

44 Innings to Paradise

By Jabin White
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Before we get too far into this story, let's get a couple of things straight:

1. I am a Red Sox fan.
2. I hate the Yankees.

Anybody who knows baseball knows No. 2 to be true based on No. 1, but in case I need to spell it out for anyone, there you go.

The hold the Red Sox have over their fans is well documented and nothing short of remarkable. This time of year, for many more years than I've been alive, the boys from Beantown have broken the hearts of Red Sox Nation, only to come up with new and creative ways of doing it the next year, and the next (Bucky f#@sing Dent, Bill Buckner, Aaron Boone, yada yada yada). Whatever. It all ends this year, Theo willing.

As seems to be the case lately, this year the Sox are locked in a death struggle in the ALCS with their dreaded rivals, the New York #%#@# Yankees. But I've got a problem. I've got what I call the "most poorly timed business trip in my life." I have to go to Amsterdam for a few days of meetings on Saturday, October 16th until Wednesday, October 20 – right during the heart of the series. But as the series gets underway, it only gets worse.

The Red Sox drop the first two games in the Bronx for a 2-0 series hole, and then rain in Boston forces Friday's Game 3 to be postponed. As I board the plane from Philadelphia to Amsterdam on Saturday night, the teams are just beginning play at Fenway. I check the score on my cell phone, and it's Yankees 3, Sox 0 in the top of the first inning. "Son of a bitch," I think to myself as I flip my phone closed. Not the start I wanted at Fenway.

Sunday, October 17th

I arrive in Amsterdam and make my way to the hotel. I rush up to the room and fire up my laptop to check the score. What??? I rub my eyes and re-focus. 19-8? Turns out I really didn't WANT to see Game 3, as the Yankees have pounded their way to a 3-0 series lead, and my boys to the brink of elimination.

I grab a quick nap to prepare for a long night, and then fire up the Internet broadcast of the Eagles game (listening to Merrill Reese and Mike Quick on WYSP somehow makes me homesick, and I've been gone less than 24 hours). The "Little Laptop That Could" is just beginning to be worth its weight in gold. The Eagles avenge their loss to the Carolina Panthers in last year's NFC Championship Game and have moved to 5-0 in this promising season. My spirits a bit uplifted, I turn my attention back to baseball.

The Einsteins at Fox, perhaps distracted by Bill O'Reilly on Line 2 wanting phone sex, have had the starting time of Game 4 moved from 4:30 to 7:30 in Boston, which translates to 1:30 AM Amsterdam time. Surprisingly they didn't check with me, so it's going to be a long night.

The alarm is set for 1:25 AM, and I turn in for a couple hours of sleep. Part of me – and this isn't easy to admit – wonders whether it is worth losing a night of sleep, getting my internal clock further screwed up, and being 'off' during Monday's meetings just to watch Game 4. I really have no desire to see the frickin' Yankees celebrate a sweep on the hallowed ground of Fenway Park. Convincing myself that the boys won't let this happen, I decide to stay awake and watch.

I am such a fan of the Internet. Yes, it has changed people's lives in many more important other ways, but how cool is it that for \$2.95 I can get the complete TV broadcast of a baseball game in Boston while sitting in a hotel room in Amsterdam? I settle in for what turns out to be a long game, even nodding off for a few middle innings, with the laptop whirring away on the bedside desk. The Sox are down going to the 9th, but get a run to stave off elimination. It's 5 a.m., and I need coffee.

"Dial 7-7 on your phone for "At Your Service," the sticker on the desktop phone says. I dial 7-7.

"At your service, sir," a female voice on the other end of the line says. The accent is hard to understand and difficult to place. Not Dutch, but Asian.

"I'd like to order some coffee, please," I say.

"You want eggs?" my new friend asks.

"No thank you, just coffee please."

Twenty minutes later there is a knock on the door, and Coco – my new friend's nametag says – has a tray with a pot of coffee. She is the same voice as the one on the phone. Phillipino, she responds, when asked. I think about asking her if she knows the Seinfeld episode with the maid named Coco that George gets to work so they won't call him Coco, and then decide it's a "had to be there" kind of story. I laugh to myself and think how funny that show was that, years later, it can make me laugh at 5 a.m. in a hotel room in Amsterdam.

"You up early," she says.

"I not sleep," I say, pointing to the laptop.

Coco has no idea what I mean, but stops for a moment when she sees the baseball game on the laptop screen. She points and shakes her head, as if to say, "what will they think of next?"

Regular season extra innings are tough on passionate fans. Playoff extra innings are excruciating. Playoff extra innings when your team is on the brink of elimination is Middle Ages torture stuff. The only salvation in this case is that the Sox are home, giving them a half inning to make up for any Yankee nonsense, unlike last

year's Aaron f\$%@\$ing Boone shot in Game 7.

Potential elimination at the hands of the asshole Yankees is bad enough, but another threat is starting to reveal itself. I'm meeting folks for breakfast at 7:45, and it's getting close to 7 a.m. What if the Sox are still playing when I have to leave the room? I shower quickly between innings without missing a pitch, shave between the next, and it is 7:25, bottom of the 12th inning.

Then "Papi" Ortiz steps in, and as if he knows that I have to get downstairs, he launches a home run into the right field bullpen as the Sox take Game 4. I'm not sure if the importance of that shot can be put into perspective. But you could literally feel the Sox metaphorically getting off the mat. They could have laid down and just as easily lost that game, and the Series. But collectively they said, NOT THIS TIME, Yanks. The celebration at home plate greeting Ortiz is a sight to see. I'm going nuts, jumping up and down on the bed, pumping my fists. I've got to call someone. Some quick math reveals that it's 1:25 AM on the East Coast, so calling home is out. I even think of calling my new friend Coco. Anyone!

"At your service, sir."

"They did it, Coco!!! Ortiz went yard, they're still alive!!!"

"You want eggs?"

Monday, October 18th

I get through the day of meetings, and get back to my room for the start of Game 5, 11 p.m.

Amsterdam time. Pedro is on the hill against Mike Mussina, who gives up 2 runs in a wonderfully shaky first inning but then settles down. Pedro is untouchable until a Bernie Williams homer and a Derek Jeter bases-loaded triple gives the Yankee assholes a 4-2 lead after the 6th. I like to think of myself as a good person, kind to people, tolerant of my fellow human beings. But I frickin' hate Derek Jeter.

The Sox bullpen comes up huge, Ortiz homers in the 8th, and they scratch out another run in the 8th to force extras once again.

I can't take much more of this.

It's not just the pressure, but the lack of sleep is starting to get to me. It's the middle of the night in Amsterdam, and I'm starting to have crazy thoughts like the Sox might not be done. Sure, no baseball team has ever come back from a 3-0 hole in a 7-game series, but these are the 'never say die' idiots. If any team can do it, it's this one. I'm almost glad that I'm alone in a hotel in Amsterdam so I'm not spouting this drivel to anyone, but I'm really starting to believe. I've got to get some sleep.

It's past 5 a.m. when Johnny "Unfrozen Caveman Center Fielder" Damon gets aboard, gets to second, and then Ortiz has one of the most incredible at-bats I have ever seen. The faith Sox fans (myself included) are starting to have in this guy is getting a little hard to imagine. Bearing in mind that baseball is a game in which failure nearly 7 times out of 10 over the course of a career gets you Hall of Fame numbers, this guy is on some kind of roll. But Papi battles

the Yankees Esteban Loaiza, fouling off something like six or seven pitches and staying alive, until finally he deposits a base knock into right center and the unshaven one hustles home. Sox win! Sox win! We're down just 3-2 in games, and we're headed back to the Bronx.

I grab three quick hours of shuteye and then get through Tuesday meetings, have a quiet Tuesday night on Amsterdam time, then set the alarm for 2 a.m.

Tuesday October 19th

Is there any precedence for a 'soft-protection boot' to be voted a series MVP? I'm not sure what the hell the Red Sox trainers did in fashioning the special boot that allowed Curt Schilling to pitch 7 of the guttiest postseason innings I have ever seen, and I really don't need to know. I just want to say thank you, guys. Schilling was supposed to be 'done,' and I almost hoped he was after the three innings of BP he pitched in Game 1 of the series, setting a nasty tone that led to the 3-0 Yankees' series lead. But he came off the mat just like the Red Sox, and a well-timed Mark Bellhorn shot forced Game 7.

But the most humorous – in the end – part of Game 6 was the "A-Rod Play." With the Sox leading 4-2 in the bottom of the 8th, A-Rod grounded back to pitcher Bronson Arroyo, and then did something that, to me, showed how desperate the Yankees were becoming. As he ran to first and Arroyo applied the tag, A-Rod 'karate-chopped' the ball out of his glove and down the right-field line. A-Rod advanced, Jeter scored from all the way from

first, meanwhile everyone in the 617 and surrounding area codes is thinking "What?????" The play was so clearly a bush-league attempt by A-Rod, and thankfully the umpire crew got it right, calling A-Rod out and sending Jeter back to first. But the Yankee players' reaction, followed by the crowd's response of throwing crap onto the field after the umps made the correct call, showed me just what we are dealing with here.

Obviously I'm biased (or haven't you been paying attention), but that whole thing was a joke. I congratulate the umpires for getting it right, and I think the Yankees and their fans showed their true selves with that spectacle. My yardstick for measuring this is quite simple: I honestly believe that if the tables were turned, and the Red Sox tried to pull a stunt like that, I would have been embarrassed. If the Fenway crowd had then reacted that way, it would have only added to my embarrassment. Bottom line is I don't think either one of those things would happen.

I am running on fumes now. Lack of sleep is really altering my perception of reality. I'm starting to believe that the Red Sox have tied this series at 3-3, but that just cannot be. I grab a few hours of sleep before I leave for the airport for the flight home. Well, sort of home. I've got a meeting in New York, so I am headed straight there instead of Philadelphia. Yes, into the belly of the beast. But I will not be attending Game 7. For one thing, I don't have that kind of money – I can't even bring myself to check eBay for how much those tickets are fetching. No, I'll be watching from the comfort of a

hotel room. It will be in New York, and I'll be watching on TV instead of a laptop, but why mess with a good thing while it's going. Game 7 is going to be one for the ages, I just know it. Turns out I'm wrong, but I've never been more glad to be wrong.

Wednesday, October 20th

I arrive in New York and check in on the NLCS Game 6. Oh, isn't that nice, Jim Edmonds goes yard and the Cardinals have forced Game 7. How nice. But I DON'T CARE!!! My focus is on The Bronx, and it starts well. Sort of. The Yanks have Bucky f@!#\$ing Dent throw out the first pitch. I curse at the TV screen.

But after Damon is thrown out at the plate in the first and I start to get that 'feeling' that you Red Sox fans know so well, up steps Papi Ortiz, who does it again. This guy is on the biggest roll this side of Carlos Beltran! Papi's 2-run shot sets the tone, and then the unshaven one hits a salami – the biggest Red Sox home run in nearly 2 days!!! – and then follows that with a 2-run upper-deck blast (man, did he club that one, or what?) soon after that is a dagger into the heart of the Evil Empire.

The Fox cameras begin showing the faces of the Yankee crowd. Shock and disbelief ... sadness ... misery. Somewhere deep in my heart, I begin to feel a twinge of pity, and then I snap out of it. Screw 'em!!! I could teach a seminar on misery and suffering while following your baseball team. The line forms here. These people can handle one night of torture followed by an off-season of coulda's, shoulda's, and all that. Builds character. What doesn't kill

us makes us stronger. Buck up, Bombers, there's always next year. I'm sure George will react in a rational, positive ... nevermind.

The middle and later innings are taking incredibly long, at least it seems. No Red Sox fan acknowledges the concept of a 'safe' lead, especially in a Game 7 at Yankee Stadium. "Why do they have to take a commercial break between every half inning?" I think to myself ridiculously. "Let's get this thing over with already."

And those frickin' commercials? Hey Fox, can we see one more "Rebel Billionaire" spot? I'm not quite sure what's on your Fall schedule. This looks like one of the worst shows ever, but then I missed it the first time it was on, when it was called "The Apprentice." And tonight they've announced that the prize will be that Richard Branson will let the winner become president of his company. I think to myself: "How'd you like to be the poor hump whose No. 2 at Virgin? Kissing up to this blowhard and running the company for 20 years while Sir Richard is off snow-shoeing in the Himalayas, and all of a sudden you come in one day – uh, gee, I know you've run the company like a Swiss watch for 20 years, but Todd here can walk a plank between two hot-air balloons, so you're out."

OK, I'm getting sidetracked here. Back to baseball.

The cell phone calls start coming in around 10:30-11, but even though the boys look like they are on cruise control, I refuse to believe this is all really happening until the final out is recorded. Then Ruben

Sierra grounds to second, and as Pokey Reese throws him out to wrap up a 10-3 win that was more dramatic than any 7-run win should be, and the tears start to come.

The Sox storm the mound and begin celebrating their AL pennant and trip to the World Series. But this is so much more than that. I'm not sure if I can put into words, and I'm not sure non-Red Sox fans can truly appreciate, what has just happened here. Sure, we've been to the World Series before (please don't make me talk about '86), and certainly the Sox are no strangers to, well, moderate success.

But this. This is special.

I can say without a hint of bitterness that I'm glad the Sox have gone through the Bronx to do this. If they hadn't, the asshole Yankee fans (and you know who you are) would have said it was 'tainted,' or that it didn't mean quite as much. Part of me would have agreed (before I told them to go "F" themselves). I realize I'm getting ahead of myself here and the Red Sox haven't won it all yet, but just to have the chance, and to have the Yankees as one of their conquered foes, is all we ever wanted. We are halfway to our collective dream.

All these thoughts come pouring into my head, and I weep. I'm not talking about the kind of tearing up like you do at the end of "Field of Dreams" (be honest), and then tell folks that you were chopping onions without sounding full of shit. I'm talking like open weeping. Suddenly I'm very glad I am by myself in a hotel room, and not having to explain to my kids why

Daddy is so happy that he's crying over a baseball game. I really don't expect people to understand this, and my wife will tell me to "get some perspective," but as a wise Sailor-man once said, "I am what I yam." And I'm just being honest.

This is pure joy. I don't mean like the kind when you have kids or real-life stuff like that (I had to write that or I'd get the 'perspective' speech again from the wife). But in terms of being a passionate sports fan, this is about as good as it gets. Four games to go, and The Curse is gone for good.

Thank you, Johnny. I'm thinking about growing my hair and a beard as a personal tribute. Thank you, Curt. Man, that guy stepped up. And Tim Wakefield. Ask yourself how many modern ballplayers would do what he did on Saturday night, volunteering to mop up in a one-sided game so the shredded bullpen could get a break, thereby giving up his starting role in the ALCS. Unbelievable. Thanks Pedro. You had it wrong; you're the Yankees' Daddy. You all are. And thanks Papi. How obvious was that MVP vote. I can't recall a guy in recent memory having a stretch like he did this week. "Hop on boys. World Series is right this way. Follow me."

As I reflect on my odyssey of two cities, multiple time zones, and the last four games, I start to think about superstition. Any Sox fan who says they are not superstitious is lying. I plan on being home for the World Series (no business trips on the schedule), remarkably changing my routine. I know people who don't change their underwear (or worse, if that's imaginable) if the

Sox are on a roll, and if winning four straight against the Yankees under the glaring October spotlight doesn't count as a roll, then I don't know what does. I begin to sooth myself with common sense thoughts like the fact that one schmuck in Philadelphia could not possibly affect the outcome of the World Series. As I check my Email on the Little Laptop that Could (thanks for a good week, little buddy), one of my friends has written, and I don't even need to read the Email to see what it's about. The subject line says it all: "Stay There!"

On to the World Series! Go Sox!