 5-4 Animals! Wheee!" Hal's front feet scurried against Sam's shoulder, as if he were on an exercise wheel.

The ump raised his arms.

"The Animals take it, 5,4." Carmine's yellow eyes glowed, and he reared back his head and howled before loping off toward left field. Aggie gnashed his teeth and smiled. And Leon the chameleon turned orange with glee.

"The next game begins tomorrow," the ump

continued. “Same time, same place—that’s if we have a new bat and ball by then.”

“Hank is such an Eeyore,” Hal muttered in Sam’s ear. “Carmine’s going to bring back that ball, or another one. And Chuck’ll whittle us a new bat by then.” He cocked his head at Sam. “Will you come back tomorrow and play with us?”

Before Sam could answer, he noticed Sambo had sidled up next to him.

“Scusi, Monsieur.”

“Yes?”

“I congratulate on fine home run. Maintenant me give you ride to casa?” Winking one of his headlights, he opened the right gull wing in silent invitation.



Sliding Home 12

SAMBORGHINI SPOKE A MIXTURE OF Italian, English, French, and Pig Latin, but Sam found it easy to understand him—all he wanted to talk about was baseball. He dreamed of breaking out of the swamp, of ball fields with cut grass. Sam didn't know how to break it to him that cars (especially weirdo hybrids like him) didn't play in the big leagues.

Just before they emerged from the swamp, Sambo stopped.

Sam tried to stay calm. The car had been nothing but a gentleman, even if he did talk weird.

“Monsieur, I must ask question,” the car said



at last. “Why you not call me out at first? Ball in glove, I touch. Why let me run?”

Sam laughed. “That wasn’t the right ball,” he replied. “That was the ball I came to get, the one we were playing with here.” He waved to the grass just ahead.

Sambo nodded once with his steering wheel. “Grazie for to play by rules.”

And sliding into gear, he crossed out of the swamp onto the smooth green grass of left field.

Most of Sam’s regular teammates had left, but Chris and Francie sat waiting for him. Two jaws dropped in unison as the blue car revved its way across the field and opened a gull wing in front of the bench.

The whole thing would be stupidly hard to explain, even to his best friends.

Stepping out of the car, Sam turned back toward the swamp. He would never look at it the same way again.

Over the beach, the sun was setting in a red ball. Time to go home.

Just before he turned back to his friends, he caught a glint of something running. Carmine?

Could it be that a weird-looking dog/coyote had gone in search of a missing baseball, only to join yet another game out beyond the edges of his home swamp?

the Cars



the Animals



the End

A BEAUTIFUL FALL AFTERNOON,
AND A MISSING BASEBALL.

Sam's
friends
warn him not
to go past the end
of the grass in left field,
where the Swamp begins.
They talk of creatures so strange
— the Swamp Rats — that not
even the local scientists know
what they are. What Sam finds
deep in the marsh might
just change the way he
plays baseball...

FOREVER.

