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A Writer's Life

Gay Talese

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GAY TALESE

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To the women in my life—Nan,
Pamela, and Catherine

ALSO BY GAY TALESE

The Gay Talese Reader (2003)
The Bridge (revised and updated) (2003)
The Literature of Reality (with Barbara Lounsberry) (1996)
Unto the Sons (1992)
Thy Neighbor's Wife (1980)
Honor Thy Father (1971)
Fame and Obscurity (1970)
The Kingdom and the Power (1969)
The Overreachers (1965)
The Bridge (1964)
New York—A Serendipiter's Journey (1961)

1

I AM NOT NOW, NOR HAVE I EVER BEEN, FOND OF THE GAME OF SOCCER. Part of the reason is probably attributable to my age and the fact that when I was growing up along the southern shore of New Jersey a half century ago, the sport was virtually unknown to Americans, except to those of foreign birth. And even though my father was foreign-born—he was a dandified but dour custom tailor from a Calabrian village in southern Italy who became a United States citizen in the mid-1920s—his references to me about soccer were associated with his boyhood conflicts over the game, and his desire to play it in the afternoons with his school friends in an Italian courtyard instead of merely watching it being played as he sat sewing at the rear window of the nearby shop to which he was apprenticed; yet, as he often reminded me, he *knew* even then that these young male performers (including his less dutiful brothers and cousins) were wasting their time and their future lives as they kicked the ball back and forth when they *should* have been learning a worthy craft and anticipating the high cost of a ticket to immigrant prosperity in America! But no, he continued in his tireless way of warning me, they idled away their afternoons playing soccer in the courtyard as they would later play it behind the barbed wire of the Allied prisoner of war camp in North Africa to which they were sent (they who were not killed or crippled in combat) following their surrender in 1942 as infantrymen in Mussolini's losing army. Occasionally they sent letters to my father describing their confinement; and one day near

the end of World War II he put aside the mail and told me in a tone of voice that I prefer to believe was more sad than sarcastic, “They’re still playing soccer!”

The World Cup soccer finale between the women of China and the United States, held on July 10, 1999, in Pasadena, California, before 90,185 spectators in the Rose Bowl (the largest turnout for any women’s sporting contest in history), was scheduled to be televised to nearly 200 million people around the world. The live telecast that would begin on this Saturday afternoon in California at 12:30 would be seen in New York at 3:30 p.m. and in China at 4:30 a.m. on Sunday. I had not planned to watch the match. On this particular Saturday in New York I had already made arrangements for midday doubles in Central Park with a few old pals who shared my faulty recollections on how well we once played tennis.

Before leaving for Central Park I thought I’d tune in to the baseball game that started at 1:15, featuring the New York Mets and my cherished Yankees. Irrespective of the weary, though at times wavering, counsel of my leisure-deprived and now deceased father, the Yankees had captured my heart and enslaved me forever as a fan back in February 1944 when, prompted by wartime gas rationing and its limiting effect on travel, the team shifted its traditional spring training site from Saint Petersburg, Florida, to a less warm but more centralized, if rickety, rust-railed ballpark near the Atlantic City airport, within truancy range of my school. From then on, through war and peace and extending through the careers of Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle to the turn-of-the-century stardom of such newcomers as the shortstop Derek Jeter and the relief pitcher Mariano Rivera, I have reveled in the New York Yankees’ triumphs and lamented their losses, and on this

July Saturday in 1999, I was counting on them to divert me from several weeks of weak hitting at my typewriter.

I needed to relax, to put aside my book for a while, I decided; and I readily accepted my wife's suggestion, expressed days earlier, that we spend this weekend quietly in New York. Our two daughters and their boyfriends would be driving down to the Jersey shore to make use of our summer home, which we had bought near my parents' place thirty years ago, following the birth of our second daughter; on Saturday evening my vigorous ninety-two-year-old widowed mother was looking forward to taking her granddaughters and their boyfriends to dine with her at the Taj Mahal casino on the Atlantic City boardwalk, where she liked to have coffee and dessert in the lounge while feeding the slot machines.

During the previous month my lovely wife and I had celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary, and I hope I will not be perceived as unromantic if I suggest that this lengthy relationship has succeeded in part because we have regularly lived and worked apart—I as a researching writer of nonfiction who is often on the road, and she as an editor and publisher who through the years has carefully avoided affiliating herself with firms to which I am contractually connected. But when we are together under the same roof, sharing what I shall take the liberty of calling a harmonious and happy coexistence that began in the mid-1950s with a courtship kindled in a cold-water flat in Greenwich Village and then moved uptown and expanded with children in a brownstone still owned and occupied by the two of us (two spry senior citizens determined not to die on a cruise ship), I must admit that I have frequently taken advantage of my wife's domestic presence as a literary professional, seeking her opinion not only on what I am thinking of writing but also on what I have written; and while her responses occasionally differ

from those expressed later by my acknowledged editor, I consider myself more blessed than burdened when I have varying views to choose from, finding this far preferable to the lack of editorial access that many of my writer friends often complain about. But to writers who bemoan their lives of neglect and loneliness, let me say this: When one's own work is not going well, having a wife who is an editor can be even *more* demoralizing, particularly during those at-home weekends and nights when she is avidly reading other people's words while reclining on our marital bed under a crinkling spread of manuscript pages that lie atop our designer duvet or between the sheets, which in due time she will shake out in order to reclaim the pages and stack them neatly on her bedside table before turning out the lights and possibly dreaming of when the pages will be transformed into a beautifully bound, critically acclaimed book.

In any event, on this weekend when we decided (she decided) to remain in New York, and while she was upstairs editing the chapters of a manuscript we had slept with on Friday night, I was downstairs watching the Yankee-Mets game (the Yankees took a quick 2-0 lead on Paul O'Neill's first-inning homer, following Bernie Williams's single). Between innings I was thinking ahead to my tennis match and reminding myself that I must toss the ball higher when serving and seize every opportunity to get to the net.

I had been introduced to tennis by my gym teacher during my junior year in high school, and even though our school did not then field a tennis team, I played the game as often as I could during lunchtime recess because I could play it better than the ungainly classmates whom I selected as opponents and who also served under me as staff members on the student newspaper. That I never achieved distinction while competing on a varsity level in a major sport (football, basketball, baseball, or track) did not upset

me because our school's teams were mediocre in these sports. Besides which, as the players' chronicler and potential critic (in addition to working on the school paper I wrote about sports as well as classroom activities in my extracurricular role as scholastic correspondent for my hometown weekly and the Atlantic City daily), I was suddenly experiencing the dubious eminence of being a journalist, of having my callow character and identity boosted, if not enhanced, by my bylined articles and the stamp-size photo of myself that appeared above my school-page column in the town weekly, to say nothing of the many privileges that were now mine to select, such as to travel to out-of-town games on the team bus in a reserved seat behind the coach, or to catch a ride later in a chrome-embellished Buick coupe driven by the athletic director's pretty wife.

As ineffectual as the players usually were, fumbling the football constantly, striking out habitually, and missing most of their foul shots, I never humiliated them in print. I invariably found ways to describe delicately each team defeat, each individual inadequacy. I seemed to possess in my writing a precocious flare for rhetoric and circumlocution long before I could accurately spell either word. My approach to journalism was strongly influenced throughout my high school years by a florid novelist named Frank Yerby, a Georgia-born black man who later settled in Spain and wrote prolifically about bejeweled and crinoline-skirted women of such erotic excess that, were it not for Yerby's illusory prose style, which somehow obfuscated what to me was breathtakingly obscene, his books would have been censored throughout the United States, and I would have been denied the opportunity to request each and every one of them sheepishly from the proprietress of our town library, and furthermore would not then have tried to emulate Yerby's palliative way with words in my

attempts to cloak and cover up the misdeeds and deficiencies of our school's athletes in my newspaper articles.

While my evasive and roundabout reportage might be ascribed to my desire to maintain friendly relations with the athletes and encourage their continuing participation in interviews, I believe that practical matters had far less to do with it than did my own youthful identity with disappointment and the fact that, except for my skill in writing pieces that softened the harsh reality of the truth, I could do nothing exceptionally well. The grades I received from teachers in elementary as well as high school consistently placed me in the lower half of my class. Next to chemistry and math, English was my worst subject. In 1949, I was rejected by the two dozen colleges that I applied to in my native state of New Jersey and neighboring Pennsylvania and New York. That I was accepted into the freshman class at the University of Alabama was entirely the result of my father's appeals to a magnanimous Birmingham-born physician who practiced in our town and wore suits superbly designed and tailored by my father, and by this physician's own subsequent petitions on my behalf to his onetime classmate and everlasting friend then serving as Alabama's dean of admissions.

My main achievements during my four years on the Alabama campus were being appointed sports editor of the college weekly and the popularity I gained through my authorship of a column called "Sports Gay-zing," which, often blending humor with solicitousness and a veiled viewpoint, made the best of perhaps some of the worst displays of athleticism in the school's proud history. Even the Alabama football team, long accustomed to justifying its national reputation as a perennial top-ten powerhouse, suffered when I was a student through many days sadder than any since the Civil War. While gridiron glory would be

restored after 1958 with the arrival of the now legendary coach Paul “Bear” Bryant, the football schedule during my time was more often than not the cause of a statewide weekend wake; and the coach of the team, a New Englander named Harold “Red” Drew, was routinely burned in effigy on Saturday nights in the center of the campus by raucous crowds of fraternity men and their girlfriends from sororities in which the pledges had spent the afternoon sewing together sackcloth body-size figures with bug eyes and fat rouge-smeared faces that were supposed to replicate the features of Red Drew.

Although Drew never complained about any of this to me or my staff, I began to feel very sorry for him, and in our sports section I always tried to put a positive spin on his downward-spiraling career. In one of my columns I emphasized the valor he had shown while serving his country as a naval officer in World War I, highlighting an occasion on which he had jumped two thousand feet from a blimp into the Gulf of Mexico. This leap in 1917, when Drew was an ensign, established him as the first parachute jumper in naval history, or so I wrote after getting the information from a yellowed newspaper clipping that was pasted in an old scrapbook lent to me by the coach’s wife. I also illustrated what I wrote with a World War I–vintage photograph showing a lean and broad-shouldered Ensign Drew standing in front of a double-winged navy fighter plane at a base in the Panama Canal, wearing jodhpurs and knee-high boots and an officer’s cap decorated with an insignia and bearing a peak that shaded his eyes from the sun without concealing an understated smile that I hoped my readers would see as the mark of a modest and fearless warrior—thinking, naïvely, that this would arouse their patriotism and extinguish a few of the nighttime torches that they raised in vilifying Coach Drew and also at times his venerable assistant, Henry “Hank” Crisp, who

specialized in directing Alabama's porous front line of defense.

In yet another futile attempt on my part to divert the fans from such disastrous performances as were customarily presented throughout such seasons as 1951, for example, when the team lost six out of eleven games, I dramatized the tragedy partly with words lifted from Shakespeare:

> To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis Drew or Crisp who must suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous blocking, or to take arms against football writers, and by opposing end them?
>
> To win: to lose: to get wrecked, routed, o'erwhelmed and consumed by prissy Villanova.…
>
> Ah, to sleep, for in that sleep of death one dreams of our opponents who plunged and fled with leather football under arm, around, under, and over Bama walls.…

I left Red Drew to his own fate following my graduation in the spring of 1953. A year later I read that he had resigned in the wake of his team's 4-5-2 record, which might have been considered outstanding if compared with the accomplishments of his successor, J. B. "Ears" Whitworth, who in 1955 lost ten games without winning even one. During these two years I did not return to the campus to witness any of these engagements, being assigned for my military service to an armored unit in Kentucky much of the time, and then stationed with that unit in Germany for part of the time, until my discharge in June of 1956 enabled me to accept a reportorial job in the sports department of the *New York Times.* I had actually

worked briefly for the *Times* as a news assistant in the summer and fall of 1953 prior to entering the army, having been recommended to the paper by an Alabama classmate and friend whose uncle from Mississippi, the journalist and editor Turner Catledge, had become managing editor of the *Times* in 1951. Mr. Catledge had arranged for my initial hiring after seeing me in his office and fingering through some of my clippings; and during the time I was away in the military, as you might well imagine, I was not remiss in remaining in touch with him.

It was he who later proposed that I work in the sports department, which he made no secret of criticizing for what he saw as its tendency to cover games in the same serious and stodgy manner that the *Times* then covered everything else; but for some reason he singled out the sports section for reform, hinting that the writing there might be more diverting, original, and (since the *Times* did not publish comics) more entertaining. And while he said nothing clearly disapproving of the sports editor, a rotund and rosy-cheeked elderly man known in the office for his long lunches at Longchamps, I somehow got the impression that the career prospects of the sports editor were no more auspicious than those of Red Drew.

As an ambitious young sports journalist, I nevertheless continued to read and be influenced primarily by writers of fiction, although my tastes were no longer exemplified by the lingerie literature that had heated up my hormones in high school. At Alabama I had read novels and short stories by William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and other southern-born writers who had been urged upon me by Turner Catledge's nephew, who himself possessed such poetic sensibilities that he swore to me in advance that he would never do what I would later do so eagerly—capitalize on his uncle's connections in journalism.

Each day in the *Times* building I made note of the authors whose names I saw on the covers of the books held under the arms of my elders in the elevators, and sometimes I overheard discussions about these books while lunching in the cafeteria. Since I was now reading literary supplements and subscribing to *The New Yorker* for the first time, I was becoming aware that even some renowned fiction writers occasionally dealt with sporting events and athletes in their novels and short stories. When reading examples of these, I kept reminding myself that what I was reading had been *imagined;* these efforts were, after all, labeled "fiction." And yet after finishing a short story by John O'Hara, for example, one in which the esoteric game of court tennis was precisely and gracefully described as it presented itself within the oddly angled interior walls of the New York Racquet & Tennis Club—a locale that I had visited and was familiar with—it did not seem to matter in this case whether or not O'Hara was writing "fiction"; insofar as he had woven into his story the facts and details about the club and the game, he had met the demanding standards of accuracy as upheld daily by the desk editors in the *Times* sports department.

I had moreover been impressed by O'Hara's ability to make me feel as if I was *there* within the Racquet & Tennis Club, watching the game from a bench overlooking the court; and I was also *there,* on a football field, rooting for a swivel-hipped halfback who elbows his way toward a touchdown in Irwin Shaw's story "The Eighty-Yard Run"; and *there* on a snow-covered golf course, shivering next to a lovelorn caddy in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams"; and *there* in the dining room of a racetrack, sitting next to a horse trainer, who, looking up from his meal, notices that he is about to be joined by a jockey friend—an aging, ill-tempered rider presently experiencing much difficulty in controlling his weight—and the trainer is overheard saying

in a voice that the jockey does not hear (but is quoted in the excerpt of Carson McCullers's "The Ballad of the Sad Café" that I had read in *The New Yorker):* "If he eats a lamb chop, you can see the shape of it in his stomach an hour afterward."

I wanted quotes like these in my sports pieces, but I also knew I could not make them up. I was a reporter, not a fiction writer. And yet if I could get close enough to some of these athletes I was now meeting in New York and could convince them to trust me and confide in me as had many of the players I had known back in high school and college —when I used to commiserate with them and encourage them after each defeat; I was the Miss Lonelyhearts of locker rooms—I might be able to write factually accurate but very revealing personal stories about big-time athletes while using their *real* names, and then get these stories published in the strait-laced *New York Times,* which Mr. Catledge was trying to loosen up in the area where I worked. Again, without faking the facts, my reportorial approach would be fictional, with lots of intimate detail, scene-setting, dialogue, and a close identity with my chosen characters and their conflicts.

And so while I sat in the back of the sports department one afternoon interviewing a glamorous visitor named Frank Gifford, the star halfback of the New York Giants, I was thinking about "The Eighty-Yard Run"; and when I was at Yankee Stadium trying to communicate with the unglamorous Roger Maris, a home-run king on a team led by the beloved Mickey Mantle, I was as empathetic as I usually am with those who are designated second-best; and after I had befriended an up-and-coming pugilist named José Torres, I shortened my sentences, like Hemingway, and wrote:

> At 22, the prize fighter has sad, dark eyes. He has jagged, small facial scars and a flattened nose that has been hit by obscure amateurs he has already forgotten.
>
> He has had six professional fights as a middleweight. Nobody has beaten him. In the closet of his $II-a-week furnished room at 340 Union Street, Brooklyn, he has eight suits, a dozen silk shirts and fourteen pair of shoes. He also has a girl named Ramona. Both were born in Puerto Rico.
>
> Each week Ramona, who is also 22, and her mother come to clean the fighter's room. The mother complains that it is always dirty, that he never picks up his socks, that he has too many shoes. Soon, he says, he will marry Ramona and will move to Manhattan, close to Stillman's Gymnasium, far from the mother.

Although baseball as played by the Yankees would continue to command my emotions as a fan, it was the realm of professional prizefighting—as personified by boxers who were inevitably disappointed, who were often ignored in defeat, and who just as often contemplated come-backs—that I tried hardest to ennoble in the sports pages of the *Times,* being joined in this quest by a nearby novelist or two who were regulars at ringside. It was fortunate for me that during the late 1950s into the 1960s the heavyweight ranks included a remarkably candid and articulate champion named Floyd Patterson, whom I got to know so well that I often thought of him as my literary property. I wrote more than thirty articles about Patterson during my nine years as a *Times* reporter (from 1956 through 1965); and although I left sports in 1958 in order

to have access to the more varied subject matter available in general news, I nonetheless continued to volunteer constantly for sports assignments—particularly if it was a World Series game involving the Yankees, or a heavyweight fight in which Patterson was a contestant.

On the late afternoons of fight nights I would sometimes spend an hour or more talking to him near his bed in a hotel suite, surrounded by his trainers and sparring partners, who were either playing cards on the dining room table or snoozing on one of the sofas. Later, as fight time approached, and I squeezed into the limousine that would transport him and his invited guests to the arena, I could feel my sweat rising as I anticipated what might be inflicted upon the body and face of this amiable, well-mannered man who sat silently in the back, glancing out at the sidewalk with seeming nonchalance, indistinguishable in his conservatively tailored suit and subdued silk tie from an average black executive who might be employed by IBM. Soon he will be standing nearly naked in the ring, I kept thinking, along with other thoughts that might seem simplistic and melodramatically banal except at times like this, when I feared that he was a few hours away from becoming seriously hurt, battered and knocked senseless because he was not really vicious and talented enough, and because he was also very light for a heavyweight, perhaps twenty pounds lighter and with a much shorter reach than his primary contenders—the menacing Sonny Liston and the arrogantly confident Muhammad Ali, both of whom would eventually annihilate him.

But even after they did, leaving him puffy-eyed behind dark glasses and with his ribs so sore that he winced with each breath, Patterson allowed me to go to his home for a postfight interview, in which he replied to questions that I might not have asked had other reporters been in the room. In 1964, after a first-round knockout by Liston, and after an

assignment editor at the *Times* told me that the paper was at this point satiated with my stories about Patterson, I spent a weekend with him in order to do an article for *Esquire,* in which, among other things, he described what it is like being knocked out.

> "It is not a *bad* feeling when you're knocked out," he told me. "It's a *good* feeling, actually. It's not painful, just a sharp grogginess. You don't see angels or stars; you're on a pleasant cloud. After Liston hit me in Nevada, I felt, for about four or five seconds, that everybody in the arena was actually in the ring with me, circled around me like a family, and you feel warmth toward all the people in the arena after you're knocked out. You feel lovable to all the people. And you want to reach out and kiss everybody—men and women—and after the Liston fight somebody told me I actually blew a kiss to the crowd from the ring. I don't remember that. But I guess it's true because that's the way you feel during the four or five seconds after a knockout.…
>
> "But then," he continued, pacing the room, "this good feeling leaves you. You realize where you are, and what you're doing there, and what has just happened to you. And what follows is a hurt, a confused hurt —not a physical hurt—it's a hurt combined with anger; it's a what-will-people-think hurt; it's an ashamed-of-my-own-ability hurt … and all you want then is a hatch door in the middle of the ring—a hatch door that will open and let you fall through and land

> in your dressing room instead of having to get out of the ring and face those people. The worst thing about losing is having to walk out of the ring and face those people....”

Although he had never complained that he had perhaps been too open with me in the long and revealing piece that appeared in *Esquire*—indeed, I later coauthored a shorter piece with him in the same magazine, and we continued to see each other socially until we approached our senior years and his memory began to fade, and he could not always remember my name—my own lingering regret about that piece was that the editors had entitled it “The Loser.”

While it is true that Patterson was never a match for Liston or Ali, and that he had probably been knocked down more times than any highly ranked heavyweight in history—he went down *seven* times in a *single* fight in 1959 while losing his title to Sweden’s Ingemar Johansson—it is just as true that Patterson was the all-time heavyweight leader in getting up off the floor. He was climbing to his feet after Johansson had decked him for the final time in 1959, but the referee stopped the fight. In a return match a year later, Patterson knocked out Johansson, becoming the first man ever to regain the heavyweight title; and he subsequently stopped Johansson in their third and final fight. And so instead of thinking of Floyd Patterson as a “loser,” I consider him an exemplar of perseverance, a man who never quit and always tried to get up, even during moments of staggering disappointment and defeat.

Not long after Patterson had retired from the ring, the Yankees also became known as losers, having fallen from first place in the American League in 1964 to sixth in 1965, tenth in 1966, and ninth in 1967. The Yankees were owned by CBS, which had become the controlling partner in 1964,

but I never knew what, if anything, the network's ownership had to do with the team's uncharacteristically poor record. I myself was now out of New York regularly, and I rarely went to see games in Yankee Stadium. After leaving the *Times* in 1965 to freelance for magazines and write books, I spent much of my time between the mid-1960s into the 1970s residing in hotels and apartments in various parts of California—in Beverly Hills to do a profile of Frank Sinatra during his autumn years; in San Francisco to write about the fifty-one-year-old Joe DiMaggio still mourning Marilyn Monroe, and also wondering what was wrong with the present-day Yankees; in San Jose, where I completed research on a book about the exiled Bonanno crime family, which had been driven out of New York by rival mafiosi in the late 1960s after losing the "Banana War"; and in Topanga Canyon, near Malibu in Los Angeles County, where I frequently hung out, from 1971 through 1973, in order to interview dozens of nudist freethinkers and free-love couples in a commune called Sandstone, which was one of the locales I used while researching and writing a book that outlined the historical and social trends that I believe made America in the 1970s so much more permissive and less prudish than the postwar, pre-*Playboy* days of my youth, when my confessed admiration for Frank Yerby's novels prompted my parish priest to predict, perhaps rightly, that I was predestined for degeneracy and an afterlife of purgatorial punishment.

One evening, while I was residing in Topanga Canyon, I drove down to Beverly Hills to dine with a writer friend I knew from New York who was now making a fortune in Hollywood working on scripts that, as far as I know, were never made into movies. He was a Yankee fan, and as we were finishing dinner, he introduced me to one of the restaurant's managers, who was a devotee of the Red Sox—a charming and gregarious Irish-American in his early

thirties who stood more than six-four and wore a trimly tailored double-breasted suit and a bow tie and was named Patrick Shields. After joining our table for a while and treating us to an after-dinner drink, Shields took the opportunity to toast the continuing decline of the Yankees.

I saw him in the restaurant a few times after that; and before I had returned to New York during the spring of 1974, we had exchanged phone numbers and had made tentative plans to meet during one of his East Coast visits, which he said he would try to arrange while the Red Sox were playing the Yankees at the Stadium. I next heard from Shields a year later, when he phoned to inform me that he had moved to New York and wanted me to be his guest at a private dining establishment and disco that he was managing on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

His place was called Le Club, and, as I would learn from frequent visits, its membership included many of New York's business tycoons who were not only sports fans but sometimes investors in one or more of the local teams—they might own a piece of the Yankees, the Mets, the Jets, the Giants, the Knicks, the Nets, the Rangers, or morsels of several of them. In any case, they traveled by limo to sporting events and usually sat in commodious, glass-walled mid-level boxes that, while offering an expansive overview of the playing area, muted much of the noise and spirit emanating from the crowds in the nearby seats and the spectators and athletes below. And yet—because most of these enclosed boxes had air-conditioning, heating systems, upholstered furniture, bartenders, waiters, and buffet tables offering a variety of seafoods, meats, and salads—the tycoons and their friends, both male and female, were able to attend games without being deprived of their accustomed comforts and amenities, to say nothing of their option to do here (as many of them did) what they might have done had they stayed home—watch the game

on television, since there were usually two or more screens affixed to the walls of the boxes.

After the game was over—and often long before, if it was not a very interesting contest—the men and their friends would perhaps be driven back to Le Club for a late supper or nightcap. I enjoyed watching Patrick Shields moving and mingling among them at their tables near the dance floor; what most impressed me was the ease with which he comported himself while in the presence of these affluent and at times abrasive and fickle individuals who, having hired him, could also have banded together at any time to fire him. But to me he never seemed to be concerned or deferential in the manner often exhibited by maître d's even in New York's more exclusive restaurants. It was as if he *had* something on these people, something more than the usual extramarital dalliances that most restaurateurs discreetly accept as part of the decor of a New York dining room. Or maybe what Patrick Shields had going for him was merely the fact that he could seat these people wherever he wished, which in itself would make him a force, at least during the evening hours, when I believe most people's sensibilities and stability undergo an altering process that makes them more dependent upon the flattering light and ego-feeding rooms that good restaurants and clubs can provide, along with the choice tables that such hirelings as Patrick Shields could reserve by way of confirming the status that most of these people take for granted during the day.

I have long believed that in such vast and vacillating cities as New York even some very significant citizens can often feel insignificant at night, in part because their offices are closed and they are remote from their support systems and the attentions of their underlings, and they are sometimes even forgotten by their limo drivers, who await them in front of restaurants but have fallen asleep behind

the wheel, and will wake up only after a few sharp knuckle raps on the side window or windshield. And so the nocturnal necessity of restaurants as extensions of important people's daytime prominence are essential ingredients that have nurtured the successful careers of all the great culinary figures—the legendary Henri Soulé of Pavillon, Sirio Maccioni of Le Cirque, Elaine Kaufman of Elaine's, and dozens of younger restaurant owners and men like Patrick Shields, who, though not an owner, was akin to them as an enterpreneur of the evening.

He was also an excellent conversationalist, and, as he passed out menus to his guests while towering over their tables, he forthrightly expressed his opinions on those subjects that were most often under discussion—the national economy, local politics, and professional sports.

Each morning, Patrick read five newspapers—the *Wall Street Journal,* the *Times,* and three local tabloids, including *Women's Wear Daily,* whose editor was a member of Le Club. During the latter part of the afternoons, while the waiters were preparing the tables for dinner, he was on the phone with his broker discussing some of the stock tips he had picked up the night before while cruising the tables. His bachelor apartment was in a high rise in the neighborhood, and what hung from the wooden hangers in his closet were bicoastal rows of tailored jackets and suits purchased from the finer shops of Rodeo Drive and Madison Avenue; and parked below in the garage was his leased Lincoln Town Car, which was spacious enough to accommodate his long limbs. Among the attractive women whom he escorted around Manhattan when he took a night off from work—and was not playing backgammon or bridge in the tearoom of a Park Avenue hotel with a few trophy wives he had met at Le Club—was his friend the actress Jennifer O'Neill, as well as some other performers he had known in Los Angeles or had met since moving to the East

Coast. He himself might have qualified for camera work. His lean and handsomely haggard facial features and blue eyes reminded me at times of the film star Peter O'Toole. But Patrick Shields's height—he was nearly six-five, as I said, and his proudly erect posture and lean frame made him seem even taller—might not have served his potential acting career as much as I think it helped to define his role as an uncommon character at Le Club, as a man who, as perhaps I have emphasized too much already, could not be cast as a glorified servant.

I have actually never known very tall people to be obsequious. Such individuals may be shy, or, as I saw Patrick Shields on occasion, reserved. But because of their stature they are rarely challenged, I think, because shorter people—even those who might be known as Napoleonic bullies in their offices—tend to modify their behavior, to become less assertive when facing men who hover over them, as Patrick Shields did every night at Le Club, casually conversing with CEOs, real estate moguls, corporate lawyers, and other people who might own a percentage of a basketball team but whose view of tall men was usually limited to what they saw from luxury boxes or courtside seats in Madison Square Garden. And yet this *was* close enough for them to note that there surely were advantages to size and reach, and they could observe as well how aggressive tall men can be in action—as, for example, the Knicks player Latrell Sprewell, whose acceptance years later by the local fans all but smothered the notoriety he had earned after choking the coach of the West Coast team on which he had previously played.

I am certainly *not* hinting here that there was anything threatening or ill-tempered about the demeanor of Patrick Shields. I am merely suggesting that his being very tall was perhaps a factor in his capacity to be both beholden to and independent from the men who paid his salary at Le Club.

Whether his height, along with his general efficiency and geniality, was entirely responsible for his apparent sense of security at Le Club, I do not really know, but my impression nonetheless was that he was very comfortable with the membership, and it is certain that they sometimes invited him as a single man to dinner parties in their homes, and also provided him with tickets to sporting events and even passes allowing him access to their boxes. One individual who did this, somewhat to my surprise, was the owner of the New York Yankees, George Steinbrenner.

Patrick Shields never concealed his ongoing affection for the Red Sox after he had moved to New York, and among the board members of Le Club who were aware of this was the Yankees owner, who was known in the media for his indifference to people with opinions other than his own. As a tabloid cartoon subject, Steinbrenner was sometimes portrayed as an antedated, barrel-chested Prussian military officer with a square-jawed scowling face partly hidden under a large spiked helmet. But since acquiring the Yankees from CBS in November 1973 (after the team had finished fourth for three straight seasons), he immediately put his considerable wealth and win-at-any-cost attitude into the organization and saw it improve within the next eight years to five first-place finishes, three trips to the World Series, and two world titles.

Among those who regularly watched these winning seasons from Steinbrenner’s box was Patrick Shields, who often showed his gratitude for Steinbrenner’s largesse by walking into Yankee Stadium wearing one of his Armani suits and a Red Sox baseball cap. I know this is true because I often accompanied him, having also gotten my name on Steinbrenner’s list after Shields had introduced us and had expounded upon my lifetime devotion to the Yankee franchise. Much as I appreciated Shields’s efforts in laying the foundation for what would become my enduring