Because TCF has no shortage of scribes fully capable of writing an insightful, well-researched synopsis of the 2011 Cleveland Indians campaign, I figured I might as well do the opposite—cover the highlights of the Tribe season based exclusively on how my slowly deteriorating brain remembers them. No stat breakdowns. No Googling. No nostalgic Vinnie Pestano tweets. Just raw, random, and sometimes weird recollections. Why go about things in such an unprofessional, potentially wildly inaccurate manner, you ask? Because, when it comes to our final takeaway from a baseball season, isn't it *the way* we remember things that matters more than what actually happened? ... Don't answer that. I'm running with the premise regardless.

Hey Moneyballers, don't get me wrong. Statistical analysis is great-- even downright addictive. And we could certainly learn a lot by SABRtoothing great Tribe seasons of lore, from Albert Belle's 1.091 OPS in '95 to Cliff Lee's 168 ERA+ in 2008. But when it really boils down to it, the specifics of these accomplishments are kind of secondary to the experience of having actually watched it all unfold… CP Lee stoically mowing down another line-up like a Razorback-country Robocop… or Albert taking his little chicken hop after going grand salami off Lee Smith with the bags juiced... Or sometimes we just remember Wayne Kirby putting bubblegum on somebody's hat. Who can say what will stick with you?

Anyway, 2011 has certainly left its own share of lasting impressions. So—in freestyle fashion—here are the things that pop into my mind when I close my eyes, stop pondering "What If?" and accept 'What Was" about the 2011 Cleveland Indians.

"Are They for Real?"

In retrospect, this was the true slogan for the Tribe season. From the moment they swept the Red Sox back in April up until Dexter finally duct taped them to his death table in August, any story about the Indians' heartwarming underdog story basically boiled down to the same question: "So, they for real or what?" I suppose the final answer was a pretty clear-cut, "Umm, no." But there are caveats, of course. What if Choo, Hafner, Kipnis, Sizemore, Brantley, Tomlin, Dorn, Sorrano, and Fukudome's mom hadn't hit the DL in quick succession? Is a healthy Tribe a "realer" Tribe? Or is a banged up, inexperienced AAA Tribe generally the realist thing we can expect?

"O-Cab Taught A-Cab How to Hit Homeruns"

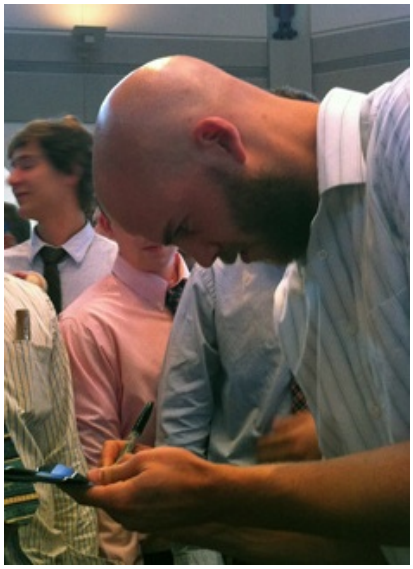
Ah, man, I'm going to miss hearing this little anecdote. It became an instant classic back in April, and local and national commentators alike just couldn't get enough of it. I can almost hear Tim McCarver now. "Ya know, Joe, Cabrera has really attributed his recent power surge to a tip he got in spring training from another Cabrera… Orlando Cabrera—yeah the one who always winds up in the playoffs, but I'll re-tell that story in a minute. Anyway, apparently, five years into his Major League career, nobody bothered telling Asdrubal Cabrera that he doesn't always have to swing the bat like he's swatting a ladybug off a puppy's nose. Orlando told him, 'you can hit homeruns, kid.' And so now he does." Unfortunately, without O-Cab around, it will be up to new second baseman Jason Kipnis to help Asdrubal discover his remaining hidden talents, like Chinese checkers and calligraphy.

"Tom Hamilton Will Likely Die Calling a Game Winning Grand Slam"

When your favorite team wins a game in its last at-bat on a titanic moonshot homerun with the bases loaded, your first thought should not be concern for your club's radio broadcaster. But amidst the pandemonium after the memorable walkoff grannies by Carlos Santana (over a kittenish early incarnation of the Tigers) and Travis Hafner (against… Seattle, right?), I recall pausing my exuberance ever so briefly to make sure that longtime play-by-play man Tom Hamilton hadn't gasped his last breath. It went something like this. "Deep right field!!!!!!!!!!!!

Goooooooooooooooooone!!!!!! …….. (10 seconds of silence, scrounging for oxygen mask perhaps?)… Carlos Santana has done it!" (Ah good, he's alive).

"Matt LaPorta's Half-Hearted Strikeout Swing Made My Cat Puke"
It was probably a hairball. It was probably gonna happen anyway. But the timing was more than a little suspicious. Not saying I blame my cat either.

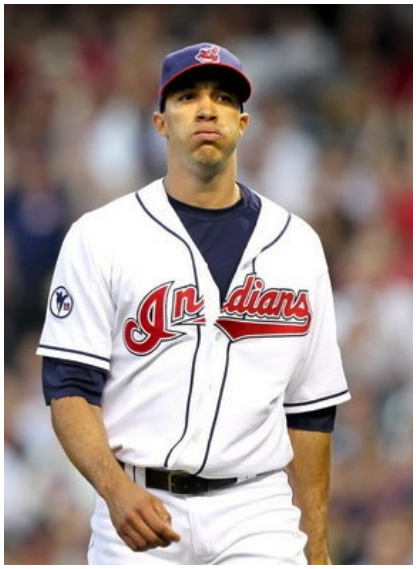


"Justin Masterson's Beard is Weird"
Let's think about the things we all agreed HAD to go right for the Indians to contend in 2011. (a) Sizemore and Hafner need to stay healthy and produce; (b) Matt LaPorta needs to stop sucking; (c) Choo must solidify himself as a perennial all-star; (d) Fausto must become a reliable #1 starter. Well, none of that worked. So how did the Tribe wind up respectable in the wreckage of all these headcases and hernias? Well, it's got to start with the remarkable consistency of most of the pitchers not named Fausto—particularly the lanky guy with the worst baldhead / beard combination since Drew Gooden. At some point during the summer, Justin Masterson shaved off his puffy, formless face fuzz. But when I look back at this season in which good ole Bats established himself as the Tribe's new ace, I will remember him fully bearded and fully bald-- twirling that weird sidearm junk into slow choppers down the third base line. Incidentally, if Jack Hannahan were a hamster, slow choppers would be hamster food.

"My Lack of Empathy for Vin Mazzaro Knows No Limits"
In one of the Indians' seemingly 57 meetings with the Royals this year, they scored something like 57 runs in one inning off of a sacrificial lamb named Vin Mazzaro. Actually, Mazzaro's been decent at times. I had him on an AL-only fantasy league for a few weeks in 2010. We bonded. But watching my old friend get his brains bashed in by a sprightly, pennant-chasing Tribe lineup did not bother me in the slightest. If anything, I became strangely aware of just how merciless I

truly could be when the situation demanded it. Against a defenseless, inferior foe, my only thought was, “More runs. More! Kill kill kill!” In other words, I briefly experienced the Yankee fan mindset, and it scared me a bit.

“The Indians Finally Made That Big Acquisition and We’re Pissed About It”
Remember when our 2012 rotation looked like this?



Masterson
Pomeranz
White
Carrasco
Tomlin
Now, for some reason, it looks more like this:
Bald Guy Due for Setback
The Rockies Guy Who Was Awesome for 3 Months a Couple Years Ago
Headcase McGoo
Josh Homerungiverupper
Jeanmar Gomez, I Guess?
Considering it was clearly the most important personnel related story of the Tribe season, it’s kind of sad that my brain is struggling to think of anything memorable—in a positive sense—about Ubaldo Jimenez’s first go-round as an Indian. I seem to remember that he was friendly enough to toss batting practice before one of our big games with the Tigers. But on further reflection, I think I am thinking of the actual game itself.

“Hey, What Better Way to Get Your First Major League Hit?”
First, it should be noted that 2011 was the year that Rick Manning became one of the best color commentators in baseball. This is not even a joke. The guy isn’t on a Shakespearian level with his vocab, perhaps, but when it comes to breaking down a situation and anticipating strategy, pitch selection, or approach at the plate… Archie is a beast. One WGN game with Hawk

Harrelson and Steve Stone was all it took to finally wake me up to Manning's genius and my unyielding reliance on it. Anyway, the above quote is something Rick likes to say when someone like Zeke Carrera comes up in his first big league at-bat and lays down a perfect suicide squeeze bunt. Or when a top prospect like Jason Kipnis drives a game-winning single through the right side for his first hit. "Toss the kid that baseball!" Cord Phelps' first career homerun was a gamewinner, too, I think. In plausible future news, Cord Phelps' only career homerun was a gamewinner.

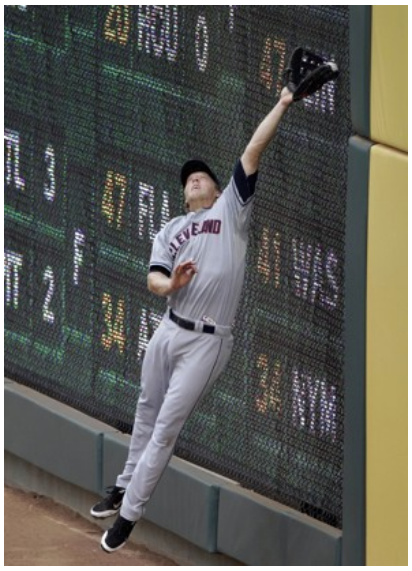
"Jim Thome Ruined My Progressive Field Statue Contest"

A few months back, I did an interactive piece for TheClevelandFan in which readers could vote for who they believed should be the next ex-Indian honored with a statue at Progressive Field (since Bob Feller is getting lonely). Jim Thome didn't even make the ballot. And nobody really complained much either, because the idea of honoring him with the very statue he'd famously rebuffed when he skipped town in 2002 would be borderline pathetic, right? Well, guess not. Don't get me wrong. I fully supported Thome's acquisition, and from mid-August on, his presence was the only thing—besides Rick Manning's incredible insight—that could get me to sit through a Tribe-Twins game. I like Jim and hold no ill will. That said, did we really have to go crawling back to the dude with another statue? Didn't anyone with the Indians pay attention to our poll numbers? Larry Doby won! Doesn't Larry Doby deserve a statue a little more than Mr. Nice Guy at this particular point in history? Is the statue going to depict various opposing GMs trying to tear Thome's Indians jersey off his back?

"Sloth Goes Supernatural"

Starting 30-15 was fun. The game winning grand slams were fun. Asdrubal's various highlight reel plays were fun. The yearlong reliability of the Bullpen Mafia was fun. The creepy bulldog confidence of Josh Tomlin and his whiffleball pitches were fun. Watching Fausto Carmona

stumble over himself like a drunk Jar-Jar Binks was fun. But if you really want to break it down, only one moment (or series of moments) from the 2011 Cleveland Indians season truly defied all logic and left fans grasping for their Inception totems to verify that we had not fallen into a collective, surreal dream state. I am referring, of course, to just a couple weeks ago, when Shelley Duncan—a bad outfielder—and David Huff—a bad pitcher—teamed up for the weirdest goddamn five minutes of weirdass weirdness I have ever seen….



Now in a lot of ways, this whole season was the Season of Sloth. Though he was shuttled back and forth from Columbus more times than an annoyingly homesick OSU freshman, Shelly Duncan had himself some highlights in 2011— including a few huge pinch hits during the sunnier portion of the summer and a monstrous September in the RBI department. Duncan also proved yet again that he is unmatched when it comes to extreme, in-game mood swings (no one looks happier when they succeed or more smoke-out-of-the-ears furious when they fail). But the thing my sci-fi loving brain will always remember about Dave Duncan's giant, strange-looking baby boy is what he did in the first couple innings of an otherwise forgettable loss to the Texas Rangers. In a sequence quite conceivably more unlikely than winning the lottery and getting struck by lightning simultaneously, Shelley Duncan bailed out David Huff with (to paraphrase LeBron James) "not one, not two," but THREE CONSECUTIVE leaping catches at the fence in left field. When you start thinking of everything that had to happen for this sort of trifecta to occur—the location of Huff's pitches, the contact of the Rangers' bats, the windspeed, Duncan's read on the balls… basically, in a controlled experiment in an empty stadium, you could try to recreate this event a million times and not get it quite right. Three straight hitters, three straight leaping wall catches by a galumphing ape of an outfielder. We shall never see its likeness again. I suppose I'd be remiss for not giving Huff his props, too, as he still managed to give up 8 or 9 runs in that game even after Sloth pulled out the miracle hat trick for him.

So yeah, Shelley Duncan making some nice catches in a meaningless September game is my finest memory of a thrilling, emotional baseball season. Go ahead and pray to your Thome

statue or ask Orlando Cabrera for advice on your golf game. Me and Sloth are gonna sit back, watch some X-Files, and celebrate the end of the 63rd straight season of championship-free Tribe baseball. What if…. there's always next year?