

Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

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Horvitz lowered the boom on a Friday, one hundred and seventy-two months, three weeks, and twelve-point-four hours into my tenure at the D.C. Metropolitan Transit Authority. Horvitz, the head of Logistics, was my seventh manager at the MTA, and now, with me sitting across from him in his dark, windowless office, he smiled like the cat who ate the canary.

“Max,” he said, “you had to know this was coming.” He swiveled his chair and tapped a silver Cross pen against his desk in perfect 6/8 time.

“No,” I said, my eyes fixed on the pen. “I don’t know anything.” I placed my hands under my thighs and did my visualization exercises, imagining the echo of a pebble tossed into a clear, mountain lake. “Is this about my work?”

“In a matter of speaking.” Horvitz reached into a drawer and dropped a ream of paper onto the desk between us.

“Where’d you get that?”

Horvitz smiled broadly enough to show his teeth. “Anything one does on a company computer falls under corporate work product.”

“So you’ve been spying on me.”

“It’s my job to know what you’re doing.”

“Your job.” Horvitz was a baby—thirty-one to my fifty-four. My previous managers—St. Onge, Satz, and Hsu—valued the appearance of propriety as ninety-two percent of the job. I’d done the numbers, quantifying promotions and yearly cost of living adjustments against work hours, deliverables produced, and projects won. The data came from an imaginary project I had submitted to payroll, my own numbers too small a sample size, especially since in my

fifteen-odd-years at the MTA, I had never stepped foot on a Metro train. I made it a point to arrive at the office pre-dawn with I-69 still swathed in darkness to provide what I thought was sufficient veneer for me to complete my treatise. The report on Horvitz desk was ten years in the making. I followed his eyes to the cover page—*VOWS: Variable Operational Win Shares and the Fallacy of “Team Chemistry.”* The acronym itself had taken months to hone.

“Feel free to fill in an explanation.”

I tried not to wring my hands. “I’m doing important work.”

“I see that.” Horvitz flipped through the report using his index finger and thumb, carefully detached, as if he could catch an infection by exposure to its pages. “What is this shit? Batting averages?”

“Actually, on-base percentage is a better assessment tool than batting average, especially when you consider runs created instead of runs-batted-in and take into account walks, sac flies, hits by pitch, etc.”

The pen dropped and Horvitz brought his hand to his head. “Jesus, Max. We’re a goddamn transit system not the New York fucking Yankees.”

“It’s going to change the game.”

Horvitz leaned back in his chair. “Listen, Max. What you do with your free time is one thing—I play bass in my brother’s band—but I pay you for fleet management, for relative fare prices, not,” and here he struggled through some of the report’s more abstruse phrasings, “Pythagorean winning percentages and defense efficiency ratios.”

Of course he was right. But I had worked the numbers hard cloistered in my cubical and in the basement of my house—where I kept my desk even after Susan left—and when I compiled my programs, I saw men knocking dirt from their cleats, snapping towels at each other, passing chew from hand to hand, and I saw calculus. There was no such thing as an intangible; everything could be averaged. Through veteran-to-rookie performance ratios, relative

salaries to team market share, contract-year multipliers, and win-shares of day-after aces, I could finally quantify what sabremetricians had always considered unquantifiable: the dugout and the locker room.

“I’m aware of your condition,” Horvitz said. “So, of course, I vetted this with legal. They gave me the green light.”

“What condition?”

“Don’t start, Max. I’m tired.” Horvitz pushed the report across the desk and wiped his hands in what I took to be a symbolic gesture. “Here. Take this back. But your laptop is MTA property.”

“Wait,” I said. “At least let me save it to disk.” I saw Horvitz in the owner’s box at Fenway, sipping chardonnay with Theo Epstein, my treatise in his hands.

“Can’t do it.” Horvitz picked up his pen. “Get some sleep, Max. You look like shit.”

I wasn’t sure what I said next—something about Horvitz colluding with the clandestine network of GMs who for years had been hacking into my computer, or maybe something about my power to crash every train in the MTA system—either way, it was enough for Horvitz to call security. Before the guards took me by the shoulders and shoved me through the Jackson Graham Building’s wide lake of cubicles, I rushed to my desk and gathered my books—Bill James’ abstracts and an arm-full of issues of *Baseball Prospectus*—along with the single existing hard copy of my treatise.

“I can’t ride elevators,” I told the guards. “I’m claustrophobic.”

The guards looked at each other, then back at me. We were on the ninth floor, and the thought of standing in a four-by-four-by-ten foot metal square with two pituitary-cases made me want to rip out my fingernails.

“Don’t make me do it,” I said, clutching the bundle in my arms.

The guards both sighed. “It’s that kind of day,” one said

as we clomped down the stairwell, me in the lead, them a step behind. “The O’s are throwing Cabrera tonight.”

“He’s gonna get shelled.”

“It’s not as bad you think,” I said over my shoulder. “They’re in Toronto, and Cabrera pitches 2.43 with cold hands.”

“No shit?” The guards stopped mid-floor. “2.43?”

We discussed the Orioles the rest of the way down: the grandiose dementia of the Angelos family and their colossal ignorance in signing Miguel Tejada, Sammy Sosa, Albert Belle, Bobby Bonilla, and a slew of other high-priced, over-the-hill free-agents with atrocious defense efficiency ratios and equally egregious secondary averages.

“You should be a GM,” the guards said at the bottom of the stairs.

“I know.” I whispered, glancing up at the ceiling, “But they would never let that happen.”

The guards shared another look and then unceremoniously slid my ID badge off from its chain around my neck. And then, despite any bonhomie engendered by our conversation in the stairwell, they maneuvered me into the revolving door and leveraged two sets of meaty hands to whirl its glass.

Disoriented, dropping magazines, I stumbled to my car. Though the Jackson Graham Building adjoined the Gallery Place/Chinatown station, I drove to work and parked in the garage across from MCI Center—twelve dollars a day a fair price to pay to avoid the dark, constricted bowels of mass transit. Even the parking garage was a little too much to handle; closed in spaces made my head feel like the arm-vice of Safeway’s blood pressure machine. These days I went to games less and less. The Lamictal was supposed to help with this, but I’d been off the pills since Susan left, the past four months the most productive of my life. There was something to be said for the knuckle-cracking, elbow-throwing, manic kinetics of bipolarity—the best of times like blasting around the base path while an outfielder scrambled for the ball only to overthrow his cutoff man—it was the swell before the

storm. I arranged the treatise in the backseat of the car with a handbook on either side, two magazines on top and three on the bottom, the pages perfectly square. It wasn't until I started the car when I realized I had absolutely no sense of where to go.

My father had weaned me on Cal Ripkin Sr. and the Oriole Way—*Perfect practice makes perfect!*—and when I sat with him in the nosebleed section of Memorial Stadium, I always kept score, balancing the program on both knees, marking each diamond with deliberate hand. I still had the program from Jim Palmer's first win—a relief effort against the Yanks where Palmer whacked a two-run shot off Jim Bouton. I had scored the at-bat with four perfectly vertical lines. I was proud of this. Baseball *was* numbers, keeping score as sacred a duty as reading the Midrash; there was an ethic to marking the direction of every hit, to chronicling every out, because, under perfectly drawn conditions—where every coach at every level taught the game the same way and where every fan and journalist understood every level of the game's parts—we would have a fluid system with replacement parts (players, media, and fans) that could be substituted seamlessly into a big league club with little or no adjustment. This was my vision.

As individuals, we were all disposable—players blew out ACLs, were traded or retired; fans died, their paraphernalia turning to kitsch after a club moved or changed its name (the O's had been the St. Louis Browns, and before then, the Milwaukee Brewers); pitching mounds, ball parks, and strike zones shrank while biceps ballooned and records were eclipsed—but the numbers, or rather, the numbers behind the numbers were constant, proof of something larger and more important than ourselves, something I wanted to be a part of. Even in '86 (post-Robinson, Powell, and McNally) when the team lost its first twenty-one straight games, I opened the paper every morning to pick through anemic averages with the same verve and attention I afforded Cal

Jr.'s 2,632nd game.

Keeping score, I cast fire from my hands, and after recoding a game's final out, the scorecard hugged to my chest, I felt like Moses carrying the commandments down from the mountain. Even as a child in the urinal lines, huddled among the sweaty masses, I imagined bell curves and standard deviations (not the schmaltz from *Field of Dreams*), and when my father, a survivor of Stalinist Russia, locked me in the hall closet for defacing the kitchen table with proofs suggesting Earl Weaver was holier than Abraham, I used baseball to quiet the mind and help me breathe. In the darkness, I ranked players by position, determining Joe Morgan to be the all-time best statistical second baseman despite the man's complete lack of faith in numbers. I imagined librarians living whole lives prostrate before the Dewey Decimal System, and I aspired to such devotion.

Susan, on the other hand, only had so much faith. She was staying with her friend Stephanie-the-lesbian in an Arlington townhouse a few blocks from the courthouse. After making two quick stops in Georgetown, I sped over the Key Bridge, parked in front of the house, and fed all my change to a meter. It was an overcast September afternoon, the sky bright as tin. A stray dog on the other side of the street ate flower bulbs from a front yard. When it saw me, it lifted its head and neighed like a horse, snorting cold air through its nose before it resumed its digging. Through an upstairs window someone was practicing the trumpet, ushering wobbly half notes up and down chromatic scales. I couldn't help but hum along. It sounded like a baseball organist trying to pump up the crowd for a late-inning rally. I tapped my foot. I'd stopped in a few stores on the way over, and now I held in one hand a bottle of Dom Pérignon, in the other a 24-pack of condoms.

When no one answered the doorbell, I tucked the champagne bottle under my arm and flipped through Stephanie's mail. One letter had my handwriting—it was addressed to Susan but I could not remember having written

it. I tested the knob and found the door unlocked, the TV on.

The TV faced a dark green sofa-loveseat set and broadcast an old episode of *The Facts of Life*. Susan joked that there were two versions of the facts of life, though I never knew if she meant the cast of the TV show or life in general. Last year at Stephanie's dinner party, I'd tried to enlist everyone in playing Milton Bradley's Game of Life right here on this living room floor. It was the original version (no money or pastel-colored station wagons) so I explained the rules: how one moved from infancy to happy old age, how the game used a teetotem instead of dice, how the squares represented vice or virtue, and how the game really had no end. "I don't know," Stephanie said, ashing her cigarette onto the game board. "It sounds a little too moralistic this close to Halloween."

Instead of playing the game, we passed a joint and watched *The Wizard of Oz* synchronized to *Dark Side of the Moon*. Both Susan and Stephanie wrote off the convergence to coincidence, but I knew about dynamic systems and the higher powers behind chaos theory. I also knew about conspiracy. That night, Stephanie had initiated her plan to steal Susan from me. She'd practically forced a cigarette down Susan's throat. Pot was one thing, an occasional thing, but Susan and I had both quit nicotine after grad school because in Susan's words, *it poured gasoline on the fire*.

"Come on," Stephanie said. "Smoking is the most fairly sure, fairly honorable method of suicide." She stole this from Kurt Vonnegut, but Susan didn't seem to care; she brought the cigarette to her lips, and in the light of the scented candle, she flashed Stephanie a mischievous glance. Since she quit smoking, Susan had put on weight, though she had never been as skinny as Stephanie, whose shoulder blades jutted out like a vestigial set of wings. Susan had a rounder face, biceps, and more meat around the hips. Maybe despite the lack of real-life, empirical evidence, it was true what they said, that opposites attract. I imagined a new square on the Checkered Game of Life—*wife seduced by dyke girlfriend, go back four spaces*—the equivalent of a catcher balking on

an intentional walk. I bet Milty would have loved baseball (he'd only been alive for its nascent years). Along with Life, he invented croquet and the one-arm paper cutter, and sometimes when I gripped the paper cutter in the MTA's ninth floor copy room, I imagined shaking hands with the inventor, asking him about the forces behind life's more elusive rules.

Upstairs, the shower was running. I climbed the stairs, opened the door to the bathroom, and carefully balanced the champagne bottle on the sink before I found a seat on the closed lid of the toilet. From the ample curves of the shadow behind the curtain, I could tell it was Susan. In bed, statistics scrolling beneath my eyes, I liked to watch her sleep. She lay on her side and showed me her eyelids, her short hair touching the dimple on her chin. She hated that dimple even after I told her it was a sign of intelligence, that God, like an ethereal conveyor line supervisor, had stamped her chin with his thumb. Susan was an atheist, but when she slept, I saw proof of a higher design; her breathing was oddly metrical—arpeggio and hemiola—a code waiting to be cracked. I liked to imagine that in those small hours, she told me things she could not otherwise say—that she loved me, that she supported my work, and that in her sleep, her communal with the numerical world proved that God did not in fact play dice with the universe—that she and I were meant to be together.

We met in Ann Arbor while I was completing a PhD in agent-based modeling, she one in linguistics. We both attended a New Year's Eve party where based on a few conversations, Susan deduced the origins of every guest (not only where they grew up but the ethnicities of their grandparents). It was a neat trick and it worked for everyone but me. "There's something wrong with your speech," she said after a thoughtful drag of her cigarette. Later that night, the two of us alone in the spare bedroom, I told her how sometimes my words came too fast to speak. She kissed me mid-explanation.

I felt a similar jolt when water shifted from showerhead to faucet and Susan yanked open the shower curtain.

“Jesus Christ,” she said, covering herself with the curtain.

“No. Just Max. And I’ve seen you naked before.”

“Get out,” she yelled. “What the hell are you doing?”

“It’s okay,” I said, uncorking the champagne, using both thumbs to rocket the cork off the ceiling. Bubbly foamed into my lap.

“I’m finished,” I told her. “I’m free.” I dropped down to my knees. “Now we can be together.”

“Jesus, Max.” She saw the condoms I’d arranged in three rows of eight on the bathroom floor. “You have to leave. Now.”

“But we’re celebrating.” I thought back to New Year’s Eve in Ann Arbor, the two of us making love under the pile of coats. “Here.” I held up the champagne. “To us!”

“You’re off your meds,” Susan said. “I can hear it in your voice.”

“Look,” I said, “the way I figure it, it’s the bottom of the ninth, there’s a man on third, and I’ve still got two outs.”

“I’m calling the cops.”

“Baby, I’ve done the math—in five years we’ve had 12.5 fights, and that’s quantifying a fight by the slamming of a door where a half a fight is a relatively strong but not too strong slam which gives us 4.8 fights a month which is only 1.2 a week. Even if you’ve switched teams, you can’t ignore the numbers.”

“I haven’t switched teams.” Susan lifted one foot from the water pooling in the tub. “I can’t do this anymore. We both know where this goes.”

“Hold on,” I said. “What about chemistry?”

Susan dropped the curtain only to reach out and grab a towel from the rack above my head. “Chemistry’s a myth. You’ve said so yourself.”

“No. Wait. You’re not hearing me.” My voice was louder than I would have liked. To calm down I thought about rosin bags, bat tar, and the fat mesh of a catcher’s mitt. A big

inning was slipping away. “Listen to me,” I said. “Listen to where I’m coming from.”

“Come on, Max.” Susan cinched the towel around her chest. “I never knew where you were coming from.”

I should have predicted this. I should have applied VOWS to our marriage and found transferable stats for “locker room guys” like Jeff Conine and Kevin Millar. But Susan never cared about numbers. In the past, she’d recognized the *Walden*-like quality of my work, but now, as I quoted Thoreau, she pushed me down the stairs. She threw changeups at me, saying that even in seclusion, Thoreau had lived one mile from his mother. “She cooked for him. She cleaned. But maybe that’s what you want. Not a wife, but a mother.”

I protested—my mother only existed as a dim, disapproving memory—but I remembered how Susan used to bring me dinner when I worked late in the basement. *I should make a spreadsheet*, she said, *of how you never eat*. If we lived in a different era, if I were a novelist or a philosopher, she’d take me in her arms instead of forcing me out the door.

“Go home to your report,” she said. “It better be worth it.”

I had more to say, but the words wouldn’t come, and I was at even more of a loss when I returned to the car, or rather, the empty space where my car had been. The parking meter flashed a cycloptic red eye, and only after copying down the towing company’s Fairfax address did I realize what I had left in the backseat.

I already knew about loss—the tidy, yuppie Camden Yards replacing the beautifully dilapidated Memorial Stadium; the skinny, hairless arm of Jeffrey Maier manufacturing Derek Jeter’s ’97 playoff homerun; and Babe Ruth, Baltimore’s proudest son, being sold in 1914 to the Red Sox on his way to becoming the Yankee juggernaut, a move which, considering the O’s past decade of miserable, sub-500 seasons, might have cursed us after all.

Racing back to the house, I imagined Ralph Ellison—

Susan's favorite writer—standing outside his burning house and watching through the window as his second novel turned into kindling one page at a time. I stabbed at the bell and nearly broke my fist off on the door, but Susan wouldn't respond. I saw the three little pigs—Susan, Stephanie, and Horvitz—sitting in the living room, laughing, lighting my treatise with the ends of their cigarettes.

"I'll huff and I'll puff," I yelled. "I'll break it all down."

The stray dog stampeded down the block, and I no longer heard the trumpeter. The count was 0-2 and I was fouling off pitches. I didn't want to be the guy who made the last out, so when Susan finally slid a Metro card out from under the door, I rubbed the gooseflesh on my arms and resolved to swing away.

Even when funneled through the turnstiles, escalators, and tunnels of Camden Yards, I was promised a green expanse of field, a view into the open arena of certainty. I tried to imagine that view now, but a few feet down the escalator's steep, subterranean descent, I was back in my father's hall closet with only numbers in my head. The Fairfax station was seven stops from Courthouse, a distance of 10.51 miles, a travel time of 21 minutes, a fare of \$2.35—no, \$3.45 in rush-hour. Rush-hour! I moved as far right on the escalator steps as I could and let the hurried crowd jostle past. They struck me with satchels and umbrellas, and when they glared up at me, I imagined a vicious dog foaming at the mouth, tearing at the ground, fighting against its leash. The MTA escalators were the longest in the Western Hemisphere, and back over my shoulder through the entrance's shrinking maw, I saw the light of a dying star.

During our disaster of a honeymoon in New York City, I'd been too afraid to leave the hotel, so Susan had traveled alone up to the top of the Empire State Building. I was not proud of this, nor was I about to give up. The treatise meant a front-office job—even in the National League—which would finally prove to Susan the importance of my work.

I'd read about Grigory Perelman, the Russian mathematician who solved the Poincaré conjecture. He was a recluse who lived in St. Petersburg with his mother. He grew out his hair and fingernails and only left the house at night to see the opera where he sat in the last row and listened for harmonics. Instead of publishing the proof, he declined the Fields Medal and posted the solution on-line. *If the proof is correct*, he said, *then no other recognition is needed*. I could never be so selfless.

I leapt from the escalator just before it swallowed my feet, and taking my lead from the other commuters, I fed Susan's Metro card into a mechanized turnstile. A smaller escalator brought me to the island of the platform, deep trenches on either side. I paced the middle of the platform, wringing my hands, trying to ignore the sight of the third rail. There was a troubling existentiality to the 70s-style hanger, the gray, corrugated, seemingly acoustically-modeled canals, the brown obelisks that served as station markers, and the blinking, circular, yellow lights that preceded the strang and thrum of an approaching train. I never imagined such violence.

The other commuters made a show of reading newspapers and books, but when they looked up over their raised collars, I knew they were watching—yes, all of them—the ones in headphones receiving secret instructions. I knew how things worked—I was always sure to tear up and flush any correspondence bearing my Social Security Number—so when the train thundered to a stop and its doors gasped open, I stood still.

People pushed their way each way through the doors, but I hesitated. Each car only held 5,250 cubic feet of air, which, divided by fifty-three passengers, meant less than twenty-seven moles of oxygen per person. For the second time today, I struggled through visualization exercises, trying to summon that mountain lake. *Go, go, go!* shouted a woman behind me, knocking me forward. I held my breath as the doors closed. With no empty seats, I stood in the aisle and clutched a metal pole with both hands.

My treatise had determined that a player's speed around the base path was overvalued, but standing on the train, surfing the bends of its track, I had to admit some comfort in velocity. An MTA train could reach fifty-nine miles-per-hour, and I willed the train to move even faster, not minding the bump and buckle of fellow passengers who were dancing the exact same steps as me. I imagined the treatise in my hands. I imagined Susan, her strong arms around me as the two of us bundled up in bed and blocked out winter's woolen days. At the next stop, I stared at the Metro map and settled on players who represented each of the five lines: Cal Ripken Jr. the affluent Maryland suburban red, Boog Powell the volatile green of south-east D.C., Brooks Robinson the bland but dependable yellow line towing the center of the city, Eddie Murray the orange's workman-like northern Virginia corridor, and Jim Palmer the blue's upscale extension through Crystal City. I diagramed it all out on the receipt for the champagne.

At Ballston, a woman in uniform boarded and moved to stand next to me. She wore a blue-on-blue military uniform, bars on her shoulders, and close-cropped brown hair. I remembered the army captain who'd approached me in Ann Arbor at the close of my PhD. *You're special*, the captain had told me. *We value special people like you.* He wanted me to model the effectiveness of government weaponry even though I'd been researching the extinction rates of Chilean sea bass. I turned down the money. I had other visions. Susan never forgave me for this.

The military woman looked a bit like Susan, especially from the neck down, but something about the woman's head—a scalloped set of ears bookending a flat, expressionless face—made her look more butch. Could physical characteristics serve as determinants for sexual orientation? With no room left on the champagne receipt, I made notes on the back of Susan's Metro card. The military woman—whose nameplate read "Kowalski"—eyed my writing.

"Are you Polish?" I asked.

The woman responded with a curt nod.

“My wife’s from Krakow. Her grandparents, I mean.”

The woman nodded again and then turned to the train’s dark window.

“You’re a dyke, right?”

“Excuse me?”

“You can tell me. I’m a scientist.”

Silence.

“Look. There’s nothing wrong with woman-woman love, or man-man love for that matter. What is cunnilingus and fellatio and penetration but attention? Love is attention. The end of attention is the end of life.”

“What are you saying?”

“It doesn’t matter what I’m saying. Life cannot be broken into words. We need to *embarrass* words, embarrass them into confessing their pigments until the colors run from our hands.” I shimmied and swayed with the train, releasing the handrail and raising my arms. Words clung to me like a burning robe. I gave over to their momentum. “Do you know how much I’ve seen? How many innings, hours, outs? I’ve recorded them, been good to them, treated them like I want to and deserve to be treated. You see, Adam didn’t doom us by eating the apple. Abraham did it by refusing to slaughter his son. He disobeyed God. And God is not pi. He’s not irrational, an infinity of digits. He’s rational, as rational as 1-2-3, a concrete, undecimaled force.

“Look, you can’t back away from this. When you bend the world with your eyes, you see the curve of the world, and that’s where God lives. He’s lives here—in every car of every train, all 662, in each one of these 86 stations, in every inch of 106 miles of electrified rail. You see, it’s a fluid system. Every piece of flesh and metal is accounted for. I know. I’ve done the math.”

“You need help,” Kowalski said. She made fists with her hands.

“No.” I took a deep breath and placed my hands over her breasts. “I need love and love is all we need.”

The chorus of the train lulled any sense of danger, so when the punch came, it caught me full on the side of the head, the force of the blow dropping me to my knees. The pain was tremendous but I kept talking, even as people jumped from their seats to hold me down. "I'm going to Fairfax," I said. "I've been fair, and the numbers have been fair, so please be fair to me."

Thirty minutes later I was handcuffed to a chair in the fifty-by-fifty foot security room of the Falls Church Metro station. Sitting across from me was a uniformed officer sorting through a pile of papers. The officer was heavy-set and black with glasses and a fine, light-gray beard. On the other side of his desk, a 12-inch TV broadcast the Orioles game.

"What's the score?" I asked, tasting blood in my mouth.

The officer shook his head. "Boy, you are a piece of work."

My jaw hurt and I remembered the time during my limited, real-life baseball playing days when I took a grounder to the face, my two front teeth busted out. My father had coached all my teams, starting me at second base regardless of my average or on-base percentage. He yelled at me for poor hitting, for not sacrificing my body to the ball, and since I couldn't hit a curveball, I never made it past Little League.

"Just tell me who's up. I can't see from here."

The officer shook his head but this time he smiled. I tried to lean toward the TV but the cuffs cut into my wrists. They were attached in front of me to one arm of the chair.

"Look," I said, "at least give me some ice?"

The officer sighed. He opened the cooler under his desk and tossed an icepack into my lap. Despite the handcuffs, I managed to hold the icepack to the side of my head. The walls began closing in.

"You know," I said. "I built this place. There's one every three stations on the Orange Line."

"Anyone could know that."

“I guess.” I would have gone on and reeled off everything else I knew—the date the room was constructed and the hours of the officer’s shift—but I was tired and my head felt like an echo chamber.

“I need to get to Fairfax,” I said. “I need to make a call.”

The officer chuckled. “You need to get hold of your business. I haven’t seen a brawl like that since ’98, when Armando drilled Martinez.”

“May 19th. A Tuesday. I was there.”

“Yeah?” The officer’s eyes lit up. “Remember Lloyd running in from the bullpen to get in some licks? And Strawberry’s sucker-punch? Jesus, he fell right into the dugout.”

“Munoz replaced Benitez. Gave up a two-run homer.”

“But that fight! Who was it who slugged Strawberry?”

I switched the icepack between hands. “I don’t know. I missed that.”

“How does anyone miss that?”

“I was keeping score.”

“Keeping score? People still do that?”

“I do.”

The officer looked me over. Then he turned back to the game, shaking his head at the TV.

Listening to the announcers, I tried to picture the game, but all I saw were peanut shells and pencil shavings. When I made a move to wring my hands, the cuffs held me back.

“How’s Cabrera?” I asked.

“His heater’s going. But Thomas is coming up.”

“Can I watch?”

“Yeah. All right.” The officer sat up and turned the TV so I could see the mountain of a man tower over the plate. Frank Thomas was the only player in major league history to have seven consecutive seasons of a .300 average and at least 100 walks, 100 runs, 100 runs-batted-in, and 20 home runs. But that was in the nineties. This season, his on-base percentage had dropped from the 400s to the low 300s, and his walks had dropped from the 130s to the 80s. His waist

had swelled and though his arms were still Hulk-like, his legs looked less like cudgels than fatty shanks of meat. Thomas knocked his bat against his cleats and then home base, bringing forth a cloud of dirt. For the first pitch, he didn't even lift his bat up off his shoulder.

"Don't worry about Thomas," I said. "His strikeout-to-walk ratio is the highest in the league."

"I don't know," the officer said. "He's still the Big Hurt."

"Wanna bet?"

"Bet what?"

"If Thomas strikes out, you let me go."

The officer ran his pen over his paperwork. Then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I'll think about it."

Thomas called time. He stepped out of the box and adjusted the plastic armor covering his left arm. He tapped his helmet over the massive dome of his head and then took a wide stance. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared, and when the next pitch came, Thomas' body unwound, the colossus of arms and legs and hips let loose like a coiled spring. I held my breath until the ball disappeared over the deepest part of the field.

"Wait." I strained against the handcuffs and tried to stand. "That's not supposed to happen."

"I told you so," the officer said. "He's still a tough out."

A tough out? I shifted in my chair and the icepack fell to the floor. We were all tough outs—I was an out and Susan was an out, just as Stephanie and Horvitz were outs, and on and on and on. Thomas dropped his bat and rounded the bases with a slow, measured gait, and I saw the hint of a smile crack through his stony face. Susan had smiled like that the first night in our house. With everything still in boxes, we sat on a bed sheet and watched the game on her tiny black-and-white, the one with bunny-ears and tracking problems. We sat Indian-style on the floor and ate fried chicken with our hands, my fingers too greasy to keep score, our mouths too full to talk. It was just Susan and me, the treatise still unborn, our degrees newly minted, the only light in the

room the gleam of the TV, the game a mere reflection in my wife's wine-dark eyes.

"The Big Hurt," said the officer, tugging at his beard. "Wow, the Hurt."

"Yeah," I nodded, sinking back in the chair. "He's still got it. It's still there."