

AT THE OLD BALL GAME

by Joe Zarrow

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## CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

GUY

Male. Thirties. Sports broadcaster.

BUCK

Male. Sixties. Sports broadcaster.

*[Dim, eerie light. BUCK (60s) and GUY (30s), wearing broadcast headsets and staring forward with anticipation, are silent. Shift up to full, white light.]*

GUY

And we're back. Two outs, two men on in the top of the third inning here at Computron Stadium, and what a game so far! Your New York Hooligans and the visiting Los Angeles Lancers are tied up at three runs apiece. Hooligan Manager Moe Whitney has just subbed out starter Horny Foxworth for Dominican rookie reliever Julio Watsoni. Two outs, two men on. It's an unusual choice, Buck.

BUCK

I agree, Guy. It's a well-known fact that Foxworth gets off to a shaky start, maybe giving up a run or two, but the three he has given up tonight and the two men he's put on for the hot bat of Methuselah Corazon have apparently become a deal-breaker for Whitney.

GUY

You think it's a bad call, Buck?

BUCK

I do, Guy. You know, sometimes, after you've watched a game, you think back to a certain play or choice and you realize in hindsight that this play was the turning point of the game. And then, you may think a play will be instrumental, but it will in fact turn out to be merely—

GUY

*[Cutting him off.]*

Up to bat now for the Los Angeles Lancers is the patron slugger for the City of Angels, mister Methuselah Corazon. Corazon is batting an unbelievable .418 since the all-star break.

BUCK

Corazon brings to mind several other great Lancer clean-up men.

GUY

Let's see. There's Joey Tendril, Madman Mandibilsky, who else?

BUCK

Well, those are the ones that most readily come to mind, but don't forget Jerome Oswald, the late-eighties shortstop with unusual power potential. He actually played his first season here in New York. I was backing Oswald years before national news started covering him with any regularity. He's a fighter, that Oswald. No giving up. He would strive. He would seek. He would find. He did not yield.

GUY

First pitch from Watsoni. Corazon gets under it. Pop out to second. And that's the inning. We'll be right back.

*[Shift to eerie light. GUY is in the middle of a cell phone call.]*

GUY

You already put 'Niffer in bed? Aw, shucks. My beautiful baby girl. Everything else is okay on the home front? Swell. Oh, we're fine. Everything's plugging along at a predictable clip. Well, if you're so concerned, why don't you turn on a TV and check what inning we're in yourself? We're local. Yes. Fourth inning. I'll be home by eleven – first pitch was at seven-fifteen, so. You know how to estimate these things. Okay then. Love you, sweetie.

*[Shift back to bright, broadcast light.]*

GUY

And we're back in the top of the seventh inning. Another Hooligan pitching change. The New York Hooligans have received a heroic performance from inexperienced up-and-coming long reliever Julio Watsoni. And now, with a pitch count of just eighty, Hooligan manager Moe Whitney has taken Watsoni out for warhorse set-up man Joop de Kornik.

BUCK

Starter Horny Foxworth does not look happy about this.

GUY

It's a no-decision for Foxworth since he left when the game was tied up at three. They usually don't ask for de Kornik to pitch more than three outs, but in this two-out situation they'll probably keep him for another inn—

BUCK

This goes beyond mere stats-grubbing, Guy. Watsoni is Foxworth's protégé; there's an implicit trust there. They belong to the same Baptist-Krishna cult and attend services together every Sunday. Set-up man Joop de Kornik, who in his native Holland pursued a career as an atheist-existentialist minister before dropping the cloth for the horsehide, rubs Horny the wrong way on a spiritual level.

GUY

Methuselah Corazon, still hitless tonight, comes to the plate with two outs and men on the corners.

BUCK

Corazon is a key batter, Guy. He gives me this sense...

GUY

*[Pause. He humors him.]*

What sense is that, Buck?

BUCK

One gets the unavoidable sense, Guy, that this at-bat is the pivot point, the decider, the keystone at the peak of the double-vaulted arch that is the rise and fall of these two teams' fortunes over the course of tonight's nine-inning classic. A hit puts the Lancers ahead and sets up indomitable closer Wiener Doodlepie. An out ends the inning with the score tied and puts the onus of scoring on the anemic back end of the Lancer line-up in the eighth and ninth innings.

GUY

First pitch. Corazon grounds to short. Out. Score tied. Inning over.

*[Lights shift. GUY is on the phone.]*

GUY

You didn't check it on the television? It looks like we're going into extra innings. I just get that sense. Tied up, middle of the ninth. I can't come home, sweetie. I'm at work. I'll just be a little late. Yes, Buck is laying it on thick, per usual, but he can't make the game run longer.

*[He hears something on the phone line.]*

Oh, no. Is that 'Niffer? What woke her up? Well, go take care of it. We're coming back from commercial. Love you. Honey? Love y—

*[She has hung up. Lights shift back.]*

GUY

And we're back. Tied, three runs apiece, bottom of the ninth. Whitney got his five outs from de Kornik. We're at the meat of the Hooligan order, leading off with right-fielder Henry McGillicuddy. Wiener Doodlepie is the best lights-out closer in the league. His stuff is just filthy, but McGillicuddy has an unusually high two-thirty-eight average against him. He could end it with a dinger right here.

BUCK

McGillicuddy's a great batter, Guy, just great. I get a good sense about him. He's a fighter. You can see that he knows that any play he initiates could potentially be the turning point, the game-decider, the momentum-turner, the predestinator, the ender of all things. This is one of those plays.

GUY

As opposed to last time?

BUCK

I'm sorry, Guy?

GUY

Well, Buck, back in the sixth inning, you were saying that Corazon's two-out at-bat was the pivotal moment of the game. And I think you said it about some other at-bat back in the...third? I might be remembering incorrectly, but I'm just wondering. Are those prior at-bats still considered pivotal? Because how do you know? How do any of us know, at the time? It just seems like a bit of a crapshoot.

BUCK

Well, Guy, as a mediocre-but-photogenic recent baseball retiree and novice broadcaster, you might not be aware of this, but I've spent a few years watching baseball, and—

GUY

*[Cuts him off.]*

Ooh! First pitch, McGillicuddy hits a searing comebacker and pitcher Wiener Doodlepie takes it in the face. The trainers rush to the mound. We'll take a break for station identification, and then come back to you with the update.

BUCK

I smell extras.

*[Lights shift.]*

GUY

Wow. Her first words and first steps all in a single night. What are the odds? I guess it's a lucky thing that you were both up at one a.m. so you didn't miss anything. Sweetie? Sweetie, that's unfair. I'm a breadwinner. Of course we're in extra innings. Seven of them so far. I would be home by now if I weren't— That's unfair, sweetie. How can we be sure it's 'Niffer's first word, anyway? Were you really watching every single thing she-- Wait. Sweetie.

BUCK

Hang up your phone.

GUY

I'm sorry?

BUCK

We are in the broadcast booth. We're coming back.

*[Lights shift back.]*

GUY

And we're back. Bottom of the nineteenth. Still tied at three. Corazon still looking for his first hit. To give you an update, Buck, Wiener Doodlepie's x-rays came back negative.

Pretty lucky for having taken a line drive to the face. His face is bruised up, but he'll be back on his feet in no time.

BUCK

I don't know, Guy. I find myself putting myself inside Wiener Doodlepie's mind at this moment. The fear, the pain, the terror. I don't know if he'll be back on his feet in any time whatsoever.

GUY

He'll cash in his chips and retire from the game? First pitch, swing and a miss.

BUCK

Not only that. I'm talking about an entire paradigmatic shift, a change of heart. You might not know this, but Doodlepie's internet service provider records show that he's extremely active in the enviro-terrorist internet web community, posting nightly on reduce-reuse-recy-kill-dot-org. Perhaps this event, reminding Doodlepie of his own mortality, will finally tip him over from observer to activist.

GUY

*[Still putting on a good face for the cameras.]*

What the heck are you talking about, Buck? Second pitch, fouled to left. Oh and two.

BUCK

It's a sense I get. I see these things happen.

GUY

You aren't even looking at—third pitch, nasty curveball hitting the outside corner, struck Corazon out. Whitney's coming to the mound. He's calling for the lefty reliever to get the next batter out. We'll be right back after this commercial.

*[Lights shift. GUY is on the phone. He waits.]*

GUY

Sweetie? Sweetie, pick up. Maybe you can't hear the phone. Sweetie, you never told me what 'Niffer's first word was. "Mama," I'm guessing. Call me back. Or text me on your cell phone. Pick up! Just text me.

BUCK

When are you going to give up calling your wife on the commercial breaks?

GUY

I know it's maybe not professional protocol, but we've got a baby girl, she's at home late at night by herself, and---

BUCK

I'm not talking about professionalism, Guy; I'm talking about your marriage.

GUY

What? The commercials are ending.

*[Lights shift back.]*

BUCK

Your marriage is over, Guy.

GUY

And we're back. Twenty-eighth inning. We've already seen three games-worth of play. That's a lot of baseball, Buck. Seems we're getting a little punchy up here in the booth. Still tied at three.

BUCK

You don't care that it's tied. I don't think you really want to talk about baseball at all right now, do you, Guy? Hell, it's three in the morning. Barely anybody's watching. The stands are emptying out. Face facts, Guy. This is a long night for you, isn't it?

GUY

The fact is that a single run could break this stalemate at any point. The game could end at any point. Any point.

*[They stare each other down. Lights shift. Lights shift back.]*

GUY

And we're back.

*[Lights shift. Lights shift back.]*

And we're back.

*[Lights shift. Lights shift back.]*

And we're back.

*[Lights shift. Lights shift back.]*

And we're back.

*[Lights shift. Lights shift back.]*

And we're back. Inning number two-hundred...fifty...four? Yes, two-fifty-four. Tied at three. Anyway, an update on Lancer third base coach Mississippi Gibraltar: doctors confirm that he remains in critical condition after being hit on the head by an emergency crate of hot dogs air-lifted in by the Hebrew National Guard. We'll give you the updates as we receive them. Valentin up to bat.

BUCK

We're of course also waiting for an update from Guy's wife, who has not contacted him—



GUY  
*[overlapping]*

Is this really necessary?

BUCK  
*[continuing unbroken]*

— since the middle of inning nineteen. Numerous voice mails sent home requesting a simple text message of his baby daughter's first word have thus far been denied.

GUY

I'm pretty broken up about it, Buck.

BUCK

Let it go, brother.

*[Pause. BUCK sees that GUY is spacing out.]*

Play-by-play. Play-by-play.

GUY

Right! Pop out. Valentin pops out. You know, Buck, at a certain point, I'm going to admit that, despite being a lifelong Hooligan fan, I don't care anymore. I just want the game to be over. So that's something that unites us all, in fact. Hooligan fans, Lancer fans. I count three people in the stands. Everybody's gone home.

BUCK

You disgust me. Want to go home. Triple digit innings, that's why we're here! Each further moment here is a significant moment in baseball history. Every second spent in this stadium is now pivotal. It's pivots all the way down. Forget your wife. You think I'm just going on a gut feeling here, asshole? You think I just randomly throw out this and that prediction or comment based on which way my balls are hanging? Don't insult me. We sit atop a mountain of data, exhaustively documented for decades by many, many smart men. There is tradition here, and it's a tradition that loves outliers. Loves something new. And without us to talk about it, what is it? A bunch of grown men in stripey numbered costumes, running in circles. You think your life has milestones? Your kid Penelope's first word—

GUY

Her name is Jennifer.

BUCK

Whatever her name is. Names don't matter. You think her first word matters? No, it's just another nonsense gurgle until you label it otherwise. We put the names on things. Without us, life is just numbers and noise. Half of all marriages fail, Guy. That's nothing special. A baseball game that goes over two-hundred-fifty innings? That's one in a million, and I'll be damned if you're going to ruin it for me because you're whining about your wife. Grow up, Guy. This is supposed to be fun! Huh?

*[Puts arm around GUY and sings enthusiastically.]*

Take me out to the ball game. Take me out to the crowd. Buy me some peanuts and cracker jack. I don't care if—

GUY

AUUUGHHHH!

*[GUY lunges viciously at BUCK, beginning to strangle him. Quickly, shift to eerie light. GUY exits. A longer pause than usual. Lights shift back.]*

GUY

And we're back. Today is an important day. We've played a full nine-hundred ninety-nine thousand nine-hundred ninety-nine innings of baseball, and that means that we are now starting inning number one million. Wow! Seven digits. Congratulations. The score is still tied at three. We haven't had a hit in...years, now? I ran out of room on my scorecard long ago. Does anybody know where my pencil is?

Hello! Methuselah Corazon comes to the plate, slowly. His knees are giving out. His long grey beard trails from the dugout to the batter's box. To those of you watching from home, that is not a snow flurry. The old lead paint is flaking off of the Hooligan stadium walls and is being blown on-field by the refreshing breeze. And now Corazon arrives in the batters box looking the worse for wear. He's the sole player left from the original Lancer line-up, the rest having of course been replaced long ago by the offspring of the original line-up and the female groundskeepers under an unusual stay of roster regulations by the umpires, now long dead. Corazon still hitless.

*[Beat.]*

At some point, several hundred thousand innings ago, I remember I said that I didn't care who won, that I just wanted the game to be over so that I could go home to my wife and my baby. I would like to officially take this moment, as Corazon untangles the bat from his beard, to say that I regret having said that. I know I am employed by the Hooligans, and should be rooting for them rather than nobody, but at this point I can say for certain that I am rooting for the Lancers. Call me a blasphemer, but if Corazon finally got his first hit of the game here in the top of the millionth, and if it were a solo home run, and if it ended up deciding the game, wouldn't that just be perfect, and beautiful? Buck would love it. Corazon at the plate.

*[Pause. He watches.]*

Strike.

*[Pause. He watches.]*

Strike.

*[Pause. The loud cracking sound of bat hitting ball echoes through the stadium. GUY is excited by all this, but he's too worn-out to express his excitement except softly.]*

Corazon has made contact. He really hit it. He hit it hard. And. Home run. The ball arced in a perfect parabola obeying all the laws of physics to the letter as it cruised to the right field bleachers. Corazon is trotting around the bases, his long beard dragging in a silver

halo around the pitcher's mound. And he crosses the plate. Four-three, Lancers. Barring a Hooligan comeback in the bottom of the millionth, this could mean--

*[His phone beeps.]*

Ooh! Text message.

*[He takes it out of his pocket, opens it up, and reads the text message.]*

“Homer.”

*[Blackout.]*