

SHELTER IN MOTION

ESSAYS FROM A BOHEMIAN LIFE

HEATHER JACKS

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Shelter in Motion: Essays from a Bohemian Life .
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DEDICATION

To my Sweet Kiwi Man, Chris—my partner, my love, and the guy who listened to every terrible first draft, celebrated every small victory, and only rolled your eyes a little when I said "I'm almost done" for the 47th time. You believed in this book when it was just sticky notes and bourbon-fueled rants, and you believed in me even when I wasn't sure I believed in myself. Thanks for the hugs and support, and for never once suggesting I get a "real job." This book exists because you love me enough to let me chase my dreams, and you kept buying me wine. Thank you, you beautiful soul.

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PART I

EARLY GROUND

FOUR WORDS



Steven Gray was a poor white boy living on Indian land. When he went missing at the age of 12, there were no words said about it: no investigation, no search, no rescue. Our milk came directly from the cow, so there were no cartons to splash his face on; his disappearance didn't even warrant a bulletin on the board at Armentrout's General Store & Mercantile; where all things of importance were posted; updates about water rights, calendar of livestock auctions, the going price for venison and open calls for shifts at Weyerhaeuser Saw Mill — no mention of Steven Gray.

But I knew Steven Gray wasn't lost or missing. He wasn't playing '*hide and seek*'; he hadn't run away. He was just gone, and becoming '*gone*' on Indian Land was not uncommon. One day, he was on the bus next to me; the next day, he was not.

I met Steven when I attended the white School, a small wooden building with an unassuming character, serving grades 1 through 8. Weyerhaeuser had donated the wood, and the school was erected over the summer. The teachers were tasked with imparting education to their 28 students,

who came from varied backgrounds: white, Black, Mexican, and the colors in between.

Attending white school was not my idea, but one morning, I found myself bundled in furry mittens, a stocking hat, a puffy coat, and directed towards my grandmother's stock truck, idling nearby. When I got in, we sat in chilled silence and traversed snow drifts, which would lead us to Armentrout's General Store, where the yellow and black school bus picked me up at 6:00 a.m. Two hours later, I was at school.

The first morning, we were told to sit on the red cement floor, which was hard and cold, with bare patches spread throughout, where the paint peeled away.

The circle was made up of unwanted children. Some were the children of Vietnam veterans, whose parents struggled to find homes or jobs in the nation they had fought for, and some were the children of those who had opposed that very war.

There were kids whose parents had been too closely influenced by Timothy Leary's suggestions and now struggled to function in mainstream society. There were others whose parents were fleeing from something or hiding from someone. Lost, unwanted, and unclaimed, we all ended

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up on Indian Land, on that floor, in that circle. It was in that circle that I first saw Steven Gray.

He was dirty and unkempt, and his ears were clogged with yellowish wax. His clothes were soiled and worn; fingernails embedded with dirt and oil from the farmland that he and his family toiled over. He would never have friends at the white School; no one would ever sit next to him on the bus, he would always be picked last for dodgeball, eat lunch alone, and be teased and called names by everyone. I wish I could tell you that I was better and treated him differently, but that would be an after-school special, and it wouldn't be the truth.

I was eight years old, and there was a hierarchy at the white school. I was one rung above Steven because the few clothes I had came from a store, while his did not. Mine were new, his were threadbare, ill-fitting hand-me-downs from who knew where. It was a small step, but it was an opportunity for me to belong in a school that I didn't want, and that didn't want me either; but, belonging is a big desire.

In the school cafeteria, the real divisions were made, and there were three distinct groups. First were the kids with bright, shiny lunch boxes, emblazoned with '*The Hardy Boys*' or '*Evel Knievel*' on their fronts and backs, and they had matching Thermoses. Their boxes would have

sandwiches made from store-bought Wonder Bread and cakes wrapped in colorful cellophane wrappers, with fancy names like Twinkie, Ho Ho, or Ding Dong. No generic letters would litter these boxes.

Next were the kids who got school lunches served on colorful, cafeteria trays. The trays were rectangular in size with little compartments for each item: pizza, green beans, applesauce, and a carton of milk. These were the government-subsidized kids whose parents made some money, but not enough to be a Lunch Box kid.

And then, there were the ones with brown paper bags that had crinkled tops and stained bottoms. They couldn't afford government lunches and had to bring their own. They had no fancy wrappings, and their milk came in a reused bottle. After lunch, they would carefully fold the bags so they could be used again the next day. Steven and I were Brown Paper Bag Kids. It was a divide we never overcame.

One day, I was at the brown paper bag table when Steven walked in. He stood at the doorway, scanning the room, assessing where to take his chance and try to sit. Backs turned, eyes cast away, people huddled together, blocking any room at their table. At last, he looked in my direction, and I didn't look away. He was caught off guard and stood

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frozen. And then, I made an imperceptible scoot to one side, silently inviting him over.

He scurried towards the open seat and sat, crouching into his jacket as if trying to disappear. I could hear snickers and giggles, see elbows nudging each other, and feel the blush in my cheeks as the red of embarrassment raced up my neck. We ate in silence, neatly folding our brown paper bags when we were finished, and left in that same silence.

Day after day, this routine continued, and soon Steven Gray and I became companions. We ate lunch together, trading fried bologna sandwiches and oddly shaped vegetables. When I was Captain of the Dodge Ball Team, he wouldn't be my first pick, but I did pick him, and I never picked him last. We did our book reports, built a solar system for science class, and dissected a pig's eye together.

At recess, we would take turns spinning each other on the merry-go-round and pushing each other on chain-link swings. And on the way home, we sat next to each other on the bus, where we talked about things only a white girl and a poor white boy who lived on Indian Land would understand. The days became weeks, which became months, and soon turned into years.

And then one day, we were getting off the bus to begin our dash to the porch of Armentrout's General Store &

Mercantile; a dash meant to help us avoid or at least shorten the daily taunts, jabs, thrown rocks, and slurs of being white on Indian land.

But on this day, Steven did not run, as we always had, as we had done for four years and as we always would do for as long as we were on the reservation. On this day, he stopped, turned, and faced the tightly knit circle of our tormentors; all bigger, stronger, and better than us. Then he shouted four words that changed our lives forever: “Leave my friend alone.”

Silence settled like dust, the word friend echoing off the mountains in the distance. Steven and the group faced each other; time stood still. And then a slight smile spread across the leader’s face. “Sure...if you say so.....Chief.” They left, and Steven joined me on the porch. He took my hand in his, and we stood side by side, never looking at each other, as we waited in silence. Soon, my grandmother arrived in her stock truck, and I climbed in, never looking back, and we drove away.

The next day, Steven Gray was not at Armentrout’s. He did not get on the bus, and I never saw him again. I spent three more years on the reservation, and I thought about Steven almost every one of those days.

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I thought about his smile; he gave it freely and easily, and it didn't depreciate over time. I thought about how he taught me not to judge a book by its cover, because it's what's inside that matters. I thought about the word friend; what it means, what it doesn't. I thought about how knowing the right thing and doing the right thing are sometimes very different things, and each has its price.

But mostly, I thought about why he stopped. Why didn't he run? Did he forget — even for a moment — that friends were the one thing we didn't have as Brown Paper Bag Kids on Indian land?

The internet became easily accessible in the 1990s. On random afternoons or late in the evenings, I find myself sitting at the blinking screen and plugging the name Steven Gray into the search bar, spelling it every way I can think of. I wonder if he went back home that night to a family with a packed pickup truck, and they left the reservation. Started a new life somewhere else. Or perhaps he just never went back to the white school, but instead went to the mill to work. Maybe he moved away to live with a relative in another state. Or he may have run away and escaped the reservation altogether. I like to think these things and imagine that he built a new life, a different life with a different name and a different story.

But that would be the after-school special I dreamed about for years, and it wouldn't be the truth. The truth is that he never left the Rez at all.

COLD STORAGE: A DENNY'S LOVE STORY



I blame W. Axl Rose—Guns & Roses—Welcome to the Jungle.

It was the only song being played on any radio, anywhere, anytime, all the time.

It was 1987.

“Do you know where you are, baby?”

Heavy breathing.

“Oh God, that feels good.”

His name was Ben. He was a line cook at Denny's Restaurant, the most opulent dining establishment around. The restaurant was located in a small Oregon town named after a tractor or some other piece of heavy farm equipment.

The Denny's of the '80s was when employees still wore brown polyester skirts and short-sleeved shirts with the word Denny's marching up and down rainbow fabric like a parade of ants.

It was my first real-paying job at \$2.50 an hour. I had started as a dishwasher, and two short years later, due to my unrelenting ability to scrape hardened eggs off plates and

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bleach drains, I was elevated to the status of waitress. We were still waitresses in the eighties who had not yet become servers.

I don't know if it was the tall paper hat perched on top of his head or the way his mustache laced across his upper lip like a lopsided caterpillar, but Ben was to be my first, the man who would shake the proverbial cherry loose from the tree and make me a woman.

I didn't become a woman in the traditional way, whatever that might be: dark parking lot, the backseat of a Buick, full moon overhead, Barry White crooning in the background, or trying to bust a cherry in the afternoon before mom and dad came home from the supermarket.

I became a woman inside a walk-in freezer on the graveyard shift at a Denny's Restaurant, the voice of Axl Rose filling my ears.

I was 18. Ben was 20-something.

Walking down the private alleyway of the cook's area, past the line, French fries dropping into vats of sizzling lard, chicken fried steaks being tossed on the grill, grease-covered ghetto blaster piercing the air with the 80's anthem, Welcome to the Jungle.

Like an anointed priestess, I followed to the Forbidden City, a place reserved only for The Tall Hat Clan, aka The Cooks walk-in refrigerator.

The chill hit my skin, turning it to goose flesh instantly.

“Are you sure about this?”

The truth is, I hadn’t been sure about this myself until a few days previously. I had spent my teenage years in terror of sex, and in this case, I really can blame my mother. Some kids have parents who sit down and give them the fabled *‘birds and bees’* chat. I wasn’t one of those kids.

I was ten years old when I inadvertently discovered sex. It was in a horse trailer with my very worldly friend, Helen. Helen had come from California to the country, and so she knew about many things, including sex.

She described it and then suggested that my own mother had committed such an act, which explained why I was here in the first place. I did not receive the information well, so I popped her in the nose.

She wailed. My mother arrived and surveyed the chaos. Her calm green eyes landed squarely on my own. Her only comment was, “How can you not know about sex? Haven’t you seen the cows?”

That image kept me away from boys and sex for years to come.

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But Ben was different. In the wake of my misguidance, he had committed himself to educating me. He had sent flowers, love notes, love songs, pages from Playboy, and anatomical drawings illustrating the difference between cow sex and human sex.

Even if I wasn't entirely convinced, the drawings made it seem possible, the songs made it seem plausible, and the Playboy bunnies made it seem pleasurable. I was curious.

"Don't worry baby....it's alright...."

"But, what if we get caught? We'd get fired. My mother would kill me."

"Don't worry baby, Ralph's watchin' the front door."

Ralph was Ben's brother and the lead cook, although his hat wasn't any taller.

"I'm leaving for college in three months and can't afford to lose this job now."

"Baby, shhh, don't worry. No one's here. You're not gonna lose this job. And I gotta make love to you before you go...because you know I love you, baby, don't you?"

Breath came in short gasps, fingers fumbling over my zipper.

My pink cotton briefs announced to the world that it was Sunday. Funny, I thought. I don't usually work on Sundays, but the proof was there on my Days of the Week Underpants;

it had to be Sunday, which meant that I needed to clean the salt and pepper shakers.

My mother bought me thematically decorated underwear for every occasion, including these most practical Days of the Week underpants.

There are two Underpants teams.

The A-Team is brought into play for very special occasions. These are your sexy woman panties: black lace, see-through eyelets, and red hearts with rhinestones. Thongs and String Bikinis are the Quarterbacks and Wide Receivers of The A-Team; in other words, your Joe Montana/Jerry Rice combination that only happens during the last few seconds of a Super Bowl.

The B-Team is your everyday wear, tastefully feminine yet simpler and more practical.

Finally, the '*Special Teams*' only called into play once a month. They are your granny panties.

Days of The Week underpants play for Team B, and I was confused as I thought about Sunday. Had they gotten out of order? Was I missing a day? Was it really Sunday?

Feeling Ben against me, and Sunday was temporarily forgotten.

I glanced down.

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OH MY GOD!! My eyes snapped shut, trying to erase the image. Quick, say something—anything.

“What if I get pregnant?”

“Baby, don’t worryyou can’t get pregnant here...it’s too cold for the sperm. Trust me.”

Years later, that same logic would be repeated to me in a hot tub.

I closed my eyes and imagined that it was Axl’s breath beating on my neck, wiry, lean body covered in tattoos and long hair spilling down his shoulders. It was Axl, minus the Denny’s hat, minus the brown polyester pants, minus the caterpillar mustache and marching ant parade.

My eyes wandered over Ben’s shoulder, where towers of gray pallets neatly lined the wall, each filled with dozens of perfect, porcelain white eggs and boxes of Chicken Fried Steaks.

“Oh baby, you feel so good.”

Then it was over. Ben rested his head on my shoulder; he looked relaxed, even content. My arms wrapped around his neck. I thought about the Chicken Fried Steaks and what part of the chicken they would come from. I thought of customers who were wondering where that damn waitress was to refill their coffee; I thought of the bus tubs that would be overflowing with dirty dishes, and I thought of my Days

of the Week underpants and hoped that Sunday was not ruined forever.

“I gotta get back,” smoothing out his checkerboard pants, readjusting his hat.

“That was fun. We’ll have to do it again before you leave.”

He opened the door, slid out, and the door closed silently behind him. I was left in a sea of darkness and chicken fried steaks.

It wasn’t as bad as the cows, but I was pretty sure I didn’t look like one of Heffner’s women.

Did he like it?

Was it good?

Maybe I had done it wrong.

As I walked back to the front of the restaurant, I wondered if I looked different.

Did I change?

Was I a woman now?

I still have a soft spot for long-haired rocker boys, especially Axl Rose. But at that precise moment, my life changed. I didn’t know what it was then as I began to clear plates of half-eaten pancakes off of Formica tables, wipe down plastic-coated menus, and refill ketchup bottles.

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Now, as I near my sixth decade of life, I look back at that younger version of myself, and although I don't recognize her—I remember parts of her, and I love her.

I have finally figured out a few things my '*walk-in fridge deflowering*' taught me.

It taught me that:

Sex doesn't have to mean '*nothing*', but it doesn't have to mean '*everything*,'

Joy must be in the journey. You will suffer if you are attached to a result and only do something because you want a thing (*love, acceptance, popularity, boyfriend, money, insert adjective here*). The result we seek comes when we show up unattached.

Keep your eyes on your vision, and don't waver. Walk willingly into the unknown. Courage is not the absence of fear but feeling the fear and doing it anyway. Magic happens on the **OTHER** side of fear—not on this side.

Set yourself up for success. You wouldn't ask yourself to walk into an exam without having studied the material...so why do life like that? Have a plan. The plan might go off track (*probably it will*), but start with one.

The next morning, I packed all my young, girly things into my baby blue Pinto and put it into gear. He growled into

life, and I began to drive down Route 140, leaving that small Oregon tractor town in my rearview.

I didn't know where I would go, but I knew I wouldn't be going back—not because I was embarrassed or ashamed, but because I was changed. I had grown up a little bit on that graveyard shift in that walk-in fridge at Denny's Restaurant.

And—I have never eaten a Grand Slam since.

ONE LAST TIME TO BOSTON



When I was six years old, I first heard the magic of a hickory stick smacking a round cork and rubber, leather-covered ball. Over fifty years later, this sound still brings tears to my eyes.

My mother would ship me off to visit her parents, my grandparents, each summer. It was a highlight of the year for me to leave Indian land (*the reservation*) and go to a town with a stop sign, a building with two floors, paved streets, and lights that blinked on and off in store windows.

My favorite spot was a wooden stump on the road, by my grandparents' mailbox, where a tree once grew. I would sit for hours and watch people live their lives; the milkman driving by, bottles rattling in racks, women pushing baby carriages, and the smell of fresh bread in the air.

I sat, watched, and waited. And every day at 5:30 p.m., I would see him ambling up the road, swinging his silver aluminum lunch box. It was dented with spots of rust, two clasps, and what looked like a flying V in the center of the domed lid. He whistled an old Johnny Cash tune, and as his 6'3" frame got closer and closer, my excitement grew in equal measures.

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At last, he arrived, ruffled my hair with his hand, and said, “Well, well, well, Little Birdie, where are we going tonight?” And I shouted out with glee, New York, Cincinnati, or Baltimore. But the best nights were the ones where I would say: “Well, Grandpa, tonight we are going to Boston.”

“Hot diggity; what are we waiting for?” And then he took my hand into his, and we skipped back to the house, talking about Carl Yastrzemski and Carlton Fisk, as if they were close personal fishing buddies. My grandpa loved going to Boston.

When we got to the house, he put his lunchbox on the table, opened the refrigerator, grabbed a beer for himself and a root beer for me. I followed him onto the porch, where the screen door smacked closed behind us and we sat in wicker chairs that were more chair than wicker; he reached for the transistor radio, pulling its rabbit ear antenna to their longest points, fingers dancing over the silver dial, and voila, the voice of Ned Martin would come in like crystal; ‘*Let’s play ball.*’ And just like that, we were in Boston. For three hours every night, we debated all things baseball: what pitch would be thrown, who would master the mound, who would get picked off, and who would shoot for the fences.

We leaned in, listening intently, and when things went our way — in other words, the Red Sox way — he grabbed me by the hands and swung me around like a tether ball, until I was laughing so hard that root beer squirted out of my nose. Soon, my grandmother would holler at us from inside the house, telling us to ‘*simmer down out there.*’ We exchanged guilty grins like scolded children.

My grandparents had a TV, but Grandpa insisted we listen to the games. ‘Listening is how you feel the game — and baseball, like life, is meant to be felt,’ he explained. I never questioned his wisdom on this point.

Those summer nights with baseball and Grandpa taught me about life in a way that school never could. I learned patience, like the pitcher waiting for the catcher’s call. With the shake of his head, I learned it was OK to say Yes or No. I learned the importance of teamwork; no one can play nine positions at a time; you gotta trust others.

I learned about weighing odds and taking risks; do I stay safe on first base, or risk it all and try to steal second? I learned about perseverance, even if everything seems against you, you still have to play. I learned about attitude; you might be down in the count, but you had to believe winning was possible. I learned to take life one step at a time, one pitch, one batter, one inning, one game; to face what is in

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front of you at that moment and make steady, measured progress. I learned that there are things you can't control: a bad call, or what others say or think about you.

So, focus on what you can control: your attitude and effort, and this shift will empower you. I learned about gratitude when Lou Gehrig proclaimed he was *'the luckiest man on earth,'* as he retired from the game with ALS, a disease that became synonymous with his name. I learned to believe in magic; because there is no other way to explain Hank Aaron's record-breaking Home Run on that April day — a moment twenty years in the making; or Pete Rose's 44 game hitting streak, or the feats of Reggie Jackson that earned him the moniker Mr. October, or the Oriole Magic of '79 or the Miracle Mets of Tug McGraw's Ya Gotta Believe.

Six summers later, I grew taller; he grew older, but each summer night still found me perched on a stump, waiting by the mailbox for the tall, lanky man with the dented lunch box, whistling an old Johnny Cash tune, to come ambling up the street. Mosquitoes came and feasted on my arms, but I waited. The sun slipped into the sky, and I waited. Darkness came, and street lights flickered on, but still I waited.

And then my grandmother came out to the mailbox. She took a deep breath, her eyes locked onto mine, and said

words that would forever change my life. “It’s time to come in. The game’s about to start.” She didn’t know how to tell me that the man who had never set foot in a hospital, not even to be born, had not gotten up from a routine hip surgery that afternoon. She did not know how to tell me that he would not be coming home that night—or any other night. She didn’t know how to tell me we would not go to Boston again. But she didn’t have to. Where words failed, baseball spoke; baseball, like life, is unpredictable; sometimes you can do everything right and still lose; sometimes you do everything wrong and still win.

I took her hand and she led me up the driveway. I walked into the kitchen, glanced at the space where no metal lunchbox stood, and never would again. I opened the refrigerator, took out a root beer, and went to the screened-in back porch, where I sat on a wicker chair, reached over to the transistor radio, fiddled with the dials, until I heard, Let’s play Ball, and I went to Boston alone.

That night’s game was not one that you would read about in history books. It would not be memorialized in a future movie, and the players would not become Hall of Famers. But that night, I listened to the best baseball game ever played in the history of baseball, because that night, baseball taught me about loss.

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Two weeks and eight Red Sox games later, my grandmother and I were cleaning out my grandfather's things, depositing them into piles: Keep and Donate. My grandmother was an Episcopalian of the most devout nature, and if she ever cried over my grandfather's abrupt departure, I never saw it, until this day. She sat on the edge of their bed, her face damp with tears. I stood in the doorway, not knowing what to do or say. So, I did what baseball taught me to do.

I waited. I listened and I felt.

She was holding a manila envelope in her hand, staring at it but not seeing it. Then she noticed me. Standing up, she said, "This is for you," and returned to emptying drawers.

I turned it over. The small print in the corner read: "Well, well, well, Little Birdie, where are we going tonight?"

I walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, got a root beer, and went to the porch, letting the screen door smack closed behind me. I sat in a wicker chair and opened the envelope. Papers fluttered to my lap. At first, I didn't understand until I did.

There was a B&W photo of 11 young men, in freshly starched white uniforms, waiting for the flash of a bulb to memorialize their hope-filled faces and toothless grins. They

held hickory bats and leather gloves. In the back row, third from the left, was a smile I knew well, and I could almost hear the old Johnny Cash tune he was whistling. He was always Grandpa to me, but he was Hard Ball Harry to the rest of the world.

The picture was from the mid-1930s, a time of FDR, fireside chats, Dust Bowls, New Deals, Wall Street crashes, the Great Depression, and baseball. America needed heroes and an escape from the grim realities of daily life, and a 50-cent baseball ticket delivered it in spades. Baseball mirrored the struggles and tenacity of the American spirit; it suffered during the Depression but endured and uplifted the nation's morale.

According to the newspaper, Hard Ball Harry first gained notoriety for his wicked fastball, which was so vicious that the best the opposing batters could do was *'weakly wave their bat at a ball already in the catcher's glove'*. His team, which became known as *'the unbeatable Modocs'*, was bound for victory in the semi-pro league of Southern Oregon. It was the final game, and Harry was called in as a relief pitcher; bottom of the 9th, bases loaded, and no outs.

The crowd rose, cheering filled the afternoon sky, and Hard Ball Harry closed the game in four pitches. Reporters

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scribbled on notepads, oversized cameras clicked away, and the Heater from Van Meter, who had been in attendance that day, was described as having “a hand over his brow as if in deep thought, finally said, *‘That was some pitching.’*”

The next headline read: Hardball Harry Heads East for the Minor Leagues. It described how this hardscrabble boy of big dreams and no education might have a chance to play ball at America’s most beloved ballpark: Fenway.

I imagine him packing a suitcase, preparing for a life of baseball in Boston. And I imagine him contemplating the 11” leather glove in his hand, how such a simple thing was delivering him to a life dreams are made of. I imagine him sitting at his table, whistling an old Johnny Cash tune and going through his mail. I imagine him coming across the letter from Uncle Sam. Sometimes, you can do everything right and still lose; sometimes, you do everything wrong and still win.

Grandpa never made it to Boston.

Forty years later, Grandpa was gone, and those summer nights were over. I bought a bus and named him Bubba. I pulled out an old B&W photograph, where 11 young men, in freshly starched white uniforms, hope-filled faces, toothless grins, hickory bats and leather gloves, waited for the flash of a bulb. I posted the picture on Bubba’s wall of

love, and then I began to drive East, until I saw that 39-foot 2-inch high Green Monster. I parked, went in, and bought a ticket. The seller told me many better tickets were available; *'you won't see much from way out there,'* they warned.

That's all right. I don't have to see it; I have to hear it.

That night, I took my grandpa to Boston one last time.