



The Losing Team

It is an experience that takes place in crowds.

People cheer; people jeer, people's feet kick over your beer.

You hear them, you smell them, you bump them, you line up behind them, time and time again.

Yes, the people.

Properly, a game isn't a game without them. Imagine the hollow knock of wood against ball in an empty stadium.

That isn't a ball game. You need the milling, the closeness, the rudeness of it, the differentness of all of us affably encroaching upon one another.

The myriad social strata, which never mix anywhere, mix here.

The rich man argues the fine points of strategy with the poor man. Patiently, the husband explains to his wife. The black man, the white man agree, that

the man at bat knows how to play.

The bat cracks. Eight, nine thousand eyes lift in solidarity.

The ball rises, and higher. All those anxious hands clench. Like a dentist's vestibule crammed full of patients.

The ball socks, disappointingly, in the visiting left-fielder's glove.

A complete stranger nudges you, says, with neither syllable of introduction nor trace of shyness, "It hung up."

And you have to answer, and you do, "He got under it."

The thrill of that instant, that crack of hope!

How seldom we experience raw, naked hope in our lives. There must be this ritual, this outward enactment, with all its trappings and sacramentals, to urge that instant, and its giddy, childlike joys, to come, inhabit our flesh.

When we are fans, we are no longer of the adult world, with its somber competitiveness and sense-dulled demands. When we are fans, we are fellows, we are friends. When we are fans, we are not islands.

An ear to the radio and its dull clamor is a link in the chain that attaches us, one by one, on a summer day, on our separate screen-door porches, to the Main, to the game, to our communion, to the ballpark grass that is Pentecost green.

Of course, it is possible to rhapsodize a thing past reality. Baseball is a rough business, and it exacts its toll from us. Particularly here.

"I want to believe, believe me, I do," a serious man I know explains, "but too much is asked. The Twins -- they are impossible. No team I know toys with the emotions as they do, first getting up one's springtime hopes, then dashing them, unfailingly, like sucked-out sno-cones on the bleacher steps of September.

"It is the modern dilemma: love and suffer."

Another acquaintance, a learned man, has made a separate peace. He has decided on perpetual standoffishness.

"The Twins aren't my team," he reasons. "They're simply the employees of a man who chose to locate in Minnesota in order to sell me tickets, peanuts, and a place to park. I'm sorry, but I feel I have to be firm about this. I compare it to falling in love with a prostitute. It's a love that has nowhere to go."

Yet another, quite clinically, examined mathematical probabilities last year and determined that he should ally himself emotionally with the Boston Red Sox. This year he passes, Ophelia-like, distractedly strewing flowers in his path. World Series? he asks. What World Series? The Sox won, didn't they?

The poor fellow, his reason, his abstractions, his statistics to the contrary, has passed on to baseball's Cloud-Cuckoo-Land:

It's just a ways past Brooklyn, he says.

I have seen the best minds of generation racked, pillaged, and torn apart in Metropolitan Stadium.

We have watched as the team owner, Calvin Griffith, systematically tortured us with his penury. And we have watched him let skilled players slip away to higher salaries and better-balanced teams.

We have stuck by younger players, tolerated their youthful errors, long after their errors were no longer youthful, just errors.

We have watched them on TV in their sodden gray road uniforms, beaten up in Baltimore, tarred in Kansas City, humiliated in the Bronx, embarrassed in Milwaukee, and nearly kicked to death in, of all places, Chicago.

Ulysses' team reached home more often.

Shabby, neurotic ballplay, and the death in the arena, the blood on the basepaths, gradually sink deeper and deeper into the fan's psyche, like a tapir in a mire.

Imagine a benchful of lovestruck fans, and one by one, exhausted with defeat, forsaken in the fight, they slump forward, motionless, in the crickety August night.

Is April the cruelest month? Is May mere fantasy? Are the Twins truly the winningest team in the majors? Will Smalley make it to the All-Stars this year? Will Marshall make us forget Matthewson?

Do we sound as happy as we should be? No.

So many fears prevent pure euphoria. So many treacheries, so many trickeries, like Charlie Brown and his running kick. So many eager hearts tumbling down the altar.

Still, we tune in. Good-humoredly, we wish we could end the season now and advance directly to Series competition. Many crossed fingers, many stiff upper lips, many more white knuckles as the score evens at the bottom of the ninth.

And all for what -- a dream of respect? A sensuous impulse when the pitch uncurls and the bat curls around it, that adrenaline crack?

The ball rises, and higher! The anxious hands are at it again! Our ball rises into the air, our hearts into our throats. All our complexes follow in its human arc.

Only this time, that ball is out of there.

(1978)