

The Expos Fan

I walk fast, the way you do when it seems like a good feeling might be just around the corner. Parc is slushy and dirty and cold but they're already starting the next round of construction. If you listen to Beano, he'll tell you his outfit runs the whole show, digging up the sidewalk every two years for insurance or obstruction or whatever. Lots of people believe him. I used to, if only because there's no normal reason they would keep redoing it when the thing looks exactly the same every time they finish.

My apartment is dark when I get inside. For a moment I'm confused and then I remember I pulled the blinds so I could masturbate before I left – not for privacy, but because I get a better atmosphere in the dark. Something happened, though, and I never got around to it. Then I remember that Louis called. By the time I got off the phone I had to go. And anyway I wasn't in the mood anymore. Talking to Louis is the kind of thing that can crush an erection, and your will to live right along with it.

I put on my Expos hat and eat a bunch of olive spread. Then I spend too much time looking for the papers Louis gave me last weekend. Guy is pretty much the dumbest person you'd ever meet in your life, but he's related about ten ways to the outfit. Nephew, grandson, son-in-law, spare prick, deadbeat dad, plumber, electrician, bag guy, fall guy – he's got every angle covered. During the season he writes out lists of ballgames, handicapping everything from wind speed to jock size. Straight from the horse's mouth, he tells you. Some of it is, but what he doesn't know he makes up.

I finally find the list under a pile of newspaper. Takes forever to find anything these days. I should clean the place, but it seems like a waste of time, with me moving and all. Thing is, I've been planning to move for five years.

I hit the street again, heading north on Parc, Montreal seeming halfway sexy and halfway dumpy, the way it does early evening. Like a strip club with broken windows. Stained glass windows, but broken all the same. There's always garbage in the gutter after the last thaw and it's the worst on Parc, the shittier of the three main drags running north-south.

Still, I love this city. Well, I love the Expos anyway. I'm a prairie boy and they were my team growing up, back before the Jays started winning and got out of that dump on the waterfront. Jays go up, Expos go down. Way down, until you couldn't give tickets away even when they were busting their butts in the playoff run of '03. People always say MLB was prejudiced against Montreal. That's true, but it wasn't the biggest issue. There was something else underneath it all, something fundamental. If I had to sum up this city in one sentence, I'd say: we couldn't keep our baseball team. I don't know what that proves, exactly, but it's *something*, believe me.

I cross the tracks onto Bellechasse, where Louis lives above a Chinese insurance company. When I walk in he's sitting in the dark staring at a lamp with his hand down his pants.

"Yeah, bro," he says, "I've been working on that list you were talking about."

"This one?" I say, taking out the list.

A kind of confused distaste crosses his face. I'd wager that's the look he used to give his teachers when they were handing over his report cards. He makes no move so I shake the papers and finally he frees his hand and takes them. Doesn't bother to look at them, though.

"Yeah," he says.

“I thought you just said you were working on it.”

“For sure.”

“How could you be working on it when I already have it?” I say.

“Yeah, bro, I didn’t want to disturb you, you know?”

Actually, I *don’t* know. I never known how his mind gets from A to B, how he manages to pull it off. It’s not just the outrageousness of his bullshit. It’s the way you can tell that on some level he believes what he’s saying.

“As I was just saying on the phone,” I say slowly and loudly, though I know there’s no damn point, “the reason I’m here is because I need to get in touch with Beano.”

“Oh, no worries bro. Your rent’s all paid. Just come on the first.”

“No, I need to settle. I’m moving.”

“Are you shitting?” he says, looking at me like that is in fact what I just told him I’m doing. Like we didn’t talk about this a couple hours ago.

“I’m moving,” I repeat. “Out of Montreal.”

“Where?”

For a second I come up blank. He didn’t ask me on the phone and it didn’t occur to me that he would now. I figured he didn’t care. Or maybe it’s just that *I* don’t care. When you get down to it, you’re either leaving somewhere or going somewhere. Never really both.

I’m leaving.

“New York,” I say finally.

“Jew York,” he says. “Why the hell you want to go there?”

“I’m getting married,” I say.

He gives me a look, trying to decide whether this is good news, bad news, or irrelevant news. Finally he lands on his go-to, irrelevant, and shrugs.

“So, if you could call Beano and set it up, I’ll be on my way.”

“Yeah, bro, thing with that is, Beano’s out of town. Somewhere. In New York. And anyway, we can’t settle till you square your marker.”

“I *am* squaring. I got the cash.”

“Oh we know you’re good for it, but you got to keep in mind the interest. Besides, we can’t take any cash right now. No place to put it, you know. Everything’s out on bets.”

We go on like this for a while and finally I resort to shaming him by pointing out all the stuff he’s screwed up on the list. Like I said, usually he gets away with it, but his bullshit always stinks worse the week before the season starts. Mostly because he’s too lazy to keep up on the late turnover. Opening day is next Monday and he’s still using the rosters from spring training. He’s got guys who’ve been traded playing for their old teams, guys who’ve been cut pencilled to play the full nine. One of the firemen he’s handicapping as a “key factor” in the Tigers’ opener has been sitting in jail for two weeks now.

“Yeah, bro, we got to give it time to make sure all the deals are kosher, you know,” he says, not batting an eye.

“Are you going to call?” I say, for about the thousandth time.

Finally he dials and makes like he’s talking to Beano. I know he’s not, but I’m sitting close enough that I can hear he’s at least talking to *somebody*. Once I listened to him talk to himself for five minutes with the off-hook signal beeping the whole time.

“Yeah, you can go over to the smoke shop,” he says when he hangs up. “Pretty much right now. I hate to kick you out,” he says, as though I’m here because I want to be, “but I got a girl coming over.”

“I didn’t know you were seeing somebody.”

“Yeah I am. Matter of fact I’m getting married,” he says.

“Wouldn’t doubt you,” I say.

I head over to St. Laurent and turn north. I pass under the arch into Little Italy. Sports bars, Ferrari shops, a park with a bandstand, restaurants where you get pizza with no cheese and the kind of sauce that gives you an ulcer. Like most of Montreal, it has the feel of something that started off big and then tanked when the money dried up.

Nobody in the outfit has enough imagination to set up an HQ somewhere else, but at least they don’t run the show out of a pasta joint. The smoke shop is actually a pretty nice spot, with lots of brass stuff and tobacco you can’t find in the States and couches where there’s usually about five guys sitting around shooting the shit. All the real action goes on in the back, though, where I’m not welcome unless Louis phones ahead.

Today the only person out front is a boy, can’t be more than twelve, drinking something out of a can. It’s only when I get close that I see it’s a beer.

I tell him my name and he smiles and nods at the door.

“My friend was over and I kicked him in the nuts,” he says, like it’s a piece of good news he’s been holding back all day.

My heart sinks when I get in the back and see that I have to deal with Roy. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a nice enough guy. Too nice for the outfit, even. I’m not sure where he gets his in, but I’ve heard he’s somebody’s reject son, maybe even Beano’s. Problem is, he’s got zero pull.

“Roy! How you doing?” I say.

Usually I know what kind of answer I’m in for. Like most guys who can’t get laid worth a damn, he loves talking about the women he’s hung up on. He has a rotation of about four or five, but his ace is a chick named Rhana who has some smuggling gig in the outfit. She used to smoke three packs a day but she cut it down to one cigarette an hour and even has an alarm on her digital to let her know when she’s good to go – mostly, I think, to remind everyone that she’s lighting up no matter what she happens to be doing.

But today things are different. Roy sticks to business right off the bat, feeding me some line about how they can’t settle my marker right now. I’ve heard it all before. But like I said, he’s an okay guy and at least he gets to the point, the real reason they don’t want to let me out.

“Beano’s got a job for you,” he says. “We got some little nut in the Plateau holding out on 2-K. Uses a runner for his bets, thinks it’ll protect him. Dropped the dimes on UNLV for March Madness. He figured they’s a safe bet because they play out of Vegas. Goddamn nutcase.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound too bright,” I say.

“This runner makes like the nut’s got five bookies on the go. A real pro, you know. But I’ve scoped out his place on Villeneuve. If the guy that lives in *that* dive has 10-K to throw around on March Madness I’ll eat my hat.”

“Well maybe – if he’s got a problem,” I say and Roy makes a face. It’s not cool to talk about stuff like that, but he has to admit I got a point.

“They’s all got problems,” Roy says and yeah, he’s got a point, too.

“So what’s the job?” I say. “I’m not going try to beat up some nut.”

“Who said anything about beating him up?” Roy says, making the same face. Funny, but when he does that I can see he’s looking better than usual. Roy’s into drugs, so most of the time he’s got a kind of used and abused look to him, like something you’d dig out the back of an industrial dryer. But now he has some colour and his eyes are alert.

“You just go over and do your thing,” he goes on, handing me a paper with an address on it. “Take it nice and slow. We trust you. You’re a pro.”

“Bullshit,” I say, because it is.

He shrugs.

“Louis give you the list?” he says.

“Yeah, he gave it to me,” I say. “Straight from the horse’s ass.”

Roy laughs. He hates Louis even more than I do.

“You getting down?” he asks.

“Hell yeah, I always do on opening day. I can’t fire out, though. I got to take it slow, getting ready to move and all. A couple hundred here, a couple hundred there.”

“For sure,” he says. I can tell he thinks that part about moving is crap. “You talked to PJ yet?”

“Not yet,” I say.

PJ is a bookie that lives out in Côte-des-Neiges, near the Blue Bonnets. He’ll tell you he owned half the horses and the whole casino, and when he bailed the track went bust. Naturally. Hard to believe a guy so full of crap isn’t part of the outfit.

“If you need a runner I’ll send Marcus.”

“That’s okay,” I say.

I'm getting ready to say goodbye, still trying to decide if I'm actually going to look up this UNLV nut, when I hear the unmistakable sound of a digital watch beeping down the hall. I raise my eyebrows at Roy but he just stands there and *smiles*. Something clicks home. Something bad.

Rhana comes in with a smoke hanging off her lip holding a beer bottle. She's got tiny little teeth and eyes as green as a garbage bag. She sees something in my face and shows me the ring on her finger.

"I guess Roy the boy toy told you the news," she says.

"Wow," I say.

"We should have a drink," she says. "Celebrate some."

"I thought we said no drinking before six," Roy says.

"No bottles, we said," Rhana says. "Cans are fine."

"What's that, then?" Roy says, nodding at her beer.

She shrugs and smiles at me.

"Bottles make him nervous," she says, tilting the bottle so the top is pointing at me.

"Have a drink."

"Well, I'd love to stay and reinvent the third wheel, but I got to go," I say. "I'm planning on moving out of Montreal," I add, just to say it.

"Sure, makes sense," she says and I feel stupidly grateful. "Sooner or later Montreal kicks guys like you out."

"Definitely," I say, heading for the door. I'm curious to know what she means, but not enough to make me want to stay. I need to get out of here.

"Tell Marcus I need to see him," she says.

“Ah yes, of course,” I say. “Marcus.”

I go in the front. The boy is pounding the can flat with his fist.

“Rhana wants to see you,” I tell him.

He steps back and examines the mangled can, then looks up at me and smiles.

“Right in the nuts,” he says.

I get out and walk down St. Laurent, not really thinking about where I’m going. I feel sick. Something bad happened in there. I found myself feeling jealous of Roy. Roy! Nice enough guy, but pretty much the biggest loser in the whole outfit, and that’s saying a lot. But he’s settling. He’s getting married. What the hell am I doing?

I remember when I first moved to Montreal. Big hopes, big plans. Well, why not? When you’ve spent twenty years bouncing around Saskatchewan and Manitoba, coming to Montreal is like hitting the big time. And everything was great at the start. I was like a bush league bum who gets called up to the show and starts wearing out the fences, pushing his team into the thick of the race. But then suddenly he starts bombing – dropping pop flies, not hitting for shit, riding the pine right back to the sticks. It’s not a baseball season, though. It’s my life. How did I fuck it all up?

But I know how. First I got a habit, then I got involved in the outfit. And somewhere along the way I scared off all the girls I liked. Well, whatever. It’s my own fault and there’s nothing I can do about it now and it’s all a load of shit anyway.

I’m surprised to find I’ve walked to Villeneuve. I check the address Roy gave me and turn left, heading downhill. It’s getting on to evening but the sun is finally coming out, shining on the rusty staircases and the dull red and brown bricks. I get a glimpse of the arm on Olympic Stadium. I think about what Rhana said to me. Sooner or later Montreal kicks guys like you out.

It's probably true. I don't have any ties here, no français, not even any franglais, no work experience, nothing except a shit apartment and a marker with the outfit and memories of a dead baseball team.

I check the address again and stop. The place is across the street. It *is* a dive, a 1960s tin box, not so much a building as a fancy dumpster, wedged between some old and new brownstones. I don't know if I could lean on the guy that lives there without feeling guilty. Of course, to look at me, you wouldn't think I could lean on *anyone*. I'm not big or mean or scary. But then, it's not like I go around kicking ass or breaking kneecaps or anything.

It's just like Roy said. You got to take it nice and slow. Go up, ring the bell, introduce yourself as someone from the outfit. But don't make on like it's a business call. Just feed him some line about how you've heard a lot about him and you figured since you were in the neighbourhood you'd look him up. He knows you're lying but he says nothing. You start talking a lot of shit about the weather, about his place, his clothes, the street, whatever else you can think of. All that small talk stuff. And the whole time you're grinning acting real friendly. Then you say goodbye and head on your way. A day or two later you run into him somewhere, maybe outside his place or at the grocery store or even at the bar. You give him the same friendly, chatty show. Only this time the talk is a little more personal. You ask him about his work, his friends, all that stuff you seem to know more about than you should. You take off but you run into him again soon enough. And again and again. Same show every time, but always a little more personal – a little more friendly and a little more threatening. You don't ever mention the two dimes he owes, but you can see it's looming larger in his mind every time you show up. Finally one day he breaks out and tries to shake it loose, telling you he'll have the cash for sure next month. And his hands shake and his voice goes up and down like a bad radio signal. He's

scared but because of the way you've worked up to it slowly he's not even thinking about the cops. And you listen to him and you look him in the eye and say: "You know, bro, I'm kind of hurt. I thought we were friends. But if you want to turn this into a business relationship, that's fine by me."

Yeah, that's how you play it.

The door opens and my man comes out. I know it's him. A skinny little weirdo wearing an Expos hat. Not one of those stylish black ones with the bill straight and the stickers still on, but a no-shit red white and blue cheese grater. And I watch him go down the stairs and walk up the street the way a guy with a habit walks up the street, a guy with a problem, a guy with an *addiction*, and I know I can't lean on him, not now, probably not ever. I'd like to say it's because we're brothers under the skin, but that's not it. We're brothers *on* the skin. I can see what the outfit sees when they look at me and for the first time I realize that Beano's never going to let me out of my lease, never going to settle my marker, cash or no cash. If I want to get out of Montreal I'm going to have to do a runner. End of story.

So I turn the other way and head down to the plaza in front of Mont Royal station, across the street from a big churchy-looking building, like a city hall for the Plateau. I pass a pretty girl and give her the eye and she looks at me the way girls in Montreal do, a quick glance and then down to her feet, as if to say, dream on.

I take the metro to Pie-IX. When I get outside the sun is going down and there's snow in the air. Olympic Stadium is in front of me. It's on a cement plateau, a wasteland of ramps and stairs and railings. You could fit a North Korean parade in this place, but it's dead empty. Not even the CFL bothers to play here anymore. It's my favourite spot in the city.

I walk down the ramps and up to the stadium. It's supposed to look like a big jellyfish. But it's also done up like a UFO. In fact, the guy who designed it had some half-assed idea that the more advanced we become, the more we try to design things to look like plants and animals. Well, shit, maybe, but who's to say aliens would even know what a jellyfish looks like? Not that it matters, anyway, because when you get close to the stadium all you can see is how grimy and heavy it looks. Just pure concrete. It ain't about to launch and it ain't about to move. This thing is here for the long haul. They couldn't even blow it up. I love it.

I stand there for awhile, thinking about a bunch of different stuff. Games I saw here and, before then, games I watched on French TV with the sound turned down. Games the Expos lost. Funny, but the best games I ever saw were ones they lost. You get the same rush off a loss that you do off a win, but you're more likely to go over a loss in your mind, imagine how it could've been different, see the way a game fits together, how every play contributes, like a jigsaw puzzle. And there's a kind of innocence to doing that. Of course, everything changed when they left. That's when I got into betting heavy. I kept the rush but the innocence was gone.

Well, who wants innocence anyway? Mostly you don't, no matter how it makes you feel. When you're young you're happy, but so much of growing up is just a big fight to lose all the things that made you that way. You fight to lose your past, your innocence, your virginity, everything everyone has ever known about you. You even fight to lose your happiness. And that's freedom – the freedom of being an adult. The freedom of losing a city, losing a girlfriend, losing love. And you tell yourself it's somehow a good thing and most of the time you can make yourself believe it. You can make yourself believe you never walk away from the table with nothing. It takes something like losing your baseball team to make you see that sometimes you do.