

What The Babe Said

a play in one-act

by Martin Halpern

SETTING:

(The Manager's office of the visiting team clubhouse in a major league baseball stadium. Stage center, a metal desk with swivel chair. On the desk, a cigar box, ashtray, several newspapers, and the manager's cap. In the front of the desk, a few office-type chairs. Stage right, a sink and medicine chest with mirror. Up left of the sink, a table on which stand a pile of towels, a glove and ball, and a portable TV set facing the desk chair. Left of the table, a wall telephone. Up center, a glass door with the words VISITING MANAGER stenciled on the outside. Left of the door, an open locker in which the manager's street clothes are hanging. Down left, a small refrigerator.)

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

SAL SALERNO, the manager, in his mid 50's

BUCK BENSON, the veteran centerfielder, in his mid 30's

TIME:

July, early 1980's, 11:30 PM

AT RISE: SAL sits slumped in his desk chair facing the TV set, from which we hear, softly, part of a late evening weather report predicting continued hot and humid weather. SAL, in full road uniform except for his cap, is not really listening to the weather report but just staring, tired and preoccupied, in the direction of the screen. Emblazoned across the front of his shirt is the team name: EAGLES.

The glass door opens and BUCK enters, in casual but well-tailored street clothes. He stops in surprise at seeing SAL still in uniform.

BUCK

Hey, you gonna *sleep* in that monkey suit tonight?

SAL

(Without turning)

Don't you knock?

BUCK

Not ordinarily.

SAL

Well, knock tonight.

BUCK

You mean it?

SAL

I mean it.

BUCK

You *said* you wanted to see me after everybody left.

SAL

I did. That don't mean don't knock.

(BUCK looks at him quizzically, then with a shrug, turns and exits, closing the door behind him. SAL, with some effort, gets to his feet, crosses to the table,

switches off the TV set, and sits back against the table facing the door, arms folded challengingly. Three separate staccato knocks. SAL ignores them. Pause. Three louder knocks.)

SAL

(Gruffly)

Come in!

(BUCK enters, stands at military attention, and salutes)

BUCK

Centerfielder Buck Benson reporting, Sir.

SAL

Very funny. Shut the door.

BUCK

Why? Everybody's gone.

SAL

Shut it anyway!

(BUCK, after another quizzical look at SAL, turns, shuts the door somewhat ceremoniously, and turns back)

BUCK

Hey, you're really in a mood.

SAL

(Gestures at the refrigerator)

Getcha self a beer if ya want.

BUCK

Thanks.

(BUCK crosses to the refrigerator)

SAL

Get me one, too.

BUCK

(Takes two beer bottles out of the refrigerator and twists off the caps)

You--uh...feeling all right?

SAL

What'd'ya mean am I feelin' all right? How am I suppose to be feeling, huh? Havin' just lost our eighth straight?

BUCK

I mean--

SAL

Twelfth in the last thirteen?

BUCK

I mean--

SAL

Seventeenth in the last nineteen?

BUCK

(Crossing to him with the beers; with a gesture toward SAL's mid-section)

I mean...you know.

SAL

Never mind about "you know!"

(Snatching one of the bottles)

I'm okay! I'm fine! Y'hear?!

BUCK

O-kay. Glad to hear it, Sal.

(Raises his bottle as in a toast. SAL ignores this and takes a small swig from his own bottle)

So then what were you doing just sitting there in that monkey suit?

SAL

It ain't a monkey suit!

(In his sententious voice)

It is the uniform of a baseball team of which I have had the honor to manage for going on fifteen years now, and of which I have had many occasions, in the *past*, to be extremely proud of.

BUCK

Okay. Sorry about that.

SAL

(Gesturing at the other chairs)

There was some reporters in after the game. Then I wanted to catch the 11 PM news.

BUCK

(Not wholly convinced)

Oh.

(Pause)

So? What's new?

SAL

"What's new?" he says! "What's new?"

BUCK

Things any better in the Middle East?

SAL

No. Worse.

BUCK

Mm. And in Ireland?

SAL

Lots worse.

BUCK

Mmm. Jesus.

SAL

'Nother earthquake in one o' them South American places. Maybe five thousand dead.

BUCK

(Sprawling in one of the chairs, with a genuine sigh)

Jee-sus.

SAL

Yeah.

(Pause)

There was also a late sports report.

BUCK

Always is on the 11 PM news.

SAL

Yeah.

(Pause, as BUCK takes his first sip from his beer bottle)

They showed a replay of that three-run pop-fly. Thought I'd vomit.

BUCK

Way it's been going lately, Sal. Can't last forever.

SAL

No? Who says?

BUCK

Aw, come on, you're a worrier from way back. Hell, we're still in first, aren't we?

SAL

By half a game.

BUCK

Is that all?

SAL

"Is that all?" You don't even know?! The Lions took two this afternoon! Didn't ya see that on the scoreboard?

BUCK

Guess not. Sorry about that.

(Takes a long swig from the beer bottle)

SAL

(Glares at him a moment)

Well, it is one half of one game as of this moment! A measly stinkin' one half of one game! On the fourth of July, we was *eleven* games ahead! Or didn't ya know that either?

BUCK

Well, makes it more interesting this way.

SAL

(About to take a sip of his beer, stops, sputtering)

Don't say that! Y'hear? Not even kiddin'! Not even behind them closed doors! That's all they need!

BUCK

Who?

SAL

You should've heard some of them questions them reporters was askin'. Little shitass innuendoes all over the place.

BUCK

Innuendoes about what?

SAL

How the hell would *you* know, where *your* head is lately? About us maybe easin' up a little, maybe even droppin' a few here 'n' there, to get things closer, "more interesting"--get the crowds back into the ballparks!

BUCK

Come on, Sal, you're putting me on. Who would--?

SAL

Well, attendance was fallin' off, wasn't it? Now it's pickin' up, ain't it, all over the league! You saw that mob out there tonight!

BUCK

Sure. But come on, who exactly's been saying it's because--?

SAL

Well not in so many words! I didn't say they been sayin' it in so many words!

(Picks up from the desk a section of one of the newspapers and thrusts it out toward BUCK)

Don't suppose you seen *this*?

BUCK

I don't read the sports pages much any more--'specially out here on the road.

SAL

No, guess not, huh? Can't be bothered. Well read it!
(Shoves the paper into BUCK's hand, pointing to a column on the front page)

BUCK

(Reading, with mock expressiveness)

"How the winds of baseball fortune do shift. A mere three weeks ago the Mighty Eagles had it sewn up again, coasting merrily along on a high breeze to pennant-land." O-ooof! See why I don't read the sports pages out here? I can just see us...

(With gestures mocking the mixed metaphor)

Sewing something up while coasting along on that high breeze--

SAL

Never mind how the bastard *writes*! Read on!

BUCK

(Reading)

"The yawn of the fans could be heard from coast to coast."

(A silent "take" expressing his critical
disdain)

"But then, somehow or other, the wind shifted..."

SAL

There! Get that "somehow or other"?

BUCK

(Rapidly scans the rest of the column)

Sal, there isn't one word of accusation in this whole silly
column.

(Flips the paper back on the desk)

SAL

'Course not! Ya think the bastard wants to get sued? But
between the lines! Between the lines!

(Snatches the paper, pointing
emphatically)

"Somehow or other the wind...somehow or other the wind--"

BUCK

(Downs the rest of his beer and heads for
the refrigerator)

Another beer?

SAL

No!

BUCK

(Lays the empty bottle on top of the
refrigerator and opens the refrigerator
door)

Mind if I have another? Thirsty work out there tonight.

(SAL stands glaring at BUCK as HE pulls
another bottle out and twists off the
cap)

SAL

Think I'm imaginin' all this, huh? Think maybe the strain's
gettin' to me, huh? Well, lemme tell you something. If I was
one of them reporters, I'd be surmisin' the exact same thing,
the way this team's been playin' of late.

BUCK

You *know* we haven't been playing that badly, Sal.

SAL

No?!

BUCK

Hell, ol' Chris pitched himself a pretty fair game tonight.
(Takes a long swig from the bottle)

SAL

He pitched a *great* game! Against Christopher, I say nothin'!
Only true competitor on that whole field tonight, in *this*
uniform. Pitched his big beautiful black heart out tonight.

BUCK

Of course I--uh...could've wished he didn't throw *that* many
dusters at Kozlowski.

SAL

He threw them dusters by orders of yours truly! In case you
didn't know!

BUCK

(Feigned surprise)

Oh. Did he? Well, in that case--

SAL

Kozlowski happens--in case you didn't know it--to be the
hottest hitter in the league right now. Shit, how many times
you had *your* head thrown at these fourteen years? Coupla
weeks ago, ya even managed to get hit with one!

BUCK

Glancing blow, Sal. Just didn't duck fast enough. And it
wasn't on purpose.

SAL

How do *you* know?

BUCK

It was obvious: that pitch just got away from Jensen, that's
all.

SAL

O-ooh, Big Mister Nice! So-ooo understandin'! Pitch just
happened to get away!

BUCK

That's right, Sal, it did. But jeez, a coupla those pitches Chris threw tonight--I thought Kozlowski was gonna go right out there after him with that big bat of his--or into the dugout after *you* if the ump hadn't restrained him.

SAL

Name of the game, Sonny. Name of the game. Ya know what the Babe said.

BUCK

(Feigned ignorance)

Who?

SAL

The Babe! Ruth!

BUCK

Oh. That Babe.

SAL

(Glares at him a moment)

He said: "Nice guys finish last." That's what he said.

BUCK

Oh.

(Pause, sips his beer)

I--uh...think that was Durocher, Sal.

SAL

Whatsat?

BUCK

I think it was Leo Durocher coined that immortal--

SAL

It was the Babe!

BUCK

I *think* it was Durocher.

SAL

And *I* tell *you* it was Ruth!

BUCK

Okay, guess you're more up on these things than me. My mistake. It was the Babe.

SAL

(Pause)

I dunno. Come to think of it, maybe it was Durocher. Just the kinda thing that son of a bitch would say.

BUCK

(With a smile, appreciating the humanity behind this inconsistency)

You're right, Sal. It was Leo the Lip.

SAL

(Turning on him)

Then why'd ya give in? If ya *knew*, why didn't ya stand up to me like a man?! Jesus, there was a time, once upon a time, when you was *the ballsiest*, most I-don-'take-no-shit-from-nobody-est man on this club. Jesus Christ! Where is Buck Benson's balls lately?

BUCK

Far as I know, they're just where they--

SAL

I ain't so sure of that!

BUCK

Wanna see?

SAL

Jesus, even the way you're swingin' that bat lately. You'd think even the goddamn bat's gone limp, can't get it up no more--

BUCK

(Easing himself into a chair)

Yeah, well I *have* been in a *bit* of a slump. Still, I thought I hit the ball pretty good *tonight*. Three solid line drives--

SAL

Yeah, every one of 'em right inta somebody's glove. You're *suppose* to hit 'em where they *ain't*--case you didn't know.

BUCK

True. Can't argue with you there, Sal. Still, you gotta admit it's sure been happening a lot to the whole team lately. My oh my, did you ever see that many line drives go right at somebody? And the *other* guys: did you ever see that many little dribblers and bloopers go for base hits? I mean, it's really kind of uncanny. Don't ya think so, Sal?

SAL

Maybe Sombody-Up-There's got it in for us all of a sudden, huh? Been winnin' too much. So they sent down a little curse on our heads.

BUCK

Could be.

SAL

Maybe Somebody-Up-There got worried about the attendance fallin' off!

BUCK

(Small laugh)

Never *can* tell.

SAL

Horseshit! With a little hustle in that infield, three-quarters of them dribblers wouldn't have *been* base hits! And it wasn't nobody "up there" in the eighth innin' tonight let that little easy-ass pop fly drop in!

BUCK

(Downs the rest of the bottle and lays it aside)

Yeah. Well, sorry about that. I did think Martinez was gonna--

SAL

It was your ball, not Martinez's!

BUCK

Well, I--

SAL

(Bangs his bottle down on the desk)

Jesus, that three-two pitch ol' Chris threw to Kozlowski! Jesus, what a gem! Bases loaded on three putrid scratch singles, all three runners goin' with two out, and he reaches back--oh, I mean reaches *back*, way back, into some...some depth in himself--

BUCK

Hey, you're starting to sound like one of those sportswriters.

SAL

And out comes the high hard one--chest high and explodin' when it gets to the plate! Nobody but Kozlowski would'a even got a piece of it! But being Kozlowski, he gets a piece...

CONTINUED

SAL (CONT'D)

(Modulating into the sarcastic)

Just a little tiny piece, underneath--just enough to send it waftin' out there like a big balloon toward that famous veteran centerfielder, darlin' of all the fans back home, two times voted Most Valuable Player and three times runner-up for that coveted honor--

BUCK

O-oh-kay, Sal, you can cool it on that.

SAL

Christ Almighty, seein' that on the replay I damn near spilled my guts all over this office!

BUCK

Sal, I was playing very deep on Kozlowski--like you ordered. The ball was hit pretty shallow.

SAL

It was your ball!

BUCK

Well, Martinez thought it was his. You saw the way the kid came barreling out there from shortstop. I did call for it at first:

(Reenacting, with a touch of parody)

"Mine," I yelled, "mine." But the kid couldn't hear me, what with that racket the crowd was making!

SAL

So ya just plain stopped!

BUCK

Martinez did have the bead on it--

SAL

Yeah, 'til all of a sudden it comes to him, in a flash! Or maybe finally gets translated up there: on this ballclub--centerfielder's got the right of way, the...the "*diritto di passaggio*" on all--

BUCK

I think that's Italian, Sal, not Spanish.

SAL

I know goddamn well it's Italian! You tellin' me what's Italian? I don't happen to know the Spanish.

BUCK

(Small laugh)

Okay. Sorry about--

SAL

All of a sudden, it comes to him in a flash: on this ballclub, by longstandin' orders of the manager himself, the centerfielder always--always!--has the right of way on flyballs hit in his general geographical domain! "*Car-ramba!* I nearly forget!" So right then and there, *he* stops comin'! And the two of you stand there gawkin' with admiration at that pretty white baseball floatin' down into the soft green grass between ya's--while all the while, three base runners, all goin' like bats outa hell with two out, comes chasin' each other's tails across home plate! And there's Kozlowski standin' on second base laughin' his big fat unbelievin' Pollack ass off! And that crowd--fifty thousand of 'em--screamin' *its* ass off in sheer joy at the sight of the mighty Eagles, which they been hatin' with all their might for years, playin' like a last-place team in the Chinese bush leagues!

(Sudden shift to the maudlin)

An' that poor son of a bitch Christopher, havin' pitched his big beautiful black heart out there for seven and two-thirds innin's, sees not just his shutout but the whole fuckin' ballgame go flushin' down the drain.

(During this performance, BUCK has taken a cigar from the box on the desk and lit it; slowly puffing out some smoke)

BUCK

Oh, Chris took it in good spirit, Sal. He's been around long enough to know these things happen.

SAL

And *you* been around long enough to know the centerfielder always--*always*--!

BUCK

Well what'd ya want me to do, run right into Martinez?

SAL

Right into him! Right over him if ya had to! Teach him a lesson about who's got the *diritto di passaggio*, or however the hell ya say that in Spanish, on this ballclub!

BUCK

You don't mean that, Sal.

SAL

Goddamn A-right I mean it! I mean it so much I am hereby, as of this moment--who said ya could have one of them cigars?

BUCK

Oh. Sorry.

(Starts to put the cigar out in the ashtray)

SAL

I am hereby, as of this moment, finin' you five hundred bucks for failin' to hustle properly and settin' a bad example for this ballclub.

BUCK

(Somewhat taken aback by this; stops snuffing out the cigar for a moment, but then finishes)

Okay, Sal, you're the manager. If you feel I didn't hustle on that fly ball--

SAL

It ain't just that fly ball! It's the whole general overall way you been lettin' down lately!

BUCK

Oh.

(Pause)

Well, I'm still hitting over 300. At least I think I am.

SAL

Think you are?! There, that's just what I'm...! Don't even care enough to know *what* the hell you're hittin'! Well, as of this moment, you happen to be hittin' exactly 298. But I'm not talkin' about no shitass battin' averages! I'm talkin' about something ya can't measure by no computer statistics! Disint'rest--that's what I'm talkin' about! Your whole goddamn general overall disint'rested attitude!

BUCK

(Pause, takes his empty beer bottle to the refrigerator)

Uninterested, Sal.

SAL

Whatsat?

BUCK

The word's *uninterested*. That year I spent in college--before you came and lured me away--I had an English teacher once chewed me out for misusing that word on a paper.

SAL

Whatsat?

BUCK

Seems "*disinterested*" is a very, like, *positive* word. Opposite of *self-interested*, see? Means, like, completely fair, impartial--like a judge, see? Or a good umpire. Or, like, when you do something for its own sake--pure--like a saint.

SAL

(Stares at him a moment in open-mouthed disbelief)

Make that seven hundred! No, make it an even thousand! Christ Almighty, here I am chewin' you out for...for...and what do I get back? A lecture on how to use the fuckin' English language!

(In a broad mock-effeminate manner)

"Like, when you do something for its own sake--pure--like a saint." "My year in college before you came along and lured me away--"

BUCK

I was just kidding about *that*, Sal.

SAL

Make that fifteen hundred! Ya hear me? Fifteen hundred bucks--payable by game time tomorrow!

(Pauses, waiting for a reaction)

Well, whataya got to say to me?

BUCK

(Pause)

That's the first time you've fined me in fourteen years.

SAL

Ya tellin' *me*? Think I don't know that? Well, I gotta deep down feelin' it may be the first but it ain't gonna be the last. So whataya say to me *now*? Nothin'?

(Supplies his own response in the same mock-effeminate manner as above)

"Oh well, what the hell, it's only money. I make plenty of that around here."

CONTINUED

SAL (CONT'D)

(Banging his fist on the desk)

Christ Almighty, how am I supposed to reach you? Even at *your* salary, fifteen hundred bucks ain't nothin' to spit on! Wonder what Ellen and them three kids of yours would say if *they* was here!

BUCK

They'd say I'd better get my ass out of here before that figure goes any higher.

SAL

(Downcast)

That's all. That's all ya got to say to me.

BUCK

Well, it *is* getting kinda late--

SAL

Yeah, in a big hurry to get outa here, ain't ya?

BUCK

And I think maybe *you* oughta get out of that monk...that uniform, and into some real clothes and back to the hotel and get yourself some sleep.

SAL

Yeah, you sure been rushin' away fast after these night games.

BUCK

You haven't been too well, Sal. And we do have a double-header tomorrow at one o'clock.

SAL

Practically the first one showered and changed and on your sweet way, this whole road trip--except when your manager *orders* ya to pay your respects.

BUCK

Well, you *know* I need a lot of sleep, or my reflexes go off. Not as young as I used to be.

SAL

Yeah sure--sleep, huh? Maybe it's somethin' else ya need a lot of these days, huh? Maybe you got a broad or two on the line in some of these towns--?

BUCK

Sal, come on now--

SAL

It's okay, I don' mind, I understand about these things.

(Sits in the desk chair; in a mollifying tone)

Maybe there's some problems with Ellen, huh? Maybe you're havin' love-life problems and they're weighin' on your concentration lately. Well come on, tell me about 'em. Sit down, have a cigar, open up to me. Don' think just because I'm an ol' bachelor I don't understand about such matters.

BUCK

Sorry, Sal, it's nothing like that.

SAL

Then what the hell is it?

(Takes a cigar out of the box and holds it out to BUCK)

Here, have one. Sit down.

(BUCK half reluctantly takes the cigar.

SAL holds out a matchbook, but BUCK has turned away with the unlit cigar in his hand)

I mean, was I wrong finin' you like that? I sure as hell don't *like* finin' you. After all, you are the oldest member of this club, next to *me*--I mean, in terms of the number of years you been here. Think I let anybody else on this club talk to me like you do? I mean, Jesus, it was me got ya to this club in the first place, brought ya along, taught ya most of what ya know. Straight to the parent club--not even a how'd ya do stopover in the minor leagues. Dunno how many times I kept the front office from tradin' you when they was offered damn good money and some damn fine ballplayers in return--

BUCK

Sal, listen, it *is* getting late. Can we talk about this some other--?

SAL

I mean, Jesus Christ, you been practically like a goddamn son to me!

(Pauses, waiting for a response. Getting none, HE rises, the angry manner returning)

Well for Christ sakes, *am* I right or *am* I wrong? Huh? *Am* I just imaginin' all this about you? Huh?!

BUCK

(Pause; laying down the cigar with a sigh
and turning reluctantly to SAL)

No. No, I guess you're not imagining *all* of it, Sal.

SAL

Aha!

BUCK

I guess I'm...just maybe getting a little too old for all
this--

SAL

Too old? What're you talkin' about? You got five, maybe six
more good years ahead of you! What're ya givin' me "old"?

BUCK

I don't mean physically, Sal.

SAL

Then what *do* ya mean? Huh?

BUCK

I dunno--how can I say it? This...this winning-losing, losing-
winning--it just...doesn't turn me on the way it once did. All
this...fuss.

SAL

(Tight-lipped)

"All this fuss. All this fuss." After all, it's just a game,
huh?

BUCK

You said it, Sal. Not me.

SAL

So that's it, huh? It's down to that, huh? "Just a game."

(Pause. Then turning on him)

What ain't? Suppose you tell me what the fuck in this world,
when ya come down to it, ain't "just a game," huh?

BUCK

Well, there are *some* things--you know--like what's going on
over there in the Middle East, or in Ireland--

SAL

Oh, that *ain't* a game, huh? What the hell's *all* this politics
stuff, when ya come down to it, but some kinda dirty game?
Somebody tryin' to win, and somebody else tryin' to win, and--

BUCK

Sure. But there's something, like, at *stake* there. Something--you know--serious, important...real.

SAL

Yeah sure! People gettin' killed, and crippled, and all that--'cause they're bein' used by the guys who're tryin' to win, or maybe they're just in the way of the *other* guys who're tryin' to win--

BUCK

Well, that's a way of looking at it. But...well, what can I say? It's gotten so I look up into the stands--like that crowd out there tonight, fifty thousand of 'em--going into ecstasies because the home team happened to win a ballgame, and I--

SAL

No, not just because they won a ballgame! 'Cause they won that ballgame from *us*! Us! The Eagles! Winners from way back! On who every poor slob of a loser in this world wants to take out his hate on!

BUCK

Except if the slob happens to be an Eagles *fan*.

SAL

That's right! Greatest, most devoted fans in the world, them fans back home!

BUCK

I guess they probably are. But why? Just because we happen to be the home team--happen to be located in the "general geographical domain" where *they* happen to be located.

SAL

(Sententiously)

It is a deep fact of human nature that human beings require something for which to root for!

BUCK

Okay. But it's not like there's any real reason for them to root for *us*. It's got nothing to do with anything we, like, *are, inside--*

SAL

That's right: "pure," "for its own sake," ya might even call it "*disint'rested*."

BUCK

(Smiling)

Score one for you, Sal.

SAL

A pure, disint' rested love! Where else do ya find that in this stinkin' world, huh? When I see us blow a game like tonight, who do ya think I think about, huh? The gamblers rootin' for us 'cause that's where their money's ridin'? The club owners and the players and coaches worryin' about their share of the pennant money and World Series money and all that? Shit on that shit! I think of that little kid sittin' by the TV back home, cryin' his eyes out in pure, disint' rested misery to see the mighty Eagles blowin' their eighth straight, twelfth in their last thirteen, seventeenth in their last nineteen, on three scratch singles and a routine pop fly that you--

BUCK

Okay, Sal, cool it on that kid by the TV! That's hitting a little low!

SAL

Not just him! I ain't just talkin' about him! Grown-up adult men and women, too. Think they don't feel it way down deep, too?

(Rushes to the desk and pulls open a drawer)

Here, I wanna show you somethin'!

(Takes a telegram out of the drawer)

Came today. Addressed to me, personally. But I'm gonna read it to ya before ya go runnin' off to your broad or your bed or your "real world" or wherever the hell you're goin'. You listenin'?

BUCK

I'm listening.

SAL

Good!

(Reads expressively)

"Wish you to know I am praying thrice daily for you in this time of trouble. May my prayers be answered and Eagles be first forever and ever. God bless you."

(Pauses dramatically)

Signed: Sister Mary Angelina, Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Heart.

BUCK

Well...gee...that's kinda...touching.

SAL

Touching? Shit, I gotta good mind to frame this thing and hang it out there in the clubhouse and require every man on this club to read it before he goes out on that field tomorrow!

BUCK

(Has wandered over to the table and is fingering the ball and glove in some embarrassment)

That's an idea, Sal...

SAL

Jesus, when I think of that poor, deprived young virgin girl--well, maybe she ain't so young, maybe she ain't even no virgin; what's the diff'rence? When I think of her stuck behind that big thick convent wall--maybe just one little black-and-white TV set in the whole place--maybe not even that, just a little old-fashioned radio. When I think of her gettin' down on her knees thrice daily to pray for me--and you--and everybody on this ballclub in this time of trouble...

(Breaks off, not far from tears)

BUCK

(Has picked up the glove and ball and is flipping the ball lightly back and forth into the glove)

Gee...I thought nuns were supposed to pray for the saving of our souls, not for us to be "first, forever and ever."

SAL

(Turning on him)

Maybe there ain't such a diff'rence! Think of all them human beings back home who you make happy winnin' and let down when ya lose! Maybe bringin' happiness to so many people is the way people like us save our souls. And maybe lettin' 'em down is the way we...!

BUCK

Well, that *is* a way of looking at it.

(Pause)

Still...ya know what the Babe said.

SAL

Whatsat?

BUCK

What the Babe said. He said: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

SAL

Whatsat? What the hell are you...? Since when did the Babe talk like that? "Shall"?!

BUCK

Not *that* Babe, Sal. The other one.

SAL

What other...?

BUCK

The Babe in the Manger.

SAL

The...?!

BUCK

You know. Jesus.

SAL

Jesus. You mean Jesus *Christ*?

BUCK

None other. "The first shall be last," he said, "and the last shall be first." I remember that line from my old church-going days, before you...oh, sorry, Sal.

SAL

(Tight-lipped; trying to contain his anger)

So what's it supposed to mean? Huh?

BUCK

(Still with the ball and glove in his hands; explicating the line with "up" and "down" gestures)

You know: the...first...shall be...last, and the last...shall be first. See? I guess it sorta means something like: God loves a loser.

SAL

(Glares at him in silence a moment)

"God loves a loser."

BUCK

That's what the man said.

SAL

(Glares at him again for a moment)

Are you tellin' *me* about God?!

(Pause)

Make that an even two thousand! And put that glove and ball down! They ain't yours!

BUCK

Oh. Sorry.

(Lays the glove and ball back down on the table, and crosses to SAL's locker)

Now whataya say, Sal, can we get moving?

(Takes some of SAL's street clothes out of the locker and starts toward SAL with them)

It's getting very late!

SAL

(Dropping into a chair)

God, huh? God and his earthquakes in South America. Maybe that's part of some kind of game too! Maybe His puttin' us here in the first place was part of some kind of game he's playin' against somebody else up there or--

(Pointing downward)

Down there, or...some place or other. Did ya ever think of *that*?

BUCK

Well, I guess not exactly. But listen, will you look at the time?

(Pointing at his wristwatch)

I'm supposed to be out there for batting practice by ten-thirty. So are you. Now come on, whataya say you...?

(Tries to put SAL's street clothes in his hands, but SAL turns away)

SAL

What'd ya mean by that before? That "gettin' too old for all this," huh? What'd ya mean by that?

BUCK

(Reluctantly)

I dunno...I...have been kinda thinking, lately, about, maybe, retiring at the end of this season.

SAL

Ya don't mean that.

BUCK

Ellen and I have talked it over. These road trips--they are getting kinda hard to take week after week. And what with the kids growing up, it's getting *really* tough on Ellen, all alone back there so much of the--

SAL

That ain't the main reason though, is it?

BUCK

Well, *you* know, I *would* kinda like to--before I *really* get too old--maybe get into something a little...a little more...*you* know...

SAL

Serious. Important. Real.

(BUCK shrugs uncomfortably. Pause. An outcry)

Like what?!

BUCK

I dunno exactly. I've thought about maybe going back to school again--pre-Law, pre-Med, maybe some kind of Social Work training. I dunno--it's still kind of vague. Now Sal, will you please--?

(Hands him a shirt; SAL flings it away)

SAL

So go on, get the hell outa here! Who needs ya! Go on, go shack up with that broad you got waitin'! Who cares?

(BUCK picks up the shirt and tries to hand it to him again)

SAL

"Poor Ellen, all alone back there with three grown-up kids. And me out on the road all alone week after..."

(Springs up, shouting)

Guilt! That's what it is! You're full of guilt! A great big fuckin' guilt complex! 'Cause every other night on the road ya go sneakin' off to one of them broads of yours! That's how come all this "God loves a loser" and "first-last, last-first" shit! Punishin' yourself, that's what! Punishin' yourself inside and out on that field every game, for cheatin' night after night on that good, sweet, beautiful, loyal woman you got waitin' for you back home!

BUCK

You know that isn't true, Sal. But jeez, if I *don't* get a decent night's sleep tonight, you're gonna have to bench me in that doubleheader tomorrow--

SAL

Bench you?! Goddamn A-right you're benched! No, I don' even want you on that bench, pollutin' the whole team with that complex you got! Maybe you *been* pollutin' 'em all this time! Maybe *you're* the curse everybody's been playin' under! Go on, sleep all day tomorrow! Don' even report! In fact, I'm gonna look into gettin' you on the disabled list and bringin' up one of them fine-lookin' young centerfielders from the minors to replace you!

BUCK

You *know* you can't put a player on the disabled list unless he *is* seriously disabled.

SAL

You *are*, and I can prove it! Disabled in the head! Maybe from that duster you couldn't get outa the way of coupla weeks back--

BUCK

Sal, that pitch just glanced off my helmet--

SAL

You went down like you was hit by lightnin'!

BUCK

For a second, from the impact. But you saw me get right up and go trotting off to first--

SAL

Well *I* think it did somethin' to your brain! Delayed reaction maybe. I'll get some shrink in here to prove it! All he's gotta do is listen to some of this crazy shit you been spoutin' in here tonight! Okay, outa here now! Out!

(Picks up one of the shoes which BUCK has brought him from the locker)

Outa my sight! I don' want you in my line of vision!

(Hurls the shoe at BUCK, who ducks just in time)

BUCK

Hey--hoah there, hoah there--

SAL

Outa here!

(Picks up the other shoe and is about to hurl it when HE suddenly groans and doubles up)

BUCK

Hey, Sal...whatsa matter--?

SAL

(Sinks into a chair breathing hard)
Shit--oh, sh-sh-it--

BUCK

(Crossing quickly to him)
What's wrong? You...?

SAL

Goddamn it...shit. Goddamn it to hell--

BUCK

I'm gonna call the doc--

SAL

Don't you dare.

BUCK

But--

SAL

There's some stuff in there...
(Indicates the medicine chest. BUCK rushes to the medicine chest and pulls out a large brown bottle and a spoon)

BUCK

This?

(SAL nods. BUCK opens the bottle, crosses back to SAL, spoons out some medicine and feeds it to SAL)

SAL

One more.

(BUCK feeds him another spoonful)

There.

(Waves BUCK away)

Better.

BUCK

You sure? I really think I oughta call--

SAL

You do and I'll murder you! I'm all right. A little passing...

BUCK

(Putting the bottle and spoon back in the chest)

I'm not so sure.

SAL

One word of this gets to the front office, and I'll know who to murder, ya hear?--Ya hear?

(Gasps slightly from the strain of the shout)

Please. I'm askin' you please. I got my own doctor--private, personal, confidential--

BUCK

Want me to call him?

SAL

No, I'll call him myself, later. He knows it ain't nothin'...nothin' serious--

BUCK

Well, at least let's get you--

(Starts to unbutton the shirt of SAL's uniform)

SAL

I can do it.

(Weakly pushes BUCK's hands away and starts to unbutton the shirt himself)

All they need. All they need up there in the front office. Already talkin' about retirin' me end of this year.

BUCK

Who is?

SAL

Not in so many words. But you can tell--read between the lines.

(Stops unbuttoning; his hands drop limply to his sides)

CONTINUED

SAL (CONT'D)

Good manager, Sal Salerno, but enough's enough. Time to get somebody younger. Youth--everythin's youth these days.

(BUCK moves in again to help him undress.

This time SAL offers no resistance)

But...what the fuck would I do?

(BUCK gets the shirt off him, picks up

SAL's street shirt and lays it around his shoulders)

Ain't like I need the money. Could quit tomorrow, without even a pension and live just fine. No wife, no kids. Don't drink, don't gamble--need a woman only now and then--less and less lately--no expensive tastes...But what would I...? How would I...?

(BUCK, having buttoned SAL's shirt, kneels at his feet)

BUCK

Foot, Sal.

SAL

Whatsat?

(Looks down and sees that BUCK wants to remove his baseball shoes)

Oh.

(Lifts one foot indifferently. BUCK starts to remove the shoe)

It's true. I'm a narrow, shallow man. All I know's this game. Eat, drink, sleep baseball. Even when I'm screwin', somethin' from baseball's goin' round and round in my...

(Pause as Sal gets his breath. BUCK, having gotten one shoe off, gestures for SAL to give him the other foot. SAL does so)

SAL

I can see it when I die. Judgment Day. Somebody'll say: "Couldn't ya ever get...concerned about anythin' else? World affairs? Important, serious...real things? Couldn't ya ever grow up?"

BUCK

(Removing the second shoe)

Nothing so wrong with being a...a true professional, Sal.

SAL

No. No, nothin' so wrong with that. Nothin'!

BUCK

Can you lift up a second?

(SAL gets halfway to his feet. BUCK opens his belt, unbuttons his trousers, and slides them down his legs as SAL drops back into the chair)

SAL

Never forget the first time I ever saw a big league ballgame. Eleven years old. Saved my pennies for weeks to get a good buck-ten grandstand seat. Family too poor for things like ballgames...eight of us in that little tenement apartment in the Dago ghetto. Walked the whole way to the stadium--fifty, sixty city blocks--mis'erable hot July day. Till then, all I had was the radio--some announcer's voice--to gimme a...an image of what a big league game was like...

(BUCK has now removed SAL's trousers and socks and has picked up his street trousers. Kneeling again at his feet, HE starts to slide the trousers up SAL's legs. SAL, engrossed in his narrative, does not give way to allow BUCK to get the trousers all the way up; and BUCK, after trying a moment to raise SAL's thighs, gives up and just listens)

SAL

I bought my ticket and went inside. All I could see was lotsa people and lotsa gray concrete--till I found the ramp leadin' up to where my seat was. I go up that ramp to the top, turn, and all of a sudden there I am, lookin' down on a big league playin' field for the first time. Outa the stinkin' grimy city streets, up a concrete ramp, and all of a sudden--you country boys wouldn't know that feelin'--all of a sudden, I'm lookin' down into this...this green and brown and white oasis in the middle of the stinkin' grimy city. And men down there--healthy grownup adult men, in them clean white and gray uniforms--some of 'em takin' battin' practice, some shaggin' flies or playin' pepper, or just throwin' that little clean white ball back and forth between 'em. Far as I was concerned, them men was angels at play in the fields of paradise.

BUCK

(Pause)

That's real nice, Sal. Now, could you...kinda...?

(Indicates that SAL should lift his thighs)

SAL

Whatsat? Oh.

(Takes hold of the sides of the chair and lifts himself far enough for BUCK to pull his trousers the rest of the way up. BUCK tucks SAL's shirt into the trousers and buckles his belt)

BUCK

Okay.

(Eases SAL back into the chair, picks up SAL's street socks, kneels again, and puts them on him)

SAL

That's when I swore I was gonna spend *my* grownup adult life doin' that or nothin'. Yeah, lotsa kids swear that--kids with lots more natural ability than I ever had. But I *did* it. Never *was* much of a second baseman. One year in the Majors durin' the war when all the good players was off in the service. But back there in the Minor Leagues, they saw pretty fast what Sal Salerno was *really* made for. A man that *knows* the game, inside and out, backwards and forwards--true competitor, lotsa hustle, lotsa savvy--a man can handle other men, knows talent when he sees it, and how to develop it in somebody else. Like in you...

BUCK

That's right, Sal.

SAL

And plenty of others too--on five diff'rent Minor League teams, Class D to Triple A--before I finally get the call from the parent club herself--a lackluster fifth-place ballclub at mid-season which *I* manage right up to second place by the end of *that* year and right up to the pennant and World Series the year after. And since then, nine *more* pennants and seven more World Series-es--and not once finishin' lower than second place!

BUCK

That's right.

(Pause)

How're ya feeling?

SAL

Jesus Christ Almighty, ya know that to this very day, every single time I walk out through that concrete runway and out into the dugout and look out on that field, I get that exact same feelin' like the first time I went up that ramp and looked down. The exact...same...identical feelin'...

(His voice trails off in exhaustion. BUCK rises, looks at him a moment with concern, then crosses to the shoe which SAL had thrown at him earlier, crosses back, kneels, and starts to put the shoe on SAL's foot)

And listen: that "Nice guys finish last" stuff--that's a lotta shit, ya know? Hell, I ain't exactly been a bastard all these years, have I?

BUCK

No, Sal. Not in the--

SAL

I mean, Jesus, I can be as...as generous, as...humble, as the next guy, when we're *winnin'*. 'Did ya ever see anybody so goddamn gracious in victory as me?

BUCK

Not many.

SAL

Nobody!

(Pause)

It's when you're *losin'* that I can't stand this humility shit!

(BUCK smiles up at him, then fetches the other shoe, kneels, and puts it on SAL's other foot)

SAL

And listen: I *am* kinda sorry the way I came down on you before. Just had to get somethin' outa my system. You know.

BUCK

Sure, I know.

(Rises, crosses to the locker, and fetches SAL's jacket)

Like I said, you probably had some--

SAL

Ya know, we got a great word in Italian for that. "*Sfogarsi*." It don't translate. Means, sorta, like, to "un-stuff yourself up." "*Mi sono sfogato*." "I have un-stuffed myself up." Know what I mean?

BUCK

Yeah, it's a good word. Can you...get up?

SAL

Sure. Sure I can.

(Struggles to his feet. BUCK gets him into the jacket. SAL catches sight of himself in the medicine chest mirror)

Jesus, look at me in these clothes. What the fuck am I in *these* things? Can you imagine me retired?

BUCK

Sal, I don't believe that about them retiring you. And if they do, hell, there's half a dozen clubs would grab you in a second.

SAL

(Turns and looks at him, aghast)

What're you, crazy? Me, manage a rival club? I been with the Eagles organization since the day I broke in!

BUCK

Well, plenty of managers have gone from one club to another--

SAL

But not me! Not Sal Salerno! What kinda cynical bastard you take me for? Switch all my goddamn loyalties all around just 'cause somebody pays me money to? Jesus, what a thing to suggest!

BUCK

Yeah, okay. Sorry about that, Sal. Now--

(Reaches out to support SAL to the door; but SAL drops into the desk chair and swivels it around away from BUCK)

SAL

Listen, I been thinkin'. I'm gonna remit that fine. I mean, maybe that *was* Martinez's ball. Maybe I *am* kinda imaginin' things lately. I *have* been under a kinda strain. After all, ya *did* hit three pretty solid line drives tonight. Not *your* fault they all got caught by somebody. Yeah, my mind's made up. I'm remittin' the fine--all of it.

BUCK

Well...thanks, Sal.

SAL

On one condition! That ya swear to me, right here and now, to forget about this quittin' crap!

BUCK

(Turns away, chagrined)

Oh.

SAL

You got six, seven, maybe eight more good years! I don't wanna hear any more of this horseshit about quittin', ya hear?

BUCK

Well, I didn't say it was for sure. I do have to do some more thinking--

SAL

(Springing out of the chair and facing him)

No! You gotta swear! A solemn oath! Right here and now! I'll...I'll get ya a bigger raise. I'll go right up there to that front office and threaten to quit myself if...Anyway, I'll see you get a better salary, and a three-year contract at least!

(Pause)

Jesus Christ, I need you, Buck! I can't keep winnin' pennants without you! And winnin's the only way I'll stay here!

BUCK

Sure you can, Sal. You got the best all-around team in the Majors. There's plenty of good young outfielders coming up in the farm system. You said so yourself before.

SAL

I don't want any of them bumbling young punks! Have to teach 'em everything I know, all over again, from the...I need you, Buck! Your bat, your glove, your arm, your experience! You! You, personally! Now come on: a solemn oath, right here and--

BUCK

Sal, a guy can't just swear to a thing like that. Swearing's a serious matter. I *will*...think about it some more, but--

SAL

No! I said Swear! Now!

BUCK

(Pause)
Sorry. I can't.

SAL

(Sinks back into the desk chair and turns
away)
Then fuck you, the fine's still on.

BUCK

Okay.

SAL

All of it.

BUCK

Okay. Now...
(Moves toward him)
Let's go, huh?

SAL

You go. I gotta--

BUCK

Sal, I'm not leaving you here by yourself! I've gotta get you
back to the hotel where somebody can attend to you if...well,
if something happens. Now come on.
(Takes SAL by the shoulders and tries to
urge him out of the chair)

SAL

(Shakes him off)
I gotta make a phone call.

BUCK

Okay, make it. I'll wait.

SAL

It's...private, personal, confidential.

BUCK

Oh. Okay, go on, call that doctor of yours. I'll wait outside.

SAL

Yeah. Wait outside.
(BUCK, after looking at him a moment,
turns and starts for the door)

CONTINUED

SAL (CONT'D)

And listen, before I forget! I want you further up in that batter's box tomorrow, if Littlejohn pitches. Last time, he made a monkey of you with that knuckle-ball. I want you up closer--get the pitch before it breaks--take a shorter swing--stop tryin' to hit that knuckle-ball for distance, 'cause ya can't do it. Got that? Am I makin' myself clear?

BUCK

Yep. I'll do that, Sal. I swear.

(Smiles at SAL, then goes out the door and closes it behind him.)

(SAL sits motionless for a moment. Then HE drops his head and shakes it from side to side, taking deep breaths in an attempt to revive himself. Then HE lifts himself up with an effort, crosses to the sink, takes a gulp of water, and crosses with a slight stagger to the wall telephone. HE lifts the receiver, dials "0," and leans against the table for support as HE waits for a response)

SAL

Operator, gemme Western Union.

(Pause)

Yeah--I wanna send a telegram. Bill it to my personal Special Billin': 0-8-3-2-5-5-1. Yeah. This is Salvatore Salerno, the Manager of the...Oh, ya do? That's nice.

(Pause)

Yeah, back home. That's right. I don't have the exact address. It's to...Sister Mary Angelina, at the Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Heart. Yeah, right. They'll find the exact address, right? Good.

(Pause)

U-uhmn...let's see...Uh--"Wish you to know how much me and all the team appreciates your"...No, no, forget that. Sorry. Start over, okay? Thanks.

(Ponders a moment)

Uh--"God bless you too for...carin'" Yeah that's right, "c-a-r-i-n-g," "carin'."

(Pause)

Uh--"With your...true faith"--no, make that "With your true and pure faith...behind us, we will"--Uh, make that "shall"...*"we shall be first again this year."*

(Pause)

CONTINUED

SAL (CONT'D)

No, there's a little more. Let's see...

(Ponders)

"For I...truly believe...that...God...loves a winner." There, that's it. Okay? Oh. Yeah. Signed: "Sal." That's right, just "Sal."

(Short pause)

Yeah, right. Read it back to me.

(Mouths the words just loudly enough to be audible as HE listens to the message being repeated)

"God bless you too for carin'. With your true and pure faith behind us, we *shall* be first again this year. For I truly believe that God loves a winner. Sal." Yeah, that's it.

(Pause)

Oh, you agree with all that? Well, wonderful! Then God bless you, too, for carin'!

(Hangs up and stands a moment leaning weakly against the wall. Then takes a few deep breaths, straightens up, stands away from the wall until he is sure he has control, then strides strongly out the door, slamming it shut behind him)

END OF PLAY