"World Series" (short story)

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It’s October 2006, and we’re watching the Detroit Tigers and New York Yankees World Series playoff game on TV with Wiley, my sleepy six-year-old son, who’s trying very hard to look like he’s not. Wiley just started playing on a team this year, so he understands a little about the rules of the game, but he seems mostly interested in cheering, not watching, hooting and holding crooked signs that he made out of empty cereal boxes. What he’s enjoying most is our tense rivalries, so we’re playing them up, pretending we’re bigger fans than we are, for his entertainment. My mother is visiting from Detroit, and she and I are rooting for the Tigers. My Brooklyn-born son and husband are rooting for the Yankees. I don’t want to spoil the fun while my son is awake, but as soon as he goes to bed I become a traitor. “I hope to God the Tigers lose!” My mother nods and says, “I know.”

Ted looks at me like I just told him I was having an affair. Or maybe he’s just incredulous that there’s something my mother knows about me that he doesn’t. We met in medical school, and we’ve been together for more than a decade, so it seems strange even to me that I haven’t told him my Tigers story before. But it wouldn’t come up in conversation, because we’ve only started to talk about baseball now that Wiley cares so much.

“How can you be so disloyal?” Ted asks. He’s teasing me, but there’s an edge to it, as if people who can’t stand by the baseball team they grew up with might not be good at marital fidelity, either. I’m probably overanalyzing, attaching too much importance to something he meant to be casual. People often do that with baseball.
We read each other so well, sometimes I forget there are things Ted doesn’t know about me, but it makes sense, since I don’t talk much about my childhood. At first I didn’t want to scare him away by associating myself with a world of truck stop waitresses and laid off factory workers. Ted went to private schools and his family read the New York Times at the breakfast table every morning. I didn’t think those kind of people hung out with people like me if they really knew. But we’ve been married seven years now, and my mother is here, looking like she’s going to tell him if I don’t, so I get my mother another can of Diet Dr. Pepper from the fridge and fill Ted’s glass from a bottle of decanted Cote de Rhone and start to explain: “I still lived in Detroit when the Tigers were at their peak.”

“Do you actually remember anything from back then?” he asks. I’m not sure if I perpetuated the myth that I forgot most of what happened to me before the age of eighteen or if that’s what Ted assumes since I never say much about it.

“Oh, I remember. It was 1984, the height of Tigers hysteria, when I was a senior in high school. I’d waited for it my whole life, and now it was so close—the moment I could finally escape.” Ted looks over at my mother, to see her reaction. I wanted to leave that place, but I wanted to get away from her, too. If my mother feels bad about my comment, she doesn’t show it. She just says, “Terry was as big as a house, remember?”

“Oh, of course,” I say. Ted does know that. It’s not easy to hide the fact that your sister never finished high school because she got pregnant when she was sixteen.

“Was that the year they were in the World Series?” Ted asks.

“There was more to it than that,” Loretta says.

Lisa nods. “It was a fairytale season. Everyone said so.”

“Everyone?” says Ted.
“Everyone who thought that if a baseball team was winning, that made the city they played in a magical place. The anchormen on the local news; Detroit’s Mayor, Coleman Young; Tom Monaghan, owner of the Detroit Tigers and Domino’s Pizza. Even my first boyfriend David bought into the myth. Terry was obsessed with the Tigers, too,” I say. “She had this grandiose idea that her upcoming birth and the city’s rebirth were somehow connected.” I remember her saying: “We haven’t won a World Series since sixteen years ago, when I was like this little guy, still waiting to be born.”

But by any objective standard--employment rates, crime, standard of living--Detroit was losing, even though the Tigers were having unprecedented success and just might win the World Series. When I told Terry this, she said, “Can’t you just try to be one of us for a change?” She used to tell me that all the time. But I really was trying.

“So Terry was obsessed with the Tigers,” Ted interrupts my thoughts. “That’s why you don’t actually like them?”

“It’s not that simple. Terry wasn’t the only one talking about ‘rebirth.’ These were the guys who won 35 out of their first 40 games--something no team had ever done before.”

“Back then we had heroes,” Loretta says.

“Yeah, the sports pages started to read like a book of Greek myths.” I remember reading in the Detroit News: “It’s 1968 all over again, the last time the Tigers won the World Series, when Detroiters could stop thinking about the race riots that turned downtown stores into empty shells a year earlier. This time it’s all the factory lay-offs that people hope a baseball win will white-wash over.”

“You read the sports page back then?” Ted asks.
“I told you I was trying to have some team spirit.” I can still see the faces of the sports writers on top of their columns, Bob Cantor, my crush, with his curly Welcome-Back-Kotter hair. Their message was so familiar it became a chant: The season wasn’t just about winning a game. It was about regaining credibility as a city, since the whole world was watching. It was about proving what the underdogs could do, without the multi-million dollar salaries of the Yankees. They said the Tigers weren’t just the best in the world that year but the best ever.

“Even I read the baseball news,” Loretta says.

Ted gives us a look like he no longer recognizes the two women who happen to be in his living room.

“It was probably more cheerful than reading the business page,” Ted says.

“The out of business page, more like,” Loretta says.

“That was the nadir year for the Big Three automakers, you know,” I tell Ted. He’s the smartest man I know, but he can’t be expected to keep up with Detroit history. In 1984, his biggest worry was probably whether he would get into Columbia or Yale.

“And then the real miracle happened,” I said. “My boyfriend David called in to a radio show contest and won box seats to a World Series game, and not just any World Series game, but the one that could be the last game of the year if the Tigers won and snagged the pennant. Everybody would be jealous of Detroiter, for a change, especially of those watching it live before their eyes like us. I still have the newspaper for that day--October 14, 1984--a day that could go down in history, a day that I got to be a part of.”

“You actually went to that game?” Ted says. My mother and I just nod. It’s hard to believe it even now. “Who did you go with?”

“Mom, Terry, David, and me,” I say.
“So you went, too?” Ted asks my mother, almost accusingly, as if she should have told him before.

“We all drove together in David’s blue Chevy,” my mother says.

“What was the old stadium like?” Ted asks.

“It wasn’t how I expected from seeing it on TV. I was surprised how close it was to the street. I was also surprised how big it was. But the most surprising thing wasn’t the stadium itself but the people who were in it.”

“What do you mean?” asks Ted.

“Well, in a city that was about eighty percent black, I didn’t expect the ticketholders to be almost all white.”

“Really?” Ted asks.

“Maybe it just seemed that way,” says my mother.

“How did he get these tickets?” Ted asks.

“He won them from a radio show.”

“WJN,” says my mother. “He was the thirty-ninth caller.”

“That kind of thing never happens to me,” says Ted.

“I know,” I say. “It’s like winning the lottery. A freakish thing. I looked around and wondered how all the other people there managed to get tickets. Maybe they were celebrities or just plain rich. Mom pointed out the local weather guy on TV, and Terry saw Ted Nugent, the rock star. Mom wanted to ask for an autograph but I thought that part of the fun of being in those expensive seats was pretending that it was something we did all the time, that we were season ticket holders, regulars. That we were the kind of people who lived in places that end in “Farms” or “Estates” or “Woods.”
“Did you get any souvenirs?” asks Ted.

“I remember Terry coming back from the concession stand with a hat in the shape of a tiger--and three hotdogs,” my mother says.

“Yeah, and it was hard for her to squeeze back in. The seats were just as narrow and cramped as the aisles, so it seemed like Terry barely fit. Though she looked like a crazy freak with all that make-up, Terry was actually the one who was totally in tune with her environment. She fit in with all the other wild fans, and the space of her gigantic belly seemed to help her cheer even louder than everybody else.”

“No you have any souvenirs?” Ted asks me.

“I kept the scorecard.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Sure,” I say, getting up. It’s in my sock drawer, with all the other trivia I don’t want Ted to see (or maybe I do). It occurs to me that if Ted really wanted to know about my past, all he would have to do is put away the laundry once.

I come back quickly and look at the score card. My handwriting looks childish, even though I thought of myself as so grown-up back then. There’s something about looking at the numbers that brings it all back to me. As Ted says, I’m the numbers person.

“The game started with the San Diego Padres up first. It was amazing how I could see the whole field. On TV, I usually just got to see a close-up of the batter or the pitcher, not everything all at once like that.

“I filled in my scorecard at the end of the Padre’s first at-bat: 0. When it was the Tigers’s turn, Gibson hit the first pitch into the upper deck for a home run, with Trammell scoring from first base. The crowd started doing its wave, standing and swaying back and forth, jingling car
keys in unison. I only had house keys to shake, since I didn’t drive, and their smallness made a wimpy little tingle. Parrish hit a single, stole second, then scored. The first inning ended and I wrote down the score: Tigers 3, Padres 0. Nobody scored during the second inning, and I wrote two zeros. The Padres got a run the third inning, the Tigers got nothing. During the fourth inning, the Padres evened the score, 3-3. I remember Terry saying, ‘This is way too exciting. Can’t we go back to the beginning?’

“The crowd was waving and chanting inside and blaring music, throwing peanuts, and cheering outside the stadium. The Tigers were back in the lead, when Gibson scored in the fifth inning. ‘The Cinderella man,’ Terry whispered to me. Everybody thought he wouldn’t amount to anything the year before, but now he was the star.

“The Tigers kept their lead in the sixth, and they added a run in the seventh. Next came the seventh inning stretch.

“By the eighth inning, it was Tigers 8, Padres 4--a comfortably boring lead, Terry would say, but the crowd was frenetic with excitement. At the beginning of the ninth inning, hundreds of policemen made a ring around the stadium. ‘What’s going on?’ I asked, and David said, ‘They want to keep the fans off the field.’ For the ninth inning, the Tigers just had to hold their lead, stave off any disasters.”

“And did they?” Ted asks.

“I felt like I was my holding my breath for twenty minutes, like the whole stadium was frozen still, hoping not to disturb this perfect moment. The Padres didn’t score anymore, and the game ended, the way the season began, with the Tigers champions of the world.”

“The Tigers won!” my mother says, as if it just happened now.
“The crowd finally let out its breath, and then a scream, with car keys jangling, feet stomping, celebrities kissing their wives in front of TV cameras, even Terry hugging Mom and pressing face paint all over her beautiful, clean coat. It was like New Year’s Eve and the ball just dropped from Times Square on TV, only bigger than that. David whispered in my ear, ‘Aren’t you glad you live here? The whole world wishes they were Detroiter.’

“The crowd was all crashing into each other. People were doing waves, hugging strangers, high-fiving neighbors, and throwing beer up in the air. It was quite a high. Terry started howling with excitement, like an animal. Normally I would have been embarrassed. But compared to the way everybody else was acting, Terry was the Queen of England.

“The whole stadium was in love, in love with these players, falling for them even more, now that the game was over. The weird part was that I felt like I won the game myself.

“People stood up, and I thought they were just going to do the wave again. Instead, they pushed down the aisles to get to the field. Mom and David and I made a kind of shield with our bodies so Terry’s belly didn’t get bumped. Despite the police, fans stormed the field. They were pulling up grass for a souvenir, stealing bases (literally and figuratively), and spray-painting the scoreboard with graffiti.

“Fans were throwing confetti and rice in the air, then they started to throw beer, some of which landed on Terry’s head. ‘Let’s get out of here,’ Terry said, but Mom wanted us to wait until the stampede was over.

“Were you scared?” Ted asks.

“I don’t know. It all seemed kind of unreal. There was a loud noise in the air, and I looked up and saw helicopters.”

“Helicopters? Was somebody hurt?” Ted asks.
“That’s what I wondered. Or I thought they were for the celebrities. But then I saw the players line up and get into the helicopters, which took them to safety. I wished one would come for us, so we wouldn’t have to snake our way through the rowdy crowd.

“When we finally get out, it was worse than inside. There were twice as many people as in the stadium. The opposite of the racial make-up of the city on a normal day, the crowd there was mostly white, suburbanites on a rare visit to the city. There was a group of a couple dozen people, who looked barely old enough to be in high school, hovering around something. When that group moved, I saw they had been gathered around a police car, and they’d ripped off the blue emergency light, knocked out the windows, and pulled off the door. Then they were moving on to the next police car. Terry said, ‘Where the hell are the police? They sure as shit aren’t in their cars.’

“We tried to cross the street to the parking lot, but a bus was in the way. A crowd--like the other one, entirely white--was ringed around it so it couldn’t move, then a couple dozen kids jumped on top of it, dancing and singing, menacingly. The door opened up, and the passengers ran away before the bus was torn apart. A group of mounted police, almost all of them black, tried to disperse the crowd, but the group on the bus roof started throwing full beer cans and bottles towards them, cursing. Some people in the crowd threw rocks, too, and the police moved their horses out of the way. A police car down the street blazed into fire, and the mounted police were diverted to that disaster.

“When it was clear we couldn’t move, Mom said, ‘Let’s huddle.’ We made a ring, holding hands, around Terry to protect her belly from the jostling of the crowd. Maybe that made us stand out too much, so one of the boys on top of the bus looked me in the eye. I heard him yell, ‘Lisa!’ It was Johnny and his rowdy twelve-year-old gang members who ruled our
block on their banana-seat bikes. ‘Hey, geek! Hey, freak! Who let you out of your cage?’ Johnny said.

‘Terry said, ‘Assholes! Get down off there before more people get hurt.’ ‘Nobody calls me an asshole,’ said Johnny. ‘You’re the one holding hands with a shrimp dressed in a pink shirt.’

‘One of Johnny’s friends started to chant, ‘Padres suck’ over and over, stomping his feet.

The bus was full of people who didn’t even go to the game, who were just trying to get home from work and were unlucky enough to have their route cross the path of Tiger Stadium. But the street had become so crowded with bodies that vehicles mostly came to a standstill, and the bus couldn’t move because people were on top of it, so the driver opened the doors, and the passengers started to fumble out. Johnny dropped some Cracker Jack crumbs on their heads. He lit a cigarette, and it looked like he was going to drop the lit match down, too. Maybe it sizzled out on its way down, so he lit another. The bus passengers were almost entirely black, like the policemen, who seemed to be almost nowhere in sight.

‘Terry yelled, ‘Get down from there, Johnny! Before people get hurt.’ Johnny lifted up a bottle of beer and pointed it as if he was going to throw it at Terry.

‘Did he come down?’ Ted asks.

‘No, then I shouted, ‘Leave her alone, she’s pregnant!’ But I guess there were enough other people walking on top of cars, throwing each other in the air, and lighting torches and tossing them into the street, that these punks must have thought the police would just ignore them.

‘Were the police using the helicopters?’ Ted asks.
“It looked like all they were using them for was just to evacuate the players. So Johnny’s punks picked up a beer bottle and held it like a caveman’s club. They were flexing their muscles and preening as if they won the World Series. Somebody turned on a boom box blasting “We are the champions.” They had never actually hurt any of us in all the years they’d teased people on the block, only threatened to. They’re not going to do anything, I kept telling myself, so just stay cool.

“I turned my back to them, then they threw a beer bottle at my head. It hit the back of my neck, but the bottle didn’t break until it got to the ground, so I wasn’t cut, it was just a shock. I turned around to see what happened, and somebody threw me a half-empty beer can. Maybe I was supposed to catch it and drink it, but instead I just got splattered with beer, and that made the punks double over with laughter. I picked up the can and wanted to throw it back at them, but before I could, Johnny found a bottle with a jagged edge and threw it at me. Just as I was standing from picking up the beer can, the bottle hit me on the forehead, knocked me down, and I started to bleed.

“My God, did it hurt?” Ted asks. My mother looks serious.

“Yeah, I was cut, and I couldn’t tell how bad it was, but if I frowned or squinted it hurt more, even if I tried to talk. I fell down on the sticky street, full of beer fizz and horse shit; it was like I was stuck on a movie theater floor, at a place that allowed booze and farm animals. If we weren’t shoulder to shoulder with 100,000 people, I could have shouted: ‘Get an ambulance.’ But there wasn’t any way to get out of there without getting stomped on.

“Everything got a bit foggy, but I do remember thinking, ‘What’s that David said about being glad I live here?’ I could feel someone propping me up. Blood was running slowly down my forehead, so I closed my eyes, but I could feel David and Mom putting their arms around my
shoulder to steady me, Mom wiping my forehead clean with a napkin. I just wanted to sit down and rest, but Mom said, ‘Come on Lisa, we’re going to the hospital.’ ‘No, I’m OK,’ I said, but Mom insisted: ‘That cut’s pretty close to your eye, so we better get it treated.’ Then I yelled, ‘Terry! Who’s taking care of Terry?’ ‘I’m cool,’ Terry said. ‘But you, let’s get you out of here before you bleed like the whole Great Lakes.’

“How’d you get to the hospital?” Ted asks.

I heard Mom and David and Terry trying to flag down the mounted police, but when they found an officer he said, ‘Sorry, we’ve got a lot of injured here.’ Then I heard Mom say, ‘My daughter’s in labor,’ pointing to Terry. ‘You know how to deliver a baby? They teach you that in police academy, don’t they?’

“Was she really?” asks Ted.

“No! But wasn’t that brilliant? All of a sudden, the guy was trailblazing through the crowd for us. ‘Where’s your car? Follow me, I’ll take you right there.’ On the way, I heard a man, sticking his head out his car window, shout to the mounted policeman, “Is the war over?”

“Was it?”

“No, but as soon as I got to the hospital, they gave me some anaesthesia, so it was all over for me. The next thing I remember I was opening up the one eye that wasn’t bandaged in the hospital, and Mom was there at my bedside. I asked her what happened to me and she said, ‘You got hit with a bottle, remember?’

“Your skin just got a little ripped up, but no bones or stuff were broke,” my mother says.

“How many stitches?” Ted asks.

“Just ten,” my mother says. “It would’ve been real bad if we didn’t get you there so quick.”

“But it sounds like total chaos,” says Ted. “Wasn’t everybody supposed to be celebrating?”

As if on cue, we hear some cheering in the streets. People are spilling out from the bar next door, so we turn the sound back up on the TV to find out what happened. The Yankees won! The Tigers are out of the playoffs. We’re not the kind of people who usually do this, but we find ourselves whooping with joy, just like our neighbors. Then my son appears in the hallway: We and the rest of New York City must have woken him up. He listens to the TV announcer and says, puzzled, “Mom, the Tigers lost. How come you’re happy?” I look to Ted for help. There’s no way I can give an explanation in a couple sentences.

“It’s a long story,” he says, “and it’s late, you have to go to school in the morning.”

“Will you tell me tomorrow?”

I’m noncomittal. I don’t want him to be disillusioned, the way I was, about everything. Not yet. But then again, maybe I’m just reading way too much into baseball. As I said, people often do that.

THE END