

# NARRATIVE

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## San Francisco

AUGUST 2001

**IT'S A WARM** Saturday afternoon at the ballpark, and Emily and I are enjoying a pleasant mid-game lull. Nothing much is happening on the field below—nonfans seem to think that's a flaw in baseball—so Emily and I have a chance to ponder.

"If you had to marry one of the Giants, who would it be?" I ask her.

"Hmm . . . tough question." She takes a sip of her lemonade.

"Jeff Kent, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because he's so steady. He just goes out there, plays hard every day, and gets the job done. You can count on him," she answers. She takes a bite of the prosciutto, provolone, and sun-dried tomato sandwich she brought to the ballpark. "So? Who would you marry?"

"Well, maybe Bobby Estalella if it was just for sex." I crack open a peanut, pop the two little nuts in my mouth, and toss the shell near my feet. I repeat this action dozens of times over the course of a game. "But if I, like, actually had to talk to the guy and spend some time with him, I think I'd go for Mark Gardner."

"What's so great about Gardy?"

"He's smart. He's a grown-up. And his wife is an athlete, so he's probably not a total Neanderthal."

"He's a right-wing Christian," Emily informs me.

My fantasy deflates. But no matter. Barry Bonds is up, and it's time to watch the game.

This is what we spectators do. We chat. We eat. We fantasize. We watch the game. We make up games of our own.

Emily, an attorney, has come up with the all-law team, including Dave Justice, Craig Counsell, and others. I counter with an all-geography team. It has Benito Santiago, Robin Ventura, Mark

Portugal, and Emily's beloved, Jeff Kent. We also have fielded an all-bald team, an all-substance-abusing team, and an extra-letter team, headed up by Robb Nen.

This is a swell way to spend some hours, sitting with a good friend, calmed by the vast green expanse of a baseball field, throwing peanut shells on the ground. It was my best friend who introduced me to baseball in 1969. Diane loved the game, and she convinced me to go with her to Shea Stadium in New York. A year too young to drive, we made the two-and-a-half-hour journey by bus and subway from New Jersey out to Queens, where the Mets played. Emerging from the bowels of New York into the wide-open ball park, I was instantly hooked. I felt awed and oddly comforted, surrounded by so much open space in New York. As we settled into our seats on the first-base side, I claimed the whole tableau—the field, the seats, the players, the vendors—for my heart. The game lay ahead like a blank page. I savored the unfolding story that was my first ball game, pitch by delectable pitch.

Maybe it was because I was sixteen, but to me discovering baseball was like discovering sex. I've always felt a link between the two. And so I have experienced baseball as an affair of adult proportions, sensual, sexual, intellectual, and this year, as the Giants found new ways to disappoint me, heartbreaking.

Recently I was on a train, heading from the Central California coast back home and listening to the ball game on a San Luis Obispo radio station. As the game lingered, the signal faded until finally there was just hissing in my headphones. At the time, straining to hear felt like torture, but later I found out I had been spared. The Giants led until the eighth inning, then coughed up the lead, then tied the game, then went into extra innings. In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth innings, they loaded the bases every time and never scored. Milwaukee finally put an end to it in the thirteenth. Had I actually heard the pitiful conclusion, I'd have been tempted to pitch myself out an emergency exit.

Which is why winning can't be the only thing for a fan. Last year the Giants won more games than any team in baseball yet were summarily dismissed by the Mets in the first round of the playoffs. Does this mean the season was a waste? Hardly. Each win was a joy, and the night my boys clinched the division was a collective

rapture for the forty-one thousand of us who were there to witness it. We pulsed, we gyrated, we screamed in ecstasy, we waved our hands and kicked our feet, we were satisfied and wanted more.

You can't win them all, of course. You can hope—and I do every time I head out to the ballpark—that today our pitcher will throw a no-hitter, or at least a shutout. You can cheer the boys on to victory, but still you cheer when they lose. Maybe just a notch lower.

I crack open another peanut shell and pop its contents into my mouth. The Giants go on to drop another game. They come off the field, and Emily and I get ready to leave the park. Her gourmet sandwich is long gone, and when I stand, the peanut shells around my seat crunch.

Over the loudspeakers Tony Bennett croons “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” I left my heart at the ballpark today and, though it got a little broken, I had a lovely time.

—*Linda Gebroe*