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María Rosa Menocal

Sons and Warriors

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My son was born in Philadelphia in 1985 and before he was out of diapers he had become an avid Philadelphia Flyers hockey fan. Those were glory years for that team: although they did not win a Stanley Cup they were always in the playoffs and several years did so unexpectedly well that they went to the finals, once taking the then-formidable Edmonton Oilers to a seventh game of the Stanley Cup. My son was an excellent little fan, knowing that watching the games meant at least two other things: knowing something of the team's history and lore, on the one hand, and, on the other, living through their ongoing season. Soon enough, he would become the storyteller, knowing how to "call" any imaginary game of his own, but in those earliest moments, the first, most simple, version was that he "became" one of the team's young star players, Rick Tocchet. Whether he was running around our living room playing along as a game was broadcast, or playing outside on our front porch pretending a game was going on and whacking a ball with his miniature stick, he was Tocchet, number 22.

One morning, when he was about five, I woke up to the dismaying news that Tocchet had been traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins. I felt that sense of loss and betrayal and incomprehension that any fan does when you find out about such a trade. Tocchet was young and extremely talented and looked like a franchise player—but at about that time the Flyers were undergoing the sort of change in management that often results in such a redefinition of the character of the team that the very notion of a "franchise" player seems to become obsolete. Indeed, trading away the hero has always been the set-up for all sorts of heartbreak, and despite the general perception that it is all a part of the newly commercialized universe of big-time sports, in fact it is an old tradition and has always broken hearts (Boston still mourns the loss of Babe Ruth, for example). It was, in fact, Curt Flood's refusal to have his life shattered by a trade that precipitated the players' rebellion in baseball and the free agency that followed. So when I heard about the Tocchet trade I knew that this would be unhappy news for my son, but I think I also naively hoped he would know what to do with loss: I comforted myself that it was only one player, after all, not a whole team, and he's just a kid. . . I procrastinated a few days and then, in the early evening, as I sat with him while he was taking his bath, that tender and intimate part of the day between mothers and young children, I told him I had bad news.

It turned out to be a defining moment, forever seared in my heart. He didn't just protest, he crumpled up and wept more piteously than he ever had before. How could they do such a thing? It broke his heart utterly, and I found myself sitting on the toilet next to the tub, wet from trying to console him and from weeping myself at the spectacle of a child with his first broken heart, one of those crystalline comings of age that literature is filled with but which are easy enough to miss in real life. We were both, my son and I, changed in that moment. He lost his innocence—and from that day on he refused to watch the Flyers and became a Pittsburgh fan, rather felicitous for him since with Tocchet, as well as the great star Mario Lemieux, and a handful of other real talent they invested in, the Penguins went on to win the Stanley Cup that year, vindicating my son's profound sense of cosmic crime and punishment. It was narrative justice. For me, it was a redefining moment because even though I had loved watching sports all my life—and saw nothing incongruous in the fact I had absolutely no talent for playing any of them—I had never thought much nor cared much about what it was that made them seem so compelling, or why, as I went through graduate school and then stayed in academia, there were fewer and fewer people around

me who shared that passion, who read the sports pages. But in that moment, suffering a mother's heartbreak at seeing a badly hurt child, I began more consciously to absorb the vital role of the culture of competitive sports—by which I mean the watching of it and the knowledge of it as a vital part of one's life, of the shaping and telling of life's stories, both tragic and comic. His tears came from the same place mine came from, the tears of our own losses, past and future, that are the ones we shed when we read or hear or see others' stories.

I carried my little story of my child's first heartbreak around with me from then on, and in the retelling its comic side would feature prominently without, in my own sense of it, any diminishment of its tricky lessons about learning how to lose and how to react to heartbreak—in some versions the moral is obviously to switch righteously to the team that will win the Stanley Cup. But soon enough it was clear that I got two kinds of reactions to the story, one sympathetic, the other uncomprehending—and the uncomprehending were, with astonishing consistency, the people to whom I most wanted to tell the story: my colleagues in academia, mostly people who deal with literature, on the one hand, and, on the other, the women who tended to become, more and more, my sometime companions because they had small children, too, and mostly boys. (Alas, the social life of a professional woman with children seems to end up narrowing down to those two groups of interlocutors: one's colleagues and other moms.) They simply didn't get it. Who? A hockey player? A trade? So what? Obviously, these were not among those people who still mourn the treachery of the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn. The notion that there could be in my anecdote a story that would make you both laugh and cry if it had been written by Flaubert was oddly hard to communicate to those who ought to have been most ready to hear it, those who, like me, read and teach literature for a living. And for the other audience, the mothers of boys, it turned out to be mostly reducible to this incomprehensibly male thing that boys are prone to. Sports, after all, are just sports: the juxtaposition is to both real life and, especially, real culture. And "cultured" women as well as academics as a cultural class not only don't know sports —especially the hard-core team contact sports that define mainstream professional sporting life and thus a significant part of our culture's communal life—but believe themselves to be superior to such knowledge, believe those sports themselves as well as that culture that involves knowing their details, their characters, their best stories, to be either essentially trivial or brutish or both. Indeed, they would consider the words "culture" (meant as a positive thing, like good table manners or the ability to converse in French or know about the latest exhibit at the Whitney Museum) and "sports" (meaning those where groups of grown men who do fairly violent things with balls or ball-like objects) to have nothing to do with each other.

For every exception to this very un-PC generalization there are a hundred stories to prove the rule and the personal anecdotes often share that same hilarious-poignant quality; and all the exceptions I know, both among women and among academics, have their own great stories to tell. One of my "exception" colleagues burst out laughing when I told him I was intrigued by this social pattern and especially by the sports-indifference of women whose male companions eat and breathe sports. It reminded him of the time, he said, when his wife, herself a distinguished academic, had returned home after a prestigious dinner in Washington, D. C. only to recount that it had been an immensely boring evening graced by none of the glamorous types one might have hoped for. But pressed further, it turned out one of the unknowns at the party was "this really tall guy who I think was from New Jersey." Right. For a certain audience, the story can end there, of course.

I suspect the "You mean you got to meet Bill Bradley?" line was, at that point, delivered in that tone that is halfway to tears from hilarity—and it was followed by that formulaic and chilling "Who's he?" When Spike Lee recently said that Bill Bradley was the only white politician he would ever vote for, one had to wonder what the "Who's he?" people would make of it. Of course, Lee's comment is just one more of those anecdotes that so easily divides the world into two groups

of people: not only those who know who Bradley is and those who don't; but those who can understand Spike Lee's opinion, whether they share it or not, and those who don't; those who understand reflexively that there is a seamless connection between Lee's fanatic attachment to the Knicks and his "serious" films; and those who imagine one set of activities and interests is separate from the other; and that the Spike Lee at every Knicks game is different from—and far less intellectual than—the man who takes on subjects like Malcolm X and the continuing problem of racism in America.

This division which pits the loftier female, the intellectual, against the more childish (or brutish) uncultured male—the unreconstructed male driven by the ferocious competitive urge—is so much a given it can always be played on in our public stories, and probably most of all in our movies. Woman of the Year, one of the classic Hepburn-Tracy films, and probably the most gallingly anti-feminist one of the bunch, plays brilliantly with the types. Both Hepburn and Tracy play newspaper writers—but while Hepburn, with that great aristocratic accent, is the embodiment of culture itself and the "liberated" professional woman so rare in the forties, poor Spencer Tracy, whom she looks down on and falls in love with despite his obvious cultural limitations, is a mere sportswriter. Their wildly different passions—and the assumed superiority of hers: history, languages, momentous world events, "culture" writ large—dominate the opening scene of the movie, which juxtaposes their competing headlines: "Hitler will lose!" "The Yankees won't lose." The scene then shifts to a bar (not what anyone would call a "classy" one, needless to say) and it turns out that the learned Hepburn character—her name is Tess Harding—is on a radio quiz show, brilliantly answering the most esoteric of questions, until she is thrown "What is the most frequently run distance in American sports?" Of course, Sam the sportswriter (Tracy), who is sitting around at the bar with his buddies, immediately says "90 feet" while Tess, on the radio, with prim condescension, answers "Oh, I really don't know anything about American sports," and, a bit later when its importance is explained to her ("game of baseball. . . thousands of boys run it every day") she sniffs "Seems like a frightful waste of energy, doesn't it." Pure lockjaw in that "frightful." And yet, in a telling scene, when he does take her to a baseball game (the Philadelphia Athletics are in town to play the Yankees, and the comedy is a familiar one for anyone who has tried to explain the complexities of baseball to someone who knows absolutely nothing) it turns out she is drawn into the sheer excitement of the playing of the game. Poor Sam, however, mistakes that momentary exuberance and ends up disappointed, almost bitterly so, that evening, when he calls on her at the classy Park Avenue apartment: her interest in the outcome of the game—she had had to leave early—has now become merely a confused politeness, part of her good breeding.

The denouement is appalling: Hepburn ends up surrendering her career in order to keep her man and there is a really ghastly final scene in which she is in the kitchen with an apron on, rather pathetically trying to make old Spencer, who now clearly has the upper hand, some kind of homemade breakfast. The easy moral of the story has to do with the incompatibility of a woman's professional ambitions and conjugal happiness, but what is remarkable for me is what even a contemporary interpretation of the movie is likely to miss: at least part of Hepburn's downfall, one of the roots of her profound lack of liberation, might lie in her disdain for Tracy's passion for sports and her reflexive assumption that writing about baseball is less noble and less cultured than writing about opera or literature or even, amazingly, politics. The underlying morality—at least the part of it that so righteously and pointedly associates the "cultured" with the disdain for the Yankees—is not much different today than it was in 1942, when the movie was made, and it is safe to say that while most women (especially those who would define themselves as "cultured" and/or "liberated") are appalled by the breakfast scene, very few of them would find anything abnormal about her feeling superior to a mere baseball writer. Indeed, a fair number of women (and certainly almost all academics) are still likely to think that whole enterprise a "frightful waste

of energy" and, like Tess Harding before she is reduced to housewife, that sports are not, in fact, even remotely in the ballpark of transcendent cultural and historical activity: art, music, literature. Knowing what 90 feet is (let alone that the Philadelphia Athletics are long since gone and currently play out of Oakland) is simply not the same as knowing who Fulgencio Batista is (Tess has a phone conversation with him in fluent Spanish) or who Proust was and in what language he wrote what novel.

I should emphasize here that what I am talking about is not the issue of women's athletics, which is often where the conversation swerves at this point, as people object that yes, well, but girls now play soccer and even rugby and so on. . . . It is true, self-evidently, that since 1942 women's participation in sports has increased exponentially, and moreover, that in part for that reason they are far more likely to be interested and knowledgeable about the sort of individual sports (tennis is an excellent example) which they may play and which may have some sort of veneer of "class." Not coincidentally, these tend to be the sports that a typical academic or other professional intellectual might know something about and watch with passing interest. But the attitude towards the culturally dominant team sports—baseball, basketball, football, hockey—still involves a high degree of disdain, a disdain that is often justified, particularly in the case of women, by noting that women are by and large excluded from competition in those sports. But the culture of these competitions, so central a part of a communal emotional life, has little or nothing to do with whether one can or has played the sport: it is, more simply, a field of knowledge (and an immensely demanding one, at that) and intellectual and "narrative" participation. To watch is the crucial starting point, but then far, far more: it means knowing about them, talking about them, writing and reading about them, participating in the great social narratives and stories that are centered on athletic competitions, the joys and agonies of whole cities and generations, and, in the end, grasping and playing out their roles in our lives and in our histories.

There is some irony that while women may be liberated enough these days that our daughters can play in little league—or on soccer or even ice hockey or rugby teams—this is seen, in the quarters I frequent, merely as an opening up of the possibility for women to participate in athletics. It rarely translates into anything further and the mothers I run into at little league and at hockey are there not because they have any interest in baseball or hockey or soccer per se—and certainly not at the professional level—but because they see their maternal duty as taking their children, boys or girls, to get their recreation, and children are introduced to a social ritual whose competitive aspects are increasingly diluted and even despised. The contrast with the attitudes about the other activities mothers "facilitate" for those same children is always marked: radically different—no matter how much they may get swept up (à la Kate Hepburn) in the emotion of seeing a child get a clutch hit in the bottom of the ninth—from taking those same kids to the MOMA or to see The Nutcracker at Christmas. That they do not know who is pitching that day for the Yankees is one thing—more poignant is that when their kids talk about who is pitching for the Yankees, as kids do, they have no communion with such talk or such interests.

So, in the end, there is greater inequality, and of what seems to me a particularly sad sort: the mothers, as always, still do the hard part, they get up early and provide the team snacks and nurse sore muscles. But they are so often shut out of the intellectual and literature-like joys of the thing (which is all that will really last for all of us, since the select few who will ever make it to any kind of big league is so minuscule, men or women). And when one rides home with those children, wearied after practices, and what they want to do—as they do—is talk about the decline of the Rangers this year, or the past greats in baseball they want to bat like, or the value of a Dr. J card they traded for, the person who knows nothing about these things is lost to that romance and those passions. How different such attitudes—and such relationships—are from other spheres of culture: it would be as if we took our kids to painting classes but thought it was basically dumb to

talk about Picasso, even when the child wants nothing more than to talk about Picasso. And does one talk about Picasso because the child has a chance of being as good as he—or refuse to do so because in his personal life Picasso was such a brute and grossly mistreated women? Does one refuse to know and talk about Proust because one's little girl is unlikely to be a major league writer (her aspirations being scientific, instead)—or because she can't empathize with being a man? Isn't it true, instead, that what is at stake is learning to be a connoisseur, a knowledgeable spectator, of things we are quite unlikely to ever be—and, quite often, of people we don't at all want to be like?

So it is that the person who does know the difference between the relative values of a Dr. J and a Charles Barkley card, who can tell some great story about some legendary game, is the person with whom a remarkable bond is formed. Boys have the mythical relationship of sports with their fathers not because they played it with them, necessarily, nor even because the fathers are the ones who do any of the hard work of making their playing possible, but rather because they can talk to them about it, because it is with their fathers, by and large, that sports is a legitimate area of knowledge and of cultural expertise. Bart Giamatti once said "Everyone in America remembers where he was when Fisk hit his home run"—but, as Giamatti himself knew perfectly well, this is not quite so. As with Spike Lee and Bill Bradley, we can safely say there are two kinds of people: those who don't need any further explanation of who Fisk is and what homerun he is talking about and do indeed know where they were and with whom when he hit it; and those who not only don't know but find it vaguely incongruous that others do. Among academics, moreover, the incongruity is often tainted with Hepburn-like disdain. "Frightful waste of intellectual energy" is sometimes actually said, and frequently thought.

Surprisingly few people at Yale really understood—let alone rejoiced in—Bart Giamatti's having traded in his professorship and the presidency of a university (let alone Yale) for his two jobs in baseball, first as President of the National League and then Commissioner of Baseball. Among most of his former colleagues, at Yale and elsewhere, as within the community of cultured women, it might be all right to occasionally wax poetic about the lovely metaphors of baseball; but for most, sports remain "just" sports: something so "obviously" inferior as a field of knowledge to things like literature or art that what Bart Giamatti did—to say that sports were as intrinsically worthy of a man's passion and life's work as Renaissance literature, to trade Milton and Ariosto for men whose names and exploits seem unworthy of being remembered—is in the end incomprehensible. Giamatti knew this of course, knew that his trading in of presidencies if the other had been Harvard instead of the National League would have provoked much less consternation, and although he always tempered his comments on this subject with graciousness, he made it clear in more than one interview that he understood the disdain: "If there's one thing I'm an expert on, it's athletic stereotypes about academe and academic stereotypes about athletics, but it's easy to say that the baseball world showed much less prejudice about me, an academic, taking this job, than the other way around. It simply was no contest."

But these stereotypes and the prejudices are, in the end, particularly odd among the community Giamatti emerged from, the world of literature. He could see clearly what they are so often blinded to: the literary qualities not of baseball's metaphors in some reductive way but of the spectacles and stories of major league competition, no more dependent on our being able to play it than our being able to be Greek warriors is necessary for us to read the Iliad. In this half-real, half-mythical arena there is much in common with the best that literature offers: narration, structure (beginnings, middles, ends), remembrance, prediction, sympathetic sorrow and communal rejoicing. The madeleines of many lives come from the memory of an event watched and retold, and the story of where you were when Carlton Fisk hit his home run in 1975 is also in part the story of who you were in 1975, with all its Proustian details, the smells of the graduate

student bar or the tenor of the voice of a companion who may now be gone from your life. None of this remotely takes away from the great drama and magic of Fisk's home run, his marvelous gesture of willing the ball to stay fair—or for that matter, the Reds' decisive win in the next and last game of that series, the small tragedy of the Red Sox losing the series after winning that game—indeed, part of the magic is there because we watched it and can remember it.

In Annie Hall, Woody Allen plays out the paradoxes of false intellectual snobberies to perfection. The scene is a New York cocktail party his second wife has dragged him to—he would rather be watching the Knicks game. As they walk in she says "There's X, he has a chair in history at Princeton." "And there's Y, he has a chair in philosophy at Cornell." But he (Alvie) manages to sneak off to a bedroom to watch the Knicks, after all. The dialogue in the bedroom, when the wife finds him there, needs little further commentary: "Here you are—there's people out there." "Two minutes ago the Knicks are ahead and now ...." "Alvie, what is so fascinating about a bunch of pituitary cases trying to stuff a ball through a hoop?" "What's fascinating is that it's physical. You know it's one thing about intellectuals—they prove you can be absolutely brilliant and have no idea what's going on." What follows—his trying to get her on the bed to have sex and her offended refusal—not-so-subtly reinforces the "it's physical" perception of the intellectual disdain, and as she pulls herself together and leaves she delivers the piéce de resistance: "Alvie, there are people out there from The New Yorker magazine, my God, what will they think?"

It is physical, of course, and it is male, and it is often violent, and always it is ferociously competitive, a ritualized version of combat, and all that and more; but I am still left puzzled at the disdain among those I spend so much time with, people for whom the line "I sing of arms and the man" does not tend to produce such disdain. After all, in the end, painting and even writing are physical too, at least in part, as is making music and dancing The Nutcracker, all those things intellectuals think so much worthier—and the best in all of those fields have necessarily been driven by naked ambition and overwhelming competitiveness. And most women mark themselves cultured because of the knowledge they have of all sorts of areas in which women have, at best, been marginal. Perhaps, as Allen is saying, it is the undisguised nature of the physicalness of it and the often thinly-veiled sexuality that goes with the physical, something lovingly portrayed by Susan Sarandon as the wonderful heroine of Bull Durham. She is a perfect counterpart to Woody Allen's frigid wife-character and the frosty Hepburn in Woman of the Year: her explicit and unashamed promiscuity, her warm sensuality, are as one with her love of baseball. But even there it is clear that what the sport is really about is what the joyful reading of literature or listening to music is about: more or less equal measures of sheer knowledge and the simple pleasure of the tales and the memories. What it is never about, certainly, is moral superiority, any more so than it is in literature, let alone in the lives of its greatest practitioners. And that is why proclamations about "role models" in sports and lamentations about decline are historically naive (or dishonest) and, in any case, beside the point. Like other moving cultural forms the sports spectacle is infinitely complex, always about both virtue and vice, about the tragic flaws of the heroes, about the fleeting nature of any instant of pure prowess and joy, about arms and the man, and the warrior's skills and Achilles's heel—and about how to shape loss, how to tell the stories, how to savor the madeleines.

My son did, of course, get over that first heartbreak of his, although I think others in his life, since then and no doubt in the future, are mapped on that first one, and a good cry with me—often in the bathroom, I now notice—is a crucial part of the ritual. After Tocchet was subsequently traded from Pittsburgh to the Los Angeles Kings (to end up playing alongside Wayne Gretzky, the best player in hockey's history, whose move from Edmonton to L.A. provoked a whole nation's heartbreak and a serious crisis for the Canadian ego) he seemed to grasp both the ubiquitousness

of treacheries, small and large, and the virtues of forgiving, if not forgetting. Thus, this past year, he found himself very much a Flyers fan again, caught up in the rising fortunes of a team that was mostly new and young but that also, crucially, included a player who was part of his first childhood love: the goalie Ron Hextall, who had been an indispensable part of that first team he had imagined himself a part of. Indeed, the brilliant but erratic Hextall, always the goalie behind my son when he pretended to be Rick Tocchet, had also been traded by the Flyers—although after my son had cut them out of his life. But last winter Hextall returned home after a long odyssey.

Being able to go back home and to forgive was, for my son, not only linked to Hextall's own redemption (which, as in life and literature and music, sometimes happens and sometimes never does) but, no less, to the fact that Hextall and he have an uncanny link: they were both born (my son, literally, Hextall metaphorically, as the Flyers star goalie) in the unfolding of one of the most poignant tragedies of sports in recent years. This, too, is a story I have always carried in my heart but have learned not to tell to those I am mostly surrounded by, those who cannot be moved by the binding of the tragedy of the flawed warrior Pete Rose to the death of Bart Giamatti. This is the story of my son's birth, and he knows it well, although, of course, what he remembers is the retelling of it.

It is the story of the death of the young and beautiful and still slightly innocent Swedish boy named Pelle Lindbergh, whose Porsche crashed into a wall in New Jersey in the early hours of a beautiful November morning. Lindbergh had grown up in Sweden idolizing the Flyers' legendary goalie Bernie Parent (a charming French Canadian whom Philadelphians so adored that the most common bumper stickers there for many years said "Only God saves more than Bernie"). So it was the fulfillment of a childhood dream writ large when Lindbergh became the Flyers' goalie and, under the skilled tutoring of a retired Parent, became a goalie so brilliant and promising that he stood to replace him in a city's heart. But that was a heart shattered, along with many, many others in Sweden, in Canada, and in the whole world of professional sports, one Sunday morning in November of 1985, when people woke up to news that got progressively worse: it went, in the space of a day and a half, from being that there had been a crash and Lindbergh would probably not be in Thursday's enormous rematch game, the biggest of the year, against the Edmonton Oilers (to whom they had lost the Stanley Cup the previous year), to his being declared hopelessly brain dead. In the Tuesday papers, pictures of the devastated parents, flown in from Sweden where Pelle was a national icon, told the rest of the story, to which they added only that they would wait to disconnect him from the respirator so that arrangements could be made for his organs to be given to others.

The final, private dying, then, took place at some unspecified hour Wednesday, and the Flyers announced that they would not accept Edmonton's gracious offer to defer Thursday night's game but would use it, instead, as the much needed space for public mourning. It would be Pelle's memorial, both the eulogies before the game and the game itself. I would go, too, I thought, and cry again, but it was not meant to be: that Wednesday evening I went into labor, some three weeks early, and by noon on Thursday, as I was walking into the hospital, I was coming to terms with the oddly wrenching reality that instead of being able to be a part of the communal grieving for an unspeakable sorrow I was about to be able to imagine, the loss of a child, I would be giving birth to my own son. He was, in fact, born as the evening's public ritual was ending, as Pelle's soul was bid good-bye at the ice palace where he had fulfilled many of his own dreams—and the evening's labor was punctuated with the periodic reports my husband relayed into the labor room from the game via phone calls from my sister, who had gone to cry in our stead.

It is a rich story and it needs many details: the poems schoolchildren wrote at his death; the public tears of big-armed warriors, Gretzky among them; the way the Flyers won that night's game

against all odds, with a goalie brought up hours before from their farm team because the regular backup goalie pulled a muscle in that afternoon's grim practice and could not play; the emotions I felt one brilliantly cold morning this past winter when, at a rink on the northern end of Central Park, my son put on goalie pads for the first time and went out onto the ice. But like almost all other such stories in sports—which have it over other arts in that as it is going on no one knows how it will come out—it is a story whose lessons and morals are always ambiguous; whose heroes are flawed, sometimes seizing the opportunity, sometimes squandering it; whose denouements are more often than not surprising and uncanny; and whose most striking value may be the way in which the public and the communal—whether joyful or sorrowful or, most likely, some poignant mix of both—becomes part of the structure and memory of the personal.

María Rosa Menocal
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