



BOTTOM OF THE 33rd

Hope, Redemption, and
Baseball's Longest Game

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BOTTOM
OF THE
33rd

ALSO BY DAN BARRY

Pull Me Up

City Lights

To
Ben Mondor

PROLOGUE

Three thirty in the morning.

Holy Saturday, the awkward Christian pause between the Sorrow and the Joy, has surrendered to the first hushed hours of Easter. The cold and dark cling to the rooftops in a Rhode Island place called Pawtucket. Triple-decker houses, packed with three, four, six sleeping families, loom over its empty, half-lit streets, while the river that cascades through its deserted downtown releases a steady, dreamy sigh. Yet somewhere in the almost sacred stillness, a white orb disturbs the peace, skipping along the night-damp grass, flitting through the night-crisp air, causing general unrest at three thirty in the morning on Sunday, Easter Sunday.

Pawtucket, it must be said, is not given to the supernatural. This is a city grounded by harsh reality, a city of striving and struggle. After all, it was here—not in Boston to the north or Providence to the immediate south, but right here—that an Englishman with a genius for business, Samuel Slater, arrived at the end of the eighteenth century to create the water-powered textile industry. It was here, then, that the muscular Blackstone River began turning the gears of the American Industrial Revolution, shifting life from farm to factory, from country to city, changing everything. Young children followed their parents into the time-hungry mills and came out old, searching for the decades that were theirs just a moment ago. Time was everything. In 1824, for example, women weavers led a raucous strike to protest longer hours, shorter pay, and lives dictated by the insistent

clangs of the factory bell. Not long after, the people of Pawtucket took up a collection to install a clock at the top of the new Congregational church. Precious time is not a mill owner's possession.

All those limbs lost to mill machinery, all those airborne fibers inhaled into the lungs, all those labor struggles and recessions and closings and reinventions over two centuries, would bequeath to Pawtucket more than just a poisoned river and a clutter of ghostly mill buildings, standing as dark brick taunts of what was. The city would also inherit a knowing hardness, an understanding to pass on to its children that life is a matter of endurance: Not everyone wins.

Tonight in Pawtucket, in some of the tidy colonial homes that border Providence, and in the cramped triple-deckers surrounding the Gothic hospital, and in the mobile homes clustered near an abandoned racetrack, baskets filled with green straw and chocolate bunnies, hollow and solid and wrapped in the thinnest foil, lie in wait. Beside them are nestled chocolate eggs filled with coconut-flavored goo, and those yellow marshmallow chicks so sweet you sense your teeth dissolving after the first decapitating bite. In a few hours these candy cornucopias will be discovered by children who are blessedly removed from mill-work, too young to have the Pawtucket worldview, and too innocent to question what possible connection could exist between the elusive white-furred rabbit who brought these gifts and the white-robed man who rose from the dead.

Then again, to a ten-year-old, anything is possible. Animals are magical and death is just sleep and you can grow up to be whatever you want to be: chief of the Pawtucket Fire Department; president of the United States; even first baseman for the Boston Red Sox. All possible.

But, now, at three thirty in the morning on April 19, 1981, these children are asleep, as are their parents, as is Pawtucket—save for one radiant swath, across from the Chinese restaurant called the Mei-King and beside the bookmaker's social club called the Lily. There, in middle-aged and tired McCoy Stadium, powerful lights shine down on small clutches of people, two dozen, three dozen at most, huddled like straggling immigrants in the steerage of a ship, watching that white dot

dance through the night. Some are drinking coffee and hot chocolate, even champagne and Chivas Regal, as a cold Easter wind slaps their faces for the audacity of their presence. They will not leave.

It is a baseball game; an early-season professional baseball game of no particular importance; an International League game between the Rochester Red Wings and the Pawtucket Red Sox. But why? Why are they playing now, at three thirty in the morning, on the holiest day of the Christian calendar? In frigid, unconscious Pawtucket?

To begin with, the game is tied, inextricably, maddeningly knotted to the night—in the 31st inning. The Rochester team has two runs and the Pawtucket team has two runs, and baseball rarely abides a tie ball game. You win or you lose.

Other reasons may wither in the light of day, when morning's logic arrives to temper night's emotions. But right now they include miscommunication; stubbornness; questionable judgment; what appears to be a clerical error made several months earlier, in distant Ohio; and, finally, this: Baseball players play baseball. They hit and catch and throw and chase after a white ball until the call and signal of the final out.

"That'll bring up Dan Logan. Struck out his last time up in the twenty-ninth inning. Singled in the twenty-seventh. Runner at first base. Two away. Here's the pitch to Logan. Misses outside, ball one. . . ."

Among the very few watching the game are several miserable men in the press box, a glorified term for a weathered trailer that appears to be suspended from the old stadium's rafters behind home plate. It has no insulation, no heat, no bathroom, and the wind howling in from the outfield is doing little to fill those inside with the hallelujah joy of the risen Lord. For the last eight hours, a sportswriter from the Pawtucket *Evening Times* has gazed from this vantage; he is underdressed and shivering. Beside him sits his competitor from the *Providence Journal*; he is unimpressed and annoyed. A talented writer who hopes to ascend soon to the big-league *Philadelphia Inquirer*, he has never liked the inferior level of baseball at uninviting McCoy Stadium. Everything is so . . . minor league. A never-ending Pawtucket Red Sox game might as well be sportswriting hell. The coffee is never hot, the editors never stop calling, you can never escape.

Also huddling in the press box are the public-address announcer, who has been calling out the same surnames for nearly eight hours now; a McCoy Stadium aide, who has been playing the same music between the incessant innings and pitching changes; and the official scorer, who has recorded every at bat—around 200 so far, and counting. On the other side of a cheap partition are Bob Drew and Pete Torrez, broadcasting the game for WPXN in Rochester, 1280 on your AM dial. Drew, believe it or not, is the general manager of the Rochester Red Wings. He has fallen so far from favor with his superiors that he is doing the radio play-by-play for this entire road trip: ten games in ten days. Torrez, beside him, is an injured Red Wings relief pitcher of modest talent, whether on the field or in the broadcast booth. He often begins his brief observations with, “I tell ya, Bob.”

But Drew has been the one doing the telling. For nearly eight hours now, he has described this game in kinetic bursts of baseball words—“Ground ball, Valdez at shortstop, got it, throw to first base, in time”—that have crackled and carried four hundred miles through the night air, across southern New England, over the Hudson River and into central New York State, to Rochester, a city of 240,000 that has proudly supported its hometown team since the late nineteenth century.

But at three thirty in the morning, Drew wonders: Is anyone listening?

He and Torrez are feeling a fatigue that streams of free coffee can no longer keep at bay, leading to mistakes, exhausted pauses, even brief eruptions of laughter at the absurdity of the mission. It is the 31st inning, with no end in sight.

“Here’s the pitch. Ground ball. Back to Hurst. Flips it over to first base, the side is retired, as Logan is out of there, one to three. . . .

“We started this game at eight o’clock last night,” Drew says, trailing off for what seems like hours in radio time. “Now approaching three forty-five in the morning on Easter Sunday morning. And happy Easter to all of you back there in Rochester. Hope you’re enjoying Red Wing baseball.

“Here in the wee morning, in the wee minutes—or hours—of the

morning on Easter Sunday. If we get a little mixed up you'll have to excuse us a little bit. Bob Drew, along with Pete Torrez."

Another long pause.

"Right, Pete?"

"Yes it has, Bob."

A while back, maybe an hour ago, maybe a month ago, this inning-by-inning standoff in Pawtucket quietly distinguished itself from every other professional baseball game ever played. It is now, officially, the longest in history.

Before tonight, the longest game on record had lasted 29 innings, when the Miami Marlins finally beat the St. Petersburg Cardinals, 4–3, on a balmy June night in 1966, in the low-level Florida State League. The longest major-league game mustered a mere 26 innings: In May 1920, the Brooklyn Robins (a.k.a. Dodgers), now gone from Brooklyn, and the Boston Braves, now gone from Boston, yielded to a misty New England night with the score eternally set in a damnable tie of 1–1. According to the *New York Times*, the home plate umpire "remembered that he had an appointment soon with a succulent beef-steak. He wondered if it wasn't getting dark. He held out one hand as a test and decided in the gloaming it resembled a Virginia ham. He knew it wasn't a Virginia ham and became convinced that it was too dark to play ball."

But no umpire has stepped up to suspend tonight's game. Of the thousands of games played every year, and of the hundreds of thousands played over the last century in ballparks gone and still standing, in Yankee Stadium in the Bronx and City Stadium in St. Joseph, Missouri; in Fenway Park in Boston and Haymarket Park in Lincoln, Nebraska; in Bisbee, Arizona; Paducah, Kentucky; Waterloo, Iowa; Wenatchee, Washington; everywhere and anywhere in North America—of all those many baseball games that came before, no game has lasted as long as this one. A game still unfolding in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, at the Triple-A level of baseball, the last stop before the major leagues. More than any other ever played, this game is testing the imagined charm of two baseball teams playing on and on, forever.

The score is 2–2. Is it 2–2? Yes, that’s right: 2–2. Strong and insistent winds blowing in from the outfield have created an invisible wall that even the hardest-hit fly balls cannot penetrate. Sometimes the wind borrows the baseball to juggle in the air for a while, like some magical Easter egg, before losing interest and allowing it to drop. The ballplayers, meanwhile, are feeling the weight of the night in their arms, their legs, even their heads. And so the innings have dribbled like spilled beer into Sunday, with each one some variation of the inning just completed, the 30th.

Rochester: groundout; strikeout; strikeout.

Pawtucket: groundout; groundout; single; fly out.

No television cameras are filming the game, which means that much of what is occurring, or not occurring, will be left to the mercy of memory, that most flawed of recording devices. The rest is preserved in the meticulous baseball cryptography of the official scorer hunched now in the press box, a young lawyer named Bill George. For every play, he marks down in a spiral-bound scorebook some number-letter combination that, when strung together, will allow the future to crack the official code of this baseball game without a hint of its humanity. A fly out to left field in the top of the 1st inning (F7); a strikeout in the bottom of the 13th (K); a groundout to shortstop in the top of the 26th (6–3).

But the official scorebook can only accommodate 12 innings—three beyond the normal nine. This game, though, is now in its *22nd* extra inning. Fear not: Bill George, solemn keeper of the book, is as serious about his charge as any Columban monk illustrating the Book of Kells. So far, he has used three different colors of ink—blue, red, and black—to note the passage of time as measured by innings. With every careful stroke of his pen, his score sheet gradually becomes a work of art: the Book of Pawtucket.

At three thirty, though, do these ballplayers even care that they have broken a record? A record that is less about achievement than it is about frustration? Most of them are too tired, too cold, and too hungry to contemplate the historic import of the night. They stamp their feet. They blow into their hands. They fold into themselves on

the narrow dugout benches and gather around fires that lick from a couple of fifty-five-gallon drums, fires fed by broken Louisville Slugger bats, many of them imprinted with the names of athletes freezing here tonight, the someday baseball famous and soon-to-be baseball forgotten.

The Rochester players hope to be summoned someday by the Baltimore Orioles, their parent club—a fitting phrase, given that every swing, catch, and throw by these sons of the minor leagues is meant to shout to front-office daddies: *Look at me, look at me*. And the Pawtucket players, oh, these Pawtucket players, their asses freezing in a shallow dugout along the third-base side, want so badly to be called up to the Boston Red Sox. Called up is another apt phrase, for Boston is forty-five miles to the north, forty-five miles that might as well be four thousand, so otherworldly is the major-league experience from that of the minor leagues. Word has come down that up in the big leagues, your locker overflows with cleats and gloves and other treats, all free. Imagine.

Well, then, the minor leaguer thinks. If freezing my ass off in Pawtucket will deliver me from Pawtucket, and Rochester, and Toledo, and Syracuse, then bring on a blizzard.

Take number 23, for example, the rock-hard first baseman for Pawtucket. According to that Book of Pawtucket, he has gotten one, two, three—four hits tonight, including two doubles. He is 4 for 12 so far, a respectable, even impressive, performance. An adequate fielder, he has some clout, having hit 27 home runs in 1979 and another 13 last year, all for Pawtucket. In fact, he's been playing for Pawtucket for several years now: a few games in '77 and '78, and all of '79 and '80.

His name is Dave Koza, and baseball has been his life's mission since the age of eleven, when some merchants in his Wyoming hometown of Torrington chipped in a total of \$175 to send him to a baseball camp in Oklahoma. You can't glimpse his constant worry by looking at him now, a broad-shouldered Marlboro Man in cleats, with a full mustache and a nose that looks like it's been broken a time or two, every part of him aware of being watched by his adoring wife of two months, the lovely Ann, who will stay in this frigid, godforsaken

ballpark as long as he does. No, you can't see by looking at him as he stands so at ease with bat in hand, but Dave Koza is trying to suppress his ever-present worries—worries that intensify with each passing game—that he will not make it to the major leagues. He senses that first phantom tug at the back of his uniform, pulling him off the field, away from the game.

As it is, the Boston Red Sox are crowded with first basemen: Carl Yastrzemski, the heart of the Red Sox and a lock for the Hall of Fame; Tony Perez, another veteran and a likely Hall of Famer; Joe Rudi, a former All Star and World Series hero; Dave Stapleton, Koza's former teammate, a good friend. The team's executives are not looking at their roster of twenty-five players and thinking to themselves: We need a *fifth* first baseman, just in case—a fifth first baseman who is a good but not great fielder and who hits for power but not for average.

Dave Koza knows this. All he can do, then, is take his extra swings in the batting cage, try to solve his problem with those vexing curveballs, field more grounders, and practice his footwork around first base; his career depends upon the mastery of these little things. Then, back in Wyoming, he will spend the off-season keeping fit when he's not working construction, squeezing a rubber ball in front of the television, strengthening his wrists, quietly determined to silence all those in Torrington who keep asking when he'll make it to the major leagues. Torrington doesn't understand Single-A, or Double-A, or Triple-A, or injuries, or fickle front offices, or standing in line behind aging stars who can still perform. It only understands the Yankees, the Red Sox, the major leagues.

For all the childhood charms of baseball, for all the grassy frolics and the sandlot puffs of dust and the relief that comes from swinging a bat instead of a pick or sledge, bitter reality intrudes upon the baseball fields of the Triple-A. Take that six-foot-six beanpole pitching now for Rochester, Jim Umbarger. A left-hander with a good mix of pitches, he reached the major leagues fairly quickly several years ago, but hurt his arm, got sick, fell out of the league, and has been trying to pitch his way back up ever since. He hopes that the Orioles just might need another

left-hander in their bullpen—less a hope than a dream, given that the Orioles have the strongest pitching staff in baseball.

Still, for almost 9 innings now, ever since the 23rd, Jim Umbarger has been nearly unhittable. He is twenty-eight years old, high on cups of coffee and dips of tobacco, his curveball so sharp you can nearly hear it snap. And when he stands on the mound, waiting for the next batter to settle in, a batter he will no doubt own, do you know what he wishes? He wishes for a baseball scout to be sitting somewhere in the swallowing emptiness of McCoy Stadium. A scout with nothing better to do than spend Easter Sunday's predawn hours at a minor-league ball game in Pawtucket. A scout jotting down two words to convey in the morning to his major-league bosses: Umbarger's back.

But there is no scout here tonight. And if there is no scout watching, is any of this really happening?

Here, in the International League, you have hungry former major leaguers like Jim Umbarger. You have stars of the lower minor leagues, the sluggers who dominated bandboxes, now facing battle-savvy pitchers eager to demonstrate how a big-league curveball, their good friend Uncle Charlie, can reduce a .300 batting average in Double-A to a .200 average in Triple-A. You have athletes who have always been the best in their county, their state, suddenly realizing that the teammate using the adjacent locker has something extra, something nearly imperceptible, that they lack.

You have hard-luck players, the hopelessly misunderstood. No one on the field tonight has surer hands, for example, than the Rochester shortstop, Bobby Bonner, whose jutting ears only enhance an aura that says nothing gets by him. Although not a strong hitter, he has the gift: that extra sense of baseball anticipation that cannot be taught.

A couple of years ago, Bonner turned his life over to Jesus Christ, snuffing out the fire of his hell-raising Texas ways and startling teammates who remembered a guy not unfamiliar with a postgame beer or joint. Before tonight's game, in addition to stretching and throwing, Bonner knelt in the bathroom and prayed: *Lord, just let me see you in the stands tonight; let me play for you.* Where was Jesus, though,