

Bob Gibson and Stan Musial,
Spring Training 1961, Tampa Bay

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

SEASON XXXVI



Angry no more.

FROM THE BULLPEN

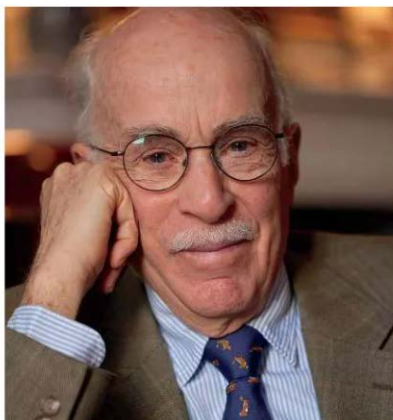
2020 Campaign

Edition No. 24

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Laddies,

On the heels of last week's wildly popular Edition No. 23 of *FTB*, which drew a fairly predictable response from the rank and file¹, I'll take another stab at the old pinata by reporting ever so briefly on the marvelous book that I am just now rounding the corner on:



No Place I Would Rather Be

Roger Angell and a Life in
Baseball Writing JOE BONOMO

In this easily manageable (174 pages) read about Roger Angell *the writer*, I learned or re-learned that Angell started out his writing career not as a sports writer for *The New Yorker*, but while in college where he wrote and edited for *The Harvard Crimson* newspaper. Later, while in the Army Air Force during World War II, he was stationed in Honolulu, Hawaii, and

¹ As in *crickets*.

worked there as a writer and editor for *Brief*, the Seventh Air Force GI magazine. After the war ended, Angell returned to the Big Apple and went to work for a fledgling magazine known as *Magazine X*. A short while later he took a job working for a magazine known as *Holiday*, whose roster included such celebrated writers as William Faulkner, Carl Sandberg, William Saroyan, Ian Fleming, Ogden Nash, Arthur Miller, James Thurber and John Steinbeck, among others.

Between 1946 and 1960, Angell published 21 fictional (mostly non-baseball) stories in *The New Yorker*. In 1956, Angell left *Holiday* and accepted a job as an editor of fiction at *The New Yorker*, where his mother, Katharine White, had worked for many years but had recently retired. Although he had written a couple of stories about baseball for *Holiday*² it wasn't until the winter of 1962 when William Shawn, then the Editor of *The New Yorker*, mentioned to Angell that he would like more sportswriting in the magazine, and suggested to Angell that he try and write a non-fiction piece about baseball, and that perhaps he could find something interesting in that realm. The assignment was vague, and Angell was admittedly apprehensive about it, but it was agreed that he would head down to Florida that March and explore the sport.

While it may or may not have been apocryphal, Shawn reportedly said something like, "Wonderful, take your time there, see what you find. But tell me, again, what exactly is 'Spring Training.' " The rest is history.

Angell's first *New Yorker* nonfiction baseball essay, "The Old Folks behind Home," ran as a Sporting Scene column in the April 7, 1962 issue. It is such a classic piece of Angell work that I include a link here to the article, and invite you to read it yourself. You won't be sorry. [The Old Folks behind Home.](#)

LA VIDA

In *No Place*, author Joe Bonomo refers to a wonderful piece written by Angell in the summer of 1987 which, for perspective, was our third year of competition in the Hot Stove League, and the last time that Big Guy's **Tigers** etched their name on The Cup, besting my own then-**Royals** by the total of 15,316 to 14,976 points. It was also the first year in the HSL for SloPay, whose **Pirates** finished in fourth place, and for Sunny, whose **Blues** finished in dead last, by a fair margin.³ As described by Bonomo, "La Vida" "explores" the men who spend decades in baseball, "gamers" such as Baltimore Orioles Earl Weaver and (then California) Angels owner Gene Autry. Worth sharing with my baseball brothers, here's the link to "[La Vida](#)," which is included in Angell's book *Season Ticket*, published in 1988.

HUB FANS BID KID ADIEU

And lastly, *No Place* revisits the John Updike article published in *The New Yorker* on October 20, 1960, about the great Ted Williams' final game at Fenway Park on September 28, 1960, in which the Splendid Splinter hit a home run in his final major league at-bat. This article,

² The first one being "Baseball--The Perfect Game" in May 1954 and the second being "Farewell, My Giants!" for the May 1958 issue.

³ Not to pick a scab on an old wound, Jon, just stating the facts.

famously titled "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," according to Bonomo, gives the impression of Updike writing an Angell essay before Angell did. Provided herewith for your reading pleasure at the following link, enjoy this historic literary read.

Having now accomplished my goal of providing you with some great baseball reading for the long holiday weekend, the Skipper now bids you all adieu.

Have a safe and enjoyable Thanksgiving holiday, whatever form it might take.

Skipper



(Added by Linda--I was planning on being apolitical this issue--Skip.)

MARCH 1962:

The Old Folks behind Home

Sarasota, March 20

This winter, a local mortician named Willie Robarts sent Sarasota residents and visitors a mailing of cards printed with his name and with the schedule of baseball games to be played here by the Chicago White Sox, who conduct their spring training in Payne Park, right in the middle of town. This must be interpreted as a pure public service, rather than as an attempt to accelerate business by the exposure of senior citizens (or "senior Americans," as they are sometimes called here) to unbearable excitement; only last night I was informed that a Sarasota heart specialist has ordered one of his patients to attend every Sox game as a therapeutic measure. Big-league ball on the west coast of Florida is a spring sport played by the young for the divertissement of the elderly—a sun-warmed, sleepy exhibition celebrating the juvenescence of the year and the senescence of the fans. Although Florida newspapers print the standings of the clubs in the Grapefruit League every day, none of the teams tries especially hard to win; managers are looking hopefully at their rookies and anxiously at their veteran stars, and by the seventh or eighth inning, no matter what the score, most of the regulars are back in the hotel or driving out to join their families on the beach, their places taken by youngsters up from the minors. The spectators accept this without complaint. Their loyalty to the home club is

The Old Folks behind Home

[7

gentle and unquestioning, and their afternoon pleasure appears scarcely affected by victory or defeat. If this attachment were deeper or more emotional, there would have been widespread distress here three years ago when the Boston Red Sox, who had trained in Sarasota for many years, transferred their spring camp to Scottsdale, Arizona, and the White Sox moved down from Tampa, but the adjustment to the new stocking color, by all accounts, was without trauma. The Beach Club Bar, out on Siesta Key, still displays photographs of Bobby Doerr and Dom DiMaggio and other members of the fine Red Sox teams of the forties, and at the ballpark I spotted a boy of ten or twelve wearing a faded junior-size Red Sox uniform (almost surely a hand-me-down from an older brother), but these are the only evidences of disaffection and memory, and the old gentlemen filing into the park before the game now wear baseball caps with the White Sox insigne above the bill.

Caps are the preferred millinery for both male and female fans in Payne Park—baseball caps, long-billed fishing caps, perforated summer-weights, yachting caps with crossed anchors, old-fashioned John D. Rockefeller linen jobs. Beneath them are country faces—of retired farmers and small-town storekeepers, perhaps, and dignified ladies now doing their cooking in trailers—wearing rimless spectacles and snap-on dark glasses. This afternoon, Payne Park's little sixteen-row grandstand behind home plate had filled up well before game time (the Dodgers, always a good draw, were here today), and fans on their way in paused to visit with those already in their seats. The ushers greeted the regulars by name, and I saw one of them offering his arm to a very old lady in a blue hairnet and chatting with her as he escorted her slowly to her seat. Just after the national anthem, the loudspeaker announced that a lost wallet had been turned in, and invited the owner to come and claim it—an announcement that I very much doubt has ever been heard in a big-city ballpark.

There were elders on the field, too. Early Wynn, who has spent half of his forty-two years in the major leagues and has

won 292 games, started for the Sox. He pitched carefully, slowly wheeling his heavy body on the windup and glowering down on the batters between pitches, his big Indian-like face almost hidden under his cap. He has a successful construction business in Venice, Florida, south of here, but he wants that three-hundredth game this year; as for the Sox, if they are to be contenders they must have ten or fifteen wins from him. Duke Snider led off the Dodger second. He is as handsome and cheerful-looking as ever—he has the classic ballplayer's face—but he is a bit portly now, and beneath his helmet the sideburns were white. As he stepped up, a man somewhere behind me shouted, "C'mon, Duke! C'mon, Grandpa—belt one!" and a lady just in front of me murmured to her companion, "Now, really, I think that's very offensive." (Clapping and small, encouraging cries are heard in Florida parks, but boos and personal epithets are bad form.) Duke's feelings didn't seem hurt; he swung viciously and grounded out to second, running it out fast all the way.

Wynn pitched three innings, shutting out the Dodgers and giving up only two hits, and was succeeded by Herb Score. The crowd was pulling for Score with every pitch; they knew his story, which is the saddest in modern baseball. Although he has entirely recovered from the terrible injury he suffered when he was struck in the face by a line drive hit by Gil MacDougald in 1957, Score's confidence, his control, and, finally, his form have vanished, and he has never again approached the brilliance of 1956, when he won twenty games for the Indians, struck out 263 batters, and finished with an earned-run average of 2.53. Now he is up from the minor leagues, battling for a job. Today, at least, he was getting batters out, but watching him work was a nervous, unhappy business. Most of his pitches were high, and it was difficult to see why the Dodgers weren't hitting him harder. He kept running into bouts of wildness, and his delivery was a painful parody of what it used to be, for his arm would come to a full, hitching halt at the end of his windup, and he appeared to be pushing the ball. He escaped his four innings with only a lone,

unearned run scored against him. Meantime, the White Sox were bleeding for runs, too, as they will be all season. They have traded away their power, Minoza and Sievers, for pitching and defense, hoping for a repetition of their 1959 surprise, and the run they scored in the seventh came on two singles and a stolen base—the kind of rally their supporters will have to expect this year.

The tension of a tied, low-scoring game appeared to distract rather than engross the crowd. The sun slid behind the grandstand roof, and there was a great stirring and rustling around me as sweaters were produced and windbreakers zipped up; seats began to be vacated by deserters, and the fans in the upper rows, who had been in the shade all afternoon, came down looking for a warmer perch. Brief bursts of clapping died away, and the only sound was the shrill two-note whistle of infielders encouraging their pitcher. The old people all around me hunched forward, their necks bent, peering out at the field from under their cap bills, and I had the curious impression that I was in a giant aviary. Out in right-field foul ground, members of the Sox' big pitching squad began wind sprints. They stood together in clusters, their uniforms a vivid white in the blaze of late sun, and four or five at a time would break away from the group and make a sudden sandpiper dash along the foot of the distant sea-green wall, all the way into deep center field, where they stopped just as quickly and stood and stared at the game. At last, in the bottom of the twelfth, the White Sox loaded the bases on some sloppy Dodger fielding, and Nellie Fox, his wad of tobacco bulging, delivered the single that broke the bird spell and sent everyone home to supper. "There, now," said the woman in front of me, standing up and brushing her skirt. "Wasn't that nice?"

Sarasota, March 21

Watching the White Sox work out this morning at Payne Park reassured me that baseball is, after all, still a young man's sport and a cheerful one. Coach Don Gutteridge broke up the early

pepper games with a cry of "Ever'body 'round!" and after the squad had circled the field once, the ritual—the same one that is practiced on every high-school, college, and professional ball-field in the country—began. Batters in the cage bunted one, hit five or six, and made room for the next man. Pitchers hit fungoes to the outfielders, coaches on the first and third baselines knocked out grounders to the infield, pepper games went on behind the cage, and the bright air was full of baseballs, shouts, whistles, and easy laughter. There was a raucous hoot from the players around second when a grounder hopped over Esposito's glove and hit him in the belly. Two young boys with fielders' gloves had joined the squad in the outfield, and I saw Floyd Robinson gravely shake hands with them both. Anyone can come to watch practice here, and fans from nearby hotels and cottages wandered in after their breakfasts, in twos and threes, and slowly clambered up into the empty bleachers, where they assumed the easy, ceremonial attitude—feet up on the row in front, elbows on knees, chin in hands. There were perhaps two dozen of us in the stands, and what kept us there, what nailed us to our seats for a sweet, boring hour or more, was not just the *whop!* of bats, the climbing white arcs of outfield flies, and the swift flight of the ball whipped around the infield, but something more painful and just as obvious—the knowledge that we had never made it. We would never know the rich joke that doubled over three young pitchers in front of the dugout; we would never be part of that golden company on the field, which each of us, certainly for one moment of his life, had wanted more than anything else in the world to join.

The Cardinals, who have been having a fine spring, were the visitors this afternoon, and their high spirits infected everyone. Minnie Minoso, grinning extravagantly, exchanged insults with his former White Sox teammates, and Larry Jackson, the big, fast Cardinal right-hander, laughed out loud on the mound when he got Joe Cunningham, who was *his* teammate last year, to miss badly on a big curve in the first inning. Stan Musial had the day

off, and Al Lopez, the Sox' manager, had filled his lineup with rookies. My eye was caught by the Chicago shortstop, a kid named Al Weis, who is not on the team's regular roster but who was having a nifty day in the field. He started double plays in the first and second innings, and in the third he made a fine throw from deep short to get Jackson, and then robbed Gotay with a diving spear of a low, hot liner. At the plate, though, he was nervous and uncertain, anxious to succeed in this one short and, to him, terribly important afternoon. He struck out in the first inning and again in the second, stranding two base-runners.

At about this time, I began to pick up a dialogue from the seats directly behind me—a flat, murmurous, continuous exchange in Middle Western accents between two elderly men.

"Look at the skin on my hands, how dry it is," said one.

"You do anything for it?" asked the other.

"Yes, I got some stuff the doctor gave me—just a little tube of something. It don't help much."

I stole a look at them. They were both in their seventies, at least. Both were sitting back comfortably, their arms folded across their stomachs.

"Watch that ball," said the first. "Is that fair?"

"No, it's foul. You know, I haven't seen a homer this year."

"Me neither."

"Maybe Musial will hit one here tomorrow."

The White Sox, down one run after the first inning, could do nothing with Jackson. Weis struck out again in the fifth, made a wild throw to first in the sixth, and then immediately redeemed himself with another fast double play. The voices went on.

"This wind melts your ice cream fast, don't it?"

"Yes, it does. It feels nice, though. Warm wind."

In the top of the eighth, with the bases loaded, Weis grabbed another line drive and doubled up the runner at second base. There were chirps from the stands.

"It don't seem any time at all since spring training last year."

"That's because we're older now. You take my grandson, he's

always looking forward to something. Christmas and his birthday and things like that. That makes the time go slow for him. You and me, we just watch each day by itself."

"Yes. You know, I didn't hardly think about life at all until I was sixty-five or seventy."

"I know."

Weis led off the bottom of the eighth, and popped up to left. He started still another double play in the ninth, but his afternoon was ruined. The Cardinals won the game, 2-0.

This evening, I looked up Al Weis's record. He is twenty-two years old and was an All-Scholastic player at Farmingdale High, on Long Island. In his three years in organized baseball, he has played with Holdrege, in the Nebraska State League; with Lincoln, in the Three-I League; and with Charleston, in the Sally League. His batting averages in those years—.275, .231, .261—tell the story: good field, no hit. Time has run out for him this spring, and it must seem to him that it went too quickly. Next week, he will report to the White Sox farm camp in Hollywood, Florida, for another year in the minors.

St. Petersburg, March 22

This is Gerontium, the elders' capital—city of shuffleboard courts, city of sidewalk benches, city of curious signs reading "Youtharama," "Smorgarama," and "Biblegraph." Today it was also the baseball capital of the world, for the game at Al Lang Field was the first encounter between the Yankees and the New York Mets, the new National League team that sprang—not simply full-grown but middle-aged—out of the forehead of George Weiss last winter. Some of the spectators' curiosity and expectancy about this game resembled the unbecoming relish with which party guests watch a newly divorced couple encountering each other in public for the first time; for they could watch General Manager Weiss, in his box behind the home dugout, and Casey Stengel, in the dugout, staring over at the team

that had evicted them so scandalously two years ago. But there was another, more valid tension to be tasted; one sensed that this game was a crisis for the Mets—their first chance to discover, against the all-conquerors, whether they were truly a ball team. A rout, a laughter, a comedy of ineptitude might destroy them before the season ever began.

St. Petersburg fans are elderly, all right, but they are noisier, keener, and more appreciative than their counterparts to the south. For one thing, they know more baseball. Al Lang Field has for years been the late-winter home of two good teams, the Yankees and Cardinals; when the Yankees moved to new quarters at Fort Lauderdale this year, the Mets moved in to take their place. I had guessed that this switch of home teams might cause some confusion of loyalties, but I was wrong. There was a respectable burst of applause when Mickey Mantle stepped up to the plate in the second inning, but this was almost immediately smothered by a full roar of pleasure when Charlie Neal collared Mantle's streaking grounder in short right and threw him out. Groans and headshakings followed when the Yanks collected three singles and a run off Roger Craig's pitching, but the Mets failed to collapse. Frank Thomas hit a double in the Mets' half of the inning—the first hit given up by Bill Stafford, the Yankees' starting pitcher, all spring—and there was another startled shout a few minutes later when Hodges and Chacon pulled off a 3-6-3 double play on Maris's bouncer. The Mets not only belonged, they were winning converts every minute.

The Mets are an attractive team, full of echoes and overtones, and one must believe that George Weiss has designed their clean, honest, but considerably frayed appearance with great care. Gus Bell, Frank Thomas, Eddie Bouchee, and Richie Ashburn are former headliners whose mistakes will be forgiven and whose accomplishments will win sentimental affection. Coach Cookie Lavagetto and pitchers Roger Craig and Clem Labine will bring the older Dodger fans up to the Polo Grounds this summer. Neal and Zimmer looked unchanged—Neal intense, withdrawn, talented,

too tightly wound for an ideal infielder, and Zimmer eager and competitive, angrily trying to make pugnacity compensate for what he lacks in size, skill, and luck. Gil Hodges still cannot hit pitches over the outside corners, but his stance and his mannerisms at the plate are a cup of limeflower-tea to those with memories: The bat is held in the left hand while he fiddles with his eyelashes with his right hand, then settles his helmet, then tucks up his right pants leg, then sweeps the hand the full length of the bat, like a duelist wiping blood off a sword, and then at last he faces the pitcher. Finally, there is Casey himself, a walking pantheon of evocations. His pinstripes are light blue now, and so is the turtleneck sweatshirt protruding above his shirt, but the short pants, the hobble, the muttering lips, and the comic, jerky gestures are unaltered, and today he proved himself still capable of the winning move.

The Mets went ahead, 3-2, in the sixth inning, on two Yankee errors, two walks, and Zimmer's single. After that, the St. Petersburg fans began a nervous, fingers-crossed cry of "Keep it up, Mets!" and welcomed each put-out with shouts of incredulity and relief. In the ninth, though, the Mets' second pitcher, a thin young Negro named Al Jackson, up this year from Columbus, gave up four singles and the tying run after Neal messed up a double play. With the winning runs on base, Stengel showed how much he wanted this game for his team, for he came out to the mound and relieved Jackson. (Pitchers are almost never yanked in mid-inning in spring training.) The relief man, Howie Nunn, retired Blanchard on a pop behind second for the last out. More wonders followed. Joe Christopher, another unknown, led off the Mets' ninth with a triple, and after Zimmer had fouled out, Stengel looked into his closet of spare parts, which is far less well stocked than his old-Yankee cornucopia, and found Ashburn there. Richie hit the first pitch into right field for the ball game, and George Weiss nodded his head, stood up in his box, and smiled for the first time today.

I doubt whether any of the happy six thousand-odd filing out

of Al Lang Field after the game were deluding themselves with dreams of a first-division finish for the Mets this year. The team is both too old and too young for sensible hopes. Its pitchers will absorb some fearful punishment this summer, and Chacon and Neal have yet to prove that they can manage the double play with any consistency. Still, though, the Mets will be playing in the same league with the Houston Colt .45s, another newborn team of castoffs, and with the Phillies, who managed to finish forty-six games out of first place last year and will have eight more games this year in which to disimprove that record. The fight for the National League cellar this summer may be as lively as the fight for the pennant. What cheered *me* as I tramped through the peanut shells and discarded programs and out into the hot late sunlight was not just the score and not just Casey's triumph but a freshly renewed appreciation of the marvelous complexity and balance of baseball. Offhand, I can think of no other sport in which the world's champions, one of the great teams of its era, would not instantly demolish inferior opposition and reduce a game such as the one we had just seen to cruel ludicrousness. Baseball is harder than that; it requires a full season, hundreds and hundreds of separate games, before quality can emerge, and in that summer span every home-town fan, every doomed admirer of underdogs will have his afternoons of revenge and joy.

Tampa, March 24

The population of Tampa is 275,000. I looked it up this morning, but I could have saved myself the trouble. Anyone attending a game in the big, modern reinforced-concrete-shell grandstand of Al Lopez Field (named for the White Sox manager, who is a Tampa native) could figure out that this is the big town in these parts; he could tell it by the sound of the crowd alone—a steady, complex, cosmopolitan clamor made up of exhortation, laughter, outright booing, the cries of venders, and the hum of garrulous city talkers. Today the old people in the stands were

outnumbered. There were young women in low-cut sun dresses, children of all ages (two boys near me were wearing Little League uniforms with "Western Fertilizer" emblazoned on the back), and Negroes and Cubans in the grandstand. The sun was hot and summery, and I felt at home: this was July in Yankee Stadium. Nevertheless, I had trouble concentrating on the first few innings of the game, which was between the Cincinnati Reds, who train here, and the visiting Dodgers. My mind kept returning to an incident—a sudden visual snapshot of a scene—in the game I saw yesterday in Bradenton, where Milwaukee had beaten the Yankees.

Bradenton yesterday was nothing like Tampa today. The weather was cold early spring, with low clouds and a nipping wind blowing in from left field. The stadium might have been a country fairgrounds, and the elders who had come early and filled up the park to see the mighty Yankees had the gravity, the shy politeness, and the silence of a rural crowd at a tent show. A rain the night before had turned the infield into a mudpie, and while we waited patiently for it to dry, three bearded men wearing plumed Spanish helmets, silvery chest plates, short striped pants, and high boots trooped out in front of the dugout, carrying swords, to have their picture taken with Mickey Mantle. They were local citizens participating in Bradenton's annual de Soto celebration. Mickey grinned and brandished one of the swords for the photographer, and the conquistadors looked awed. At last, the game began, in tomblike silence. No one complained when Mantle, Howard, Boyer, and Berra failed to appear in the opening lineup. Hardly anyone cheered when the Braves got to Jim Coates for a run in the third. A man standing in front of the scoreboard in deep center field hung up a numbered placard for each ball, strike, and out. When the sun began to break through, another employee came out of the Braves' clubhouse beside left field and hung a dozen sweatshirts—white, with black sleeves—out to dry on a clothesline strung between two palm trees. The game turned out to be a good one; there was some small

shouting when the Braves came from behind to tie the score in the bottom of the ninth on a home run by Tommie Aaron, Hank Aaron's kid brother, and some guffaws when the Yanks lost it on an error in the tenth. In spite of the score, and perhaps only because of the peacefulness and stolidity of the fans, I came away with the impression that the Braves have become a middle-aged team, now somehow past the point of eagerness and energy that has made them champions or fearsome contenders for the last nine years.

The incident that startled me at Bradenton was one of those astonishing juxtapositions that are possible only in spring training. In the seventh inning, with the sun now fully out and the grass turning soft and emerald as it dried, Whitey Ford came in to pitch for the Yankees. At the same moment, in the Braves' bullpen in deep left field, Warren Spahn began throwing—not warming up but simply loosening his arm. Suddenly I saw that from my seat behind first base the two pitchers—the two best left-handers in baseball, the two best left- or right-handers in baseball—were in a direct line with each other, Ford exactly superimposed on Spahn. It was a trick photograph, a *trompe-l'oeil*: a 158-game winner and a 309-game winner throwing baseballs in the same fragment of space. Ford, with his short, businesslike windup, was all shoulders and quickness, while, behind him, Spahn would slowly kick his right leg up high and to the left, peering over his shoulder as he leaned back, and then deliver the ball with an easy, explosive sweep. It excited me to a ridiculous extent. I couldn't get over it. I looked about me for someone to point it out to, but I couldn't find a recognizable fan-face near me.

The Tampa crowd this afternoon would have spotted it. They knew their baseball, and they were tough and hard to please. Joey Jay, the Reds' top starter, was having all kinds of trouble on the mound. His control was off, he had to throw too many pitches, and he kept shaking his head disgustedly. After the first two innings, the Dodgers were waiting for him to get behind and

come in with a fat pitch. They batted around against him in the third inning, scoring five runs; two of them came on a home run by Daryl Spencer, and then in the fifth Spencer knocked another pitch over the fence. Manager Hutchinson left Jay in, letting him take his punishment while he got the work he needed. The fans, though the Reds are their team, seemed to enjoy it all. They booed Jay lightly; they didn't mind seeing him suffer a little—not with that \$27,500 salary he won after a holdout this spring. They applauded Koufax, the Dodger pitcher, who was working easily and impressively, mixing fast balls and curves and an occasional changeup, pitching in and out to the batters, and hitting the corners. Koufax looked almost ready for opening day.

There were fewer rookies and scrubs in the lineups today; the season begins in just over two weeks. These two teams will almost certainly fight it out with the Giants for the pennant, and I was tempted to make comparisons and private predictions. But then I reminded myself that baseball would be competitive and overserious soon enough. The city crowd around me here, the big park, and the approaching time for headlines, standings, and partisanship had almost made me knowing and Northern again. Already I had begun to forget the flavor of Florida baseball—the older, easier pleasures of baseball in the spring in the country.

MARCH 1968:

The Short Season

Baseball has begun. East and west, this is the week of the unfurled bunting, the flexed mayoral or gubernatorial wing, the restored hope, the repainted seat, the April fly ball falling untouched on resodded turf, the windblown shout, and the distant row of pitchers and catchers huddling deeper into their windbreakers as the early-spring sunlight deserts the bullpen. Now everything counts; from now until October, every pitch and every swing will be recorded. In another month, some order will begin to emerge from the standings. Infields will have hardened, some arms and expectations will have gone bad, and enormous crowds will pour out for the first weekend doubleheaders. The long season will engage us once again. Before this happens, however, there may still be time to set down some notes about the other, shorter baseball season that is just past—the time of spring training. I know, of course, that spring ball games in Florida and Arizona are meant to be forgotten. March standings and averages are written in the sand; winning is incidental. Many ballplayers hate spring training—rookies because of the anxieties of trying to win a job, the regulars because of the immense labor and boredom of physical conditioning, the fear of injury, and the threat, heavier each year, of losing a starting position. Only the fan—and perhaps only the big-city fan, at that—is free to savor the special taste of this time and place. After a recent week in Flor-

exceptional relief artist), and infielders, hitters, coaches, managers, scouts, executives, and owners, and most of the time I started with the same question: "How do you do what you do?" They responded with floods of information and instruction, example and anecdote, all put forth with an intensity that confirmed my belief that this placid, easy game is in fact a thing of such difficulty that it easily holds off our wish to master it and bend it to our desires. No team in this decade has established itself as a dynastic power — it is quite the contrary, in fact — despite the best corporate and strategic efforts of twenty-six major-league duchies to achieve that end: a macrocosm of the resistance presented by every game, almost every inning, on the long summer schedule. Since I am a fan, I will always be an amateur of baseball, but I no longer feel like an outsider; none of the old pros I talked to on the field or in the dugout or up in the stands gave me the impression that he had subdued the game, either. We are baffled but still learning, and we keep coming back for more.

— R.A.

★ ★ ★ ★

Two chapters have been shuffled out of calendar order in the book, in the interest of better flow. In the interest of sanity, I have omitted mention (for the most part) of the trades or other shifts of affiliation that have moved some players and managers along to other teams since their appearance in these pages.

ONE

La Vida

Summer 1987

BASEBALL opens your eyes. Each new season, it takes me four or five games before I begin to see what's really happening on the field — how the pitcher is working to this particular batter; the little shifts in the infield defense, with men on base, as the count progresses; how bold or how cautious this manager will be with his fresh assemblage of hitters and base runners. Over the winter I also seem to forget another part of baseball — the stuff away from, or off to one side of, the teams and the standings and the vivid events on the diamond, which can reward the experienced and reawakened fan. But that, too, comes back in time. At Tiger Stadium, early in June — June, 1984: the Year of the Tiger, it turned out — I watched the Toronto Blue Jays valiantly trying to chip away at Detroit's mountainous early-season lead in the American League East in a contest that the visitors eventually won, 6–3, thus narrowing the Detroit margin to three and a half games. (The Jays never came as close again.) There was a big, apprehensive crowd and plenty of action — back-to-back doubles by the Jays' Dave Collins and Lloyd Moseby and an inside-the-park homer by George Bell — but between all the action and the cheering and the rest of it my attention was taken by a spider I happened to notice up in one corner of the frame of the open press-box window before me. It was a very small spider — a dot, really — but a busy one. It was working on a web. Inning by inning, the creature persisted, laying out struts and cables, catwalks and connectors, and the stadium floodlights illuminating the green field below us also lit up the little construction project as it grew in size and beautiful design. The white light struck each fresh thread with silver as it appeared, magically, where there had been none be-

fore, and was stretched to its planned and perfect mooring. I pointed out the web to my seatmate in the press box, and he studied it, too, and in time I noticed that each of us was following the game in the same way — watching the pitch or the play below and sometimes making an entry in his scorecard, but then returning at once to the smaller event above us in the window. I ran into that writer, an old friend, in October at the World Series in Detroit, and after we'd exchanged some remarks about the players and the pitching and the coming game he said, "Say, do you remember that night back here in the summer, with that little spider? Wasn't that *something*? You know, I woke up the other night and I was thinking that again. Funny . . ."

Then I might add that the thing we remember at my house about a Fourth of July Mets-Astros game at Shea (four of us had gone to it: a family party) isn't the terrific postgame fireworks or a little blood-letting of Astro runs in the first inning but our getaway from the parking lot afterward. (I hope soon to complete my small monograph on stadium-quitting.) Actually, by the time we turned up at Shea the lot was full, with the gates and pay booths closed, and we had to make do with a narrow, muddy little junkyard off some street out beyond the center-field parking sectors, where a local entrepreneur took our seven bucks and then absolutely buried us in a welter of other late-comers. No hope, but when we found our way back there, hours later, beyond the motionless thousands of overheating cars and captive fans and patriots self-blocked in the main lot, someone in our group spotted a little alley at the back of the yard, and we took a chance and swung that way, against the flow of cars inching out, and found a miracle there: an empty street. I zipped through a couple of blocks, hung a right away from the honking tangle, extemporized a dazzling U-turn under the Whitestone Expressway, guessed and grabbed another right, spotted the good old boat basin off to my right, and laid a little left onto the Grand Central Parkway: home free, homeward bound, with the cheers of my fans loud in the car and cascades of Queens-side Roman candles on either hand celebrating our brilliant departure.

Nor is there anything in my baseball notebooks about the second game of a Saturday doubleheader in the middle of August — the Twins against the Red Sox at Fenway in the latter stretches of one of those long, nearly eventless games when the sawdust slowly begins to leak out of the pastime. Why do I remember it so well? The pitcher out there has run the count to 3-1. There is a foul, then another foul.

The pitcher doesn't want the new ball the umpire has thrown in and asks for another one. He gets it and rubs it slowly in his hands. He winds and throws: another foul. The outfielders shift from foot to foot and stare deeply into the grass before them. A base runner leads cautiously away from first, then trots back as the pitcher steps off the rubber. The third-base ump walks seven steps out toward left field, turns, and strolls back again. Another foul ball, bounced softly past first base. "Throw it *straight*," somebody in the press box mutters. There are spatters of applause in the stands, but they die away for lack of hope. The lights are on, for evening has crept closer, and here and there in the lower decks I can see some fans getting up, in twos and threes, and heading up the aisles for home and dinner. The park is half empty by now. Out in the sloping right-field sector of the seats, there is a thin, a-cappella rendering of "Happy Birthday," for somebody — her name is Ella, it turns out — and other fans around the park join in on the last "happy birthday to you-ooo!" and Ella gets a little round of applause, too. But that ends as well (a coach is out talking to the pitcher now), and even the everyday noises of the baseball park — the hum of voices, the undercurrent of talk and cheers and laughter and vender cries — drop and fade, and Fenway Park is almost silent, just for a minute. The flag in center field hangs motionless in the last late sunlight, its pole a startling pink. The right-field bleachers are bathed in pastel, and a first breath of evening cool floats up from the lighted field below. I sigh and stretch, wanting the game to get on with itself, but in no hurry, really. No place to go, no place I need to be. Midsummer.

Baseball is not life itself, although the resemblance keeps coming up. It's probably a good idea to keep the two sorted out, but old fans, if they're anything like me, can't help noticing how cunningly our game replicates the larger schedule, with its beguiling April optimism; the cheerful roughhouse of June; the grinding, serious, unending (surely) business of midsummer; the September settling of accounts, when hopes must be traded in for philosophies or brave smiles; and then the abrupt running-down of autumn, when we wish for — almost demand — a prolonged and glittering final adventure just before the curtain. But nowhere is this metaphor more insistent than in baseball's sense of slippage; our rueful, fleeting awareness that we tend to pay attention to the wrong things — to last night's rally and tomorrow's pitching match-up — while lesser and sweeter moments slide by unperceived. Players notice this, too. Bob Gibson, the

most competitive man I have ever seen on a ballfield, once told me that what he missed most after he had retired wasn't the competition at all. "I don't miss the pitching but I can't say I don't miss the game," the Cardinal Hall of Famer said. "I miss it a *little*. There's a lot I don't want to get back to. . . . I think it's the life I miss — all the activity that's around baseball. I don't miss playing baseball but I miss . . . baseball. *Baseball*. Does that sound like a crazy man?"

I told him he wasn't crazy, and I think I also said that I'd heard some other players and managers use the same phrase in the same way: *the life*. It was a little while, however, before I began to appreciate that this other side of the game was there for me, as well. *La vida* is not the same for a middle-aged baseball writer as it is for the players (scribes — even the beat men — never wholly belong in the clubhouse, the way the players do), but there are some compensations; for one thing, the life is easy for me to bring back, because I wrote down so much of it. For another, I was encouraged to write about myself, myself as a fan, which is a kind of reporting that other lucky baseball writers should be given as their beat. I could be light-hearted or even trivial, if it suited me, and I could revisit old baseball friends whenever I wished.

Earl Weaver, for one. Here he is, as jaunty as ever, even when seen in serious circumstances — just before his last game in baseball (or so he thought and we all thought), on the first Sunday in October, 1982. He lost that day, and the Brewers, not his Orioles, progressed to the playoffs and then on into a bruising seven-game World Series with the Cardinals. When the Orioles' season came to its end that afternoon in Baltimore, the downcast but grateful multitudes in Memorial Stadium repeatedly summoned Weaver back to the field with their applause. He waved his cap again and again, and then led the funny local letter-cheer for the fans one more time, stubbornly spelling out the name of their team, with tears glistening on his face. But never mind that; here is the beginning:

This is the final day of the regular season, the last tick on the great summerlong, hundred-and-sixty-two-game clock, and the two teams here in Memorial Stadium — the Orioles and the visiting Milwaukee Brewers — are tied for first place in the American League East. The winners of this game will finish up with ninety-five victories and sixty-seven losses (the best record in either league in 1982) and will catch an evening flight to the Coast to begin preparations for the league-championship series that opens on Tuesday against the California Angels. There is such a thing as caring too much, and here

on the sun-warmed field, chatting with writer friends and watching the batters in the cage, I realize that I almost don't want this game played, for one of these two sterling, embattled clubs — equal favorites of mine, if that is possible — must lose before the day is done. But play they must, and, deep down, I want the Orioles to win, because of Earl. He is retiring after fourteen and a half seasons at the helm, during which span his teams have twelve times won ninety games or more, with six divisional championships, four pennants, and one World Championship. Only the late Joe McCarthy had a better managerial record in this century. Retiring now is Weaver's idea, announced more than a year ago; he wants less time in airplanes and hotel lobbies, more time to give to his vegetable garden, to the dog track, to visiting his grandchildren. "Anybody has to be stupid to work when he doesn't have to," he has said, but he is only fifty-two years old, and the betting is that he will be back in a year or two, managing somewhere, at a very large salary, and talking baseball better than anyone else.* Here, sitting at ease in his dugout, his cap pushed back, one leg comfortably crossed, ankle on knee, over the other, and with the press kneeling and sitting and leaning in about him in a three-deep semicircle, he is hoarse and cheerful and profane, and so eager in response that he makes each reporter's questions sound simply conversational. He is himself, that is, and the burdens of this special day have not dimmed him. No, he tells us, making out the lineup card this morning didn't require any more care than usual. "I think hard about all my lineup cards," he says, "so this was no harder than the other hundred and sixty-one." No, he hadn't worried about the games ahead when he was out in Detroit the other day and down by four. "What happened in *that* game and what was happening to Milwaukee in the game over in Boston was what mattered. It's always one game at a time. You can't do nothing about the other

*Quite right, and the job, it turned out, was managing the Orioles. Earl took up the reins again in midseason of 1985, and helped steer his old club to a second-place finish. The next year, however, everything went sour — most of all, the pitching — as the team slipped into the cellar of the American League East, and when it was over Earl stepped down for good. In retrospect, I think I should have known that the first retirement wouldn't work. Earlier in 1982, I recall, I asked him in a casual sort of way if he was truly ready to leave — and in particular if he'd be able to stick to his promise to stay out of baseball altogether. Wasn't it possible that he'd end up coaching a college team or even a high-school team somewhere, the way so many other retired skippers had done? "I *hate* kids and I *hate* fucking kid baseball!" he barked, startling us both into laughter. He wanted the real thing, nothing less.

ones." The talk shifts to Jim Palmer, who will start today, and to his opponent, the veteran Don Sutton. "I'll get goose bumps when Jimmy walks in from the bullpen before the game," Weaver says. "I always do. He's a lot responsible for us being here today, you know." Palmer, at 15-4 for the year, has lost only one game in his last twenty-four starts. "There've been times when he did it with just this" — he taps his forehead — "and the other man out there today can do the same thing if he has to. It's always easy for the scouts to say 'Pitch a good fastball up and in on this batter,' but maybe the guy on that little hill can't always *do* it."

There is more, and in the next few minutes Earl stands up (not an extended process for him, at five feet six and a half inches) to illustrate a right-handed batter leaning out over the plate in pursuit of an outside slider and to show how good infielders all reflexively lean to their left in response; sits down again and recalls the pain he experienced in the spring of 1948, when he was an aspiring seventeen-year-old second baseman and was suddenly cut from the roster of the Class B Lynchburg, Virginia, club and had to watch his teammates depart on a train while he and another unfortunate waited for the bus that would take them to join the Class D West Frankfort, Illinois, team ("The guy to feel sorry for," Earl says, "is the kid with West Frankfort who thought he had the second-base job nailed down until I turned up"); and gets up again to illustrate a play in 1964, when he was managing the Elmira (N.Y.) Pioneers. Coaching at third base, he watched a wild pitch that struck the corner of the plate and bounced crazily into the air. "I go halfway down the line to see if the catcher can make the play," he says, "and when he does I try to stop my base runner, Paul Blair, who is coming in all the way from second, but by the time I spin around, Paulie is *there*" — he puts the palm of his hand an inch in front of his nose — "and when I pick myself up I've got footprints here and here and here. Yes, he scored."

In time, he goes off to talk for the television cameras, and when he steps up out of the dugout there is an instant response from the early crowd — a fervent little scattering of "Wea-ver! Wea-ver!" — which he acknowledges with a shy half wave. Like the fans, I want more Earl, but I can console myself by remembering how many dugout monologues and postgame interviews and springtime dissertations and late-night World Series battle summations I have heard from him over the years — all of them, without exception, a lesson and a treat. Back in August, almost two months earlier, I interrupted a seaside vacation in eastern Maine to catch a couple of Orioles-Red Sox

games at Fenway Park — to see the teams and hear the crowds and revisit my true favorites, the Bosox, in their jewel-green home park, but mostly to call on Earl Weaver in his last summer of baseball. I had no idea then, of course, that his club would make it back from its third-place spot in the standings, and neither did he, I think. In the dugout just before that series began, Weaver said, "This is a big game for us — I hate to say it. We've lost eleven of sixteen, and our ass is about to hit the water. We just died in Chicago." Rick Dempsey, his veteran catcher, came by at that instant and murmured, "Outman-aged again," and Earl laughed. Clif Keane, the emeritus professor of insults of the Boston press, asked Dempsey about his .129 lifetime batting average (he is in fact a career .235 hitter), and Dempsey said, "Yes, I got to admit it. I got fourteen years in and I've never been hot." Earl lit another Raleigh and politely asked a hovering young woman sportswriter from a suburban Massachusetts paper if she knew any two-syllable words, and when she said yes, she did, he said, "Then you'll go far. This man" — he nodded toward Keane — "got by all these years on just one syllable at a time: 'They-played-a-game-on-this-day-and-our-team-beat-their-team-by-a-score-of-two-to-one.'" "That was for *you*!" Keane cried. "I always did that when I knew you were in town and might buy the paper!" And so on. But there was some real baseball in it, too, and soon Earl was on his feet to show us how he and his coaches had been working with the brilliant young Baltimore rookie Cal Ripken, who was making the difficult transition from third base to shortstop in midseason and had just begun to learn not to take the tiny half step toward the plate which every third sacker makes with the pitch — because he must be so quick to respond to a bunt or a bulletlike line drive — but which the shortstop must avoid, since it can cost him a full stride to one side or the other in the much wider area of the field he must cover. "Wherever he plays, you can write him in for the next fifteen years, because that's how good he is," Earl said of Ripken. "He's got fifteen home runs already, and he ain't missed a ground ball yet, and that's amazing."

The following day at the Fens, Earl was sitting beside Jim Palmer during the dugout levee and, in response to some question or other, unwarily said, "I watch a game with my mind completely blank. Most of the time, I'm only thinking that I'm glad I don't have to make a decision." Palmer, nodding his head happily, said, "Me, too, Earl. I'm always glad about that." The next exchanges have slipped my mind, but when Palmer picked up his glove and went up onto

the field I noticed how Weaver followed him with his gaze. The little manager and the tall pitcher have been together on the Orioles ever since the summer of 1969 — over two thousand games now — and they have had some celebrated disagreements. Most of the time, though, they remind me of a father and son who have been forced to spend too many days and hours together behind the counter in the family stationery store or delicatessen. There are hundreds of shared anecdotes that they tell differently and squabble over, and a few serious, semi-public differences of opinion between them about business strategy and comportment, but mostly they convey the pleasingly complicated impression that while they can hardly bear each other's company for a single day longer, they care about and count on each other more than either one can admit. The moment one of them is out of earshot of the other, what you hear is a compliment. This time, Earl turned to one of the Baltimore writers and said, "Do you remember Jim pitching that day against Oakland — the old Oakland team, when they were so tough — when he started rearranging our outfielders, the way he does? Bando is coming up, with men on base, and he's a right-handed hitter, of course, and Jimmy begins to move our *right* fielder — I think it's Rettenmund — in, and then over a step, and then *back* a half step, like a goddam photographer arranging a picture, and then he holds up his hands — Hold it! Right there! — and the next pitch, the very next goddam pitch, Bando hits a *shot* out to right, and the fielder goes like this and like this, bending in and leaning back while he's watching the ball, but he never has to take a single goddam step, and he makes the catch. Jim Frey was coaching with us then, and he turns to me on the bench and says, 'Well, now I've seen everything.'" Weaver laughed and coughed, and shook his head at the memory of it. "Nobody like Jim Palmer," he said.

One spring in Mesa, Arizona, I ran into Gene Autry, the owner of the California Angels, who was chatting with some of his players in the visiting-team dugout. He was wearing cowboy boots and a narrow string tie. He looked gentle and old and agreeable, the way he always does. When the Angels lost the American League playoff in 1982 by dropping three games in a row to the Brewers (after winning the first two games), and then threw away another championship series in 1986 under even more unlikely and scarifying circumstances, everybody in baseball felt bad, I think, because they so wanted a Gene Autry team in a World Series. We chatted a little, and he told me

about his baseball beginnings. "I was always a Cardinals fan then," he said, "because I came from Oklahoma, and they had the Dean brothers and Pepper Martin and all those other Okies playing for them. Then I followed the Cubs, because I'd started in singing over Station WLS, in Chicago. The Gabby Hartnett-Charlie Grimm Cubs, I mean. Oh, I had a lot of baseball friends. I have a photo at home of me and Casey Stengel and Mantle and Whitey Ford. I wouldn't take anything in the world for that photo. You know, I was thinking just the other day about the old days down home, when we'd listen to Bob Kelley, who did those game re-creations from the Coast over the radio, from a telegraph ticker. You don't remember that, I imagine. There'd be nothing, and then you'd hear the ticker begin to go and you'd know something was happening in the game, and then he'd describe it. He could bring it all alive for you."

But I did remember. I still do — me, at ten or eleven, with my ear next to the illuminated, innerly-warmed gold celluloid dial of the chunky, polished-wood family radio, from which there emerges, after an anxious silence, the clickety, train-depot sounds of a telegraph instrument suddenly bursting with news. Then a quick, closer *tock!* — the announcer or some studio hand rapping on the mike with a pencil, I suppose — and the re-creator, perched in his imaginary press box, says, "Uh-oh. . . . Hafey really got hold of that delivery from Fat Freddie. The ball is rolling all the way to the wall in left, and here come two more Cardinal runs across the plate. . . ." The front door slams — my father home from work, with the New York *Sun* under his arm (and the early-inning zeros of that same Giants road game on the front page, with the little white boxes for the rest of the line score still blank), and I get up to meet him with the bad news.

Spring training is the life. One March day in Phoenix Municipal Stadium, I strolled slowly away from the batting cage in the dazzling desert sunlight and climbed the shallow grandstand steps behind the Oakland home dugout, on my way to grab a pre-game hamburger and a cold Coors at the little freeloader picnic grounds for the media out by left field. The fans were coming in — old folks carrying seat cushions and scorecards, college kids in T-shirts and cutoff jeans, young women in sandals with serious tans and white "A's"-emblazoned painter's caps, kids balancing mammoth cups of popcorn — and unhurriedly scouting around for good seats in the unreserved rows. A last fly ball rose and dropped untouched behind second, where an Oakland coach and a batboy were picking up the batting-

practice balls and dropping them into a green plastic laundry basket. The first visiting ballplayers, fresh off their bus, were playing catch over in front of their dugout; it was the Giants this time, and I was looking forward to seeing Al Oliver again and to watching this kid pitcher Garrelts (if he did work on this day, as promised) and a couple of others, but there was no hurry about the game's starting, of course, and nothing to worry about even if I did miss a few pitches and plays while I lingered over my lunch. A friend of mine, a beat man with the San Francisco *Chronicle*, came along and fell into step beside me. Smiling a little behind his shades, he nodded toward the field and the players and the filling-up stands and murmured, "You know, it's a shame to have to mess all this up with the regular season."

Teams in Arizona and Florida play with identical rules and before the same sort of audiences, but the two spring flavors are quite different. I don't understand it. Florida ball seems more citified, hurried, and temporary; no matter how rustic the setting, I always have the sense that the regular season impends, and that these humid, sunny afternoons are just postcards, to be glanced at later on and then thrown away. Arizona baseball is slower, sweeter, and somehow better fixed in memory. For one thing, there seem to be more young children in attendance at the western parks; the stands are stuffed with babies and toddlers — or else I just notice them more. In Phoenix one afternoon, a small barefoot creature came slowly and gravely up the aisle behind the home dugout wearing nothing but a Pamper. Six- or seven-year-old home-team batboys are already veterans of two or three Arizona seasons. In one game at Scottsdale, matters were suspended briefly when a very young rookie batperson in pigtailed went out on the field after a base on balls, picked up the bat (they were both the same length: the thirty-three-inch model), and paused, staring slowly back and forth, until she remembered which dugout she had come from, and then returned there, smiling in triumph. The home-plate umpire, I noticed, made a good call, holding up one hand and watching over his shoulder until we were ready for baseball once again. It wouldn't have happened in Florida.

For me, Arizona baseball is personified by a young woman vender at Phoenix Stadium I came to recognize, after several springs, by her call. She would slowly make her way down an aisle carrying her basket and then sing out a gentle, musical "*Hot dog! . . . Hot dog!*" — a half note and then down four steps to a whole note. She'd go away, and later you heard the same pausing, repeated cry at a different

distance, like the cry of a single bird working the edge of a meadow on a warm summer afternoon. "*Hot dog!*"

Old fans and senior scribes want the spring camps to remain exactly the same; they should be like our vacation cottages at the lake or the shore — a fusty and familiar vicinity in which we discover, every year, the sparkle and renewing freshness of another summer. The wish is doomed, of course. Each succeeding March, the small ballparks are visibly more crowded and the audiences younger and more upscale, with affluent, Hertz-borne suburban families on the kids' spring break lately beginning to outnumber the cushion-carrying retirees in the stands. Authors and television crews cram the sidelines at the morning workouts, and by game time the vendors at the souvenir stands look like Bloomingdale's salesgirls during Christmas week. Spring training is "in," worse luck, and even the most remote baseball bivouacs are incipient Nantuckets. Out in Mesa, descending hordes of Cubs fans absolutely swamp little HoHoKam Park every game day, lining up at breakfast time to buy up the twenty-three hundred unreserved seats that go on sale at ten o'clock; the park put in new bleacher seats in 1985, enlarging its capacity to eight thousand, but this was insufficient to handle the numbers of the new faithful. A friend of mine — a retired Chicago baseball writer who lives in Arizona now — told me that he drove over to the Cubs training complex on the very first day of spring training that same year, when only the pitchers and catchers had reported, and counted license plates from twenty-six states in the parking lot. "There were maybe a thousand fans at the workout," he said. "A thousand, easy, just watching the pitchers doing sit-ups."

Chain O'Lakes Park, the Red Sox training site in Winter Haven, is less frantic, but it has changed, too. It was an inning or two into my first game there in 1985 when I saw the difference: the old, fragrant orange grove out beyond the right-field and center-field fences was gone, replaced by a cluster of low, not quite finished white buildings, with a drooping banner out front that said "LAKEFRONT CONDOMINIUMS." I gestured miserably at this phenomenon, and my seatmate, a Boston writer, said, "Yes, I know. Remember when we used to write 'and Yaz hit it into the orchard'? Now what do we say?"

Trying to perk me up, he pointed out that the two nesting ospreys I had seen here on prior spring trips were still in residence in their big, slovenly nest on top of the light pole in short right-field foul ground; just the day before, he said, a batter with the visiting Reds

had skied a foul ball that had landed in the nest — landed and stayed there, that is — but the birds did not seem discomposed. I kept an eye out, and over the next few innings I saw one or perhaps both of them depart and return to their perch, coming in with a last flutter of their great wings and then settling down on whatever they were keeping there above the field. Someday soon, I decided, we would hear about the first confirmed sighting of a young red-stitched osprey (*Pandion ueberrothiensis*) here, hard by the banks of Lake Lulu. I cheered up. A little later in that game, we had a brief shower — the first rain in weeks, I was told — and some of the older fans got up from their unprotected seats along the left- and right-field lines and came and stood in the aisles of the roofed grandstand, out of the wet. The game went on, with the sitting and standing fans quietly taking it in, and I had a sudden, oddly familiar impression (this has hit me before, in this park at this time of year) that I had found my way into a large henhouse somewhere and was surrounded by elderly farmyard fowls. We perched there together, smelling the aroma of mixed dust and rain, and waited for the sun to come out again.

The life — baseball as a side order, so to speak — is not necessarily slow or reflective. What I remember about an October now seven years gone isn't an unmemorable World Series between the Dodgers and the Yankees (the Dodgers won it) but the crowds at the Stade Olympique, up in Montreal, during the stirring Dodgers-Expos playoff games there. All that is still clear: the middle innings of Game Three, say (the clubs had come back from Los Angeles with the series tied), with the Dodgers' Jerry Reuss and the Expos' Steve Rogers locked in hard combat, and the Dodgers up a run — the only run of the game so far — and the encircling, in-leaning rows upon rows of avid, baseball-mad Canadians, seeming to sway and shudder and groan and cry in the chilly northern night air with every pitch and movement of the fray. And to sing. When I wrote about this, several days later, I still half heard in the dusty back chambers of my head the vapid, endlessly repeated chorus of that damnable Expo marching song — "*Val-de-ri! Val-de-rah!*" — that the locals bellowed together, in enormous and echoing cacophony, at every imaginable stitch and wrinkle of the games' fabric. The song is not some famous indigenous voyageurs' chantey, as one might suppose, but only the old, implacably jolly "Happy Wanderer" hiking ditty that generations of sub-adolescents across the continent have had to warble through ("*Val-de-ra-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*") during mosquitoey marshmallow

roasts at Camp Pineaway. But the Montrealers sang it with a will — sang it because they *wanted* to, of all things — and they won my heart. I didn't even mind the weather, which was unsuitable, if never quite unbearable, or the appalling ballpark. The round, thick-lipped, inward-tilted concrete upper wall of the Stade Olympique appears to hang over the stands and the glum, Astro-Turfed field in a glowering, almost threatening way, shutting out the sky, and fastballs and hard-hit grounders are so hard to see from above, for some reason, that the accompanying noise from the crowd is always an instant or two out of sync. This time I didn't care, because the teams and the players and the quality of play were all so good that every part of the games mattered and made you glad you were there and no place else in the world just then.

In the sixth inning of that third game, the Expos tied things up with a single and a walk and a little roller by Larry Parrish, *just* through between Cey and Russell at third and short. Reuss, perhaps ever so slightly distracted by the blizzards of torn-up *journeaux*, and the layered explosions of noise, and the illuminated "PLUS FORT!" up on the scoreboard, and the back-and-forth billowings of an enormous white Québécois flag, and the hundredth or perhaps thousandth bellowed cascade of "*Val-de-ri!*"s and "*Val-de-rah!*"s — now got a fastball a millimeter or two higher than he wanted to against the next batter, outfielder Jerry White, who socked the ball up and out into the left-field stands for a homer and three more runs and, it turned out, the game.

I imagine everyone who thinks of himself or herself as an Expo fan still clings to that moment, for the team lost the next two games — lost them late, under grindingly painful circumstances — to miss out on the World Series, and sank into a long baseball torpor. Sometimes it's wiser to remember the byplay of big games — the songs and the rest of it — instead of their outcome, because losing hurts so much. Players understand this all too well. A day or two before the end, Steve Rogers, talking about all the singing and happiness in the Montreal stands, shook his head a little and said, "Yes, it's beautiful, but — well, euphoria is not always the name of the game."

People who don't follow baseball very closely assume that fans care only about their own club. I don't agree. Whenever I happen upon a Little League game or a high-school game or a Sunday game in Central Park between a couple of East Harlem amateur nines, it only takes me an inning or so before I find myself privately rooting for

one of the teams out there. I have no idea how this choice is arrived at, but the process is more fun if the two sides offer a visible, almost moral, clash of styles and purpose, and — even better — if each seems to be personified by one of its players. At that 1982 Cardinals-Brewers World Series, York and Lancaster were brilliantly depicted by the rival center fielders; the frail, popeyed, apologetic-looking Cardinal rookie, Willie McGee; and the hulking, raggedy-ass veteran Brewer slugger, Gorman Thomas. McGee had a great series, it turned out, both at the plate and in the field; in the third game, which the Cardinals won, 6-2, he smacked home runs in two successive at-bats, and in the ninth he pulled down a mighty poke by Gorman Thomas (of *course*) after running at full tilt from mid-center field into deep left center and then to the top of the wall there all in one flowing, water-like motion — a cat up a tree — with no pause or acceleration near the end to adjust for the catch; at the top of his leap, with his back to the field, he put his glove up and bit to his left, and the ball, in the same instant, arrived. The play almost broke my heart, for I had already somehow chosen the Brewers and Gorman Thomas as my own. Thomas, as it happened, did nothing much in the Series — three little singles, and this after a summer in which he had hit a league-leading thirty-nine home runs — so I certainly wasn't front-running. The frowzy Thomas was a walking strip mine; he had worn the same pair of uniform stockings, now as threadbare as the Shroud of Turin, since opening day of 1978. I recall a moment in the Brewer clubhouse during the Series when a group of us were chatting with Thomas's father — he was the retired postmaster of Charleston, South Carolina — and some genius reporter asked what Gorman's room had looked like back when he was a teen-ager. "Terrible!" Thomas *père* said, wincing at the thought. "Why, I could hardly make myself look in theah!"

Events on the field qualify in the life, as well; they only have to be a little special. In September 1986, during an unmomentous Giants-Braves game out at Candlestick Park, Bob Brenly, playing third base for the San Franciscos, made an error on a routine ground ball in the top of the fourth inning. Four batters later, he kicked away another chance and then, scrambling after the ball, threw wildly past home in an attempt to nail a runner there: two errors on the same play. A few moments after *that*, he managed another boot, thus becoming only the fourth player since the turn of the century to rack up four errors in one inning. In the bottom of the fifth, Brenly hit a solo home

run. In the seventh, he rapped out a bases-loaded single, driving in two runs and tying the game at 6-6. The score stayed that way until the bottom of the ninth, when our man came up to bat again, with two out, ran the count to 3-2, and then sailed a massive home run deep into the left-field stands. Brenly's accountbook for the day came to three hits in five at-bats, two home runs, four errors, four Atlanta runs allowed, and four Giant runs driven in, including the game-winner. A neater summary was delivered by his manager, Roger Craig, who said, "This man deserves the Comeback Player of the Year Award for this game alone." I wasn't at Candlestick that day, but I don't care; I have this one by heart.

Or consider an earlier concatenation that began when Phil Garner, a stalwart Pirate outfielder, struck a grand slam home run against the Cardinals at Three Rivers Stadium one evening in 1978. Every professional player can recall each grand slam in his career, but this one was a blue-plate special, because Garner, who is not overmuscled, had never hit a bases-loaded home run before — not in Little League play; not in Legion or high-school ball; not in four years with the University of Tennessee nine; not in five years in the minors; not in six hundred and fifty-one prior major-league games, over two leagues and five summers. Never.

We must now try to envisage — perhaps in playlet form — the events at the Garner place when Phil came home that evening:

P.G. (*enters left, with a certain swing in his step*): Hi, honey.

Mrs. P.G. — or C.G. (her name is Carol): Hi. How'd it go?

P.G.: O.K. (*pause*) Well?

C.G.: Well, what?

P.G.: What! You mean . . .

C.G. (*alarmed*): What what? What's going on?

P.G.: I can't believe it. You missed it . . .

Yes, she had missed it, although Carol was and is a baseball fan and a fan of Phil's, as well as his wife, and was in the custom of attending most of the Pirates' home games and following the others by radio or television. When he told her the news, she was delighted but appalled.

C.G.: I can't get over not seeing it. You can't imagine how bad I feel.

P.G. (*grandly*): Oh, that's O.K., honey. I'll hit another one for you tomorrow.

And so he did.

Attention must be paid. In March, 1984, I watched a talented left-handed Blue Jay rookie pitcher named John Cerutti work three middle innings against the Red Sox at Winter Haven; at one point he struck out Jim Rice with a dandy little slider in under his fists. I talked to Cerutti after the game and learned that he was four credits away from his B.A. degree in economics at Amherst (he has since graduated) and that his senior thesis had to do with the role of agents in major-league player salaries. I also discovered that he had a baseball hero: Ron Guidry.

"I don't have many fond memories of baseball until I was about eighteen and pitching for the Christian Brothers Academy, in Albany," he said. "Then I got the notion that I might make it in the game someday. I had a real good year that year — it was 1978 — and, of course, that was the same time that Guidry had *his* great year. I was a Yankee fan — always had been — so naturally I followed him and pulled for him, and that spring I began to notice that something weird was happening to us. I mean, I won seven games in a row, and he won his first seven. Then I was 9-0 when he was exactly the same — we were winning together, me and *Ron Guidry*! School ended and I graduated, but I went on pitching in American Legion ball. I was 13-0 when I lost my first game, and I thought, Uh-oh, that's the end of it, but that very same night Guidry lost, too, for the first time — I was watching on TV — so we were still the same. Well, I guess you know he finished up the year with a 25-3 record, and was the Cy Young winner and all, and I ended at 25-2. So you could say we both had pretty good years. That affinity began."

Cerutti said all this a little offhandedly — with a trace of college-cool irony, perhaps — but his face was alight with humor and good cheer.

"So do you want to know my dream now?" he went on. "My dream is that first I make this club some day, and then I end up pitching a game against Ron Guidry. It's a big, big game — a Saturday afternoon at the Stadium, one of those big crowds, with a lot riding on it — and I beat him, 1-0. It could just happen."

"I know," I said.

"Keep watching," he said.

"I'll be there," I said.

Making the Blue Jays took a little longer than Cerutti had expected, but when he was called up from Syracuse in the spring of 1986, it was noticed that he had his stuff together at last; he went 9-4 for the season, with a shutout along the way, and took up his place in the

Toronto starting rotation. I was happy about the promotion (I had renewed acquaintance with him briefly a couple of times in the interim, mostly in Florida), and in June this summer I watched him work a game against the Yankees in New York one evening — watched him over the tube, I mean. It was a significant game for both clubs, since the Blue Jays were a half game up on the Yankees at the top of the American League East. There I was, with my dinner and a drink before me and with John Cerutti, big as life, up there on the screen, when several rusty synapses clicked on at last. "My God!" I cried. "It's Guidry, too. It's happened."

I had blown our date, but Cerutti kept his, all right, beating the Yankees by 7-2, it turned out, to solidify his team's hold on first place. Not Cerutti's plan *exactly*, but close enough. I considered rushing up to the Stadium to catch the later innings, but I didn't. I got there early the next evening, however, and at batting practice a couple of writer friends said, "You see John Cerutti? He was looking for you last night."

He came in from the field at last — he had been doing his sprints out there — and found me in the dugout. "Hey," he said cheerfully. "Where were you?"

"I blew it," I said. "I'm sorry, John — I stood you up. I feel bad about it. Only you said it would be a *Saturday*."

"Well, I looked for you," he said. "Everyone else was here. I heard a couple of days ago that it might be me and the Gator, so I called my mom and she came down for it. In the end, I had to leave sixteen tickets for people from home. They knew how long I'd been waiting. It was all just the way I'd dreamed about it. In the first couple of innings, I kept thinking, Here I am, with my spikes on the same pitching rubber where Ron Guidry's spikes were a minute ago. It was a thrill."

"I know — I saw it at home," I said miserably. "There's no excuse, only well, you know . . . I didn't believe it. Life isn't *like* this."

"I know," he said. "But this is different."

"This is baseball, you mean."

"That's right," he said. "In baseball — well, stuff can happen."

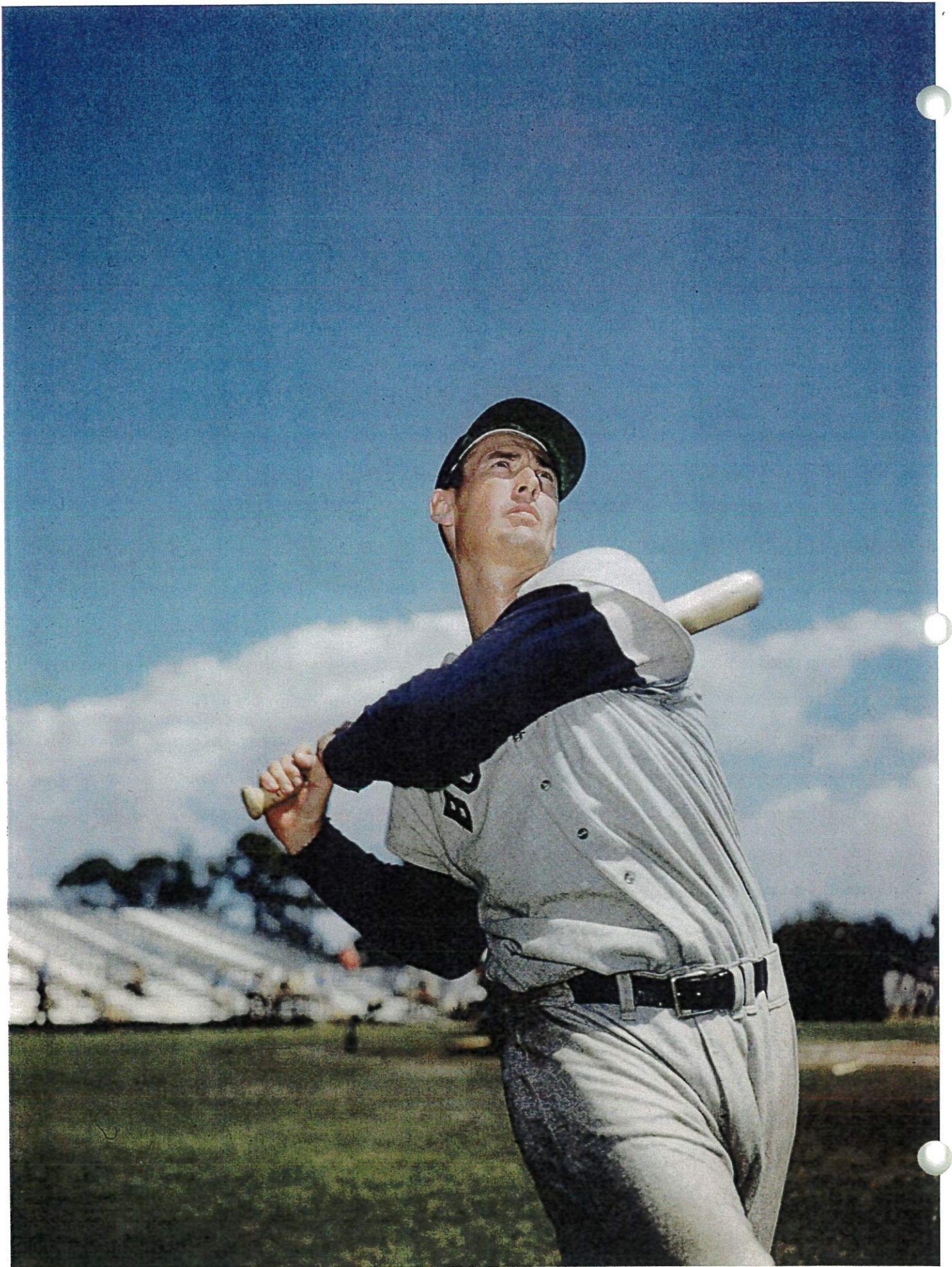
HUB FANS BID KID ADIEU

Ted Williams's last game at Fenway Park.

By John Updike

October 22, 1960

Fenway Park, in Boston, is a lyric little bandbox of a ballpark. Everything is painted green and seems in curiously sharp focus, like the inside of an old-fashioned peeping-type Easter egg. It was built in 1912 and rebuilt in 1934, and offers, as do most Boston artifacts, a compromise between Man's Euclidean determinations and Nature's beguiling irregularities. Its right field is one of the deepest in the American League, while its left field is the shortest; the high left-field wall, three hundred and fifteen feet from home plate along the foul line, virtually thrusts its surface at right-handed hitters. On the afternoon of Wednesday, September 28th, as I took a seat behind third base, a uniformed groundkeeper was treading the top of this wall, picking batting-practice home runs out of the screen, like a mushroom gatherer seen in Wordsworthian perspective on the verge of a cliff. The day was overcast, chill, and uninspirational. The Boston team was the worst in twenty-seven seasons. A jangling medley of incompetent youth and aging competence, the Red Sox were finishing in seventh place only because the Kansas City Athletics had locked them out of the cellar. They were scheduled to play the Baltimore Orioles, a much nimbler blend of May and December, who had been dumped from pennant contention a week before by the insatiable Yankees. I, and 10,453 others, had shown up primarily because this was the Red Sox's last home game of the season, and therefore the last time in all eternity that their regular left fielder, known to the headlines as TED, KID, SPLINTER, THUMPER, TW, and, most cloyingly, MIS^TER WONDERFUL, would play in Boston. "WHAT WILL WE DO WITHOUT TED? HUB FANS ASK" ran the headline on a newspaper being read by a bulb-nosed cigar smoker a few rows away. Williams' retirement had been announced, doubted (he had been threatening retirement for years), confirmed by Tom Yawkey, the Red Sox owner, and at last widely accepted as the sad but probable truth. He was forty-two and had redeemed his abysmal season of 1959 with a—considering his advanced age—fine one. He had been giving away his gloves and bats and had grudgingly consented to a sentimental ceremony today. This was not necessarily his last game; the Red Sox were scheduled to travel to New York and wind up the season with three games there.



I arrived early. The Orioles were hitting fungos on the field. The day before, they had spitefully smothered the Red Sox, 17–4, and neither their faces nor their drab gray visiting-team uniforms seemed very gracious. I wondered who had invited them to the party. Between our heads and the lowering clouds a frenzied organ was thundering through, with an appositeness perhaps accidental, “You *maaaade* me love you, I didn’t wanna do it, I didn’t wanna do it . . .”

The affair between Boston and Ted Williams has been no mere summer romance; it has been a marriage, composed of spats, mutual disappointments, and, toward the end, a mellowing hoard of shared memories. It falls into three stages, which may be termed Youth, Maturity, and Age; or Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis; or Jason, Achilles, and Nestor.

First, there was the by now legendary epoch when the young bridegroom came out of the West, announced “All I want out of life is that when I walk down the street folks will say ‘There goes the greatest hitter who ever lived.’” The dowagers of local journalism attempted to give elementary deportment lessons to this child who spake as a god, and to their horror were themselves rebuked. Thus began the long exchange of backbiting, hat-flipping, booing, and spitting that has distinguished Williams’ public relations. The spitting incidents of 1957 and 1958 and the similar dockside courtesies that Williams has now and then extended to the grandstand should be judged against this background: the left-field stands at Fenway for twenty years have held a large number of customers who have bought their way in primarily for the privilege of showering abuse on Williams. Greatness necessarily attracts debunkers, but in Williams’ case the hostility has been systematic and unappeasable. His basic offense against the fans has been to wish that they weren’t there. Seeking a perfectionist’s vacuum, he has quixotically desired to sever the game from the ground of paid spectatorship and publicity that supports it. Hence his refusal to tip his cap to the crowd or turn the other cheek to newsmen. It has been a costly theory—it has probably cost him, among other evidences of good will, two Most Valuable Player awards, which are voted by reporters—but he has held to it from his rookie year on. While his critics, oral and literary, remained beyond the reach of his discipline, the opposing pitchers were accessible, and he spanked them to the tune of .406 in 1941. He slumped to .356 in 1942 and went off to war.

In 1946, Williams returned from three years as a Marine pilot to the second of his baseball avatars, that of Achilles, the hero of incomparable prowess and beauty who nevertheless was to be found sulking in his tent while the Trojans (mostly Yankees) fought through to the ships. Yawkey, a timber and mining maharajah, had

surrounded his central jewel with many gems of slightly lesser water, such as Bobby Doerr, Dom DiMaggio, Rudy York, Birdie Tebbetts, and Johnny Pesky. Throughout the late forties, the Red Sox were the best paper team in baseball, yet they had little three-dimensional to show for it, and if this was a tragedy, Williams was Hamlet. A succinct review of the indictment—and a fair sample of appreciative sports-page prose—appeared the very day of Williams' valedictory, in a column by Huck Finnegan in the Boston *American* (no sentimentalist, Huck):

Williams' career, in contrast [to Babe Ruth's] has been a series of failures except for his averages. He flopped in the only World Series he ever played in (1946) when he batted only .200. He flopped in the playoff game with Cleveland in 1948. He flopped in the final game of the 1949 season with the pennant hinging on the outcome (Yanks 5, Sox 3). He flopped in 1950 when he returned to the lineup after a two-month absence and ruined the morale of a club that seemed pennant-bound under Steve O'Neill. It has always been Williams' records first, the team second, and the Sox non-winning record is proof enough of that.

There are answers to all this, of course. The fatal weakness of the great Sox slugging teams was not-quite-good-enough pitching rather than Williams' failure to hit a home run every time he came to bat. Again, Williams' depressing effect on his teammates has never been proved. Despite ample coaching to the contrary, most insisted that they *liked* him. He has been generous with advice to any player who asked for it. In an increasingly combative baseball atmosphere, he continued to duck beanballs docilely. With umpires he was gracious to a fault. This courtesy itself annoyed his critics, whom there was no pleasing. And against the ten crucial games (the seven World Series games with the St. Louis Cardinals, the 1948 playoff with the Cleveland Indians, and the two-game series with the Yankees at the end of the 1949 season, winning either one of which would have given the Red Sox the pennant) that make up the Achilles' heel of Williams' record, a mass of statistics can be set showing that day in and day out he was no slouch in the clutch. The correspondence columns of the Boston papers now and then suffer a sharp flurry of arithmetic on this score; indeed, for Williams to have distributed all his hits so they did nobody else any good would constitute a feat of placement unparalleled in the annals of selfishness.

Whatever residue of truth remains of the Finnegan charge those of us who love Williams must transmute as best we can, in our own personal crucibles. My personal memories of Williams begin when I was a boy in Pennsylvania, with two last-place teams in Philadelphia to keep me company. For me, "W'ms, lf" was a figment of the box scores who always seemed to be going 3-for-5. He radiated, from afar, the hard blue glow of high purpose. I remember listening over the radio to the All-Star Game of 1946, in which Williams hit two singles and two home runs, the second one off a Rip Sewell "blooper" pitch; it was like hitting a balloon out of the park. I remember watching one of his home runs from the bleachers of Shibe

Park; it went over the first baseman's head and rose meticulously along a straight line and was still rising when it cleared the fence. The trajectory seemed qualitatively different from anything anyone else might hit. For me, Williams is the classic ballplayer of the game on a hot August weekday, before a small crowd, when the only thing at stake is the tissue-thin difference between a thing done well and a thing done ill. Baseball is a game of the long season, of relentless and gradual averaging-out. Irrelevance—since the reference point of most individual games is remote and statistical—always threatens its interest, which can be maintained not by the occasional heroics that sportswriters feed upon but by players who always *care*; who care, that is to say, about themselves and their art. Insofar as the clutch hitter is not a sportswriter's myth, he is a vulgarity, like a writer who writes only for money. It may be that, compared to managers' dreams such as Joe DiMaggio and the always helpful Stan Musial, Williams is an icy star. But of all team sports, baseball, with its graceful intermittences of action, its immense and tranquil field sparsely settled with poised men in white, its dispassionate mathematics, seems to me best suited to accommodate, and be ornamented by, a loner. It is an essentially lonely game. No other player visible to my generation has concentrated within himself so much of the sport's poignance, has so assiduously refined his natural skills, has so constantly brought to the plate that intensity of competence that crowds the throat with joy.

By the time I went to college, near Boston, the lesser stars Yawkey had assembled around Williams had faded, and his craftsmanship, his rigorous pride, had become itself a kind of heroism. This brittle and temperamental player developed an unexpected quality of persistence. He was always coming back—back from Korea, back from a broken collarbone, a shattered elbow, a bruised heel, back from drastic bouts of flu and ptomaine poisoning. Hardly a season went by without some enfeebling mishap, yet he always came back, and always looked like himself. The delicate mechanism of timing and power seemed locked, shockproof, in some case outside his body. In addition to injuries, there were a heavily publicized divorce, and the usual storms with the press, and the Williams Shift—the maneuver, custom-built by Lou Boudreau, of the Cleveland Indians, whereby three infielders were concentrated on the right side of the infield, where a left-handed pull hitter like Williams generally hits the ball. Williams could easily have learned to punch singles through the vacancy on his left and fattened his average hugely. This was what Ty Cobb, the Einstein of average, told him to do. But the game had changed since Cobb; Williams believed that his value to the club and to the game was as a slugger, so he went on pulling the ball, trying to blast it through three men, and paid the price of perhaps fifteen points of lifetime average. Like Ruth before him, he bought the occasional home run at the cost of many directed singles—a calculated sacrifice certainly not, in the case of a hitter as average-minded as Williams, entirely selfish.

fter a prime so harassed and hobbled, William was granted by the relenting fates a golden twilight. He

A became at the end of his career perhaps the best *old* hitter of the century. The dividing line came between the 1956 and the 1957 seasons. In September of the first year, he and Mickey Mantle were contending for the batting championship. Both were hitting around .350, and there was no one else near them. The season ended with a three-game series between the Yankees and the Sox, and, living in New York then, I went up to the Stadium. Williams was slightly shy of the four hundred at-bats needed to qualify; the fear was expressed that the Yankee pitchers would walk him to protect Mantle. Instead, they pitched to him—a wise decision. He looked terrible at the plate, tired and discouraged and unconvincing. He never looked very good to me in the Stadium. (Last week, in *Life*, Williams, a sportswriter himself now, wrote gloomily of the Stadium, “There’s the bigness of it. There are those high stands and all those people smoking—and, of course, the shadows. . . . It takes at least one series to get accustomed to the Stadium and even then you’re not sure.”) The final outcome in 1956 was Mantle .353, Williams .345.

The next year, I moved from New York to New England, and it made all the difference. For in September of 1957, in the same situation, the story was reversed. Mantle finally hit .365; it was the best season of his career. But Williams, though sick and old, had run away from him. A bout of flu had laid him low in September. He emerged from his cave in the Hotel Somerset haggard but irresistible; he hit four successive pinch-hit home runs. “I feel terrible,” he confessed, “but every time I take a swing at the ball it goes out of the park.” He ended the season with thirty-eight home runs and an average of .388, the highest in either league since his own .406, and, coming from a decrepit man of thirty-nine, an even more supernal figure. With eight or so of the “leg hits” that a younger man would have beaten out, it would have been .400. And the next year, Williams, who in 1949 and 1953 had lost batting championships by decimal whiskers to George Kell and Mickey Vernon, sneaked in behind his teammate Pete Runnels and filched his sixth title, a bargain at .328.

In 1959, it seemed all over. The dinosaur thrashed around in the .200 swamp for the first half of the season, and was even benched (“rested,” Manager Mike Higgins tactfully said). Old foes like the late Bill Cunningham began to offer batting tips. Cunningham thought Williams was jiggling his elbows; in truth, Williams’ neck was so stiff he could hardly turn his head to look at the pitcher. When he swung, it looked like a Calder mobile with one thread cut; it reminded you that since 1953 Williams’ shoulders had been wired together. A solicitous pall settled over the sports pages. In the two decades since Williams had come to Boston, his status had imperceptibly shifted from that of a naughty prodigy to that of a municipal monument. As his shadow in the record books lengthened, the Red Sox teams around him declined, and the entire American League seemed to be losing life and color to the National. The inconsistency of the new

superstars—Mantle, Colavito, and Kaline—served to make Williams appear all the more singular. And off the field, his private philanthropy—in particular, his zealous chairmanship of the Jimmy Fund, a charity for children with cancer—gave him a civic presence somewhat like that of Richard Cardinal Cushing. In religion, Williams appears to be a humanist, and a selective one at that, but he and the Cardinal, when their good works intersect and they appear in the public eye together, make a handsome and heartening pair.

Humiliated by his '59 season, Williams determined, once more, to come back. I, as a specimen Williams partisan, was both glad and fearful. All baseball fans believe in miracles; the question is, how *many* do you believe in? He looked like a ghost in spring training. Manager Jurgens warned us ahead of time that if Williams didn't come through he would be benched, just like anybody else. As it turned out, it was Jurgens who was benched. Williams entered the 1960 season needing eight home runs to have a lifetime total of 500; after one time at bat in Washington, he needed seven. For a stretch, he was hitting a home run every second game that he played. He passed Lou Gehrig's lifetime total, then the number 500, then Mel Ott's total, and finished with 521, thirteen behind Jimmy Foxx, who alone stands between Williams and Babe Ruth's unapproachable 714. The summer was a statistician's picnic. His two-thousandth walk came and went, his eighteen-hundredth run batted in, his sixteenth All-Star Game. At one point, he hit a home run off a pitcher, Don Lee, off whose father, Thornton Lee, he had hit a home run a generation before. The only comparable season for a forty-two-year-old man was Ty Cobb's in 1928. Cobb batted .323 and hit one homer. Williams batted .316 but hit twenty-nine homers.

In sum, though generally conceded to be the greatest hitter of his era, he did not establish himself as "the greatest hitter who ever lived." Cobb, for average, and Ruth, for power, remain supreme. Cobb, Rogers Hornsby, Joe Jackson, and Lefty O'Doul, among players since 1900, have higher lifetime averages than Williams' .344. Unlike Foxx, Gehrig, Hack Wilson, Hank Greenberg, and Ralph Kiner, Williams never came close to matching Babe Ruth's season home-run total of sixty. In the list of major-league batting records, not one is held by Williams. He is second in walks drawn, third in home runs, fifth in lifetime averages, sixth in runs batted in, eighth in runs scored and in total bases, fourteenth in doubles, and thirtieth in hits. But if we allow him merely average seasons for the four-plus seasons he lost to two wars, and add another season for the months he lost to injuries, we get a man who in all the power totals would be second, and not a very distant second, to Ruth. And if we further allow that these years would have been not merely average but prime years, if we allow for all the months when Williams was playing in sub-par condition, if we permit his early and later years in baseball to be some sort of index of what the middle years could have been, if we give him a right-field fence that is not, like Fenway's, one of the most distant in the league, and if—the least excusable "if"—we imagine him condescending to outsmart the Williams Shift, we can defensibly assemble,

like a colossus induced from the sizable fragments that do remain, a statistical figure not incommensurate with his grandiose ambition. From the statistics that are on the books, a good case can be made that in the *combination* of power and average Williams is first; nobody else ranks so high in both categories. Finally, there is the witness of the eyes; men whose memories go back to Shoeless Joe Jackson—another unlucky natural—rank him and Williams together as the best-looking hitters they have seen. It was for our last look that ten thousand of us had come.

Two girls, one of them with pert buckteeth and eyes as black as vest buttons, the other with white skin and flesh-colored hair, like an underdeveloped photograph of a redhead, came and sat on my right. On my other side was one of those frowning, chestless young-old men who can frequently be seen, often wearing sailor hats, attending ball games alone. He did not once open his program but instead tapped it, rolled up, on his knee as he gave the game his disconsolate attention. A young lady, with freckles and a depressed, dainty nose that by an optical illusion seemed to thrust her lips forward for a kiss, sauntered down into the box seats and with striking aplomb took a seat right behind the roof of the Oriole dugout. She wore a blue coat with a Northeastern University emblem sewed to it. The girls beside me took it into their heads that this was Williams' daughter. She looked too old to me, and why would she be sitting behind the visitors' dugout? On the other hand, from the way she sat there, staring at the sky and French-inhaling, she clearly was some body. Other fans came and eclipsed her from view. The crowd looked less like a weekday ballpark crowd than like the folks you might find in Yellowstone National Park, or emerging from automobiles at the top of scenic Mount Mansfield. There were a lot of competitively well-dressed couples of tourist age, and not a few babes in arms. A row of five seats in front of me was abruptly filled with a woman and four children, the youngest of them two years old, if that. Someday, presumably, he could tell his grandchildren that he saw Williams play. Along with these tots and second-honeymooners, there were Harvard freshmen, giving off that peculiar nervous glow created when a quantity of insouciance is saturated with insecurity; thick-necked Army officers with brass on their shoulders and lead in their voices; pepperings of priests; perfumed bouquets of Roxbury Fabian fans; shiny salesmen from Albany and Fall River; and those gray, hoarse men—taxi-drivers, slaughterers, and bartenders who will continue to click through the turnstiles long after everyone else has deserted to television and traporamas. Behind me, two young male voices blossomed, cracking a joke about God's five proofs that Thomas Aquinas exists—typical Boston College levity.

The batting cage was trundled away. The Orioles fluttered to the sidelines. Diagonally across the field, by the Red Sox dugout, a cluster of men in overcoats were festering like maggots. I could see a splinter of white uniform, and Williams' head, held at a self-deprecating and evasive tilt. Williams' conversational stance is that of a six-foot-three-inch man under a six-foot ceiling. He moved away to the patter of flash bulbs, and

began playing catch with a young Negro outfielder named Willie Tasby. His arm, never very powerful, had grown lax with the years, and his throwing motion was a kind of muscular drawl. To catch the ball, he flicked his glove hand onto his left shoulder (he batted left but threw right, as every schoolboy ought to know) and let the ball plop into it comically. This catch session with Tasby was the only time all afternoon I saw him grin.

A tight little flock of human sparrows who, from the lambent and pampered pink of their faces, could only have been Boston politicians moved toward the plate. The loudspeakers mammothly coughed as someone huffed on the microphone. The ceremonies began. Curt Gowdy, the Red Sox radio and television announcer, who sounds like everybody's brother-in-law, delivered a brief sermon, taking the two words "pride" and "champion" as his text. It began, "Twenty-one years ago, a skinny kid from San Diego, California . . ." and ended, "I don't think we'll ever see another like him." Robert Tibolt, chairman of the board of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, presented Williams with a big Paul Revere silver bowl. Harry Carlson, a member of the sports committee of the Boston Chamber, gave him a plaque, whose inscription he did not read in its entirety, out of deference to Williams' distaste for this sort of fuss. Mayor Collins presented the Jimmy Fund with a thousand-dollar check.

Then the occasion himself stooped to the microphone, and his voice sounded, after the others, very Californian; it seemed to be coming, excellently amplified, from a great distance, adolescently young and as smooth as a butternut. His thanks for the gifts had not died from our ears before he glided, as if helplessly, into "In spite of all the terrible things that have been said about me by the maestros of the keyboard up there . . ." He glanced up at the press rows suspended above home plate. (All the Boston reporters, incidentally, reported the phrase as "knights of the keyboard," but I heard it as "maestros" and prefer it that way.) The crowd tittered, appalled. A frightful vision flashed upon me, of the press gallery pelting Williams with erasers, of Williams clambering up the foul screen to slug journalists, of a riot, of Mayor Collins being crushed. ". . . And they *were* terrible things," Williams insisted, with level melancholy, into the mike. "I'd like to forget them, but I can't." He paused, swallowed his memories, and went on, "I want to say that my years in Boston have been the greatest thing in my life." The crowd, like an immense sail going limp in a change of wind, sighed with relief. Taking all the parts himself, Williams then acted out a vivacious little morality drama in which an imaginary tempter came to him at the beginning of his career and said, "Ted, you can play anywhere you like." Leaping nimbly into the role of his younger self (who in biographical actuality had yearned to be a Yankee), Williams gallantly chose Boston over all the other cities, and told us that Tom Yawkey was the greatest owner in baseball and we were the greatest fans. We applauded ourselves heartily. The umpire came out and dusted the plate. The voice of doom announced over the loudspeakers that after

Williams' retirement his uniform number, 9, would be permanently retired—the first time the Red Sox had so honored a player. We cheered. The national anthem was played. We cheered. The game began.

Williams was third in the batting order, so he came up in the bottom of the first inning, and Steve Barber, a young pitcher who was not yet born when Williams began playing for the Red Sox, offered him four pitches, at all of which he disdained to swing, since none of them were within the strike zone. This demonstrated simultaneously that Williams' eyes were razor-sharp and that Barber's control wasn't. Shortly, the bases were full, with Williams on second. "Oh, I hope he gets held up at third! That would be wonderful," the girl beside me moaned, and, sure enough, the man at bat walked and Williams was delivered into our foreground. He struck the pose of Donatello's David, the third-base bag being Goliath's head. Fiddling with his cap, swapping small talk with the Oriole third baseman (who seemed delighted to have him drop in), swinging his arms with a sort of prancing nervousness, he looked fine—flexible, hard, and not unbecomingly substantial through the middle. The long neck, the small head, the knickers whose cuffs were worn down near his ankles—all these points, often observed by caricaturists, were visible in the flesh.

One of the collegiate voices behind me said, "He looks old, doesn't he, old; big deep wrinkles in his face . . ."

"Yeah," the other voice said, "but he looks like an old hawk, doesn't he?"

With each pitch, Williams danced down the baseline, waving his arms and stirring dust, ponderous but menacing, like an attacking goose. It occurred to about a dozen humorists at once to shout "Steal home! Go, go!" Williams' speed afoot was never legendary. Lou Clinton, a young Sox outfielder, hit a fairly deep fly to center field. Williams tagged up and ran home. As he slid across the plate, the ball, thrown with unusual heft by Jackie Brandt, the Oriole center fielder, hit him on the back.

"Boy, he was really loafing, wasn't he?" one of the boys behind me said.

"It's cold," the other explained. "He doesn't play well when it's cold. He likes heat. He's a hedonist."

The run that Williams scored was the second and last of the inning. Gus Triandos, of the Orioles, quickly evened the score by plunking a home run over the handy left-field wall. Williams, who had had this wall at his back for twenty years, played the ball flawlessly. He didn't budge. He just stood there, in the center of the little patch of grass that his patient footsteps had worn brown, and, limp with lack of interest, watched the ball pass overhead. It was not a very interesting game. Mike Higgins, the Red Sox manager, with nothing to lose, had restricted his major-league players to the left-field line—along with Williams, Frank Malzone, a first-rate third baseman, played the game—and had peopled the rest of the terrain with unpredictable

youngsters fresh, or not so fresh, off the farms. Other than Williams' recurrent appearances at the plate, the *maladresse* of the Sox infield was the sole focus of suspense; the second baseman turned every grounder into a juggling act, while the shortstop did a breathtaking impersonation of an open window. With this sort of assistance, the Orioles wheedled their way into a 4-2 lead. They had early replaced Barber with another young pitcher, Jack Fisher. Fortunately (as it turned out), Fisher is no cutie; he is willing to burn the ball through the strike zone, and inning after inning this tactic punctured Higgins' string of test balloons.

Whenever Williams appeared at the plate—pounding the dirt from his cleats, gouging a pit in the batter's box with his left foot, wringing resin out of the bat handle with his vehement grip, switching the stick at the pitcher with an electric ferocity—it was like having a familiar Leonardo appear in a shuffle of *Saturday Evening Post* covers. This man, you realized—and here, perhaps, was the difference, greater than the difference in gifts—really intended to hit the ball. In the third inning, he hoisted a high fly to deep center. In the fifth, we thought he had it; he smacked the ball hard and high into the heart of his power zone, but the deep right field in Fenway and the heavy air and a casual east wind defeated him. The ball died. Al Pilarcik leaned his back against the big "380" painted on the right-field wall and caught it. On another day, in another park, it would have been gone. (After the game, Williams said, "I didn't think I could hit one any harder than that. The conditions weren't good.")

The afternoon grew so glowering that in the sixth inning the arc lights were turned on—always a wan sight in the daytime, like the burning headlights of a funeral procession. Aided by the gloom, Fisher was slicing through the Sox rookies, and Williams did not come to bat in the seventh. He was second up in the eighth. This was almost certainly his last time to come to the plate in Fenway Park, and instead of merely cheering, as we had at his three previous appearances, we stood, all of us—stood and applauded. Have you ever heard applause in a ballpark? Just applause—no calling, no whistling, just an ocean of handclaps, minute after minute, burst after burst, crowding and running together in continuous succession like the pushes of surf at the edge of the sand. It was a sombre and considered tumult. There was not a boo in it. It seemed to renew itself out of a shifting set of memories as the kid, the Marine, the veteran of feuds and failures and injuries, the friend of children, and the enduring old pro evolved down the bright tunnel of twenty-one summers toward this moment. At last, the umpire signalled for Fisher to pitch; with the other players, he had been frozen in position. Only Williams had moved during the ovation, switching his hat impatiently, ignoring everything except his cherished task. Fisher wound up, and the applause sank into a hush.

Understand that we were a crowd of rational people. We knew that a home run cannot be produced at will; the right pitch must be perfectly met and luck must ride with the ball. Three innings before, we had seen a

brave effort fail. The air was soggy; the season was exhausted. Nevertheless, there will always lurk, around a corner in a pocket of our knowledge of the odds, an indefensible hope, and this was one of the times, which you now and then find in sports, when a density of expectation hangs in the air and plucks an event out of the future.

Fisher, after his unsettling wait, was wide with the first pitch. He put the second one over, and Williams swung mightily and missed. The crowd grunted, seeing that classic swing, so long and smooth and quick, exposed, naked in its failure. Fisher threw the third time, Williams swung again, and there it was. The ball climbed on a diagonal line into the vast volume of air over center field. From my angle, behind third base, the ball seemed less an object in flight than the tip of a towering, motionless construct, like the Eiffel Tower or the Tappan Zee Bridge. It was in the books while it was still in the sky. Brandt ran back to the deepest corner of the outfield grass; the ball descended beyond his reach and struck in the crotch where the bullpen met the wall, bounced chunkily, and, as far as I could see, vanished.

Like a feather caught in a vortex, Williams ran around the square of bases at the center of our beseeching screaming. He ran as he always ran out home runs—hurriedly, unsmiling, head down, as if our praise were a storm of rain to get out of. He didn't tip his cap. Though we thumped, wept, and chanted "We want Ted" for minutes after he hid in the dugout, he did not come back. Our noise for some seconds passed beyond excitement into a kind of immense open anguish, a wailing, a cry to be saved. But immortality is nontransferable. The papers said that the other players, and even the umpires on the field, begged him to come out and acknowledge us in some way, but he never had and did not now. Gods do not answer letters.

Every true story has an anticlimax. The men on the field refused to disappear, as would have seemed decent, in the smoke of Williams' miracle. Fisher continued to pitch, and escaped further harm. At the end of the inning, Higgins sent Williams out to his leftfield position, then instantly replaced him with Carrol Hardy, so we had a long last look at Williams as he ran out there and then back, his uniform jogging, his eyes steadfast on the ground. It was nice, and we were grateful, but it left a funny taste.

One of the scholasticists behind me said, "Let's go. We've seen everything. I don't want to spoil it." This seemed a sound aesthetic decision. Williams' last word had been so exquisitely chosen, such a perfect fusion of expectation, intention, and execution, that already it felt a little unreal in my head, and I wanted to get out before the castle collapsed. But the game, though played by clumsy midgets under the feeble glow of the arc lights, began to tug at my attention, and I loitered in the runway until it was over. Williams' homer had, quite incidentally, made the score 4–3. In the bottom of the ninth inning, with one out, Marlin Coughtry, the second-base juggler, singled. Vic Wertz, pinch-hitting, doubled off the left-field wall, Coughtry advancing to

third. Pumpsie Green walked, to load the bases. Willie Tasby hit a double-play ball to the third baseman, but in making the pivot throw Billy Klaus, an ex-Red Sox infielder, reverted to form and threw the ball past the first baseman and into the Red Sox dugout. The Sox won, 5–4. On the car radio as I drove home I heard that Williams had decided not to accompany the team to New York. So he knew how to do even that, the hardest thing. Quit. ♦

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*John Updike contributed fiction, poetry, essays, and criticism to *The New Yorker* for a half century. He died in 2009.*

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