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APPRECIATION OF THE DRAG BUNT

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ABSTRACT

APPRECIATION OF THE DRAG BUNT

By

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This collection of stories reflects baseball's compelling hold on me, and hence, my inevitable joy or sadness at the results of the contest. The lover of baseball, like the lover of life and the lover of art, is willing to sacrifice almost anything for participation in the aesthetic of the moment--frozen, suspended, captured like a snapshot. Such willingness yields an appreciation of the fragmentary and elusive quality of life, and of baseball. In utilizing the artistic constructs of the short story, this collection aspires to bridge the gap between baseball and life, harnessing such dramatic fragments within the framework of prose. The fragments, in their simple way, are meant to reach the reader subtly, yet passionately--in a hanging curve, in a ball rising from a bat, in a drag bunt delivered at the last possible moment, the ball poised between the grass and the foul line.

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KNUCKLEBALL

"What's this guy's record again?" George asked.

"Twelve and three," I said. I pulled out a handful of corn chips from the bag on my lap. On the other end of the couch, George leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. He shook his head.

"And he's only got one pitch?" George said.

"It's an important one," I said.

"And it never gets over seventy on the gun?" George said.

"More like sixty-five."

"If it's going so slow, how come there're so many passed balls and wild pitches?" George wanted to know.

"It's hard to know where the pitch is going," I told him. "Once the pitcher releases it, it's up to nature." I brushed the crumbs from my hands, rolled up the corn chip bag, and set it on the coffee table.

On the screen, the pitcher eased his left foot forward, brought his right arm easy, like he was playing catch. The ball dipped at the plate and the batter swung and missed.

"And he's how old?" George asked.

"Forty-two."

"Unbelievable." George shook his head. "How come you never learned it? You could've made a hell of a living." I pitched in high school and took our team to the state finals. George was never more than a reserve

outfielder. He was caught smoking our senior year and was kicked off the team.

"It's not as easy as it looks." I watched George on the other end of the couch, staring at the television with his arms on his knees and his mouth half open. His hair was thinner, and his arms were more rugged, like leather. But he was the same man, the same man Coach Garrison found smoking Marlboros behind the gymnasium.

"How much is this guy making?" George asked.

"Something like 800 Grand."

George shook his head.

On the screen, the pitcher went into his windup and delivered the pitch. The ball skirted left at the last moment and the batter hit a weak grounder off the handle of his bat. The second baseman picked it up and threw to first for the out. George's eyes narrowed. He focused in on the pitcher, who waited on the rubber for the next batter.

"*I* could throw that pitch," he said, straightening up and rubbing his hands back and forth on his knees.

"It's not as easy as it looks," I said. I could remember trying the pitch several times after practice in high school. It seemed impossible to throw for strikes.

George held out his right hand, face-up, and curled his fingers. I looked at his hand and saw the hand of a mechanic. The heel of the palm had a diamond-shaped burn scar that he'd gotten from the corner of a car radiator, years back. The edges of his cuticles were black with grease that even a six week lay-off hadn't removed. Two of his fingernails--the most important part of a knuckleballer's hand--were badly damaged. He straightened his fingers and stared intently at his palm, rubbing his scar with

his left thumb.

"With a little practice, I could throw that pitch," he said.

On the screen, the pitcher delivered a floater that dropped and darted right. The batter swung and missed, for the third strike and the third out.

"Goddamn," George said, under his breath. He kept rubbing his scar and flexing his fingers. Even though I hadn't been there at the time, I pictured a nineteen year-old George leaning his hand against the radiator of his father's Pontiac while he lifted the hood on the shoulder of Highway 83. I pictured him cursing up a storm, yelling and shaking his hand and kicking the cattails in the ditch.

And now he was sitting on my couch, twenty-three years later, fingering his scar. But in his head, he'd already taken the mound.

There he stood--a laid-off, forty-two year-old mechanic with broken, dirty fingernails. He checked the runner on second. He brought his hands to rest above his belt. He stepped, eased forward, delivered.

The ball floated, tipped, drifted--with no known destination.

EVERYBODY KNOWS

Through five, the Huskies hadn't touched me. I was working my heat around the edges, and dangling curves in front of their faces and then dropping them away; my slider was shooting right to left like Myers (our catcher) had it on this string that he was yanking into his glove when the batter started fishing. In the sixth, after I got Garrison to pop-up behind the plate, I walked McAfferty to spoil my bid for a perfect game. It was a seven pitch battle: first, heat on the inside corner, then a change outside that he fouled off the end of his bat, then two tantalizing curves and a wicked slider that he didn't even nibble on--which made it a full count. I brought him back the heat and he got just enough to stay alive, sending my pitch back into the stands. I thought, *This guy's bush league and I'm not giving in*, and I shook off Myers' sign for the slider and gave him more heat on the outside corner; only this time he just froze and watched it go by and the ump decided to yank my chain and call ball four. Myers turned and gave him a long look, but that was the end of that. The next batter was the pitcher, MacIntyre. He was a tough kid with mean, stringy forearms, and he punched a low fastball toward Bandell, our shortstop. The ball took a hard, funny hop and handcuffed him, and I thought, *Here we go*; only Bandell had softer hands than my girlfriend, and he scooped it in nice and easy like he was making a hamburger patty, and he flipped it like a birthday present to Vasquez, our second baseman. Vasquez had fire in his veins and he drank blood for breakfast, and he took

the feed from Bandell like it had nothing to do with my no-hit bid, and everything to do with some contest I figured he was having with himself that season. The contest was to see how many times he could flail around like a madman and still make the plays. So he took the feed, spun like a top on fire, and launched a ridiculously fast throw toward first, and all in enough time to come down with both feet on McAfferty--who'd made a hell of an attempt at breaking up the double play. Johnson, our first baseman, scooped Vasquez's fireball out of the dirt in time to record the out, and held his glove up for everybody to see; he looked so beautiful in that full stretch with his glove held high, and the dirt and the gravel and everything except the ball spilling out of it, that it felt like it was Christmas morning and all the gifts were for me. So I went into the seventh with my bid intact.

I had this theory back then about no-hitters. The only way you could get one by was for somebody who was watching, just somebody, to *not know* that you had one going. It's not so bad through five-or-so innings. But come the sixth and the seventh and the dreaded eighth (anybody who's been there will tell you that, in many ways, the eighth is worse than the ninth) and everybody's got a whiff of it. Every runny-nosed kid in the stands has been briefed on what's going on, and everybody's on their feet when you take the mound, until even the drunk ones know, and then the whole place starts to whisper, and the trees shake with it, and the bats in front of the bench clank together with it: *No-hitter. No-hitter.*

Your own teammates are probably the worst. They stop looking at you and talking to you and by the sixth, when you get back to the dugout, you can't turn to any one of them and have a conversation or anything. The pitcher with a no-hit bid is the loneliest man alive. Players don't want to say it out loud because they think they'll spoil it. But this is foolishness.

Somebody always says it, for God's sake. Somebody somewhere always takes the time to say, "Hey Fred, look what Butch Phillips is doing! He's pitching a no-hitter!" And you think those T.V. and radio announcers give two cents for player superstitions? They're blabbing it after every commercial break! So it's obvious that *saying it* has got nothing to do with it. So I thought I was pretty smart back then and I'd figured out the secret. Just take one old lady in, say . . . Dubuque, Iowa--watching your game via satellite with the sound down on her T.V. set--who didn't know until the last out was made that it was a no-hitter, and that was enough, I figured. So all the pitcher had to do was sit back and endure it, wait it out.

Nine innings of that stuff is plenty, if a pitcher's unlucky enough to take it that far. Because it may seem like two or three hours to you, but to that pitcher with that no-hit bid those innings drag along like the big clock in the sky stopped ticking and nobody's there to wind it up. I know because I sat there in the dugout and watched my teammates move to the on-deck circle and the batter's box like they were walking through molasses. And every time one of 'em stepped out of the box to get a speck out of his eye, or yank around on his jockstrap, or take a little stroll ten feet from the plate for who-knows-what-reason, it was like the guy was saying, "Hey Butch, here's another year to take off your life." Thanks, fellas. Thanks a million. I know that when I had to bat, I took a jog out there and swung like Holy Hell at the first three pitches, and then jogged myself back to the bench. I had nothing to prove at the plate; I was working at my little piece of history on the mound.

So my teammates, who'd been lagging at the plate like batters always do in these situations, finally decided to put some runs on the board for old Butch in the bottom of the sixth. One run would've probably been enough, if

I was to complete my bid with any dignity. (I've seen guys pitch no-hitters and lose games: mostly knuckleballers, who walk batters and throw wild pitches in their sleep. I wanted no part of that kind of history.) Two runs would've been a nice figure. Three runs were obviously excessive. But my boys got me four. They got four runs like they thought I'd be pleased, like some dumb kid who draws crayon pictures on his bedroom wall thinks his mom'll be proud. I did what I could to stop the madness and get back out to the mound; I made the first and third outs of the inning, on six wild swings.

The seventh started off easy for me, with Gunderson and Baker going down on a total of only four pitches. I started thinking to myself, *Maybe that old lady in Dubuque's got the set turned down after all, and this is the first game she's ever watched, and she has no idea what's going on.* Then Thompson, the Huskies' left fielder, gave me a wake up call with a long, two-strike foul ball down the left field line that he converted from one of my fastballs. You could see the fear in Myers' eyes, through his mask. I didn't turn and watch the ball; I just watched Myers eyes as he stayed in his crouch and followed the ball deep, deep, and finally foul. I'd gotten a little cocky with Thompson and I'd almost paid for it. You could see in his eyes too that something had been stirred up; he'd gotten a taste of me and he liked it. I'd opened the cage just a bit, but it was enough for the wolf to show his teeth and cram his face through it. He was snapping at me, wanting more, but I had just the medicine to put him to sleep and get the gate back shut. I fed him a long, lazy curve that took all afternoon to get to the plate. Thompson waited until he couldn't stand it anymore, and he swung hopelessly at what he knew he couldn't hit. The pitch settled into Myers' glove for the third strike and the end of the seventh.

The eighth inning in a no-hit bid, as I already mentioned, is a pitcher's

nightmare. There's something about that second-to-last set of batters. The pitcher's got his mind on the ninth, and those three guys in the eighth are just standing in his way. He's thinking, *After these three, I'll face the 7th, 8th, and 9th batters*, and his mind starts to work on what the 7th batter in the lineup did against him so far--*He's got a weakness for high heat, he struck out looking on my slider in the third*-- and so on, and so on, right on up until the pitcher gives Mr. Lead-off-the-Eighth a nice juicy piece of apple pie right down Broadway, and Mr. Lead-off-the-Eighth takes it to the bank and cashes it in for all it's worth. This is, in a manner of speaking, what happened to me; only, God intervened, or something like what I thought of back then as God on Earth--Julio Rodriguez, our right fielder.

Our boys had gone three-up, three-down in the top of the eighth and I took the mound in the bottom half of the inning with my mind on all the wrong things, like I already said. So two pitches into the count against their cleanup man, John Rockhurst (a heavy-set third baseman with shoulders like an ox), I'd gone one ball and one strike and hadn't even stopped to think about what I was doing. I don't even know if the third pitch was what Myers had asked for; like I said, my mind was in Ninth-inning Land. But I do know I gave Rockhurst a certified, gift-wrapped humdinger down the pipe. I think the only reason he didn't get all of it was because he was as shocked as the rest of us. He got enough to clear the fence though, and he would have too--if Julio Rodriguez hadn't backed, backed, backed himself on the run like a cornered cat, and then leapt higher than I'd ever seen any man jump before or since, coming down with all five ounces of baseball I'd given to Rockhurst. Julio just threw it in like it was nobody's business but his, like he didn't have a clue that he'd probably made the greatest catch in AAA history. I have no idea where Julio is now and I sometimes wonder what happened to him. I

know that if I'd been a representative from the parent club at that game that afternoon, I'd have called him up the following morning and locked him into a five-year contract. Of course, I was a somewhat biased observer. The next two men went down relatively easy. I K'd Rafferty on four pitches and Potter sent a weak excuse for a fly ball out to KoKo in center. I couldn't help but think that--just maybe--that old lady was still in the dark.

My teammates obliged in the bottom of the eighth by going down in a hurry. After three quick outs, they grabbed their gloves in eery silence and marched out to their positions. They could feel the hour upon them. They didn't know they were hurting more than helping, that their awful silence was putting more and more weight on my shoulders. But I know now, after all these years, that every one of them was thinking of himself. No one wanted to botch a tough play and have it ruled a hit by the official scorer; no one wanted to live with a mental error that caused the beginning of the end. There was pressure, it seemed, on all of us. Only Vasquez--all five feet, seven inches of him--was making sound. He jabbered his way out to second, and continued to jaw while Johnson threw balls to the infield; he talked about everything--cars, women, restaurants, relatives. He routinely talked throughout our games, turning his conversation to insults hurled at the batters when they stepped to the plate. And this time nobody listened, except me.

After I warmed up on the mound, as Garrison of the Huskies approached the plate, a deep fear and nausea swept over me. I looked to Garrison at the plate, to the on-deck circle and the man kneeling there, to the front of the Huskies' bench where the third batter crouched, choosing a bat; I didn't think I could face three more batters. Never mind the twenty-four I had put to rest; there were three more batters and three more outs to get, and I remember thinking then--suddenly, as I stood there on the mound in the

center of everything--that three was the worst number in the entire world.

That ninth inning, I learned to appreciate the term "battery," because I'm sure I couldn't have thrown another pitch without Myers' help. It was as if the target of his glove and the soothing motions of his flashing fingers were telling me to relax. His eyes, through the mask, so different from when they'd widened with fear at the towering foul ball in the seventh, were calm and insightful. He looked straight at me with those eyes as if to say, "Don't worry. She still exists. The little old lady in Dubuque--the one with the set turned down--she still exists." He guided me through the first two batters, chose the pitches without so much as a peep from me. I got Garrison to swing wildly on a third strike, and McAfferty to ground out to Bandell; after two batters, we had two outs. Only one batter stood between me and history.

I don't know the batter's name, and I didn't know his name back then. The young man strode from the dugout with the announcement of "Now pinch hitting, number fifty-three." He was some kid they'd called up from AA that morning, and he didn't even have his own jersey. They'd given him the best one they could find. He had long, lean arms and legs, and must've been six-three and no more than eighteen years old. It was obvious that he didn't care much about his appearance, because his jersey top was a little big, and his pants were a little short, and his hair was sticking out in clumps from underneath the brim of his batting helmet. The kid looked like a cartoon of a ballplayer.

As he stepped to the plate, something terrible happened.

The crowd began rising to their feet--first a few, and then groups of four and five--and pretty soon everybody in the place was standing up and cheering. I can't convey enough how much this affected me then. I was weak in the knees; my arm felt like it was made of rubber; the field seemed

to be spinning around me. The possible number of fans who didn't know what I was doing up there on the mound was dropping by the hundreds every second. I glanced around the stands and saw everybody looking my way; there wasn't a little boy among them who was preoccupied with an ice cream bar; there wasn't a single drunken idiot who was facing the wrong direction; they all seemed to know what was happening. I saw Myers say something to the kid to shake him but the kid wasn't paying any attention. Like the rest of them, he was looking right at me.

I knew then that I was losing my concentration, because as I stood on the mound and looked in at Myers' signals, I didn't see his fingers at all anymore, or his calm eyes, or the comfort of his open glove. I saw the old woman in Dubuque moving toward her television. She was reaching for the volume switch to see what all the commotion was about. I shook my head and moved off the mound. I picked up the rosin sack from behind the mound and bounced it against the back of my hand. Then I put both hands on my hips and just stared down at the grass. The crowd's cheering died down and then I could hear Vasquez loud and clear, going through his routine, screaming every insult in the book at the kid.

Our pitching coach back then was a man by the name of Tom Haskins, an ex-pitcher who'd spent some time with the Mets in the late fifties. I'll never know for sure why our coach, Mackey Barnes, sent Haskins out to talk with me, but I do know this--it was both the best and worst thing that ever happened to me. Haskins was an unemotional realist and the most unsuperstitious person I ever met, which made him a rare individual in the sport of baseball. None of the infielders (not even Myers) came to the mound to join Haskins that afternoon, which was unusual. But I knew what they were doing. They were afraid to hear or speak the words, to let it slip

between us that I was on the verge of something, that we were all on the verge of something. I watched Myers as Haskins walked slowly toward me. All of the confidence he'd given me for the first two batters was gone. He looked down as he squatted, and he ran his fingers back and forth in the dirt, like a nervous child.

Haskins stepped onto the mound and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Everybody knows," he said.

"What?" I rubbed my cleat back and forth across the pitching rubber.

"You know what I mean," he said. "Everybody knows." And he turned around and went back to the dugout.

As I stepped back onto the rubber and took Myers' signals, the crowd noise picked up again as one by one, fans began to rise. They clapped in unison, whistled, rocked the bleachers beneath them with their pounding feet. On my wind up, the noise stopped dead, and even Vasquez had stopped his jabbering. I didn't have to look at him to know what he was doing, that he was crouched with both hands in front of his knees, staring straight at the batter. I wanted to yell something to him then but I didn't; I wanted to make him start up again with his nonsense, because the silence was making me nauseous, but I had put myself into motion and there was nothing I could do.

Vasquez's silence was like the tingling sensation a person gets before lightning strikes him.

It took forever to come down on my foot, and forever for my arm to follow. I was suddenly aware of my arm and it was dead, and it took all of my strength to move it, and it swung forward like a rotten tree branch. I hung a curve just below the kid's letters. He took a stride and with those long, terrible arms that--in a flash--reminded me of Ted Williams, he sent my pitch deep and high into the gap between KoKo and Rodriguez. I didn't care

where it landed; I stopped watching.

I was just then understanding. I was the one who wasn't supposed to know what I was doing up there on the mound. Nobody else mattered.

THE YEAR KARL JACKSON SAVED BASEBALL

Where do I begin?

Long before you were even a little crapper, before even your father's father knew the difference between a slider and a screwball, a man by the name of Karl "Salvation" Jackson walked onto a ball diamond in Aratonga, Pennsylvania and changed everything.

Oh, he wasn't "Salvation" then, that's for sure. Back then he was just KK, which stood for Karl somethin'-or-other. His middle name's been lost in the shuffle, so don't bother listenin' to anybody who tries to tell you it was Karl Kristmas or Karl Kennedy or any such other nonsense.

These're the facts for goshsake, not some half-blown gobble-de-gook you can get from any old freak on the street.

Listen closely:

Karl stood a head taller than any other man on the field and when he came to the plate in the bottom of the first inning, the startin' pitcher took himself out of the game immediately, on account of sudden stomach cramps. They didn't have any fancy-dan medical facilities back then, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that what the pitcher had was FEAR, which is the oldest disease known to mankind.

Well they found *somebody* to pitch, I assure you. Any young kid was lookin' for a chance to play, even if it was in an old, rickety dump like Aratonga, Pennsylvania of all places.

Well the kid only had time to wind up, pitch, and then get out of the way because KK hit one back through the box that took the pitcher's cap off and put it somewhere in short-center field. The shortstop and second baseman were still in their crouches when they heard the ball hit the grass, and the center fielder had just enough time to get his glove on the ball and stop it from takin' a bounce into his chops. KK was held to a single, not due to any lack of speed on his part--I assure you--but because of the sheer force of the ball he hit. (The center fielder threw it in practically before KK got to first base.) We're talkin' about a legitimate bird killer now. We're talkin' about real smoke.

So KK's standin' at first, mindin' his own business, maybe thinkin' about hot apple pie or somethin' (He was a natural, you understand. He didn't have to think about what he did when he did it.), when the first baseman asks him where he's been hidin' himself and KK tells him that canon blast he sent whizzin' by the pitcher's noggin' is the result of the first time he ever swung a bat.

Now how can a man be taken seriously in such circumstances? The only thing that kept the opposin' team from labelin' KK a smarty pants and beatin' him fifteen shades of purple is the fact that, like I said, he was a full head taller and a good deal wider than any of 'em.

The fact of the matter is--Karl "Salvation" Jackson was walkin' by the field that fine afternoon shortly before game time when the hometown manager, who was one player short on account of the flu bug, spotted him and asked him if he wanted to play. Karl had never even seen a diamond, but he took a long look at the field, snapped a mitt open and shut, turned a bat in his hands, and *knew* what to do.

Okay, Okay. Who's to believe such nonsense without more facts?

Listen up:

It took KK three pitches--all of which were fastballs--to steal his way to home plate. He came up four more times in the game, hit two more line drive singles, a double, and one gap home run which skipped so far away that the next batter up had to wait five minutes for the left fielder to return with the ball. On each of the singles he stole home on three pitches, and on the double--he did it in two.

So I know that look on your face and you're sayin':

"Karl who? KK whatchamacallit? Who's this Salvation character? I should've heard of this fella."

Hold on there. Maybe you *have* heard of Karl "Salvation" Jackson. Just maybe you've been thinkin' about him all your life, but you haven't been quite able to picture the face. You know his swing, but you can't say you've ever seen it in person. Just maybe you see Karl take long, smooth strides at the ball a hundred times over when you go to bed at night and shut your eyes.

Just hold onto your horses. I don't want to get ahead of myself.

Now then, how long do you think it took Karl to get a call from one of them big league teams? A week to be exact, a week in which KK hadn't swung and missed!

So in two weeks--you have to account for the trains--he was in New York and he was up at the plate for his first at bat in the big show. There was a lot of horsecrap bein' dished out by the fans, I can tell you: "Can KK hit big league pitchin'? Betcha he can't learn the move of some of these tough lefties. Can he hit the curve? Betcha he can't hit the curve like he did in that backwoods league. He's just a big Country Joe. He's strong, but it takes more than strength to play this game. This KK kid's got three weeks tops in this league. He'll be back down after a cup of coffee." And on and

on and on.

The first offerin' was up in KK's teeth, and it put him on his backside.

Karl "Salvation" Jackson put the second pitch--which was heat down Broadway--deep over the left field fence, and he didn't even stop to tip his hat. He ran full out and touched all four.

Well I could go and sing this fella's song 'til the cows came home, as you can well imagine. But where would that get us? I'm tryin' to get to the point, which is the intention of any good story. Listen up:

Karl continued to put the ball anywhere he wanted to, which was most often up in them stands behind the left field wall. And when he didn't make it all the way around with one swing, he more often than not stole his way back to home plate. He didn't stop and think about it, neither. He just did his job and by the time he was done, he'd rewritten the record books.

Your face is tellin' me all kinds of things now. It's sayin':

"Listen to this hooey. Get a load of this old man."

Your problem is--you don't listen to what I'm tellin' you. Your problem is--you're too busy worryin' about "real" or "make-believe," instead of considerin' the basic truth that this story I got to tell you is more important than any of that crap.

I'm tellin' you this story, and that's a fact!

Karl was out of baseball for more than two decades when it happened, when them fancy-cats with their cash and their big-town ways started meddlin' with the game. The players had formed a union on account of exploitation or some other nonsense, and after a few years of that kind of talk, the management decided to put its foot down and try to take back the horse's reins. Only that horse wouldn't have none of it.

Are you followin' me here? This here's the part I've been tryin' to get

to, the part you oughta understand--on account of the way the game is today. You see, the big league always had the potential in itself to mess baseball up, because money was involved. And you've gotta hear me loud and clear now. The big league ain't baseball and baseball ain't the big league. The difference I'm talkin' about here is everything.

Anyway, them fancy cats and them exploited players locked horns one year, the year I've been tryin' to get to. And here it was spring, and nobody was warmin' up his arm or nothin'--on account of the fact that players and owners got to thinkin' they didn't need baseball so much if they couldn't have it just the way they wanted it. So the season was in jeopardy.

Now I'm talkin' your language. You were thinkin' you had the monopoly on all this nonsense, that your modern boys were the first players to ever strike. But let me tell you that greed and short-sided horsecrap got their roots in somethin' deeper than you or me, somethin' older than the whole lot of us.

So as you can imagine, practically the whole world was cryin', and there was kids wanderin' around in empty ballparks, lookin' for somebody to show 'em how it was to be done. There was a lot of grief. More than any war can do--I figure--because a war is expected to make people unhappy. But this was baseball--a game, for goshsakes, a game for kids and grown men wantin' to be kids. But you know all about that.

Now it don't take a genius to put two and two together and wonder what in the hell Karl "Salvation" Jackson has to do with any of this tragedy. I was gettin' to that. I was right on the doorstep of it.

Them fancy-cats and them exploited players was involved in one of their meetin's one afternoon (which was probably their four or five hundredth for all I know) when Karl Jackson himself comes walkin' in, not announcin'

himself or nothin'. They all recognized him, of course. He'd been out of the game twenty years but he was still a part of the nation's imagination, as you can probably guess. He looked pretty near the same as when he walked onto that field in Aratonga, Pennsylvania that day, only now he had gray hair and a few wrinkles to match.

Well the meetin' stopped, because when Karl "Salvation" Jackson showed his face the whole country practically stopped doin' whatever it was doin' and took a gander. He told 'em all, the whole lot of 'em, that he was sick to his stomach, that he couldn't sleep nights. They asked him what was wrong.

He said it was a great day for baseball. And not a one of 'em could answer that. They just turned away because they couldn't look into his eyes. Not KK's. Not at a time like this. So he told 'em all to follow him and he marched out--only KK didn't march, he sort of *strode*, as they say, long and tall.

By the time they got to the little diamond down the block, practically the whole neighborhood was followin'--I assure you. Because it didn't take Karl "Salvation" Jackson more than a minute tops on the open street to attract every Tom, Dick, and Harry (plenty of Sallys too). So KK rolls up his sleeves and asks one of the little crappers to fetch him a bat and some balls, and takes his place behind the plate. By now the folks were pourin' in, you understand. Word got around quicker than you can imagine in those days.

And Karl called to one of the players who was there, dressed fancy in his bargainin' suit (only it was more of a sittin' around suit, because that's all that went on in them meetin's). But you know all about that. Karl called out his name and told him to pitch, which was no small deal--on account of the fact that he was the league's hottest pitcher from last season, a kid with all

fire and lightnin' for an arm. And the kid laughed a little, the kid along with some other players and owners, because Karl had been out of the game twenty years, like I said, and was pushin' sixty-five.

It didn't matter to 'em that Karl was who he was. This was their game now, you understand. But no fans were laughin'. Not a single one. It was only players and fancy-cats laughin' at Karl Jackson that day. So after some persuasion, the fireballin' kid goes to the mound and takes off his fancy suit coat and winds one up, still with a smile on his face, and lets it rip at KK. And KK puts it past his grinnin' teeth, sendin' the kid down on one arm and one knee. And the laughin' stopped--I assure you.

So the kid, bein' a kid and a fireballer, digs in harder and decides to really show Karl some stuff this time. He lets the next one fly, and he even grunts a little. And Karl Jackson swings smooth and easy, and the ball takes a bounce off a house across the street. The crowd started gettin' loud now, like the old days in Aratonga or in New York even. And the fancy-cats and the players took seats at either side of the lines. And the kid kept puttin' 'em up to the plate like bolts of lightnin' from his hand, and Karl kept sendin' 'em deep and gone.

He told 'em, in between swings:

"Someday, I won't be around anymore."

"There'll come a time when you'll need each other to get you through."

And the owners and the players took long looks at the balls Karl was sendin' into the sky, and for a year at least, the game was saved.

APPRECIATION OF THE DRAG BUNT

There was this noise in my head the night my father died, and it took me a long time to figure out it was the crowd at the ballpark. We got home from the game that evening, and there was nothing peculiar in his walk or the way he ate his dinner, but sometime after I went to my room to go to sleep--I heard my mother's voice, soft, then loud, then doors opening and closing. I heard men moving and talking, and I saw lights flashing through the cracks around my bedroom door.

When I finally came out of my room, they were bringing him by on a stretcher, and his head rolled to one side. I saw the color of his skin and I knew then that it wasn't my father anymore, that my father had walked away from the kitchen table earlier that evening and walked into his bedroom for the last time.

I kept looking for my mother and when I found her she was moving quickly away, following the stretcher. She was turning in little circles.

"Sam," she called to me. "Sam," she said.

"I'm here," I said. When our eyes met, the noise began--clapping at first, then cheering, roaring--in my ears, from the stretcher and the closing ambulance doors, from everywhere. I was thinking two things. I was thinking how I didn't get my homework done like I'd promised my parents I would. I was thinking how I forgot to thank my father for taking me to the game.

* * *

Seven years after my father took me to the ball game, I went through a box of his old stuff in the attic, and I found his baseball glove--the one he wore in high school. I put the glove on, and brought it to my face. I smelled the leather, and tightened the loose laces.

It came to me like a stiff wind, caught me completely off guard. I was fifteen years old, and it was the first time I cried for my father.

The noise of the crowd was everywhere, calling from every space of the attic, from behind every box. The voices built to a crescendo, to a roar, and died back down. The noise came like that in waves, rising and falling, and I knew it was the crowd I heard at the ballpark, the afternoon my father took me to the game. And all at once, I knew it was the same crowd I heard later that night when my mother turned in circles and they brought the stretcher by. I stayed up in the attic for over an hour, until the tears stopped.

* * *

It was a Sunday afternoon game at County Stadium. Our seats were on the first baseline, fifteen rows above the bag. We came for batting practice, and my father sat in his seat--smoking his pipe--while I paced back and forth behind the dugout, watching players go in and out.

Players took turns at the plate--balls skipped off of the dirt and grass; balls rose into the afternoon sky. I often looked back at my father. That's my lasting mental picture of him--he's sitting fifteen rows up with his pipe, nodding, smiling. I watched the grounds crew come out and tidy up the field. These men were the same size as the players, made of flesh and blood. But

there was something missing, something missing in the way they moved, which the players had and they didn't. I couldn't figure it out, but I was certain these men were like me and the players weren't, that the players were more like my father.

By the time I decided to return to my seat, the stands were much more crowded. For a moment I couldn't find my father. I stumbled up the steps, moved my eyes across the bodies, across the faces, the hats, the moving mouths. It was three or four minutes before I saw him, waving both of his arms above his head.

"Sam!" he said.

I can't help but think about that sometimes, the way he waved his hands above his head--shouting my name--that last day he was alive.

* * *

Last summer, a week after my twenty-second birthday, I watched a ball game on television. I know it isn't the same as seeing a game in person, but I watched. The announcer kept talking about the natural talent of the man at the plate, about his weight transfer and his bat speed. I raised my beer to the man and I said, "You should know." I thought about this, what the announcer knew. I wondered where he learned everything he told me, everything he told all the poor saps watching baseball in a twenty-by-twenty inch space. I realized something then--I wouldn't be watching baseball if it wasn't for my father. I picked up the phone and called my mother.

"Hello," I said. "How are things?"

"Good," she said. "It's gorgeous out today. You should really take advantage of this weather."

"I know," I said. "I will."

"We should have a barbecue," my mother said. "Like we used to."

"I was thinking of that," I said. "Dad used to love a barbecue. I was thinking of dad."

"Ralph is pretty handy with a grill," she said. Ralph is the man who entered the scene later, almost ten years after my father had his quiet heart attack. I've only seen him a handful of times. I missed my mother's wedding because they had it on Opening Day. My father never would've approved.

"I have to get going," I said.

On the television screen, the batter hit the ball high into the air. The third baseman waved everyone off and caught it.

* * *

By the time the game started that Sunday afternoon, there were over thirty thousand people in the stands. My father bought me a hot dog and a soda in the bottom of the first. He bought me a Brewer cap, that I put on immediately.

"You've gotta break it in," he told me. "You look like a rookie." He took it off my head, bent the brim, and twisted it slightly.

"There," he said, replacing it. To our right, two rows back and ten or fifteen seats over, was a group of rowdy teenagers. One of them spilled beer down his pant leg when he got up to go the rest room. All of them laughed and pointed. A girl in the group danced around as the others cheered.

"Look at this," my father said, pointing toward home plate. "Look at Cooper's stance."

I watched Cooper dig in. I watched him wipe away what was left of

the chalk around the batter's box.

* * *

Two years later when the Brewers went to the World Series, an uncle of my friend, Tony, got tickets somehow. Tony asked me to go with them to Game Four, and our seats were way up in the top row, our backs to the metal wall of the stadium. I insisted that we arrive early to watch batting practice. My mother gave me twenty dollars to spend that day, because I explained to her that it was the World Series. There were things to buy that nobody else would ever have.

Tony and I stood behind the dugout for a while during batting practice, and then I went and sat in the seat where I was when my father had taken me. I leaned back like he did that day. I smiled and waved to Tony when he wasn't looking, my arms moving above my head. I bought a hot dog and a soda. Pretty soon, a young couple came and asked me to move. The man said I was sitting in his wife's seat.

"I just want to finish this hot dog," I said.

"Finish it in your own seat," he said. His wife laughed.

* * *

The first time I saw Ralph was by mistake. He and my mother were shopping at Sentry, and I happened to be there picking up some groceries. I made a quick turn into the cereal aisle, and here was this man standing next to my mother. They each had a hand on the same cart. He was tall and had very dark hair--just how my mother had described him. I moved out of the

aisle before they saw me. I went to the counter with only half of the things I needed. As I drove out of the parking lot, they were coming out through the doors. My mother saw me.

"Sam," she said, as I passed by in my car. "Hey Sam." She waved, and then Ralph waved too. This man who had never seen me waved, but I kept driving. I suppose my mother had shown him pictures. It was the middle of summer and my window was down, so I really had no excuse. They just kept yelling like that as I rolled out of the parking lot.

"Sam!" they said.

* * *

Until the seventh-inning stretch on that Sunday afternoon, I'd never seen my father sing. He looked out toward home plate and held his pipe out in front of his open mouth. I'd watched him in church, of course, but his lips never moved. He would just stare at the hymnal. He hadn't even sung at the start of the game during "The Star Spangled Banner." But he had taken his hat off. I remember watching him hold his hat against his chest. That's how I knew I wanted one.

After "Take Me Out to the Ball game," "Roll out the Barrel" started, and my father sat down.

"Sing if you want to," he said to me. "It's not traditional, like the other one."

I decided to sit down too.

* * *

At Game Four, the Brewers were down by four runs in the bottom of the seventh when Robin Yount started a rally with a line-drive single. Just before the rally, Tony--who's a pessimist--said, "If they lose this one, it's all over." The loss would have put them down three games to one in the Series.

Then the rally started. Yount hit a frozen rope over the second baseman's head that sent a chill up my spine. The exact moment the bat hit the ball, every member of the capacity crowd stopped making noise, stopped breathing, stopped everything. Everything paused except the ball. Then the roaring started. Tony and I jumped as high as we could, and the runs just kept coming in. The same thing happened again, ten years later. When Robin Yount got his three-thousandth hit, for a moment the world stopped and only the ball kept moving. Then the crowd roared in, relieved, exhausted, leaping like a single body.

These are two things my father missed, two times I thought of my father immediately--when Robin Yount started the rally to win Game Four of the World Series, and when he hit his line-drive single for his three-thousandth hit.

* * *

Ralph called me once after I got home from work. He said a buddy of his had given him two tickets to a game at County Stadium for that Friday night.

"Lower box?" I said.

"Lower box," he said. I had met him by then, of course. Ralph and my mother had stopped by my place the weekend before unannounced. Even though they'd only stayed a few minutes, I'd gotten the feeling I couldn't

avoid him any longer.

"Sure," I said.

"How about I come by around six-thirty?" he said.

"What about batting practice?" I said. There was a pause at the other end.

"I've got a business meeting," he said.

Ralph and I got to the game just in time for the announcement of the lineups. He was still wearing his suit. If he had stopped to change, we would've been late. Ralph was finishing a story he was telling in the car, about work that afternoon. He finished it right as we stood up for the National Anthem.

"What do you think of that?" Ralph said.

"Crazy," I said, but I had stopped listening. When the Anthem was over, we sat back down and Ralph turned to me.

"Your mother tells me you work over at Miller," Ralph said. "We do some business with them."

"I drive a lift," I said. "My father drove a lift."

Ralph nodded. A short while later, he turned toward the aisle and waved at a vendor.

"Two beers," he said. Darryl Hamilton hit the ball sharply to left. He took a wide turn around first but held his ground.

"You missed it," I said.

"Did I?" Ralph said.

* * *

In my senior year of high school, Coach Davis had me lead some of

the underclassmen in bunting drills. He knew I took special pride in my bunting. I was a bench player, a fourth outfielder, but nobody on the team could lay one down with greater skill. I used to practice in the backyard with my friends. I'd make them pitch until they couldn't take it anymore.

Davis used to put out these hula hoops down either line. He'd tell us to try and put the ball in them, against our best pitchers, against inside and outside, high and low, the fastball and the curve. I'd usually put seven of ten in or near the hoop. Coach Davis told us all about the bunt, and when I was a senior, he had me tell the rest of the team:

Sometimes you need a bunt more than anything.

Sometimes a bunt is the most beautiful thing in the entire world.

"There are two things we're talking about here," I told the underclassmen. "You've gotta know when to sacrifice and when to drag." I showed them the sacrifice. I turned to face the pitcher early in his delivery. I saw the whole field. I slid the bat down, and curled in my fingers behind the barrel. I made sure the bat stayed in front of the plate, and when the pitch came, I took it in like a bullet. I sucked the ball in and let it hop down the third baseline. It settled in the hoop, in the tall grass.

"The drag is a surprise," I said. "You have to wait as long as humanly possible." The pitch came in and I lowered the bat quickly, moving my feet into position as the ball skipped down the first baseline. I sprinted fifteen feet down the line before slowing down. I picked the ball up from the hoop as I returned to the plate.

"The drag bunt can be the most exciting play in baseball," I told them. "It can ignite an entire offense. It can change the course of everything." I put down another and another, alternating lines, hoops.

"It's the surprise most of all," I told them. "Sometimes, nobody in the

world knows it's coming." I dragged until my arms and legs were weak. Coach Davis had me rest a while. He had the others try it.

* * *

After Game Four, it took two and a half hours to get home. Tony and his uncle and I stood for almost an hour after the final out, whistling and yelling. We pounded our hands against the metal wall behind us. We jumped around and hugged each other. After a while, the Brewers came back out of the dugout and waved to everybody. As the crowd made its way out, people who didn't know each other talked and laughed. People patted one another on the back, and shook hands.

The next day Tony wasn't in school. I got into a fight with another kid who didn't believe that I was at the game.

"You didn't see it in person," he said. There were others gathering around us on the playground.

"What do you know?" I told him. "I was with Tony."

"Tony isn't here, you liar," he said. "You didn't have tickets to the game."

"I saw it all," I said. I leapt on him. I swung at him wildly, clawing at his face. "I saw all of it!" I screamed. When the teachers got us separated and sorted it all out, I was given a one-week suspension.

When I returned the next week, it wasn't an issue anymore. The Brewers had lost the Series.

* * *

When my mother first called to tell me about her and Ralph getting married, I was in the kitchen with Louise, who was my girlfriend at the time. I was frying hamburgers, and Louise was telling me about how the weather was in Florida, which is where she was originally from. The phone rang and Louise answered it.

"Hello," she said. "Sam Terrence's residence." She paused and got a big smile on her face.

"I'm Louise," she said. I could hear my mother's voice from where I was. I could hear my mother's voice through the telephone.

"Yes, I'd like to meet you too," Louise said.

"Give me the phone," I said. I wiped my hands on a towel and asked Louise to look after the hamburgers.

"Hello mom," I said.

"How are you?" my mother said. "This Louise sounds very nice. Good manners."

"Yes," I said.

"Listen, Samuel, I'd like to get together with you," my mother said. "Ralph and I would like to get together with you."

My mother rarely called me Samuel. She saved the name for extra leverage. When my father died, after the doctor quietly told my mother how it was, she called me Samuel. She took me by both shoulders in the hospital waiting room and said, "Samuel. Samuel, it's very hard for me to say this." My mother started crying then, and the roaring in my ears blocked out everything that was said that evening.

"Mom, I'm pretty busy," I said. "Louise and I have plans and everything."

"I didn't even tell you what day," my mother said. "Samuel--"

"Look, mom--"

"Ralph and I are getting married," she said. "I wanted to tell you in person." She didn't call me Samuel again. She just waited.

"I see," I said. I watched smoke pour from the hamburger pan. Louise thumbed through a magazine.

"Congratulations," I said.

* * *

On that Sunday afternoon, Robin Yount lead off the bottom of the ninth inning. The Brewers were down by a run. A few diehards stood and cheered when Yount was announced.

"It's now or never," my father said. I nodded. It'd been largely a pitcher's duel, going on two and a half hours.

"Watch him close, Sam," my father said. The first pitch was just up high. The fans clapped. My father bit down on his pipe.

"This guy's going to be around for years," he said. "He's a natural."

The rowdy teenagers to our right were acting up again. They were throwing peanuts down into the aisle. I watched as the girl who was dancing earlier, got up and jumped onto the lap of the guy next to her.

The crowd roared.

"Did you see that?" my father cried. I turned to look. Yount was already halfway down the line. The third baseman scrambled forward, ran at the ball with his bare hand, but it was too late.

The crowd continued to roar. It roared and roared.

"You missed it," my father said. He looked down at the cement between his feet and shook his head back and forth. "I don't know why I

even bothered to bring you."

"What?"

"A perfect drag bunt," my father said. "It was beautiful." I looked to the field. I looked to Yount on first. There was nothing. I tried to imagine it but it didn't work.

I've tried to picture it for years now, tried to complete the picture that began with Yount halfway down the line. I've seen drag bunts, of course, but nothing close to what I imagine Yount did that day. Nothing like that Sunday afternoon, just hours before my father died, when Robin Yount lowered his bat at the last possible moment, and my father's eyes lit up like they never would again.

JERRY'S TRUMP

There was only one Mays, and only one way to decide it. My father had brought us home one pack. He didn't seem to care that there were two of us, Jerry and I, two teenage boys and one Willie Mays. The rest of the pack went evenly--I took Kluszewski and Piersall; Jerry took Ford and Logan.

For my entire life I had read Jerry like a book, a book consisting of one page. He always took Rock. He took it first, never changing or trying anything else, proud of the fact. He even told me once:

"I always take Rock. Someday, when you least expect it, I'm gonna take Scissors and blow you away. When it's important, when everything's on the line."

I worried about this. This fear passed through me as we stood over the kitchen table with Willie Mays between us. In a way I hoped he'd do it, get it over with, use his trump so that I didn't have to think about it anymore.

We counted three and I went Paper, as always. As always, Jerry held out Rock. I reached for the Mays. I felt kinda sorry for him. But then a thought passed through me--if Jerry didn't use his trump, the one he'd been building all his life, for Mays, what the heck would he use it for?

What was there? Maybe a car. Maybe a house, or worse--a wife. I envisioned us waiting outside the church, the girl of our dreams waiting inside, Jerry and I counting three, and Jerry going Scissors.

There was no question about it. He was gonna bury me one day when

he finally went Scissors.

I got Mays into my hand, carefully, and turned to leave. Jerry whispered something.

"What?" I said.

"Rock beats Paper," he said. I laughed aloud, looked him in the face.

"What're you talking about?" I said. Jerry stared at the linoleum floor without fixing his eyes on anything in particular.

"I am Rock," he said. "I am the hardest, strongest, heaviest of the game. Who dares to challenge me?"

I thought about this a minute.

"I am Paper," I said. He didn't crack a smile or anything.

"I push upward through Paper, tearing it open," he said. "Of Rock and Paper, Paper is the first to die."

"Nice try," I said, turning myself a little so I was between Jerry and Mays, holding the edge of the card delicately between two fingers like the stem of a flower.

"What can you do to me, Paper?" he said. I wanted to walk away but something kept me where I was. I looked at my brother standing like that with his dull, sad eyes, and I knew that I couldn't just leave him like that. There was something that had to be said.

"I cover you," I said. It seemed so obvious to me. "I cover you. I make it so you've got nothing but your own voice to keep you company. You can't even move. You're just sitting there . . . and nobody loves you."

"Drop me," he said. "Drop us both at the same time. Who wins the race? You are moved by the wind," he said. "You flutter like a dying sparrow. I let the wind cool my back when the sun gets high. I win the race of stamina. You lose the race of time."

I shifted my feet back and forth a little. I was losing Mays. I could feel him slipping from me.

"How do we always play the game?" I shouted, trying to break through to Jerry. Rock answered.

"Put us both in the water," he said. "I sink and nestle myself in the soft sand. I watch the fish overhead. You!" He pointed at me suddenly, his eyes igniting like little flames. "You drift! You never rest because the air and water move you! You tear apart! You saturate!"

I pushed his finger out of my face. I stuttered a little bit but I got it out.

"You're not--you're not good for anything!" I said.

He smiled. I'll never forget the way he smiled.

"You are malleable," he said. "You take on the personality of your maker when he prints upon you." He shook his head and looked a little ashamed, ashamed that I was his big brother.

"You are refuse," he said, in a whisper. His smile disappeared, and then he turned and walked out of the room.

I sat down at the table with the Mays card. I read all of the statistics and memorized every inch of the picture--the way Willie looked, his eyes focused on something outside of the photo, his teeth locked in a smile, the way his fingers curled on the bat, like a promise.

Later, I went into Jerry's room. He was lying on his bed, looking at the ceiling.

"You're right," I said, and I put Mays on his desk, on top of his Ford and his Logan.

PASTOR TAYLOR'S CURVEBALL

There are those who don't believe in the curveball. They refuse to accept its existence, like some angry, young men refuse God. You can tell them about asymmetric forces and the Magnus effect, about how a ball--thrown in such a way that air pressure from one side of the ball exceeds that from the other side--will *curve*, dip, dart, dive, shimmy, slip, drop right off the table. You can place an official baseball in such an unbeliever's palm, let him juggle it a bit, instruct him to consider its five ounces of potential, bend his fingers along the stitching, teach him the snap of the wrist and the delivery, and watch his eyes light up in utter amazement as the ball takes a course other than a straight line between his hand and the catcher's mitt. You can do all of these things, and watch the unbeliever just as quickly shake the amazement out of his system, stand up straight, and with somewhat shifting eyes, proclaim, "I don't believe it." And the next words out of his mouth will be that all of it is an illusion.

Such a society of unbelievers does exist. They gather in dark basement meeting rooms, lean close together around dusty tables, comfort each other in the communal agreement of their premise, in what they find to be a far less dangerous world. I am certain that every minor leaguer whose shot at the big leagues was destroyed by an inability to hit the curve ball is among them. He must've said it a thousand times, through a thousand vicious swings and misses: "This is an illusion. This can't be happening."

I have one thing to say to them, which I learned when I was twelve years-old, taught to me by Pastor Taylor:

It is easier to believe in the curveball, than to believe in God.

* * *

Pastor Taylor's reputation preceded him, when he was first transferred to my middle school. We were just seventh graders, my friends and I, but we knew enough to eavesdrop on the conversations of the teachers. We heard their discontent at the impending arrival of the controversial Pastor. Some claimed he'd been asked to leave another congregation in New York for disagreements on dogma. Others bought into the theory that he'd had a nervous breakdown as a result of his wife's death, and that his ministerial services were no longer up to par. All things told, nobody knew what to expect, and the consensus was that our under-funded, mis-matched, parochial school in Gary, Indiana was once again getting a rejection from another system. We were used to other people's dirty laundry, used to second-rate service and second-hand pastors. We lived, after all, in a second-rate Midwestern city, with second-rate access to the Great Lakes, and second-rate air pouring out of the mills, into the skyline.

On first impression he didn't appear to us, my friends and I, like a pastor at all--at least not anything like any pastor we were accustomed to. Of course, we judged with the instruments of twelve year-old boys, and eyed him curiously from our classroom windows as he emerged from his Ford pickup, and walked into the front office. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and thick brown hair, and he carried a duffel bag over one shoulder. He had kind, widely spaced eyes, and a large--if not comical--nose

that bent slightly at the end. But most impressive were his long arms and his hands, like a giant's hands, beaten, sod-stained hands with character; he reminded me immediately of the pictures I'd seen of Honus Wagner. My friends and I were--all at once--in fear and in awe, and every one of us in the seventh grade watched him take that walk (he cut the distance significantly with his loping strides) from his truck door to the office.

A contemptible girl in my class named Mandy Flowers (who had long, tight braids and high cheekbones) was the first to break the silence:

"He looks like a clown." This caused more than a few snickers from the group.

"What do you mean?" I said, a bit irritated. I had never heard Honus Wagner described in such a disrespectful fashion.

"Well, he's so big, and with that big nose and those big ears. He just looks kinda funny."

I forgot to mention the ears. They were huge specimens that protruded awkwardly from the sides of his head, and were somewhat masked by his locks of bushy hair.

"I think you're too superficial," I told Mandy, and this got more than a little support from my comrades. Our class had learned the word in our spelling quiz the previous week, and any proper use of it didn't go unnoticed. My friend Mark came to my aid.

"He looks pretty cool to me," he said, and because Mark was the most popular of the seventh grade boys, that was the end of the issue.

What we sensed from that first glimpse, I suppose (and I've given it much thought in the past eighteen years) was the humanness of Pastor Taylor, the look of something like failure that we'd seen so often on the faces of our fathers. We were fed up with the distant eyes, smooth, white hands,

and small, upturned noses of our other role models at the school. Here was a man who knew, above all else, that he was a man, that he had been left in a hole of the earth called Gary, Indiana, that if his only way to exist was to exist in such a manner and in such a place, he was ready to embrace it. Pastor Taylor was not a man of illusions, but a man of the world.

* * *

It was another two days before we saw him again, in his preordained place at the front of the chapel, behind the podium. He placed both of his giant hands on the front corners of the lectern, and all of us (all the way down to the fifth graders) sat quietly waiting for the voice that would fit such a man.

We were shocked, of course. As is always the case when something is waited for, the result never equals the expectation. He spoke quietly, in a voice we had to strain to hear, in a voice I hadn't possibly imagined when I mused in bed the previous two nights about how he would sound. It didn't occur to me then that I'd never heard Honus Wagner either, that his voice could have been just as ineffectual.

Pastor Taylor said:

"Good morning, I'm sure you all have a lot of questions for me, so go ahead." Then he leaned back and just waited. None of us knew what to do next; we were accustomed to Wednesday morning chapel service going smooth and easy, with no real participation on our parts. Now Honus Wagner was staring at us.

One of the teachers, Miss Ellers of the fifth grade, raised her hand and spoke (the fifth grade intellect is always of the brave and careless variety, and

their instructor was no different):

"Tell us where you're from, Pastor Taylor," she said.

"Gloversville, New York, most recently," he said. "It's about fifty miles outside of Cooperstown."

It was then that the first impressions of my friends and I were confirmed. I'd learned about Cooperstown from my father a few years earlier, and it'd been on my mind ever since . . . the baseball hall of fame, the memorabilia shops running up and down the streets, the birthplace of baseball--or so the legend goes. I couldn't contain myself, and I raised my hand. Pastor Taylor nodded in my direction.

"Have you ever been to the Hall of Fame?" I asked, immediately upset at myself for the stupidity of the question, as if a man who resembled Honus Wagner and lived fifty miles from Cooperstown could've avoided such a place. Pastor Taylor smiled.

"Several times," he said.

"How is it?" I asked, and I could sense the eyes of Mr. Harris, our teacher, on the side of my face.

"Unimaginable," he said. "If you love baseball like I do, it's well worth the trip."

I nearly shook with the joy of this discovery.

"Who's your favorite baseball player?" I blurted out. Now Mr. Harris's eyes were burning into me. There were snickers and conversations among the children.

"All-time or current," he said, without hesitation. How could the *coolness* of such a man have ever been in doubt, by such an unworthy source as Mandy Flowers? These paired categories had been a source of constant discussion for my friends and me. Jim Rice, George Foster, and Jim Palmer

were all the craze then; but did they measure up to the all-time appeal of Aaron, Ruth, or Koufax? None of us knew for sure; we feared we'd never know.

"All-time," I said, immediately sorry that I didn't ask about his current favorite as well, all too aware of the fact that Mr. Harris was on the verge of pulling the plug on my line of questioning.

"Bob Feller," he said, again without thinking. "That man had an arm like a cannon."

"Thank you," I said, spurred on by some form of gratitude I had not yet discovered in my life. I risked a glance at Mr. Harris and found him to be more flushed and upset than I'd imagined.

"Thank you," I said again, beside myself.

* * *

My friends and I found ourselves looking forward to our Friday catechism class, which for us, was akin to being fueled by divine inspiration. Granted, we were not any more enthusiastic about the subject matter than usual; we were tired of the seemingly endless list of "shalt nots" the catechism offered us--with each memorization came the burden of an added chain on our psyche. We were interested in Friday's class for one reason: Gary, Indiana's version of Honus Wagner, our own veteran of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

I specifically remember writing out questions the night before, a first in my theological education. I numbered them, coming up with somewhere around fifty questions, spaced neatly on a loose-leaf sheet of paper I folded and tucked between two pages of my catechism. I'd tried for ninety-five

questions (a number I felt to be appropriate, considering Martin Luther's ninety-five theses) but I couldn't keep my eyes open long enough to complete the task.

The first one was obvious:

"What is your favorite League, American or National?"

I went on from there in a somewhat logical progression:

"What is your favorite Big League team?"

"What is your favorite position?"

I then attended to more urgent business that was held over from Wednesday's chapel:

"Who is your favorite current player?"

"Why?"

I then went into matters of a more philosophical nature:

"What are your thoughts on the designated hitter?"

"If given the choice and the ability, would you rather pitch a no-hitter in the regular season, or a win in the World Series?"

"Imagine Walter Johnson pitching to George Foster--power vs. power. What would be the outcome?"

And on and on and on.

When Friday morning's catechism class finally arrived, I could hardly contain myself with the excitement. Mr. Harris introduced Pastor Taylor (a feeble introduction with no mention of his baseball background) and then left the room. Pastor Taylor moved to the front of the room, smiled, and said:

"Good morning, everyone. I understand we're into the Second Article. I'm not exactly sure how things were run by Pastor Brunland, but I'll do my best to answer any questions that may arise as the year goes on."

I raised my hand, and unfolded my sheet of paper.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to learn your names one at a time. I remember you from the chapel."

"I'm Matt Borgman," I said, clearing my throat.

"Matt, okay. What's your question?"

"What is your favorite League, American or National?"

I can't say that I remember exactly how Pastor Taylor responded initially to the question, other than giving a slight chuckle, because my train of thought at the time was interrupted by a hoarse whisper from Mandy Flowers:

"You're an idiot."

I do know that, although he told me kindly that catechism class was no place to be talking the game of baseball, and that it was inconsiderate to others who didn't give one iota about such matters, he agreed to answer one such question at the end of every session. This was a brilliant tactical maneuver on his part, one which insured the sustained attention of every seventh grade boy in the class, not to mention a few of the girls who could hit a ball or two (Mandy Flowers not included). So after that first session--forty-five odd minutes or so of prolonged agony--he closed his catechism and looked me straight in the eyes:

"The American League," he said. "I grew up in Cleveland."

He'd answered two of my questions without even realizing it.

* * *

The first time we saw Pastor Taylor hold a baseball bat was about three weeks after he'd arrived. Mr. Harris was sick with strep throat one Monday, and our substitute was an elderly woman who was blind in one eye.

The rumor that gym class would be replaced with a study hour had swept the classroom, but before panic completely engulfed us, Pastor Taylor walked in wearing jeans, an old T-shirt, and an Indian's cap, and announced that he'd be taking us outside for gym class that afternoon. The passage of time has taken much of the excitement out of the memory, but I still can recall that more than one of my friends and I stood up immediately with the intention of following Pastor Taylor out of the room, despite the fact that gym class was still an hour or so away.

When we finally did get outside, we found Pastor Taylor on the ball diamond, tossing up balls and hitting them into the cyclone backstop behind home plate. I remember the scene vividly, because it was the first time I'd ever noticed that he wore a tarnished wedding band on his left hand; what little shine the ring had was catching the sunlight as his hand moved up and down.

"Ladies and Gentleman," he said (an address he sometimes used on us when he was in a jovial mood). "Today, we're going to play baseball."

Mandy Flowers (who was standing sacrilegiously close to the pitcher's rubber) spoke, and her voice was a knife in the fabric of the atmosphere of the ball diamond:

"Mr. Harris was going to begin teaching us square dancing in the gym today." A few of us groaned. Rage surged through me.

"I'm well aware of that," he said, with a big smile on his face. "But it's springtime now, and there's no better time to get out the old ball and glove." He leaned the bat on his shoulder, his gargantuan hands looking more like Wagner's by the minute. "Given the weather, I'm sure Mr. Harris would've brought you outside today," he added, diplomatically.

And then he said something I'll never forget, because of the promise

and the ecstasy of it:

"Mr. Harris is probably going to be out all week. Why don't those of you who have gloves, go ahead and start bringing them to school."

* * *

My first positively answered prayer in my life was a simple one, spoken as many times a night as I could say it before falling asleep, every night of that glorious first week in which Pastor Taylor was our gym teacher:

Lord, please allow us to keep Pastor Taylor as our permanent gym teacher. Amen.

The unmentionable fact that I was perhaps--inadvertently--asking for the demise of Mr. Harris was, I felt, justified by the priceless baseball instruction we were receiving on a daily basis. The Lord listened, saw, and answered. Mr. Harris returned the following week, admitted to never having liked teaching gym class in the first place (this was no surprise to those of us who lived solely for that period of the day), and relinquished command to his superior instructor, Honus Wagner of the Great Lakes. Only Mandy Flowers was among the notably disappointed.

Life, for a time, went smoothly. My friends and I spent every moment of the morning thinking about gym class and praying for rainless skies; we spent every moment of the afternoon contemplating each and every play of the game that period, reliving the brilliance and buffoonery of the day's contest with each other on the bus as we went home.

Among his greater accomplishments, Pastor Taylor taught us the hook-slide, the drag bunt and the sacrifice, the delayed steal, the run-down and the cut-off throw. Some of us (notably, my friend Mark and I) knew such

nuances of the game already, to be sure. In our cases, Pastor Taylor acted like a grindstone, sharpening each of us into the beautiful blades that flash and parry in a well-executed game of baseball.

Without a doubt in my mind, however, the greatest pedagogical accomplishment of Pastor Taylor's brief career with Gary Lutheran Grade School was his demonstration of the curveball. He mounted the pitching rubber sometime late into that first week he'd taken over as gym class instructor, chose one of the most agile of the students to catch, and proceeded to deliver a pitch that rolled along an imaginary table level with the batter's armpits, only to plummet right off the edge as it reached the plate, ending up ankle high in the catcher's mitt.

Now, as I've already said, there are those people out there who refuse to believe in such a phenomenon, and even those who acknowledge it, but try to limit the *actual curve* to something like fourteen inches. All I can say is that seeing is believing. For two and a half months of my life, I watched Pastor Taylor take the mound, and with utter amazement, I saw a ball drop three feet if it dropped an inch. Sometimes I was in the box, swinging desperately at the elusive ball; other times I just watched--from as nearby as I could get--as the most athletic of my friends made fools of themselves.

Pastor Taylor showed us his method, placed our fingers along the seams, and taught us to snap the wrist on the delivery. Needless to say, only a few of us ever got so much as a dip out of the pitch. But any progress whatsoever was treated with the utmost respect; all of us strained our eyes at each pitch, looking for what we so desperately desired to see.

* * *

I didn't find out until late that spring that Pastor Taylor was an ex-major leaguer in his own right. On a wild hunch, I looked his name up in a baseball encyclopedia, and discovered that he'd been called up for a cup of coffee with the Cleveland Indians in 1960, that he struck out three batters in 8 innings of relief work, that his lifetime ERA from those eight innings was 3.38. I asked him about it after catechism class the following Friday:

"How come your career as a baseball player ended?" I asked. He seemed surprised at my discovery, and took a minute to regain his composure.

"Outside forces," he said, and he left the room with his catechism under his arm.

* * *

During most of those sessions of catechism class that summer, a type of unspoken battle waged among my classmates and me. Each of us watched closely to determine when Pastor Taylor was summing up for the day, when he would place his hand on the back cover of his catechism book and draw it closed. Then a flurry of hand-raising would begin, with many anxious friends of mine (I'll even admit to doing it on occasion) calling his name aloud to provoke him to look in their direction. And there was the inevitable let-down when he would call on someone such as Mandy Flowers (yes, even she became involved, for the inclusion, if nothing else), who would invariably ask the most asinine of questions, usually pertaining to the rules:

"How does the infield fly rule work again?" Or she'd ask a question which obviously had the answer in mind:

"Can a player legally throw his glove at the ball to catch it?"

If I had known then that his time with us was so limited, I think I would've gone to greater measures, bribed the others to be silent, stood on my desk to be heard. I had so many things I wanted to know about my hero from Cooperstown, and such little time in which to ask it.

* * *

To understand Pastor Taylor, one must come to grips with the fact that he was a man of severe and abrupt mood changes. I've told you a bit about his jovial side, his magnanimous side, the side which took us all within his great arm-span and addressed us as "Ladies and Gentleman." But for each and every jovial moment, he had a morosely quiet, even vicious one. I am the last person to judge such a man; I never once held it against my Honus Wagner that he was subject to alcohol abuse, that he was haunted by demons from his past, that he, our Pastor, was a recovering atheist. Yes, he was all of those things. And I have heard that Ty Cobb was the biggest son-of-a-bitch who ever walked, that Pete Rose was an uncontrollable gambler, but I love them nonetheless. I've never had a problem separating the athlete from the social animal. My friends were no different, and perhaps it was part of our Gary upbringing. We were too often disappointed when we held a moral barometer against our idols; we were used to the second-rate tarnish that covered us all, that poured from the lakeside smokestacks.

It took a little over three weeks for us to get a glimpse of Pastor Taylor's darker side, of his second-hand status. He'd been unusually curt for the entire catechism class that Friday, speaking only the bare minimum of instruction, refusing to acknowledge even the most adamant of hand-raisers. At the end of the period, he closed his catechism and headed for the door

without offering to answer his one promised question about baseball. Because we hadn't yet seen this side of his personality, I called after him foolishly. He turned slightly and looked at me from over his shoulder.

"Pastor Taylor," I said, "You forgot to allow a question about baseball."

He stared thoughtfully back at me, crossed his arms, tucking his book between his arms and chest.

"Am I allowed the right to ask a question once in a while?" he said.

I nodded because I didn't know how else to respond.

"Why do people die?" he said, "Think about that. This is a religion class, after all." And he left the room.

That was the first of the incidents which sent waves back to our parents, through the congregation members, waves that alerted everyone that their initial instincts were right: Pastor Taylor was a second-rate cast-off from another world, a world outside of our hole in the earth. Because it was somewhat expected, his morbid exploits went--for a long time--without repercussion. He went for days at a time on the diamond without throwing a curveball, just sitting on the bench, watching listlessly as we played one another. His catechism class and chapel services were equally affected by the malaise; none of us cared to acknowledge the fact. It was easy to forgive him; he could snap out of it in an instant, take his place on the mound and begin throwing his long, arcing missiles toward the plate, or brighten up in the middle of catechism class and begin fielding any and all types of questions. It wasn't until later, when it became clear that the real offense was alcohol, that Pastor Taylor's stay with us was in jeopardy. Alcoholism itself is a pardonable offense in Gary; what is not, are the acts of carelessness that so often accompany it. One such careless act cost Pastor Taylor his job, and

it is not Pastor Taylor who I've had a hard time forgiving, but myself, for my role in his demise. I can't, after all, blame Mandy Flowers entirely. She was just the vehicle which quickened the process.

* * *

It was ten years to the month of my graduation from Gary Lutheran Grade School when I bumped into Pastor Taylor at a concession stand behind the third base lower grandstand at an afternoon Indian's game in Cleveland. I knew specifically that it had been ten years, because that morning's paper in Gary had a small, two column story on the demolition of the school, a little piece about the lack of funding, and the subsequent loss of a place of education. I had read the article aloud to my girlfriend at the time, as she drove us down to the stadium that day. It got me thinking how long it had been, and I counted back the years; I couldn't figure out why it felt like yesterday that I had been there. But I'm the first to admit that life is full of coincidences, so I took it in stride that I was reminded of my life at Gary Lutheran on the tenth anniversary of my graduation, and I took it in stride that the man I bumped into at the concession stand in Cleveland later that day was Pastor Taylor.

He was carrying one of those twenty-four ounce beers, and I was standing in line to get some food for my girlfriend and myself. I knew him immediately. He looked old, older than I'd imagined a man could get in ten years (he was only something like fifty-two at the time), but he was still Honus Wagner, from his gentle eyes to his comical nose to those oversized hands that were locked around that beer. On his left hand was the tarnished wedding band that I'd never seen him without.

I called him Pastor Taylor, a mistake I regretted immediately, because his eyes started to dart around like they were looking for an old and formidable enemy. Then he saw me in the line, waving, and I stepped out from it and went over to where he then stood, next to the condiments. He was raggier than I'd remembered him from ten years before, more haggard, with loose-fitting, drab clothing hanging from his sizable frame.

"Matt?" he said, and I wasn't surprised one bit that he'd remembered me, that he'd memorized every inch of my face. "How're you?" he said, and his eyes flashed quickly to my chin, as if in fear that there would still be some evidence of his shame. I do, in fact, still possess a small scar, no more than an inch long, somewhat faded into my skin, but still noticeable to the discerning eye.

"It's good to see you," I said. "I should've guessed you'd be at a ball game."

He nodded, took his eyes off my chin.

"I come here whenever I can afford the tickets," he said. "I live here now, in Cleveland."

"I'd heard that," I said, and again regretted my words, regretted the door I'd opened upon the mischievous gossip of the congregation.

"Are you . . .working?" I said, stumbling over my question with the realization that everything I said was wrong, that the only thing I'd ever talked about with this man to any success was the subject of baseball.

He ignored my question and leaned against the condiment cart. I could tell by his breath and the way his massive hands (those beautiful hands) were shaking, that this wasn't his first--or even his second--beer that afternoon. His wedding band made a dull, distorted reflection against the silver counter it rested on.

"How much of baseball is played from the neck up?" he said suddenly, pointing one of his long fingers at me.

"Ninety percent," I said, "at least."

He nodded and leaned toward me, looking past me and over my shoulder to something above and behind me.

"Are you a religious person?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"How much of religion is played from the neck up?" he said, pointing one of his fingers at his temple.

"All of it," I answered.

"Every single last bit," he said, and he sipped from his beer. He laughed.

I looked down at the cement between my feet, remembering--in an instant--all of the uncomfortable catechism classes on his bad days.

"I tried to hang on," he said. He lifted his beer and took a drink.

"Mr. Taylor--" I said.

"And it left me when you were at the plate, son," he said, "I wanted you to know I was sorry. Especially that I was sorry."

"Mr. Taylor--" I said.

"You saw the last of it," he said.

I wanted to tell him that I'd learned an immense amount from him, that I never held a grudge against him for what had happened. I wanted to tell him that I'd practiced, and my curveball had improved, and that I'd pitched through four years of high school. But I just shook his hand and watched him walk away, knowing deep inside, like a person knows immediately that they've done a very wrong and irreparable act, that I would never see him again. He pushed through the crowd, blending into the bodies.

* * *

I was the first to stand in against him on that fateful, Friday-afternoon gym class. It was exceptionally nice out (partly sunny with a light breeze), and there seemed to be so much promise as I went to the plate. I felt that day was going to be the day I'd get a hit off his curveball (there had been only dubbers and foul balls to that point). Pastor Taylor was in one of his jovial moods, and he called out to me as I stood in the batter's box:

"Okay, Matt, let's see how you handle *this* one."

And I knew it was coming; he always tipped it with a cocky statement. It came out of his hand, and I tried to read the spin; I'd heard about DiMaggio doing just that. Only, I was no DiMaggio, and the ball stayed high and inside, and when I leaned in for what I thought was going to be his glorious arcing curve, I took the pitch off the left side of my chin. And I saw from the expression on his face that he thought the curveball was coming too, that something had gone terribly wrong. I stood for a fraction of a second after being hit, just long enough to see his face and wish I hadn't, and then I fell to the dirt, and purple spots flashed across my eyelids.

Only after Pastor Taylor propped my head up and leaned over me did I smell his breath, and then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mandy Flowers running from her place in right field as fast as she could, toward the school. And I tried to get up and stop her, to stop all of them from caring about what'd happened, but when I did, Pastor Taylor told me to lie still, and he put his fingers against my chin.

"You're bleeding," he said.

"Goddamnit," I said, forgetting myself in front of the Pastor. But he didn't say anything at all; he just nodded and looked away.

The school nurse came out, followed by a few teachers, and Mandy Flowers was with them, pointing in our direction--and I hate her today as much as I did then. I rose to my feet, against their hands, and kept my palm over my chin. I fought against my body. But the teachers and the nurse kept crowding and crowding, pulling my hands from my face to see the damage, smelling the air that was filled with Pastor Taylor's breath. And I suspected then what I confirmed ten years later--that a lousy five-stitch cut, compounded on a lifetime of disappointment, was enough to finish a man.

TURK AND THE GREEN DOG

Running a hot dog stand at a minor league ballpark is not my idea of a good time. It doesn't pay good, and the customers are usually rude. When the weather's bad I suffer more than the rest, because that little umbrella Mister Dog supplies me with doesn't do diddly to keep out the cold and rain. I don't take any pride in what I do, but I sure as hell don't deny it. There's no point in that. The list of "cons" for what I do would fill up a library. And there's only one "pro:"

You see some things.

Sure, ask your travel agent or your stewardess or even your Greyhound bus driver, and they'll tell you they see plenty. But I'm not talking about rolling landscapes or foreign art museums or world class architecture. I'm talking about flesh and blood. Human interaction. Show me a better place than the ballpark to find that, and I'll work there.

Tuscanny's got two things anybody'd be interested in, and only two things--the minor league ball club, and the House of Glass. The House of Glass is a building the original owner, J. P. Green, built entirely out of different kinds of glass. All it takes to get something declared a monument is for some knucklehead with money to build something grotesque. So J. P. Green (God rest his soul), back in '47, built this house which everybody around here now--some sixty years later--thinks is absolutely amazing. If you ask me, the only thing amazing about the thing is that it made it this long

without some drunk teenager and his buddies throwing a brick through it. Now they actually have a building built around the house itself to protect it, but it made it twenty-five years or so without it, and never got a scratch. The thing is--kids around here know what the town thinks of J. P. Green and his grand creation, and they know that if they even took a can of spray paint to that house, it'd be like J. P. himself opened up the clouds and said, "Hey Tuscanny! You have sinned!"

I can't explain why this town does what it does, or why I was born in it, or even why I've decided to stick around for the past twenty-nine years. All I know is that J. P. Green practically built it from the ground up, and that if the people of Tuscanny were allowed to cast a vote, the majority would rule that J. P. Green's face go on every dollar bill, and every flag on every flagpole, and every garage door of every house.

It's no coincidence that the ball club's called the Tuscanny Greens, as you've probably already figured out. A lot of people think that's neat. But then a lot of people don't have to spend day in and day out looking out over nine morons in uniforms made entirely of three different shades of green. You've got your standard green on the hats and for the accents. Then there's your lime green, which (thank God) is used sparingly for striping along the sides of the pants. And finally, there's your dark green, which makes up most of the uniform and which wouldn't look half bad all by itself, if it wasn't against a background of green grass with a green fence and green dugouts and green grandstands, in a town where the sole purpose of every tax-paying citizen is to perpetuate J. P. Green's favorite color.

I don't own a thing that's green. Not a shirt, not a sock, not a book, not a pen, not a shoelace. I live in an apartment, so I can't even claim the little strip of grass outside my front door. That's just how I like it. One day, about

two weeks after I moved back to Tuscanny from college, I took all my green belongings and threw them into a fire pit over at Potter's Park, and lit them up. I roasted a hot dog on a stick over the blaze. It was the best damn dog I ever had. I washed it down with a six pack of Genuine Draft and I said to myself, "Ron, you are one serious piece of shit. You wasted seven years of your life and over fifty thousand dollars to get a master's degree in English literature, with a special focus in creative writing. Creative writing! You are back in Tuscanny and applying for a job at the ballpark. You are one serious piece of shit."

I would've taken my diplomas too (one signed by Mr. Christopher Harris, and one signed by Ms. Jean Debhart) and I would've tossed them into the fire also, if I'd taken the time to think twice about it. There's not a speck of green on either one, is the thing. If there'd been *any* green--a signature or an emblem or a discolored apostrophe, I'd of eaten those diplomas, in the form of some charred piece of ash, on the skin of that glorious hot dog.

I saw it coming when it got near the end of my master's. I saw it coming from miles off, like a train with a big trail of smoke pouring out of it. I sat down to write one day, near the end, and suddenly I realized--like a chill from an open window--I didn't have a damn thing to say, and I didn't have any damn business trying to say it. And--all at once--I saw Tuscanny, green as money, waiting for me as I drove down the expressway, and the sign for J. P. Green's House of Glass, and the faded lime paneling of the stadium walls beyond the outfield that you can't miss when you're heading down Business 48. And Donna's Diner was there. And the Belmann Outlet Barn was there. And there was my mother in her babushka, stumbling toward her rusted-out station wagon, with two armfuls of groceries. And there was my father outside Pete's Tackle, gnawing a beef jerky and testing the air for rain with

an open hand. And there was my Cousin George. And Aunt Clara. And Sister Kathy, just turned sixteen, in tight, black jeans. And Uncle Bob. And our neighbor Tom. And everybody . . . and everything.

So it wasn't even as if I had a choice. I was allowed a short respite from my place of birth and then--seven years and fifty-seven thousand dollars later--I was told in so many words, in the form of two useless diplomas and a startling vision as I sat in front of my laptop computer: "You are Ron Jacovich. You were born in Tuscanny, Wisconsin. You will die in Tuscanny, Wisconsin."

I had worked the hot dog stand as a teenager. When I marched into the office to see Bill Flescoe--sole owner, general manager, assistant general manager, promotional adviser, and marketing consultant of the Tuscanny Greens--nearly ten years later, it took him about two and a half seconds to hire me back.

"Kid," he said. "You've always got a place here."

And he hadn't changed a bit in seven years. Right down to his wide, speckled tie that was loosened at the collar, and his white scalp you could see through the thinning strands of combed-over hair. And his office walls were the same olive green, faded where the sun from the window hit them. And it was the same office door which didn't shut quite right, because of the emerald carpeting that was too plush. And the same dollar bill in a picture frame above his desk (the first he'd ever earned).

And it's still the same to this day, three and a half years later. It's as if everything in Tuscanny remains the same. Except me. I'm the only thing changing within it; I'm the only one opening my mouth against the almighty J. P. Green. And nobody's listening.

Running a hot dog stand at a minor league ballpark is beneath me.

This I know. But like I said, you see some things. I consider myself a connoisseur of the human condition. I am a shameless Peeping Tom of the single oddest, most destructive, most narcissistic animal on Mother Earth. Mister Dog's stand is located on the deck beyond the first baseline seats. From my perch, if business is slow, I can see every seat in the place.

In June of '82, during my first stint with the Tuscanny Greens, Maxine Donnely told her husband from seat 12, Row F, Section D that she'd been cheating on him for the past three months. He knocked out two of her teeth before the ushers could get him facedown on the concrete. A month later to the day, Tom Peck made a spectacular grab of a foul ball from the same seat, and ended up breaking his tibia as he tumbled over the row of seats in front of him. Tom Peck--it turned out--was the man Maxine was screwing behind her husband's back. I don't make this stuff up. I saw it.

In the fall of that year, when the pennant races were heating up, a boy by the name of Leif Braybury got lost trying to find the men's bathroom, and ended up wandering through a service entrance and out onto the field. Chuck Feller, the Greens' first baseman at the time, punched Leif in the chest and knocked him on his ass. Later, Chuck said he didn't know whether the kid had a knife or a gun or something. He apologized in the papers, but got sent down to the single-A affiliate the following week. In May of '83, Grayson McNeil--a local bigwig--spilled mustard on his new sport coat as he was walking away from my stand, and began bawling hysterically. His wife just kept saying, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" louder and louder, and then Grayson took his sport coat and threw it in the trash can, and left through the front gates. No one heard from him again until he wrote the Tuscanny Journal a detailed letter from a mental hospital in Milwaukee. He said, among other things, that he hated the color green. Later that year, I saw an old man

stumble along the concourse behind the bleachers, chasing a windswept dollar bill. His open, gnarled hands were almost scraping the ground as he hunched over and took swipes at the bill. His hat flew off as he ran, and his ankle twisted, and he went headlong into a cyclone fence. About thirty feet away, a little girl with pigtails picked up the dollar bill and smoothed it out against her thigh. I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried. I saw every last bit of it.

During a rain delay in August of '84, Mimi Glandower took off her blouse and made belly-flop slides along the tarp over the infield. What was left of the crowd cheered and whistled. They booed when the ushers covered her in a blanket and escorted her off the field. On the last day of the season that year (which was bitterly cold), Karl Nokes, who is a big man from the south side of Tuscanny, stood up behind home plate between the sixth and seventh innings, and told the two hundred remaining fans that he was a homosexual. Two and a half years ago, I saw a man in line outside my cart take hold of his son's shoulder and tell him that if he didn't stop pestering him, he would break his nose. The boy opened and closed his mouth, but he didn't cry. Julie Meiko--who was once a girlfriend of mine--walked up to my stand last year, with a yellow halter top on, and asked if I'd like to have sex with her outside in the parking lot. Her boyfriend then walked up, put his arm around her waist, and ordered two hot dogs and two Diet Cokes. You think I'm sick enough to tell lies about things like this?

Last fall, Greg Forester (who was in my graduating class) attended a ball game just two hours after his father's funeral. He sat in the top row of Section H, down the third baseline, and when the Greens blew a lead in the seventh, Greg got up and shook hands with everyone in his section before leaving. Dutch Dawson, longtime shortstop for the Tuscanny Greens, once

cracked two bats on two consecutive fouled-off pitches. The second one splintered, and a chunk hit this kid sitting behind the dugout in the head. The kid went out like a light, but when he came to--Dutch was standing over him holding up two fingers, and all the kid could say was, "I don't love you." For twenty-three consecutive years, on every day of every home game, Lloyd and Rosetta Brockenfeld held a sign that said GREEN MACHINE from their box seats behind home plate. Rosetta died during the summer of '93, at the age of seventy-one, and Lloyd died three days later. The club retired the sign beyond the wall in left-center field. If a player hits it with a long home run, he wins a 20 oz. steak from Meriweather's. In the spring of '85, a six week-old girl was abandoned somewhere on the concourse behind the third baseline. She was adopted by the Felsh's, who live on Cramer Ave. Larry Tuckey once got drunk on Vodka and drove his Dodge into the scoreboard during a play-off game. An out-of-towner with fat, red cheeks and thin, greasy hair once asked me to change a hundred. When I told him I couldn't, he said he'd kick my ass if he was twenty years younger. That's not the half of it. I haven't even gotten to some of my better ones.

Jason Haynes proposed to Tammy Mason over the loudspeakers, and got turned down. A man in a long rain coat once stood underneath my umbrella for ten minutes and tried to light a cigarette. When the cigarette finally took, his face lit up, and the streaks of rain made it look like he was crying. A teenage girl sitting behind third base once caught two foul balls on two consecutive pitches. Once, Bill Flescoe came over to ask me how business was, and while he was talking, the tornado siren in town went off. Bill kept his mouth wide open, turned toward the siren, and just stared like that into the dark sky. I saw my mother, in her babushka, slip on a step coming down the aisle in Section H, and I saw Gus Landaw catch her arm so

she wouldn't fall. He held her there like that for a second--my small, frail mother, with her right leg twisted back and underneath. On a race around the bases one afternoon, between the fifth and sixth innings, a little boy took a spill rounding second. Everybody laughed, and then the kid got up, and there was blood and dirt on his face, and everybody stopped. Derrick Henderson got to third base with my sister Kathy last summer, underneath a blanket in the left field bleachers. I once had to run down a kid and knock him onto the concrete after he swiped two hot dogs from my stand. His nose and his elbows were scraped up, and he called me an asshole. Bill told me there'd be something extra in my paycheck, but he never gave me anything.

Tonight, when I lie down in bed and close my eyes, I will see the silver counter of the Mister Dog stand; I will see the cracked concrete blocks beneath my feet; I will see the rectangular concourse entrance beneath the stands, with men and women filing in and out of it.

I don't make this stuff up. It just happens.

And nothing I've ever seen has made more of an impression on me than what I saw in the summer of '85, the last season I worked at the stand before going to college.

During that spring, Bill had come up with this grand idea of raffling away a green dog. Don't ask me where he got the dog, or what he did to it to make it green, because I've tried to learn as little as possible about the dog's origin. In fact, the day after he told me about the promotion, I sent off the college applications that'd been sitting in a pile on my desk for the past three months. I'd had enough of Tuscanny and its green religion. I couldn't have possibly known at that time that Tuscanny was an inseparable part of me, that I'd be back--despite my hatred.

Have you ever seen a green, long-haired dachshund? You can picture

it in your head, but you really have to see it to believe it. It takes that first moment when the dog is lead out on a leash to the pitcher's mound, for a person to realize--all at once---the great absurdity that is human life. I can't tell you enough how my stomach dropped the first time I saw that little green animal shuffling along behind Bill's green, studded leash, how my heart ached when the full capacity crowd--not a single member without a green hat, sweatshirt, or jacket--rose to their feet and cheered. It was one of those times you think to yourself, "And now the world will end . . . and I will have peace."

But the show went on.

Anticipation rocked the grandstands, and shook the crowd up and down with every single number of the five digits Bill spoke into the microphone: *7 - 1 - 0 - 9 - 2*, (a number I'll carry with me to my death bed). Bill repeated the five numbers, and the crowd noise fell to whispers, speculations, quiet curses for what could've been. There was a moment like that where nothing seemed to happen, and we were all suspended between the announcement of the numbers and the appearance of the winner. In that quiet blink of a moment, I thought again, "And now the world will end."

As if in direct reply to my thoughts, a voice in section G cried, "Pick another number!" There was silence and then consent, until the crowd was whistling and hooting for another number to be drawn.

But mere seconds before Bill could reach his hand into his olive pillow case and withdraw another number, the show picked up its slack, as it always does. The crowd directly behind third base began to cleave, and from where I stood behind my Mister Dog stand, it looked like a green seascape which a lone swimmer was cutting through. Finally--the swimmer was taking his time--a man emerged from over the third baseline rail, and was met with the

apprehensive applause of the disappointed masses.

The man's name was simply Turk, and I don't doubt that every person there that day knew at least one or two stories about him. He was, without question, Tuscanny's most famous "street person," and wasn't well liked. He lived somewhere in the network of alleys behind Main Street and Mason. He'd gotten into a shoving match with Jerry, the manager of Safeway, when Jerry tried to keep him from loitering on his front steps. He'd brought a forty-seven inch musky straight from the pier to the front doors of Pete's tackle one afternoon, and was denied entry into Pete's fishing log, because no one believed he'd caught it. He'd repeatedly wandered out into the streets without any concern for traffic, causing more than his share of minor collisions. He'd been arrested for shoplifting at the Belmann Outlet Barn. Above all, he'd been a street person, a vagrant, a blot on the green landscape of Tuscanny. And now he was marching out toward the pitcher's mound with a claim on Tuscanny's most coveted prize.

There was some speculation, even controversy, about how Turk got the ticket, and how he managed to get into the stadium. But Bill checked Turk's ticket three or four times, and couldn't deny it's unmistakable claim on the green dog: *7 - 1 - 0 - 9 - 2*. Turk left with the dog, through the side gates behind first base, not even bothering to stay for the game.

At the time, the crowd was utterly dissatisfied, and figured Turk to be the rudest and most unworthy recipient of the prize. But people have looked back now on that incident and surmised that Turk and the dog were bonding, learning each other's moves, that Turk was training the dog for the upcoming pennant drive, that somewhere in the alleys behind Main Street and Mason--a legend was coming to life.

The bonding session must've lasted seven days, because a week later,

Turk showed up at the ballpark for just the second-known time in Tuscanny history, with the dog under his arm. Immediately after the Star Spangled Banner, Turk walked over to the Greens' dugout, climbed up onto it, and set the dog down at his side. The leash and collar were gone. Turk may have been in clothes that were once green, but they were so faded and stained that it was hard to tell for sure.

Most of the crowd booed and shouted. But only for a moment.

Turk started at one corner of the dugout and danced his way across it to the opposite corner. He stopped, squatted, spun, and began a march toward the middle. He then dropped from a standing position to a full splits. The dog, that little freak of nature or victim of Bill Flescoe's heinous tamperings (choose whichever theory suits you), followed every step, ducked with every dip of Turk's, rose to its hind legs with every jump of its owner, and ran in circles barking when Turk went into the splits.

A legend was born.

The crowd caught its breath, began cheering, whistling, screaming. For a minute or two, the noise was nearly deafening. I watched in utter amazement from beneath my umbrella. Bill stood only a few paces from me with his hands in his pockets, his mouth wide open. Players from the Greens emerged from the dugout and peered out over the top. The crowd began clapping in unison, Turk and the dog hopping to every clap. The umpires stood and watched, helpless to the dancing pair.

I distinctly remember walking out from underneath my umbrella, during Turk and the green dog's first dance, and staring up into the sky and thinking, "This time, this time the world must end."

But there was only more of the same. The emergence of Turk and the green dog coincided with the pennant drive of the Greens. Turk and the dog

attended every home game, were greeted with cheers, danced throughout the game, and sparked rallies with their antics. After that first night, Bill gave Turk a contract which included a small salary, free admission to all of the games, and as much food as he and his dog could eat from any of the concession stands. After two weeks of packed houses and a twelve game winning streak, Bill gave Turk a green suit to wear, with matching shoes and fedora. The townspeople of Tuscanny began looking out for Turk during that legendary pennant drive. He began showing up to the games clean-shaven, with wet, slicked-back hair. He'd put on a few pounds, filling out his otherwise emaciated frame. Pete went back to his fishing log from 1981 and inserted Turk's forty-seven inch musky. On any given day--driving down Main Street--you could see Turk in his green suit and fedora conversing with a group of four or five people outside of Pete's Tackle, or the Bellmann Outlet Barn, or Donna's Diner. And wherever Turk went, the green dachshund went, never on a leash, always willing to be petted or fed by one of its many admirers.

I don't think I've ever seen so many people united for the same cause, acting so positively about a single issue, without any fear of the inevitable collapse, the unavoidable cessation. In late summer of 1985, Tuscanny *was* the ball club, and the ball club *was* Turk and the green dog. Nobody ever wanted to imagine something different than what was going on right then, in Tuscanny's heyday. I suppose I saw it coming first because I am the most pessimistic and unenthusiastic member of Tuscanny's clan.

On the last day of the regular season, in the top of the seventh inning, with the Greens assured of a play-off spot, I saw it coming before anybody else. Kiki Felder--a man whose name isn't spoken in Tuscanny without the whispering sneer one uses to verbalize the name "Adolph Hitler"--hit a sharp

line drive just over the Greens' dugout and off the head of Turk's green dog, knocking him off his hind legs and into the front row of seats. He was dead before Turk could cradle him against his chest.

How can I say that I saw it coming first? Because, as I said, all of Tuscanny had united in a single, optimistic cause. There was a smile on every one of their faces until the moment the ball struck the dog. I, however, was taking each day as if it were the last. How could a town be so blind? How could every citizen expect such riches, day in and day out--a pennant winning team, *and* a beloved pair of mascots? I was waiting for God to drop the boom. The sky was overcast. It was the last day of the regular season. There was a moment of utter nothingness and silence when Kiki Felder's bat met the ball. What more does a person need? What greater sign from above could have pointed out that we were all at the end of something?

Turk cradled his dog against his chest and wept openly. Fans near him tried to comfort him, but it was obvious that he was beyond their help. He eventually got up and left with his dog through the side gates, just as he had done two months earlier when all of Tuscanny hated him. There was some blind hope that he'd arrive later that week for the beginning of the play-offs. But he never showed up, of course. The Greens were swept and the stadium shut down for the season.

I, for one, have never been surprised at Turk's disappearance. There were others, less pessimistic, who couldn't accept the fact that they'd seen the last of Turk. For weeks, families set extra places at their tables, hoping against hope that Turk would drop in for dinner. Betty Ferriston wandered into the allies behind Main Street and Mason with an apple pie in hand, on more than one occasion, to no avail. Pete stood outside his tackle shop for hours on end, waiting. Even Bill Flescoe refused to believe the inevitable,

and took Turk's last paycheck up to the Safeway, and posted it on the bulletin board with a long letter and an offer to work one of the concession stands the following season. They all lacked the insight that Turk had, the numbing awareness that he had lived his moment in the sun, that there was nothing more to be gained in this world.

I've left a part of the story out, though. A part about the act itself, the death of Turk's dog. I suppose it's because it's a hard thing for me to come to grips with, that even I--self-proclaimed enemy to Tuscanny and all of its nonsense, unwilling inheritor of J. P. Green's legacy--even I became swept up in the moment. There's a reason that I'm sure I knew what was coming before anyone else, before Turk or Bill Flescoe, or Kiki Felder, or any member of the smiling crowd. At the moment Kiki took his swing and the world stopped, I yelled. At the top of my lungs, I yelled:

"Look out!"

That night, I told Bill I wouldn't be back for the following season. I fled Tuscanny for college, and it took seven years to come to terms with that moment in 1985, when I lost myself to the Tuscanny masses, when I told myself in a two word shout:

"You are Ron Jacovich. You were born in Tuscanny, Wisconsin. You will die in Tuscanny, Wisconsin."

CURSES

Tommy Halverson, our shortstop, slips in the shower and sprains his throwing wrist the night before our big game with the Panthers. The month before, Phil Driscoll's mom gets in a car accident, and he's gotta cancel pitching against the Bulldogs. Frisco Harris (he's from out West), our cleanup hitter and left fielder, gets the measles the night before Opening Day and misses two weeks of practices and games. Whatd'ya think happens to a team's chemistry when stuff like that happens? It gets shaken, that's what, like a can of Budweiser.

They think I'm crazy. They call me "Scrapper," 'cause they watch the way I play second base--mean, like a rabid dog. I don't take no guff from nobody. I don't care if he's Jason Filbinger from the Canons (all six feet of him) and he's barrelin' down my way like nothin' short of Holy Jesus's gonna stop him, thinkin' I'm gonna bail out and settle for the force at second. Only, I take one for the team. I make sure Jason gets a piece of my cleats when I come back down, too.

The other reason they call me Scrapper, at least some of the funny boys, like Hutch and Darren Rodhurst, is because they say I got nothin' but scraps left of me, that my brain's turned to mush and my life's just a hunk of junk. Funny stuff. They know I'm not from around here, and about what happened to my parents, and that I'm living here with my aunt. They know she don't want me anymore than I want her. You gotta know how to laugh,

though. You gotta take a punch or two from your own boys, same as from the Canons, or the Panthers, or even the Dragons when they come barrelin' down the base path, lookin' to make you piss your pants.

So they say to me (Hutch, Darren, Phil and the others), *You're Crazy. What d'you know about curses?*

I tell 'em, "I'm more than qualified."

They say, *What d'you know about anything, Mr. Brookline, Massachusetts?*

I tell 'em, "Brookline is a suburb of Boston, and it counts for somethin' that I was born there 'cause Boston is the King Daddy of Curses, you stupid sons-of-bitches."

They think I'm probably ready to start scrappin' with one of them (I've done it before), so they back off and just say stuff like, *Oh that Scrapper . . . What a Nut.*

Only, I'm not through.

I say, "I'll take a good superstitious ballplayer over any of your asses, any day of the week." I say, "I'd trade in Phil's arm, and Hutch's smart-ass antics, and Frisco's stick for a good, honest-to-god, superstitious ballplayer. In fact," I say. "None of you *are* ballplayers, if you wanna get right down to it."

They have a good laugh at that one. Only, Frisco's hurt. I can see it in his eyes.

"Oh sure," I say. "You think playin' ball only has to do with roundin' second on the right foot, or knowin' how to hit the cut-off man, or some pile of shit like that. A ballplayer's in here, you dipshits," I say, pointin' to my head. I know I'm gettin' a little nasty. I can't stop now, though. It's a condition I got which I know'll kill me or put me in a wheelchair someday. I

got a bad feeling about pushin' things too far and knowin' all along I'm doin' it without bein' able to stop, and then hearing somebody pull the trigger of a gun, or flip open a switchblade. I'm tough, but I don't want it to end like that.

So I go in for the kill, on account of my condition, like I say.

"Frisco," I say. "You don't have a goddamned clue," I say, pushin' him a little bit in the chest. Cripes, the guy's a head taller than me but he wouldn't step on an ant if he could help it, 'cause he reads the Bible, and he can't stand to watch anybody get hurt. I like him, but I got this mean streak, like I say. So I push him again.

"Frisco," I say. "You wouldn't know a ballplayer if he slapped you on the ass." This gets a laugh or two from Hutch and the peanut gallery. Some of the guys are angry though. They're tellin' Frisco to pop me one. It's gotta look ridiculous--me, the runt of the team, pushin' this gentle giant around the ball diamond. What most of the guys have to understand is that I'm the oldest, and by a long shot. This goofy-ass city league we're in allows players between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. I'm seventeen, but a few of the guys, like Malcolm (our catcher) are only fourteen. Fourteen years old! Like any one of 'em would know diddly shit about the world around 'em!

Just then, Lady of the Lake steps into it.

Lady's real name is Sam Larue, and he's supposed to be our coach. It didn't take long to figure out what *he* was about, though. We show up to this cheap-ass city league on the first day of Spring and get grouped into our teams, and the Director tells us this guy named Mr. Larue is our coach, so be nice and sweet to him. Mr. Larue struts up with his long, wavy hair down past his shoulders and says, "Call me Sam," like that's gonna break the ice between us. He's fortyish and lives on some lake in the suburbs, and he always wears these muscle shirts on hot days. Only, he's got nothin' but flab,

and he sits his ass on our bench (it don't matter if it's a practice or a game) and stretches out and tans himself. On the first day, he points to Frisco ('cause he's the biggest) and tells him he's the actin' manager, and that he should make out the lineups. Boy, was that a mistake. Like I said, Frisco's as timid as a church mouse, and that just won't do for a manager. So I took over. Anyway, roundabout two weeks into our practices, while we're taking throws back and forth to stretch our arms, Tommy looks over at Larue sittin' on the bench (Tommy's the brain) and says, "Get a look at Lady of the Lake over there." And it stuck.

So Lady steps between me and Frisco and says, "Now boys."

"Christ Almighty," I say, under my breath.

"Watch your language," Lady says.

"We got everything under control," I say.

"Good," Lady says, and goes back to his beach-side bench. Some coach!

But I like the guys on the team. I really do. Little incidents like that don't mean I have it out for 'em. I just got it in my mind to win this damn league, and it's gonna take more than Bible readin' and simple-minded nonsense to take the title. We got two games to catch up on the Alley-Cats, and only two weeks to do it in. I know it's time to push these boys, and I'm just the man for the job.

So I tell 'em about Bill Buckner, back in '86.

We watched the World Series, they say.

"Oh you watched," I say. "Probably holdin' your Mommy's hands and drinkin' milk. You don't know shit," I say, and I think to myself: Oh no, here we go again.

Why do you hafta come down on everybody all the time? they say.

"I got reasons," I say. "How many of you guys care about bein' the 1992 City of Milwaukee Junior League Champions?"

It's an easy one, so everybody--including Frisco--raises his hand.

"How many of you believe in curses?" I say, and none of 'em do anything, except stare straight ahead or paw the dirt or roll their eyes.

"Jesus Almighty," I say. "I haven't lived seventeen some-odd years and traveled one thousand miles from where I was born to play ball with a bunch of pansy-asses. Tommy," I say, hopin' I can rely on a superior brain. "Why d'you think you slipped in the shower last month before our big game against the Panthers?"

It was slippery, Tommy says, real dead-pan like.

"Oh Jees," I say. "You guys got no respect for nothin', that's the problem. Phil, how come you suppose your mom got in that car accident?"

Phil stares at me like he means it, and I know about moms, so I lay off a little.

"Why did you miss your start?" I ask him.

Because my mom got blindsided and I was at the hospital, he says.

I let it go, 'cause I see he's gettin' upset and he's not thinkin' straight.

"Frisco," I say, hopin' against hope that teachin' Frisco will be like training a good Cocker Spaniel. "What kept you out those two weeks at the start of the season?"

Measles, he says, real quiet, and I can hear the word before he even says it; I can hear it coming out of all of their idiotic mouths in some kinda conference of stupidity.

"God in heaven!" I say. "Holy Christ Almighty!" I pace back and forth a little bit from first to the mound.

"Frisco's got religion, so I can't blame 'im that much," I say. "But the

rest of you! I'm ashamed to call you teammates." They start lookin' at each other, and I know they don't really understand.

Take it easy, they say. *Lighten up, you jerk,* they say.

Only, I'm revving up, and I know nobody nohow is gonna stop me except with that gun or that knife. They don't know the first thing about curses, is the thing. I can't blame 'em so much, though, for not knowin' how everything's out to get 'em. You can live real happy like that without thinkin' about it, until somethin' happens.

"That ball that went through Bill Buckner's legs in the '86 Series was a can't-miss dribbler," I say. "It looked like something Lady would hit, for Chrissake." Most of 'em get a chuckle out of that.

"How many of you saw Bill Buckner miss a ground ball to lose Game Six?" They raise their hands, real slow.

"Not me," I say. "I saw Babe Ruth laughing."

What the hell are you spouting off about now? they say. These guys don't know their history, is the problem.

"When the Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the Yanks back in 1920, they kissed their World Series hopes goodbye," I say. "How many titles has Boston won since?" I say.

None, Tommy says.

"Damn right," I say.

What the hell does this have to do with us? they say.

"Everything," I say. "Everything under the friggin' sun."

If we're cursed like you say, how the hell can we do anything about it? they say.

Now we're gettin' somewhere.

"Being prepared," I say. "It's all about being prepared. Phil, what

d'you do on your way out to the mound every inning?"

I dunno, he says.

"Exactly," I say. "You better start knowin'," I say. "You better start havin' it down to a goddamned science. You strike somebody out, and you better know sure-as-shit what you did."

I remember the pitches, he says, and Malcolm backs him up.

"Oh Lord," I say. "Here we go again! I *mean* you better know whether you touched your cap or didn't. You better know whether you swiped the rubber clean beforehand or not, and with which foot, too. You better know if you stepped on the goddamned baseline chalk on your way out to the mound." They're startin' to give me scared and wild looks now, like they never had it in for such a workout, like they thought playin' baseball was a walk in a goddamned daisy patch.

"Tommy," I say. "I've seen your good and bad days, and your good days work out fine, but your bad days ain't nothin' to write home about."

Like most of us, he says. Like I said, he's the brain.

"Sure," I say. "Like most of us. Only I highly doubt you morons have a second thought about what you ate the morning you had that good game, about which pair of socks you had on, about which friggin' way you took to get to the ballpark."

This is crazy, they say.

"This is life, goddamnit," I say. "This is life and you sure-as-shit better be ready to handle it. It's not a walk in the park." And I can feel my blood practically boiling in my head, so I start to pace again. I try to calm myself down by thinkin' how I didn't understand any of this either until six years ago, how I didn't know what was comin'.

"You know what I do when I come in from every inning?" I say. "I

put my glove in the same damned spot every time, over the far left corner of the bench."

We noticed, they say, rolling their eyes some more.

"I don't have to tell you idiots that I'm pulling more weight than anybody," I say. "I'm the smallest goddamned guy on the team, and I'm battin' .400, and I haven't made an error all season."

Batting .400 is still missing 3 out of 5, they say, and I know what they're getting at.

"This is a team," I say. "And a friggin' team oughtta think and act like one. Nobody under the sun's gonna hit better'n .400. Nobody's gonna live forever, neither. You think Wade Boggs didn't have that curse in mind? He's the most superstitious bastard of 'em all. When Bill Buckner missed that ball, I watched Wade Boggs cry on national television. You think he didn't have that curse in mind?" I say. "The guy eats chicken before every game, regular as clockwork. He knows what's what."

Maybe he likes chicken, they say.

"Look," I say. "I don't care if he buys a Kentucky goddamned Fried Chicken restaurant. The point is that he knows what to do to keep the hits coming. He knows what to do to keep the curse from catchin' up with 'im," I say. "It's a team effort, for Chrissake. If you think hittin' 3 or 4 times outta 10's such a bad deal, you sure-as-shit better figure out a new profession, 'cause you ain't gonna do any better. I promise you."

They sit and think on that one, pawing the dirt or scratching their heads. Then it hits 'em, and I wonder what the hell took 'em so long.

Why are we cursed? they say. *What the hell did we ever do?* And I realize--all of a sudden--that this makes all the difference, and that once you know it, it's like you're on a one-way street and there's no goin' back. Only

they can't really understand what I'm about to say until somethin' major happens, somethin' crazy.

I can see my old man, like it happened yesterday, raisin' his pistol up to my mom's head.

"You were born," I say. "You were born into this stinkin' world, and that was enough."

WAITING FOR THE WORLD TO CHANGE

I told Coach I wasn't up to it. He asked me if I wanted to run with the big dogs or stay home and piss with the puppies, and I told him I wanted neither, I wanted to sit this one out. He told me we were only two games up on New York, and a long way to go. He said I had the sorriest excuse for a ballplayer's heart he'd ever seen. Then he told me I'd be batting third again and playing shortstop. It's what I've done for going on five years.

I could quit, but I've been there. You sit and you sit and you think, *Now what?* You can watch a television screen full of screaming maniacs on parade all day, or you can type 70 words a minute in an air-conditioned office building, or you can paint fences in 90 degree heat, or you can pontificate to students on the benefits of democracy, but in the end it's always the same, always the *Now what? Now what? Now what?*

I went 3 for 4, with two doubles. I had the game winning hit, and I made a backhanded, diving catch to end a rally in the top of the ninth. Inside my stomach, there was nothing. I felt myself run, swing, dive, continue.

* * *

I ate breakfast this morning because it seemed like the thing to do, and then I washed my hands and face and took a walk to the corner to get a paper from the box. A kid with glasses and a Band-Aid on his chin asked me for

an autograph on my way back home. He happened to have a pen in his back pocket, and I signed the bill of his ball cap. After I got my name down, I held his cap a second and looked at it--my name on this kid's cap. And for a second or two, it didn't look like my name at all. This kid had come up and asked me to scribble some loops on a perfectly good ball cap. It was like I was in the third grade and had written my name over and over a hundred times in penmanship class, and the letters had lost their significance. Then my name came back suddenly--in a rush or a wave--and I was standing on the sidewalk, halfway between my house and the paper box, holding a boy's cap which I'd scribbled My Name on. . . because he'd asked me to. And I thought, *I've made 20 bucks a pop for these at card shows.*

I took a shower when I got home, and then I read the paper and there was another article about me, from The Associated Press. I glossed it, and it had phrases like "franchise player," and "game-saving catch," and "go-to guy" in it, and I set the paper down on my lap and tried to think real hard about what it felt like to make a game-saving catch. It'd been years since I actually felt it. Trying to think of something like that is like watching a movie you've seen so many times you've gotten to know every nuance of every scene, and every twitch of every actor's face, and the tone in the voice of every delivery, and the camera angle on every shot, and each time you've watched it, you've lost a little more of the feeling. I'm not talking about the memorization now, but the feeling. And it gets so you don't know what the movie is and what reality is, because nothing suspends disbelief anymore.

I haven't felt the sting in my hands from a pitch off the handle of the bat for as long as I can remember. For years now, I haven't felt myself drive a ball over the fence, I haven't felt a line drive burrow into the pocket of my glove.

* * *

I just went 7 for 16 over a four-day stint at the Metrodome, with two doubles, two triples, and a home run. I extended my errorless streak to 61 games.

Macey said to me last night in the hotel room that I could be the greatest shortstop who ever lived. I told him that I didn't care to be the greatest shortstop who ever lived, and he asked me what else was there? *Except ass*, he said. *Except a little piece of ass now and then.* And poor Macey, dumb kid, poor Macey, the rookie that I must educate with my experience, sat in the dark with wide, white eyes and listened like I was somebody important, like I had something to say.

I told him there were motor homes, and giant bunches of grapes, and brand new high-top sneakers, and railroad spikes, and goldfish, and halter tops, and shaving cream, and the President of the United States, and hurricanes, and Chevrolets, and Cocker Spaniels, and brown rice. And Macey stared and blinked his wide, white eyes, and said, *Quit shittin' me.* And before I could elucidate my answer, he laughed and fell asleep and was probably dreaming of blueberry pancakes, and naked brunettes, and long line drives.

* * *

Another statement came from First Financial this afternoon.

It said I had 0 dollars in that account, which is what I've had in that account for the past eight years, and never would've opened if it wasn't a requirement for my student loans. Despite the fact I paid off those loans long

ago, and withdrew my 25 dollar minimum balance from the account, the statements keep coming.

I put the statement in a drawer with the others. Someday I will add them all up and deposit a ZERO into my checkbook. ZERO plus AN OBSCENE AMOUNT OF MONEY equals AN OBSCENE AMOUNT OF MONEY.

I could write out a thousand dollar check to the mailman every day, and never even know the difference. I could say, *Here you go, friend! Here's your daily bonus!* And I'd turn every day into Christmas for the mailman, but because it'd happen every day, he'd come to expect it, and he wouldn't even care that much. He'd start to come up my front walk not for money but because of the regularity of it all--the numbing predictability--and he'd even learn to hate Christmas, because it wouldn't be any different from the other days. And when every day's the same, it all comes down to the lowest common denominator.

* * *

Macey asked me today how I prepared myself in the field when somebody was at the plate. *You know*, he said. *Mentally*. Tobacco dribbled down his chin, and he waited with his head cocked, like a dog waits.

Everybody's different, I told him.

*But how do **you** prepare?* he asked, dribbling more tobacco. I could hear Coach's bat behind me hitting fungoes to the outfielders--the ridiculous sound of balls hitting wood and taking off into the air.

I looked Macey in the eyes and told him

Everybody's different, but if you really want to know, I look at the

batter and think--Why are you alive, swinging a 32 ounce piece of wood, you stupid son of a bitch?--and I wish for the ball to come funny at me, like rising and falling and rising again, or to take two or three wild bounces on its way over, because it makes me sick inside when the round, leather-stitched, five and a half ounce ball comes in one of the finite ways a ball has to come when struck by a round bat, and settles in my glove like it always does, and I turn and throw the runner out.

The dumb kid's eyes got wide and then he grinned and showed all of his brown teeth, and he said, *You're shittin' me! You are always shittin' me.*

* * *

I've given things twenty days to improve. At the end of twenty days, if the world is still the world, I'll be forced to take action. Why did I choose twenty? 20 is the number on the back of my uniform. I have a 20 game hitting streak. I have 20 home runs. Yesterday, I signed 20 autographs. There are 20 games left in the season.

* * *

Coach pinch ran Macey for me today in the seventh, because we were up by eight runs, and the Coach likes to keep his horses fresh. When I came into the dugout, he told me to go ahead and hit the showers, and get an early start on the traffic. I asked him if he would be doing this if I was hitting .250 instead of .350, and he called me a wise ass. He said he just figured I could use the time off. I asked him if I could have the next 19 days off, and he turned away and began looking at the Jays' line-up card.

I don't think the Coach has ever understood me. He dislikes me, but he can't do without me in the lineup. I'm his ace in the hole. I'm his number one stud.

As I was getting dressed, after I towelled off, Macey went down swinging on our final at bat in the eighth.

* * *

I sent Pamela 12 roses this morning. I woke up this morning and thought to myself, *You must end this charade, for her, if for nothing else*, and the next thing I knew, I was on the telephone with the florist.

I need to get her to hate me, because there are only 18 days left, and I have no time for her. Five months ago, when I saw her waiting for an autograph, I thought maybe she was the answer.

But she couldn't kill the monotony. She comes to me with her sweet perfume and her hair in long ribbons and sometimes with her arms outstretched, or just talking, just talking, and smiling, and bending her neck, and she is the monotony.

She has become the monotony.

* * *

Pamela called and told me she loved me, and I told her I loved her too.

* * *

I dreamt that Pamela picked up a rose from my bouquet and caught her

fingers on a large thorn. Her fingers stuck together, impaled side-by-side on the thorn, and she screamed and shook her arm up and down, and blood flew from her hand, against the walls and the floor.

Then I woke up and got a glass of water, and in another hour or so, fell back asleep.

Then I dreamt that I was taking grounders again. Macey was next to me fielding them, too. He kept saying, *Nice grab, Mick!* and *Way to stick with it!*, and other useless things. And the coach was taking them from a catcher I've never seen before (Even though he was wearing a mask, I could see his eyes, and I knew I didn't know him from Adam. They were small and without expression.) and tossing them from his hand out in front of his body, and beating them into the dirt with his fungo bat. Macey and I fielded, threw to first (The first baseman was different too. He was tall and he gritted his teeth when the balls struck the pocket of his mitt.), and the first baseman threw back to the catcher. Coach started to hit them harder and harder, causing me to run to both sides and make diving grabs, causing me to take short hops and block rockets with my body. All the while, Macey jabbered. *Nice one! Way to go!* And then Coach hit the ball and it took one high bounce in front of the mound, and then dropped to a roll, skirted right, and then flew up on a line at my teeth. And I remember thinking, *Here it is!* And Macey was screaming--a constant, high-pitched wail--and before the ball caught me in the face, it swerved around my head and skipped into the outfield grass.

* * *

Today in BP I hit three in a row into the right-field bleachers, and

Bender and some of the other guys whistled and patted me on the back when I came out of the cage. I wanted to make them stop, but the damage was done. I saw two children in the seats wrestling over one of the balls I had hit. Just when I was thinking of running at them with my bat, or yelling something incredibly obscene, Macey broke my thought with his abrasive voice and said

Maybe you could help me with something.

And I thought, *When will this end?*

And then Macey got into his batting stance and took a couple of mock swings and asked me if I thought he was opening his hips up too soon.

I could see Coach watching us and listening in from a little ways away, and for his benefit I said

It's possible.

But it made me sick, and I felt like I was watching myself talk from somewhere behind my body, and then I added

There's only an infinitesimal difference between you and me. You could be a hair off in timing. That's the goddamned difference between 80 points in average. And the other difference between 80 points in average is a platoon player and a superstar. Less than 1 out of every 10 at bats, I get a hit that you don't . . . Less than 1 out of 10! And you're a platoon player with no job security. And I'm Jesus Christ. I'm King of the Goddamned world.

Macey stared, and then he smiled, and before he could say anything, I turned and walked away.

Coach followed me into the dugout and asked me what was up my ass. I didn't say anything, and I thought, *If things don't change in 16 days, I'll do something to make them change.*

Coach said if I had one iota less talent, he'd bench my ass. If I wasn't so goddamned important to this team, and this city, he'd have my ass riding the pine. I told him I'd like to have a leave of absence.

He shook his head and spit onto the dugout floor, and then he walked away.

* * *

Pamela and I went out to dinner after today's game to celebrate my 3 doubles, the team's 4 game lead on first place, and our relationship. I decided sometime while I was eating my salad that I would tell her, for her own good.

So I started with the dream about the flowers, and I didn't get it out right, and when I described her hand shaking up and down, and the blood spraying the walls, she said, *My God*, and she put down her fork and covered her mouth. So I changed the subject, and sometime while I was eating apple pie, I began to tell her about the ground balls, and I could tell she wasn't getting it, so I said

Ever since I was nine years old and I took my first ground balls on a hardball diamond, they've come in one of many predictable ways toward my glove. Ground balls belong to a finite set.

And she said

What's a finite set?

And I told her that

If a single ground ball took an unpredictable course over the field I could

And she said

What about bad hops? You get bad hops all the time.

And I told her

Bad hops can be explained. They are the product of a 5 1/2 ounce, leather-covered, tightly-wound ball of yarn being struck from a round, wood surface and moving at a given velocity over grass and soil, in such a way that the ball's course brings it directly onto a stone or the seam between grass and soil, or some such explainable hazard between the ball and my glove, and the ball then takes a hop directly relative to the object it struck.

And she asked me if I was alright.

And I told her

I was saying that if a single ground ball took an unpredictable course over the field, then I could find the strength to go on with this.

And she said

With what? What are you talking about? And her face lost its color and she set her fork down again, this time next to her apple pie, and leaned forward slightly.

My career, I said, Only I wanted to say *My life, My career, Our relationship, Laughter, Talk, Sleep, Sex, Breathing, Driving, Walking, Continuing.*

Her face got its color back and she put her hand on mine and said *You're too good. What would you do, anyway? What would you do?*

And I thought, *Anything, Nothing, Anything,* but I said

I don't know. I guess you're right.

* * *

After losing 3 of 4 to Milwaukee, we fell even with New York with 9 games left. The local papers demanded our heads. The writers here are old

and have waited all their lives for a World Series title. The city has learned to expect failure. Ever since we began to slip, after the All-Star break, there was a rumbling throughout all of Boston.

Today, as I was getting into my car after dinner, a man wearing a Red Sox cap put his hand on my shoulder, and said

Mick, I know you guys are gonna do it.

If I could've summoned the strength in my voice, I'd have told him that failure and success are two sides of the same coin. What is one without the other? When you please someone, you disappoint another. How can it be avoided?

I tried to look at it as I once did. And I saw our lead shrinking in the papers, the little number in the Yank's "Games Back" column getting smaller and smaller. And I saw Jacoby drop an easy fly to lose our third game in a row. And I saw the light in the eyes of a fan go dim after another failure. How can I tell him that it means nothing? That I could stomp my feet and run in circles and warrant just as much respect as when I dive to save a ball game, or hit a pitch over the Green Monster?

The lowest common denominator, I wanted to tell him.

The lowest common denominator makes it all monotony.

* * *

My dad called from Buffalo and asked if I could get play-off tickets for him. I told him we weren't in the play-offs yet. He said he knew we could do it, and that he was proud of me. He said everybody at his office was pulling for us, on account of the fact that I'm his son. I told him we still had a 4 game series with New York, and we were a game back. My dad said

he knew the standings by heart, and wanted to know why I was always so pessimistic. I wanted to say

Not counting on winning 3 of 4 games to finish the season is not pessimistic, but realistic, even if we are playing at home.

I wanted to say

Don't you remember when I was 13, and a grounder took a bad hop off my mouth in batting practice, and I lost a tooth, and cried, and threw my glove onto the dirt? It wasn't the pain, or the tooth, or the blood coming down my chin that made me so upset, but the predictability of it all, the absurd rising and falling, and the way I knew where the ball was going but could do nothing about it.

I wanted to say

I would like to be you for a while on the phone, and you could be me. I would say precisely the exact words that were in your head.

I wanted to say

Your pride in me is ludicrous because what else could I have ever been but myself?

I wanted to say

The world has just 4 days to stop being the world.

I told him I was trying to set myself up for disappointment, so that I wouldn't be heartbroken if we lost. My dad told me that I had to be positive. I told him he was right and I'd scrape up some play-off tickets. He told me he'd gotten my last check.

I appreciate it, he said. *You're a good son.*

* * *

The night before the big game, Pamela made me spaghetti. She tried to keep the subject off the game, because she thought I was nervous. She moved from her sink to her stove to her refrigerator, talking about her life as a receptionist. I sat at the kitchen table with a glass of wine.

I wasn't nervous. It was almost the twentieth day.

Pamela's hair was pulled back and a thick strand of it was loose and lying along her cheek. The steam from the pot on the stove rose up into her bright face. She said my name more times than I've ever heard it before in any given conversation. My Name, My Name, My Name echoed around the room. I saw it on the bill of a child's ball cap, on the backside of a ticket stub. I saw it reproduced on the front-side of a baseball card: in the picture I'd already taken my swing and was starting toward first. A child was waving the card in my face and asking me to put My Name on it. Again. My Name.

Pamela put the salad bowl on the table, and her arms were bare and white, and I wanted to tell her that she was the most beautiful monotony I could ever imagine.

Tomorrow, I said, because I wanted to keep her from speaking, and I wanted to talk about the game more than anything. *Something is going to happen. I can feel it.*

You're going to win the division, she said, touching my shoulder as she went to the refrigerator once again.

If something doesn't happen, I said, *I'm going to make it happen.*

She stirred the sauce and hummed something to herself.

Pamela, I said, and for a second I thought I was going to get it out. The monotony. The ground balls. The world changing. For a second I heard myself saying all of the right words.

She turned her head and gave me a concerned look, hearing something in my voice.

I'm nobody's savior, I said.

* * *

Today is the day the world must change, the last day of the season, and we're 2 outs from taking 3 out of 4 from New York, and winning the East by the skin of our teeth, and I can see the Coach from where I crouch at shortstop. Macey's been brought in to play second, for defensive purposes. There's a runner on first, and we're up by a run. Pamela is in the stands, behind our dugout.

The batter hits a sharp grounder to Macey, and like a machine, I shuffle toward second. Macey scoops it clean, and already the crowd starts to raise its terrible voice. Macey underhands the ball my way, and it meets me at the bag in plenty of time. The runner is barely half-way down the line. I am pivoting, and my arm is cocked, and there are members of the crowd standing, and Pamela's palms are pressed together in front of her lips, like a prayer.

And then a chill goes up and down my body. *Of course*, I think. *Of course.* I send the ball as hard as I can, over Taylor's head and well into the stands. I watch people scramble for it as a groan goes up. Coach curses. Pamela covers her face. I picture my father and his friends from the office, watching via satellite.

Of course.

The next batter hits a ball 450 feet, for the lead. As it takes to the sky, and I watch it clear the fence, I have to hold back tears. Macey, poor, dumb

Macey tells me that we'll get 'em back in the bottom of the inning.

In the bottom of the ninth, down by a run and with two outs, Macey hits a line-drive single over the third baseman's head. I approach the box from the on-deck circle, and Macey is clapping his hands enthusiastically, and shouting my way. *Get it back!* he's yelling. *Pick yourself up!*

I want to tell him that I'm going to lose the game and the division title, and that I'm going to do it on purpose. I want to tell him that when the home run cleared the fence, I nearly wept tears of joy. He's 90 feet away, clapping and shouting. I want to embrace him. *Macey! This is my ground ball! The unpredictable bounce! This is the world changing! At the last possible moment, the world is changing!*

The pitcher stretches, delivers, and sends a fastball over the outside corner for strike one. I step out of the box and look down the line to Ferris, our third-base coach. I let the air out of my chest. Ferris looks into the dugout at Coach to get the sign, and then puts on his dumb show. He slaps his palms against his thighs, rubs the bill of his cap, scrapes his belt, lifts one foot off of the ground and grazes his shin with an open hand.

What you're doing is futile, he tells me. *Hit the ball and win the game.*

The next pitch is also a strike.

I step out of the box and take 7 steps toward Ferris. I squint my eyes and take a good look. His hands float around his body. The muscles of his face contort and relax as he goes through the motions.

Monotony, he says, *is inescapable.*

You are the monotony, he says.

Ferris has a small potbelly which hangs over his belt. His face is red and sweaty. His teeth are exposed in a crooked grimace. I can't fathom why he's alive just now, moving and jerking his limbs.

I step back into the box. I can see every ground ball ever hit to me. Macey now looks pale and afraid, dancing off first. I want to tell him how I hate him, that he can have his world back.

Coach yells for me to get the goddamned bat off my shoulder.

I hit the next pitch into the right-field bleachers.

GODDAMN ALUMINUM

Jeff and I are on the tram at the Omaha Zoo. We're killing time between games. The Omaha Zoo is this great modern facility with all kinds of expensive exhibits. I guess it's because of the Mutual of Omaha. All of that funding. We found out about the zoo in a brochure we got when we first sent away for World Series tickets. I suppose Omaha's best known for the College World Series. But this zoo. It's amazing.

Anyway, Jeff and I are just relaxing on this tram, which is one cart after another--like a train--being pulled by a motorized cart in front. I'm sure you've seen them. The driver--the guy in front--he's got a little microphone he talks into while he's driving. It's not something I could do. He's gotta rattle off all this information about emus, elephants, monkeys--you name it. And with one hand on the wheel, he's gotta steer clear of anybody walking on the path. You know people at zoos. They cut back and forth on the path in groups of four and five, eating cotton candy, without a care in the world.

Anyway, this guy--I think he said his name was Gary--he does his job pretty good. I mean, he pronounces all the animal names correctly, near as Jeff or I can tell. And he doesn't hit any little kids or escaped chimpanzees or anything. Jeff and I don't have any complaints. The round-trip is only a buck.

So everything seems fine and dandy, and Jeff and I are just sitting back relaxing, like I said, and just as Gary drives us past the aquarium, Jeff

says the magic words. You know, the ones that let the Genie out of the bottle.

"Who's pitching tonight?" Jeff says. "Do you know?"

Abracadabra.

An old guy with these crooked, yellow teeth leans his head in between us, from the seat behind us.

"Goddamn aluminum," he says. That's it. He says *Goddamn aluminum* and then he sits there, with his head so close we can smell his breath, and from where I 'm sitting, I can see the little white hairs sticking out of his nose.

"Excuse me?" I say, but I shouldn't even have bothered. I should've taken a diving roll off the tram. It's only moving at something like ten or fifteen miles an hour. Jeff could've fended for himself.

"Goddamn aluminum bats are killing the game," the old man says. Jeff takes a quick glance at me and then stares straight ahead. Then the old man stands--I don't know, the tram's only moving at something like ten miles an hour, like I said, but it *is* moving. He has to crouch slightly to keep from hitting his head on the roof.

"How can you watch a game with that sound?" he says. The tram slows to a stop. Gary's voice breaks off in the middle of something like "On your right you'll find several . . ."

The old man covers his ears with his hands.

"That noise is like hell opening up," he says.

People are turning in their seats, and a fat kid sitting up front is giggling.

Gary comes on the speaker:

"Sir, please remain seated while the tram is in motion."

"Ting! . . . Ting!" the old man yells. "Like they're turning open the locks on the gates of hell!"

Now Gary's up and moving toward us, along the outside of the tram. Gary's not a particularly big guy, but the old man--he's only 100 or 110 pounds max.

The old man puts a bony hand on my shoulder.

"Have you ever hit a ball with a wood bat?" he asks, and his voice is quiet this time. "Back up the middle, right off the sweet spot?"

"Sure," I say. I know what he means. It's not something you forget.

"Have you ever listened to the difference?" he says. "When the bat meets the ball?"

Then Gary gets a hand on him. I don't think he grabs him hard, but the old man spins around like he's been bitten by a snake. He takes a kick and a swing and next thing you know, he tumbles out of the tram, on top of Gary. Gary gets up and his teeth are showing, and he takes a fistful of the old man's shirt and begins shaking him.

"Sir!" he's yelling. "Sir!" And he brings the old man to his feet and shakes him so his head rolls around. But the old man's eyes--they stay focused on the tram, on the people sitting there.

"They're opening the gates of hell!" the old man shouts, and spit flies out of his mouth, into Gary's face.

Gary cocks back his arm and makes a fist.

Then the word *they* hits me: Gary, Jeff, the fat kid sitting up front, the rest of the tram passengers, the couples walking by with cotton candy, me, even me.

"Wait!" I shout, getting up from my seat.

EXTRA INNINGS

Millions of people later claimed that they were there that day, when it began, but this was impossible, of course. People from all over the place, not just New York and the surrounding area, said that they sat in the stands that day, that they were one of the original forty-five thousand. The strangest account I heard was from a man in Peru who wrote to *Baseball Weekly* and said that he had been there with his son. He said he told his son after the first pitch was thrown. Somehow he knew that this game was going to be different, that this game was unlike any other before it. He told his son to get ready for a long one, that they could be there a while. After the first pitch, he claims!

I don't know. I suppose I've heard more far-fetched stories than that guy's. The thing is, for me, I can remember so many little things about that year, during the course of that game. Nothing major, mind you. Just little stuff. That was the last year my wife and I made a go at it, and I remember having some honest-to-god long, late-night talks at the kitchen table with the radio playing in the background. I remember telling her:

"Caroline. We've gotta stick this thing out. For the kids if nothing else." Then I remember, like it was yesterday, that the announcer's voice picked up, and we heard him yell "It's gone!" Just like that. We both had to laugh at that one. That was in the top of the seventy-second inning. Or was it the seventy-third? The seventies were full of home runs.

* * *

When the game first went into extra innings, most, if not all, of the fans were still in the seats. It was the opener, after all, and it was a real peach of a day. I have to admit, I was listening on the radio. I was out on my front porch drinking cold beer and listening. I'm not like that guy from Peru. I can't say I predicted anything. But when it got into the teens, like around inning fourteen, I'd say only half of the originals were left. Oh, it was still a nice day. By then it was about six o'clock and there weren't any clouds in the sky. I was into my second case and feeling pretty good about the whole thing. In another four innings, I was gonna get double my pleasure on opening day. I didn't know the half of it then.

Just as they were going into fifteen, Caroline called from the kitchen and said that the whole family was sitting down to dinner, and would I like to please come in and sit with them for a change? "The whole family" was the wife and me, our son Timmy, and my step-son Roger. The way she said it I pictured all my damn relatives from Connecticut sitting in there, packed like sardines, including my Aunt Hester, who died in a train wreck when I was a kid.

I went in and ate dinner, but I didn't say much, and Roger, who's the one who likes baseball and claims to be kind of a know-it-all, asked me who won the game. I asked him if he was such a trivia buff, how come he didn't know? How come he wasn't listening? He told me he was at the park hitting balls with his friends, which was better than listening, and so he had me there, like he usually did. I didn't even really care, I specifically remember that I didn't, but I did something I shouldn't of then. I got to thinking how this kid was telling me how it was, and he was twelve and I was in my

thirties. So I slapped him. Maybe it was the beer.

Everybody was shocked, but not as much as I was. Caroline stormed out of the room and turned off my radio by pulling the cord out from a place it wasn't supposed to come out of. And then I got to screaming in her face and telling her the game wasn't over and pretty soon everybody was screaming, except Timmy. He's the quiet one.

So the next day I went to Target and bought another radio, just like the one that Caroline gutted. When I got home I plugged it in and turned it on real loud, so that Caroline would know what was what. I could be a real jerk in those days. I started turning stations until I got rid of the static, and next thing you know, I had the game on. I went to the fridge to get a beer, but by the time I had opened it, I heard the announcer say it was the bottom of the thirty-fourth inning. It was the same game!

* * *

There was this one guy that the papers followed that year, because he went into a coma at the exact moment the game went into extra innings. He was a real old guy, and he'd been a baseball fan all of his life, and his son and daughter-in-law were at his bedside in the hospital when he slipped into it. He had been in the hospital for a while because he felt weak and tired and the doctors didn't know what was wrong. He and his son and daughter-in-law were listening to the game on the radio when he turned to his son and said:

"These players make too much goddamned money. They have no loyalty." According to the papers, his son tried to calm him down.

"I saw Ty Cobb play," the old man said, and then he slipped into it. The son said he was about to get a doctor when the radio announcer said:

"We're going to extra innings. And by the looks of it, we could be in for a long one."

* * *

When the game went past midnight that first day and was already going on eleven hours, the umpires convened and decided to postpone it until the next day. They decided the two teams could finish it before the next game. The Yankees and Red Sox would start the next day in the thirty-first inning. It wasn't anything that hadn't been done before. Rain in a tied game and other really long games had pushed games over into two days before. Roger told me that ten and a half hours was a record already, though, and by a long shot. He told me no one in the baseball world had ever heard of such a thing.

So I didn't know for sure that I was listening to history until Roger and Timmy came home from school, and Roger told me how it was. I had a pretty good idea, though. I mean, it was already in the high thirties. After the boys got home from school, the three of us sat around the table listening to my new radio from Target. Eventually, Caroline came in from the bedroom and sat with us too. We came close to being a family that evening. I remember that when it went into the fortieth inning, I asked Caroline what we were gonna do for supper. She shrugged her shoulders. She stared at the radio.

"It's so weird," she said.

Roger told her it was unprecedented.

* * *

I had been laid up from work that summer with a bum ankle, and was raking in Workman's Comp. The truth was I could've went back to work. But why fix something that isn't broken? I took the opportunity to catch up on baseball, on just what the hell was going on in that playing field. I always had a pretty good idea. I mean, I watched plenty of games in my lifetime and knew what was what in terms of the rules. Except the really strange ones. Only Roger knew those. But I know now that baseball is never really understood until it is completely absorbed. I'm talking about addiction now. I'm talking about getting some sort of high, and tears in your eyes when the middle infield turns a tough double play. I've seen it in Roger. I've seen him widen his eyes and wet his lips whenever the conversation turns to baseball. The thing about baseball is, it creates more addicts than any other thing on Mother Earth.

No drug comes close to it.

Caroline went to work everyday and the boys went to school, and I went into Roger's room and took one of his baseball books off the shelf and brought it with me into the kitchen. For several weeks, I sat by the radio, drank my beer, and read about it all: Delahanty, Wagner, Cobb, Hornsby, Ruth, Williams, Robinson, the cut-off and the shift, the double-steal and the suicide squeeze.

All the while, the game played on in the background. Every afternoon, the teams got together and started the game where they had left it the night before. Every evening the umps eventually postponed it. Two weeks into the season, other teams were five and five, or seven and two. The Yanks and the Sox, they were all tied up in the opener. Schedules were shifted because of the game; tickets were altered. The stadium continued to pack the seats. Interest in the team even increased. Everybody wanted to see how it would

turn out. Everybody wanted to be there when it ended. All the batters started coming up to the plate and swinging for the fences. They all wanted the honor of finishing the game. But nobody hit one, and players started to go back to hitting the way they were before the extra innings. Only they couldn't do it. Nobody could find his swing, and in the second and third weeks, pitchers dominated.

Every evening, the boys came in from school with nervous looks on their faces. They rushed to the kitchen table and looked for something in my face. I didn't ever say anything. They could hear the radio. They could make out the score. They knew the game was still going and everything was all right. Another evening of peace at the kitchen table. Caroline even came home singing on occasion. She walked in the door on those nights and would say something like:

"Did you see Macpherson strike out that guy to end the ninety-ninth? What a fastball."

We were gathered around the radio, and she had heard it in her car on the way home from work. But we all understood. That's another thing about baseball.

You don't have to use your eyes to see it.

* * *

It was about a month into the game when I put batteries in the radio and took the boys to the park down the road. Roger showed Timmy and me how to hit. I had never played baseball much, and Timmy isn't the athletic type. But Roger was a little league all-star, and he played every day in gym class when it was nice out. I took my turn first and Roger lobbed one in there

that anybody's grandmother could have probably smashed. It really looked that way to me. Only I missed it! I swung right through it. He pitched again and again, and I kept swinging and missing. Timmy even laughed a little. Roger told me I was pulling my head off of it, that I wasn't looking at the ball.

"Of course I'm looking at the ball," I told him.

"Watch it all the way until it hits the bat," Roger said. Timmy giggled some more. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Let 'er rip," I said. Roger lobbed another one in there and this time I clobbered it. It was the first baseball I ever really hit, and when I did, I thought the whole world waited for a moment. I really put a charge into it, and I watched it go and go until it stopped moving.

* * *

People had been piping up for some time that summer, and when the innings got up over three hundred, the critics really started to raise hell. They aired a show on ESPN where all these baseball gurus came on and sat around a table and argued about why they should or shouldn't end the game the Yanks and Sox had started over six weeks ago. The four of us watched it. Roger and Timmy sat cross-legged on the floor and looked up into the screen. My wife and I held hands on the couch, which we hadn't done in years. Off in the kitchen, we all could hear the faint sounds of the radio.

Those gurus said a lot of things that night, and even got a little wild. One guy's face got redder than any I've ever seen before or since. The veins bulged in his neck and forehead and he tipped the chair he was sitting in. I laugh about it now, but none of us laughed then. Caroline popped some

popcorn and put it into two bowls, and the four of us ate it and watched silently. We were waiting for what the commissioner was going to say. The commissioner was at the end of the table, listening like we were. Hell, the whole world was listening.

One guru shouted "Anarchy!" and another yelled "Inalienable Rights!" Before you knew it, they were shoving each other. When they got things calmed down, the commissioner ruled. He cleared the room to prevent any further disturbances, and he spoke. The commissioner looked right into the camera and said:

"The game will continue."

We all breathed a sigh of relief and Caroline got up and shut the television off. Then Roger stood up and said something none of the gurus had said, something I'll never forget. He said:

"Baseball is mankind's impossible struggle against time."

* * *

Radios were everywhere that summer. People shared them on buses, brought them into bathrooms. I even saw one lady in a phone-booth with one once. When the Sox scored a run or two, the city moaned. When the Yanks battled back in the bottom of the inning, they roared. In crowded places, even outside in the neighborhood, you could hear everyone moan and roar.

Once, the Sox scored five runs at the top of the inning. Everyone thought it was over. I was in the grocery market when it happened, and people were stopped in all the aisles, glued to their radios. I helped an old woman to her feet who was lying on the ground pulling at her hair. She said:

"I've been a New York fan all my life. My Mother, she followed them

when they were still the Highlanders." She cried and held her hands against her face. "Once, when we got beat bad at Fenway, the Sox called us bush leaguers in the papers. Bush leaguers!" She shook her fist and cried some more.

"Just wait," I said. "Remember what Yogi Berra said," I told her, thankful for Roger's books. I put my arm around her. I pulled her close. Just then, the intercom system switched to the game. People shut off their radios and turned their faces toward the ceiling. The old woman and I held each other. The Yanks put four runs on the board with a grand slam in the bottom of the inning. People cheered and slapped each other on the back. Some guy at the end of the aisle dropped a carton of eggs and danced around it.

"One more," I whispered to the old woman. She was shaking. With a man on third and one out, Doherty hit a high fly ball to right field. Everyone held their breath. The announcer couldn't tell if it would make it out. The fielder circled underneath it, backing to the wall. The ball hit his mitt just inches from the fence, and the runner tagged.

"A sac-fly," I said. The old woman hugged me tight and then pulled away. She clapped her hands and jumped up and down. The next batter grounded out and everyone went on with their shopping. That's when I became sure that it wasn't going to end that year, that something was keeping it going.

* * *

By August, Caroline and I had taken the boys to the game several times. We went maybe ten or eleven times in all. It was always hard to get

tickets, but we managed, and usually stayed for nine or ten innings. Nothing compared to the last night of course, in early October, on the last day of the season. All the other games in the league had finished and nothing but the play-offs remained. The Tigers won the division. The Yanks and Sox were both twenty-four games back with a hundred and sixty-two to play. Nobody cared about that. That night, no matter what happened, it was over until the next spring. The commissioner had ruled that after nine more innings, tie or not, the game was finished for the season.

I remember we were quiet in the car that day on the way to the park. We had spent a good chunk of Caroline's paycheck to get the four seats, but that wasn't it. There was something else. The whole city was quiet. We were waiting for something. I had been off of the stuff for about two months at the time, and as we walked into the ballpark I remember craving it again, suddenly, desperately. Two beer vendors passed us before the game even started. I looked between my feet and held Caroline's hand.

The game resumed, and for a little while, everything returned to normal. People moaned and consoled each other when the Sox scored here and there, and people cheered and hugged one another when the Yanks battled back. But as the sun sank and the game neared the final inning, an uneasy quietness settled on the crowd. There was a capacity crowd in the stands, and thousands more in the parking lot, and hardly any of them were making noise. Only the vendors continued to yell. They walked back and forth, and again and again they yelled.

"Beer!" they said. That's the only one I heard. The beer vendor's eyes met mine and Caroline squeezed my hand tighter. I looked to the plate. It was the bottom of the last inning, the game was tied at something like 438 apiece, and the Yanks had just made their second out. Roger stood up first,

and then the rest of us stood up, and then the section stood up, and then the entire stadium was standing. Pretty soon everyone was clapping. Roger looked up at me.

"The game will continue next spring," he said. I stared at him. "If Gonzalez makes an out, it will continue." The ball crossed the plate for a strike, and the count evened at one and one. I looked away from Roger. I began cheering and whistling. The whole stadium roared. I raised Caroline's hand and held it between us, above our heads.

I turned to Caroline and started to speak, but I didn't get it out, and maybe it's for the best. Gonzalez hit the next pitch. Everyone stopped cheering. The ball hit the sky and started to rise. It climbed and climbed, and the left fielder trotted back. It climbed and climbed, and I dropped Caroline's hand and just watched it.