

The Turnstile Kid

(Cleveland)

The first thing is to get out of mass early because it's eight or nine miles down to the park. Which means you can't be the altar boy, because there's no way to do that and get away without bein' seen. And sure enough, there was my name right on the list for Sunday noon mass. I get picked a lot for the big Sunday masses because I been doin' it for three years now and I got the Latin down cold. "Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper: et in saecula saeculorum." I'd tell ya what it means but we don't have to learn that, just how to say it, and I can do that like I was talkin' to my sister.

Graney and O'Neill go to our church sometimes, on account of they and their wives live around here. And lately we been seein' the Chapmans, too. But they usually go early when there's a game. I gave O'Neill communion once. Can't say as I've actually met him, but Mrs. O'Neill brought her shopping list into McGregor's when we was hangin' around there. She asked would I carry the bag home for her and I said yeah, but I knew I wouldn't see O'Neill himself because the Indians was in Detroit at the time. They live up on Knowles.

Ain't no big trick to getting' out of altar boy if you have to. I just called up Doherty – he's one of the junior altar boys – and said I was comin' down with something

and could he cover for me, and he said he would. He knew what I was comin' down with, but there wasn't no chance a him goin', to the game anyway, and since he's only a junior altar boy he don't got much choice; he's got to do it.

That meant I could slip into 10 o'clock, sit in the back where nobody'd see me, and cut right after Communion. I couldn't go to Communion, of course; Father Smith woulda seen me, and then I'd be in dutch for sure. But it ain't no sin to not go to Communion. Ain't no sin to say you was comin' down with somethin', neither...well, maybe a small one, but not a big one.

From St. Philomena's you can catch the Euclid line because it stops just down at the corner a half a block away. The park's on the east side at 66th, and the way the trolleys run you better figure on a half hour and sometimes more. I like to look at the sights, except not the first one. That's Lakeview Cemetery over on the left just a few blocks from the church. They say lots a famous people are buried in there, but I don't need to ever find out. The place gives me the creeps.

You get past Lakeview and then you come in to Little Italy, where the dagos all live. Well, most of 'em. The Dago and his family live on the next street over from us. I don't go there much because it ain't my area, if you know what I mean. But the people I see from the trolley always look interesting.

A couple miles past there comes Doans Corners, which is where Euclid turns west for the center of town. It ain't far from there to Millionaire's Row. The mansions start at about 87th Street. My favorite is this huge white three story one with the columns out in front, six of them proppin' up a big porch in front of the vastest lawn I ever seen. You could put our whole ballfield on that lawn and I don't suppose anybody'd ever hit one over the fence. But if they did they weren't getting' it back, neither, because they couldn't even jump the fence: It's six feet high and it's got iron spikes on top of it.

But we only see most of the mansions if we're goin' downtown, because if we're goin' to the ballpark you got to get off at 66th. The older folks transfer there, because there's a line that lets out right at the park entrance. But we generally like to just run from Euclid. It's only a half dozen blocks or so north to Lexington, and you can see the field from Quimby. The first time my dad took me I never imagined anything could be so big as League Park. There's the ticket office on the corner and then rising behind it one, two, three stories for the grandstand. You'd think it would block out the sun, except the sun always shines at the ballpark so that couldn't happen.

If you lived around here, you were probably playin' yourself in the vacant lot a few houses back on Lexington from 66th. I seen them guys playin' a few times on the way to the park. Looked like a pretty good bunch, but we ain't never actually played 'em. Lexington's too far from East Cleveland for us to get a challenge

match, and even if it weren't we all seen they got a nigger playin' shortstop so it wouldn't be right for us play 'em anyhow. Their ballyard looked a lot like ours. A big old cinder lot where they hadn't built no house yet with some patches of grass and weeds where we didn't run too much. Gettin' off the trolley you could see that on the Lexington lot somebody'd put together a couple benches, but we didn't have none of those. In our neighborhood pretty much the games start a half hour after church or school, if it ain't summer. Somebody gets the hot idea and he goes to the next guy's house and yells "yo, Bob," and Bob pops out with his mitt and bat and down to Billy's and the two of 'em yell "yo, Bill," and down to Mitchell's and Schultz's until eight or ten show up. If you ain't got eight or ten, you pretty much can't play a real game, but you can still play Bounce or Fly or Five-hundred, and that's OK.

Now if you only get eight or ten you might have to play pitcher's hands and off-field out, and maybe use invisible runners and supply your own pitcher. But that's OK too. If you get six on six you can supply your own catcher and play pitchers hands and all you're short is one outfielder, so it's just about like real baseball. At least until somebody's got to go home. But usually on Sunday most of the guys can stay out all afternoon so long as they don't go runnin' off or break windows and stuff. Once Schultz hit one foul out on the street and it hit a car drivin' by and busted a window so we all had to scatter, but we may as well have quit anyway because we didn't have no ball to keep playin' with, so what was the use? We all

chipped in a dime so's Mitch could buy one, but Schultz chipped in 15 on account of he lost it.

I'd have to say Mitch is probably our best chucker. He's one of the oldest and he can throw hard. The other thing is once the ball gets beat up a little, you can't hardly hit him. You should see him look one over if somebody's fouled it off a tree...he'll give it the eye just to see whether it's gone lopsided, and if it has you can bet Mitch will know just how to hold it to give it the best dip. Even if it ain't, he can use the scuff marks just like Covey. There ain't much Mitch loves better'n a busted seam, either. I seen him wedge a fingertip in under the seam right before he throws and the ball'll do a little dart down and away from righties so they never do figure out how they missed it. We try not to use balls that got electrical tape bindin' 'em up, but sometimes it's all we've got. If Mitch gets a hold of one of them, watch out, because he can grip that slick tape just so it's the image of Cicotte's shine ball comin' up. They made that pitch illegal in the majors, but none of us got the nerve to call it on Mitch. The Dago tried once and Mitch whipped him good for it.

So that's a Sunday afternoon unless you're goin' out to the park, which with the Sox in town and all I couldn't hardly miss. I didn't see whether the kids was playin' in the lot down Lexington yet because there was too many people gatherin' as I got off the trolley. I was hurryin' just in case I could get picked as a turnstile kid, and if I did I didn't even have to pay to get in the game. Course I'd

have to miss the first couple of innings, but the point is I'd actually get in and it wouldn't even cost me 50 cents. You got to get there early to be a turnstile kid because they only pick a half dozen or so, and the kids line up on Lexington to be seen by the gatekeepers. Better be loud, too, and have good elbows because each gatekeeper only picks one kid a day to turn the turnstile and the only thing that matters is being eager and looking reliable. I make sure my hair's slicked down and my shirt's tucked in.

I didn't figure I'd get picked, what with the odds and all and the fact that I never been picked before. Kids from all over Cleveland must a had the same thought I did. Plus it bein' a Sunday and the Sox bein' in town. But then when the gatekeepers come out to look us over and the scramble started and the pushin', well doggone if the kid ahead of me don't get too worked up and just fall over leanin' and yellin' and falls onto the kid in front of him and the whole pack of 'em goes tumblin' and suddenly I'm right up in front. The keeper points and says 'you' and I could not hardly believe my luck.

Bein' the turnstile kid ain't hard. I seen it done dozens of times. The guy takes the ticket and you turn the turnstile to let the customers in; one turn per ticket. You can't see much at the turnstile, just the concrete and the beer stands and all the fine people comin' in. But you can sure hear. Even if you didn't know nothin' about baseball you knew the place would be pretty well jammed. I mean jeez... (Sorry, God, I know it's Sunday.) But you know it's the Sox comin' in – Jackson,

Weaver, Collins and Williams pitchin' today. And they're playin' our guys: Spoke and Elmer, Chappie, Wamby, Bagby and Covey. Covey's goin' for us so we'll probably win for sure. High talk? That's what you say. Here's what I know. Never mind what New York did. We're still in first, and for as far back as I can remember – and I can remember almost back to Lajoie – this is the best bunch of Indians I ever seen.

Hear that roar? I don't even have to see the field to know what happened...somebody ruthered one. Spoke, they're sayin'. He took Williams right out onto Lexington and it's still the first and we're in front already. Hurry up and get in here folks; you don't want to miss it...and I don't either.

The first and second basically take forever, but by the bottom of the third the gatekeeper shuts down and I'm free to go in. The ballpark is all sights and sounds and smells, too. You go up the stairs and the first thing you see is the fence out to Lexington. It's 20 feet of chain link and that's on top of a 20-foot wall and it fills your vision going up and boy oh boy Spoke cleared it. But then you get to the top of the stairs and the people begin to part and that's when you see the green. The wall itself and the grass and more grass and more grass and the brown of the dirt and the cheering and screaming and the fans in the stands and on the field. I didn't realize I let that many people in today. They say the place holds 22,000 but there must be 30,000 watchin' because they've got the ropes up and they're packed eight or 10 deep around the outfield all the way around.

Well, like I said, who wouldn't want to see this game? Musta been a lot of people leavin' after Communion.

I don't guess I'll find a seat in the grandstand so it's out to the ropes for me.

That's OK, though. I wind up probably no more than 20 or 30 feet from Jackson, although it's hard to tell because the bigger folks is up to the front so I can't see as much as I'd like. But even when I can't see I can tell what's happenin' because the bugs nearby is chatterin' pretty good about the game. Y'know, small bets. Pop says it's a sin to bet, but all's I can say is the line's gonna be long at confession next week. "I got a quarter says Williams gets Gardner," one bug says to the other. "You're on." The crowd's loud but the bugs is talkin' softer because ever since the Series rumors last fall the clubs has got real touchy about bugs in the stands. At least the little ones; the big ones they pretty much leave alone. You can tell the big ones. They sit in the grandstand, dress nicer, smoke better cigars, sneer more but the real tipoff is they don't smile nearly as much. We passed some in the stands walkin' out here. You could a probably picked 'em out yourself without needing no help from me if you was lookin'. But never mind them for now; back to the little ones. Now the pressure's on Gardner, only he don't know it. Williams bein' a lefty and Gardner a lefty you figure the one bug ought to get odds, but Gardner swings and whacks one out in front of Jackson, and the quarter has a new owner.

So the winner bets him double or nothin' that Wood gets a hit and sure enough Wood sends Felsch on a chase and now we got second and third and the bug is 50 cents to the good of his friend. Which brings up Wamby. So the bug who's to the good offers double or nothin' on the bundle against Wamby makin' another hit, and I figure Williams ain't givin' up three in a row except that with Williams the scuttlebutt is you can't be real sure when he's tryin', if you know what I mean. So Williams whistles one up there and Wamby rolls one out to Weaver and what does Weaver do? He drops it. Which lets Gardner score. Then he picks it up and throws it about six feet over Collins' head at first, and that lets Wood score, too.

But by now neither bug is happy because just as the quarters are about to transfer from one pocket to the other they are intercepted by a gentleman in uniform who has been patrolling the premises searching for just this sin. As I said, they are very sensitive concerning gambling in the parks these days, especially if it is done for small change. They will be leaving on an escorted trip to the station now, which is bad for the two of them but good for me because I am now up close to the front of the rope where I can see Evans and hassle Jackson.

The Sox is not done. They get one run back in the fifth and another in the sixth and I can holler "shipyard!" and "slacker!" all I want at Jackson, but it don't affect him none if the Indians don't hit it out this far, which they ain't. But in the seventh we get to Williams for three more runs, and Covey meanwhile has gotten his

backbone back and we get one more to go home on in the eighth to make it 7-2 and a happy trip home. With the 50 cents I saved I by a popcorn and a soda and pay for the trolley ride.

That is the way it has gone pretty much all summer here. All since the end of last season for that matter. I figured all along the Indians would cop. Spoke said so in January, and who'd know better than Spoke? Who's a better player, for that matter? The Babe? Yeah, sure, he can hit the long one, but Spoke's got a higher average. Golly, he's hittin' better'n .400 all year. That's more than Jackson or Cobb or even Sisler or anybody. And Spoke can go get 'em before any of those other guys even got started.

We got Elmer in right with Cuckoo and Evans in left. OK, Smitty ain't no Ruth, but he's just about the next best thing. He hit nine out last year – weren't but four who hit more – and he's nearly got that many again already. Jamieson and Evans? Don't matter who you pitch, Jamieson hits the righties and Evans kills the lefties. No wonder the A's is in last place, lettin' us have Jamieson and Gardner and Myers for just Roth. The saps. I mean Cuckoo's hittin' .340 and he hasn't even really got hot yet. And Evans? Well, I dunno where it come from. I mean the guy's been around since I was 10 and he never done nothin' and now all of a sudden, pow, he's hittin' .350.

Gardner? You show me a better third baseman in the league. Sure, Weaver can hit, but Larry's every bit the fielder Buck is and as good a stick...plus he's level. So he's hittin' .300 now and I don't see no reason he don't keep that up all year.

'Course Chappie's my hero. I may not a told ya I play shortstop, so you could probably figure he would be. He's tough like a shortstop ought to be. He don't flinch even when the ball's hit right at him. And up at the plate you can't back him off no matter how tight you throw him. My dad says Chappie ain't scared a nothin'. I was one of the altar boys at his wedding last October, y'know. They had it at Miss Daly's dad's house because Miss Daly – that's Mrs. Chapman – was Catholic and Chappie said he was gonna become one, too. Father Smith was the priest and Spoke was the best man. I didn't actually meet Spoke, but I got to see him real close. I remember they was goin' in and the papers were all getting' pictures they used the next day and the reporters asked Chappie was he gonna quit and and go to work for the East Ohio Gas Company – Mr. Daly runs it, y'know. Chappie just kinda turned to 'em and he said, "I'm gonna play next year and we're gonna win the pennant for Cleveland." And that's when I knew. That was the moment I knew. I knew. Chappie wouldn't a said it except that he was gonna make it true. He's a shortstop, y'know. Like me.

And even if Chappie hadn't a said it, the Indians have to win. They got Wamby and Doc at second and first, and O'Neill behind the plate. And look who he's catchin'. Bagby for starters...he won 17 last season and he's already bagged 20

this year and I'll bet he gets 30 by the series. Then we got the Polack. He was even better'n Bagby last year, 24 wins and only 12 losses and beatin' the Sox today made it 16 already. Nobody's got two better than Bagby and Covey. Not Williams and Cicotte and for sure not Mays and Shawkey. Shawkey's not bad but Mays? Why he's just a quitter. Did you hear about the way he stiffed Boston last season? They shouldn't even a let him back in the league.

But then on top of Bagby and Covey we got Caldwell, who's also the best number three guy in the league. I know maybe Boston didn't think so last year, but that's why Boston's fifth and we're first. Maybe Frazee should have kept him; I'm glad he didn't.

I'm glad the Indians are back home, too...seems like that Eastern swing lasts forever. Now they're comin' in to our place: First Washington for a couple, then Boston, and finally those Yanks. I'm gonna have to save up because if you can't get a turnstile job the games ain't cheap. First there's the trolley ride just to get out to the park, then 50 cents at least to get in – and a buck, imagine it, if you want a seat in the grandstand. Somethin' for pop and a hot dog maybe and before you know it you're out a couple bucks. On the other hand, what I wouldn't give to get back out here to see the Babe.