

Al Guard's Night of Nights

Philip Damon

I know my rights.

Anything I say can be used against me therefore you can't force me to say anything, lest it be used, by you, against me. You don't have to tell me. I know my rights. I'm also entitled to an attorney, either one of my own choosing, or a court-appointed one in the event I can't afford one, which I can, or *could*, if I wanted one. A mouthpiece. Get me sprung out of this joint in no time, right? Raymond Burr, maybe. Judd for the Defense.

Whose defense? Not mine. Who needs those guys?

A mouthpiece. Who's a more famous mouthpiece around this town than me? I've logged more TV hours defending a client than Perry Mason and Judd and the Defenders put together. And what a client I had! How about the New York Gothams for a client? Richest client in the city, probably, and the hardest to defend over the past four seasons. It's easy to defend a team that's winning pennants, not much goes wrong you have to find an excuse for. But when they're on the skids? It's no small task, let me tell you.

And now they're prosecuting me. And don't give me any of that stuff about it really being the state that's prosecuting me. It's the Gothams. My old client.

But I know my rights.

My name is Al Guard. My rank is announcer. Ex-announcer. My social security number is 150-28-2600. And that's all you're entitled to. Geneva Convention. Right?

My real name? It's Al Guard, like I said. My *legal* name? That's a different matter. Asa Weingarten is my legal name, but despite what you police types may believe legal and *real* are not necessarily the same thing. My real name is Al Guard and that's who I am. Ask the Gothams, they created me.

But if you boys want a statement I don't see any reason why I shouldn't give you one. Even though I know my rights I'm willing to talk. I'm not suffering from any prosecution complex. Sorry. I've been dying to say that ever since you boys brought me in. It just seemed to fit at that moment.

Let's see now, my statement. How should I begin it. It all began, yes, I guess it was that afternoon I had lunch with Johnny Gianucci. You know who Johnny is. You don't. He was the Gotham's batboy until this past season. Thirteen seasons he spent with that ballclub. Two seasons more than Spider Spinella, that bum. Thirteen seasons as the Gotham's batboy. A book came out, back when he was eighteen or so, you may remember that, called *Batboy for the Gotham's*. It explained how lucky Johnny was, having grown up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and now a batboy in the Big Leagues.

Johnny retired finally, because his kids were getting old enough, the oldest is ten I think, to be teased because their father was a batboy. A thirty year old batboy. Some picture, wouldn't you say. He asked the Gotham's for another job, any job, club house attendant, trainer, but all they'd offer him was one selling hot dogs. So the two of us were out of work on opening day this season and decided we'd get together at The Dugout, you know the place, across from the stadium, and watch the game on TV over a few drinks. Beer for Johnny. The same beer I sold for fifteen years on Channel 10. How many beers do you think I drank between innings on camera? Before they instituted the no-drinking code, that is. Only God knows the answer to that one.

So there we were watching Spider Spinella making a mess of my old job, mispronouncing names, bragging about how well *he'd* done everything on the field when he was playing. I don't blame him for talking about himself as a player, since he probably figured it would take the viewer's mind off what an inept announcer he was.

Johnny wasn't paying much attention to the Spider, actually. He was mainly concerned with watching the batboy. Some teenager has the job now, or had the job until tonight, and at one point he started to cry over his beer as he watched the kid rush out on the field with a warm-up jacket, or to retrieve a batting helmet, I don't remember which it was.

We were both sick to our stomachs. It was opening day! And we were in a bar watching it happen.

Maybe the whole thing goes back earlier than that game. Maybe it goes back to my own career as a player. It wasn't a very long career, contrasted to Spider Spinella's. In fact it was over when I was eleven, but it ended on a note of triumph.

I was a right fielder with the Cubs in the Ridgewood, New Jersey, Little League. I was not the star of the team. I was a stocky kid. Maybe pudgy. Fat. And cursed with the same myopia that afflicts me now. I wore horn-rimmed glasses. I was also the only Jewish kid on the team, maybe in the whole league. My memory fails me on that point. It was a big game, for third place, and I had dropped a fly ball early in the game and misjudged another. But I came up in the sixth with two out, the bases loaded, and us behind by three. Sounds like a John R. Tunis novel, right? There was nobody the coach had to pinch hit for me, so the hopes of the rest of the Cubs were riding on me. No one was expecting much.

"Okay, Abie," my teammates encouraged, "just get on. Please don't strike out!"

No one ever called me Asa, which was understandable. Who calls anybody Asa? But in my own fantasies (You know what I mean, “Weingarten back on the warning track to haul it in,” “Weingarten with a great throw to the plate,” “Weingarten puts it in the upper deck.”) I envisioned myself as “Ace” Weingarten, sturdy and reliable outfielder of the . . . Cubs then, perhaps, but maybe someday . . . the Dodgers? Who could tell? But I never asked to be called “Ace”—it seemed a little presumptuous—and it never occurred to anyone else to call me that. So they called me Abie.

Well to make a long story short . . . Please bear with me, this is relevant to my case. To make a long story short, I connected on a fastball and sent it sailing over the center fielder’s head. This was in the days before outfield fences and it must have rolled a mile. As I said I was sort of stocky and none too swift on the bases. By the time I was around second the center fielder had caught up with the ball. Two or three relays and the ball and I were both heading for the plate. Now from the time I rounded second I had envisioned a great fallaway slide to the plate, barely evading the tag and saving the day for the Cubs. What happened was I stumbled about five feet from home, dropped to my knees, and dove head first and hand outstretched for the plate. The ball arrived at about the same time and the catcher hurriedly applied a tag at the first part of me he saw, my head. He broke my glasses, cut his hand, and dropped the ball. I had scored the winning run.

When I got home I had two badly skinned knees, bloody cuts on my nose and cheekbones, and a pair of broken glasses in my hand. My mother never allowed me to play baseball again. It was a *goy’s* game, and if they couldn’t play it cleanly, I wasn’t going to play it with them.

And that’s how I came to be an announcer instead of a right fielder. Or a shortstop like Spider Spinella.

But let me get back to opening day with Johnny Gianucci. As I said he began crying. He said he didn’t give a damn if he was *forty* instead of just thirty, he’d rather be out there on the field than there in a bar watching the ballgame. He even commented on how slow the new kid got the warm-up jacket out to the pitcher. I was a little irritated at Johnny’s failure to see that Spider’s butchering of the play-by-play was a good deal more important than how quickly the warm-up jacket got out to the pitcher. I mean it still *got* there, didn’t it? You see what I mean. Along about the fifth inning I went home.

Now my wife has never been a fan. As a matter of fact she hasn’t watched a game in years to my knowledge. “If you were a *player*,” she’d say to me, “then there might be some reason for watching.” Most of her time is spent with causes. You know, cancer drives, unwed mothers, stuff like that. She was pretty big on telethons a while back. My name was a pretty well-known name in this city, you know.

She was on a cause the day I lost my job.

You have to picture this. I had been called into the front office after a day game, right? Okay. Now in the first place I had been expecting to receive some special news for quite a while. This might sound silly to you, but I’d been expecting the announcement of “Al Guard Night.” It sounds silly to you. Well it’s

not as silly at it sounds. A lot of announcers around the league had had "nights" in the past season or two and why shouldn't I have had one? Twenty years of service to the same club isn't anything to sneeze at, you know.

So when I went into that office the last thing I expected was to be informed that they were not going to need me in the booth this season. Seems there is a trend in sportscasting toward more ex-players behind the mike. You know, expert analysis, color, that kind of stuff. I knew, I had spent the past two seasons working with an expert analyst and a color man. Have you ever heard Moose Mungo and Rocky Davis give out with the expert analysis?

"Infield fly rule on that one," says Moose.

"There's two out," says I to Moose (softly so the mike won't pick it up). "You dolt," I add (more softly so Moose won't pick it up). You've seen Moose Mungo, I'm sure.

Or from Rocky: "Well, that last run scored on a wild pitch so it's unearned." Runs scored on passed *balls* are unearned, on wild pitches they're earned. Rocky spent eleven seasons in the outfield, quite a distance from the official scorer's booth. I never bothered to correct him, he's a lot bigger than Moose.

They explained, anyway, that Spider was retiring at the end of the season (I knew that), and they wanted to keep him in the organization (I could appreciate that), and Spider had always had his heart set on being an announcer after he hung up his spikes. And I was out in the cold.

So I went home to seek solace from my wife.

She greeted me at the door. "Guess what . . ." I began.

"Don't say a word," she interrupted. "Do you know what the most discriminated against minority in this country is?"

"Puerto Ricans?" I ventured. No. *Schwartzes*? Homosexuals?

"Come here," she said.

I followed her into the kitchen and she began throwing open drawers, cupboards, closets. She held up a pair of scissors, a ladle, an ice cream scoop. She grabbed a fistful of utensils, pancake turners, spatulas, a carving knife, a can opener. "What do all these things have in common?"

"They're larger than a matchbox but smaller than a breadbox."

She frowned. "They're made for right-handed people. The most discriminated against group of people in this country are left-handed people."

An immediate picture of Moose Mungo and Rocky Davis flashed into my mind. They're both southpaws.

"What's the most often used, cold water or hot?" she asked.

"Cold," I said.

"The cold water faucet is on the right." She held up the measuring cup with her left hand. "Can't read the measurements, can you?" I shook my head. She held up the *teapot* with her left hand. "Where's the design?" I shook my head again. "On the other side," she said. "For right-handers to see it."

I tried to interrupt. "I have some important . . ."

"Pull your pants down," she said.

"What?" My wife is no sexpot.

"Pull your pants down!"

I complied, dropping my pants to my ankles and standing there in my jockey shorts. She pulled up the tails of my shirt and said, "Look. Are those shorts made for easy access for a right-handed or left-handed person?"

I fumbled around for a moment and admitted, "Right-handed."

In the next fifteen minutes I was dragged down to the cellar (an old Coleman stove, pump on the right, a bowling ball, paint brushes, screw threads), back up to the garage (my golf clubs, the hedge clippers), then into the living-room and a look at the stereo, the TV and the radio, all with dials on the right side.

"Sit down," she said.

I sat down. I knew now that it might be months before she found out she was no longer Mrs. Al Guard, but only Mrs. Asa Weingarten, whose position on the Equality for Left-Handed People Committee was no longer important. She didn't want to know.

"How about sports?" she asked.

"How *about* sports?" I asked.

"How many left-handed catchers have you ever seen?"

I started to explain the impracticality of throwing past right-handed batters, but she interrupted me. "Second basemen, shortstops, third basemen."

I sat back and listened.

"Quarterbacks. Have you ever seen a left-handed quarterback?"

How did she know all this? She didn't even know what these positions were, in relation to an entire team.

"Hunting. Did you ever see a rifle made for a left-handed person? Of course not."

I got up to go. Out. Anywhere. The nearest bar. Just away from all this where I could feel sorry for *myself* and not a group of people whose plight was totally academic to me. Me! I wanted to shout at her. Feel sorry for me! But she wouldn't anyway, and deep down I knew that I didn't want her to. I couldn't stand it if she added me to her list of causes.

"How about mouse traps," she hollered at me as I walked toward the sidewalk. "They have to be set with the *right* hand!"

I went to a neighborhood bar and ordered whiskey. I never was a beer drinker, really. Other than the ones I've drunk on camera I probably haven't had more than a dozen beers in my entire life.

I stared into the mirror at Al Guard. It was still Al Guard at that point, make no mistake about it. Asa Weingarten had peered at the world through horn-rimmed glasses, remember? Al Guard wore contact lenses, which, after about six months of squinting agony, almost made him look like twenty-twenty. Asa Weingarten had been balding. But Al Guard had spent—how much was it? a dollar a follicle?—thousands for a youthful hairline. And more agony. Asa Weingarten's teeth had been a mess. Al's were capped, white, even, a Hollywood smile. ("This is the best beer money can buy . . . ahhh . . ." Then the smile.) You see me now? This gut? It belongs to Asa Weingarten, who eats food. Al Guard drank Metrecal and was svelt. A TV personality.

So it was Al Guard that looked back at me from the bar mirror that day. And a lot of days after that. It was Al Guard that bought the rifle. (Al Guard was right-handed and there was no problem with loading.) It says Al Guard on the license, you can check it. He bought it for hunting, he told himself.

After all what was he going to do with his winters from now on? In past years the off-season had been spent keeping up with the trades, occasional speaking engagements, attending the winter meetings, you know, stuff like that. For a while he had a local sports show, another couple of seasons he did some football, there was always something to keep him occupied. But now he had to find a hobby.

He wasn't broke, you understand, in fact was quite comfortably well off, so there was no pressure to find a job. To ever even work again if he didn't feel like it. I'm not sure he could have worked for anyone other than the Gothams.

So why did he decide on hunting for a hobby? When he'd never fired anything other than a Daisy Air Rifle in his entire life? He had always hated rifles, guns, firearms of any sort. He had been in total sympathy with his wife's crusade to make the possession of firearms illegal. (It's strange, though, wouldn't you say, that he never picked up the inconsistency in his wife's hatred of all who owned and used guns, and her sympathy with left-handed hunters because it was difficult for them to manipulate the weapon?) Perhaps his wife's mentioning of hunters was what suggested it to him. Because as he would sit in that neighborhood bar and stare into the mirror, and even as he went through the motions of announcing the games of the last two weeks of the season, those were the only words his wife had uttered that remained with him. In point of fact he couldn't erase them from his mind.

Actually they weren't the *only* words that remained. He also remembered her sympathy for left-handed shortstops. As he watched Spider Spinella play out the final games of his career—amidst deafening applause and cheers from the Gotham fans now: they knew he was retiring and every chance in the field, every trip to the plate reminded them of thousands he'd made in a glorious tenure in the Majors—he began to see himself as the left-handed shortstop and Spider as the right-handed one.

One week after the season was over he bought the rifle. He purchased it in a local sporting goods store. They knew him, the employees in the store, knew him as a figure in the sports world, and it was no surprise that he would be buying the most powerful rifle they had, equipped with a scope and a season's supply of shells. They even sold him a hunter's cap, a red woolen one, with little furry flaps to cover his ears on cold days.

He had lingered long after the last game or two were over, savoring the stadium quiet, the sense of grandeur, of heroic battles lost and won, that empty stadiums so often give. Do you know the feeling? Perhaps not.

The next to the last game had been a night game and after the crowd had left, not a large crowd since the Gothams were mired well down in the second division, and the big lights had been turned off, he went down and sat in the box seats. The only lights were those that shone in the exit runways, but they were

enough to cause the outfield grass, worn from a season of play, to glow with a green lustre. Al Guard stayed late that night.

The final game was a day game. A larger than average crowd had come to cheer as Spider Spinella bowed out as a Gotham. He had responded with a home run and a double, and a sensational play in the field, before being lifted in the seventh. The ovation was deafening, and the retiring shortstop stepped out of the dugout for one last wave of his cap before returning to the clubhouse for the last time. Rocky Davis had been on the mike in that last inning, and Al was relieved that *he* hadn't been. Could he have mustered the enthusiasm the dramatic moment warranted? Maybe. He was a pro, too, you know.

He didn't stay as long after that game. The grass was much browner under the probing heat of the sun. The orange seats, which the night before had seemed to sparkle in the dim exit lights, were obviously faded. There was the same sense of emptiness, of quiet, but the paper cups and hot dog wrappers that littered the aisles allowed Al little feeling of nostalgia. He was as empty as the stadium, and as bitter as the stale bits of beer left in the paper cups.

His eyes followed the emptiness of the stadium all the way up to the roof. He stared for a long time at the elaborate grillwork of girders and rafters. Perhaps it was at that time that he made up his mind to do what he was going to do. It's hard to say. But one thing is clear: he never again returned to the stadium until tonight, one year to the day after he was fired.

So his hobby became hunting. Instead of the Gotham cap he had often worn during previous winters, when he was shoveling the walk, or running down to the store for some last-minute groceries, he now wore the red hunting cap. There was a rifle range a short drive from his home and he began going there for a couple hours every afternoon, despite the vehement protests of his wife. She had picketed that precise rifle range a year and a half earlier. What if someone recognized him? She'd be mortified.

He became a reasonably decent shot, surprisingly enough. It's even more remarkable considering one major self-imposed handicap: he insisted on learning to shoot left-handed. This meant squinting with his right eye since he found it impossible to close his right eye without closing the left one as well. Otherwise, except for moments when his contact lens would slip and he'd have to blink to slide it back in place, he began to shoot consistent bull's-eyes, with the aid of the scope, of course. This is a key point in his behalf, I think, and I'll come back to it later.

When deer season opened Al took a lodge in a quiet area of Pennsylvania woods country and moved in for a month. It was the happiest month of his life. He brought along a case of Jim Beam, the complete works of Dostoevski, and Jim Brosnan's baseball books. For the entire time, except for occasional trips to a small general store a few miles away for steaks, potatoes, and canned fruit, he saw no one and spoke to no one. Whatever trades were made that winter were made without his knowledge.

Every day he took his rifle and went out stalking deer. He saw dozens. When he spotted one he immediately lined it up in the cross-hairs of his scope and fol-

lowed it till it was out of sight. He then would pick a tree in the general area where the deer had disappeared and shoot at the trunk. Invariably, after hiking down to check, he discovered he'd connected dead-center. This is another point in his behalf which I'll return to later.

Life in the lodge was quiet and pleasant. For some reason he began doing everything left-handed. He used each of the few utensils that were there, all of them designed for right-handed people, with his left hand. He peeled his potatoes left-handed, then fried them in a big skillet, turning them over with a turner made for a right-hander. He opened his tinned fruit with a right-handed can opener and mixed powdered milk with a measuring cup which listed the measurements only on one side. After a while it came quite naturally to him and he found he was no longer dependent on his right hand even when he urinated.

When he returned to civilization he was, for all intents and purposes, left-handed. Oddly enough his wife, except for once when she commented that he was wearing his watch on his right wrist, never noticed the switch. Neither did Johnny Gianucci on opening day.

"Somebody oughtta do something about it," Johnny said.

"What?" asked Al.

"That damn kid batboy. He can't do the job for beans."

"It's only opening day. Maybe he'll get better as the season goes along."

"Yeah?" Johnny's eyes flashed with pride and pain. "Well maybe Spider Spinella will too."

It was at that point, with two out in the Gotham fifth, that Al went home.

The next four months or so were spent planning. He enrolled in a correspondence course in electronics. He bought a book on mountain climbing and began seeking out the erection sites of new buildings and standing for hours and watching the steeplejacks. He was not quite sure he was *learning* anything from it all, except the electronics books, of course, which were opening up a whole new world to him, but watching the steeplejacks was having a profound psychological effect on him. He began to understand, earthbound as he was while he gazed up at them, the freedom that must be involved in moving around that far above the ground. More freedom, even, than the woods, which only gave a sense of freedom.

The announcer's booth had been elevated but he never felt free in it. It was an enclosure. An acquaintance had once remarked (back in the radio days before the contact lenses and the capped teeth) that he must feel rather like a god, since it lay within his power to tell the listener almost anything. He could say someone hit a home run when in reality he had just struck out. Al had tried to explain that it wouldn't change the fact of what had happened, and the man had finally nodded and said, "Yeah, I guess you could always read the paper the next day and find out what really happened."

The real gods inhabited the struts and girders of unfinished buildings. He knew that now. They were above the world, immune to the kind of practical necessity that supercedes people like him and Johnny Gianucci. They were the world's only left-handed shortstops.

He was tempted once to find out where they ate their lunch and go sit near them. He wanted to listen to them talk of high-altitude exploits, matter-of-factly, of course, as true heroes always do. But he sensed, perhaps, that that was just it. They *would* be matter-of-fact. They would no longer be heroic. He contented himself with watching them at a distance, in their natural habitat.

Those months passed quickly for him.

And then the past few weeks were spent busily preparing for tonight. He purchased a case in which he could inconspicuously carry his disassembled rifle. After searching around for awhile he was finally able to locate some climbing gear, most of which, besides the rope, was far less important functionally than it was psychologically. One goes somewhere to climb, he needs the gear. And of course he purchased all the necessary electronic equipment—wiring, tape, cutters, mike, stuff like that. It added up to a great amount of weight and bulk, but in his present state of excitement he probably would have been able to carry a safe into the stadium today, and lift it the necessary distance besides.

Getting into the stadium before dawn presented no obstacle to him. He knew every entrance and exit to the stadium by heart and how to get in or out at any time of the day or night. And by the time the sun had become visible over the left field bleachers he already had the pulley system rigged among the girders and was moving the equipment up to his planned perch just below the grandstand roof. It was hard work but he had to get everything up there before the groundskeepers arrived to give the field its daily once over, and he knew he'd have the entire day to rest once he was safely into his aerie.

By mid-morning everything was up and after taping it all securely in place he spent the next hour or so relaxing and sipping coffee from a thermos. He then lowered himself to the cable which ran from the booth to the P.A. system, and, surprising himself with the ease with which he handled it, he jacked himself into the system. In a matter of minutes he had cut in, spliced, and taped it all neatly back up. Left-handed, of course.

Not long after that the stadium began to stir. The groundskeepers, clad in a motley assortment of work clothes, rolled the tarp off the infield and began dragging the skin baselines and home plate area and mowing the grass. If they were called on to apply and remove the tarp during the game they would be wearing the royal blue Gotham jacket and cap, embossed with the famous white script "G." At that time they would be referred to as the "ground crew."

They then watered down the dirt areas, playfully spraying each other occasionally, their jocular outcries only faint squeaking sounds to Al Guard at his height. The baselines, batters' boxes, catcher's box, coaches' boxes and on deck circles were then limed and it suddenly struck him just how trapped everyone who was engaged in this pastime actually was. Everyone—not just the announcers in their little booth—was caught in an enclosure. Some of their enclosures were actually limed off to emphasize the fact, but all of them, whether they were boxed into the confines of the dugout or the bullpen, or simply restricted to the more subtle limitations of a particular position, were woefully unfree. In the morning paper, when their identity would be verified by a name in a boxscore

and a series of statistics, they would be categorized as "CF" or "SS" or "2B". Even each fan's identity would be qualified, by the seat number on his ticket. Just a number, part of the total attendance that would be listed at the end of the boxscore.

Al felt a deep exhilaration, up there on his girder, where everything seemed so small and insignificant. He took out his fingernail clipper and trimmed his nails, allowing the slight breeze to blow the clippings capriciously throughout the grandstand, occasionally all the way down to the box seats.

In the afternoon the vendors began to arrive. He could hear them in the runways, opening up their concessions and preparing for the evening's game. The smell of popcorn sifted up to him, along with that of the hot dogs that would be cooked now, then kept warm in the gigantic ovens that were designed to accommodate even the largest World Series crowd. The clink of bottles. The clunk of cans. The sounds and smells of an empty ball park.

The sun was still lingering on the outfield grass as the players began to straggle from the dugouts. In small groups, two and three at a time, they jogged to the outfield for wind sprints and light calisthenics. Some disdained this form of exercise and emerged from the dugouts only when batting practice had begun. Occasionally Al spotted an announcer or a writer, most of whom he knew, interviewing a player, or with a cameraman piecing together a feature story. For a moment he almost wished he was down there with them.

By the time they started hitting a few fans had begun to arrive. Many of them youngsters who stationed themselves outside the fences in hopes of retrieving a batting practice home run, they were, for the most part, the real fans. These were the fans Al had felt he was speaking to when he announced the Gotham games. Those who came early when they came, in order not just to see nine innings of a game, but the entire spectacle. They watched batting practice and infield drill with an expert's eye, wondering and trying in their minds to predict who would have a good night and who might "take the collar." There was something about the crack of a well-hit ball echoing in an empty ball park, and Al knew that these early fans shared the feeling.

The Gothams were hitting now and occasionally one would go into the bleachers, bouncing around hollowly among the empty wooden seats before being descended upon by a gang of souvenir-hungry youngsters. Soon the visiting team would bat, and take infield. The Gothams would then take infield and the game would be almost underway. The players were beginning to blur the line markings and the ground crew would have to come out and re-apply them before the first pitch. Some felt it was a waste to do it twice, but the Gothams had always prided themselves on doing everything first class. The field should look in practice the way it looks in a game. It was worth a little effort, they felt, and Al had always agreed.

When the Gothams took infield Al noticed that after the regulars had had their turn there were a few minutes when the non-infielders had a try at it. This was as much a part of the ritual as batting practice or the regular infield drill. Catchers would work out at shortstop, pitchers at second, left-handers, right-

handlers, it made no difference. It was their attempt, for a moment, to break away from the limitations of their own positions, positions that some of them would play without exception for anywhere from ten to twenty years.

The grandstand had begun filling up below him. He was not able to relax now, otherwise a fan might spot a dangling leg and his goose would be cooked. In a short while however it would be quite dark in the upper strata of the stadium and detection would no longer be a problem. He checked to make sure his gear was ready to go.

It was a dull game.

The Gotham's scored a few runs in the early innings and their pitching appeared strong enough to hold the lead easily. The excitement Al had felt before the game had faded, much the way a player's pre-game butterflies disappear with the first pitch. The height of his perch had lost some of its novelty as well, along with the sense of superiority it gave him. He felt apart from the proceedings.

A number of fans had brought portable radios to the park and Spider Spinella's call of the game drifted up to him from a hundred different corners of the grandstand. He hadn't improved since opening day. Al felt a strange sense of betrayal. His feelings should be of satisfaction, of gratification, listening to Spinella do poorly what he, Al, could do, had done for so many years, as well as anyone in the business. And here he was, perched *above* his unworthy successor, mike in hand and ready at any moment to take over, yet feeling like an exile flying over his own country, a country he could never again set foot into.

He had planned to wait calmly until the seventh inning. Then, at a moment no less appropriate than the seventh inning stretch, he had planned to casually take command. But he couldn't wait. The Gotham pitcher had just singled to open the home fifth, a hit that Spider Spinella had described to the portable radio owners as a "lazy looper." Al remembered that on opening day no fewer than four lazy loopers had dropped for hits by the time he left the bar in the fifth inning. Johnny Gianucci's successor had just presented the pitcher at first base with his warmup jacket and was trotting toward the plate to retrieve the bat, and preparing to step into the batter's box was the rookie shortstop who was trying to fill the famous shoes of Spider Spinella. Al aimed the rifle and squeezed off one round. The bullet kicked up dirt a few feet in front of home plate, followed a fraction of a second later by the explosive report of the rifle. I took the mike.

"Your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen," I began. I was slightly nervous, as you might imagine, since it was the first time I'd ever spoken in public. "Our apologies for this unexpected interruption, but we have a special announcement to make."

Some of the fans in the grandstand had seen us now, and hundreds of hands began pointing upward toward the roof. Soon the entire grandstand was gazing up at us. This made me just that much more nervous and I was anxious to turn the mike over to Al.

"My name is Asa Weingarten," I announced, then as an afterthought: "but a

few of you out there may remember me as *Abie* Weingarten. It's my pleasure tonight to announce an unscheduled tribute to one of the greatest Gothams of all time."

Some of the players had begun to move and Al fired again, into the same spot of dirt in front of the plate, and they froze. This second shot silenced the murmurings that had been coming from the stands. Neither the P.A. announcer nor Spider Spinella on the radio said a word.

"This man was an unsung hero throughout many of the Gothams' most trying pennant campaigns." I was hurrying my announcement slightly, I'm afraid. I was anxious for Al to take over. "As the Voice of the Gothams for twenty seasons he verbally soothed their wounds during the lean years and extolled their virtues during the fruitful ones. I know therefore, that you will all wish to join me in declaring this Al Guard Night."

There were some excited shouts below, as questions like "Al Guard? Is that Al Guard up there?" and "But where's the other guy? The one who's doing all the talking?" floated up toward the girders. I spoke again quickly, to silence the crowd. "We know you all would have wanted to bring gifts to honor Al had there been ample notice, but we assure you Al has no desire to be recognized in this way. New automobiles and television sets are nice, but not necessary. Al will be pleased simply to take the mike and bring you the rest of the game.

He took the mike and cleared his throat to tell the players to resume their positions and carry on with the game, but just then he spotted Spider Spinella take the radio mike in his hand and through the portable radios came: "He must be off his rocker, folks. He's above us with a gun and . . ." Al let go of the mike and it fell toward the crowd, bringing an "Ooooh" from them before the cord stopped it short in mid-air and held it there, dangling above them. He aimed the rifle at the announcer's booth, but with no intention—and I emphasize this fact—with no intention of anything other than shooting the mike. And he was a good enough marksman to do that, as I have already established.

Spider must have seen the rifle pointed at him because he put the mike back on the table among the scorecard and record books and ducked down along with Moose Mungo and Rocky Davis. It was an amusing sight in that fraction of a second before Al fired, seeing those three big men trying to find a place to hide in the tiny booth, and knowing Al had no intention of shooting any of them. He had *no* intention of shooting them. Or *anyone*. He hadn't even been able to kill a deer! Remember?

He fired at the mike but it was partially concealed by the railing now and the bullet must have ricocheted off the railing because the mike was not hit. Instead the bullet glanced down toward the field and struck the batboy still standing between first and home. The boy fell and Al dropped the rifle. He dropped it immediately. By the time the stadium police had surrounded us Al had already dropped the rifle. He turned himself in peacefully. He hadn't wanted to shoot the batboy, officers. Just the mike. And I know for a fact that he didn't even feel, as I did, not for an instant, that if he had been able to announce just one play, just one pitch, it would have been worth it.