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Ramiro, Baseball, the Bar, the Ticker Tape, and the Scoreboard

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In the summer of 1955, when I was twelve years old, I made a momentous discovery: baseball. Before that, I had seen and played baseball, but I had not yet become obsessed with it. Next door, Abelino Ochoa had been listening for years to the radio “Game of the Day” on the Mutual Radio Network. Balls and strikes broke into lazy, hot afternoons in Kingsville, in South Texas, during the “hour of the lizard” as my grandmother called it. Only lizards could manage to get around at that hour, she said.

From next door, at this hour, I could overhear many words strung together just flowing out from the radio to me. Abelino was a veteran of World War II; two of his brothers did not return from the war. Abelino had baseball in the afternoon. His radio air clutter was a meaningless hodgepodge to me. I didn't know about anything else Abelino did. I played baseball with the barrio guys but didn't understand or care about all that empty, incomprehensible radio clutter. It was just a bunch of bumblebees.

Mid-summer of '55 changed that. I caught myself listening, really, for the first time, to the All-Star game and I liked the names: Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, Hank Aaron. I got a feeling that gods played baseball. The heroics of Mickey Mantle and Stan Musial (who were these guys?) and the misfortune of the great Robin Roberts resonated. In fact, the names of baseball players have remained fascinating ever since. Mythic heroes have great names; or the names become great along with the emergence of gods. I had also entered a new world of terms and I loved them too: ERA (earned run average), batting averages, RBIs, homeruns. A swing and a miss was common, but not so a stolen base. Glimmerings of a glorious past came through also: Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson. The House that Ruth Built. The Green Monster.

Not surprisingly, after my initiation, I became a faithful listener of “the game of the day.” (We didn't have a TV set.) How could one batter improve his average 30 points with a hit, but another only a point or two? Who was Grover Cleveland Alexander? I found the answers at the public library and at a newsstand downtown, but best of all was just listening to the games all the time. For sure, just like that I became a diehard fan. An extra-inning game-winning homerun and baseball became my world.

The usual afternoon baseball games we guys in the barrio played that were so much fun (and actually cause for screaming and meaning) continued every late afternoon when we could stand the glaring heat of Kingsville's never-ending, burning-hot summer. The bright sun, though, gave way by late afternoon, fading into shadowy twilight.

A daily double. How could I lose? Major league baseball became a prelude to the daily baseball double-header. Although I couldn't afford to buy scoring pads, I made my own and I learned how to score baseball games and did it almost every day no matter which teams were playing. I worshipped, predictably, the New York Yankees, unable to resist Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, and Whitey Ford. It wasn't at all hard to go with winners, if you could choose freely from the whole spectrum and become a sunshine fan without knowing what that was. I also got St. Louis Cardinal games on KMOX at night. And I had a secret, guilty pleasure: the Corpus Christi Clippers. A minor league team, the Clippers were part of the Big State League (like the Beaumont Exporters); a step below the much weightier Texas League (with the upper-level San Antonio Missions and the Austin Senators, among others). On Sundays, I read the Big State League statistics. There was a name listed for the league statistician. I dreamed I could be that guy when I grew up.

I had been overwhelmed by baseball fever, my over-excited nerves jumped up and down with such a delicious pleasure within me that it was like a magical world I couldn't ever imagine resisting. No, I hadn't seen it coming. No one had ever mentioned it to me.

At the barbershop, I felt grown-up because I could talk baseball with the suave barber, Armando López, who was a big fan of the Cleveland Indians and Bobby Ávila, Mike García, and their manager, Al López. I had to be careful, though, that I didn't let on I was a Yankee
fan because Armando so despised the Yankees he might have cut off one of my ears for being so heartless, so crazily out in left field. The Indians, Armando would say, were sure to win the pennant because they had the best starting pitchers in baseball—Mike García, Bob Lemon, and Bob Feller. And, softly, Armando would say, “Of course, everybody knows good pitching will stop good hitting anytime.”

A surprise awaited me in the latter part of the summer of 1955. A friend of mine from junior high, Ramiro Martínez, told me of a discovery he’d made at a bar in downtown Kingsville: The place, the Oasis, he told me, had a baseball scoreboard and by the side of it a ticker tape machine which clattered away evenly, receiving all the information about the baseball games going on. Ramiro had come in and quietly took charge of the ticker tape machine. No one cared. That was the news Ramiro had for me. Could I join him?

As the ticker tape spat out from the machine, humming away, the guys who ran the bar let Ramiro and me transfer the info to a blackboard. With a chalk in hand, and holding out the ticker tape with the other, Ramiro handed me the news. I wrote what the ticker tape, the oracle, said. Constant updates were necessary. Guys would come around, elbowing their way in, and ask about their teams, what the score was, who was pitching. Drunken bets depended on Ramiro’s or my chalk marks. Staggering around, disappointed, their team maybe being shut out, an argument would break out, curses against cosmic gods were louder than they thought. Some rejoicing shouts broke out, with wincing. The Oasis Bar in downtown Kingsville, close to a newsstand and the Trailways bus station, was a paradise. That we knew. The world was light air and fun. Some new-fangled type of music called rock ‘n’ roll, was constantly bursting out from a gigantic jukebox, whirling around in red, green, yellow, purple, and blue. We were constantly absorbed by our baseball word, as we were going about our solemn baseball duties, keeping to ourselves, sort of out of the way, so we wouldn’t get kicked out, fearing someone would say we had to leave because we were minors. So Ramiro and I huddled in our ticker tape machine and blackboard corner. We shared our baseball blackboard with a chalk dusting of people also under the spell of baseball who poured over the scoreboard, maybe wincing or whooping it up.

A special memory is reserved for a sailor who repeatedly played Little Richard’s “Miss Ann” and danced, mostly alone, rarely with a woman, always with his shoes off, white socks, in his navy blue uniform, spinning around.

Ramiro and I were incredibly busy, writing updated scores on the baseball chalkboard, using eraser and chalk as fast as we could. At times, as Ramiro bounced around, pounding out that the Orioles had poured out a seven-run inning, I quickly wrote out that rookie Von McDaniel had pitched a complete game, a brilliant two-hitter, for the Cardinals.

Time flew. There was just so much to do. And we were in the service of heroes, overwhelmed by our good fortune. How could we help but feel this way? Ramiro and I would spend many hours there at the Oasis bar, our hands and blue jeans always full of chalk marks, and eagerly answer questions: “The White Sox have changed pitchers twice in the 7th—there’s no telling yet what’s going on.” Or: “That’s Willie Mays’ second homerun. You know, he’s leading the league.”

Ramiro and I were teenage baseball nuts. Often, we’d wait for all the baseball action in the major leagues to conclude before we left the bar. At that time in the mid-50’s, of course, there were no major league teams west, or south, of St. Louis. Also, the few day games we could cover by getting to the bar early.

It must be made clear: We were at a bar; there was a lot of beer drinking going on; there were ladies of the night there, or at least barflies. But we didn’t know about such things. We were intoxicated ourselves. Beer soaked the walls. Smoke drifted up and engulfed us with its smell and fogginess. Our addiction to baseball swept us up. The world was light air and fun. Some new-fangled type of music called rock ‘n’ roll, was constantly bursting out from a gigantic jukebox, whirling around in red, green, yellow, purple, and blue. We were constantly absorbed by our baseball word, as we were going about our solemn baseball duties, keeping to ourselves, sort of out of the way, so we wouldn’t get kicked out, fearing someone would say we had to leave because we were minors. So Ramiro and I huddled in our ticker tape machine and blackboard corner. We shared our baseball blackboard with a chalk dusting of people also under the spell of baseball who poured over the scoreboard, maybe wincing or whooping it up.

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Rarely do I hear a recording of “Miss Ann,” but it always means that sailor spinning around in his very own circle with a hazy backdrop.

I re-enter an old but brand new magical world. It’s not nostalgia, nor memory, but magic and also a powerful kind of reality. How could I have known how waves would ever enlarge from the times of a jumbled, incomprehensible baseball game on the radio that Abelino hung on to, whiling away the afternoons with baseball as an anchor? First the radio; then, marvelously, the waves in my mind surge into bigger and bigger circles, with Ramiro, the bar, the ticker tape machine next to a chalkboard, followed by a dancing sailor. Just a perfectly natural way to grow up. Waves upon waves, and then a baseball hits the middle of a pond in an oasis. It happens every spring.