

7. Brothers

Andre Dubus

In the winter of 1974, I met my agent, Philip Spitzer, and his brother, Michel. I had liked Philip for months when he was only a voice on the phone. I had sent him a collection of stories in the summer of 1973, and he wanted to try to sell it; till then, I had not had encouragement from anyone in New York about a book of stories, without a novel. After that, I talked too often on the phone with Philip. He was friendly and patient, but I had no discipline then, and I phoned at least every week to ask if a publisher had taken my book.

Of course if a publisher had taken it, Philip would have called me. But I can be suddenly and powerfully filled with a hope that feels like certainty: *an editor has just called Philip, now is the time, it is happening now*—something like that. In the winter he called to tell me he was going to visit his brother in Exeter, New Hampshire, and they would like to see me on their way north from the airport in Boston.

Philip is a sensitive man; calling me about having a drink together probably gave him some difficulty: he would know that, when I heard his voice, I would expect him to say he had sold my book. That happened later, in the spring. I lived alone in a two-room apartment, up three flights of stairs Philip and Michel climbed one night. I had very little furniture, and one or two of us sat on the bed. Philip and Michel are witty, athletic, good-hearted men who like to tell jokes and stories. That evening, we became friends. It is a deep friendship, though we rarely see one another. I feel like a brother to them; a few summers ago, I went to the wedding of Michel's son, and either Philip or Michel pushed me up a sloping lawn to pose with the Spitzers for the family photograph. Michel's son said, "You're an honorary Spitzer."

In April, after meeting that winter, we went to the Boston Red Sox opening day at Fenway Park. I was a teacher then; I taught five after-

noons a week and had never been to opening day. But that year—and for the next twelve years, till I retired, early and burned out—I canceled my classes and went to the game with Philip and Michel and my friend Jim Valhouli, a teacher of literature who twenty-one winters later broke through ice while skating on the Exeter River and drowned. Yet there we were, the four of us, in our thirties, laughing in Michel's car, on a holiday not only from work but from Time and what we perceived as our daily lives, and from what would become of us. That is what a baseball game gives. When Sandy Koufax retired from the Dodgers, he said that baseball was not reality; it entertained people and allowed them to escape for a few hours.

At a baseball game in Fenway Park, I feel like a boy, watching grown men on a playing field, and watching grown men and women in their seats in boxes and the grandstand, and faceless bodies across the field in the bleachers; watching them watch, cheer, eat, talk, drink; watching them go up and down the steps for food, drinks, or the restrooms. The sound of the crowd is steady, the calls of roaming vendors rising higher, as the cries of certain people do, those who yell at umpires, players, managers, and those who call to the players: *Good eye; You can do it*, as if they—we; I do it—had been infielders years ago, when the voices of infielders were part of the game, calling to the pitcher: *Come babe, come boy*, we used to say in spirited voices, our bodies poised, our weight on our toes, our gloves ready. During ball games at Fenway Park, strangers talk to one another about the game; people cheer when one catches a foul ball; vendors standing on steps hear an order from someone sitting the middle of the row; the buyer hands money to someone in the next seat, who passes it on; the paper and coins move from hand to hand to the vendor, who places in these hands popcorn, hotdogs, peanuts, beer, soft drinks. Sometimes at mass I think of Fenway Park, for at mass there is the same feeling of goodwill: people are there because they want to be, and I feel among friends who share a passion.

For me, baseball is real in a deeper way than much of what I do. I do not begin a baseball season hoping the Red Sox will win a pennant and the World Series. I enjoy each game. Next day, I wait with excitement for the game on television that night or afternoon. Then I watch what

happens and does not happen in a moment. I rarely concentrate on a moment of anything but writing and exercise and receiving communion. Yet watching a game, I do. A batter steps out of the box, looks to his left at the third base coach; the coach moves his hands, touches his arm, his chest, his face, his cap; the batter steps to the plate; the catcher's right fingers signal to the pitcher; the pitcher shakes his head; a runner on second creeps away from the base, glancing at the shortstop and second baseman; the catcher signals again, the pitcher nods, brings up his hands, kicks, throws. I watch the ball, and the batter. The ball is moving ninety-three miles an hour, but there is time for me to focus on it, maybe hold my breath, enough time so that it feels like waiting. Then I am amazed: the batter not only hits the ball but times his swing so well that he pulls it, a line drive right at the third baseman, who somehow has time to dive for it, but he does not touch it; he is lying on the ground, the ball hits the grass a hundred feet behind him as the left fielder sprints toward it to stop it before it bounces and rolls to the fence.

The reality I am watching is moments of grace and skill, gifts received by men who do not turn away from them but work with them for the few years they are granted. One spring, the batter will not be able to hit a fastball, the pitcher will not be able to throw one; the gifts are gone, as if they existed independent of men, staying with one for a time, then moving on to another, a boy in the womb, and when he is in elementary school, you can already see that he has it.

A Zen archer does not try to hit the target. With intense concentration, he draws the bow and waits; the target releases the arrow, and draws it to itself. A few summers ago, during an All-Star game, retired pitcher Steve Carlton visited the television broadcasting booth. One of the announcers asked him if hitters had ever intimidated him. He said he had ignored the hitters and played an advance game of catch with his catcher; it's an elevated form of pitching, he said. I have told this many times to young writers, and have also told them that Wade Boggs watching a pitch come to the plate, starting his stride and swing, probably does not know his own name, for his whole being is concentrating on that moving white ball. I could have said this about any good hitter, or fielder, or pitcher: men whose intense focus on a baseball burns their consciousness of the

past and future into ashes blown quickly up and away from the field. This happens over and over in a game, and these moments are so pure, they may be sacred. They are not ephemeral; they seem so, because they exist in Time, but so did my friend Jim Valhouli; a river took his life, but it did not take the life he lived.

After that first opening day, we went to every one for twelve more years, the four of us becoming a crowd of sometimes forty men and women, writers, editors, teachers, publishers, booksellers, husbands, wives, boy-friends, girlfriends. In late fall, when the Red Sox ticket office opened, I would drive to Boston and buy tickets: two for me, ten for the Spitzer brothers, some for my publisher, David Godine, and people who worked for him, and always we had rows of good seats behind third or first base, and everyone sent me checks for their tickets. Cold weather postponed one game, and always we wore coats, hats, gloves, scarves. I wore a Red Sox jacket and cap. There must have been days with warm sun, our coats on our laps. In my memory, I see them all as warm days, weather for throwing and hitting and catching a baseball, for sitting and watching a game. The last year we went was 1986, my last spring as a biped, and in the late fall of that year, I was in a hospital bed in my home, my right leg in a full cast that would be on it till June, my left leg amputated above the knee, and none of us bought tickets for opening day.

I was thin and weak and in pain and could do very little for myself. I could eat, but not much; talk, read a book, try to write, but I could not lift my four-year-old daughter, who weighed thirty-five pounds. In March, walking to the bathtub with crutches and an artificial leg, with two strong women, a physical therapist, and a home health aide, I took my first shower since a car hit me in July 1986. I wore loose-fitting gym shorts. When I reached the tub, I slowly turned my back to it and the shower bench I would sit on, and held a grab bar on the wall as the women took the crutches; they squatted, held my leg and the artificial one, gripped my arms at the shoulders; then, as I held my breath, they rose, pulling up my leg and the other one, and eased me onto the bench. Now I could release my breath. They pulled off the leg, and unrolled onto mine a rubber sheath like a condom that covered the cast, and we laughed. I closed the curtain, pulled off my shorts, handed them to a

woman whose hand was in the water from the faucet; when it was very warm, she pushed the lever to divert it, and out of the shower nozzle it came, spraying my face, my hair, my chest, hot joy on my body, which for eight months had felt unclean, and I closed my eyes to it, lifted my face to it, then washed my body, my hair, and stayed a long time in the shower, with a window at my right. Out the window were poplars on the steep hill behind my house, a hill I had loved to climb; at its top, near the electrical fences of the dairy farmer whose hill rises from mine till it peaks and descends to the Merrimack River, I had hung two rope hammocks. Sitting on the shower bench, in the blessing of hot water, I believed I would climb that short hill again. It would only take time. Then my right knee would bend, the damaged muscles and nerves would be again and for all my life sound, and, wearing jeans and boots, I would climb that hill, with my golden retriever, and I would lie on a shaded and swinging hammock, and while the dog lay on the grass chewing a fallen branch, I would look up through the poplars at a summer sky. In 1987 I watched opening day on television, sitting on the couch I transferred to from my wheelchair while my wife held the leg I could not lift in its cast.

So the Spitzer brothers and I saw thirteen baseball games, forty hours or so, with twenty or thirty or forty other people, some of whom I saw only on opening day. Jim Valhouli did not go to all the games. He left the college where we taught and moved to Exeter to teach at Phillips Exeter Academy. Probably in the third year, some of us began meeting for lunch before the game at a Japanese restaurant someone discovered on Newbury Street: the chef performed on the grill at our table while some of us drank hot sake. In 1977, eight of us sat at a table, the Spitzers married but without their wives; I was with mine, and our friends George and Tom were with theirs. A year later, the Spitzers and George and Tom and I sat in the same restaurant, smelling and eating shrimp, filet mignon, chicken and vegetables and rice, talking about baseball, checking our watches, timing our pleasure so we could walk to Fenway Park and see the first pitch of the game. George was talking, and then he stopped, chopsticks in hand; he blushed, looking at the rest of us, his mouth open. Then he said, "Last year, we were all married."

We stopped eating, looked at one another: we were all divorced. Then

we laughed, not at the dismal pain of divorce, not at the loss of hope, of faith, of love that divorce is; we laughed because it was opening day and during the year since the last one we had each lost, each suffered, some less than others, as our wives had, but then they had moved strongly, it seemed, onto new courses. And here we were, perhaps with invisible limps and aches and longings, eating Japanese food with wooden sticks, sitting as if poised in Time, waiting for the excitement of being with over thirty thousand people and watching a game that does not employ a clock.

I do not remember any of the games, only moments, and the one I remember with most love was in the early 1980s. I had a wife again. The weather was good. Probably we wore jackets, but the sky was blue, the sun warm, and the Red Sox won. I happily left the game, walking with my wife and Philip and Michel, and other friends, slowly with the talking crowd, down the steps and the ramp, to the paler light and coolness beneath the grandstands, the smells of steamed hotdogs, beer, hamburgers, tobacco smoke, a faint scent of urine from the restrooms, and the smells of people, of their clothes, hair, skin, makeup, and that indefinable smell in a crowd, as if you are smelling the fact of being alive. We moved slowly, with thousands of others going to the sidewalks and streets that would be filled with people who, for now, were happy.

We reached an exit and walked into the sun again. About ten yards ahead, I saw eight or so white teenagers beating three black ones who lay on their backs on the ground, their arms covering their bleeding faces. I ran to them, jerked collars, necks, shoulders; pulled and pushed white boys, and grabbed the black ones, pulled them as they stood; I pushed them against a car to protect their backs, then turned to face the white boys. I raised my fists. "Police!" I yelled. I was both afraid and sad. I said to the white boys, "It's opening *day*. It's opening *day*." That is all I said, between cries for police. The white boys edged toward me, their fists ready; the one closest to me lunged, feinted punches, and hissed through his teeth. Not one of these boys was bleeding. "It's opening *day*," I said, waiting for the attack that would hurt. Then I felt a touch on my right shoulder, and then one on my left, and I looked, and Philip stood on one side of me, Michel on the other, their fists raised, and we stood like that, our shoulders touching, with the three bleeding boys behind us, until

my wife came with police officers, who dispersed the white boys, then looked at the black boys' cuts, and sent them on their way.

As we went on ours, to drinks and dinner, then to drive to our homes in the night. Jim Valhouli was not with us that day; he would have joined us in front of the boys. Michel would marry again; then, nearly a year after my crippling, Philip would, and a few months after that I would not have a wife. All of it happened in our lives: the love of wives that was good and still is, with the pain of its loss, outside of Time; the baseball games I cannot remember but which still exist not only because they are recorded but because of what men brought to them and received from them, on the field, in the dugouts and bullpens; and what women and children and men brought to them and received in Fenway Park and at home with a television set or a radio; what athletic and passionate Jim Valhouli and his wife and two sons gave and received till the ice broke; and on that April afternoon, lit by the sun, those moments of violence, injustice, fear, and love, when my two friends came to my side and stood with me, waiting.