

THE HOT STREAK

Like a dead fish dislodged from the lake-bottom mud, bobbing toward the watertop mirror in its slippery up-and-up-and-up zigzag, the same thought surfaces periodically in Artie's mind. Every once in a while it comes, on days when his skin is tight against his face, when his muscles feel the weight of his bones, when the pressure he's under takes corporeal form and threatens to smash him underfoot.

The image that swims into his mind, dipping, bobbing, and cavorting in the rising bubbles, is of himself, a mimeograph of Artie perhaps more grizzled and inveterate than it has any right to be. Inside-Artie can believe, on the best days, that Outside-Artie projects a picture of wind-worried confident heaviness, like an outcropping worn away over millennia into the shape of a lion, roaring his disclaimers across the desert. The product of a thousand blustering cuts. These times, though, the dense and weighty days, he pictures himself harsh-edged and somewhat lopsided.

Mostly, though, Inside-Artie sees Outside-Artie for what he is. A mix of scrounged ingredients that bakes right on down to average. Gray, tinging the edges of dark hair. Hint of gut. One set of glasses that try desperately to escape the bridge of his nose every time his gaze declines. The face of a character generated to fill the stadium bleachers in a video game. Still, on the days when it's rainy and dim, and the streaked windows of his apartment show more of the lit inside than the stormy out, Artie can't ever see himself in the reflection. He sees – and once believed himself to be – the embodiment of the great old ballplayer, some generic and haughty monolith whose face is specked with old-ballplayer tears. Outside-Artie is Big Ed Delahanty, Doc Gooden, Shoeless Joe. The droplets staining his cheek, of course, are saline salutes to days way-back-when, when pitches seemed to hang for eons in dead air, waiting to be smacked into oblivion. Pitches Artie's never seen.

Even on good days, Artie sometimes sees in himself this imaginary washed-up-sluggger.

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Delusions of that nature often lend themselves to complex explanations, Freudian scripts read aloud with certainty. The reason this one sticks around is simpler: Artie loves baseball. Once, he'd consumed all sports equally with an open, hungry mouth. He devoured Football, Basketball, Tennis, and whatever the hell else popped up on Fox or NBC when the channel changed, maybe WNEP if he was on the move. Never NASCAR. Eventually, though, the sports had withered away, shrinking smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller in scale until, now, the First-and-Goals he sees on TV at restaurants and bars are no more meaningful than vestigial organs. Baseball alone hangs on.

It's hard to define exactly why Artie loves America's Pastime so, because he doesn't much care that it *is* America's Pastime - in fact, mostly he watches alone. There's something enchanting about baseball on the radio, to be sure - a sense of slow method interspersed with meaningless heat. Something about AM/FM baseball suggests a wood-slat porch when he closes his eyes, surrounds him with pleasant dry heat and just the barest hint of a breeze.

And he doesn't just love it on the airwaves. He's religious regardless of medium, and sometimes he's even overtaken with the urge to see-in-person that particular shade of green that ballpark grass enjoys when it's in perfect company with the light, sandy dirt. Even Artie isn't quite sure why he has this fascination

(obsession)

with baseball. But 162 times a season (and more, if the good guys make the playoffs) he tunes in and listens to the crack of the Louisville slingers and the slap-thud of ball into Wilson glove and the crazy vibrant commentary nothing else can quite match.

This year, the season starts on a Monday. Sure, Artie watches what he can of Spring Training, but it really doesn't hold the same luster when your boys are playing down in nasty

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swampy Florida, even if it just looks beautiful on TV. The longball just looks strange poking its arcing dash past palm trees.

Artie goes to work that morning in his best jersey (one of two #27s) and a throwback hat, with the old logo that upper management never should've changed. From Mikaila, the guard on duty, he gets "reppin' today, Mr. Paget?" and receives a rivalry jab from Bill down the hall. Bill is certainly not "reppin' today" in his three-piece suit. Artie leaves work fifteen minutes early to pick up the ceremonial chips-and-dip from the corner store, twisting urgently through the squeezed Gondola shelves. He's snugly in his watching-spot when the pregame starts, half-an-hour out.

Chuck and Chet on the local pregame show prattle on for a while, here's-a-guying this and stat-citing that, and finally the game starts at its staggered time slot. First Pitch, 7:08.

By the third inning, Artie is nearly in tears.

"We pick up three new F/A sluggers," he mumbles to himself, "and not a ball put in play the first time through the lineup?" He smashes a closed fist into the wall beside his couch, saved from property damage only by the heavy-duty exposed brick. His hand is not similarly saved; he'll be favoring the other one for days. "Seven runs against," he moans, and lays down for a while, his eyes still fixed on the abysm unfolding onscreen. "Seven."

In the bottom of the fifth (13 runs against, 0 hits for, with a reliever in), Artie picks up and leaves. He can't sever himself from the game, not completely, and so he keeps headphones in, listening to the WNEP broadcast, where the situation only grows more and more dire.

Artie heads for the gym, his stomach still heavy with the chips he'd scarfed and the "cheese" dip that almost audibly congeals as he walks. He starts out at the punching bag, naturally, but the inning-by-inning failure still piping into his ear means that even the satisfying *thwap* of his

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hand into the nylon can't soothe his soul. The rowing machine, its rhythm and stress normally so calming, simply whirs and thrums in tune to the enemy bats as the score creeps up to 21-zilch.

It's a 24-run deficit by the time he mounts the elliptical (and only the top of the eighth), and by then Artie's a seething ball of frustration. The good guys have position players on the mound at this point, and Artie's fury is so potent it makes an appearance on his face. At least one fellow patron goes home to her wife sharing the story of "the dude whose eyes were almost popping out his head." He works into as clean a stride as he can manage on angry, trembling legs, and goes as fast as the four pounds of junk food in his stomach will permit.

When the game returns after ads, Artie gets the miracle he's been praying for ever since his heroes went down a run. It doesn't take much to get Artie dialing up God's number, and most times it seems like the big man has him on Caller ID Block. But there's a run, and another, and another, until the rally gets to 12 straight and the score is a helluva-lot closer with just one man down. They come back all the way by bottom-9, at true diamond miracle, and with the game tied, it goes to the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, blow for blow by each team. The commentators ramble about the game's record-breaking potential, and Artie rattles on atop the elliptical until the only ones left in the 24-hour fitness center are him and the security cameras.

It ends in the sixteenth, 34-33, and the righteous have inherited the ballgame. Artie stumbles off the elliptical and sits on the floor, pouring water down his reddened face. It soaks into the jersey he's left on, mingling with the perspiration and turning it two different shades of wet. He sighs a deep one, and waits for the strength to walk the three blocks home. The elliptical's user-friendly monitor blinks for 60 seconds before figuring out that he's gone, and displays his stats from over three hours on the machine.

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In the warm, sunny light of the next morning, Artie's mind has already come to its conclusions. Three years prior, when the fellas in the right uniforms had made it into October, he'd grown himself a big old playoff beard. He'd let the thing run wild ("You look like a caveman, Mr. Paget") and the best-daggum-ballteam in the world had come away with a trophy. This is irrefutable evidence in his mind, in the tangled processes of those flashing neurons, that his own influence is critical; Artie's habits, of course, knit right on into his team's success. Indivisible. It happened when it was just a beard, no real sacrifice on his part, so *imagine*, Artie's brain whispers now, in its little voice, in a hiss that never changes volume, *imagine what happens when you really put yourself into it*.

But he doesn't commit, not at first; it takes about a month for him to realize that the connection is absolute. They win when he works out - they lose otherwise. Binary.

So after that first month, Artie sets about making his own luck. He tries, up until the All-Star Break, to keep an even keel. He'll stuff his face after the game to refill his coffers and send back in the energy he'd sweated and panted out as the runs ticked up. But he gets the message soon enough, because every time he over-eats in replenishing, a loss is in store the next day, no matter how hard he runs. He decides to throw himself into it. Totally, fully, 100%.

It's only until October.

Artie comes by joy through his method. The team is near perfect down the stretch – a record performance, frankly – and when they aren't, Artie's always able to figure out just which of his indiscretions caused the loss. By mid-September, he isn't drinking, smoking, or eating sugar. He's cut out caffeine and non-baseball entertainment, and he's donated any slivers of his salary past the essentials, rent, and the cable bill. He weighs 128 lbs.

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By the end of the month, the gym has cut him off, and he's begun to slip at work ("Getting' awful thin, Mr. Paget"). No matter, he can run, and listen in on the station website. He learns the city well, and when the Series comes around he has his schedule all set. For Game 5 (he'd had a coffee at work the morning of Game 2), Artie's suited up in an XS team shirt he bought online and a pair of baggy basketball shorts.

He starts running through Royale Park, his wiry frame almost the only thing out on the streets of a city whose hometown boys are playing tonight. He beats his way down the gravel running trail as the President throws out the opening pitch, and he's rounding the lake, breath coming heavy, by the time the top of the ninth comes around, a lead fairly secure.

Artie Paget dies there, on the mixed gray-and-white gravel of the lakeside trail, sometime around the game's final pitch. The rest of the city cheers and revels, and the postgame show plays over the radio into Artie's dead ears for about three hours. He's not discovered until the next morning, when a sorority girl with half a hope of jogging off her hangover stumbles across him, screaming her surprise into the chilly October air. The coroner's never seen a thinner corpse, and he notes in his report that the decedent's thin, pale lips have drawn back from the teeth after death.

Artie doesn't die the image of a weathered stone lion, doesn't die the imaginary washed-up old slugger he thought himself to be. Artie dies looking like a stick-figure of himself drawn in flesh-colored crayon. Emaciated. Ghastly.

But Artie Paget dies with a smile on his face.