

MICKEY MANTLE'S SUMMER

by Michael Ventura

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It was Mickey Mantle's summer. It was another world. All the televisions were black-and-white, and in New York City you could get seven stations – three or four more than in most of the country. TV news hadn't gone to fifteen minutes yet. Milk was still delivered to your door. In summer you expected to swelter. Nobody had air conditioning, at least nobody who wasn't rich. Even most public buildings weren't yet air-conditioned – only movie theaters, and that was still so novel that “Go to An AIR-CONDITIONED MOVIE!” was the big ad. There were few drugs on the streets, and almost no guns. Twenty-five percent of the American people lived in harsh poverty, but that was never mentioned in the papers or on TV. Nice people didn't discuss upsetting topics in mixed company. Forty years later, it seems like those Americans walked in a daze, carried forward by the momentum of their ignorance – an ignorance that they called, and believed to be, “security.”

It always seems like that when you look back forty years. The conditions change, moods and fashions may alter, but the essential quality of the daze – the refusal to see or admit the obvious – seems with us forever.

During Mickey Mantle's summer the music was sly and pretty and innocuous. There was lots of talk about “juvenile delinquents.” Kids from one turf fought kids from other turfs. The Irish and Italians and Puerto Ricans fought each other, all three fought “the coloreds,” and everybody beat up on the Jews – except in some parts of Brooklyn, where the Jews beat up on everybody else. But it was all fists and sticks and occasional knives. Rarely did we get hurt.

Many mothers didn't work. Most households had fathers. Divorce was still rare and weird. If your parents were divorced, you were teased and looked down on. No one who'd been divorced even fantasized about going into politics; there were no votes for divorcees. If anyone went to a shrink, they kept it to themselves, for it was a shameful stain, though not nearly as shameful as homosexuality – a word so rare then that I don't remember hearing it until long after Mickey Mantle's summer. Politicians, cops, doctors, and the faces at political conventions were male; if anybody on our block thought this was strange or unfair, they kept it to themselves.

During Mickey Mantle's summer any family that was offbeat or out-of-step was called “the commies” – every block had a family like that, and they were usually shunned, and it was the duty of all-American kids to make the “commie” kids miserable. Somewhere way beyond the sea was a race of monsters called “the Russians,” and everybody knew we'd kill them someday or else they'd get us first. Not only actors and writers, but thousands of teachers, civil servants, unionists, and professionals were driven from their jobs for suspected “Red” beliefs.

Somewhere in America, during Mickey Mantle's summer, Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk were pursuing their genius. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were pursuing theirs. B.B. King and Muddy Waters, too. But almost nobody white knew about them, the way almost nobody knew, except as rumor, about the heroin and marijuana that were part of their reality. (Let somebody else condemn those drugs. As Frank Sinatra

once said, “I’m for anything that gets you through the night, be it booze or religion.”) Rock’n’roll was just getting started, and any pundit could tell you that it was a crude, noisy fad which, by next summer, would be gone.

During Mickey Mantle’s summer you didn’t see “No Smoking” signs, not even in hospitals. Most Americans smoked, even newscasters on TV. A few, a very few, were “health faddists,” vegetarians and such, and they were considered extremely strange. Nobody jogged. Cars were big and sleek. You never heard words like “pollution” or “ecology” or “abuse.” Rapes were rarely reported; to be raped was too great a shame. Blacks were still lynched in the South at the rate of two or three a month, but they didn’t draw much ink, and nobody went to jail for it. The big political issues were such questions as whether a Catholic could ever be president. In Alabama, a “Negro” minister named King was starting a movement of some kind, but most thought he was a troublemaker, and very few (white) people thought anything would or could change.

During Mickey Mantle’s summer, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Henry Miller, Anais Nin, John Steinbeck, William Carlos Williams, and Flannery O’Connor were alive and working. So were Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Martha Graham. Norman Mailer and James Baldwin were young writers. Albert Einstein and Carl Jung were aging geniuses. American painters quailed under the shadow of a still-energetic Picasso, and American thinkers felt dwarfed by Jean Paul Sartre. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller were in their prime. Joe DiMaggio was in love with Marilyn Monroe.

During Mickey Mantle’s summer, people spoke about “the year 2000” as though it were 2,000 years away. It was going to be a gleaming time when technology had fixed everything, disease had been eradicated, and everyone lived in peace and harmony and the most sanitary of prosperities. In the year 2000, everything was going to be exactly the same, only shinier, more efficient, happier. It’s hard to imagine, now, how deeply we believed this back then.

During Mickey Mantle’s summer, atomic bombs exploded frequently about 60 miles from Las Vegas – you could see that mushroom cloud rise over the mountains from anywhere in town. When the government said that fallout was harmless, most people believed it. Most people believed anything the government said. There were barely enough atomic bombs in the world to take out more than a few dozen cities then, and there were no missiles capable of traveling long distances, but Hiroshima was barely a decade past, many built fallout shelters, and everyone was frightened. Schools drilled children on what to do during an atomic attack. (Hide under the desk and cover your head and it would be all right – that’s what they told us. And they wondered why, when we grew older, we didn’t trust many of the other things they told us.)

But it was Mickey Mantle’s summer, and for a while he really did seem more important than all those things. At least, everyone talked as though he was. New York City had three baseball teams. Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Houston, Toronto, Miami – they didn’t have any. The Mick was a kid in his early twenties. He was always smiling, and it seemed he could do anything. They talked about his power, they talked about his speed. He played the game with a ferociously innocent enthusiasm, played it brilliantly, bravely, cheerfully, generously, and it seemed that everywhere you looked you saw his open and happy expression, unassuming yet commanding – the seemingly

simple hero of a seemingly simple game, who seemed to ask nothing of life but the clarity and drama of his particular brand of hardball.

If he drank, well, ballplayers were supposed to drink. If he philandered, that seemed his right and his due, in the ethic of that time – and it was only written of between the lines. If he suffered, who in our world could have possibly known? There seemed not a trace of suffering in that smile, not a sign of the strains of obsession that we expect, say, in artists. He didn't even seem to have an ego. The power to hit the power to run, the power to throw. The power to be Mickey Mantle. It was *his* summer, it was *all* his – and the next summer, and the next. Pain didn't seem to bother him. Nothing seemed to bother him. He played with joy, and it was a joy to see. That much was real: the joy of his playing. Watch the footage. You can't mistake it. He seemed the very embodiment of America – of what America wanted to be, of what they told us America was: an innocent giant with power that was good for everyone.

He's dying as I write this. The harsh thing is that he's dying ashamed of himself, ashamed of his drinking, ashamed of his evasions – the way America has become ashamed of itself. It seems he can't help but reflect us. Can't help but reflect how we see ourselves. That was his glory then and that is his destruction now. (The cancer is merely the finale; the destruction goes so much deeper.) And his wan, ravaged face, so frightened and unsure – you want to cup that face in your hands, you want to say, "Don't be ashamed, don't die in shame, you did something beautifully once, and you took the projection of our innocence upon yourself the way Marilyn took the projection of our lust, and it was too much for you, and your demons ate you alive, you hurt yourself and your loved ones like we all do but you never went out of your way to do harm and you kept the joy of your hardball game, you never sullied *that*, not ever. In a time of evasions, in a summer of lies, *that* wasn't a lie. You lived it out, and you didn't betray us. Nobody, nobody at all, begrudges you that summer. Go well."

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