Did you ever have one of those moments you want to hide from everyone else? One of those moments when you said or did something so blatantly stupid you should no longer be considered a member of the human race?

The windy city was living up to its name. The wind was so bad that O’Hare shut down the runways. My brother and I had driven down to Chicago to pick up our parents for one of their biannual trips. We now had hours of waiting ahead us as they never got off the ground in Kansas City. We instinctively found our way to a pair of barstools and waited for the wind to die down.

We were lucky to get a seat. Nobody was going anywhere for quite a while and everyone seemed to think getting a bit drunk would make the time go by faster. As the hours passed, we became buddies with the five or six guys drinking around us. One of these fellows suggested that an athletically built man sitting ten or fifteen feet behind us was Jim Thome of the Cleveland Indians baseball organization. Nobody really felt comfortable verifying this. It was possible that it was him the bartender informed us. Cleveland had just finished a series with the Cubs.

This caused quite the excitement for my drinking buddies. It was as if one of the Jonas Brothers had walked into a high school dance team convention. Everyone was a-twitter about being in such close proximity to such greatness. Perhaps they were thinking that this spatial encounter was genuinely improving their bar league softball play. Whatever the cause for their excitement, they were so excited and intimidated by this possible Thome that they were afraid to go ask the man if it was really him.

Not being a baseball fan myself, I offered to inquire about this legend’s identity. I mean I couldn’t tell you Big Pappy from Major Floppy. As I walked toward this gentleman, I was impressed by his physical stature. He was a presence to be sure. He was alone, eating French fries by the handful, apparently already finished with his sandwich. He paused, bicep flexed, fries midway to his mouth as I entered his personal space.

“Pardon me for interrupting your meal, sir,” I paused here, mentally, and thought how smooth I was being in front of a possible celebrity. I wasn’t some silly, star struck fan so impressed by the mythic greatness I couldn’t think straight. No. I was smooth baby. He could sense my confidence and was thinking I was “one of him”.

I continued and asked his name. Nothing moved. Fries were erect, bicep still curled. Slowly, this giant statue before me turned his head to look at me. This is the first time he looked at me directly with his chiseled face, bronzed by hours of exposure to sunshine.

“Excuse me,” he replied still holding my gaze intently. It was the great Jim Tome. I was sure of it. I had caught him unawares, eating French fries and now would have a great story to tell my future grandkids. Did I ever tell you the time I had dinner with my friend and Hall of Famer Jim
Thome? I was getting caught up in his greatness, the celebrity. I understood his “excuse me” to be because the bar was so noisy and he hadn’t caught my question.

“I said,” reiterating, “are you” and said his name. This caused his eyelids to squint almost imperceptibly and his forehead to frown. He was like a boy looking at the mangled mess of his bicycle after his father had run it over backing out of the driveway. “What’s this?” the boy would say. “I left my bike were I always do and now it is twisted, abstract sculpture?” Seemingly incomprehensible.

I began to get the feeling that something was not going the way it should be. Was this a day I was wearing deodorant or not? Was it the garlic from the plate of bar nachos? Was he Dominican? I was falling from grace and his answer sent me spiraling out of celebrity heaven. He answered simply, “No.” And the statue thawed and turned and continued to munch its fries by the handful.

Well, I guess the bar fellas were wrong. They were not sitting in the presence of greatness. Their hero does not haunt the same space as these lowly barstool pigeons. I approached the bar wondering how I could let these dreamy worshippers down lightly. Their expectant faces were all directed at me hoping, no begging, to be able to have a story of their own to tell. Maybe one of them would ask for a picture using his cell phone because the guys at work would not believe this chance encounter to be possible for the likes of Larry.

“Well, is it him?” asked the bartender. Short and sweet, “no,” I replied. Unable to let a chance at greatness slip away, they persisted. “What did you say?” they asked, hoping to find some flaw in my story. At this point I replayed the encounter with them, quickly and with a little irritation. I mean, was it so hard for them to realize this guy might not be the one guy they thought he was. I mean there are six billion people on the planet. The chances were not in their favor.

“I went up to him and said, ‘pardon me for interrupting your meal, sir, but are you Mel Torme?’ He said, ‘excuse me’ and I said, ‘are you Mel Torme?’ He said, ‘no’ and I walked away.”

They looked at me. A silence grew between us as they processed the events of my story. I was failing to see why there was such deliberation with my narrative. For Christ’s sake, it wasn’t him.

“You asked Jim Thome if he was Mel Torme?” they questioned and the greatness of my stupidity finally hit home.