

The Boys of Summer

ROGER KAHN

 HarperCollins e-books

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

LINES ON THE TRANSPONTINE MADNESS

BOOK ONE The Team

1 THE TROLLEY CAR THAT RAN BY EBBETS FIELD

2 CEREMONIES OF INNOCENCE

INTERLUDE I

BOOK TWO The Return

3 CLEM AND JAY

4 THE BISHOP'S BROTHER

5 CARL AND JIMMY

6 THE SANDWICH MAN

7 BLACK IS WHAT YOU MAKE IT

8 THE ROAD TO VIOLA

9 A SHORTSTOP IN KENTUCKY

10 THE HARD HAT WHO SUED BASEBALL

11 ONE STAYED IN BROOKLYN

12 MANCHILD AT FIFTY

13 THE DUKE OF FALLBROOK

14 THE LION AT DUSK

15 BILLY ALONE

INTERLUDE II

AFTERWORDS ON THE LIFE OF KINGS

AN EPILOGUE FOR THE 1990s AND THE MILLENNIUM

A FAREWELL TO THE CAPTAIN

[Index](#)

[ALSO BY ROGER KAHN](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

THE TROLLEY CAR THAT RAN BY EBBETS FIELD

I

That morning began with wind and hairy clouds. It was late March and day rose brisk and uncertain, with gusts suggesting January and flashes of sun promising June. In every way, a season of change had come.

With a new portable typewriter in one hand and a jammed, disordered suitcase in another, I was making my way from the main terminal at La Guardia Airport to Eastern Airlines Hangar Number 4. There had been time neither to pack nor to sort thoughts. Quite suddenly, after twenty-four sheltered, aimless, wounding, dreamy, heedless years, spent in the Borough of Brooklyn, I was going forth to cover the Dodgers. Nick Adams ranging northern Michigan, Stephen Dedalus storming citadels Europe anticipated no richer mead of life.

“Mr. Thompson?”

A stocky man, with quick eyes and white hair, said, “Yes. I’m Fresco Thompson. You must be the new man from the Herald Tribune.” Fresco Thompson, vice president and director of minor league personnel, stood at the entrance, beside a twinengined airplane, all silvery except for an inscription stenciled above the cabin door. In the same blue script that appeared on home uniform blouses, the Palmer-method lettering read “Dodgers.”

“How do you like roller coasters?” Fresco Thompson said. “On a day with this much wind, the DC-3 will be all over the sky. Perfectly safe, but we’re taking down prospects for the minor league camp and a lot have never flown.” He gestured toward a swarm of sturdy athletes, standing nervously at one side of the

hangar, slouching and shifting weight from foot to foot. “We may call on you to be nursemaid,” Thompson said. “Some ball players are babies. Let’s go on board. The co-pilot will see about your luggage. We’ll sit up front. Might as well keep the airsickness behind us.”

Thompson smiled, showing even teeth, and put a strong, square hand on my back. “Come on, fellers,” he shouted over a shoulder, and the rookie athletes formed a ragged line. Looking at them, eighteen-year-olds chattering and giggling with excitement, one recognized that they were still boys. The only men in the planeload, Thompson indicated by his manner, were the two of us. We had flown and earned a living and acquired substance. We were big league. Entering the DC-3 under the royal-blue inscription I felt with certitude, with absolute, manic, ingenuous, joyous certitude, that the nickname “Dodgers” applied to me. Beyond undertaking a newspaper assignment, I believed I was joining a team. At twenty-four, I was becoming a Dodger. The fantasy (“He performs in Ebbets Field as though he built it; this kid can play”) embraces multitudes and generations (“Haven’t seen a ball player with this much potential since Pistol Pete Reiser back in 1940, or maybe even before that; maybe way before”). I strode onto the plane, monarch of my dream, walking up the steep incline with the suggestion of a swagger and dropping casually into seat B2. “What the hell!” Something had stung me in a buttock. I bounced up. A spring had burst through the green upholstery. A naked end of metal lay exposed. “What the hell,” I said again.

“Nothing to worry about,” Fresco Thompson said. “The people who maintain the springs are not the same people who maintain the engines.” He paused and raised white brows. “Or so Walter O’Malley tells me.”

“Seat belts,” the pilot announced. Fresco turned and counted heads. “Eighteen,” he said, “and eighteen there’s supposed to be.” The little plane bumped forward toward a concrete runway and the seabound clouds of the busy March sky.

In the end, I would find, as others since Ring Lardner and before, that Pullman nights and press box days, double-headers dragging through August heat and a daily newspaper demanding three thousand words a day, every day, day after blunting day, dulled sense and sensibilities. When you see too many major league baseball games, you tend to observe less and less of each. You begin to lose your sense of detail and even recall. Who won yesterday? Ah, yesterday. That was Pittsburgh, 5 to 3. No, that was Tuesday. Yesterday was St. Louis, 6 to 2. Too many games, and the loneliness, the emphatic, crowded loneliness of the itinerant, ravage fantasy. Nothing on earth, Lardner said, is more depressing than an old baseball writer. It was my fortune to cover baseball when I was very young.

From brief perspective, the year 1952 casts a disturbing, well-remembered shadow. It was then that the American electorate disdained the troubling eloquence of Adlai Stevenson for Dwight Eisenhower and what Stevenson called the green fairways of indifference. That very baseball season Eisenhower outran Robert A. Taft for the Republican nomination and, hands clasped above the bald, broad dome, mounted his irresistible campaign for the Presidency. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy rose in Washington and King Farouk fell in Egypt. Although the Korean War killed 120 Americans a week, times were comfortable at home. A four-door Packard with Thunderbolt-8 engine sold for \$2,613 and, according to advertisements, more than 53 percent of all Packards manufactured since 1899 still ran. Kodak was rising from \$43 a share and RCA was moving up from \$26. The New York theatrical season shone. One could see Audrey Hepburn as Gigi, Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh as Caesar and Cleopatra, Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer in *Venus Observed*, Julie Harris in *I Am a Camera* and John Garfield, who would not live out the year, bearing his special fire to Joey Bonaparte in a revival of Odets' *Golden Boy*. It was a time of transition, which few recognized, and glutting national self-satisfaction. Students and scholars were silent. Only a few people distinguished the tidal discontent beginning to sweep into black

America.

I used to wonder
About living and dying—
I think the difference lies
Between tears and crying.

I used to wonder
About here and there—
I think the distance
Is nowhere.

On the book page of the Herald Tribune, Lewis Gannett called Langston Hughes' "Border Line" "heartbreaking." Hughes was an exotic taste, however, and not yet fashionable. Housewives followed Costain's latest, *The Silver Chalice*. Important books, commentators suggested, were Herbert Hoover's *Memoirs* and *The Collected Papers of Senator Arthur Vandenberg*, adapted by his son, which were said to reveal "secret Roosevelt promises to Stalin at Yalta."

My companion, on the silver DC-3 bucking toward a cruising altitude of four thousand feet, had brought neither important book with him. One can travel for weeks with baseball men and see no books at all. He did carry the latest copy of *Look* magazine. Susan Hayward stared hotly from the cover, seductive in soft focus, but Fresco Thompson was concerned with something else. Clyde Sukeforth (*Look* announced), ex-coach of Brooklyn, tells "Why the Dodgers Blew the Pennant."

"I wonder," Thompson said, "if Sukeforth really does know why we blew the pennant, how come he wasn't able to avoid it last October." Thompson smiled, without warmth. "The man worked for the Dodgers for years. We kept him as a coach, paid him a good salary and as soon as he left he turned on us. For what? A few thousand dollars. We didn't blow the pennant. We lost it. And to Sal Maglie. Bobby Thomson and a damn fine Giant team. I don't

understand people who look for the negatives in everything. Baseball is such a fine game. It's such a fine business. Mr. O'Malley says it's too much a business to be a sport and too much a sport to be a business. I came out of Columbia a young fellow and this game has been my life ever since—laughs and a fine living, accomplishments and great friendships.”

The cockpit door opened and the pilot, a tall, light-haired man wearing a short-sleeved sports shirt, said that the headwinds were increasing. “Flying time might be nine hours to Vero.”

Thompson grimaced. “Why don't you hitch this thing to the back of a Greyhound bus?”

“You got a long enough rope?” the pilot said.

Thompson smiled the hard smile. “This man here has to make a game tonight in Miami. In six hours I want you flapping your arms, if necessary.”

The pilot laughed and retreated. “Whatever else they say about the DC-3,” Thompson said, “if anything goes wrong, you set it down in a parking lot. It'll glide better than some planes fly.” Beyond the windows, whorls of cloud spun past. The plane continued bouncing on March winds. “Settle in and enjoy it,” Thompson said. “There's no place we can go and at least the telephone can't bother us here.”

By reputation, Thompson was a wit and he proceeded to fill the morning with a brattle of baseball stories. His voice grated faintly, not unpleasantly, as an anvil moving over firebrick. His delivery was quick, practiced and caustic.

As a ball player, he had been fast, he said, and a good infielder but never an outstanding hitter. He stood five feet eight and weighed 150 pounds. In 1931 he was traded to the Dodgers and assigned a locker adjacent to one given Floyd Caves “Babe” Herman, a mighty batter who occasionally intercepted fly balls with his skull.

“Geez Christ,” Herman complained. “They're makin' me dress next to a .250 hitter.”

“Geez Christ,” Thompson said. “They're making me dress next to

a .250 fielder.”

He winked at my laughter and continued. Afterward, when he became a minor league manager, a surgeon in Birmingham, Alabama, a man with a bullying voice, became a leading critic. The team played poorly, and one evening Thompson had to guide his starting pitcher back to the shelter of the dugout, after four runs scored in the first inning. “Hey, Thompson,” the surgeon cried from a box seat, “another mistake.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Fresco called loudly in his gravelly voice, “but my mistake will live to pitch tomorrow.”

As an executive, Thompson constantly evaluated talent. A skinny pitcher named Phil Haugstad twice backed up the wrong base, and Fresco asked, “What can you expect of a man whose baseball cap is size 6½?” Haugstad’s matchstick calves were accentuated by the flapping knickers of his uniform. “But it’s nothing to worry about,” Thompson said. “His legs swell up like that every spring.” One minor leaguer, seeking to impress Thompson with his powers at self-analysis, said, “The reason I don’t hit better is that I swing an eighth-inch underneath good fast balls.”

“We’ll make you a star immediately, ” Thompson said. “Simply insert eighth-inch lifts into your soles.”

With the longest story, Thompson turned on himself. In Havana once he had scouted Saturnino Orestes Arrieta Armas Minoso, called Minnie. The bases were loaded, with nobody out. Minoso, playing third, fielded a bouncing ball and looked toward home. It might be too late to make that play. Minoso glanced at second. The runner was leaping into his slide. Another runner flashed before him and by now the batter had crossed first base. Considering four outs, Minoso had gotten none. He walked slowly to the pitcher’s mound, holding the baseball in one hand and scratching his uniform cap with the other. “Right then,” Thompson said, “I concluded that this was the dumbest bastard in all Cuba. I caught the next plane home, and when I looked up, Cleveland had signed Minoso and he was batting .525 for their farm team in Davton. Intellect isn’t everything

in this game. They say Einstein wasn't much of a hitter."

The torrents of Fresco Thompson's tongue shaped an idyllic beginning. No game is as verbal as baseball; baseball spreads twenty minutes of action across three hours of a day. The pitcher throws. Whsssh. Klop. Three-fifths of a second and the ball hits the catcher's glove. It will be thirty seconds before the pitcher throws again. The infielders say, "Attaway! No-hitter. Youkindewitbaby!" The coaches say, "Takes one, only one, let's go, Buck, get a holt of it, Bucko-lucko-boy." Players in the dugout say, "Hey, Ump! In the blue suit! Who taught you to call pitches, Helen Keller?" And in the grandstand, among the beer peddlers and peanut pushers ("Here y'are. Salted right in the shell. Only a quarter and straight from Brazil"), the fan tires the clock with talking. "Lookit that guy in center. He's too shallow. The Duker played it better. He played deep. The way this pitcher moves toward first reminds me of Whitey Ford. Except, of course, he's righthanded. I saw a game once kinda like this. You know what the pitcher's doin'. He's letting that batter think. He's got him all set for a curve and he's givin' him plenty of time to think curve. so's he can throw the fast ball. What's that? Ball two? Who they got umpiring? Ray Charles? I saw a one-eyed ump one time in semipro. I played semipro two years. Whenever that ump called me out, I'd say, 'What the hell happened, Buster? You wink?' Get it? Wink? He only had one peeper. If he winked, he was blind. I was a helluva hitter in semipro."

"I guess I've been talking a lot," Fresco Thompson said.

"No. You've got great stories."

"Well, I've been around the game long enough. I ought to. Say," Thompson said, "isn't it unusual, a young fellow getting assigned to the team?"

"I guess it is."

"How did it happen?"

"A lot of luck, mostly."

"Ah, it can't be just luck that got you on this airplane."

“It’s kind of complicated.”

“Did you play ball? Or maybe your dad? I’ll bet your dad played some ball.”

“That’s part of it.”

“I thought so,” Fresco said. He closed his eyes, content, and I let it go. How could I explain that what had gotten me aboard the Dodger plane that morning was nothing more than a succession of miracles?

II

Baseball skill relates inversely to age. The older a man gets, the better a ball player he was when young, according to the watery eye of memory. In the house where I grew up, everyone liked to talk and, as I was growing, my father recalled increasingly what a remarkable hitter he had been. Talk? In that sprawling apartment, talk was bread, air, water, fire, life. My grandfather, Dr. Abraham Rockow, was a dentist who asked a greater fate than probing bicuspid. Gray, handsome and assured, Dr. Rockow would wander from his office—it was the sunny front room of the apartment on the second floor at 907 St. Marks Place—and expound on pinochle, politics and art. Disease was caused by “a focus of infection, often in the gums.” Roosevelt was an untrustworthy patrician, “pretending to be concerned about the masses.” Macbeth (pronounced “Macbaat”) was a masterpiece, “but if you think it is a good play in English, you should read it in Russian.” Off a long center hallway, Dr. Rockow and I shared a bedroom that overlooked Kingston Avenue and trolley cars that ran by Ebbets Field.

Olga Rockow Kahn, who had majored in ancient history at Cornell, “under Westerman, the Professor Westerman,” was a slight, forceful woman with smoldering eyes and round red cheeks. “Olga the Opple” they called her at Cornell, and Olga the Opple was a classicist. While teaching English literature and composition at Thomas Jefferson High to pupils named Gotkin. Flaum and Kantor.

she longed to live the Athenian Experience. "My God," she complained, "before some silly game with Samuel Tilden the organized cheering in assembly, that shouting 'Tee Jay Aitch Ess,' was Spartan, or perhaps simply animal." She took secret pride in the intellectual level of the TJHS English Department but never relaxed her vigilance for Philistinism. She entertained elegantly, taught five days a week, relished radical theater and feasted on concerts conducted by Serge Koussevitzky, which still left time to exorcise Philistinism from her home. At three I was required from time to time to mount a wicker chair, being careful not to grind heels into the cane, and announce to imprisoned guests, "I'm studying to be a doctor of philosophy with a major in psychology." Many chuckled and a few, but not enough, winced. Although my hands were small and my digital coordination appeared inferior, I began piano lessons at five.

The friendly cow
All red and white
She gives us milk and cream.

Now can you play that (said the straw-haired piano teacher) and see if you can make the piano sound a little bit like a cow. How does a cow sound? Moo-c-under-middle-c-no-that-one-that-one-mooooo-hold-the-note-mooooooo. Ah, that was fun. Olga, he may have real talent. (My mother could pay real bills during the Depression.) Olga would not clutter my mind with vagrant tales of goops or Winken, Blinken and Nod. Instead, she worked bedtime stories into a well-disguised course in Greek mythology. By seven I knew the Lethe from the Styx (if I forget thee, River Lethe, let my right hand lose its cunning), and I knew the Olympians from the Titans and how Hephaestus, son of Zeus and Hera, god of blacksmiths, jewelers, goldsmiths, masons and carpenters, built himself a throne from every different metal and precious stone. Olga was the first of her friends to give birth, which stimulated her pride and overstimulated a sense of destiny. Her son, she said, "might. mind vou iust might. strike Promethean fire before he's

through.” There was a history of accomplishment in the family. Her own mother, Emily Rosenthal, had graduated from Medical College in Berne and, about 1900, became one of the first women physicians in Brooklyn. Dr. Rosenthal was slight, her practice was small and it was her misfortune to die before reaching forty. But the brief career appeared brilliant to Olga. “And we may have another brilliant one,” she remarked to my father, “if he’s given the chance, if only you’d stop that incessant ball throwing with him in the hall.”

“Applesauce,” said Gordon J. Kahn. “Bosh.” He was lying on a blue velvet sofa, his black shoes resting on a cream-colored antimacassar, as he completed the crossword puzzle in the New York Sun. “A seven-letter clinical word for lockjaw is trismus,” he announced, and turned 45 degrees to go to sleep. Gordon Kahn taught history at Thomas Jefferson and basic English to adults at a night school, which allowed time for a game of catch, a crossword puzzle and a brief nap each afternoon. His relaxation, like his life, was carefully ordered. His forebears, settled people, came originally from Strasbourg. Usually Jews from Western Europe enjoyed a social advantage over Ostjuden. This was canceled in my parents’ case. Not only had Olga attended Cornell, while Gordon worked his way through City College; both of her parents bore the title of Doctor. Also, Gordon’s father had been a butcher. Olga needed no heraldry to trace sources of persistent Philistinism in the household.

Gordon Kahn, once nicknamed Genghis, claimed to have played third base for City College. He explained carefully that he was a good fast-ball hitter, bothered by curves, and in the field he covered no more than a half dollar. This would seem to contradict my age-ability hypothesis, but it does not. Gordon Kahn was too sophisticated to have claimed stardom. He mentioned weaknesses as well as strengths, even stressing them somewhat in order to build plausibility. He was five feet seven, and horseshoe bald by thirty, but he did have powerful arms—“from hoisting sides of beef,” he said, goading Olga—and I saw him hit with power in softball games. Years afterward, when I could have found the City College baseball line-up of 1923 in newspaper files. choosing to believe. I

lacked the heart to check.

Gordon Kahn possessed a phenomenal, indiscriminate memory. Snatches of great poetry, subplots from inferior detective stories, mathematical formulae, themes from Brahms, lyrics from a Ziegfeld Follies, phrases from political speeches, measured sentences from Jefferson, and the sequence of roads that intersected a Westchester parkway forever were imprinted on his brain. When a loud, abrasive former union organizer struck the format for the radio program "Information Please," he at once consulted Gordon Kahn. My father used his recall as a party trick and to win arguments. "Witch hazel comes from a shrub of the genus hamamelidaceous, not from a tree. It's explained on the upper part of page 206, in Croft's Dictionary of Trees and Shrubs." Dan Golenpaul, having heard him, asked his help and my father subsequently bent "Information Please" to his own inclination that Brahms, Jefferson, Shelley and baseball could and indeed should fascinate equally. As the program grew, and Gordon stopped teaching night school, our dinners became contentious question bees.

Gordon: Three lines of poetry, please, with the word "light."

Olga: When the lamp is shatter'd, the light in the dust lies dead.

Dr. Rockow: Waat light troo yonder winder breaks?

All: Roger?

Himself: We were sailing along on moonlight bay.

Gordon: Fine.

Dr. Rockow: Waat is daat?

Olga: Not a poem, certainly. And he's not eating.

The delicious attention to the only child, whose hair curled and whose eyes were large and dark, was diluted by the arrival, with the New Deal, of a sister, Emily for her late grandmother, the doctor, very round and very blonde, with a round blonde curl, trained by Elisabeth, a methodical plain-faced broadbodied governess from Austria. The household did not end with resident kin. Elisabeth, brown-haired and taciturn, had been a village

kindergarten teacher until Mitteleuropa began to go mad and—bitter lines around the mouth may have told of this or only of bad dentures—she had to come to America, where she kept house for Jews. She was efficient and free of ordinary vices. Her only indulgence was attending the New York Philharmonic Thursday nights. She earned \$60 a month, plus board, and idolized Toscanini and Beethoven. Her radio played classical music constantly and she sneered at Olga Kahn's taste. "Your mother likes Koussevitzky only because he is handsome,"

Elisabeth said. "He is not a musician. Toscanini is a musician." When Dr. Rockow opened the bathroom door once, when she was in the tub, Elisabeth screamed as though scalded. Then she screamed as though scarred, "Don't look!"

"All right," Dr. Rockow said. "Stop getting so excited." Later he told Gordon Kahn that if a woman wanted privacy to bathe, she locked the door before taking off her robe.

What a house. Two parents teaching. A grandfather pulling teeth. A housekeeper screeching. A sister pouting. A cleaning woman arriving for "the heavy" work. A radio program, Brahms, sex, poetry, Karl Marx and Freud. The bond between my father and me was baseball.

First a little toy bat came and we climbed out a rear window that led from the apartment to a pitch roof over a stationery store. "I'm going to show you how to use that thing," said Genghis Kahn. "Take your stance. Not that way. Sideways. You're resting the bat on your shoulder. Hold it off the shoulder. Not that far off. Elbows out. Hands together. Bat a little higher. Be comfortable! Oops, my fault, a little high. Oops, try to keep a level swing. Oops, you swung a little late. Well, that's three strikes, but today I'll give you four. Oops, hold that darn bat tighter! You could have plunked me in the shins."

"Gore-don." Olga stressed the second syllable and enunciated it as the title of an Oxford tutor. "Bring the child in immediately. The roof is no place for him to play. He could fall off."

Gordon Kahn had gray-green eyes that lost their kindness when he was rebuked. "He can't get the ball off it, much less himself."

"What was that?"

"Nothing." And to me, "Let's go in. It isn't that important for the moment anyway."

"Do you like this playing baseball?" Olga said, with faint, obvious distaste. She and Hephaestus had been kept waiting in the living room.

"I really like playing baseball. I think I'd like to play first base for the Dodgers."

"Oh, God," Olga cried, pressing a hand to one round cheek. "A ball player, is that what we're raising?"

"First basemen have to be tall," Gordon Kahn said with great authority. "With his genes, I wouldn't worry."

"Well, I suppose we'll have to humor him," Olga said, and a few days later brought home a baseball suit, complete with genuine Dizzy Dean insignia.

"Ma! Who wants a suit like that? Dizzy Dean is a Cardinal. I'm a Dodger."

"Gore-don, I think you'd better have a talk with him. His manners and sense of gratitude are incomplete."

Although on two occasions Gordon Kahn clipped his firstborn child with righthand punches, he had to be fearfully provoked. Now he simply walked into the hallway and without a word we began to catch. "Other people's feelings," he mumbled presently. "No disgrace in Dean. He won thirty ball games last year. Your mother is a sensitive woman. It's never dull around here. Don't push the ball when you throw. Try to snap it."

When Babe Ruth, drinking through his last days as a ball player, came to Ebbets Field with the Boston Braves, Gordon said that he wanted to take me on Saturday. "Ruth is more exciting striking out than somebody else hitting a home run," he announced at dinner. "And as a historian I can assure you that he is part of American

history. He should be seen.”

“Wance I umpire,” Dr. Rockow said. He was eating buttered asparagus one at a time, pinching the base between thumb and forefinger and swinging the stalk into his mouth. “Firrst pitch werry high, but I said strike. Next pitch werrry good, so I said ball.” Dr. Rockow, my father and I all laughed. Olga glared at a stalk Dr. Rockow dangled above his face and said, with great determination, “Is the Boston playing Sibelius’ Fifth Friday night?”

“No,” Gordon Kahn said. “They’re playing the Seventh.”

“I just wish,” Olga said, “that Sibelius were a little less diffuse.”

“Is Ray Bengé pitching, I hope, Dad?”

Olga’s anti-Philistine glare danced from me to my grandfather and finally settled on my father. “Talk later,” Gordon said solemnly. “Eat now.”

“And later,” Olga said, “if he must talk, encourage him to talk about something of consequence.”

Guilt made my father furtive on Saturday morning. Were there any errands he could run for Olga? Could he get something from the Schenectady Avenue library? A new criticism of Whitman? No? Was there enough meat for the weekend? He might pick out a good bottom round? Not necessary? Fine, fine, but he was alive and kicking and if Olga needed anything, she had only to ask.

“Could we have a catch?” I said.

“No. Not this morning. Don’t you have schoolwork?”

“Just some junk.”

“Homework is not junk. When I was at Boys’ High, we had three to four hours of homework a night and we were glad of it. We considered it a privilege to be able to work that hard. And in City College—when I took a course called vector analysis—well, you wouldn’t understand.”

At two o’clock the old Boys’ High homework lover and CCNY vector analyst silently led me onto a trolley at Kingston Avenue and St. Marks Place. After we had ridden three blocks, he began to

relax. "Ruth swings upward," he said. "They call that uppercutting and it's not good for most batters, but Ruth is a special batter. When he rides in an auto, he distinguishes other cars' license plates five seconds sooner than anybody else. That's the sort of eyes he has. In one World Series, he pointed to the bleachers and then hit a home run exactly where he pointed. He could have been a great pitcher if he hadn't decided to become a home run hitter. He's never been known to make a mental mistake. He never throws to the wrong base."

We got off at the corner of Empire Boulevard and Bedford Avenue. Only two blocks away loomed the brownish bulk of Ebbets Field. Babe Ruth did not play that afternoon. Someone said he had a head cold. "What he prob'ly has is a snootful," said a man in a straw hat and suspenders.

"What's a snootful?" I said.

"Head cold," said my father. "A snoot is a nose. With a cold, your nose is full."

"Hey, that's a good one," said the man in the straw hat. "That was quick. You think quick, Mac."

"I do," my father agreed. His voice was normally deep. Now he managed to lower it half an octave.

"Ain't it a shame," said the man, "there ain't more people? Bad times, I guess, but if they'd ever win, they'd draw."

"They'd hit a million," Gordon Kahn announced. His full voice rang among the empty seats behind first base. "Unquestionably they'd hit a million with a serious pennant contender in Brooklyn."

It surprised me that my father had abandoned his reserve as soon as we sat down. That man in the straw hat lacked a front tooth and wore no jacket. "Watcha thinka this team?" he said.

"Need one more pitcher and a shortstop," my father said.

"Nuthin' wrong at third, though."

"Nope, but he's only one man."

"Who plays third, Dad?"

“Jersey Joe Stripp.”

“And, sonny,” said the man in the straw hat, “he’s a professional and don’t you ever forget it.”

“That’s right,” said Gordon Kahn. “Never underestimate Jersey Joe Stripp.”

The two men chattered on and it began to seem less strange, my father talking to a toothless man without a jacket. The Dodgers would finish a poor fifth. The Braves would fire Ruth and finish last. But amid the spellbinding conversation of grown men, these inglorious teams transfixed me. What did it matter, Babe Ruth or Jersey Joe Stripp? If vector analysis was beyond me, I could still watch a ball game. I studied Stripp and Frenchy Bordagaray and Buzz Boyle and Tony Cuccinello. Stripp flagged a line drive backhand. That was something. He dove and reached across his body for the ball and rolled over twice and didn’t drop it. My father and I and the straw-hatted man jumped up and cheered together. In the dead sunlight of a forgotten spring the major leaguers were trim, graceful and effortless. They might even have been gods for these seemed true Olympians to a boy who wanted to become a man and who sensed that it was an exalted manly thing to catch a ball with one hand thrust across your body and make a crowd leap to its feet and cheer.

Now the streets beckoned and ball games ruled streets before the automobile pandemic. Interminable, fierce, ingenious improvisations were set on asphalt every afternoon. Stickball is famous. Willie Mays played stickball, and Duke Snider maintains that never, not even the year that he hit .341 for the Dodgers, could he match locals at stickball in his summer neighborhood, Bay Ridge. “I couldn’t hit the damn thing with the damn skinny broomstick,” Snider says. You needed a stick and a red rubber ball manufactured by Spalding, sold for ten cents and called, no one knew why, the Spaldeen. The pitcher threw the Spaldeen on one bounce at a manhole-cover home place, and by pinching the ball, “fluking it” we said, he made the bounce eccentric. You could run up and swing the light stick like a whip. but you looked ridiculous

if you whipped the stick and the squeezed ball fluked into your chest. A ball walloped to a roof was lost, so on the roof was out. Stickball produced centerfield hitters, who had seldom touched a bat, could not recognize a curve, but with broomsticks were murder against fluked Spaldeens.

If there were no sticks, or if the police were running one of their sporadic campaigns against stickball ("Now look, son, you could hurt a lady hittin' one hard with a stick"), there was punch ball. The police tolerated punch ball. Somewhere, in the windy heights of Fiorello H. La Guardia's administration, a command decision had been taken. Attention: All Precinct Commanders, Desk Sergeants, Undercover Men. Calling All Cars. Punch Ball is Okay. Legal, even on St. Marks Place, Brooklyn West. But no stickball. Repeat. No stickball. Stickball is forbidden. Be on the alert for stickball players, particularly in the area of St. Marks Place. Be prepared to seize sticks. Use necessary force. A kid could hurt a lady hittin' one hard with a stick.

The stick was crucial. Punch ball was not much of a game because you couldn't punch a ball very far without Popeye forearms. Slapball, played in a chalked triangle, was delicate. Girls played slapball. Sometimes, you threw a Spalden against the white cement steps of 907 St. Marks. In stoop baseball, a Spalden rebounding safely from the steps to the street was a single or a double; a rebound reaching the far sidewalk was a triple. One carrying clear into Mrs. Beale's yard was a home run, but perilous. Mrs. Beale always called the precinct. Attention Cars Eleven, Eight and Four. Proceed at once to Kingston and St. Marks. Boys playing stoop baseball. Spalden has landed in Mrs. Beale's privet. Break up game. Confiscate Spalden. Be careful of hedge. Watch crocuses, Cars Eleven, Eight and Four. That is all.

In alleys safe from the prowling cars we played pitching-in, the only street game really close to baseball. The hitter held a stick. The pitcher threw a tennis ball, from which the fuzz had been shaved, at a chalk rectangle behind the hitter. A good pitcher made the shorn tennis ball jump, and a killer pitch was the high overhand curve. It

passed the batter above the brows, then dropped down into the rectangle for a strike. If the tennis ball struck you, it stung briefly, but no one was afraid of a tennis ball. That was all the difference. Soft dream and hard reality. Once hit by a real baseball, a boy (or man) crumpled.

Bleacher seats at Ebbets Field cost fifty-five cents. You sat in the upper deck behind center field and felt right in the game when you shouted at Goody Rosen, "Come on, Goody, get a hit, get a little bingle, next time up." ("Yeah, Rosen," called a blackeyed, black-haired Irishman, "bring home the bacon for Jakey.") Rosen heard. At least he heard the Irishman. You could see Rosen's shoulders stiffen. Then he spat.

If you had \$1.10, you bought a general-admission ticket and sat almost anywhere. Weekdays, when crowds were light, you worked your way so close to the dugout that you could glimpse ball players' faces. Goody Rosen had a short pug nose. It might have been flattened in a fight.

Without money, you could still assault the ball park. In the deepest corner of right center field, 399 feet from home plate, the concrete wall gave way to two massive iron doors, called collectively the Exit Gate. The base of the doors did not come flush against the ground. Lying prone on the slanting sidewalk of Bedford Avenue, you looked under a crack, twice as wide as an eyeball, and saw center field, left field and two-thirds of the infield. First base lay beyond the sight line, but if you cared enough, you learned to tell whether the man was safe at first by the reactions of the other players. If a man was out at first base, nobody ran to cover second. You had no choice but to learn the game. A sidewalk position was comfortable, except when wind lifted dirt from the outfield and swirled it under the gate and into your eyes, or a policeman poked a shoe into your ribs and said, "On yer feet. Move." Then you muttered, "Weren't you ever a kid yourself?" And you moved, sometimes to a garage roof across Bedford Avenue. The garageman, an enormous but agile Italian, barred the direct route, so you climbed another building and then, at a height of thirty feet, leaped

an alleyway that was four feet wide. I did it once, noticing in flight that the alley was paved in pebbled concrete. From the garage roof you could see the entire infield and a third of the outfield, which would have been satisfactory had I not been nagged by the idea that I was going to have to make that jump again. The alley paving was not merely hard. It was rough. If you fell, pebbled imprints would stipple an entire side of your body. In the fifth inning of a Dodger-Pittsburgh game, I sneaked down the ladder to the garage and, while the garageman spoke with a customer, I fled, hearing behind me, “Go wan, run, ya big-nosed little bastard. Ya sheenies wanna own the world.” Anything, even anti-Semitism, was better than trying that leap again, and after a while I made a friend at 200 Montgomery Street. His roof was almost as good a viewing place as the garage, and more congenial.

These adventures helped make plausible the idea of becoming a professional ball player. Ebbets Field was always in reach. There were obstacles—money, the policeman’s shoe, a leap, the greasy garageman—but a boy could contend with them and triumph, if he had wit and persistence and a touch of courage. It was easy and absolutely irrational to relate getting to see a Dodger game with getting to be a Dodger. Which, in the fine irrationality of boyhood, is what generations of Brooklyn children did.

“Find the tennis ball,” Gordon Kahn suggested. “Let’s catch. You’ve got a hitch in your throw I want to work on.”

We repaired to the long hall.

“Reach back; reach. You want to zip it.”

“Gore-don! Is that child playing ball in the hall again? He should be reading.”

Olga again was exorcising Philistinism. She thrust forward *Little Stories of the Great Musicians*, a large yellow book with “full color” illustrations. “When Franz Josef Haydn conducted at the Court of Esterhazy, he noticed that many of the nobles were dropping off to sleep right in the middle of his symphonies. Well, thought Papa Haydn, placing a hand to his powdered gray wig, I think I shall

compose another symphony that will give all the lords and ladies a surprise!"

"Hey, Dad. Whosa better fielder? Cookie Lavagetto or Joe Stripp?"

"Comparisons are nefarious," Gordon Kahn said.

"Please, God," said Olga, who aspired toward atheism, "let him become interested in a book. One book. Please. Any book."

Her large eyes gazed on the off-white ceiling toward Yahweh. And soon, in His infinite humor, the Lord God of Yisroel placed in my hands a book that enslaved me. *Pitching in a Pinch*, bound in dun, published in 1912, was a memoir written (with help) by Christy Mathewson, who, say the canons of legend, is "the greatest pitcher ever to toe the mound." It appeared one day on a high shelf among botany guidebooks and novels by Frank Norris and Michael Arlen. "A relic of my own boyhood," Gordon Kahn said, and he fetched *Pitching in a Pinch* and displayed a photograph of "Ty Cobb, the Georgia Peach, sliding. Note spikes high." Interested in a book? I was overcome. *Pitching in a Pinch* became my constant companion. No one has ever read a baseball book harder or for more hours of a day or with such single-mindedness. I read nothing else, no Dickens, no Twain, no Swift. Mathewson (with help) created a baseball world that added humor to the earnest and heavy baseball cosmos of my fantasy.

In *Pitching in a Pinch*, Johnny Evers of the Chicago Cubs studied "deaf-and-dumb sign language" after learning that John McGraw, who managed Mathewson and the Giants, was using it to flash signals. But Evers, "no match for McGraw, threw a finger out of joint in a flash of repartee." According to Mathewson, Silk O'Loughlin, "the umpire who invented strike tuh," always kept his pants so perfectly pressed that "players were afraid to slide when Silk was close for fear they'd bump against the trousers and cut themselves." Jinxes caused bad luck and "seeing a cross-eyed lady" brought about a jinx of terrible power. To kill an ordinary jinx, "vou sdit in vour hat." "but when a cross-eved girl fell in love with

one of the Giants and began going to the ball park every day, McGraw told the Romeo to find another Juliet—or go back to the minors.” Mathewson’s opening to Chapter Ten, “Notable Instances Where the Inside Game Has Failed,” was a particular favorite.

There is an old story about an altercation which took place during a wedding ceremony in the backwoods of the Virginia Mountains. The discussion started over the propriety of the best man holding the ring and by the time it had been finally settled the bride gazed around on a dead bridegroom, a dead father, a dead best man, not to mention three or four very dead ushers and a clergyman.

“Them new fangled self cockin’ automatic guns has sure raised hell with my prespects,” she sighed.

That’s the way I felt when John Franklin Baker popped that home run into the right-field stands in the ninth inning of the third game of the 1911 World Series with one man already out. For eight and one-third innings the Giants had played “inside” ball, and I had carefully nursed along every batter who came to the plate, studying his weakness and pitching it. It looked as if we were going to win the game, and then zing! And also zowie! The ball went into the stand on a line and I looked around at my fielders who had had the game almost within their grasp a minute before. Instantly, I realized that I had been pitching myself out, expecting the end to come in nine innings. My arm felt like so much lead hanging to my side after that hit. I wanted to go and get some crape and hang it on my salary whip. Then that old story about the wedding popped into my head, and I said to myself: “He sure raised hell with your prospects.”

It is 1936. Gordon and Olga are embarking on a tour of Mexico by boat, leaving the children and housekeeper in care of Dr. Rockow. For one month I am the ward of the continental dentist. “It won’t hurt you to be apart from us for a time,” my mother says. “And at least you’ll find something to do beside plaving catch with

your father in the hall. But we want you to be happy. We'll leave your grandfather money for tickets to games during August."

"How many games?"

"How many, Gore-don?"

Gordon Kahn pursed his lips. His new mustache had grown in three-shaded, brown and black and like the herring sometimes red. "There are two home stands. One game each should be sufficient."

"Bleacher seats?"

"No," Gordon conceded, "general admission."

"All right, all right, you'll miss your boat," Dr. Rockow said.

On the next day, I sat behind home plate and saw the Dodgers lose to the Cubs. Then I spent an afternoon at stickball. On the day after that, I sat between third and home while the Dodgers lost to the Cubs again. August was three days old and I had exceeded my quota of major league baseball.

"All right, allrrright, if it means so moch to you," Dr. Rockow said, "we can both go Thursday afternoon when I don't practice." I saw four more games before my parents returned, two by myself and two with my grandfather. Dr. Rockow began to root for Johnny Cooney, a very smooth center fielder, and drew from me an oath never to tell my parents about the games or his own rooting. "Don't ee-wen speak too moch of Cooney," he said. "Bahtter these games be jost between us."

It is 1937. The family considers sending my sister and me to camp. The camp director, "Uncle" Lou Kleiderman, visits and asks what I like best.

"Baseball."

"Wonderful," says Uncle Lou Kleiderman, a stocky mustached man who limps and smiles. "We like boys who like baseball." Boys? Baseball? Uncle Lou Kleiderman likes families with two parents teaching and a grandfather pulling teeth, who pay the full tuition in advance. "We have three baseball fields," Uncle Lou says.

“Diamonds,” corrects Gordon J. Kahn.

“And”—the camp director is spiling, not listening—“I have pictures of them in this folder right here.”

“A hardball diamond,” I cry.

“That’s right, son,” says Uncle Lou, smiling, “and the baseball counselor, Uncle Iz Brown, once had a tryout for the major leagues.”

“But hardball?” says Olga. “Won’t the child be hurt? Do you have a program in arts and crafts?”

“Maaaa!” Who wants to twist leather into bracelets? You might as well spend a summer in school. “Who did Uncle Iz Brown play for?” I ask Uncle Lou Kleiderman.

“Well, he went to the University of Idaho or Ohio and he can fill you in on the rest.” Uncle Lou’s smile is beginning to turn.

“Gore-don. Aren’t injuries more likely in hardball?”

“We have a full-time physician, Dr. Hy Kogelman, and a nurse.” Uncle Lou’s face quivers and the smile is gone. Superior medical care is nothing to smile at.

“I dislocated a shoulder sliding once,” Gordon Kahn says. “I was stretching a single into a double.”

“Good for you,” says Uncle Lou, confused by the terminology.

“But I was only out for a few seconds,” Gordon says, not wanting to cause a fuss.

“What does Kogelman think of focus of infection?” says Dr. Rockow.

Uncle Lou winces, makes a gastric noise and promises to mail Dr. Rockow a photograph of the infirmary. “First thing in the morning. First-class mail.”

“Pip, pip,” says Emily Kahn. She is six and she has learned the rule of the house. Whether you have something to say is unimportant. What is important is to make a sound.

“How’s that shoulder now?” Uncle Lou says. Gordon explains

that the effect is most severe when he serves a tennis ball and he is still explaining when he signs the contract to send us to Camp Al-Gon-Kwit. "A real athletic family," says Uncle Lou Kleiderman. "That's what we like to see." Oops, wrong coda. Olga's face freezes in horror.

"Would you believe," Uncle Lou says, desperately, "they're some who say Jews are afraid of sports?" But Olga glares him to the door.

Since I will play first base for the Dodgers, my new glove is a first baseman's mitt, big, heavy and, for \$2.95, stiff as a shirt cardboard. To soften a glove, you work neats-foot oil into the palm and fingers and when the oil dries into a stain, soft mottled brown on tan, you place a hardball in the pocket. You put one hand into the glove and move the ball up toward the webbing and down toward the heel until you find the spot where the feel is perfect. It is a matter of sensors and quite precise. Being careful not to jiggle the baseball, even a quarter-inch, you slip your hand out, wrap the leather around the ball and tie the glove tightly. Then you leave it alone. Except that in a few days you want to see how the pocket is coming so you untie the glove and toss the baseball underhand and catch it, aware of touch and listening for the sound you want, a deep clean thwack! Then you add more neats-foot oil, replace the ball and tie the glove again. After a while, a pocket develops that makes you seem a better fielder than you are. By that time, you have fallen in love with the glove.

I am overwhelmed by the first baseman's mitt and soon we are sharing a bed. Now, in the middle of the night before a train will leave Grand Central Station for Camp Al-Gon-Kwit, I have untied the glove for the penultimate time. It is 11:45 by a radium dial and I am tapping the pocket softly when Dr. Rockow coughs, turns in the other bed and calls my mother's name.

"Pappa? What's the matter?"

"Motter? Nothing is the motter. I have a little cough. But it may be contagious. You had better sleep somewhere else."

I bed down in another room with my sister and my glove, and in the morning Gordon takes us to Grand Central and a black and white sign that says “Al-Gon-Kwit Indians Pow-Wow Here.”

What a summer of tragedy. With my stickball swing, I’m not much of a hardball hitter. A baseball bat weighs as much as five broomsticks. I can’t pull and I haven’t any power. My arm is weak. I would be all right at first base because I’ve mastered catching thrown balls in the hall on St. Marks Place. But throws can be short, and a hardball bounces erratically off dirt, especially the pebbly, grassless Berkshire soil of Diamond 2 at Camp Al-Gon-Kwit (not depicted in the brochure). I am the third best player in Bunk 4. I am good enough to play the first half of Al-Gon-Kwit’s game against Camp Ellis (named for the owner) and to line a single to right field. But Wally Siedman (two doubles) is a better ball player and so is Lonnie Katz, who has long, sleek, veiny muscles and cracks a home run down the left-field line. I am no idiot. I know about Hephaestus and Haydn and about Tinker and Matty and McGraw and I have even, not telling my mother so as not to give her satisfaction, read a little of Ivanhoe. If, in my bunk alone, Siedman and Katz are already better, will there be room for me on the Dodgers? And first base! In practice, I lean toward a short throw which bounces off a stone and hits the side of my head. It is a minute before double vision passes. “You’re a pretty fair ball player,” says Uncle Flit Felderman, my counselor, rubbing my head as we sit on an embankment. He is in dental college and understands first aid.

“I’m not crying, Uncle Flit. A hit in the head just makes your eyes water.”

“You’re all right,” Uncle Flit says. “With a little more size, you’ll start to pull. But not first base. The outfield.”

Hasn’t Uncle Flit noticed—I have noticed—that I am a terrible judge of fly balls?

“Or second.”

I’m not crazy about hard grounders either. “Thanks, Uncle Flit,” I sav. A week later in batting practice. Uncle Iz Brown throws a

medium-speed pitch into my ribs. I spin in pain but keep my feet and rub dirt into my palms. "You want to play the game, play the game," barks Uncle Iz. "Get in and hit, or go to the infirmary."

As the camp train carries us slowly down the Harlem Valley toward New York, I am coughing just often enough to remember the sensation of a baseball striking ribs. On my lap the outsized first baseman's mitt shows the scratches and scars of a vigorous summer.

I cannot tell my father. How can I admit to the old City College third baseman what I have grasped, that I will never be good enough for the Dodgers? "You want to play the game, play the game!" My sister? A child, and sometimes vicious. My mother? She wants me to make leather bracelets. That leaves my grandfather, the dentist, the white-haired whizbang continental Marxist toothpuller, wearing a white jacket, out of Minsk, U.S.S.R., Brooklyn's leading battler against foci of infection, Dr. Abraham Rockow, D.D.S.

My mother, the enemy, meets the camp train and kisses me softly and says, "Oh. By the way. We've moved." A taxi takes us to Lincoln Place, near Grand Army Plaza, and a large apartment building of red brick. "We have seven rooms on the top floor," my mother says. She shows me the living room, which leads to glass doors opening onto a tiny terrace. "Those are called French doors," Olga says. "Now would you like to see your name in the New York Times?"

"Who? Me? In the Times? Yeah, sure." We walk to my parents' bedroom in the strange apartment. I have never heard the household so quiet. Olga reaches into a bureau, a chiffonier, she calls it, and shows me a clipping from the New York Times. Rockow, Abraham, D. D. S., suddenly on June 30. My name appears two lines lower in the agate type. Beloved grandfather of Roger. What he had called a little cough was a massive coronary.

III

The world is never again as it was before anyone you love has ever died: never so innocent. never so fixed. never so gentle. never

so pliant to your will. But these are afterthoughts. Generations vie and the young recover swiftly, or believe they do. A few years later in the new apartment there is some horseplay and then Elisabeth, the Austrian maid, makes a lively proposition. "Would you like to watch me take a bath?"

"But." Long indrawing of breath. "What? Sure."

It is Saturday night. Emily is asleep. Olga and Gordon have gone to hear Dimitri Mitropoulos conduct the New York Philharmonic. From the black Air King in my room, the theme of the "Lucky Strike Hit Parade" blares, "All your friends are here to bring good cheer your wa-a-a-y." Then, "And here's number seven, still on the top ten: the Hit Parade orchestra brings you an exciting instrumental version of I Hear a Rhapsody." "That song? In a neighborhood schoolboy joke the druggist jumps a lady customer, who cries out, leading a chocolate malted to comment to the glass on its left, "I hear a rape, sody." That song? That ridiculous song? And now?

"Well?" Elisabeth says. I cannot joke. My throat is dry. I nod. Elisabeth leads the way down a hallway into the kitchen, through a door into her small bedroom, which is tidy and painted white. She turns to face me and removes her dress and slip. She does not wear a brassiere. I stand motionless and gape.

Elisabeth removes her underpants and does not remove her dentures. The body is broad and functional. "Wow," I say, finding my voice. "Wow, Elisabeth, you've got a build."

"Ach." She shakes her head, pleased. "I'm a woman, aren't I?"

She bathes, puts on a rayon nightgown and shoos me off to sleep. In my own bedroom, I can hardly believe my fortune. Age germinates allure, and Elisabeth must be thirty-five. Two weeks later, my parents return to Carnegie Hall and Elisabeth invites me back to her bath. At thirteen I have a steady date. Elisabeth bathes. I watch. In my mind I prepare an arcanum of advances, but I cannot act. At length, out of boredom or bitchery, Elisabeth betrays me. She confesses to Donald the daytime doorman, a tiny man with wisps of

white hair running down his neck. Donald wears buff uniforms and shouts at eight-year-olds playing catch in Lincoln Place. "Ge-radda-here. Go backa shannytown." Thirteen-year-olds are not assaulted by the war whoop of Donald the Doorman. Most are bigger than he. This undersized tormentor of children not only became the repository of my secret, but with the terrible righteousness of menials, he recounts all that he has heard to Olga. A stormy scene breaks in the living room, between the French doors and the massive ivory-colored bookcases Olga herself has designed. From my bedroom I can hear the tone but only a few of the words. Olga is saying something must be done. Shrill fragments rattle down the hall like shrapnel. "Wastrel. Pitching in a Pinch. Dodgers! Baseball! Sex fiend!"

I open the door. "Applesauce," Gordon Kahn is saying. "Absolute applesauce."

"Speak to him. You have to speak to him! Before he does something terrible!"

"All right. It's all a lot of bosh, but I'll speak to him."

The next day, Saturday, my father speaks to me about baseballs. Don't I want a new one? Gordon says.

"It's okay, Dad. I got a baseball."

"What kind?"

"A quarter ball." All baseballs were described by price. The nickel ball was worthless. Jerry Surewitz hit a nickel baseball once. It split. The cardboard halves were stuffed with crumpled pages of a Japanese newspaper. The dime ball was better. It was made in America. The twenty-five-cent baseball was really good. You could hit a quarter ball for days and when the cover ripped, you peeled it off, exposing tightly wound yarn. You then wrapped the yarn in black friction tape and you could use the ball for another month, although the tape made it heavy and hard to throw.

"I'm talking about a real baseball," Gordon says. "A fifty-center. Come on over to Levy's Stationery on Nostrand Avenue." My father is a short man who walks with long bouncing strides. Although it is

Saturday, he wears a suit and necktie. He has several suits, all from Howard Clothes, all blue or gray, or blue and gray, all herringbone. He explains that two Howard suits are better than one from Saks, but the truth is he does not care about clothing. The radio program, "Information Please," is a national success and he has made one error, one inconsequential error in business, something he does not care about either. He is on salary. He has not demanded a half, a third, a tenth of his brainchild, "Information Please." Dan Golenpaul, the man who came to him for help, owns it all. And as Golenpaul grows rich, his arrogance rises like a miasma and he finds this short, bald, mustached man from Brooklyn, who remembers poetry, Jeffersonian sentences and the sequence in which roads intersect Saw Mill River Parkway, a thorn to conscience but a necessity to the program. No one can prepare and edit so many questions on so many topics so deftly as Gordon J. Kahn. Golenpaul is galled by his dependence, which he denies, and Gordon J. Kahn, still teaching high school, starting at eight each day, travels to Madison Avenue for radio work and Golenpaul's abuse at three. The only sign of pressure is that now, instead of smoking one pack a day, he smokes three, Pall Mall king-sized cigarettes, which one finds "wherever particular people congregate."

"Red Barber is going to be a guest expert," Gordon Kahn tells me, as he lurches toward Nostrand Avenue, a Pall Mall preceding him, an inch of ash suspended at the tip.

"Watch the ash, Dad." Too late. The burnt tobacco congregates with the blue-gray herringbone Howard suit. "You gonna have a lot of baseball questions for him? Have you met him?" (A nod.) "Say, what is he like to talk to? He knows Durocher."

"He's an intelligent man." "Intelligent man" is the highest award in Gordon Kahn's private storehouse. It is his Medal of Honor. "Barber is extremely intelligent," he says. "He may make a living broadcasting Dodger games, but his interests go beyond that. He knows American history, particularly the Reconstruction Period. He likes poetry. His name is Walter Lanier Barber and he's a distant

relative of Sidney Lanier.”

“Who’s Sidney Lanier?”

Gordon Kahn lights a new Pall Mall from the old and says, “When we get back, you are to look up a poem called ‘Song of the Chattahoochee.’”

“I thought we were playing ball.”

“I mean after that. You might even read the poem. It wouldn’t hurt you to read more poetry.”

“Aah,” I say. “Who has time for stuff like that?” Doubt and pain film Gordon’s gray-green eyes.

With the new ball, we drive to Cunningham Park in Queens. Or rather, we are driven by Olga. Gordon Kahn stopped driving one morning four years earlier when, confusing brake and accelerator, he drove a new Studebaker into the glass front of a stationery store. I sit in the rear seat of the new Dodge, thumping the fifty-cent ball into the old Camp Al-Gon-Kwit mitt.

At Cunningham Park, Olga excuses herself to walk. My father and I find an empty diamond, number five, and Gordon says, “We’ll start with grounders, then we’ll go to flies.”

I station myself at first. The grounders skip out hard on two or three bounces. There is no faking on sharp grounders. You put your head down and follow the ball and hope that the last bounce will be true, or at least playable, and not carom into your mouth or groin. Head down is the secret. To follow the ball into your glove you have to keep your head down, but when you do, you leave your nose and mouth and eyes unprotected. “Head down,” my father calls. “The ball can’t bite.” Oh, baseball is a game of subtle terrors. You hope for the last bounce to be high. A high bounce is as easy as a throw. But nobody who understands the game is fooled. One grounder bounces high; and then another. “L. H.,” my father calls. “L. H. Kahn.”

“What’s that?”

“For Lucky Hop. Be ready.”

A kind of test is under way. Coming of age at Cunningham Park, Queens. Gordon Kahn is testing to see if his indulged, skinny, quick-tongued son dares show his face to hard ground balls. For once the gabbling is quieted. The bald mustached man, with the thick wrists, who wears a white shirt and bow tie to hit fungoes, and the boy are reaching, sensing, challenging and I suppose loving one another through a fifty-cent baseball, whose cover, even now, is showing spots of grass stain. One bad bounce hits me in the wrist. Another smacks my shoulder. I am not Jersey Joe Stripp, but I keep forcing myself. Head down. Head down. The baseball smarts, but pain passes and I feel a crown of sweat and all sensations are obliterated by pride. I am showing Gordon Kahn that I am not afraid of the ball.

Olga returns from her walk. She is wearing a plaid skirt and sensible brown shoes. "Gore-don. Have you talked yet?"

"Please, woman!"

But the cue for action has been sounded. Olga has commanded exorcism of the satyr. After four more ground balls, my father beckons with one finger. My left wrist is red. My glove is soft with perspiration. I half-turn, flip it to the fringe of outfield grass, and lope in, knees pumping high, head up. Then I lean forward, palms on knees, the way major leaguers do when they are awaiting an artful stratagem from the manager. "You know," Gordon announces, "women are different from men."

He rests the bat against a hip and wastes three matches lighting a Pall Mall. Then he puffs furiously. I realize. The warm sweat freezes. I lose my breath. They know I have been watching the maid. In the hot sun on the ball field, I cannot envision the maid naked or any woman naked or myself fool enough to lust to see. But I have wanted, and now I have fetched myself a retribution. A dozen punishments spin about my brain. They'll take the radio. That's it. They'll commandeer the black Air King radio and I won't be able to hear Red Barber and his sidekick Al Helfer broadcast any more Dodger games.

“Once a month,” my father says, “women have a flow of blood through their private parts. This flow has to do with ova, the eggs women produce, internally. They produce a new one every month. The bleeding is called the menstrual period.”

“Is that right? I didn’t know that. I never heard about that.”

“Well, it’s true, even so,” my father says. “This is called the menstrual period, although in certain vulgar quarters it is referred to as the monthlies. Nobody we know or would care to know could possibly refer to it in that way.”

“Once a month, they bleed? From there?”

My father puffs the Pall Mall. “Get out in left and I’ll hit some flies,” he says, concluding the only discussion of sex that is ever to pass between us. I run down fly balls poorly. “You’re probably tired,” Gordon calls. “But you weren’t bad on the grounders. Not bad at all.” That is the second highest trophy in his storehouse. “Not bad at all” is my father’s Distinguished Service Cross.

We rejoin Olga at the gray Dodge, feeling very close. “Did you listen to your father?” Olga says.

“Yeah, Ma.”

“Your father’s a very sensible man,” Olga says.

“He’s okay, Ma.”

I feel tears welling. “Your wrist,” Olga says. “It’s all red and it’s swelling. Gordon! What have you been doing to that child?”

IV

When the wind blew from the south and the French doors had been opened, the sound of cheering carried from Ebbets Field into the apartment. It was astonishing, to hear cheers from a major league crowd while sitting at home. Over the Air King, Red Barber talked in his wise, friendly way. “Camilli up. Dolph isn’t the biggest man in baseball, but there are none stronger. No, suh. They don’t come stronger than Dolph Camilli. Down in training camp one time

some of the ball players went to visit a zoo. Hold it. Here's Warneke's pitch. A curve down low. There was a gorilla in the zoo and Camilli got to staring at the gorilla and the gorilla got to staring back at Dolph. Warneke's a fast workman. A curve stays wide. Ball two. And they're both a-lookin' at each other and someone, I think it may have been Whit Wyatt, John Whitlow Wyatt of the North Georgia Wyatts, says, 'You know I think Camilli could take him, hand to hand.' Hold it! Camilli swings! There's a high drive to right. It's way up there. Way up! Slaughter's at the base of the wall looking up, looking, but Enos can plumb forget this one. It's gone. Over the 344-foot sign. Number 16 for Dolph Camilli. Say, folks, I think Wyatt may have something there." Muffled cheering escapes the Air King. I thrust open the bedroom door. Seconds later an undulating roar, the real cheer arrives, borne by the wind. "That line drive was still rising when it went out of sight over Bedford Avenue. Did you see where that one landed, Brother Al?"

"No, I didn't, Red, but where's Canarsie?"

"Hey," I shout. "Camilli hit another."

"That was a real Old Goldie," says Red Barber on the Air King, "and we're rollin' a carton of Old Golds, two hundred fresh-tastin' real cigarettes, down the screen to Dolph. We know he'll 'preciate 'em. He's quite a guy."

The Dodgers arose out of the 1930s, the wretched of the earth, armored by the tactical cunning of their new president, Larry MacPhail, Leland Stanford MacPhail, a man who tried to kidnap Kaiser Wilhelm in 1918 and failed but did capture a genuine Hohenzollern ashtray. MacPhail was gutty and brilliant and he rebuilt the team with remarkable trades and with monies cadged from the Brooklyn Trust Company. He put lights up in Ebbets Field, and for the first night game, the first Brooklyn contest ever under the arcs, John Vander Meer of Cincinnati pitched his SECOND consecutive NO-HITTER. Double-no-hit Vander Meer! MacPhail was not only good, he was lucky, and Dodger baseball became a carnival. He hired Babe Ruth to coach, which didn't work out, and signed Leo Durocher to manage, which worked wonderfully, and he

brought Barber, the Ol' Redhead, to broadcast. Even if the baseball wasn't really that exciting, how could you tell when you listened to that siren-sweet Southern tongue? Red knew his players and his league and his game and how to tell a story and how to let rhythms run. A ball game told by Barber was a drama, with plots and subplots, but going onward, always onward among stories rounding out scenes, and climaxes described with such dramatic restraint that you cried out, "Come on, Red, come on, Old Friend, Companion of a Hundred Afternoons, let go, come root with us." And from the Air King: "These Phillies are an interesting team. They're in for three days and they're plenty of tickets, heah! Syl Johnson has been to the mound before. That runner on first, Tuck Stainback, won't bother him. Not a bit. Been pitching in the major leagues since 1922. They used to talk about O rare Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's friend, but the Phils have their own rare one in Syl." All right, Red. Great sportsmanship. Hurray for all the Johnsons! But do you have to tell us when the lousy Phillies are beating us 2 to 1? "There's a second strike on Coscart. Fine curve ball." All right, Red. But he's against us. Crack. Cheer. "Coscart lines the two-strike pitch cleanly into center field. Base hit." Hey. We're alive! "Plenty of tickets left for tomorrow. Two-thirty game. I'll be looking for you, heah! They're stirring in the ol' pea patch, and with men on first and second and nobody out, here comes the Phillies' manager, Doc Prothro, to the mound, with the potential Dodger winning run at first base."

For six consecutive years, the Dodgers had been clowns. I never remembered them out of the second division. Now in 1939, with MacPhail and Barber and Durocher and Camilli and Hamlin and Hughie Casey, they finished third and drew a million people. "Everything happens in Ebbets Field," Red Barber said, "so it's worth coming out, but still, there are no fans anywhere like Brooklyn fans. Anywhere. No, suh." In 1940 the Dodgers added Joe Medwick and finished second. Then, in 1941, after a beautifully close race with St. Louis, they won the pennant. You knew they had to win after you heard Barber report a game in Sportsman's Park, the only major league ball park west of the Mississippi River. It was

one of those rare encounters where two teams match strength so heroically that the verdict, the final score, describes not only an afternoon but a season. Twenty years later participants became excited anew in recollection. Whit Wyatt and Mort Cooper pitched three-hitters. In the fifth inning, the Cardinals put men on second and third with nobody out. Wyatt, master of the outside slider and the inside fast ball, overwhelmed the next three batters. Nobody scored. In the seventh inning Billy Herman and Dixie Walker hit doubles. That was the game: Brooklyn, 1; St. Louis, 0. The Dodgers won the pennant by roughly the margin of that victory.

“You have to give these Dodgers credit,” Red Barber confided on the Air King. “They won when they had to win. They weren’t afraid. And plenty of credit goes to the fans of Brooklyn, too.” Thanks, Red, but credit? Credit for what? We weren’t pitching. We were riding the trolley cars for five cents and paying for our tickets or listening to the radio at home. Well, credit for patience, maybe, but mostly that belonged to another generation. The previous Dodger pennant had come during the final days of the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson. “Now there’s a team that was a team,” my father insisted. It was a point of dignity with him not to be caught rooting as ardently or for precisely the same things as I. “You should have seen Zack Wheat, ‘Buckwheat’ we called him, smack that ball down the right-field line, wobbling his back leg before he swung. You should have seen him, but he finished the year before you were born.” Gordon was speaking of Wheat and his boyhood, but he was excited by Camilli and mine. We both knew it in that pennant season. We exchanged quick looks and for the first time we were men together.

That was how the forties began in the Grand Army Plaza section of Brooklyn. There was concern about the Nazi-Soviet treaty, nervousness about the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and horror at Hitler’s pogroms. But little Abe Fishbein with the faintly red mustache said the Soviets had been encircled. Gary Lapolla thought he had a point. Gus Simpson seemed pained. Jack Lippman looked uncomfortable. Sol Sherman said that as far as he

was concerned Stalin was a Russian Hitler. Nothing else. Or could someone explain if he was any better, how he was? “Dinner,” said Olga smilingly, “is served and I don’t see how you can equate Stalin with that monster.”

“What are we having, Ma?”

“It’s impolite to ask.”

“Ah, Olga, tell the kid.” Abe Fishbein with the beetle-bright eyes.

“Crown roast.”

“You’re some Stalinist, with your crown roasts, Olga,” said Gary Lapolla, all olive skin and suavity.

“Those two son of a guns do exactly the same things, isn’t that so?” said Sol Sherman, a thick-chested man with a mustache like Hemingway’s.

“It’s good, Sol, you teach math,” Lapolla said. “If they let you at young people in history, you could do serious damage.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Sol, shouting.

“What do you think of the Nazi-Soviet pact, Regor?” Gary said. “Your mother thinks you think nothing. She thinks you think of nothing but baseball, which she thinks is nothing. Ergo.” The large living room was crowded with bright failed poets and unpublished novelists, now forty-five, teaching or practicing law. “Do you know what ‘Regor’ is?” Gary said. “It’s Roger in a little-known tongue, the obfuscated dialect of Serutan.”

I blinked. “Backwards,” Jack Lippman said, kindly.

“I suppose there’s something wrong, in your cockeyed scheme, with a kid liking baseball,” shouted Sol Sherman.

“Aaah,” Elsa Sherman said. “Come, Sol. Come, Gary. And you, my dear. Or poor Olga’s marvelous crown roast will be cold.”

It was hot. The meals were always hot and the meat was always tender. In the dining room, furnished in square walnut pieces, a large mirror contended with Olga’s nonrepresentational paintings, and conversation spun from Eliot to Sholokhov, with a touch of Mann, a dash of Auden, a suspicion of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Through each remorselessly intellectual social session, I caught threads. And when the conversation moved to Dixie Walker, I could weave fragments of my own like an adult. That was how the forties began in the Grand Army Plaza section of Brooklyn before, with sickness, heartstorm and most of all with time, the gaiety weathered away.

First, the maid left. After nine years, Elisabeth said she was sick, moved in with a sister in Queens and sent the brother-in-law for her things. "She only stares at the wall all day," the man said, shaking his head in what appeared to be concern. But Olga doubted the story. She regarded the abrupt departure as treason. "Do you know, the bitch saved enough from her pay to buy a small apartment house. She was planning to desert us all the time." Gordon disliked taking sides and by this time he had perfected a diversionary tactic. "I'm having trouble with a question on groupings," he said. "I have the Four Horsemen, the Three Fates and the Sixteen Nines. You should know the last, son."

"The major leagues," I said.

"Amazing," Gordon said. "Now I need a fourth grouping, but not in music. Wendell Willkie is the guest next week and music isn't for him."

"Oh, God, who cares?" said Olga, defeated. "Back-street Annie never gets to meet anyone."

"The Brahms clarinet quintet would be unfair. Levant will miss the show. He and Golenpaul aren't speaking again."

"What is it now?" said Olga, who really did care.

No German governess could be found who would work for what the family could afford. Thereafter the maids were day workers, which rankled Olga. "Information Please" had become successful beyond anyone's fantasies. Olga recognized the glibness of Clifton Fadiman, the memory of John Kieran and the heavy charm of F.P.A. But basically, she said, there would be no program without Gordon. It was Gordon who polished every question. It was Gordon's eclecticism that established the tone. "The awful irony," she said, "is

that for all you do, Golenpaul won't pay you enough for us to hire sleep-in help."

Gordon blinked and gazed across the dinner table. "Camilli hit any today?"

"Collared again, Dad. Fast balls, I guess."

"Why don't you speak to that man and simply put some of these things to him?" Olga said.

Gordon Kahn, who disliked few things but despised unpleasantness, sputtered, "Woman, please." He could not explain himself. He would not put such things to Golenpaul. (Camilli was finished by fast balls in '43.)

Soon afterward on a soft July evening, in a clapboard summer house fifty miles north of Brooklyn, Emily was stricken with poliomyelitis. In twenty-four hours she journeyed from a life of piano lessons, swimming dates and gossip to an isolation ward in a municipal hospital, where she watched vermin cross unpainted walls and heard meningitis victims die. Within a month she was transferred to a private hospital, but it was two years before she could come home. The quadriceps muscle in her right leg was dead. When at length she was discharged, her walk, once airy, had become a sequence of lurches.

Olga took a leave from the English Department of Thomas Jefferson High School and studied physiotherapy. She would return Emily to grace with her own hands. Gordon grew more silent. In a stricken family, the responses of many years abruptly become obsolete. Olga recognized this and she set out, after a lifetime of teaching, to become mother, nurse, healer, all at once. Gordon persisted in his old responses. "Bosh," he would say, "there's nothing permanently wrong with the child." But the rationale was insupportable and he cast about for a language with which to reach his daughter. Emily responded. Broken-bodied at fourteen, she became a devout Dodger fan. By chance, the vanguard of the great and final Brooklyn Dodgers was beginning to appear.

"Is Furillo a better hitter than Galan?" The speaker at supper was

not me, but Emily.

“He seems streaky,” I said.

“Galan is past his peak,” Gordon said.

“But the good righthanders, Dad. Furillo doesn’t hit them.”

“Red Barber says he’s improving,” Emily piped.

“Oh, all the saints,” Olga said, her large eyes rolling upward with great drama. “Is there nothing else in this family but the nightmare of baseball?”

The nightmare was polio. Baseball was simply a point where vectors converged. “Yessuh,” Red Barber liked to say, “baseball is more than a little bit like life.” At carefree times in early boyhood I chose to believe that life was a kind of ball game, but with a mix of years and perception I learned better. The flaw in Barber’s analogy was inevitability. A bad game ended and no matter how ardently you rooted for the Dodgers you could snap the sour mood with a good meal. But life in the household of a crippled young girl was permanently embittered. There was no escape or even avoidance. Whenever I came home, disaster rose before me. The distinction between baseball and life was as the transience of the flambeau to the permanence of night.

In retrospect, the Dodgers won the 1947 pennant with a raggle-taggle team and, also from perspective, the quality of that club was insignificant. In the year 1947 Jackie Robinson became the first black man to play in the modern major leagues. After Robinson’s remarkable season with Montreal the year before, Branch Rickey, who succeeded Larry MacPhail, assigned Robinson to take spring training with the Dodgers, while still under contract to Montreal. Robinson was so good that Rickey imagined that troops of white Dodgers would demand his immediate promotion. “After all,” he said, “Robinson could mean a pennant, and ball players are not averse to cashing World Series checks.” If the players asked, Rickey postulated, Robinson’s place would be at once secure. Actually, no white Dodger demanded Robinson and, when Rickey himself initiated the promotion, a half dozen players threatened to quit.

The law of the wallet proved itself in the converse. Rickey invited the dissenters to quit, on principle, which would also have meant abandoning major league salaries. The most extreme of Dodger racists turned out to be Dixie Walker, but even he asked only to be traded. Rickey sent Walker to Pittsburgh a season later, and he played for two more years without incident or distinction.

Elements mixed in 1947 to make Robinson's challenge an Everest. The Dodger infield was established everywhere but at first base. Robinson, who had never played first professionally, entered the major leagues at an unfamiliar position. There a number of base runners, notably Enos Slaughter of the St. Louis Cardinals, tried to plant spikes in his Achilles' tendon. As a batter, Robinson was thrown at almost daily. Verbally he was assaulted with terminology proceeding from "nigger" up to the most raw, sexually disturbed vulgarity that raw, sexually disturbed men could conceive. In the face of this Robinson was sworn to passivity and silence. He had promised Rickey that he would encase his natural volatility in lead.

Jimmy Cannon, the columnist, spent a day with the Dodgers in 1947 and concluded that "Robinson is the loneliest man I have ever seen in sports." Red Barber, born in Mississippi and raised in Florida, was afflicted with doubts. Prejudices from boyhood, like a cypress swamp, still haunted him. But by May, Barber was captivated by Robinson's ability and courage. One afternoon between innings he made an apparently casual, but touching talk. He, a back-country Southerner, had come to admire Robinson so much, Barber said, "that I hope, I really do, he bats 1.000."

The season turned on a remarkable story composed by Stanley Woodward in the Herald Tribune. Rud Rennie, who covered the Giants for the Tribune, celebrated his four yearly trips to St. Louis by joining a local band of singing tipplers, which included Dr. Robert Hyland, the team physician of the St. Louis Cardinals. The Giants preceded the Dodgers into St. Louis in the spring of 1947 and, late one night, Hyland told Rennie that it was too bad he wasn't with the Dodgers because one hell of a story would break when that nigger hit town. The Cardinals, he said, intended to

strike. Rennie, high, but not drunk, telephoned Woodward, who checked the story with a number of sources, including Ford C. Frick, president of the National League. At length, convinced, Woodward wrote an article describing the projected strike and adding that Frick had already addressed the Cardinals along these lines:

If you do this you will be suspended from the league. You will find that the friends you think you have in the press box will not support you, that you will be outcasts. I do not care if half the league strikes. Those who do will encounter quick retribution. All will be suspended, and I don't care if it wrecks the National League for five years. This is the United States of America and one citizen has as much right to play as another.

The National League will go down the line with Robinson whatever the consequences. You will find if you go through with your intention that you have been guilty of complete madness.

Whether the words were Woodward's or Frick's—eloquence was native only to Woodward—the strikers were put to rout. After that, Robinson's road, although still steep, led from thicket to clearing. He batted well, but not as well as he would, stole more than twice as many bases as anyone else in the league, and fielded adequately. Three times he found himself on base when Dixie Walker hit a home run. Invariably he trotted directly from home plate to dugout, skipping the customary handshake, so as not to embarrass Walker, or risk refusal.

Robinson was competent but uninspired in the World Series, by which time another Negro had begun to play in the majors and dozens were being scouted. The most exciting Series play was a catch made in deep left field by a stumpy outfielder named Al Gionfriddo. The batter who hit the long drive was Joe DiMaggio and, while I was saluting Gionfriddo's genius, as reported by Red Barber, my father suggested that against a hitter like DiMaggio, Gionfriddo should have been stationed far into left, in the first place.

“What do you mean, Daddy?” Emily said.

“Hell,” I said. “He caught the ball.”

“Good legs,” Gordon said, “but he doesn’t qualify as an intelligent man.” Gordon turned to his daughter and lectured on the basics of positioning oneself in defensive baseball. Her round face lit, as though she were hearing a Philippic. After a while, I excused myself, pleading homework. The Yankees won the Series, four games to three.

Olga was aging softly. She maintained her weight at 105 pounds, and as lines furrowed her face they fell in flowing contours. Wedged between polio and baseball, she became more militantly intellectual. She subscribed to little reviews and no obtuseness could stay her from finishing an essay. Wandering into the living room, I would find Hudson, Sewanee, Partisan and Kenyon stacked on an end table beside a blue couch. With time, copies became dog-eared. We owned the world’s only dog-eared collection of essays by Philip Rahv. Further, Olga acted on the essays seriously. The library, housed in high cases that faced the French doors, grew with new copies of Henry James, Wallace Stevens, Edgar Allan Poe, Yvor Winters, giants of letters and princes of bombast as the season commanded. Abruptly John Keats was “rather quaint.”

Gordon consumed himself with work, with baseball talk at his crippled daughter and, when he and Emily were not closeted, with the escapes of crossword puzzle and detective story. I was not interested in the little reviews. I disliked puzzles. There was no place for me in a closet scene. One morning at the age of twenty, I awoke a stranger in the household where I was born.

“It’s time seriously to discuss what you intend doing for a living,” Gordon said. Then, yielding to his Mahleresque weakness for triteness when most serious, he said, in a portentous bass-baritone: “I think it’s time to take stock.”

“The idea of sending you to college may have been a mistake,” Olga said. “You may not be good college timber and we—I am certainly very much to blame—should not have inflicted so many

demands on your intelligence.”

After high school, I decided on a semirevolution. I would run away to familiar ground. I prepared preliminary applications for Cornell, Olga's college, mentioning that I intended to major in English. My grades were strong in English, but spotty, and my parents were surprised when an admissions dean wrote an encouraging letter. The problem, Gordon said very tightly, was that the expense of hospitalization and physiotherapy for Emily precluded my going to Cornell. He was sorry, but there was only so much money and, by the way, if I hadn't really decided on a career, he wanted to suggest radio law.

“Radio law?”

“Yes indeed. There's a chap who does legal work for Golenpaul. It's fascinating and he is very affluent. I never thought of affluence as being important but, as you can see, I was wrong.” His eyes dropped. I was accepted at the Bronx campus of NYU, where, I told the admissions dean, I intended to pursue a career of radio law.

“Radio law?” the dean said.

The University College of Arts and Pure Science offered compulsory ROTC, clasp-hands-on-desk discipline, an ancient faculty, a persistent strain of anti-Semitism and a kind of justifiable paranoia among cadres of young Jews who craved good marks, but not learning, as they thrashed recklessly toward the common goal, medical school. All the NYU Bronx campus lacked was a balanced curriculum, an intellectual climate and girls. It was not a college, but an anticollege. It was not a place of learning but a theater of memorization. It was an institution where students regarded Lear's catastrophe as insignificant unless it was worth eight points on an exam. During my sophomore year Dr. Theodore Francis Jones, whose history course ranged down a thousand byways from Thebes to Byzantium, summoned me after a lecture. He was bald, with a bird head and bright blue eyes. “I'm surprised to see you're flunking organic chemistry,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you interested in organic chemistry?”

“No, sir.”

“What do you want to do?”

I paused. Dr. Jones looked like someone to trust. “Well, sir, I believe I’d like to be a writer.”

“A writer!” Dr. Jones spoke so loudly that I blushed. “Then what on earth are you doing at a place like this?”

But in the living room at the Lincoln Place apartment two years later I would not tell my father my longing. We sat in overstuffed chairs, feeling Olga’s eyes, and reading disappointment in one another. “You seemed to like journalism, once,” Gordon said. “Go to the Herald Tribune. Ask for this name. You may be put on a list to become a copyboy.”

“Great.” The word exploded, like hope.

“If this doesn’t work,” Olga said, “you should take a trade. It’s no disgrace. Not everyone can be an intellectual.” We exchanged looks of loathing love.

V

The Dodger DC-3 burst out of overcast near Jacksonville, finding clear air at the border of Florida. “Just like the Chamber of Commerce says,” the pilot announced. No one had gotten airsick and I had neglected to tell Fresco Thompson how I found my way to the Dodgers. It was too difficult, too much on the senses, and, besides, it did not seem plausible. “You can see beach and breakers off to the left,” the pilot’s voice intoned. Minor leaguers lunged to one side of the plane, and the DC-3 tipped slightly. I grabbed both seat arms.

“Don’t worry,” Thompson said, “ball players haven’t overturned a plane in flight yet, not that there haven’t been some crazy enough to try.” The late sun lit the cabin. “Slowest trip I can remember. I’m afraid you’re going to miss your game.”

“I guess I can wait until tomorrow.”

“You can afford to. You’ll see a ball game every day from now until October.” Thompson winked. “You had better like baseball, young man.”

And writing, I thought. At twenty-four, I was passionately fond of both.

Ball players were returning to the Hotel McAllister in Miami when I finally checked in. I recognized Reese, wearing Puck’s expression, and the soldier bulk of Gil Hodges, and Carl Furillo with a face from Caesar’s legions. It surprised me how many Dodgers I did not know. I had begun to consider the absence of black players—they were not welcome at the McAllister—when someone poked my ribs and cried, “Hiya, Rudolf.” It was Harold Rosenthal, who was abandoning the job I would take. He was a round, stooped man of thirty-eight, with crinkly brown hair and eyeglasses, respected at the Tribune for deft writing. “You know Vinnie,” Rosenthal said. “This is Vin Scully. We’ll get a Scotch.” Scully had a long-chinned, rather handsome face, under a shock of red hair. He was the number three broadcaster on the unit which Barber led.

“Into the gymnasium,” Scully proclaimed.

“Yes,” I said, vaguely. “Hey, Harold. How was the game?”

“Eech,” Rosenthal said. He waved his right hand in a deprecatory motion. “Into the gym.”

When drinks came to our table near the bar, I tried again. “How did it go tonight?” I said.

“What?” Rosenthal said.

“The game.”

“We win, 5–3. Forget it.”

“Just an exhibition,” Scully said.

I still wanted to talk baseball, to draw out the men.

“Pitching good?”

“Whoop,” Scully cried. “There goes one.”

“One what?”

“You know why I call this place the gym,” Scully said. “You’ll see more whores chasing more ball players than in any other place in the world.”

“And breaking the New York A.C. record for the sixty-yard dash time after time,” Rosenthal said.

“Time after time,” Scully sang, in a pleasant baritone voice.

The Miami baseball field possessed some of the gingerbread modernity that characterized the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The stadium roof was a cantilevered arch. Tubes of neon served as foul poles. The press box consisted of individual booths where reporters sat glassed in and comfortable. “Wow,” I said. “This is going to be all right.”

“Now listen,” Rosenthal said, “if you’re gonna cover this club, there are a few things you better learn right away. First, don’t use words like ‘wow.’ Second, when you get excited, you talk too fast. Third, get your hair cut. This is no place for a Jewish musician.”

“Right. I know what you mean.”

“You don’t know what I mean. Now when there’s a night game, you file for the Early Bird by two in the afternoon. Three pages. For the next edition you sub. ‘Preacher Roe was on the mound before 8,000.’ You know how to do that? Then you sub-all afterward. You’re not down here for the goddamn sunshine.”

“Is it very hard?”

“Is what very hard?”

“The pace. Is that why you’re giving up the club?”

Rosenthal sighed. His round cheeks puffed and deflated. He had come to the paper in the Depression, he explained, when it was hard for a Jew to get a decent job. He’d been forced to wait years to be hired. “Isn’t that something?” he said. “Now I’m walking away from the best sportswriting job in New York.”

“Why?”

“I can’t bring up a family this way. It’s two weeks at home and two weeks on the road most of the year. My wife finally had enough and said, ‘What’s it going to be, the marriage or the team?’”

Rosenthal’s large, sad face hung open for an instant. Then he said harshly, “Come on. Let’s go see the Hun-yaks.”

“Hun-yaks?”

“The people you’re down here to write about. The ball players.” He led me under the grandstand, through a door marked “No Admittance” into a dressing room tiled in pumpkin-colored slabs, where Jackie Robinson was standing up and saying, in great excitement, “It wasn’t a heart attack. Nothing like that. It was just a muscle strain in my chest.”

“Robinson,” Rosenthal said, “is not afraid to be dramatic.”

“I’m a fan of his,” I said.

“That’s your problem,” Rosenthal said.

“Who’s the horse-faced guy in the corner?”

“Cox.”

“Bill Cox.”

“Billy Cox,” Rosenthal said. “Don’t go doing that in the paper. It was Bill Terry but it’s Billy Cox.”

“Okay,” I said, “but please, Harold, not so loud.”

“You’re talking too fast,” Rosenthal said, “and, Christ, remember that haircut.”

The players were dressing before lockers that lined the pumpkin wall. “Okay,” Rosenthal said, “let’s go down the line. This is Pee Wee Reese,” Rosenthal said. “He’s the captain. Good morning, Captain. Here’s the new fella.”

“He won’t get anywhere hanging around with me,” Reese said. “You told him that, didn’t you, Harold?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I’m not good copy,” Reese said and flickered a smile.

“Look, I’m just glad to meet you. I’ve been watching you play for a long time.”

“Well, I’ve been playing for a long time.” He winked at Rosenthal, whose elbow nudged me to move.

“This is Jackie Robinson,” Rosenthal said. “Hey, Jack,” he shouted. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Robinson said. “It was just some muscle pulls. The cardiogram was negative.” Robinson shook my hand warmly over a fierce look, a large, handsome and commanding man.

Proceeding, I met Clem Labine (“He’s got sense; he won’t need the players’ pension”), Carl Erskine (“classy guy”), Preacher Roe (“a pitching scholar”) and Roy Campanella. “You’ve got to be a little careful with Campy,” Rosenthal said, behind his hand. “Roy kind of exaggerates. He gets carried away.”

Suddenly Reese’s head was alongside Rosenthal’s. On the way to the field he had paused to eavesdrop. “Isn’t that right, Pee Wee?” Rosenthal refused to be embarrassed.

“Well,” Reese said slowly, “let’s put it like this: with Campy catching, on a close play at home plate nobody has ever been safe.”

After a while we went upstairs and Rosenthal introduced me to an unusual-looking man, whose features seemed a cross of Amerindian and south Italian. Dick Young, of the Daily News, was blinking against daylight.

“Young will take care of you till you get set,” Rosenthal said.

“Yeah, sure,” Young said. “Anything you want.” He sat in the press room, stirring a Scotch and soda with a large plastic swizzle stick shaped like a pair of crossed bats.

“Harold,” I said, “I’m gonna take care of myself.”

“You can’t do it right away. Don’t you understand? This job is too big.”

“I’ll give you what you need, kid,” Young said.

I shook my head. Vin Scully joined us. He began to talk about a friend who worked in Europe. I’m no goddamn novice. I thought as

Scully spoke. "This guy travels," Scully said, "to Florence, Paris, London. Well, we travel, too. Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis."

Rosenthal and Young laughed. What's wrong with Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and St. Louis? I thought. The names excited me. I had never been to any of the cities that Vin Scully, at twenty-five, dismissed in a worldly way.

Rosenthal left Florida and the team on Monday, March 25. It was an off day; no game was scheduled. My first problem, then, was to decide what to write. "Today's story," Young announced, "is Clem Labine." The pitcher had developed a swelling on the inside of his right forearm, near the elbow.

"The trainer says it's nothing," I told Young.

"Yeah." I was following him through the lobby of a Miami Beach hotel called Sea Gull, nicknamed Siegal, where the manager gave sportswriters a cabana without charge.

"Well, if the trainer says it's nothing, how can we make it a big thing?"

Young entered the cabana, changed into a bathing suit, pulled a bridge table into the sun and started to type. "Because it's not nothing," he said. "You talked to him this morning?"

"Sure."

"Well, so did I. He's really worried."

After a while, I typed:

MIAMI, Fla., March 26—A muscle knot about the size of a small potato cropped up in Clem Labine's forearm today and threw a kink into the Dodgers' plans for the 26-year-old pitcher who is Manager Chuck Dressen's choice as most likely to succeed Don Newcombe as the team's big righthanded winner.

A discussion of Dodger pitching followed. When I finished, Young gave me his story and examined mine. He had written a similar piece, except that the muscle knot, in the News, would be "the size of an adult walnut."

Loneliness hit me at night. I had felt the Miami Beach sun, tried the surf outside the Siegal and written my first Dodger story. Now, on a warm, restless March evening, there wasn't anyone to talk to.

"What are you doing?" Someone approached as I stood in the marble lobby. I spun. It was Clem Labine. "How about a movie?" he said.

"Sure. Say, Clem. How's the arm?"

"About the same as it was at 11 A.M."

Labine was a well-built, handsome man, with a pointed boyish face under a careful crew cut. He wore light slacks, a tomato sports shirt, and a pale sports jacket that fit beautifully. "There's something nearby," he said, "called Moulin Rouge, about the French painter Toulouse-Lautrec."

Near the box office, Labine pushed in front of me and bought both tickets. "I asked you," he said. For the next two hours, while I watched Jose Ferrer hobble and Zsa Zsa Gabor whirl, while a haunting sentimental song resounded and the astonishing palette of Lautrec brightened the screen, even as Ferrer-Lautrec grown weary but not old lay on his deathbed, I could not forget that at my elbow, indeed my host, was a gentleman whose career I had discussed clinically, as though he were of cardboard, and whose end in baseball I had considered only in terms of Dodger games won and lost, which is to say inhumanely, for the 350,000 daily readers of the New York Herald Tribune.

Three days later, Labine was throwing to a catcher in the bullpen of empty Miami Stadium as I walked by. "Hey," he said. "Stand in there."

He wanted me to assume a normal batting stance, to help with his control. I buttoned the cardigan I was wearing, fetched a bat from the dugout, trotted back.

"What's the bat for?" said Rube Walker, the catcher.

"Help me take a normal stance."

"Don't swing now," Walker said. He had no mask.

Walker squatted and Labine threw a sinker. Although Labine was not regarded as very fast, and was complaining about his arm, the ball exploded past the plate with a sibilant whoosh, edged by a buzzing as of hornets. I had never heard a thrown ball make that sound before. The ball seemed to accelerate as it came closer; an accelerating, impossibly fast pitch that made the noises of hornets and snakes.

“That looked all right,” I said to Walker.

“Don’t turn around, for chrissake.”

“Oh.”

“And it was outside.”

“Stand in there,” Labine called. He threw a dozen sinkers, closer to me, and after that began to break his curve. Because of certain aerodynamic principles, a righthanded pitcher’s curve starts toward a righthanded batter’s left ear. I watched the baseball approach. It closed with me. I was paralyzed. Then, at what seemed the last millisecond, the spinning ball grabbed air and hooked away from my head and over the plate. Labine threw another curve and a third, wincing.

Through a resolute act of will I held my ground. The impulse was not simply to duck, but to throw away the bat and throw my body to the thick-bladed Florida grass. “Bailing out,” ball players call this. Resisting was the totality of my strength. I could no more have swung, let alone hit, one of Labine’s pitches than run a three-minute mile.

“Okay,” Clem said to Walker. “Enough.” He turned and bit his lip and shook his head. “I just got to,” he said to himself. “I just got to.”

I passed him, stunned, and said, unthinking, “Hang in.” I went upstairs to the press room and drank an early Scotch and then another. I began to sweat, and then the shock of standing in gave way to something deeper. This was not my game, I knew. All the baseball I had played was irrelevant to sinkers that hissed like snakes and curves that paralyzed. What an odd arena for catharsis, the press room of Miami Stadium. This wasn’t my game, that the

Dodgers played. I didn't want to play this other game. It was too full of menace. It was the knotting of young muscles and killing self-demands.

A fast ball would shatter the human temple.

I didn't want to play this game.

I had never wanted to play this game.

“What Labine have to say to you out there?”

It was Dick Young.

“He said his arm still hurts.”

Well, thank God, and the hell with it. Now there was a world ahead to write.