

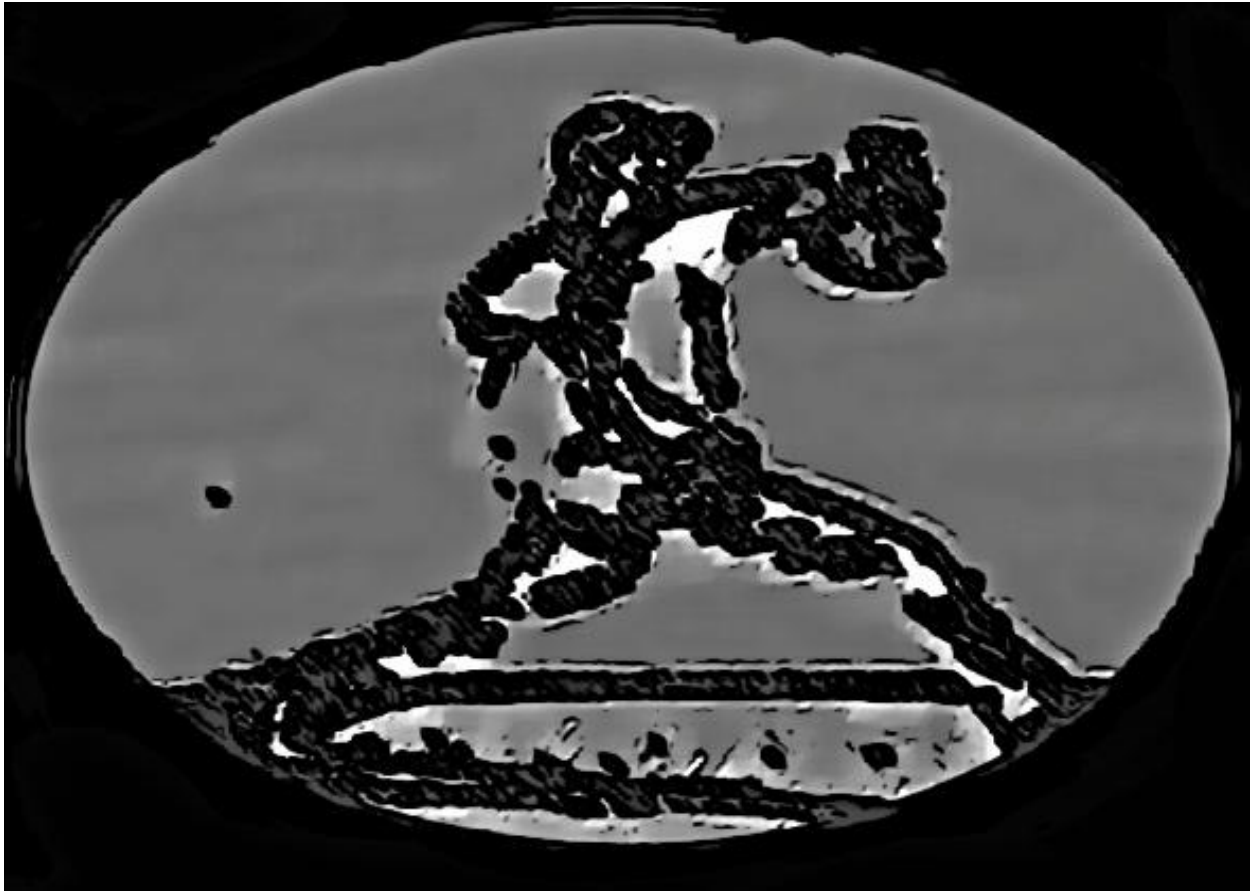
GREEN EXPECTATIONS



EDWARD DROBINSKI



Green Expectations



By

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Chapter 1

Spring went into reverse gear, in most crowds referred to as the fall. Summer trees resisted at differing rates, some elms browning out days before stronger, better watered ones. But they all eventually gave in to the constant barrage of dry cold air. Pines demonstrated the strength and adaptability of their soft wood, remaining green after shedding a few superfluous needles. Rabbits scurried about, seeming to be desperately searching for something that was no longer part of their world. Blackbirds descended in gangs, scavenging the remaining grounded apples carelessly ignored by the pickers. A lone Broad-Winged Hawk circled low, content for now to mirthfully view the forms he could easily terminate whenever the mood struck him. Baseball's winners readied for their next big game while the losers disappeared from sight and memory.

LAST WEEK OF 2012 SEASON - 9-25-12 - NEW JERSEY MEADOWLANDS

"Go back to hockey infested Toronto, puck head," screamed the fat fortyish man with the black mustache and goatee sitting behind the dugout. "My eight year old girl can pitch better than you."

Another day's work for thirty-three year old Dave Nelson had ended early after the seventh run scored in the second

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inning, with two more potentials left on base with no outs. He wasn't feeling particularly bad, but was more than a trifle resigned. This must have been at least the three hundredth time he experienced an early removal in his eleven year Major League career. His head was properly to the ground, trying to look sorry or something that would tell the fans that he felt awful. They required it.

"Send this Canadian to the Mapleleaves," continued Mr. Behind the Dugout. With many empty seats available other fans moved away from him, either afraid that the spittle running from his contorted face might get on them or that he was capable of imminent violence, like a tractionless hockey fight. This was the first game of the season ending home stand against the perennial league doormat, the Washington (as in DC) Senators. The New Jersey Crows were 75-84 and mathematically out of the playoffs for a month; mentally after the tenth game.

Dave reached the foul line and still hadn't heard Mr. Behind's assessment. He was thinking about whether he should call baseball lovers, Joan or Barbara.

"You ain't got the speed of a camel, you loser."

Fifteen feet from the dugout Dave detected movement in the stands and looked up for the first time. Other fans were kind of circling around the critic, not sure whether they were coming or going. Some laughed.

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"Hey, hey, Dave the Rave. Who ever raved about you? The other team?"

Dave had heard joking insults since he was a kid and only got upset when it was personal. This wasn't. It was just business as usual.

"You, you, you pitiful nuck," came the insistent bellow from the irate man who now was dripping saliva from his chin to his dark gray Crows overpriced windbreaker. "Check this foreigner for a green card."

Dave smiled and eyed the man he found comical in his exuberance. However, he was also irritated at again being called foreign when he was born and raised ten miles from this stadium. He was drafted and played his first seven years for the Toronto Lumberjacks, went free agent and came home to New Jersey. But, that didn't stop his many detractors from calling him a Canadian, either out of ignorance or in trying to be upsetting. Though he hadn't done it since he was a kid, something compelled him to answer this time. As he started the three steps down, he widely opened his right eye with his right middle finger and said; "At least I wasn't dumb enough to pay to see this bullshit." Cameras flashed and he tipped his hat.

Bobby Preston was sitting at the edge, on the dugout's top step, with a broad grin on his cool and amused black face. He said; "Hey, hey, Dave, man, I think you're his favorite."

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Dave considered Bobby his best friend on the team. He was also a pitcher who'd been around a while and they had talked together a lot; by the minimal standards of baseball. He said; "I don't know what anybody expects from me. The home plate umpire, what's his name, oh yeah; Bertolucci can't see the corners, so I'm comin' right in with this mediocre stuff."

Bobby scratched the back of his neck and turned his head to the field where Rip Fitzgerald was warming up. "I'm glad you got the start today. That's taking one for the team."

Dave punched Bobby's non-pitching shoulder and said; "You are a lucky devil. Wonder how much this is gonna mess up my numbers?"

In an incredulous falsetto voice Bobby returned; "Your numbers were messed before the day started."

Dave and Bobby sat on the bench. Dave had another three years remaining on a seven year, three million per contract and wasn't financially concerned. He wanted to joke with Bobby for a while before he showered. Besides, he wasn't out there long enough to work up much of a sweat. "I knew I was in trouble right away. My first pitch must have caught two inches of plate and he goes; 'Baw.' Can't even say 'ball' right."

"You know he always has that tiny strike zone."

"Yeah, but today it's the size of the buck he squeezes like a tube of toothpaste."

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"Everybody's not rich like you, Mister Gates."

"Oh, hell. Half the jerks in this league make more than me. Did you know that Manny Cardillo, that no-power, .220 hitting second baseman on Baltimore makes five million a year? Five million US smackers. He can probably buy his home town and three of its neighbors."

"Great fielder."

"Anybody can be a great fielder up here. Perfect grounds. Never a bad hop. I'd like to see what he could do on the rock quarries I played on as a kid."

"Maybe you should have played the field."

"I hit .120."

"Any power?"

"Yeah, it's coming out right now." Dave stood up, bent over slightly and a sound something like "Phrrputputbah" was heard. He slapped Bobby's thigh and said; "I'm getting out of here," and started his trek to the locker room.

They heard the crowd make its largest roar of the day. It sounded like someone turned on the dryer. Dave saw that the new pitcher, Rip Fitzgerald, a thirty-eight year old mop-up man, had already had his fill with Bertolucci and had walked halfway to the plate. Note: A mop-up man is a pitcher who enters the game in an almost certain loss situation, wherein the team doesn't want to waste the arms of its regular pitchers, but has to

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finish a game, such as when they are losing 7-0 in the second inning.

His middle finger was pointed to the heavens and he was yelling something indecipherable; either because of the appliance-level din or the fact that Rip didn't get his name due to his hitting prowess; he liked his J&B. Rocco Bertolucci had taken off his mask and walked toward the mound.

Dave turned around and said; "See. Rip's had it already."

Bobby replied; "Rip had it before the game started."

Bertolucci yelled; "You wanna get thrown out of the game?"

Rip said; "Trow me out, you cockeye focker."

"What was that?"

"Trow me out, you cockass soccer."

"You sayin' what I think you're sayin'?"

"You can tink? God damn. Can you tink as gid as you can see?"

Bertolucci defiantly got in Rip's face and with rancid ravioli breath said; "One more word and you're outta here."

Rip didn't care as he was retiring from baseball in a few days, mostly because of a dearth of offers. The buzz in his head gave him the courage of Superman and he wanted to go out with something he'd be remembered for other than his lifetime 22-63 won-loss record and 7.36 ERA. This was his moment and his world was spinning. He yelled; "Ka-zoo-kah," and vomited a stream into

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Bertolucci's face, the velocity of which, put his best fastball to shame. Bertolucci turned away, furiously wiping his face. Rip fell to his knees, in what later years he would describe as a praying position and puked his guts out. He frequently called out; "Plis god, I'll never do it, oh shit, boolyayup, again; boolyayup, boolyayup. Oh, God." When he passed out he wound up in a highly religious Middle-eastern near horizontal position, face immersed in the chunky holy water.

Technically, he never got thrown out of the game as the medics carried his righteous body from the field on a stretcher, thinking a van ride to the hospital a waste. Bertolucci completed wiping his face and chest protector with the catcher's cap.

As, Rip, the wounded hero actually pitched no-hit ball for his brief stint, the fat fortyish man with the black mustache and goatee, wanted to show that he had, indeed gotten his money's worth. He stood up and made slow deliberate hand claps, nodding and looking from his fellow fans to the stretcher. He upped his rate of applause and the other fans joined him either out of appreciation for the short no-hitter, fear, or some silly need to appear socially supportive.

Dave applauded the body as it passed through the dugout and said; "What a way to go. What a perfect way to go. I hope

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somebody's got this on tape for his family. Rip, you are my hero."

Bobby gave a few claps, nodded his head appreciatively and said; "Not bad. Not bad at all."

They stood in silence for one minute with their caps held over their hearts in deference to the great one. Bertolucci yelled; "Play ball."

Dave said; "Oh, man. I'm inspired. I'm gonna call it a day and hit the shower." He got up and started walking when he heard; "No you ain't Nelson. You got more to do." He recognized the gravelly, over-demanding voice to be that of Charlie Sanders, the manager. Dave reluctantly turned thinking that the little man was going to order him to stay in the park for the duration of the game.

Dave looked down at Charlie and facetiously said; "What will I be doing, chief?" Most players didn't tolerate much crap from Charlie as they considered him more useless than an armless ballboy and likely not to be back next year. Charlie was credited as having been the founder of the "Sanders School of Hitting," an approach wherein the batter stood as far away from the plate as the batter's box allows, then stepped his front foot toward it as far as necessary to get the good wood on the pitch. The problem was that the only hitter successful with this stance was Rogers Hornsby and he retired in 1937 with a .358

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lifetime average, long before Charlie was born. He pointed up with one thumb and said; "Boss wants to see you upstairs pronto."

"Can I shower first?"

"No."

"Can I change into regular shoes? I don't want the spikes to mess up his plushy carpet."

"Take 'em off in the hall and go in with socks."

"Yazzuh." Dave made a rolling genuflection and followed orders as usual. He went off singing; "That's entertainment," and wondering if he should put his stinking feet on the General Manager's desk.

Dave took the elevator to the press box. This was not his first choice, but was the only way to the GM's office. He tried to duck through the dimly lit room, but the clop-clop of his spikes woke up the preying beasts. His biggest single mass media detractor, Chucky Deletrimian, turned from his perched and vicious eagle's vantage point, five stories over home plate and said; "Hey, it's All-Star Dave Nelson in the flesh. To what do we owe this condescension to the poor representatives of the public?" He got up from his roost and slowly walked toward Dave, with a malicious grin on his lined, gray face.

Chucky's lesser companion buzzards turned for a second and briefly made quarter-hearted waves in Dave's general direction,

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some off as much as Bertolucci's strike zone. They quickly went back to their cigars, beer and hot dogs with their butts on "affordable" chairs lining the dirty window under the overhang. The shade from the overcast and overhung afternoon created the appearance of a smoky cloud carrying bits and pieces of sluggishly moving dust. The tiny particles were highlighted in blurred rays emanating from the table lamps residing on the window length table in front of the press corps in the thirty by ten foot room.

"Just passin' through, Chucky. I wouldn't want to disturb the hard work of the people's informants."

Chucky got next to Dave making his eight inch height disadvantage to the six foot three ballplayer obvious. He wasn't intimidated and actually reveled in his perceived role of David meeting a vanquished Goliath. He looked down and spit out some of his cigar tobacco. He licked his lips when he looked back up into Dave's face, grinning as if he were displaying a Queen high straight flush. He said; "We've got you on tape, champ."

Dave wasn't surprised and he also wasn't thinking of much more than Joan and Barbara's assets, absently musing about whether he preferred the look of a cornfield in full bloom or one yet to sprout. It was amazing how both varieties got excited staring at a fountainhead of well-handled green. He grimaced and

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shrugged, saying; "I've been on tape all my baseball life," then added; "What's new?"

"Got something enormous, this time. Calling America's pastime bullshit. Shameful." His head must have overheated in his contained excitement as two of the seventeen strands of hair he oiled and brushed straight back marginally popped up.

Dave got the gist of Chucky's unusual glee and decided to do the smart thing; deny and act dumb. He solemnly said; "No way, little man. You're just angling for something interesting to write, for a change."

Chucky meandered back to his affordable throne while he said; "We'll see what the fans have to say about this one, ace."

Up until now Dave's best guess as to why the GM requested his presence was that he was going to resurrect his fruitless periodic discussions of how he found some violation of his long term contract and try to get him to stupidly sign something. "Jeez," he thought as he started up the vaguely lit stairs. "There's nothing in my contract about using foul language, but there is something about upholding the sanctity of the game. I may have committed a sacrilege." Dave assumed he was going to be recorded or videotaped, so he sat on the third step and tried to formulate a plan. Thoughts of cornfields became of importance to farmers as he gave priority to the well-handled green; twelve million more of the dirty little crispies yet to come if he

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hadn't plugged the supply chute with his mouth. Dave considered his options. He thought; "I can say nothing, but that will only allow the wound to fester, perhaps to the point of amputation. Exactly what did I say; something about the fans being stupid enough to pay to see this bullshit. No, not exactly. Yeah. 'At least I wasn't dumb enough to pay to see this bullshit.' Pretty bad." He concentrated the way a good player does on the field.

"The largest objection has to be to calling baseball bullshit. I didn't say that. I said 'this bullshit.' I could say I was referring to my pitching performance. It definitely was bullshit Of course, with the help of Bertolucci. Irrelevant in this situation. Now how about 'I wasn't dumb enough to pay?' Could be a poor way of saying that the fans ought to get their money back? Maybe. I'll go with that. It's harmless. Who can say for sure what was really in my head? Only my father thinks he can and he's not here."

With a rookie's adrenaline rush flip flopping with his initial awe of the stars, Dave climbed the stairs and forcefully knocked at the darkly stained, heavy, wooden door with the iron placard, which read; "**THOMAS C. BARROWS,**" and below that; "**GENERAL MANAGER,**" in raised black letters. He heard a familiar, though not immediately obvious female voice say in a high pitched, annoyed manner; "Who's there?"

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