DAVE MONDY

And We'll See You Tomorrow Night

1 (top)

Andrew lived his life as if it wasn't his life, as if instead he were just a character in the Sims, and he was constantly asking, "What would be the most interesting thing for this character to do right now?" He wasn't suicidal with his avatar/self, but he possessed a rare recklessness.

For example, in his more criminal days, Andrew observed a Persian rug.

And he observed that the rug would perfectly fill his loft—and he decided it should fill his loft, even if the rug was currently adorning the foyer of Minneapolis's most upscale mall. So, outfitted in blue work shirts from thrift stores, Andrew and a few friends stalked in, rolled up the rug, hoisted it atop their shoulders, and walked out. A fake explanation about a scheduled shampooing remained locked in Andrew's mind; he never even needed to produce it. No one stopped the crew or questioned their presence. Everyone just assumed the men in work shirts were supposed to be there—a plan so audacious as to be invisible.

Or there was the story of Andrew picking up a canoe and strolling out the front door of the sporting goods store. Again, no one would just walk out with a canoe, right?

In order to tell the story of the Best Baseball Game, I first have to introduce Andrew.

1 (bottom)

Elysian Fields: The name of a park in Hoboken, New Jersey, that was the site of the first baseball game, in 1846. Based on the English game of rounders, but significantly altered, that first game spawned so many others, so quickly, that by the 1860s baseball was already known as America's "national pastime."

But also: Elysian Fields was the afterlife home of Greek heroes. And Elysian Fields is an avenue in New Orleans, which was the setting for

A Streetcar Named Desire. These would be the less obvious connections between the Elysian Fields and baseball: Heroes and Theater.

> What do we wish for in the perfect game?
>
> Do we wish for our team to take the field and thrash the opposition from the First Moment, rolling up a walkover win at the final gun? No. We wish for a closely fought match that contains many satisfying reversals, but which can be seen, retroactively, to have always tended toward a satisfying conclusion.
>
> We wish, in effect, for a three-act structure.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

2 (top)

By the time I met Andrew, he was older, and his odd originality had found subtler forms than outright theft.

For example, after too many shots one night, Andrew needed a ride home from the bar. He also desired pizza. So he walked across the street to the pizza place, ordered delivery, and then over-tipped the driver to let him ride along. Soon, this was a regular occurrence, Andrew riding home with the pizza guy after a boozy night out. Several years later, I would see this same trick reenacted on a Captain Morgan commercial, but by then, Andrew was over it. A special cabbie, "his guy," would show up whenever Andrew asked. Unsurprising.

Andrew's world was a weird web of a million handshake grifts, little under-the-table deals, not quite criminal. He managed a prominent bistro, but that was just what he put on a tax form. His real income came from, well . . . Let's pretend that Andrew received some free theater tickets, and then gave them to a local florist who happened to love the stage; say the Florist then gave Andrew access to an occasional overstock of flowers (and later, unfortunately, a key to the store, which Andrew used to take more of these extras, yet never enough to be noticed). So then Andrew set up a side business, selling flower arrangements for catered events at the bistro—but oddly, a major Wine Distributor received all his arrangements at no charge; and when

Wine Distributor stumbled upon hundred-dollar Barbarescos for just twenty-five dollars and happened to alert Andrew, Andrew invested in several of them—but also gifted a few to the upscale Butcher who cured special charcuterie; so then Andrew had an excess of fine wine and duck prosciutto and coppa and specialty salami, and not only did he have an in at half the restaurants in town, but even better, should some Theater Worker stumble into his bar, Andrew could treat him to some wine and fine meats; Theater Worker might feel cool, might even offer Andrew free tickets, and the tickets could go to the Florist; the circle of grift could start anew.

And yet for all his dealing, Andrew never got very far ahead financially. He'd end up drinking too much of the wine himself, or he'd suddenly give most of his flowers to the mariachi band walking home from a Día de los Muertos celebration. I think Andrew liked the excitement of acquisition, the electricity of exchange, more than any of the actual objects. He loved the thrill of the deal and the strange wonders it allowed in his life. Like the wonder of Andrew living in a fairy-tale-ish mansion. That was the summer we went to the game.

2 (bottom)

Say someone materializes a time machine for you, with instructions that you may use it for the sole purpose of zooming chronologically backward to witness a single baseball game (which, admittedly, would be a terrible—and terribly specific—use of a time machine; nonetheless, that's what the Materializer dictates). Don't use it to see that first game in 1846. Instead, here's a handy list of the generally-agreed-upon greatest World Series games:

1) Game 8, October 16, 1912
2) Game 7, October 10, 1924
3) Game 7, October 13, 1960
4) Game 7, October 16, 1962
5) Game 6, October 21, 1975
6) Game 6, October 25, 1986
7) Game 6, October 26, 1991
8) Game 7, October 27, 1991
9) Game 7, November 4, 2001
10) Game 6, October 27, 2011

You can't really make a bad pick here—they'd all be great. Were the machine materialized for me, however, option seven would be verboten.

3 (top)

The lucky bastard—Andrew had a house-sitting gig for a local lawyer who spent most of the year in Costa Rica. It didn't seem to matter that Andrew hosted pool-table parties at the carriage house abutting beautiful Lake of the Isles, where he drank the lawyer's wine and smoked his (quite fine) cigars. Indeed, the lawyer felt lucky to have Andrew oversee the property. This was another aspect of Andrew: Despite his always coming out ahead, a person felt fortunate just to be involved with him.

I was drawn into the web so subtly that I didn't even realize it until years later. I worked at a theater across the alley from Andrew's bistro, and when he started giving me free wine after my shift, it seemed like it was because we were both such big fans of the Minnesota Twins. I felt cool. I felt like a VIP. It seemed only natural that when Andrew wanted some free theater tickets, I'd return the sentiment. Yes, the provenance of the theater tickets in that previous scenario? That would be me. Was I a sucker? I don't know. Because when Andrew landed three tickets to the Twins vs. the Boston Red Sox on June 13, 2006, he gave one to my best friend Allan and one to me.

Now this stops being Andrew's story and becomes the ultimate story for any fan—the story of how Andrew and Allan and I actually influenced who won the Best Baseball Game.

3 (bottom)

The Time Machine Materializer would forbid me to travel to 1991's Game 6 because, as we all know, encountering a previous version of oneself can cause the universe to implode, and somewhere in the stands of the Metrodome on October 26, 1991, a fifteen-year-old Dave was screaming. Young Dave was screaming because his childhood hero, Kirby Puckett, had just hammered a walk-off home run in the bottom of the eleventh inning to give the Twins one more chance, the very next night, to win the World Series. I couldn't hear it at the time, but television broadcaster Jack Buck had just extemporized one of the most famous calls in baseball history. "Hit into deep left center . . ." he said, with the ball still hanging in the air, before dropping into the stands: "And we'll see you tomorrow night!"

Hell, even risking universal implosion, I might hijack the time machine just to see that moment—the moment I truly fell in love with baseball—to see it with adult eyes. Like Kirby's adult eyes—some of the best eyes in the game, the eyes that allowed him to hit pitches like no one else, eyes that failed him only five years later, when he suddenly morphed from National Hero into Half-Blind Guy With Sudden-Onset Glaucoma and then into Former Athlete Who Cannot Handle His Personal Life Once The Game Has Been So Suddenly Taken From Him, and then morphed, at the time most of his teammates were merely retiring, into being dead.

I'd promise the Time Machine Materializer that I'd be quiet, inconspicuous—but that'd be a lie.

> In Act One, Our Team takes the field and, indeed, prevails over its opponents, and we, its partisans, feel pride. But before that pride can mature into arrogance this new thing occurs: Our Team makes an error, the other side is inspired and pushes forth with previously unsuspected strength and imagination. Our teams weakens and retreats.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

4 (top)

Moments after Andrew and Allan and I found our seats, it looked like a walkover win. Our pitcher, Johan Santana—the inimitable Latin inamorato—was just destroying Boston's batters. *Inimitable* and *inamorato* might sound a bit excessive, but in an otherwise disappointing Twins season, Santana engendered passion from fans of both genders. He came across so sensitive and so naïve in press profiles, like some sweet Venezuelan just off the boat, happy to be in the big leagues—he had Sharpied a smiley face on the bottom bill of his baseball cap and would look at it while dancing around to happy Latin beats before each start. But when Johan took the mound, though the eyes would stay misty, his face would turn suddenly steely, sociopathic. A kind killer.

The strikeout is the fuck-you play in baseball; like the slam dunk in basketball, it's a mano-a-mano assertion of physical dominance over

another human being. The pitcher says, *I will throw this little ball right past you*, and the batter replies, *Just try*, and the pitcher pitches and the batter swings—and when the batter looks back, the ball is in the mitt of the man behind him. The pitcher does this three times, and the batter has to sit down like a bad little boy being put in time-out.

When I was younger, I thought the fastball was the most impressive means of a strikeout. And Johan had an impressive fastball. But Johan taught me to love the change-up. It's a subtle pitch, difficult to master. The pitcher whips his arm as fast, and with the exact same motion, as when throwing a fastball; it looks just like a fastball; but with a trick of fingers and palm, the ball arrives at the plate 10 mph slower than anticipated. The result is that strong men look silly. Batters swing as hard as they can to hit the fastball, then realize (too late!) they need to slow down, and try to check their swings.

Boston's big batters, the batters who'd recently won the 2004 World Series the year before, the batters who so often dominated my mid-market midwestern Twins, were falling to their knees—stumbling over the plate like subway riders who forgot to hold onto the pole. In the top of the fourth inning, Santana rang up the thousandth strikeout of his career. A premade graphic played on the Jumbotron. Jubilation.

The problem with the change-up comes, of course, when the deception fails to deceive. It only takes one mistake.

4 (bottom)

"Baseball and football are the two most popular spectator sports in this country," George Carlin said in 1973, "and as such, it seems they ought to be able to tell us something about ourselves and our values. And maybe how those values have changed over the last 150 years."

So began one of Carlin's most famous routines, comparing baseball and football, and the bit still tells the truth: These sports are still played—and attended—more than any others in America, forty years after Carlin first quipped his contrasts.

He'd generally begin by noting how football was all about "ground acquisition," relating this to American expansionism; from there, the routine changed over the years, but a general compendium would look like:

FOOTBALL	BASEBALL
A 20th-century technological struggle	A 19th-century pastoral game
Played in a stadium	Played in a park
Played on a rigid grid	Played on an ever-widening angle
"Sudden Death" if time limit is exceeded	"Extra Innings" if needed
Two-minute warning	Seventh-inning stretch
Helmets	Caps
Players receive penalties	Players make errors
Begins in the fall	Begins in the spring
Played in any weather	If it rains, we don't go out to play
In the crowd, a war-party atmosphere	In the crowd, a picnic atmosphere
Announcer is often yelling	Announcer is often talking, or silent
Goal is to penetrate enemy territory . . .	Goal is to round the bases . . .
And breach the end zone	And get home

When Carlin first delivered the routine, baseball was the number one sport in America; when the piece was performed for the last time, in 2008, "America's pastime" hadn't been our most popular sport for at least twenty years. Regardless of which metrics one uses (total attendance, dollars spent, TV share, etc.), football usurped baseball in the early '90s, if not earlier.

At my worst, I'm that clichéd intellectual baseball fan, the cranky young man, old before his time, lamenting cultural loss. At best, I can simply acknowledge a change in Americans' tastes. I can admit the prophetic truth of *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory, who wrote in the early '90s (long before stats would validate her), "Baseball is what we were, football is what we have become."

5 (top)

"Strikeouts are fascist," said Crash Davis in *Bull Durham*—and he was right. Strikeouts are one individual dominating a team game. The fielders don't get to field, the hitters don't get to hit. Strikeouts are fascist, and in this way, on that day in June, Santana was Generalissimo. But it's hard to keep up that level of control—and not long after Santana's Jumbotron jubilee, Boston's Jason Varitek hit a solo home run. No big deal. But just like that, the hit-hungry Twins were losing, 1–0.

And a fatalist fan might have wondered, *Even with Santana's dominance, am I going to leave the Metrodome a loser?*

> In Act Two of this perfect game Our Team, shaken and confused, forgets the rudiments of cohesion and strategy and address that made them strong. They fall deeper and deeper into the slough of despond. All contrary efforts seem for naught; and just when we think the tide may have turned back their way, a penalty or adverse decision is rendered, nullifying their gains.
>
> What could be worse?
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

5 (bottom)

I have one clear memory of leaving the Metrodome as a fifteen-year-old after Puckett's big hit: I look down and my fingertips are shockingly purple—purple blooms on the red stalks branching from my hand. White cords bind the stalks—the hanky!

Homer Hankies were preprinted promo-rags for fans to wave during big moments of a game—a person sees these all the time on TV now, for all sports, but the Homer Hanky was the original. I didn't have one—I had five or six. But I had only a single lucky one.

Below my fingers, strangling my palm—knotted and frayed—the hanky. I didn't remember twisting and pulling at it during the game, such was my nervous distraction.

6 (top)

Sure, a little kid gets wrapped up in a game, but an adult? Ridiculous, right? Of course it is—and Andrew and Allan and I knew this, too. We couldn't explain why we cared if the Twins beat the Red Sox—so we sublimated: Andrew led the wave, an act too garish, usually, even for him; Allan immersed himself in the stats in his program; I tried to pretend none of it mattered, tried to think of different times, places—

6 (bottom)

A San Francisco cabbie with indeterminate accent once told me why Candlestick Park was called Candlestick Park. The ballfield was built right by the bay where they'd decommission old ships. They would light the ships on fire, and the ships would sink, their masts the last to disappear. Still burning. Like a candlestick on the water. That image.

Is beautiful, the cabbie said. *Is.*

7 (top)

But Boston's pitcher keeps striking out everyone—and I'm pulled right back into the tension. I can't help it. It's like trying to look away from the screen during a horror movie—you hear a scream, and even though you know it's a knife sliding into the guts of your favorite protagonist, you have to witness the carnage. There it is: Boston's pitcher tricks our batting champ, Joe Mauer, into a fly out. The Twins' best bet is dead.

Andrew and Allan and I know how this goes: After the subsequent inning, seductive Santana will have to sit down, will have to watch lesser pitchers lose in the ninth.

But in the bottom of the seventh, Michael Cuddyer hit a home run off Boston's Curt Schilling, and just like that, the game was tied.

> Just When All Seems Irremediably Lost, help comes (Act Three) from an unexpected quarter. A player previously believed to be second-rate emerges with a block, a run, a throw, that offers a glimmer (a glimmer, mind) of possible victory.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

7 (bottom)

Right before each baseball season, I read Jim Bouton's *Ball Four.* It's often rated the best sports book of all time—for example, it's the only one ranked in the New York Public Library's Books of the Century (it sidles in awkwardly between Anne Frank's diary and Dr. Seuss's tomes),

and I wish I could claim that I read it for literary virtue. But no. Mostly, I crack the cover in mid–Minnesota winter because by the time I close it, spring will have arrived.

But Bouton's book really is great. The best part? It wasn't trying to be great. It was just a journal.

8 (top)

"What the hell is that kid doing?" I say to Andrew. There's a very large child running around the top of the stands, running around the empty seating at the top of the Metrodome—the kid is running as if he's doing laps.

"He's rally running," Andrew says.

"What?"

"It's a thing," he says. "You run around to start a rally."

"Bullshit."

"Fifty bucks to follow him."

"What?"

"Fifty bucks," he says, "to be a rally runner."

"What?"

"It's a thing. It's a rally. You don't want the Twins to win?"

"You do it," I say.

"You first. Fifty bucks."

"Jesus . . . ," I say.

"Okay."

"You have it on you, or . . . ?"

He pulls out two twenties. "I'll get the ten after the game."

"Fucking A," I say, and start running up the steps to the top row of Metrodome seating.

8 (bottom)

My copy of *Ball Four* is an old first edition, given to me by my closest friend, originally given to him by his father before he died. I treat it a bit like a religious relic.

The author, Jim Bouton, was a bionic-armed fastballer for the Yankees at the end of their golden age—winning twenty-one games in 1963 and

winning two World Series games, among other accomplishments. He hurled the ball so hard that his hat would fly off as he finished a pitch. And after three seasons, he blew out his arm, forfeiting his fastball and career trajectory.

He muddled around in many middling attempts, and in 1969 he was trying to make a comeback as a knuckleballer (considered a ridiculous gimmick of a pitch) for the Seattle Pilots—an expansion team that only lasted for one embarrassment of a season.

Always known as outspoken and intelligent, even iconoclastic, Bouton was asked by a journalist to keep a journal of his season. The resulting collection of a single season's anecdotes became *Ball Four.* At the time, the book spawned major controversy. Sportswriters sometimes classify sportswriting as being pre–*Ball Four* or post–*Ball Four,* when the myths of the hallowed stars started to slip and the public saw what lay beneath. The revelations in the book seem tame today, even charming, but in 1970 the stories were shocking—especially those surrounding Mickey Mantle. *Ball Four* showed Mantle while he was:

1) Beaver-shooting, a term for ballplayers spying on nude women. One scene has "The Mick" leading a gang of Yankee greats around the roof of the Sheraton, scouting for naked women in windows. Another scene shows the boys of summer running beneath bleachers to see up women's skirts.
2) Hung over. "I remember one time [Mantle]'d been injured and didn't expect to play," Bouton wrote, "and I guess he got himself smashed. The next day he looked hung over out of his mind and was sent up to pinch-hit. He could hardly see. So he staggered up to the plate and hit a tremendous drive to left field for a home run. When he came back into the dugout, everybody shook his hand and leaped all over him, and all the time he was getting a standing ovation from the crowd. He squinted out at the stands and said, "Those people don't know how tough that really was."

Compared to more modern sports scandals like the Dallas Cowboys' "White House" or the Minnesota Vikings' "Love Boat"—prostitutes and mountains of cocaine flown in from a special company that exclusively

services professional ballplayers—Mantle's foibles look like Norman Rockwell Americana. The public was surprised that an adult paid to play a kids' game was a bit of a boozer and Peeping Tom? The public's shock now seems shocking.

Overall, Bouton brushed a loving portrait of Mantle, counting him a friend. Like in the home run anecdote, Mantle comes across in *Ball Four* as flawed but charming, and still heroic. But *Ball Four* got Bouton blackballed from baseball. He'd violated clubhouse omertá, and Mantle, among many others, never spoke to him face to face again. The Yankees thoroughly shunned him. For years Bouton was excluded from the honorary Old-Timers' Day at Yankee Stadium. All this fallout seems especially unfair when one considers that the Mantle passages fill just two pages of a four-hundred-page book. The "scandals" in *Ball Four* aren't what make the book so great.

9 (top)

I'm only a quarter of the way around the Metrodome when the large kid stops running and starts down the steps to his parents. There is, as I suspected, no such thing as rally running. The kid was just taking a shortcut. But I keep going.

It's not just the fifty bucks. Now that we're in the ninth, and heading toward extra innings, I'm getting tense, and running helps me deal with it—a physical outlet for emotional stress. But I must be careful. It's difficult to watch the game and yet also watch straight ahead, so as not to tumble down the steps and over the edge. . . . Boston gets a hit, then our reliever Joe Nathan gets a strikeout. . . . A group of fans notices me.

"What are you doing?" they yell.

"Rally running!"

"Wooooo!" they yell. The game is still tied when I run down the steps to our seats, and Andrew instinctively meets me halfway, running up, slapping my hand like a wrestler tagging in, a sprinter passing a baton.

"Go go go!" I yell. Andrew, in terrible shape but always game, starts running around the Metrodome.

> Yes, only a glimmer of victory, but it is sufficient to rouse the team to something approaching its best efforts. And the team, indeed, rallies. Our Team brings the score back even and, mirabile dictu, makes That Play that would put them ahead.
>
> ONLY TO HAVE IT CALLED BACK, yet again, by fate, or by its lieutenant, a wrong-headed or ignorant official.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

9 (bottom)

What makes *Ball Four* endure is that it provides the reader with the day-to-day feeling of actually being a ballplayer. What makes *Ball Four* so great are the truly beautiful, truly hilarious, anecdotes. What makes *Ball Four* so great is that Bouton writes what we wish stars would say, eschewing clichés:

About God: "The philosophy is that religion is why an athlete is good at what he does. 'My faith in God is what made me come back.' Or 'I knew Jesus was in my corner.' Since no one ever has an article saying, 'God didn't help me' or 'It's my muscles, not Jesus,' kids pretty soon get the idea that Jesus helps all athletes. . . . So I've been tempted sometimes to say into a microphone that I feel I won tonight because I don't believe in God, just for the sake of balance, to let the kids know that belief in a deity or 'Pitching for the Master' is not one of the criteria for major-league success."

About infidelity: "A young girl asked one of the guys in the bullpen if he was married. 'Yeah,' he said, 'but I'm not a fanatic about it.'"

About positive thinking: "When I pitched in the World Series in '63 and '64 I won two out of three games and the only thought that went through my mind before and during the game was, 'Please don't let me embarrass myself out there.' No thought of winning or losing. If you told me beforehand that I would lose the game but it would be close and I wouldn't be embarrassed, I might well have settled for that. I was terrified of being humiliated on national television. . . . That's certainly not positive thinking, and yet I was able to win ballgames. Maybe there is a power to negative thinking."

About teammates: "It's difficult to form close relationships in baseball. Players are friendly during the season and they pal around on the road. But they're not really friends. Part of the reason is that there's little point in forming a close relationship. Next week one of you could be gone [traded or sent down]. Hell, both of you could be gone. So no matter how you try, you find yourself holding back a little, keeping people at arm's length. It must be like that in war too."

What makes *Ball Four* great is that Bouton was telling an unflinching truth about his passion. A mash note would have been boring, but so, too, a hatchet job; he revealed intimacies about his beloved, and as any part of a romantic pair could attest, such honesty can be trouble.

Despite the success of *Ball Four,* despite Bouton's obvious joy at being an iconoclast and provocateur, the reader gets the sense that Bouton would've given it all up just to be able to throw one more pitch in the Major Leagues. Baseball: his true love that was lost, and once lost, he'd be a fool to pursue—but what can one do? In 1978, nine years after writing *Ball Four,* nine years after detailing his declining powers as a pitcher, nine years after his book got him blacklisted from most Major League clubhouses, Bouton attempted yet another comeback, this time with the Cleveland Indians. A thirty-nine-year-old man, who hadn't pitched in the majors in half a decade, gave his all, still tossing his ridiculous knuckleball, a pitch requiring the impossible grip he still couldn't quite master—he gave his all to try to get back in the game again. The last line of Bouton's book is "You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time."

> But see: the Lessons of the Second Act were not lost on Our Team. This or that one might say it is too late, the clock is too far run down, our heroes are Too Tired, yet they rouse themselves for One Last Effort, One Last Try. And do they prevail? Do they triumph, with scant seconds left on the clock?
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

10 (top)

I tried to avoid other people while running, but Andrew didn't. He steers right at lines of seated fans, even if he has to descend a few rows to do so. We see those fans stand, we see them high-five Andrew (of course). Near the end of his lap, Andrew is running with a raised fist, and people are cheering.

Also, it's halfway into the tenth, and the Twins are still in it. When Andrew collapses into our seats, we look at Allan and say, "C'mon."

"No," he says. "Nope."

Allan is the playwright. Allan is the ultimate intellectual baseball fan. He likes to keep score in the program. He doesn't even like it when people do the wave because he believes it distracts from a pure appreciation of the game. But unfortunately for him, as a real baseball fan, he also is required to be superstitious. Even as a rational humanist, even as a scientifically minded atheist, even as the anti-crowd introvert, he must concede that so far, while Andrew and I were rally running, the Twins have not lost.

"Okay, that's cool," Andrew says. "It's cool if the Twins lose. No seriously, it's fine. . . ."

With a look of near-pure loathing, Allan ascends.

Could it make a difference? Could such a dumb thing, a thing that we all know rationally doesn't matter, help us triumph?

> They all but triumph. As, in the final seconds of the play, the outcome rests on That Lone Warrior, that hero, that champion, that person upon whom, in the Final Moment, all our hopes devolve, that final play, run, pass, penalty kick—Yes. But wait:
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

Allan wanted to avoid other fans far more than I did, but this option isn't open to him. Andrew has already riled up the upper-deck seating. As Allan runs around the topmost part of the stadium, fans are running up to meet him, to high-five him. On that single lap, Allan probably tripled his lifetime high-five total. Each one must've made him inwardly recoil. And I loved it.

Allan was and is my closest male friend. It has been this way for thirteen years. He is the one who gave me his copy of *Ball Four;* he is the one who gave me *Three Uses of the Knife* during a particularly dark time, sensing I needed guidance about life almost as much as I did plot construction. The guy has given me a lot. And yet, what is it about male friends? In the very largest of moments, we are unwaveringly supportive—and in any other moment, we delight in watching each other get utterly humiliated.

As Allan descends, the game is still tied, and the Twins are about to bat in the tenth. We instinctively know that I must go again. Regardless of earlier beers starting to have a big effect, regardless of my unsteadiness, the game is still tied. The inferior Twins have not yet lost to the superior Red Sox. And now we can see other fans running around the top of the Metrodome. We've actually started something—rally running does exist now—and we hope, we hope far too much, that it will rally the Twins to victory.

I have to run.

> That Warrior we would have chosen for the task, that Champion is injured. No one is left on the bench save a neophyte. . . .
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

10 (bottom)

Humble Proposition: Jocks vs. Nerds is not a valid dynamic in adulthood.

"I thought I was at a party with a bunch of artists," an actor recently bemoaned at a boozy theater gathering, "and all we're talking about is sports!" Sure. Why would that be strange? Sports and art are not in opposition to one another, but aligned. A great baseball game and a great play operate using exactly the same methods—suspension of disbelief and protagonist empathy—to create moments of transport, and then learning, for the viewer.

Even though I know that Hamlet is just an actor pretending to be Hamlet, and I know that actor himself has not perished, I nonetheless weep when the melancholy Dane dies.

Similarly, I know that nothing in my life will change if the Twins' Jason Kubel hits a home run in the bottom of the twelfth; I also know that the team I root for is an arbitrary enthusiasm rising from geographic proximity. *The Onion* offers a shirt that reads The Sports Team From My Geographical Area Is Superior To The Sports Team From Your Geographical Area. And yet, if the player on my team swings and connects, there will be jubilation, and there will be temporary despair if he strikes out.

One study of World Cup soccer fans revealed a marked decrease in the testosterone levels of those following the losing team, and a marked increase in the fans of the winning club. Some might say, "How pathetic." But that is only true if it is also pathetic to cry at the end of a movie (which I suppose, depending on the movie, it is—just as it's pathetic to root for the Yankees; but for worthy teams and movies, it isn't pathetic, it is human).

Driving home from a baseball loss, or a baseball victory, as the disappointment or joy fades, I sometimes wonder, *Oh my god, why the hell did that even matter to me?* It's a fair question—why would I care when there are so many Bigger Questions (see: death & God & meaning & love & emptiness & identity & the mind/body problem & my carbon footprint & why do I never remember to buy beer until after the liquor store is closed, etcetera).

But maybe baseball matters *because* of the Big Questions, not in spite of them. Maybe the Big Questions cannot be answered, and yet my mind will nonetheless continue trying to do so, chewing and chewing at them like a cow its cud, constant—and maybe, sometimes, a consciousness needs a break from that. Needs some transport. If I can't explain how a benevolent God could allow so much evil, or how I can find personal meaning in an impersonal universe . . . Or if I can never really know if the decision to leave Carly was a good move, and was it really her fault or mine . . .

Well, I can know if replacing Joe Nathan with Juan Rincón for the tenth was the right decision. I get to find out, in fact, in about twelve pitches. I get to watch a scaled-down arena of striving and decision-making, with an admixture of malevolent forces and blind chance, and I get to see what happens.

But beyond any existential concerns, baseball is like ballet or modern dance in that it can be physically, kinetically beautiful. A few years ago, watching Zenon Modern Dance Company (at 3rd and Washington in Minneapolis) and the Minnesota Twins (about eight blocks away, at 5th and 3rd), I was: bored, irritated, mildly interested, transported, excited, delighted, and (most wonderfully) not conscious of thinking anything at all.

I still don't know what to make of the short Zenon piece involving the dancers' posteriors cantilevered as high as possible for five minutes, accompanied by tribal sounds and feedback; but my confusion was no less than when watching Tsuyoshi Nishioka's ham-handed attempts at turning a double play. And for every shortstop flub, for every bit of modern dance confusion, I get a spectacular Tamara Ober solo, or a Michael Cuddyer solo home run, and think, *Thank you.*

> In which conceit we see that not only does the game recapitulate the drama, but each act of the game (the Perfect Game, mind you) recapitulates the game (following the paradigm: "Yes! No! But wait . . . !"), just as each act of the play recapitulates the whole.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

11 (top)

And so we keep rally running—and replacing Nathan with Rincón was the right choice: He sits Boston's batters down one inning, then the next. Rally running works! But with Andrew on lap three, Allan and I espy the Twins' Jesse Crain warming up in the top of the eleventh. Allan eyes me warily and utters, "Crainwreck?" It's our term, our portmanteau, for Crain's capacity to be so often dominant, yet melt down in the moments that matter most.

Allan is on his third lap when his pessimism proves prophetic: Crain loads the bases. It's torturous, feels endless, this long buildup to a bad end—we've waited so long, just to see this? Boston's Mike Lowell

scores. Rally running is meaningless. We sense and see that the Twins will lose 2–1.

11 (bottom)

Bouton ruined nothing.

Seeing the sordid truth behind ballplayers' heroic personae shouldn't reduce our enjoyment of the ballgame itself, any more than our enjoyment of *Hamlet* is reduced by knowing an actor's personal foibles.

I loved Kirby Puckett. He was my favorite, embodying everything a baseball player should be. He was hardworking but hilarious, always smiling—and it wasn't just the guys in his own clubhouse who loved him; opposing players loved him, too. After he hit a single, you could watch him standing there, cracking up the first baseman. And yet, when the game was on the line, he was serious. He was your man. Before game six, with his team down two games to three, he famously told his mates, "Jump on my back. I'll carry you." And he did. He hit a triple in the first. Then he robbed the Atlanta Braves of runs, leaping over the center-field fence to snag a ball in the topmost webbing of his glove. And then, in the bottom of the eleventh, he hit that home run. "And we'll see you tomorrow night."

John Smoltz, Atlanta's Hall of Fame pitcher, would later say, "In 1991, in playing against him in the World Series, if we had to lose and if one person basically was the reason—you never want to lose—but you didn't mind it being to Kirby Puckett. When he made the catch and when he hit the home run, you could tell the whole thing had turned. His name just seemed to be synonymous with being a superstar."

Then one morning during spring training of 1996 he woke up and couldn't see his wife lying to the left of him in bed (his vision that quickly corroded), and after his sudden retirement, as his life devolved into disease, we learned of another side to Kirby, the specificity of the details making them hard to forget: the vibrator gifted to a long-time mistress, after endless empty Christmases; the phone cord wrapped around his wife's neck once she discovered his cheating; the woman he dragged unwillingly into the men's room of the Red Stone American Grill.

Is this sinfully demythologizing? To mention such things? Why pen

such a paragraph about a childhood hero? But Kirby's devolution does not mean he didn't hit that home run. Just as that home run doesn't excuse the phone cord. One can still be enjoyed, while the other is condemned.

> The ball game, then, is perhaps a model of Eisenstein's Theory of Montage: the idea of a SHOT A is synthesized with the idea of a SHOT B to give us a third idea, which third idea is the irreducible building block upon which the play will be constructed.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

Two different parts. Of the many parts that are a person—a person being the collage of A and B, etcetera, ad infinitum. Other Kirby parts might be: his childhood in Chicago housing projects; his prowess as a Little Leaguer; his work on the Ford assembly line when no one would give him a baseball scholarship; his ascent through the Twins' Minor Leagues after the team took a chance on him; and then, before things got bad, his glorious adulthood in baseball, where it seemed like he was always winning but in fact was always retreating. Retreating to his one area of competence, the one realm where everything made sense—and I'd like to say that I can identify with that, except that I've never been as competent in my specialty as Puckett was in his, in and around baseball. Before sudden-onset glaucoma.

"That's what really hurt him bad, when he was forced out of the game," said Kent Hrbek, the man who batted behind Puckett for most of his career. "I don't know if he ever recovered from it."

After the sexual harassment suits and arrests, Puckett fled Minnesota for the Arizona desert. Became a recluse. The few friends who saw him reported that he weighed over three hundred pounds before his deadly stroke. The deeply flawed star did get to see himself inducted into the Hall of Fame—the second youngest ever to be enshrined while still alive (the one younger player, another man whose career was cut short by disease, was Lou Gehrig).

I don't know why any of these facts would lessen the power of Puckett's game-six home run—the peak of his career, a peak that seems to me all the higher knowing the depths of the surrounding landscape.

> The Defense of Team A and the Offense of Team B are synthesized in THE PLAY, the one play, after which the ball will be found at a different position. And to that new position we, the audience, internalize/intuit/create/assign a philosophical meaning.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

No. Game six is not the Best Game Ever, but it's not the fault of Puckett. Game six is not the best game because I can't remember game six.

It was a historic game, and I was there, but I was fifteen—and I've seen so many highlights and replays in the intervening years, erasing and muddling, that I have no sense of the game, no clear memories at all, save walking out of the Metrodome with the hanky knotted around my hand. This is why I need the time machine.

So here it is: June 13, 2006, the Minnesota Twins versus the Boston Red Sox, is the best game I can remember—so exciting and amazing, even if the Twins lost the game.

And therefore, since it is my best game, it is THE best game. Because for me, my world is the entire world; just as, for you, your world is the entire world. Vonnegut's ancient Bokononists understood this. Their sacred phrase uttered before committing suicide was *Now I will destroy the whole world*.

> We rationalize, objectify, and personalize the process of the game exactly as we do that of a play, a drama. For, finally, it is a drama, with meaning for our lives. Why else would we watch it?
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

The whole world was destroyed on June 22, 2008, when George Carlin died from heart failure. "You're all going to die," Carlin said in the same show as his original baseball routine. "Sorry. I didn't mean to remind you. But it is on your schedule." Carlin believed there was nothing after death, and went on to wonder at people who used the phrase "He's looking down on us." Carlin asked why people always figured that their relatives were in heaven, and not the other place. Carlin wondered why

people didn't use a different phrase: "He's screaming up at us." Some suggested this might be the perfect Carlin epitaph.

The whole world was also destroyed on August 13, 1995, when Mickey Mantle died of liver failure after years of alcoholism; previous to that destruction of the world, the whole world was destroyed on March 12, 1994, when Mantle's son Billy died from heart failure after years of substance abuse.

The Mick learned of his son's death soon after he emerged from the Betty Ford Clinic, sober for the first time in his adult life; he had been struggling with his legacy of alcoholism, often telling kids, "Don't be like me." Many thought that his son's death would plunge him back into booze, but The Mick managed to hang on. "In the last year of his life, Mickey Mantle, always so hard on himself, finally came to accept and appreciate the distinction between a role model and a hero," Bob Costas said, eulogizing Mantle at his funeral. "The first, he often was not. The second, he always will be."

The man who had first articulated that difference was still barred from the clubhouse—but far from being bitter, Bouton just seemed to miss his friend. "When Mickey's son Billy died, I wrote him to say how badly I felt, how I remembered Billy running around the locker room in spring training, and how awful it must be to lose a child," Bouton said in a later interview. "I never expected Mickey to respond. He's pretty shy. But about ten days later, Mickey leaves a message on my machine: 'Hi, Jim, this is Mick. I got your note and I appreciate it. Also, I want you to know I'm OK about *Ball Four*. One more thing; I want you to know I'm not the reason you're not invited to Old-Timers' Day. I never said none of that. Take it easy, bud.'" Thirty-five years after Bouton's book, the two were reconciled—even though the Yankees continued to shun Bouton.

"I still have the tape," Bouton said recently. The answering-machine tape is locked away, willed to his sons upon his demise. Bouton treats the tape like a religious relic.

Two years after Bouton wrote Mantle, the whole world was destroyed when Bouton's own daughter, Laurie, was killed in a car crash at the age of thirty-one.

"The Unsinkable Molly Brown was almost sunk tonight," Bouton had written in *Ball Four.* "Unsinkable is what we call Laurie, our youngest. She's only three, but a tough little broad. This spring alone, for example, she's been bitten by a dog, hit in the head by a flying can of peas and had nine stitches sewed into her pretty little head. Nothing puts her down."

Instead of highlighting her toughness, Bouton noted her tenderness in his eulogy, noted how she wanted to be a nurse—how she imagined the job as putting flowers in people's rooms and throwing open curtains and bringing sunshine into their lives. "But that dream ended," Bouton said, "when she discovered that in nurse's training school she had to dissect a frog, and she couldn't bring herself to do it. And a dead frog at that." He smiled, then began to cry.

Bouton had been holding his daughter's hand at University Hospital, Newark, when she died.

University Hospital is very close to Elysian Fields—not the afterlife home of Greek heroes, rather the site of baseball's first game—but that doesn't really mean much, and certainly wouldn't have meant much to the Boutons then. "Nor do any of those onetime sports successes, or headlines, help, either," the *New York Times* noted: "Just as little else can comfort for now Laurie's mother, Bobbie, and her two brothers, Michael and David, and other family members and friends."

Michael Bouton wrote an open letter, in the *Times,* to George Steinbrenner, owner of the Yankees. After explaining his family's grief, and his father's reconciliation with Mantle, Michael laid out a point-by-point argument for Jim Bouton's inclusion in that summer's Old-Timers' Game, conveying what it would mean for the family. Michael was a philosophy student, and, as Jim would later note, "It took a philosophy student to write that letter."

Steinbrenner reluctantly relented.

And so in 1998, Bouton took the field again, and his family cheered. A hat had been found and fitted so that it would fall off Bouton's head, just like it did back in 1963. A genuinely happy but bittersweet event. "This is for Laurie," Jim said, in an odd timbre, into the microphone.

The whole world was destroyed on July 13, 2010, when George Steinbrenner died of heart failure. So at least there's that.

* * *

Of course the world hasn't actually been destroyed. Not the important world. The real world. By which I mean your world, you, the person who is reading this.

What I actually mean is that my world hasn't been destroyed. Depending on when you are reading this.

What I mean is that, though it is terribly self-centered, it's hard not to view oneself as the center of the world.

> It is difficult, finally, not to see our lives as a play with ourselves as the hero.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

But sometimes, getting wrapped up in something outside oneself, something like a great baseball game, can take us out of our myopic minds. For example, I mentioned that on June 13, 2006, the Twins went down 2–1 to the Red Sox in the top of the twelfth—but baseball is the only major American sport without a time limit; if tied, according to its own byzantine guidebook, the game can technically go on forever; the home team always gets a last chance. What I mean is: The Twins had one last half inning to go for the win.

> We recall how each attempt (each act) seemed to offer the solution, and how raptly we explored it, and how disappointed we (the hero) were on finding we had been wrong, until . . .
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

12 (top)

Though it seems ridiculous at this point, I keep running, even though the Twins haven't managed a hit in ages, and it's all but over. But mirabile dictu, the Twins load the bases. Still, this can only work out poorly—the Twins will not actually make something of such fortune, will fuck it up somehow, right?

But as I run in front of the scoreboard, Jason Kubel hits a walk-off grand slam to win the game. This is something that happened, something that actually happened. What I mean is this happened, and there is proof: baseball-reference.com reports it all as I have described (reading through their play-by-play feels almost like time travel).

As I pass the scoreboard, I collide with a large Mexican family. Four to seven kids going apeshit—they've whipped off their shirts, helicoptering them above their heads. Somehow, we all end up embracing. Yes. And jumping up and down, screaming. I remember the palm of my hand getting slick with the father's sweat, in the middle of his back, seeping through his T-shirt as we did the handshake-turning-into-one-handed-hug-while-slapping-the-other-person-on-the-back, and then a full bear hug, while yelling *Wooooo* . . .

We were dancing for a while, then, all of us. I think. I can't be sure. I returned to find my friends, our seats. I was a bit dazed. Heading out, filing out of the Metrodome, felt a bit desultory. Andrew had this tendency, no matter that he'd led the revelry, to get a dark look and disappear suddenly the moment the revelry died. Allan and I looked around and couldn't find him; soon we split, too, to take different trains. An unsatisfactory denouement, I guess, but after the high of the game, how much did I need? The night. The game. The hit.

It was enough.

> It is enjoyable, like music, like politics, and like theater, because it exercises, it flatters, and it informs our capacity for rational synthesis—our ability to learn a lesson, which is our survival mechanism.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*

12 (bottom)

My favorite Andrew anecdote: As a Vikings fan, he had a rivalry with a Packers' bar across the street from his own. Like Cheers versus Gary's Olde Towne Tavern. Six months before the big Vikings/Packers game, Andrew surreptitiously stole a remote for the rival bar's televisions. And then waited . . . until, on game day, he entered the bar, disguised

in a stocking cap and an oversized Packers' hoodie—the remote taped to his forearm like Travis Bickle's revolver in *Taxi Driver*, secreted beneath his sleeve.

This was traditionally the Packers bar's biggest business day, and never before and never since have they suffered from so many patrons walking out. So many customer complaints. Because every time it looked as if the Packers were going to make a big play, the television turned off. Or, even more infuriatingly, switched to the Home Shopping Network. Amazing.

Allan and I were recently joking about this prank over the phone—we've all scattered, our little group, moved for Woman or Career, like we always knew would/should happen. Allan has his favorite Andrew stories, and I have mine. To know Andrew is to have an Andrew story, and we few Andrew adherents always proffer our preferred ones upon meeting, such is our clan's tradition—and yes, half the stories are apocryphal, and I can't say why mine's my favorite.

I certainly don't have sympathy for the Green Bay fans. They're football fans, and Packers fans, besides. But I do have this inchoate empathy. As a fellow sports fan. Say the game is going good. Getting exciting. Were the game over, you'd have to go back to your normal life, have to rejoin all that again, but for now, you have Your Team, and They are charging, surging, perhaps They might score, might—

—click—

> At that point, then, in the well-wrought play (and perhaps in the honestly examined life), we will understand that what seemed accidental was essential, we will perceive the pattern wrought by our character, we will be free to sigh or mourn. And then we can go home.
>
> —DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*