

# Feeding the Green Monster

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# First Inning



*Tuesday, April 11*  
*Opening Day at Fenway Park*

In a couple of months I'll be thirty-four years old, and it strikes me, as I sit here in Section 29, Row 13, Seat 10, that a great percentage of those nearly thirty-four years have been spent preparing me for this day.

Opening Day at Fenway Park.

I'm here because I have, since I was a boy, loved baseball more than anything else, and I believe that Fenway Park might well be the best place in the world for a baseball lover to pass his days and his nights.

A couple of weeks ago, *Sports Illustrated's* cover featured Pedro Martinez, Boston's (and for that matter, the world's) ace pitcher, along with the words, "Why the Red Sox will win the World Series." Heady stuff, but perhaps not so much of a reach, given that the Sox won ninety-four games a year ago and reached the American League Championship Series before bowing to the hated New York Yankees.

It's been eighty-two years since the Boston Red Sox won a World Series.



My "baseball life" began when I was nine years old. After a decade of moving around the Midwest like middle-class American gypsies, in the spring of 1976 my family—me plus my mom, my dad, and my little brother, Eric—arrived in Raymore, Missouri, a small town just a few miles south of Kansas City.

Two things happened that summer: I turned ten, and I fell hard for a baseball team.

We'd moved to Missouri because my dad was starting a new job with a company called American StairGlide (they built chairs that slide up and down rails installed next to stairs). American StairGlide was a subsidiary of Marion Laboratories, which was owned by Ewing Kauffman, who owned the Kansas City Royals. So my dad could get good tickets for the Royals games. That summer, I saw my first major-league game and wound up going to the ballpark seven times. The Royals won all seven of those games. I just knew that I was their good-luck charm.

That same season, the Royals won their first American League West title. In October, I cried when Chris Chambliss—of the Yankees, damn them—hit a game-ending homer to beat the Royals in Game 5 of the American League Championship Series. (A year later, I cried again, this time at Royals Stadium, when they lost *another* decisive Game 5 to the Yankees, *again* in the ninth inning.)

At the same time, my parents were finally ending a lousy marriage, and the daily soap opera of the baseball season was a welcome, stabilizing presence in my life. I have a friend, a brilliant man who has written many books about baseball, whose mother died when he was a boy. He's never told me so, but I suspect that he lost himself in the comforting intricacies of baseball. Perhaps more than any other American sport, baseball has the power to fill a hole in one's life, because, at least for six months, it's so regularly *there*. Nearly every Monday through Saturday, the Royals would be on the radio in the evening. And then Sunday, in the afternoon. One might have to adjust for time-zone differences when the Royals were on the road, of course, but the rhythms of the season were predictable, and they made sense. Unlike the uncertainties of a busted home.

Perhaps that 1976 season, coupled with my parents' divorce, would have been enough to cement my enthusiasm for the Royals. But they won division titles again in 1977 and '78 (and again lost to the Yankees, damn them, in the playoffs both times). Given the general apathy surrounding the Royals these days, it's probably hard for younger fans to believe, but in the late seventies the Royals were immensely popular in the Kansas City area, and for that matter much of the Midwest. For every home game, buses would arrive at Royals Stadium from not only outlying regions of Missouri and Kansas, but also Iowa, Nebraska, even Colorado. If you happened to miss a game, the chances were good that the next person you met could tell you if the Royals had won. It was in this atmosphere that I became fairly obsessed with the Royals.

In August of 1980, I was involved in a fairly serious car wreck. I was fourteen. As my mom tells the story, she drove for three fearful hours in the middle of the night before arriving at the hospital to see me. I came out of unconsciousness for a few minutes. My only words were, "Did the Royals win last night?" (They had lost to the Blue Jays, but eventually reached the World Series for the first time. I was in the left-field bleachers for Game 4, and saw Willie Mays Aikens hit two home runs.)

The next stage of my obsession with baseball began in 1984, when three things happened.

First, I went off to the University of Kansas, and although my apartment was only half an hour from home, it was the first time I'd been away for any length of time, and I was lonely. Shoot, I even missed my mom. Fortunately, a pair of fellows named Denny Matthews and Fred White—longtime Royals broadcasters—would keep me company that fall, as my white-and-blue-clad heroes got themselves involved in a death struggle, ultimately successful, for the American League West title. My roommates and I didn't have a TV, so every night I sat huddled next to the radio as the pennant race turned and twisted to its mysterious conclusion. (There was, of course, no good reason to park myself so *close* to the radio, but it's one of those things you do when you want to be there, but can't be.)

That same fall I joined the History Book Club, and my first selection was *Bums: An Oral History of the Brooklyn Dodgers*, written by Peter Golenbock. With little else to do at night but study and listen to the radio, I devoured *Bums* in two or three days. Or, more precisely, two or three late nights and early mornings. This book inspired what became my fascination with baseball's incredibly rich history. Golenbock, in all honesty, is not a great writer or a great researcher, but he's a great interviewer and he does understand something that has eluded any number of baseball authors: The most interesting thing about baseball is the *voices*. And not only the voices of the players—baseball oral histories had been popular since the late 1960s, when Larry Ritter's wonderful *The Glory of Their Times* made a big splash in the book world—but also the voices of the *fans*, who had hitherto been completely neglected in the literature of the game.

I've never quite understood why authors don't pay more attention to the fans, because it's the fans who see the most. Players, in extreme cases, spend perhaps twenty years with one team. If they stick around as a coach or manager, maybe it's thirty or forty years. Some men have owned the same team for half a century or

more. But the fans . . . given that little boys and girls often become enamored of teams when they're five or six years old, and more and more people are living to be one hundred years old or more, we might assume that there are baseball fans with nearly a *century* of baseball memories. Who knows more about a team? Who has more stories to tell? Who has rejoiced and/or suffered more? After reading *Bums*, a little man in the back of my brain resolved that if we ever wrote a baseball book, we'd find a place for the fans.

And third, shortly after finishing Golenbock's book, and being particularly excited about baseball because of the Royals, I stumbled across the *Bill James Baseball Abstract 1984*. I was eighteen years old, and anything seemed possible. Even though I could barely afford to eat—I mean that quite literally, as my food budget was ten dollars per week—there was always something new to read, something new to learn. When ignorant people talk about Bill James, they talk about numbers. That's not quite right. In his annual *Abstracts*, James looked at baseball—and by extension, everything else—from a unique perspective based on a sort of rational iconoclasm. Sure, he used plenty of numbers, but the numbers were nothing more than tools in the employ of something greater. If you were a baseball fan in the 1980s, there was no better place to learn than at the figurative feet of Bill James.

I studied quite a lot of non-baseball subjects my first year in college, but after that . . . look, I'm not accusing baseball of destroying my academic career. Quite likely, if it hadn't been baseball, it would have been something else. Playground basketball, *The New Yorker*, pool halls, pretty girls . . . whatever. Some people just aren't ready for college when they're eighteen years old, and some people are never ready. I fell into the first of those categories, and perhaps both. Without question, though, the particular catalysts of my academic demise were Harry Caray, his son Skip, and Bill James. Many days, I watched the Cubs on WGN, then the Braves on WTBS. And when there weren't any games on TV, I listened to the Royals on the radio and reread my *Baseball Abstracts* yet again.

By the end of my fourth year—notice I don't say "senior year" (it wasn't)—I'd had enough. With the end of the semester approaching, I took a job roofing houses, and when my classmates were taking their finals, I was developing a gruesome sunburn and learning how to use a staple gun. I never got an official notice from the University of Kansas telling me that I was no longer welcome, but I clearly did not belong there.

Thankfully, the roofing job lasted only nine months, at the end of which I stumbled into an incredible stroke of good fortune. Bill James—yes, *that* Bill James, the author of *The Baseball Abstract*—lived not far from me. What's more, we shared a mutual friend named Mike Kopf, who told me that Bill was in the market for a research assistant. And somehow, before I knew it, this college-dropout-turned-roofer was working for Bill James. The one job, among all jobs, that I would have chosen for myself. It's safe to say that I learned more in those four years about baseball, and about writing, than I had learned in the previous twenty-three years (or in the eight since).

The job with Bill led to one thing, then another, until I arrived at—as people love to tell me—"the greatest job in the world." I write about baseball, and people give me money.



The Red Sox won their last World Series in 1918.

In 1999, the Red Sox won ninety-four games.

You could argue that they'll be even better in 2000, given that (1) three of their everyday players—the great shortstop Nomar Garciaparra, right fielder Trot Nixon, and catcher Jason Varitek—are still in their mid to late twenties, and thus might be expected to improve, and (2) the Sox have added a much-needed slugger to the lineup, in the person of center fielder Carl Everett.

But while it's true that Garciaparra and Nixon might be better this season, I'm not convinced that Varitek will improve. He's twenty-eight, and his numbers last year were out of character with the rest of his career. As for Everett, his 1999 season—he played for the Houston Astros and came to Boston in an off-season trade—was also out of character. More worrisome is Everett's long history of non-dependability. He turns twenty-nine this summer, and he's never played more than 142 games in a season. Last year, easily his most productive, he played only 123 games. Oh, and one more thing: in 1999, Pedro Martinez went 23–4. Even if he can match last season's amazing 2.07 ERA, will he match that 23–4 record? I think it's unlikely. Bad luck, bad hitting, and his own inability to start more than perhaps thirty-two games will probably conspire to keep him below twenty wins, let alone twenty-three.

For all these reasons and perhaps a few more, I suggested in my ESPN.com column two weeks ago that the Sox would finish third in the American League East,

behind not only the Yankees but also the Toronto Blue Jays. And I'm not the only one with some questions about the Red Sox. In the *Boston Globe's* preview of the 2000 season, four baseball writers—Peter Gammons, Dan Shaughnessy, Bob Ryan, and Larry Whiteside—picked the Yankees first and the Red Sox second. Interestingly, though, all four have the Red Sox finishing a strong second, strong enough to earn the American League's wild-card postseason berth. A bit of wishful thinking, perhaps.

Actually, that's what *Sports Illustrated* says, too. They also rate the Red Sox as just the number-two team in the American League East (behind the Yankees, of course) . . . but number three in the major leagues (behind Atlanta). And I suppose the thinking is that once the Red Sox reach the postseason, the presence of Pedro Martinez will be enough to carry them to the World Championship.

I don't believe in jinxes. But people around here, whether they believe in jinxes or not, do dearly love to talk about them. In response to that *Sports Illustrated* cover, Shaughnessy devoted an entire column to the latest supposed hex. He wrote, "The *Sports Illustrated* cover jinx takes its place alongside the Curse of the Bambino. Black Cat Bookends . . . will contribute to the paranoia and collective angst that pains the soul of Red Sox Nation." What Shaughnessy ignores, of course, is his own literary contribution to the paranoia and collective angst (but hey, a guy's gotta make a living).

Yes, it would be a wonderful story if, as *S.I.* predicts, the Red Sox really do win the World Series, their first since 1918. But as much as I'd love to see the Sox win the Series—God knows their fans have waited long enough—that's not why I'm here.



I visited my first major league ballpark—Royals Stadium—when I was nine years old. Believe it or not, I didn't visit my second major league ballpark—old Comiskey Park in Chicago—until I was twenty-four. My "work" eventually led me to a number of stadiums, but for too long Fenway was not among them. It took me thirty-three years, three months, and three days, but I finally made it on September 25, 1999. Fenway had always been exciting and exotic to me, as exciting and exotic to this Midwesterner as Dodge City, Kansas, might have been to a New England lad in the nineteenth century. And there I was, after all those years. And unlike so many things, this experience lived up to my expectations.

A few minutes before game time, the organist was playing in a mysterious sort

of way and I thought to myself, "Good, no rock music. The only rock 'n' roll song that should ever be heard in a ballpark was written by John Fogerty."

Moments later, with none of the sound effects and fireworks that you hear and see in some stadiums, the home team popped out of their Lilliputian dugout and trotted to their respective positions. And at that moment, the PA system (bless its electronic heart) began to play "Center Field." It was then that I knew I was in the right place, and I'm only a little embarrassed to admit that I got a little shiver up my spine, and a little moisture in my eyes. Roger Angell once described Fenway as "the best place in the world to watch a baseball game," and I could not have agreed more. I was in love.

It struck me that day that what people say about Red Sox fans, that they know more about the game than fans anywhere else, is true. As I looked around at my fellow spectators when something important was happening or might happen, I saw ninety-five percent of them staring at the field. They were not eating, or drinking, or talking to their neighbor about their kids or their stock portfolios. If they were talking about anything at all—and most apparently couldn't be bothered for something so trivial as conversation—it was why Jimmy Williams didn't use a pinch-hitter for Darren Lewis, or whether Pedro Martinez is better than Roger Clemens.

How knowledgeable are Red Sox fans? Here's one example, from my second game at Fenway last September . . . In the bottom of the ninth inning, Orioles manager Ray Miller summoned forty-two-year-old Jesse Orosco from the bullpen. Orosco, by most accounts a decent-enough fellow, was nonetheless greeted by a medium-sized chorus of boos. Why? Because in 1986, then pitching for the New York Mets, he saved Game 7 of the World Series. Against the Red Sox. You tell me, where else in America (or Canada) will the fans boo somebody for something that happened thirteen years ago?

But it really wasn't until my third game—a night game—that Fenway's magic dust settled on me, and I was hooked. I know this will sound sacrilegious to the "traditionalists" (or is it the "purists"? I always forget), but I believe that baseball is a better game at night, when the field is lit up like a stage, and there are fewer distractions for the fans. And this is especially true at Fenway Park where, when it's dark, the green lights that signify balls in the old scoreboard are greener, the red lights that signify strikes are redder, the yellow neon on the fair poles are yellower, and the Green Monster is both Greener and, well, more Monstrous. At night, every-

thing at Fenway stands out in sharper contrast than in the daytime. It's like the difference between wearing my contact lenses and not wearing them. And I always wear my contact lenses.

As John Updike so famously observed, "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." And I would argue that the park comes into even curiously sharper focus after the sun goes down. Sitting in my seat for a night game at Fenway Park, then, it struck me that everything I've done, all the reading and the work and the skipping of college classes and the neglecting of girlfriends and everything else, all of it served to prepare me for this moment. As much as I might enjoy watching baseball games in Kansas City or Seattle, both cities are relative newcomers when it comes to Major League Baseball. So there's almost always been something missing: a sense of history, a feeling of mass devotion, a singular *focus* that I dearly wish everyone else in the stands would share with me. But in Fenway, all of that *is* there, all of the history and the passion and the focus.

So sitting there in my seat, thinking about flying back home to Seattle in a few days, it occurred to me that *this* is where I should be, and for more than just a few games. Ralph Waldo Emerson—like Fenway Park, a New England native—liked to say that one might find Truth in a blade of grass. But I suspect that if Emerson were still with us, and working on a baseball book, he'd rather spend six months in Boston than in Seattle or Kansas City.

And thus it was, sitting in Seat 5 in Row CC in Box 101 in Section 12, that I decided I should spend an entire baseball season in Boston. That I *must* spend a baseball season in Boston. Six months in Fenway, eighty-one games—what might all of that tell me about not only the Red Sox, but also about being a fan? What might I learn about my obsession with this useless but perfect game?



I didn't find an apartment with a view of Fenway Park, but I did pretty well, I think. My address is 111 Park Drive, and it's four short blocks, almost a straight shot, from the front door of my building to Gate D at Fenway. I walk outside, take a left, walk past one building (a halfway house for ex-convicts), then turn left onto Jersey Street. Three blocks later, Jersey crosses Boylston and turns into Yawkey Way. One block later, Yawkey reaches Van Ness . . . and Fenway Park. At

a leisurely pace, it's six minutes and 537 steps, from my apartment to the greatest ballpark in the world.

And right across the street from my apartment—I'm on the fourth floor, so I do have a nice view of this—are the Back Bay Fens, a winding, mile-and-a-half-long park that ranks as one of the lovelier jewels in Frederick Law Olmstead's "Emerald Necklace," a system of linked green spaces designed by the architect of New York's Central Park. The Fens are home to a softball field and two basketball courts, but also a large number of small gardens cultivated by neighborhood residents, and a real wetlands that's home to a wide variety of flora and fauna.



So that's how I got here. And today, "here" is a frigid Fenway Park, 46 degrees at game time. Everybody's bundled up, which makes for something of a comical experience in the grandstand, where the seats have been in place since 1934. People in 1934 were built quite differently than people in 2000; we're taller now, and we're wider. And if you're taller than six feet, your knees bang into the seat to your front; if you're wider than a two-by-four, you're going to bump elbows and thighs with whoever's sitting to your left and right. Or as Ray Kinsella says in *Shoeless Joe*, ". . . the seats are much too close together and we are hunched knees close to chins, as if we were passengers in the rear seat of a foreign car." Now toss in the cold weather, with the attendant layered clothing and baggy coats, and when someone returns from a trip to the bathroom or the beer stand, it's like trying to stuff a kernel back into an ear of corn.

Any other day, and it would be too bloody cold for baseball. But this isn't any other day, this is the *first* day. The first Red Sox home game of the season. *Opening Day*. I've read a number of poetic essays over the years, tying Opening Day to such lofty themes as rebirth, and rejuvenation. It's done quite artfully . . . and it misses the point completely. Opening Day doesn't have much to do with a mystical rejuvenation, or even something so pedestrian as springtime. No. Opening Day is plenty significant for the simplest of all reasons . . . *It's the first day of the baseball season*. Or in this case, the first day of Fenway's season. That's quite special enough for 99.9 percent of us.

But even more so than usual, this Opening Day is important to me. I have been thinking and talking about this book for months, yet on a symbolic level this is Day 1 of the project. If I don't get at least one thousand words about Opening Day on

my hard drive, I will consider the day a failure. This summer promises to be something akin to a new marriage, both thrilling and terrifying. Thrilling, because I will be living and working in and around Fenway Park, perhaps the best place in the world to do what I love best—watch baseball games. Terrifying, because I'm supposed to produce a manuscript of roughly one hundred thousand words about the experience.

Beginning today, I must produce. Or perish, at least in a limited, professional sense.

I haven't written a word yet, but I've been thinking about this book for months, since I first conceived it last September. A little research here, a few thoughts jotted down there, and just a week ago I was in Seattle for the Red Sox' first series of the season. That was a homecoming of sorts, as I just moved from Seattle to Boston two weeks ago, after four years there. In fact, I've kept my season tickets at Safeco Field, and in a happy coincidence that's exactly where the Sox opened the 2000 season. So just eight days after arriving in Boston, I was on a plane back to Seattle for three games featuring the Red Sox, then one Mariners-Yankees contest.

The Sox lost two of those three games in Seattle, and then they traveled to Anaheim for three games against the Angels. They won only two of their first six games, and both victories came when Pedro Martinez pitched. In the other four games, Red Sox pitchers went 0-4 with a 7.59 ERA. Not a good sign.

Here's another sign that's not so good . . . the Red Sox lineup for today's game:

#### OPENING DAY LINEUP

	POS	AGE	OBP	SLG
1. JOSE OFFERMAN	2B	31	.366	.377
2. TROT NIXON	RF	26	.354	.464
3. BRIAN DAUBACH	DH	28	.357	.551
4. NOMAR GARCIAPARRA	SS	26	.367	.566
5. TROY O'LEARY	LF	30	.338	.469
6. CARL EVERETT	CF	29	.348	.458
7. MIKE STANLEY	1B	36	.372	.460
8. JASON VARITEK	C	28	.324	.460
9. WILTON VERAS	3B	22	.323	.398

With the exception of Wilton Veras—who is holding down third base only until John Valentin returns from an injury, probably later this month—these are the guys who are being counted on to produce enough runs for the Sox to win ninety-some games.

It's not a great lineup. The stats I've listed here are the most important ones—on-base percentage, and slugging percentage—and they represent each player's career totals entering this season. Garciparra and Daubach are the only regulars with .500-plus career slugging percentages. And Daubach's career consists of just 120 games, all of them last season. It's unlikely that he's really that good. Essentially, it's a lineup with one superstar in Garciparra, one star in Everett (though he's only been a star for about a year), and a bunch of guys who might be good. Or might not be.

Today, though, this lineup was just fine. Facing the Twins, who depending on their starting pitcher can look little better than a Triple-A club, the Red Sox scored twice in the first inning, sent thirteen runners to the plate in the second, and romped their way to a 13–4 laughter. I attended the game with my girlfriend, Sarah, her younger brother, and their parents. Sarah and Joseph are both native New Englanders, while their folks are from Cuba. All of them are, of course, rabid baseball fans. Sunday afternoon, I called Sarah while the Red Sox were playing the Angels in California. I asked her if she was listening to the game, and she replied, "No. What's the point? The Sox are horrible."

After five games and four losses, Sarah had given up on them. And she wasn't alone. Baseball fans in these parts are about as moody as a pregnant woman who forgot to eat lunch, and some of them had already given up on this season. But of course, Pedro beat the Angels that afternoon, the Sox are now 3–4 after today's blowout, and the Twins are in town for a couple more days. Hope springs eternal, especially in the spring.

### *April 12*

Walking to the ballpark tonight, I knew it was going to be cold.

I just didn't know *how* cold. Had I known, I might never have left my apartment. Fenway Park or no Fenway Park. Book or no book. I don't believe that baseball is meant to be experienced while shivering and sucking down hot chocolate just to survive, and it was flat-out cold tonight. When the first pitch was

thrown, the thermometer registered 46 degrees, the same as yesterday. The difference, of course, is that while yesterday's game began shortly before noon, and warmed up at least slightly, tonight's game began at 7:06 and only got chillier. Oh, and there was also a brisk wind blowing in, straight over the Green Monster and right into my face.

It's been seven years since I tasted meat, and perhaps a dozen years since I've eaten a hot dog. Yet I was sorely tempted in the third inning as I watched a vendor, just a few seats away, flip open the lid of his shiny stainless-steel bin. As he reached in for a dog, steam surrounded his forearm, and then the wiener itself came out, accompanied by its own moist blanket of heat. The guy selling the hot dogs was young but very good at his job, and the entire process, grabbing the bun to handling the completed dog to the customer, didn't take more than about eight seconds. But that was plenty long enough for me to fantasize about how wonderful it would feel to have five or six bites of pure warmth making the journey from my mouth to my stomach. One could, I realized, eat three or four hot dogs in the course of an evening like this one.

I kept score for the first six innings, but finally gave up in the seventh, preferring instead to devote my full attention to keeping warm. Now, one might think that scorekeeping would provide a pleasant diversion from freezing, but I felt significantly warmer after I stopped. Instead, I simply watched the ball game, my hands jammed into my jacket pockets, and concentrated on relaxing my muscles. The game ended just a few hours ago, but already I remember very little about it. After looking at the box score on the Internet, I can tell you that the Red Sox scored five runs in the third inning against Twins rookie Johan Santana, and cruised to a 7–3 win. I can also tell you that Troy O'Leary doubled (and scored) twice in two innings, and that Jeff Fassero picked up the victory despite pitching only five (shaky) innings.

None of that information will reside in my conscious memory. I'm going to remember freezing my ass off tonight, and that's all I'm going to remember.

Yesterday, the Detroit Tigers christened their new "mallpark" with a victory, beating the Seattle Mariners 5–2. But the game featured five errors, some of them due to the extreme conditions: 40 degrees at game time, plus a steady, stultifying drizzle throughout. While nearly forty thousand fans showed up for the inaugural festivities, at least half of them had gone home by the third inning. And that's kind

of sad. If baseball players can't feel their fingers, then they shouldn't be on the field. Baseball is, after all, "the summer game."

In the old days, games would occasionally be postponed due to "cold grounds," but that almost never happens anymore. In recent years, only the Chicago White Sox have used this excuse to postpone a game, and only then when the result was a strategic advantage for them. The reason, of course, is money. Postponements can mean, somewhere down the line, doubleheaders, and baseball teams hate doubleheaders.

But baseball should have a rigid rule about frigid weather, something that would dictate postponement if the game-time wind chill is lower than 32 degrees. Or even 40.

That's one simple solution. Here's another. As much as I love baseball, I'd also love to see Major League Baseball cut the 162-game schedule back to 154, like it was before 1961. This would allow the season to start a week later than it does now. Start a week later and avoid early games in the more northern cities with outdoor ball-parks, and you eliminate at least some percentage of the freezing temperatures. An alternative would be for each club to play five or six doubleheaders over the course of the season, which would allow the retention of the 162-game schedule *and* an April 10 Opening Day. But you say the word "doubleheader" in the presence of a baseball executive, and he'll make the sign of the cross and back away slowly, because it means a few less dollars.

Billy Herman, who managed the Red Sox in 1965 and '66, once observed of the weather here, "Boston has two seasons: August and winter." That's something of an exaggeration, of course, but everyone I meet tells me that the conditions at Fenway are often brutal in April, and I can't help but think there's a better way.

*Thursday, April 13*

Baseball is scrambling for a ball yourself. You don't want an autograph; that's like standing in line for gas.

—ex—Red Sox pitcher Bill Lee

After last night's nipple-raising experience, I decided to enjoy tonight's game on television, safe in my toasty apartment. But sometime in the middle of the after-

noon, I started thinking . . . *What, are you nuts? You've got a ticket for a great seat at Fenway Park, you live four blocks away . . . and you're going to stay home? What if something great happens? What if Carl Everett hits three home runs? What if Brad Radke throws a no-hitter? What if . . .*

No, of course I wasn't going to stay home. Instead, I went out and bought some long underwear, and by game time I was just as excited to be going to the ballpark as I always am. And it was a good thing I went, because . . . wait, before we get into that, a few words about souvenir baseballs.

You can walk into any good-sized sporting-goods store and purchase an official Major League Baseball baseball for eight or ten bucks. But turn one loose in a ballpark, and you'd think it was the Hope Diamond. I have thought long and hard about this, and I have come to the conclusion that we find baseballs so fascinating because, all of a sudden, this common object, this whiteish sphere with red stitches, has escaped from its natural element. We're fascinated by baseballs for the same reason that we were fascinated, as children, when we spotted our fifth-grade teacher in the grocery store, comparison-shopping as if she were a normal person.

You've seen it. A ball is fouled into your section, and suddenly every adult male within twenty feet wants to see it, fondle it, *just be with it*, as if he'd never held a baseball before. Aside from the sheer surprise of suddenly having this *objet d'heart* in one's very own hands, the only interesting thing about such a baseball is its color, which is something not exactly white. For as every longtime baseball fan knows, before each game the umpires "rub up" each game ball with Delaware River Mud, to remove the slickness, the gloss, thus making the balls easier for the pitchers to grip. Game-used baseballs look dirty because they are. And people are surprised at this discovery. It's sort of like finding a brown egg in a carton that's supposed to contain white ones.

All right, back to the game. Bottom of the first inning. Three-and-two count to Garciaparra. Radke threw a change-up, and Nomar sliced it foul . . . way foul, a liner over the Red Sox dugout. Anybody who's been to Fenway more than a few times knows that a foul ball like this one is likely to hit one of two steel facings below, respectively, the roof-box seats or the roof itself. And if that happens, the ball will carom back into the lower deck.

This ball did indeed *bonk* off a steel facing, and directly toward me. All this takes less than a second, but one second is time enough for any number of reflex-

ive thoughts . . . *that one might come back down, better dump the scorebook . . . it's coming this way . . . damn, a little too high, just over my hands . . . all right, that was moderately exciting, now let's get back to the ball game . . .*

Like anybody else, I pay attention when there's a foul ball heading in my direction. But once it's past me, I immediately give up and focus on the game. So as soon as this ball was gone, I was already turning back toward the infield. But then I noticed a blur of activity just to my right and my front, and suddenly everyone was looking at my feet. I looked at my feet, too . . . and there sat an official Major League baseball, as ripe for the picking as a Maine apple in September.

I reached down, past a small pair of arms that didn't reach far enough, and that ball, until just a few seconds ago an integral part of a *Major League Baseball game*, was mine. Not for long, though, because that small pair of arms was attached to a small girl sitting directly in front of me.

Let me explain . . . For some years now, it has been my position that adults don't have any business with baseballs, at least not if there are children within hailing distance. When I arrive in my seat for a game, I spend a few minutes scanning the fans around me in search of, in no particular order, (1) attractive women and (2) the best candidate for a free baseball, should I somehow find myself in possession of such an orb. Before the summer months, there generally aren't so many kids in the stands, which often makes the decision easy. Once school lets out, though, it's more complicated. Then you have to study not only the kids, but also the parents. If there are different children roughly equidistant from my seat, I try to guess which one of these kids is mostly likely to get whacked around at home. And that's who gets the baseball.

Tonight it was easy. I picked up the baseball, straightened up, and staring me right in the face was that little girl: brown-eyed, round-faced, and gap-toothed, with long hair, the bangs cut across her forehead as straight as a Triple-A pitcher's fast-ball. I am powerless when it comes to small children and big dogs, so without even thinking about it I handed her the ball, in return for which I received two thank-yous, three big smiles, and a snack to be named later (as it turned out, a handful of popcorn).

We got to talking, me and the little girl. Her name was Tracy, and she was eight years old. Nice and cozy in her bright red winter coat, tights, and purple tennis shoes, Tracy spent the rest of the game clutching her new baseball in one hand and

a tiny version of Wally the Green Monster, the Red Sox mascot, in the other. Tracy's favorite player? Why, Nomar Garciaparra, of course.

In Matt Tavares's children's book, *Zachary's Ball*, young Zachary is given a foul ball caught by his father at Fenway Park. As it turns out, the ball has supernatural powers (the full nature of which will not be revealed here), but eventually the ball simply disappears from Zachary's room. Years later, Zachary is walking down Lansdowne Street, behind the Green Monster, during a Red Sox game. Suddenly a baseball arcs over the Monster, settling gently into Zachary's hands. As he turns for home with his prize, Zachary spies a young girl staring at it. At which point . . . He places the ball in her hands and she proclaims it's magic. But Zachary says they're all magic.



Making a little girl happy certainly ranks as the top highlight of my evening, but it wasn't the only highlight, as I also got to see Tim Wakefield record his first victory of the season. Pete Schourek started for the Sox, and pitched well enough. When he exited, with two outs in the top of the seventh, Boston trailed Minnesota 3–2. Rich Garces walked the first batter he faced, thus loading the bases, but then El Guapo retired Matt Lawton on a fly ball to escape further damage. (Back in the first inning, after Lawton singled, a young man behind me grumbled to his girlfriend, "The Bad News Twins. A high-school team could beat these guys.")

After the Red Sox tied the game in their half of the seventh, Wakefield trotted in from the bullpen.

That's not exactly accurate. Tim Wakefield does not trot. He jogs stiffly, sometimes accompanied by the strains of "Eight Days a Week" (presumably in honor of his ability to pitch whenever necessary). Slowing down as he reaches the infield dirt, Wakefield hands his warm-up jacket to a batboy, then proceeds to the mound with short, bowlegged strides, calling to mind a semiretired cowboy, determined to rope an ornery old steer after the young ranch hands have all given up.

I've always liked Wakefield, ever since he came up with the Pirates in 1992 and went 8–1 for the pennant-winning Pittsburgh Pirates. He's a knuckleball pitcher, and I like knuckleball pitchers. People sometimes ask me *why* I like knuckleballers, and I've never really come up with a satisfactory answer. But I'm thinking about it tonight, and I suspect it's simply because they're *different*. I can relate to that, because I grew up thinking I was different, too (of course, that only makes me non-

different, because nearly all of us grew up thinking we were somehow different from our peers, and of course we were).

That's not the only reason, though. I like Wakefield because we're nearly the same age, he being just six weeks younger than I. I like Wakefield because he bears a mild resemblance to John Cusack, one of my favorite actors. And I like Wakefield because, among the few baseball players that I've interviewed, he was the most gracious and revealing.

### *Friday, April 14*

Shortly before leaving for the ballpark tonight, I got word that Gary Gaetti had retired. This news was not unexpected. Gaetti went hitless in his first ten at-bats, and looked even worse than his batting average. Nevertheless, the news was unwelcome, as I had hoped to see the old warhorse come through with at least a few more big hits before he left the game for good.

Gaetti's presence on the Red Sox roster, it should be said, has always been fairly inexplicable. He's forty-one years old, and, last year with the Cubs, Gaetti batted .204 and posted a pitiful 599 OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage). True, the Red Sox desperately needed a right-handed bat this spring, but when they, alone among the thirty major-league clubs, invited Gaetti to spring training, I assumed it was simply a favor to a grizzled veteran of the baseball wars. But then he got hot in spring training—well, at least warm, .280 with a couple homers in his first nine games—and suddenly Gaetti was given a valuable role on the roster, a role that he pretty clearly was no longer capable of filling with any sort of adequacy.

Now he's gone, and I'll miss him.

Gaetti certainly wasn't a great player, and is distinguished mostly by his longevity. Nevertheless, there are some things that, if you were paying attention, you might remember about him. He hit a home run in his first major league at-bat. He eventually participated in seven triple plays as a defensive player, which is the all-time record. For a while, he sported long, curly (permed) hair, which masked, at least to a small extent, the fact that Gaetti—nicknamed "The Rat" by his teammates—was not the most handsome man who ever played the game. And later on, he apparently had some teammates in Minnesota—Kent Hrbek sticks out in my mind—who did not appreciate their third baseman's God-fearing ways.

Gaetti ranked as one of baseball's better third basemen from 1986 through '88, but in 1989 he seemed to lose most of his ability to hit major-league pitching. After a couple of years with the Angels, Gaetti joined the Royals in the spring of 1993, and, supposedly thanks to a better prescription for his contact lenses, he suddenly began to hit again.

In 1995 I was living in Chicago, where I found myself without regular doses of Royals baseball for the first time since I was ten years old, so on those rare occasions when they did show up on television, I acted like a ten-year-old. I will always remember one evening in particular. I think ESPN's A-game had either been stopped by rain or had finished up a little early, so the network switched to the Royals and Rangers for some "bonus coverage."

With the game tied 5–5 in the top of the eighth, Gaetti stepped to the plate with two outs, runners on first and second, and Rangers reliever Matt Whiteside on the mound. Gaetti was always a free swinger, so Whiteside went fishing with a couple of pitches off the plate. Gaetti wasn't biting, though, leaving the count at two balls and no strikes.

Even in his prime, the key to retiring Gaetti was always the same: get ahead, at which point he'd swing at the weakest shit you can imagine. But get behind Gaetti, and he could hurt you. I didn't see him play often with the Royals, but for that season-and-a-half when he was going good, it seemed like he *never* missed a fastball if he knew it was coming. Of course, I know that this is simply a trick of memory, that Gaetti must have missed any number of down-the-middle fastballs, including some that I witnessed. I will not fall into the same trap as all those people who tell you that Gil Hodges or Tony Perez *always* came through in the clutch.

Nevertheless, on this occasion a small cheer escaped my throat as I cackled to myself, "He's going deep." And that's exactly what he did, driving Whiteside's next pitch, what baseball players call a "cock-high fastball," over the fence in center field. And there was much rejoicing in the land, or at least in my cramped, cluttered apartment in Evanston, Illinois. That's one of my all-time favorite baseball memories, and I'm grateful to the Rat for it. I'm also grateful for the thirty-five home runs Gaetti hit in 1995, for a Royals team that was, otherwise, virtually powerless.

But even more than his home run that I "called," I'll remember Gaetti as the answer to a somewhat obscure trivia question . . .

*Who was the last major league player to bat while wearing a helmet with no earflaps?*

The following is Rule 1.16(c) from the *Official Baseball Rules* (2000 Edition):

All players entering the Major Leagues commencing with the 1983 championship season and every succeeding season thereafter must wear a single earflap helmet (or at the player's option, a double earflap helmet), except those players who were in the Major League during the 1982 season, and who, as recorded in that season, objected to wearing a single earflap helmet.

Now, why anyone would choose not to protect his ear from baseballs traveling ninety-plus miles per hour, I haven't the foggiest idea. But a number of players continued to wear the earflap-less helmet after 1982, Gaetti among them.

By 1996, there were only three such players: Gaetti, Tim Lincecum, and Ozzie Smith. Ozzie retired after the '96 season, leaving only Gaetti and Lincecum. Lincecum actually played his last game early in the 1999 season before being struck by Lupus, but he attempted a comeback this spring with the Yankees. Meanwhile, Gaetti was hanging on for dear life in the Red Sox camp. It could have gone either way, but Lincecum retired and Gaetti made the club.

Earflap or no earflap . . . I know it's a small thing, unnoticed even by some who consider themselves serious baseball fans. But I revel in details like this, and every day I hear from people who share my joy at such things. So let history remember that the earflap-less helmet made its last appearance in Fenway Park on the evening of April 12, 2000, when Gary Gaetti struck out swinging against Twins pitcher Hector Carrasco.

There is one more reason that I regret the passing of Gary Gaetti: He's old. Or at least, he's older than I. And it's always reassuring to know, however many birthdays I've had, that there are still *major league baseball players* who have had more. I was born on June 22, 1966, and so, even after the retirement of Gaetti, I'm still younger than 140 players (give or take a few) currently making big-league meal money. Small comfort, perhaps, but I suspect that the day that number drops to zero will bring my mortality into sharp focus, even more so than my fortieth birthday.

Postscript: The morning after Gaetti hung up his spikes, I spotted my first gray

hair while shaving, nestled among its light-brown cousins and happily sprouting next to my left ear. After half an hour of rooting around in my apartment for tweezers, I sent that lonely gray soul to an early, unnatural death. He was just the advance party, though. There are more on the way, just as sure as Gary Gaetti is going to spend most of this summer huntin' and fishin'.

### *Saturday, April 15*

Last night, perhaps missing Gary Gaetti, the Red Sox got hammered by the Oakland Athletics in the first game of a three-game series.

I admire the Athletics, but I really don't like what they mean for baseball. See, the A's are quite likely the future of the game. Most of the Oakland hitters are like heavyweight boxers: They're big, they're slow, and they swing rarely but with deadly intent. And this is the recipe for offensive success early in the twenty-first century. The hitters are bigger (and stronger), while the strike zones and the ballparks are smaller. Speed? Relatively irrelevant. The Athletics have virtually none, but last year they won eighty-seven games, and this year they were my preseason pick to win the American League West.

As a fan of rationality, I'm thrilled to see Oakland succeed, because power and plate discipline are two of the pillars of sabermetrics (**sabermetrics**, *n.* the scientific search for baseball knowledge). But as a fan of baseball, I'm ambivalent at best about the Athletics' success, because Oakland baseball, quite frankly, is boring baseball. It's a bunch of sluggardly sluggers standing around waiting for a pitch to hit over the fence. That's not to say the A's themselves are boring; at this point in baseball history, they're something of a novelty. But if they should win, say, ninety games this year, they will be imitated. And while one team like this might be a novelty, eight or ten would be a blight.

In practice, here's how Oakland baseball works: Last night the Red Sox actually out-hit the Athletics, 12–11, but the A's outscored the Sox 13–6 because they outwalked (8–1) and out-homered (3–0) them.

Today, though, it was almost as if the Red Sox had gotten together after last night's game and said, "Hey, why didn't we think of that?" Because in the first two innings, Boston scored seven runs thanks to five walks and four extra-base hits, and they cruised to a 14–2 laughter behind Pedro Martinez, the best pitcher on the planet. Including the 1999 postseason and a pair of relief outings, here are

Martinez's stats against major league hitters since last August 19 (when he lost to Tim Hudson, today's starter for Oakland):

G	IP	H	K	BB	W-L	ERA
14	94 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	45	152	18	11-0	0.76

In none of those fourteen games did Martinez allow more than two runs. In eleven of his twelve starts over this span, he struck out at least eleven hitters (today the streak ended, as Martinez struck out only nine Athletics). At the risk of hyperbole, I think it's safe to say that few pitchers have ever dominated the competition like this over a comparable period of time. Consider that seventeen of those innings came last October against the Indians and Yankees, two of the great offensive teams of our time, and consider that *all* of them came in an era of bloated run production.

**Fenway Moment:** Back on Opening Day, the first fifteen thousand fans through the turnstiles were rewarded with a magnetic schedule, the kind you slap on your refrigerator as soon as you get home. Late in tonight's game, our local usher sidled over and sort of surreptitiously slipped Sarah and me a pair of the magnetic schedules. We both smiled and said thanks, as if we couldn't live without two more of these things. His response? A smile, and a few words of wisdom: "Them are handy, you can put 'em on the fridge."

### *Sunday, April 16*

Bottom of the ninth, four runs apiece, and leadoff man Carl Everett tattooed a T. J. Mathews pitch into the center-field bleachers. Game over, just like that.

In the old days—hell, just last year—Everett's hit would have been described as a "game-winning home run." No longer. Now it's called a "walk-off homer."

"Walk-off" is not a new term. Then with the Athletics, Dennis Eckersley introduced it to the masses back in the early 1990s, and apparently it goes back further than that, with any number of people eager to take credit for inventing it when they played in high school, etc. I'm not particularly interested in the history, because we're simply never going to have an accurate creation story.

Anyway, despite Eckersley's best efforts—maybe he should have allowed more walk-off homers—it never really took. I read about "walk-off" in a *Sports Illustrated* profile on Eckersley seven or eight years ago, and that was the last I saw or heard

of it . . . until last week. Repetition is a powerful force, and last week "walk-off" was all over the place. Or at least it was all over ESPN, and that's where I get most of my baseball news.

DATE	OPPONENTS	SCORE (INNINGS)	HERO (HIT)
APRIL 10	TWINS	6–5 (9)	JOHNNY DAMON (HOMER)
APRIL 11	ORIOLES	7–5 (12)	BRIAN JOHNSON (HOMER)
APRIL 12	ORIOLES	7–6 (9)	REY SANCHEZ (HOMER)
APRIL 13	ORIOLES	6–5 (9)	CARLOS BELTRAN (SINGLE)

To my knowledge, nobody had used "walk-off" to modify anything except a home run until Beltran kept the Royals' walk-off streak alive with his ninth-inning, game-winning single. By that time, the Royals had won three straight games with walk-off homers, and they had become a big story, at least if *Baseball Tonight* is the most important thing in your day. All of this was, of course, a hell of a good time for me, as the Royals generally are given just a few seconds of highlights, and sometimes less than that on *SportsCenter*.

Baseball fans are, of course, generally conservative by nature. And that's even true, though to a lesser degree, of the people who read my iconoclastic column on ESPN.com. Most of them didn't mind the use of "walk-off" to describe a game-ending home run. That's a special event (yes, even in today's homer-happy environment), and it deserves a special descriptor. But fans are a bit less sanguine about the use of "walk-off" as a modifier of lesser hits, and I would tend to agree with them. "Walk-off single" just doesn't *sound* right. As I write this, though, the policy at ESPN is to use "walk-off" for any game-ending hit, at least in their "Bottom Line" (the scrolling ticker-type line that runs across the bottom of the screen during news programs on ESPN, and constantly on ESPN2 and ESPNNews). I suspect that this particular policy won't last the summer, because of opposition from viewers and even (I hear) a fair amount of grouching from the ESPN "talent."

### ***Monday, April 17***

Patriots Day has a long tradition in New England, where the third Monday in April is a holiday for just about everyone in Massachusetts. In Boston, there are two wonderful traditions that come with Patriots Day: The Red Sox begin playing a baseball

game before noon, and somewhere between fifteen and twenty thousand endeavor to run upward of twenty-six miles through the streets of the city and surrounding villages.

The baseball game was yet another frigid affair, and would have been so even if it had started in the afternoon rather than 11:07 in the morning. The pitchers took advantage of the conditions, the two teams combining for fourteen hits but just a single run. Oakland's Gil Heredia tossed seven shutout innings, and then two Athletic relievers finished up with two more, Oakland taking the 1-0 decision.

At the start, I was sitting by myself in the grandstand behind home plate. In the top of the second inning, a young man settled in next to me. With his sensible shoes, pinstriped shirt, and a tie that almost certainly cost more than my jeans, he looked like an extra from *The Boiler Room*. I had to hand it to him, though; he had guts. No coat or gloves, but somehow he stuck it out—with the help of two hot dogs and a container of something that looked vaguely like Asian food—until the middle of the fifth. We conversed twice. Early on, he asked me who was pitching for the Red Sox (Fassero). And later, he asked me why O'Leary wasn't playing (just getting a day off). And then he was gone, back to his warm office, and the comfort of bears and (especially) bulls.

After the game, I hustled down to Kenmore Square, where Beacon Street meets Commonwealth Avenue ("Comm Ave"), a prime viewing point for Boston Marathon watchers. The crowd on the sidewalks was five deep, but I nestled in behind some shorter spectators and had a decent look at the runners going by. From snippets of conversation, I gathered that I'd just missed seeing the three male leaders, who apparently had been bunched together (it would be the closest finish in the race's history).

As a spectator sport, distance races have to rank somewhere between curling and chess . . . unless you know someone in the race, and given that there are 17,741 entrants this year, that would probably describe a lot of the people on the sidewalks. Not me, though. I went because it's something you're supposed to do on Patriots Day: watch the Red Sox, then troop down to Kenmore Square and watch the marathon. I hung around for another ten minutes, long enough to see the two leading women, and then I headed home, visions of a long, hot shower dancing in my head.

After that long, hot shower, I was off to Harvard. Yeah, me and Harvard! The dropout from the University of Kansas! A young man named Gautam Mukunda

(Harvard, Class of '01), invited me to speak at something called Current Events Table, at Leverett House, Harvard's biggest residence hall. (The way it's supposed to work, the speaker eats dinner with whichever residents are interested in the talk, and afterward there's a discussion of the subject at hand; in my case, baseball. Unfortunately, due to post-marathon slowdowns in the subway, I was late. By the time I arrived, everyone else had eaten, so for fifteen minutes, twenty-five Harvard brains watched me eat a big salad. Aside from that, it went well. No honorary degree, though.)

Anyway, heading to Kenmore Square to catch my train to Cambridge, I walked past Fenway Park and turned right on Brookline. There, at the intersection of Brookline, Yawkey, and Lansdowne, sits the Cask 'n' Flagon, a large sports bar, and the preferred hangout for serious pre- and postgame drinkers. And just outside the bar, there was a young man sitting on the sidewalk, a large, bleeding gash in the middle of his forehead. A group of bouncers stood around with nothing to do, like vultures who had already eaten their supper. Meanwhile, this poor fellow is sitting on the sidewalk like carrion, his back against the masonry, dazed from his injury and quite likely intoxicated, too.

I slowed down some, not to help or even to sympathize, really, but rather to try and figure out what might have happened. Everyone was pointing at another young man, who had stopped on the sidewalk atop the Mass Pike, and was looking back toward the scene as if slightly surprised by what he had wrought.

Four days ago, returning from the aforementioned trip to purchase thermal underwear, I happened across a young woman who had apparently just been struck by a car. The way she was lying on her side, with her legs crossed and her head resting on her right arm, she looked like she might have been taking a nap on her couch, on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Except it wasn't Sunday afternoon, and she wasn't taking a nap on her couch. She was lying on the street, a few feet from the curb.

It's been at least two years since I've seen anyone in this sort of distress, and now two within a week.

When you live in a city, you're regularly going to see things that make you feel helpless. This, more than the amorphous threat of violence and the occasional rudeness from strangers, is what I find most disturbing about urban life. I suspect that most people are made uncomfortable by feelings of helplessness, and I'd be committing some sin of self-absorption if I thought I was particularly special in that

respect. Still, when I see things like this and wish I could help, I occasionally flash back to when I was a little boy, six or seven years old. Things weren't going well for my mother, and occasionally she just sort of collapsed on the bed that she and my father shared, and sobbed. That little boy—who sometimes shadows me still, only to fade away when I turn my head to get a good look—knew he should do something, but of course he had no idea what that something might be. And part of him, I suspect, still wants to help his mommy.

There's an ambulance permanently stationed in Kenmore Square, and I had been wondering why. Now I think I know. In the city, bad things happen to people with disturbing regularity. And once again, there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

### *Friday, April 21*

Today is Good Friday, but it's been anything but a *good* Friday. Last night the Red Sox game in Detroit was postponed due to inclement weather, and tonight it was our turn in Boston. During the day, the temperature was in the 40s and it was too wet for water polo, so I was less than excited at the prospect of another miserable evening at Fenway. On the other hand, tonight's scheduled starter was Pedro Martinez, and I was blessed with one of the best tickets in the house, six rows behind the Sox dugout.

I knew the evening's plans were in danger when, a bit after noon, I turned on The Weather Channel, and the entire state of Massachusetts was covered by various shades of green, the most common being something one might describe as "off-Kermit." In fact, the entire northeast corner of the country was splotched with a swirling, depressing mess that brought to mind Jackson Pollock with a severely limited pallet. There would certainly be no baseball tonight—the game was officially postponed in the middle of the afternoon—and tomorrow's 1:05 start has been pushed back to 3:05, which might or might not be late enough to let this front move through.

If there's any positive at all in this brutal weather of late, it's the prospect of a future doubleheader, a wonderful occurrence made even more wonderful by its modern rarity. Of course, the catch is that you don't want a doubleheader unless the weather's at least tolerable, otherwise you're miserable for eight hours instead of four.

*Saturday, April 22*

*Rain, rain, go away . . .*

Not as nasty as yesterday, but plenty nasty enough. The good news? A double-header tomorrow. Even better, it'll be the old-fashioned type of twin bill: one ticket gets you both games, with the second starting thirty minutes after the first. The bad news? The weather forecast for tomorrow calls for a 60 percent chance of more rain. If the Sox don't play tomorrow, it'll end up being thirteen days between home games, leaving me with not a whole hell of a lot to write about in April.

*Sunday, April 23*

I wish I could report that, after two days of steady rain and zero baseball, the Great Climate Gods had taken their pounds of flesh, and this morning brought sunny skies and balmy temperatures. Alas, 'twas not so. I awoke at ten in the morning and padded over to the window, only to be greeted by a gray sky and damp streets. And The Weather Channel on today's forecast? THIS AFTERNOON . . . CLOUDY WITH SHOWERS AND PATCHY FOG. CONTINUED COOL. HIGH 45 TO 50. NORTH WIND 10 TO 20 MPH. CHANCE OF RAIN NEARLY 100 PERCENT. (I have watched The Weather Channel more often in the month since I arrived in Boston than in my four years in Seattle.)

Meanwhile, on WEEI, Boston's top all-sports radio station, Dick "Monster" Radatz predicted that the Red Sox would get both games in today. At 12:05, an hour before game time, I looked down at the street from my fourth-floor flat, and the first two cars moving down Park Drive had their windshield wipers on the intermittent setting, not a good sign. (Somebody on WEEI said, "It's drizzling here at the ballpark, but don't worry, they'll force this one in.")

By 12:30 the drizzle had turned into something worse (the Monster allowed that it might be a *solid* drizzle), but I left for Fenway anyway because I was supposed to meet Bill Considine, who had my ticket, at 12:40. For some unknown reason, hundreds of people with tickets were actually entering the ballpark, but Bill and I spent the next couple of hours drinking beer as the solid drizzle turned into light rain. Finally, at 2:30 I walked back home; one of the nice things about living four blocks from the ballpark is that if they suddenly decide to start playing baseball, I can be there in five minutes.

They never did decide to start playing. Once the big green mass reached eastern Massachusetts, it just sat here, with Boston at the epicenter, and so the Sox

finally decided to give up. That was at 2:45. Unfortunately for those fans who never stopped hoping, the club didn't announce the postponement until 4:27, which meant that some people had been sitting in the stands, watching old baseball video on the JumboTron, for close to three and a half hours. The Red Sox claimed they didn't want to announce anything, anything at all, until the makeup dates were approved by the Players Association. They also claimed that this was done as a courtesy to the fans. The truth, of course, is that the Red Sox, like nearly every other baseball team, think of their fans only when everything else on the "To Do" list has been crossed off.



Today marked the first time since 1976 that the Red Sox have lost four straight games to rain (one in Detroit, and now three here). And the postponement of today's doubleheader cost all of us a little piece of history. Pedro and Ramon Martinez were supposed to start for the Sox today, which would have marked the first time brothers started both games of a twin bill since Gaylord and Jim Perry did so for the Indians in 1974.

Worse, this means no Fenway Park baseball until May, when the Sox return from a weeklong road trip.

### *Tuesday, April 25*

Not long ago, the Royals won four straight games in their last at-bat, three of them on walk-off home runs. But they've not won since the last of those four games, and that was ten days and nine losses ago. In geological time, as we all know, eleven days is less than the blink of an eye. Even in human time, eleven days will pass quickly if you're busy and/or having fun. But when your favorite baseball team has not won in eleven days, it's like they haven't won in eleven years. You forget what it *feels like* to win. You wonder if you'll ever win again. You have murderous feelings in your heart for the manager, the pitching coach, the bullpen catcher, and the guy who shines the players' shoes. And you become desperate. The Royals' pitching has been, as it was last year, atrocious. So tonight I decided that the panacea for all the team's woes is a new pitching coach. Not just any pitching coach, though. We need the *best* pitching coach. But unfortunately, the best pitching coach—a compact, energetic man named Leo Mazzone—is gainfully employed by the Atlanta Braves.

My passion for the Royals, I realized tonight, knows no reasonable bounds. It occurred to me that if writing a check for five thousand dollars would bring Mazzone to Kansas City, I would do it. Ten thousand? I would write that check, too.

And yes, I am fully aware that this borders on some sort of insanity.

Fortunately for both my imaginary bank account and my quite-real state of mind, the Royals came back to win tonight, the decisive run scoring thanks to an error by the enemy pitcher in the bottom of the ninth.

Pedro Martinez won, too, upping his record to 4–0 and dropping his ERA to 1.59. And tonight at least, the world seems to make sense again.

### *Wednesday, April 26*

It rained here today. All day. Oh, except for a few minutes in the early afternoon. When it snowed.

Medium-sized flakes drifting down as if they owned the place, late April or no late April, leaving me to thank the schedule-makers for sending the Red Sox to Texas this week.

Speaking of the Sox, this afternoon they destroyed the Rangers, 14–4. And the Royals won yet another game in the bottom of the ninth, their sixth last at-bat victory in their last six home games.

Here's an oddity involving my two favorite teams: the Royals have now stolen twenty-four bases and been caught once; the Red Sox have stolen one base and been caught four times. And for anyone who still thinks that stealing bases is particularly important in the current environment, it's worth noting that the Royals are now 10–12, the Red Sox 11–7.

### *Saturday, April 29*

This morning I was listening to NPR. Or rather, I was sort of half listening, trying to read William Goldman's new book at the same time. The top of the hour rolled around, time for a newsbreak, so I put the book down for a moment. After the big stuff, the announcer told us that New York's mayor, Rudy Giuliani, who has just been diagnosed with prostate cancer, spoke yesterday with New York's manager, Joe Torre, who recovered from prostate cancer a year ago.

My ears perked up. I set down my book and quickly reached for a pencil and a pad of paper, the better to record the Bronx Sage's words, sure to provide guidance

not only for Mayor Giuliani, but also for the millions of men who may, one day, face the same illness or something like it.

According to the news—prepare yourself for Enlightenment, Dear Readers—here's what Torre said:

*Listen to your doctors.*

Wow. No wonder this guy is considered one of the brilliant managerial minds of our time. Sure, "Listen to your doctors" might *sound* simple enough, but the sheer genius of it, the way he was able to distill everything down to just those four words . . . All right, I'll stop with this silliness now. My point is not that Joe Torre is not a wise man. He's managed one of the five greatest teams in the history of the game, and it's getting to the point where we have to consider him a serious Hall of Fame candidate. And I'm sure that Giuliani wanted to talk to him because when something like that happens to you, it's comforting to speak to someone who has been through it, and lived to tell the tale.

No, my point is, why should we give a damn?

Of course, we shouldn't. Nobody should, except Mr. Mayor himself. Yet National Public Radio, quite possibly our most intelligent, substantive, least-pandering national news organization (if a bit hung up on political correctness, Harry Shearer's occasional contributions notwithstanding), felt that listeners around the country simply had to know what Joe Torre told Rudy Giuliani.

And this is, in a nutshell, why people who don't live in New York resent New York sports teams and their fans. Trust me on this, it is *not* because we're jealous of all the success. Last year I co-wrote, with Eddie Epstein (a Baltimore native), a book called *Baseball Dynasties*. Of the fifteen teams we featured, eight hailed from one of the five boroughs: one New York Giants (Manhattan) club, one Brooklyn Dodgers club, one New York Mets (Queens) club, and *five* New York Yankees (Bronx) clubs. And I promise you, there wasn't a single moment when either Eddie or I begrudged the New Yorkers their great successes. What's annoying is when New York is shoved down our throats for no particular reason, other than that it's New York.

And I promise you this, too: Nobody gets more annoyed than Bostonians.

*Sunday, April 30*

Pedro Martinez didn't have his best stuff today, notwithstanding the seven shutout innings he threw in Cleveland against the Indians, who scored 1,009 runs last year. His stuff was just good enough, the Sox topping the Tribe and Charles Nagy in a tense game, 2–1. As if the good pitching weren't enough to get everyone's nerves on edge, a little beanball war erupted in the eighth inning. First, Martinez threw a pitch high and tight to Einar Diaz in the bottom of the seventh. Diaz had doubled twice earlier in the game, and it seemed like a clear message: Don't crowd the plate.

Top of the eighth, Nagy nailed leadoff man Jose Offerman in the midsection. The benches cleared, order was restored, nobody was kicked out. Bottom of the eighth, Martinez nailed leadoff man Roberto Alomar in the midsection. And after waiting a few seconds, plate umpire Tim Tschida threw Martinez out of the game. It seemed like a fitting end to an appearance in which Martinez spent much of the game glaring at Tschida after borderline pitches were called balls. This marked Pedro's first ejection since September of 1996.

No real harm done, as Derek Lowe came in for the save (though he did permit a solo homer in the ninth).

If you'll indulge me, I'd again like to run Pedro's stats since his last loss, against the Athletics last August.

G	IP	H	K	BB	HR	W-L	ERA
16	108 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	55	170	22	2	13–0	0.83

It would, of course, be fun if he never lost again. Barring that unlikelihood, it'll be fun to see the reaction here in Boston when Martinez finally does lose. Coming into this season, I assumed that Pedro's chances of duplicating last year's 23–4 campaign were akin to the chances that the next Red Sox ballpark will come in under budget. After watching him for a month, though, I'm not so sure. You do need some luck to go 23–4, and you gotta stay healthy. But Pedro seems to be able to do just about whatever he wants. And whatever else happens, the Sox have a shot at the postseason if he goes 23–4 (or thereabouts) again.

Now, for those of you who bought this book thinking it would be about the Red Sox and only about the Red Sox, you have my apologies. Things will get better, I think, but I simply haven't had much material with which to work. The season is

nearly a month old, and the Sox have played the grand total of six games at Fenway Park. Still, given that today is the last day of April, I figured this might be a good time to pause, and see where the Red Sox are . . . except they're not really anywhere. Here are the American League East standings at the close of April:

	W-L	GB
YANKEES	15-8	—
ORIOLES	14-10	1 1/2
RED SOX	12-9	2
BLUE JAYS	12-14	4 1/2
DEVIL RAYS	9-15	6 1/2

If you had to summarize the standings in three words, it would be, "We know nothing." The Yankees are, as usual, in first place. But they've done it with smoke and mirrors, outscoring their opponents by only six runs (112-106) through their first 23 games. The Yanks' starting pitching has been inconsistent, aside from Orlando Hernandez, and somehow they've scored only 4.9 runs per game; in the American League, only the Tigers have done worse.

Still, the Yankees are the Yankees, and one must assume that they'll get their shit together, until they don't.

The Red Sox are doing, to this point, almost exactly what I thought they would do. Pedro is fantastic, the rest of the rotation is shaky but not disastrous, and the Sox offense is decent but not outstanding.

The Orioles might be too old, the Blue Jays might be too young, but right now neither club has proven that it's not a contender for at least the Wild Card. And though the Devil Rays are still within shouting distance, they look just the same now as they did a month ago. Crummy.

Getting back to the Red Sox, are they likely to get better? One thing's for sure, they can't suffer any injuries at key spots. If Garciparra, Everett, or Nixon goes down for any length of time the Sox are in trouble, because the club has no outfield depth and Nomar is irreplaceable. And of course, they're sunk if anything happens to Pedro.

Even barring injury, though, the Red Sox need two things if they're to approach ninety-five wins. They need help in the rotation—a rehabbed Bret Saberhagen

and/or hot prospect Sun Kim provide hope—and they need another bat. The Red Sox have two decent hitters playing for Pawtucket—oops, make that *one* decent hitter down in Pawtucket. Outfielder Michael Coleman, who's seemingly been a prospect since Yaz patrolled left field, severely dislocated his left wrist Friday night, and he may not play again this season. That leaves only Dernell Stenson, a left-handed hitting, first-base/DH type. Exactly what the Red Sox need. The problem is that Stenson's batting average (.222) is, at this writing, lower than his weight (230). He's only twenty-one and may well have a bright future ahead of him, but the Sox need help now. Yesterday Manny Alexander DHed against Chuck Finley, and that's just not going to work.

It's clear that the Red Sox simply have to trade for another potent bat. It's funny, though, as much as people decry the paucity of quality starting pitchers in baseball, a number of contending clubs are short a hitter this year. The Yankees, like the Red Sox, could really use one or two sluggardly sluggers. And everybody knows the Mariners have been looking for a left-handed hitter with power since Griffey left for Cincinnati.