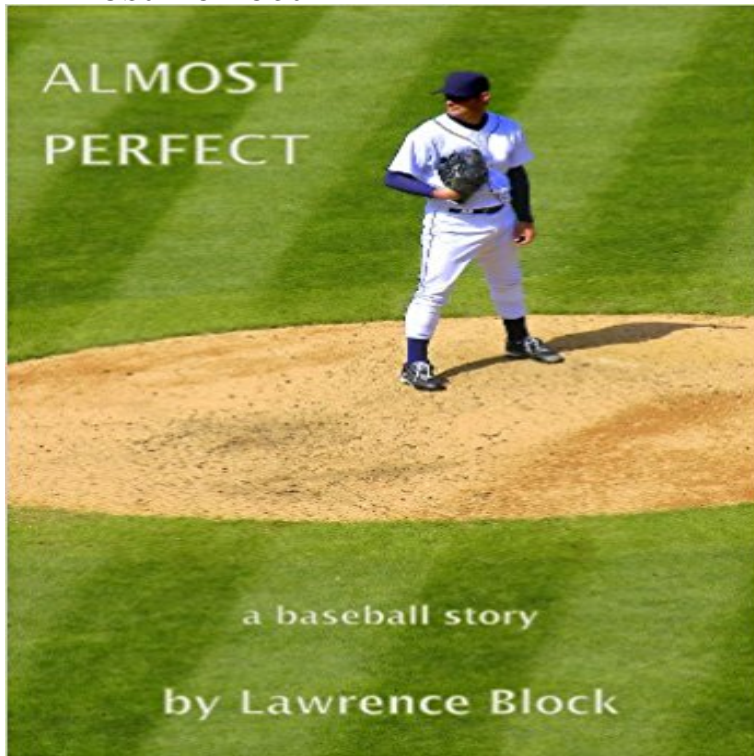


Almost Perfect



Almost Perfect is a baseball story. It was written at the invitation of Otto Penzler, who wanted it for an anthology but he didn't get to publish it. Alice K. Turner, as incisive a reader as I've ever known, was Playboy's Fiction Editor at the time, and I always gave her first look at anything I wrote. She snapped it up, and I had to choose between disappointing Otto and missing out on a sale to Playboy. Talk about your nobrainers. The story appeared in Playboy, and in due course I tucked it into my omnibus collection, Enough Rope. My own favorite baseball stories are all novels. Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* is a critical favorite, and justly so, but there are four other books I like even better. Three are by Mark Harris: *The Southpaw* and its two sequels, *Bang the Drum Slowly* and *A Ticket For a Seamstress*. (Harris wrote a fourth novel about the same character toward the end of his life, and it can be charitably described as disappointing.) And Charles Einstein's *The Only Game in Town* is a book I've reread several times, with undiminishing enjoyment. Malamud's novels in print; the others are not, but once can find them readily and reasonably in the aftermarket. Back to Otto. He was disheartened when he heard I wasn't going to be able to give him a story after all. So write another story, he said. There's plenty of time. A baseball story, with a crime in it. But, I said, I didn't have an idea. A pause. Well, he said gently, that's never stopped you in the past. So when his anthology, *Murderers Row*, appeared, it contained a story of mine called *Keller's Designated Hitter*. But that's another story.

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