BEEP

Contents

WARMING UP

The Kid

WHEN I CLOSED my eyes as a kid, I heard baseball.

In the summer, my dad would put me to bed in the fourth inning of Red Sox games, but once he'd left the room I'd flip on my clock radio and friendly Sox announcer Joe Castiglione would tell me about another Wade Boggs double off the Green Monster, another run-scoring blooper to right. It seemed as though the Red Sox were always playing the Minnesota Twins, and they always trailed 4–3. But catching up was the best part. I'd listen to Roger Clemens's fastball popping into the catcher's mitt and do a sleepy eight-year-old's fist pump with every strike. Some people say they dream in color, but I dreamed in baseball chatter, the broadcast sound of a rundown and a staticky seeing-eye single through the left side.

I spent the days announcing my own backyard baseball triumphs—*Here's Wanczyk, riding a 55-game hit streak.* I crushed home runs into a rhododendron, rounded the third-base tree stump in slo-mo, and chest-bumped a ghost runner. It should have told me something about my baseball future, though, that even in my pretend world, I pretty often whiffed. When that happened, I'd announce in Castiglione's affably nasal voice that the ball had been "ruled foul," and I'd pick up a clutch single on my fourth strike.

Pretty soon, baseball changed for me. By age ten I'd have tantrums over Little League, thinking I should have been the one pitching instead of whichever coach's kid was on the mound, but when I got my chance one Saturday morning, I promptly gave up twenty-seven runs in one inning. This is not an exaggeration. The carnage took eighty-five minutes, and my major-league dreams went up in a cloud of infield dust. *Here's Wanczyk, who's walked twelve and beaned three kids named Josh square in the ass.* My dad tousled my hair and did me the favor of withholding any clichéd pitching advice. My lifetime ERA was 243.00.

To go along with my on-field struggles, I had freak-outs over the Red Sox, too. In 1995, I dropped a fly ball in the finals of my Babe Ruth League, and I decompensated when the Sox lost to the Cleveland Indians in the playoffs; in '98, a pickoff throw broke my nose, and the Sox lost to the Indians in the playoffs; in '99, at sixteen, I was the co-MVP of JV ball—like being salutatorian of summer school—and the Sox lost to the Yankees in the playoffs. After that elimination, I grabbed a wooden rocking horse my family still kept in our basement, spiked it to the carpet, and spent a few bleak hours thinking about spring training as I tried to Scotch-tape its tail back on.

In college, with the help of some daydream-inspiring Latin and Greek classes, I continued to believe that the epic tribulations of the Red Sox were part of my personal mythos. That's the kind of thinking a twenty-one-year-old steeped in Homer and a hatred of the Blue Jays gets himself into when he's not having much luck with the ladies. So, when the Red Sox lost game seven of the American League Championship Series to the Yankees in 2003, it made perfect sense that I'd also get dumped, as though the universe (or Zeus) had constructed a diorama of coincidental suffering in which I was fated to reside—a tiny paper doll of a man left holding his drooping pennant.

That school year, I got into experimental theater and Irish literature, the balms of the despondent. I stayed up late writing Yeatsian ballads about collarbones, the wind, and the way collarbones look in the wind. While I sometimes let myself read rumors about a new relief pitcher the Red Sox were courting, it was mostly a long, lonely off-season.

Then, when I was twenty-two, the Red Sox finally won the World Series. "Can you believe it?" shouted Castiglione. I couldn't. I'd just moved to Ohio to start a teaching job, but I'd flown into Boston for the clinching game, and after the last out I ran around Kenmore

Square hugging anonymous Murphs. This was it. I'd graduated college, I had employment, and, most importantly, I had a new girlfriend whose over-the-shoulder glance felt like a late-inning rally. All this coinciding with the Red Sox winning it all, right when I'd stopped being a kid.

As I got older and got married to the over-the-shoulder glancer, I grew out of my Red Sox obsession (and away from overwrought baseball metaphors). I couldn't stomach the five-hour games or the talk radio bluster that accompanied early-season fiascos. The life-and-death attitude that had seemed necessary as a pre-2004 Red Sox fan felt a little ridiculous, especially after my daughter Natalie was born. We bought her the obligatory "Born to Be a Red Sox Fan" onesie, I pointed out David Ortiz on TV as she spat up strained beets, and the Red Sox won the series again that year. But my wee-hours heart wasn't in it.

As whole seasons passed me by, I missed my baseball obsession, the impracticality of memorizing on-base percentages, and I missed listening to the games on the radio as I had as a dreamy kid, when it was all right to be kept up nights by a thing that was supposed to be fun. But I found that feeling again where almost no one else was looking: on a field in Iowa where the players heard baseball, too, and imagined the game, and hoped like hell it would give them something beautiful.

In 2012, I traveled to the Beep Baseball World Series to write a clever magazine story on something peculiar—blind guys playing sports. But as Lupe Perez of Austin, Texas, dove in the mud for a beeping baseball he couldn't see, and as Rock Kuo of Taipei, Taiwan, worked with his team's pitcher to make solid contact at the plate, this game became more than a novelty. By the late innings I felt the old childhood single-mindedness again. The Austin Blackhawks trailed their rivals from Asia, but that seemed right; coming back was the best part, after all. And as I watched guys who'd mostly grown up without baseball, I saw that they could still approach the game as a kid could.

Maybe they had retinoblastoma, or Leber's hereditary optic neuropathy. Maybe they'd lost their sight in a botched operation or a hunting accident. But whatever the circumstances, when they put their hands on each other's shoulders and lined up to take the field together, they were baseball players: trash-talking, backslapping, and loving the fight. So I decided to go with them. What follows is the story of beep baseball as I heard them tell it.