

Shoeless Joao Strikes Out

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Chapter 1: Vider a Viva

It's not Joe. It's certainly not Jayo, Woh, Wah, Jewy, Chewy, or Juicy. And it's especially not Gay-O, but it is as common as infield dirt where I come from, the Favela do Pantanal in southern Brazil. My name has been butchered, willfully or not, since I arrived in New Jersey in 1972. So repeat after me - Jo-Wow.

As for shoeless, that's an old story.

"Be ready to run when Paulino gets on" commanded our balding coach Nick Nardello poking a stout finger into my skinny freshman chest.

All I could manage was a gulp and a nod because the varsity coach of the Bound Brook Crusaders scared the crap out of me, as did the thought of actually playing in the game at rival Middlesex High. The much hated Blue Jays had just thinned ranks when all the seniors were dismissed by their hirsute alumnus coach for missing a practice.

This was the directionless 1970s when boys who had witnessed both broken U.S. soldiers returning from Vietnam and jubilant hippies enacting a social revolution were often either aimless patriots or equally aimless potheads. Their old school sports coaches were not ready for the latter.

The normally taciturn Nickie Nard had offered "we can make it up later as a double header." The Middlesex coach responded "Nah, we'll beat you with our JVs". Nardello countered by calling up some freshmen to inflate the numbers arriving off our bus. In the bustle to board I had forgotten my spikes.

"Here, take mine" offered another freshman sitting next to me, untying the red laces on his white size eleven Riddells.

"My feet are only nines, but he won't put my skinny butt in anyway."

The call to pinch run came in the top of the 7th and last inning with Middlesex up by a score of 3-2. Our stocky and cocky catcher Paul Paulino led off with a sharp single up the middle.

"What the fuck do you want, Gay-O?" he spat as I jogged over to replace him on first base.

"Get in here Paulino" shouted Nicky Nard from the dugout.

Next up to bat was our cleanup hitter, an all-state centerfielder with an equally wicked arm and bat. On the first pitch he ripped a lined drive to deep left center. I took off from first base with the crack of the bat and was rounding second as their centerfielder snagged the ball on the first hop, whirled, and fired a rope to third base catching me halfway there. I skidded to a halt and turned back toward second as the third baseman gave chase and then lobbed the ball over my head to their second baseman. Again I skidded and turned, only this time the too big white shoe slipped off my left foot. The second baseman followed me back toward third and tripped over the shoe as he fired high and wide past the bag. The ball caromed off the fence as I scrambled home barefooted for the tying run.

"Lucky baserunning Shoeless Joe" smirked their bespectacled catcher as I hobbled back to our dugout.

So now you know my nickname and my modus operandi to stumble into opportunity. It's good to get that out of the way, but it's only the beginning of seizing the day.

Chapter 2: Bebe Merda

"Pretty fair stretch there Ace" calls an old guy hobbling past as I lean my now six-foot frame into the girder of a new building going up over my favorite running path along the Raritan River.

The late winter construction on the abandoned site of the Johns Manville factory is nearly finished. Most of the asbestos from this former Superfund site was washed away in one flood or another rushing off the south slopes of the Watchung Mountains. The rest was buried in a government cleanup, but the site is now cordoned off with the new stadium construction stirring up ghosts of sins past. I'm taking a long floodplain run from the home I'd inherited from my foster family in the lower west end of the downstream town of Bound Brook.

"Sorry, gastrocnemius and soleus" I blurt, scared that I would be arrested for trespassing and spouting the name of the muscles that had cramped as I rounded the circular structure.

"How about a tour from the trainer for the first professional baseball team in central Jersey?" he growls, squirting a black-flecked stream of tobacco juice from a corner of his mouth. "Let's go!"

"Joao, let's go" whispered my big brother Jorge laying in front of me on the cardboard mat beside our makeshift door. "We need to be in the first match."

I opened my eyes to the orange glow of a late summer dawn suffusing our room around an old blanket hanging in the doorway. Then I quickly rolled over to stir my little brother Javier spooning behind me, and so on down the line. Soon all five of us were trotting barefooted through trash strewn alleys

between ramshackle houses until we suddenly emerged onto a lovely expanse of packed brown earth.

Futebol, futebol, futebol - that was what and how long we played in the dirt field wedged into a corner of our slum. We stopped only for drinking and eating, the former by leaning over the canal wall for a quick slurp of the diverted river water. When the sun erased all shadows and burned the tops of our heads, both teams marched in a ragged line to the Curitiba city dump for breakfast, lunch, and dinner all mixed into one midday fiesta.

"Whatcha got there little brother?"

"An American with our last name" I marvelled, holding up a crumpled 1966 baseball card. "Joe Nosseck of the Minnesota Twins."

I follow Tony the trainer up concrete ramps and into a dark runway that miraculously opens onto a kelly green expanse with a chestnut brown diamond at the base. The sweet smell of newly cut grass takes me back to the pampas south of Curitiba where I had cut and baled hay one summer along with hundreds of other boys rounded up by school bus each morning from the favela soccer fields.

"Say Moe, I need an aide who knows how to stretch a player" he offers, rocking back and forth on his heels with hands jammed into back pockets as we look out over the empty baseball field.

"It's Joao and I only played baseball for a few years before switching to running."

"Cut that brunette mop and you'll fit right in with these screwy ballplayers, Cuz."

"I do know about stretching for runners, and my job as a home health aide trained me to clean up after others. What's the salary?"

"It pays squat and you'll drink shit from those prima donnas, but you get the best seat in the house."

Chapter 3: Um Homem Feio

"Good try, but let's do another take" calls a photographer snapping a posed shot of the new catcher for the Manville Minutemen who's pretending to scoop a baseball out of the dirt with his mitt while throwing off his face mask with the other hand.

I'm in the training room behind the dugout stocking ace bandages and can't see their faces but do hear his ugly response and it takes me back to being nine-years-old in Brazil:

"Hey bitch, just shut the fuck up and get this baseball card bullshit over with!"

"That'll be fifty centavos young man" said a pale bald guy behind the counter at a luncheonette that sold baseball cards just across the six-lane highway from our favela.

I just stared at the numbers stamped on his forearm and tried to count out the coins I'd just earned by squeegeeing car windows at a nearby traffic light, all the while terrified that the creepy old man had seen me slip another pack into my pants pocket.

"Get any good ones?" whispered Jorge that night when he caught me sliding the shoe box of cards behind the gas stove in the corner of our one room house. The little boys were asleep on our mat and our Mom was at her job at Class Night Clube.

"An MUP candidate" I gushed, pulling the box back out and showing him Al McBean of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

"That's MVP for most valuable player, and relief pitchers don't have much of a shot" he reasoned, flipping the card back into the box after reading the back.

"Any card is eligible for my Most Ugly Player award" I countered, revealing the depth of my baseball card obsession in the summer of 1967.

"Hey little buddy" he cautioned, "some of our futebol friends might kick your white German ass for calling a black player the ugliest man in baseball."

"It's not that he's black, it's the funny way he's pretending to bend forward for the picture."

"Don't you have some other award for this Al McBean?"

"I know, he can be the first nominee for a Lookie of the Year award."

"Joao, you're too much" he laughed, giving my head a little push toward the unused stove.

"Great, that shot should do it" concludes the pretty photographer after the tenth take at an action shot.

"Hey babe, how about a few more shots in my hotel room tonight?" winks the catcher as she tucks her fine black hair up into a Topps ball cap and stalks away without looking back.

Chapter 4: Que Saudade

"Sorry Cuz, some of these lazy slobs won't oil their own mitts" says the Tony the trainer, his beer gut bulging over a cart full of baseball gloves as he wheels it over. "It ain't training, but we do what's needed."

"No problem boss" I answer, and it really isn't because it's Spring I desperately miss the cut-grass triggered ritual of glove oiling. And there on top of the pile is my first glove, a Wilson T1000.

"Joao, did you take five cruzeiros from my wallet while I was delivering papers?" asked Jorge on the first cool morning in March.

We lived in southern Brazil so it had started cooling down with the start of American baseball season. Our three little brothers were still asleep, and Mom had not yet gotten home from her all night job at Class Night Clube. We'd been skipping early morning soccer since Jorge had gotten a newspaper route in the rich neighborhood across the highway.

"No" I blurted and then started to turn away, but not before he had seen my face turning red.

"Tell the truth" he commanded, clamping a hand on my shoulder.

"I am, I didn't take your money while you were working" I whined.

"Then why are you blushing?" he growled, squeezing harder as I tried to sink away.

"OK, OK, I took it while you were sleeping" I cried with tears starting down my cheeks.

"Joao, that's not like you" he said, softening his grip. "Why do you need that much money? It's more than you could spend on baseball cards."

"There's a glove at the Luncheonette for \$4.50" I gushed. "It even comes with a baseball and a little can of glove oil."

"Well let's go get you that glove, you can pay me back a little each week from your car washing change."

I roll the cart into the dugout and sit at the trainer's section toward the left field side of the long wooden bench.

"Take...me out to the...ballgame" I hum, taking a big whiff of the fresh cut grass on the bright green infield.

The field crew are raking the dirt around pitcher's mound and homeplate in preparation for tomorrow's arrival of pitchers and catchers.

"Take...me out with the...crowd" I continue, grabbing the Wilson, sliding my left hand into it's five fingers, and squirting a pool of clear oil into it's upturned pocket.

The fingers of my other hand slide the thick oil up the glove's fingers one at time, releasing a musky scent as the old leather turns from tan to earthy brown. Turning it over, I work a little grease along each finger and then finish it off by slipping it onto my lap, rubbing my hands together, and sliding my now coated left hand back in to oil the inside of the short infielder's glove.

"Give me some peanuts and Crack...er Jacks" I sing, grabbing a left-hander's Rawlings glove from the pile in the cart and repeating the oiling process with my hands reversed.

I finish oiling a wierd black Mizuno with the long fingers of an outfielder's glove and a few more Wilsons and Rawlings, leaving only a big Spalding catcher's mitt at the bottom of the cart. Slipping my left hand in and turning it over, I gasp to see the name scripted across the palm.

"I...don't care...if I never...get back" I hiss, squirting a big pool of oil onto Paul Paulino, definitely not a name that I desperately miss.

Chapter 5: Una Bola Murcha

"Hey Gay-o, go get me a beer" orders a chunky guy laying face down on the training table as my boss massages his cramped calf muscles.

"Yeah, make it a St. Pauli Girl" quips one of the pitchers soaking his sore shoulder in the ice tub.

It's the first Spring training practice on JM Field and is for pitchers and catchers only. But it's not the first time my ball has been deflated by American baseball.

"OK Joe, read the ball off the bat" shouted Coach Nardello before hitting a flyball toward me in right field.

It was a bright but chilly afternoon in early April with a stiff westerly wind blustering across LaMonte Field. The multi-purpose field was nestled beneath the greening trees of First Watchung Mountain to the north. Our baseball diamond was wedged behind the eastern endzone of the football field that was enclosed by a cinder track circling behind the backstop and cutting across right field.

As the ball flew off the fungo bat I leapt forward onto the cinders and then scrambled back as it skipped off the fingers of my short glove and bounced into the chain link fence, disappearing into the overgrown ivy. I frantically rooted around until noticing the coach waving me in.

"As an outfielder, you'll make a pretty good base runner" he chuckled, his large gut bouncing over his belt with each guffaw. "Now get over there on second and be ready to tag up when I hit it to Gubi in center."

To my puzzled look he just shook his head and grumbled "stay on the bag until he catches it, then run like hell to third."

"Hey Coach, we're about to start the 880" called the track coach walking over along the left field foul line. "Can you keep it in the infield until they're done running?"

"Our first conference game is tomorrow" is all Coach Nardello said out loud, but I heard him grumble "God damn track team" as the other coach walked away.

A gun fired and the distance runners headed around the track into the wind. One of my sophomore classmates Stu Woody was already out in front as the pack rumbled along the left field foul line. He was an amazingly fast and equally confident runner who had broken many course records in the Fall cross country season. Woody rounded the backstop and sprinted across right field with the tailwind propelling him farther in front.

A big black bird zagged across the field as Nicky Nard tossed up a ball, cocked the bat back into his left handed swing, and launched one into the wind. Gubi took off, glancing over his left shoulder as he ran toward the trajectory of the ball, runner, and bird. Two of them collided in a tangled heap as the other runners and the big black bird dodged past.

I decided right then and there to report for track practice the next day.

"Forget it Cuz" growls Tony the trainer as I'm headed out toward the concession stand. "This homo here can't order us around just because he's the player-coach. Just go get me that stack of towels."

"Ah, you guys are no fun" moans the catcher, turning onto his side from under a little white towel.

I see who he is and jump back a step, my shoulder length brunette locks bouncing as I land. The coach and catcher for the Manville Minutemen really is my former Bound Brook teammate Paul Paulino.

Chapter 6: Farinho Do Mesmo Saco

"Pitchers and catchers to the bullpen with me" commands Coach Paulino as the whole team takes the field for the first full practice including position players. "Two laps for the rest of you pussies."

"There's no running in baseball" grumbles a veteran first baseman just picked up by the Minutemen from the parent club, the Minnesota Twins. "These old knees can barely make it out to the bag."

"Quit your whining" continues the player-coach. "Gay-O here will take care of any sore joints after practice."

"Come on Killer Two" whispers our lanky centerfielder grabbing the big guy's elbow and walking toward the right field foul line. "We'll flock together."

I nod and give a thumbs up as they take off down the side of the field, all the while remembering my first cross country season at Bound Brook High School.

"With Stew gone we'll have to flock together to win" plotted a red-headed runner under a big tree before the first meet at Calco field.

After the collision on the baseball field during track season Stewart Woody had transferred to a private school with a top running program. With no star runner BBHS cross country was not expected to win many meets even though undefeated the previous year. The Mountain Valley Conference was pretty darn competitive, with teams that trained to aerobic excellence by running the Watchung hillsides.

"Let their fastest runners take the lead" he continued as the Fall sun dropped behind the tree line. "Then we'll stick together and take turns blocking any sprinters in the last mile."

"Are you in?" he shouted, stirring up six big black birds in the tree as he reached his hand into the center of the circle of six runners.

"Six-pack on three, one, two, three..."

"...SIX PACK" we shouted, breaking the huddle and jogging over to the starting line as the big black birds flapped up from the huge old oak.

"Get moving chicken shit" shouted Paulino as the veteran and his escort hobbled past the bullpen at the end of the first lap.

"They don't call me Killer Two for nothing" growled the old first baseman as the other fielders caught up from behind on their second lap and slowed to join them for the rest of the run.

Chapter 7: O Bicho Vai Pegar

"There's errors and there's errors" whispers Paul Paulino from the therapy table, raising a dark eyebrow as I knead and stretch his tight calf muscles.

"Hey P, I'm throwing on opening day" growls lanky Eddie Cicotte with his left arm hanging down into the ice tub. "There'd better be no errors out there."

"The old man's got the bucks and is paying us peanuts" grumbles Paulino. "We might as well plant a few of our own."

"Oh, you mean..." gasps Cicotte, both eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "No way I'm throwing that."

"Sinclair's so hyped about the new field he's probably putting half of that fracking fortune into a win" explains the coach and catcher, rolling over so I can stretch his hamstrings. "At twenty five to one we can ante up a thousand each and double our salaries."

`Sinclair. I know I know that name from somewhere but where?

"Any of you boys know the way to the big tree?" shouted a mustached man, halting our first afternoon soccer match after a landfill siesta.

He was in a dark blue Petrobras uniform and behind him was a group of foreigners in white polos and khakis. I imagined a traveling baseball team and my hand shot up before any of the others.

"You there, lead these American Rotarians to the Imbuia" commanded the state oil company guy handing me a machete.

We marched along the canal path for a kilometer and then turned single file onto a narrow trail into the Pantanal swamp. Soon the air stilled into stifling humidity as I put the machete to work on fronds that had filled the slender sliver of light above the old trail. Glancing back, I saw the panicked eyes of five sweaty guys swatting away at mosquitoes and vines.

"Dez minutinhos" I called, hoping one of them understood a little Portuguese.

"We'll be there ten minutes" translated the smallest guy from the rear of the line, wiping his glasses on a now untucked shirt.

After another half hour of chopping and swatting in the dense green jungle a little breeze cooled our faces as the path opened onto the floodplain of the Parana River. And there she was.

"Amazing" exclaimed the little guy reaching around the massive trunk.

"My God, how much timber in this beauty?" asked a bearded guy joining in trying to stretch around the tree.

"I don't need to clearcut to drill" answered their apparent leader.

Soon all five were standing fingertip to fingertip and they still couldn't encircle the ancient pine.

"Venha aqui por favor" called the smart one waving me over to join the chain.

"Milagrosa!" he proclaimed as we completed the loop around the trunk with six sets of arms, and the massive density and soaring branches of the old imbuia tree really was a miracle.

"Você quer ir comigo ao Nova Jersey?" he asked. "A smart and beautiful boy like you would do well in an American foster family."

"Sinclair, let's get the fuck out of this hellhole before we're eaten alive" grumbled the bearded one waving at mosquitoes and stomping away.

"What do you say we get this show on the road" conceded the leader following him back up the trail.

The others followed and I took up the rear on the march out of the Pantanal.

"I don't know P" replies Cicotte yanking his arm out of the ice. "This could get us banned for life."

"Come on Fast Eddie, we're already minor league lifers" continues Paulino. "Why not earn that nickname and share in the pot?"

"So how would we do it?"

"A passed ball here, a wild pitch there, a missed backup" the catcher concludes rolling up from the table and slipping on his flip-flops. "They'll never know that this battery has a short circuit."

"I'll let it ride overnight" concedes the pitcher grabbing a towel and heading for the shower.

Chapter 8: Mais Chopp

"What can I do ya for?" calls the bartender at the West Brook Inn as I duck into the door.

The square whitewashed building is tucked into a corner of Bound Brook wedged between the Raritan River and the Middle Brook, southern and western boundaries for the flood prone town. It's my usual stop after the three-mile run home from JM Field to my house just around the corner.

"Bottle of Bud" I respond sliding onto a stool at the bottom edge of the L-shaped bar and noticing the photographer perched at the top edge and scanning images on her laptop.

"Big day tomorrow" comments the tender sliding my longneck over. "Are the Minutemen ready?"

"The trainers are and the baseball cards will soon be" I answer nodding toward the camerawoman whose dark bangs brush black-rimmed glasses as she leans over her work.

"One more!" bellowed a big guy at the middle of the bar, and I see her quick frown come and go.

"Mais chopp!" bellowed a big guy sitting alone at a table near the dance floor as I ducked into the club where my mother waited tables.

She had told us never to go there, but I needed to tell her what the American had said about going to school in New Jersey. So I walked into the city at dusk and waited on the corner until there was no one near the entrance,

slipping into a dark corner. A waitress backed out of the kitchen door carrying a tray of drinks, her tight shirt and short skirt briefly framed by the bright light until the door swung closed. It wasn't her.

The purple stage lights started flashing as men at tables clapped to the beat of a samba blaring from the big speakers. A pretty woman in stiletto heels, tight sliver pants, and long dark hair draped over a white tank top danced onto the stage. A quick hand to the mouth stifled my gasp, and I slipped back out of Class Night Clube.

"Refill Joao?" quips the West Brook tender.

"Nah, one after a run is good, two just makes me go to bed early."

"I hear ya" he replies. "I also hear Paul Paulino's back in town. Wasn't he a prick before he went off to college baseball in Florida?"

"Some things never change" I manage, sliding the tall stool back to go, but not before I see the Topps photographer flash a quick smile.

Chapter 9: Catar Coquino Na Ladeira

The players stand along the base lines holding caps over their presumed hearts as a diminutive woman with a tower of dark wavy hair stands on homeplate and belts out the Star Spangled Banner.

"And now a few words from the owner of the Manville Minutemen" booms the announcer as the roar from the fans dies down and the players reposition hats, shuffling from one foot to the other.

"Welcome to our beautiful new stadium" exclaims a short guy as he removes his glasses and wipes them on his tie. "It's my great honor to christen this first professional baseball field of central New Jersey as Sinclair Yard."

From my seat at the outfield edge of the dugout I can see that it's a bottle of Brazilian cachaça that he smashes over a baseball bat held in front of home plate. Then he walks briskly down the third base line shaking the hand of each player before striding into the dugout and plopping onto the bench beside me.

"What do you say we get this show on the road" he laughs as the players either jog out to their positions or shamle into the dugouts, and I'm taken back to the day after that fateful trek to the imbuia.

"Where is the one who led the Americans to the big tree" called out a pretty woman holding a clipboard as she stood by the side of our soccer field.

We all froze in our tracks, me behind my brother whose 15-year-old body was considerably larger than mine.

"Who wants to know?" demanded Jorge.

"Petrobras has provided a scholarship to go to high school in America."

"It was Joao" he declared, stepping aside and pointing at me. "Joao Nossick of Favela do Pantanal."

Eddie Cicotte looks sharp throwing his warmup pitches, popping fastballs into Paulino's big catcher's mitt and slicing curves down over the plate.

"Play ball" yells the umpire as the leadoff hitter for the Newark Bears steps to the plate.

The left-handed batter crouches into a low stance and cocks his bat back over his left shoulder. The pitch is a curve ball that doesn't quite break, plunking him in the right hip. He glares at Cicotte while rubbing his hip and hobbling to first base.

The number two hitter positions himself at the rear of the right-hander's batter's box and digs his right foot into the dirt. Paulino flashes a single finger down between his legs and toward the batter, positioning his mitt as a target at the lower inside of the strike zone. The fastball misses low and tight, caroming off the glove and skidding to the backstop. The base runner sprinting to second base sees Paulino frantically looking around for the ball and turns the corner, heading to third for a two-base passed ball.

Cicotte starts his next windup and settles into the stretch position with pitching hand holding the ball in his glove at the waist and back to the runner taking a short lead off third. He raises the glove to resume the windup but quickly twists toward third.

"Balk" shouts the home plate umpire, waving the runner home from third because Cicotte had interrupted his pitch after the pause.

"Two pitches, no hits, down one" grumbles the owner.

"You'd think they're throwing it" I offer.

"Nah, just a rough start for these two old pros."

"OK boss, I'll go pick coconuts on a slope" I quip.

"That, my friend, might be better than watching this fiasco" he laughs.

Chapter 10: O Canto De Esperanca

What's up Fast Eddie?" asks our pitching coach skipping over the third base line on the way to the pitcher's mound. "Is that wing still alive?"

"Yeah coach, he'll settle down" soothes Paulino as he strides out from homeplate.

"I got it" nods Cicotte, stepping back to the pitching rubber to end the conference.

"I got it" nodded Frankie Grouchowitz to my request for a ride to the DMV over in Piscataway a few towns east. "Get that license and you're halfway to citizenship."

"There's the little problem of a permanent address" I mused, resigned to going back to Brazil after my upcoming graduation from Bound Brook High School.

"Frankie's going into the Army" sighed Mrs. Grouchowitz. "I'll adopt if you'll stay and help with this leaky old house."

"I'll help anytime but could never impose" I replied.

"She's terrified of the floods" laughed Frankie. "It would help us both if you stayed here after high school."

"I can handle a little water in the house. It ran through our shack in Curitiba with every rain."

Paulino squats behind their best batter and flashes a single finger down and away from the right-handed hitter, wiggling it upward to indicate a fastball up and away, then positioning the catcher's mitt where he wants the ball. Cicotte steps back from the rubber, turns left into his windup, and lunges forward, propelling a perfect pitch into the upper outer strike zone.

The hitter simultaneously steps toward the mound and uncoils his hips and arms, whipping the thirty-five inch Louisville Slugger into a monster swing.

"Thwack" launches the baseball into a tremendous arc up and over the field.

All heads turn to watch the white dot finally drop over the centerfield wall disappearing onto the Raritan River floodplain.

"Couldn't a thrown it better for batting practice" quips a grey haired guy leaning in from a seat beside the dugout.

"Too true Joe" glares Sinclair, waving to the manager at the other side of the dugout to get Cicotte out of the game. "Leave it to a former player to see what I won't. My trainer here tried to warn me. Joao, meet Joe Nossick, senior scout for the Minnesota Twins."

Chapter 11: Um Beijinho

"Don't get run over Cuz" warns Tony the trainer as I head out of JM Yard for a run home after a Sunday double header in late June.

"Very unlikely" I reply. "I'm taking the tow path."

"In that case don't get lost" he calls. "And good work this week after that rough start!"

"Hey trainer" called the soft voice of someone sliding onto the next barstool. "What happened out there in that wild first inning?"

I had popped into the West Brook after our comeback win on opening day for my usual bottle of Bud before bed.

"Boa noite to you too" I replied, swiveling to face a tall dark woman dressed in tight bluejeans and a loose black silk blouse.

"Sorry to be so blunt" apologized the Topps photographer. "I'm Raven but call me Ray."

"Joao Nossick" I smiled, glancing down at her lowtop Doc Martins. "I guess you could say our battery was discharged in one swell foop"

"Funny man" she laughed. "Well Cicotte needed to go, but why that asshole of a catcher too?"

"The owner caught them trying to throw the game" I whispered with a hand curled around my mouth. "They'll be banished from baseball for life."

"Wow, it's the Chicago Black Sox all over again" she mused.

"That'll be Joao to you" I frowned before giving her a grin. "Did you know that Shoeless Joe Jackson was later exonerated?"

"Say it ain't so, Joao" she whined, and we both giggled, tapped bottle tops, and took a slug.

My seven mile run home starts down the back sidewalk out of the stadium parking lot and past the Walmart Supercenter, turning left onto Main Street of Manville, a borough named for the factory that graced it's citizens and streams with asbestos for most of the 20th century.

Dodging parked and turning cars through town, I catch a glimpse of the twin azure turrets of Ss. Peter and Paul Orthodox Church in the waning light of a long midsummer's eve and pause to gulp half of a Mounds bar, dropping the other into the back pocket of my red running shorts. Immigrants from eastern Poland and the Ukraine flocked to this river town in the 1940s and 50s for holy communion and unholy factory jobs.

A left on Wilhousky takes me over the Millstone River bridge and onto the Delaware and Raritan canal towpath, now an 8-foot wide greenbelt cutting across the 70-mile waist of New Jersey. I pass the watered down Zaraphath Pillar of Fire compound lodged between canal and river where self-proclaimed bishop Alma White preached white supremacy in the guise of a biblical mandate until her death in 1946.

Pondering these churches and the immigrants they brought to central Jersey, I'm soon flying down the path and reviewing my own peregrinations. The hardest was to leave my mother and three little brothers in Favela do Pantanal, with only the hope of them following allowing me to accept Sinclair's philanthropy. Playing baseball in Bound Brook was a big win, but it's driving

me into a life of running got me to the postseason. The adoption by Mrs. G granted citizenship, inheriting her house autonomy even with occasional brown water churning through the living room. And now the Army Corps of Engineers was finishing a dike and channelization project that promised to reduce the flooding.

I feel like the luckiest man alive as I cut under the 287 bridge into South Bound Brook. Then a big black bird glides along the darkening Raritan, its bright white head catching the very last rays. In the vacuous flap of its huge wings I hear a soft giggle, in the imperfect alignment of tail feathers I see dark bangs.

Then I'm crossing the wooden walkway of the Queens Bridge and cutting left at the circle onto Bound Brook's old Main Street. Running past Dominican storefronts in the growing gloom, I glimpse a big guy stumbling across the street toward Torpedos go-go bar and know without seeing who it is. An unseen slap on the back propels the drunken Paulino to the curb. I sprint away and a smile grows as I take the jog over to Talmadge Avenue heading for my buff stucco house in the west end. And there on the decaying wooden porch is a small upright package.

I sit on the top step, untie the ribbon bow at the neck of the package, and pull down the red tissue paper. My mouth falls open as the words Cachaca Companhia and then Parana Brazil are revealed. I fumble with the little card, finally flipping it open with a fingernail. A single tear glides down my cheek as I find, imprinted in red on a white background, an utterly perfect little kiss in the guise of a pair of photographer lips.