

the Rusty Nail

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G.S. Payne earned his undergraduate degree from Penn State University and, eschewing the confines of academia, has been largely self-educated in the twenty-plus years since, devoting his energies towards the study of his true passion, creative non-fiction. Now living on the Gulf Coast of Florida (except for those summers in State College), he works predominantly as a ghostwriter, specializing in narrative non-fiction and memoir. Works in Payne's own name have appeared in *Foliage Oak*, *Straitjackets*, *The Writer's Disorder*, and *History Magazine*.

Between the Lines

by G.S. Payne

On a clear August evening this past summer I caught the Spikes playing at Medlar Field. Minor league baseball. As American as pie. An affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Spikes play in the Class A New York-Penn League, and I noticed by the latest standings printed in my "WWWZ News 95" game program that they were occupying the bottom position of that league, much like their parent team in the Majors.

Medlar Field at Lubrano Park (its full name) was built smartly so that the stands, ringing the bottom half of the diamond, face beautiful Mount Nittany off in the distance, a straight shot from beyond the center field fence. From that rolling peak comes the name of the mascot for the university that sits in its idyllic valley. The mascot, of course, is the fabled Nittany Lion, the university is Penn State, and the valley, back in those innocent summer days, was cheerfully nicknamed Happy Valley. But of course that was before.

Baseball, between the lines, is a beautiful game, a pure sport, free of the bustle of the times and charmingly lacking in ambiguity where ideas of morality or integrity are concerned. Baseball is a game played without a clock; a game where, as Bill Veeck once observed, if you get three strikes against you even the best lawyer in the world can't get you off, and a game that produced, according to Red Smith, man's closest bid for perfection: ninety feet between bases.

I had these thoughts vaguely on my mind as I chomped into my hot dog and listened to the P.A. announcer rattle off the Chick-fil-A starting lineups. The visiting Aberdeen Ironbirds went down in order in their half of the first, the final out being a fly out to center. "Don't forget, fans," exhorted the announcer, "get *your* flies out with Park Pest Control!"

Outfielder Wes Freeman was the Boar's Head lead-off hitter in the Spikes half of the inning. Freeman worked the count full, fouled off a couple pitches, then took one in the dirt and trotted down towards first, the base-on-balls brought to us, revealed the P.A. jock, by Nittany Beverage ("Make it *your* choice!").

Everything around State College, the small town that borders on, and feeds off, the university, seems to be named Nittany something. Besides Nittany Beverage (a place that thrives selling beer in a state with hopelessly archaic laws that prevent the selling of beer and wine in supermarkets and convenience

stores), there is Nittany Oil, Nittany Bank, Nittany Paper Mills, and Mount Nittany Medical Center. And those are just the businesses advertised on the outfield wall of Medlar Field. In my two months of summer vacation in State College (a working one), I spied Nittany Chem Dry, Nittany Antique Emporium, Nittany Travel, Nittany Home Inspection, Nittany Car Wash, Nittany Construction, Nittany Dental Lab, Nittany Gymnastics, and the Nittany Mall, presumably filled with an entire subset of Nittany-named shops and kiosks.

After Freeman, the next three Spikes went down in order, including Samuel Gonzalez, batting fourth in the lineup – the ServiceMaster Clean-Up Hitter, we were told.

Spending a summer in State College had been a dream of mine for years, finally realized when it dawned on me one typically hot, muggy, summer day in Florida where I have lived since graduating from Penn State in 1982, that, as a freelance writer, I can live anywhere (within financial reason). I have a laptop, after all, and a cell phone. Give me an Internet connection and I'm in business. I found an apartment that was actually built onto a private residence a scenic twenty-minute walk from the Corner Room restaurant, a fixture in the town as iconic as Old Main. A beautiful stone building with imposing columns and a bell tower that peels out Westminster chimes on the quarter hour, Old Main is the university administration building and sits on a rise a hundred yards or so off College Avenue, the main drag and dividing line between town and campus. It was basic, this apartment I found, but basic was enough.

Ashley Ponce doubled in the third, driving home a run for the Spikes, and in the process becoming hailed by the announcer as the Arby's RBI guy. Everyone cheered and I cheered, too, then I went for a bag of peanuts and a Yuengling. Yuengling seems to be the beer of choice in State College these days, although when I was a student it was Rolling Rock. You'll find Yuengling available at the Rathskeller, a basement bar that's been in business since 1933, the year Prohibition ended, and the bar that became my place of choice for Friday happy hour. They serve it at Zeno's, too – a bar downstairs from the Corner Room and where I would often spend nights listening to local blues bands –, and at Whiskers, the only on-campus bar, right off the lobby of the venerable Nittany Lion Inn, the official university hotel for visiting dignitaries and other VIPs. And you'll find it pretty much everywhere else, too.

With the Spikes up 5-2 in the fourth, the Ironbirds decided to make a pitching change, the call to the bullpen brought to us, we were informed, by Verizon Cellular. During the break in action the crowd of probably 3,000 was entertained by the Kiss Cam, a staple in ballparks these days. Couples in the crowd are shown on the Jumbotron and compelled, under heavy peer pressure from the rest of the fans, to share a smooch. The camera bounces around from couple to couple, and each couple, upon seeing themselves on the big screen, kisses. Every so often the camera stops on a couple who is either on a first date or has something merely platonic going on and you can almost feel the awkward discomfort. That night's Kiss Cam was brought to us by Gardner's Candies in nearby Tyrone ("Home of the original Peanut Butter Meltaway!").

The real beauty of State College in the summer is the fact that probably eighty percent of the students are gone. The bars and restaurants and shops are rarely crowded. Even The Diner, another State College fixture with its delicious breakfasts and world-famous sticky buns, has seats available at the counter on any given Sunday morning. And yet there are enough people populating both the town and campus to provide an energy not seen in your typical small town – an energy born of the perpetual youth of a major university. You feel it as you walk around the place, and it's a place that was made for walking. The town is all cafes and t-shirt shops and pizza joints and bookstores, and you can easily shoot a day just meandering around its streets. The campus is sprawling and sylvan, and sidewalks running past old classroom buildings are framed by tall, shady elms.

The Spikes added a run in the fifth, bringing yet another visit from the Nittany Bank Nookie Monster, a big fuzzy blue thing that runs out onto the field from a door in the outfield fence, every time a Spike player crosses the plate, and does a quick back flip before returning to his station behind the fence to await the next run. I had no idea what it was supposed to be, really, this Nookie Monster, but the crowd cheered and I cheered and then I went to get another Yuengling.

The best summers of my life have been spent in State College, two of them as a student taking summer-term classes and one as an adult, enjoying the energy and ambience and cool temperatures and the occasional Spikes game. But this latest summer, though just last year, seems an eternity ago, played out just months before the single defining moment that will forever divide the history of Penn State University into that which happened before and that which happened afterwards. There was "then", and there is "since".

There was a mascot race between the sixth and seventh innings between a Chick-fil-A cow, a guy dressed as a fireman, somebody in a costume that was one gigantic eyeball, and a cowgirl named, for some reason, Jane Doe. The race went from home plate around the bases and back home again (mere yards beyond where the players were loosening up in the infield) with the participants bumping into each other and occasionally falling down and then getting back up. The crowd cheered enthusiastically, as did I, and in the end the Chick-fil-A cow won and we were all reminded by the P.A. announcer that in celebration we could take our game ticket stubs to the nearest Chick-fil-A restaurant for a free twenty-ounce soda (with the purchase of a meal).

It was the most ironic and stunning of scandals, taking place at a school which prided itself on its pristine reputation for integrity – a football program, coached by a living legend, with never so much as a hint of impropriety. And then the bomb was dropped: reports of child sexual abuse by an ex-assistant coach and an alleged university cover-up. Within days the football program, athletic department, and university itself seemingly lay in ruins.

When the Ironbirds scored a couple of quick runs in the seventh, putting the game in doubt, it produced another Verizon Cellular call to the bullpen, this time to the Spikes' bullpen to bring in the Rolands Relief man, a lefty who warmed up to the tune of "Mony Mony".

Of course time spent away from home never leaves you without some minor complaint or other. Mine was that the town wasn't as friendly as I'd remembered it as a student. But then, as a student, I drew my circle of friends among other students, not full-time residents of the town. It's to be expected of any small northern town, I suppose, and since I'm something of a loner anyway, the cool regard for strangers was fine by me. Still, there was one small occurrence on my last night, before I returned to the more open warmth of my fellow Floridians, that doggedly stuck with me no matter how hard I tried to shake it off.

I had finished my dinner at the cozy Tavern Restaurant and decided on an after-dinner Irish Mist at the restaurant's bar, the Adam's Apple. The place was uncharacteristically crowded that night (I imagined some convention in town) and I found it fairly impossible to access the front of the bar with the crowd lingering there with their drinks. I stood instead to the side, in front of the waitress station, careful not to be in the way, quickly stepping aside whenever a waitress needed to reach through to pick up a drink order. I hadn't planned on standing there long; there was just one bartender but I was sure I had caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. But then another patron managed to elbow his way to the front of the bar adjacent to my position. "What'll you have, Bob?" asked the bartender to which the other guy pointed a thumb at me. "I think he was here first," he said. "Yes, but he's standing in front of the waitress station," replied the bartender flatly. I was sure, at first, that I'd misheard, but then it struck me that, as a stranger to the bartender, and one who was apparently breaking some serious saloon positioning rule to boot, I was essentially being dismissed.

I was floored. I suppose I could have corrected my egregious error by moving around to the front of the bar and elbowing my way through the people there, but, there being no shortage of places to get a drink in State College, I decided to take my after-dinner libation business up College Avenue to the Allen Street Grille instead. Walking along the sidewalk, past the dark windows of the shops that had closed for the evening, I tried to get my mind off the remarkably odd moment back at the Adam's Apple. It was a small matter, after all, and although I could not imagine such an occurrence in, say, a Key West bar, I didn't want to make too much of it in my mind. But the incident has never really left me and I've thought about it often since. It has come to symbolize a sort of unfamiliarity I have come to realize I possess with respect to the town, and in the wake of the scandal, to the university itself perhaps. A little hidden, surprising thing that seems alien to what you think you know about a place. Something that separates you from it somehow.

The seventh-inning stretch featured a pair of fifth-grade girls (I think they may have been twins) singing "Take Me out to the Ballgame" and their singing was lively and sweet. We all sang along and applauded loudly as the announcer let us know that the girls had been brought to us by the Ramada Inn (official host hotel for NYPL visiting teams) and P.J. Harrigan's Bar & Grill, which apparently adjoins the Ramada ("The Ramada and P.J. Harrigan's: a winning combination!").

But for that last evening at the Adam's Apple, I thoroughly enjoyed my time in State College. I'd work in the mornings from my apartment living room, my desk looking out on a grove of thick trees that ran alongside my landlady's house, squirrels frequently chasing through the branches, distracting me. I'd often take my laptop to Paterno Library in the afternoon and work from there, parking downtown at the corner of Garner Street and College Avenue and walking the half-mile or so to the library, for there was

always precious little on-campus parking available. Even if there had been, the walk through campus, across Old Main lawn and up the Mall towards the library, was worth the extra time.

In the evenings I would sit on the short stone wall (simply “The Wall” to the students) that runs along the campus side of College Avenue, in front of Old Main, and I would read and watch the people – students, faculty members, townsfolk – strolling along the sidewalk in front of me. The academic atmosphere inspired me to revisit some books from my classroom days, and I was able to buy inexpensive, used (very used, in fact) copies of *A Moveable Feast* and *The Crack-Up* at the Student Book Store. Weekends were spent at the Palmer Museum of Art, on hikes around Mount Nittany, or on self-guided walking tours of the historic neighborhoods that surround the town and campus, each activity typically followed by a trip to the Berkey Creamery on campus for a few scoops of their famous ice cream.

After the eighth inning came the Pizza Hut scream. A guy in a Jolly Green Giant costume (the connection escapes me still) walked through the stands with a large Pizza Hut pizza looking for the group that was screaming the loudest, dramatically cupping his ear with his free hand and earnestly gazing around the stadium. Everyone in the section I was in screamed and I joined in and screamed as well but a group of high school girls in Section 201, with screams that could no doubt be heard as far away as Altoona, won the competition, and the pizza. The Ironbirds couldn’t muster any runs in the ninth and the game ended, a 6-4 Spikes victory and we all cheered and I walked back to my apartment, cutting across campus, watching for fireflies in the dark.

I’ve thought a lot about State College in the months since and about Penn State and the scandal – what the scandal means, and what it says about institutions and people and maybe even our society’s values, for surely there is more in all of it than just the problems of a single university. But I’ve never really been able to come to any kind of decent conclusions. The whole thing remains confusing and inexplicable. Of course on that summer night at Medlar Field, I had none of those weighty issues on my mind nor would they have been welcomed. I just wanted to watch a baseball game on a clear August night in all its purity. I wanted to cheer when the State College Spikes scored. And cheer again when the H.R. Office Supply “Employee of the Home Stand” was announced and when the announcer declared the winner of the Supercuts “Name-that-Hairstyle” contest. The first won a pair of free movie passes; the second received a coupon for a free haircut.