

Ballgame

by DeWitt Henry

"Look, Anna Maye," Mary Lloyd offered suddenly, "why don't you come with us this weekend? Are you doing anything?"

Confused and alert, she replied no, nothing. Mary Lloyd said they had tickets to the ball game, a twilight doubleheader. She and her husband, Tom, and Tom's brother, Ralph (who was coming in from out of town): they could all go together and have a swell time.

Immediately doubts raced through her mind. She hurriedly straightened the samples she'd been shellacking, glanced out at the girls waving goodbye as they passed her booth. Howard and Mary, what would they think? What about having a man pushed at her like this--also the humiliation of it, coming from Mary Lloyd? But Mary Lloyd knew her too well, and waved aside all indecision: "Oh, come on," she insisted in a gentle, friendly way, "what's the problem? This Ralph is a regular guy."

Before, when there had been these chances, she had always been afraid of the trouble her father would make: Where are you going? Where have you been? What about Mary? What about me? People depend on you. You got no business fooling around. You don't know nothing about life. Get the romance out of your head. You're not going out to no bars and no movies and back seats of cars. Sneaking around. How did you meet this jerk? Your place is here. You don't see me running around, do you? No! I work. I bring money to this house. I respect your mother's memory. Now stay here where you belong and get these ideas out of your head. Meanwhile Mary, teenaged and attractive, would jeer at her, for Mary was the one he let go out, do anything she pleased. Also men had hurt her. The boys at school were cruel.

She knew that she was bland and overweight and dull; that what was beautiful in her was locked away like a tiny maiden, far, far away in a tower, too difficult to find or reach. She must face her lot, grateful for her family and her work. Life was rich within these bounds, and other longings dangerous. Different people were luckier, like another race; if you compared yourself to them you only grew bitter and sad.

She accepted Mary Lloyd's invitation.

Tom was a quiet, patient, gray-haired man, but balding, a plumber by trade. He and Mary Lloyd had three children (Betty, the oldest, was home babysitting for them). She picked up her purse and started out as soon as their station wagon appeared. Mary Lloyd waved. Tom honked, and a short, husky man, younger than Tom, opened the back door and came around to greet her at the walk. "I'm Ralph. You're Anna Maye," he announced. "Been hearing all about you. C'mon. We're late. Some day, huh? We're having a time. We got some chicken; you eat yet?"

"Yes. Mary Lloyd said--"

Removing the cigar from his mouth, he stepped closer and took her elbow with his free hand. "C'mon." His hair, receding high on a sloping forehead, was crew-cut and gray; his face was coarse and round, with a short, thick neck and double chin. He wore a sport shirt with palm trees on it, open at the neck.

"Hello, there," she said to Tom. Ralph held the rear door open for her to climb in, went around and got in the other side. Mary Lloyd was wearing slacks and a faded pink blouse. Sunlight glared off the hood and in the windows. Tom wore a felt hat tipped back, one arm crooked out the window and the other resting heavily along the top of the seat; he turned and smiled back at her. He looked tired.

"Well, we thought we'd never get here," said Mary Lloyd. "We got lost and we got a ticket."

"Some dumb cop," said Tom.

"Some dumb driver," Ralph corrected him, blowing out a puff from his cigar. "You should see this guy."

"You know what you can do."

"Running stop signs."

"Don't mind them," said Mary Lloyd. "That dress is sweet. You look so fresh; I like your hair like that too."

Ralph reached over the front seat and held up a chicken leg. "She already ate." He sat back, stuffed his cigar in the ashtray, and began to eat.

"We better get started," said Tom.

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"Okay. We're here," Tom announced, swinging into a space.

Ralph looked around: "What do you mean, here? What's this? What are you stopping for?"

"We're taking the trolley."

"Trolley? Now what the hell. Ain't we got a car?"

"We got a car; we also got a place to park. I'm not bucking any traffic in there looking for spaces. We take the trolley--pfft!--goes

right in."

* * *

They worked their way up through a mass of people almost to the top of the bleachers, in the direct afternoon sunlight. The men went together, while Mary Lloyd kept turning to see if she was coming and reaching out impatiently for her hand: "C'mon. C'mon! You with us?" There was so much commotion, the roar and murmur, shouts and razzing horns and blaring radios. And all these people watching her. She felt self-conscious, on display. She was relieved when they finally found some seats. But even then Tom wasn't satisfied; he wanted to move a whole section further over to where they could get seats with arm and back rests instead of just a hard bench. But Ralph said, "Naw, we can't get nothing over there," and Mary Lloyd agreed, so they sat down finally and she felt secure.

"Any score yet?" Tom asked people behind them.

"Devlin just drove in a run!"

"One, nothing!" Tom informed them as they got settled, Ralph to her right, then Mary Lloyd, then Tom, with people crowded close in front, behind and to her left. Devlin was on second; Schatz at bat. She saw the players: outfielders near them and farther in the distance, dwindling in perspective, the infield and the batter, who swung: a foul tip popped up high into the net behind home plate, rolled slowly down as the crowd went: "Whooooo-up!"

"We should have brought a beach umbrella," said Mary Lloyd. "It's baking out here!"

"Watch this guy!" urged Tom. A hit! The crowd rose, cheering; the ball was rising towards them, closer, closer--a home run, maybe--but it dropped out of sight below them; the crowd groaned; the

announcer said the fielder had caught it. She saw it shoot back towards the infield, and players started running everywhere, changing places. Ralph relaxed.

"Ralph," she said, touching his arm, "now which ones are the Finches, and which are the Phillies?"

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The sun was burning, dazzling, a forceful pressure beating down, making her head light and her clothes hot; she squinted up into it, perspiring, trickles down her back and front and itching in her hair.

"Okay. Here we go." They were playing ball. "That's Myers up now. C'mon baby! C'mon, c'mon, you can do better'n that. At's it!" Ralph shouted. "Yeah, frozen rope! C'mon!" He was on his feet, conspicuous in this section of the stands, and drawing angry stares. He sat back down, calling something tauntingly at Tom.

* * *

So inning after inning passed: two hours. Ralph, confident of winning, was pleased and talkative, but Tom and Mary Lloyd refused to listen to him, concentrating on the game and drawing away, stonily, from his loud bragging and rejoicing. The score was 5-1: Finches. The crowd stamped and hooted and clapped, but each time the Phillies came to bat they struck out, hit foul balls, flied out or were thrown out, and when their turn came to field, they couldn't catch the balls the Finches hit, or dropped them, or couldn't throw them to the base in time; also they kept stopping the game to have conferences or to bring in new pitchers. Meanwhile their seats grew hard; the sun was lower, weaker, but bright in her eyes; sea gulls looped and soared and now and then an airplane passed, still higher, bearing west. A great shadow engulfed one whole side of the stadium and crept across the infield.

"You got to be a sport, see?" Ralph was saying in a low voice to her ear. "Tom there, now, he's a lousy loser, a real sorehead." He crossed his leg and started scratching the ankle. "I mean, you got to have a sense of humor. But him, oh, no, he's going take it personal. You oughta see him lose at cards. You know, like his life's at stake, and you're some kind of enemy? Well, hell, I don't care he's my brother or what; you lose, you blame yourself, you don't blame the guy that wins. We were kids, you know...Hey..."

All down the rows faces were turning to look up; Ralph looked and she did too several times before they saw him: "How about that guy?"

Just over the park wall, she saw the tip of a billboard--like the bow of an ocean liner--and in the bow was a man with binoculars, watching the game for free.

"How did he get up here? ... Mary Lloyd! Hey..." He dismissed them: "Soreheads." And then: "See, Tom and me, we're different. He's got this thing, like he's the family pride and I'm the bum?"

She frowned: "Is it him that thinks that way, or you?"

"He's...What?" He sat up, eyeing her narrowly: "Wait a minute. Whatta you mean?" He glanced at Mary Lloyd and Tom.

"Nothing. I'm sorry; it's not my business, Ralph."

"What did she tell you? She's been saying things to you, hadn't she? What kind of things?"

"Nothing. Not a word. I just know the way you sound, that's all."

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Without warning, the Phillies' hit that the whole crowd had been tensely willing, stamping, hooting and clapping for, miraculously happened. Tom, Mary Lloyd, the whole stadium leapt to their feet. Strangers were congratulating and hugging each other. She kept her seat beside Ralph, who sat stunned, affronted, refusing to get up and muttering: "So they got a hit, big deal! Sit down! Look at these jokers. What do they think they can do, bottom of the ninth?" But the Phillies, catching the crowd's enthusiasm, continued to rally with a series of base hits on Finch errors, with stolen bases, and with two home runs. The stands kept shrieking unrelieved. Ralph, ponderously, stood up to watch. Tom and Mary Lloyd were jumping up and down and hugging and shouting, and suddenly--as the tying run came in--Tom reached around to Ralph (who was shaking his head, gripping his fists) and punched him in the shoulder: "Hey, how about that; how about that one, buddio? Hah!" Ralph punched him back, tight-lipped and furious. Tom hit him again; they were both in tempers, about to jump for each other, but Mary Lloyd got between them and drew Tom aside, who kept on cheering wildly, as if he didn't know what he had done.

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Grimly, they watched the game conclude: the winning run, the final out.

Cheering subsided around them; some people sat down, others started moving down the aisles; advertisements for beer blared on all the radios.

"I'm not making up nothing to that bastard," Ralph promised.

On the far side of Mary Lloyd, Tom stood stretching, hat off, running his hand through sparse gray hair. He yawned, put his hat back on, sat down:

"Hey, you all want anything? Ice cream, drinks, pop, hot dog? I'm buying. What do you want? Hot dog? What? With everything? Okay, two cokes, grape? Hey," he called to Ralph, "c'mon. Let's go down and get some stuff. I'm buying." Ralph looked off across the crowd, refusing to answer. Tom's face hardened. "Okay, I'll go down alone. Thanks a lot!"

"I'll go," said Mary Lloyd, getting up.

"Naw. You stay here."

They watched him leave, nudging and shuffling and barging his way down to the front of the tier, and then across their section, to the stairs. They were alone. Overhead, on towers, grids of lights were coming on, and below them a maintenance crew was dragging some kind of sweeper around the infield, making everything look smooth and new.

"Fog's coming in," a voice commented behind her.

"Listen, that husband of yours, he can be pretty goddamn hard to take sometimes."

"Sometimes? Next to you, he's the most impossible person I ever hope to meet..." Mary Lloyd was searching in her bag.

"Okay. Okay."

"Okay, nothing, Ralph--Excuse us, Anna Maye--Look, we came out here for a good time, didn't we? I mean, now here I bring my friend, how do you think she feels with you two carrying on like a couple of saps? I mean how about it? You want to leave? Because I think we better if you can't be a little more decent. You two want to spoil everything, fine. But don't expect us to sit here and suffer through your squabbles. I don't see the point."

"He started it," insisted Ralph.

"I don't care who started it. You promised me. Now why don't you try living up to your promises? Okay? You be nice to our guest here and quit fooling around, picking fights."

Ralph shifted and rocked, grimacing; Mary Lloyd was firm.

"I like the lights," she offered, to break the silence.

"They come on brighter later," Mary Lloyd told her, straining forward, then craning back to speak around him. "Hey, look!" She pointed out his hat. Tom was working his way back, slowly, starting up the aisle.

Ralph got up without another word, climbed up and over, and sat down on her left. She moved closer to Mary Lloyd; then he moved closer too.

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The second game was underway. The lights shone down through mist and rising smoke, making the grass look blue-green and the players shadowless, unreal. Matches flared like fireflies in the dark mass of the crowd across from her. The Finches were off to an early lead. Ralph leaned over once or twice to whisper: "I would've hauled off and hit him back if Mary Lloyd hadn't gotten in the way!"

But she drew back, annoyed and scowling; there was no excuse for this. He baffled and offended her. All he cared about was his revenge: cheering and jeering extra loud, defiantly, together with another Finches fan two rows below, until finally someone threw a blob of ice cream at them and it splattered on her dress.

They all stood up outraged, shocked, but there was no one to blame and all she could do was to wipe it off and say, "That's all right. I'll get it out. No, it's all right. I don't mind." She felt increasingly marooned. To her right, Mary Lloyd and Tom sat disgusted not only with Ralph but with the game itself. The crowd was restless, ugly, booing; at one close call, Tom stood up, tore his program, threw the pieces down. Ralph gloated, squirming close beside her on the left.

The Phillies had simply collapsed; and people were filing down and trickling out even before the sixth inning ended. Tom and Mary Lloyd, however, were bitterly resigned to stay. The score was 9-2. A match flared and she glanced askance at Ralph, the glow of his cigar, then choked and turned her face away. She wanted to be home, away from this, safe in her own room; she was tired of people and unpleasantness.

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Tom led them down, step by step, slowly, to the exit, then on down the stairs, which were echoing and dark, with girders around and light bulbs shining. Other people straggled down along with them, ahead and behind, shuffling aimlessly; no one hurrying or noisy, no one crowding. When they reached the bottom level, Mary Lloyd stepped purposely ahead to be with Tom, who crooked his arm around her neck, hugging her close and leaning on her. She and Ralph lagged farther and farther behind as they trailed on through trampled litter and out the gate, hearing the muffled shouting and booing behind them. She felt a pang to watch Tom and Mary Lloyd share each other's concern, reassuring, comforting each other. Ralph shuffled along, stoop-shouldered, scowling, grumbling to himself; she avoided him and he avoided her.

"Hey, wait!" called Ralph, as they started down a kiosk's steps. "You sure this is the right way?"

Tom waved his hand; Mary Lloyd looked back reproachfully. They kept on going down.

"Say, we're in luck!" exclaimed Mary Lloyd, as an empty car appeared almost at once, headlight bright, and pulled up beside the deserted platform. They climbed on and took seats on opposite sides, still keeping their distance.

But the very next stop was Stadium itself; outside she saw a mob close in. She couldn't understand. People pressed up flat against the windows and doors, and the doors opened and they came pushing, shoving, shouldering, spilling, clamoring in. She glanced across at Tom and Mary Lloyd and then at Ralph, but he avoided her look, though he was bothered too, smoking his cigar. The crowd came scrambling in: faces of ruthlessness and determination, faces of rage, and the struggling bodies, arms, each one for himself. They clutched their baseball hats, and pennants and portable radios, and their animal feet shuffled closer as they jammed in tighter and tighter, with their red faces bending down, sweaty and glowering, and each one clinging to part of a loop, or a pole, or a hand on part of the window, until they were backed tight against her too. They reached around, bent over, crushed against her, separating her from Ralph and blocking any glimpse of Mary Lloyd. No one could move or breathe. She held her legs together, straining, doubled over and clutching her purse, and turned her head and bit her lip. Everything was swarming together, blurred and moving, swelling: too much, more than she could bear. She swallowed, fighting it back, gripping her arms, unable to contain herself. When suddenly Ralph was clutching towards her, pushing aside a man and shouting: "We got to get off, c'mon! We got to get off here!" She stared at him, then forced her way to her feet, blindly: she mustn't be abandoned. She clung tightly to her purse with one arm and lifted the other in the air: "Let me out!" she cried. "Please let me out here! I have to get off! Out!" She fought against bodies, flesh, impassively resisting, and Ralph was clearing a way by lunging ahead, and shouting to the driver who had shut the doors: "Wait a goddamn minute!...We're

getting off here!" She kept pushing on one person to force her way past another. People were laughing. Someone jabbed her painfully, and she glanced around, and someone else crushed her foot. Ralph and the driver were having words; Ralph pulled at her arm: "Got any change? Got a dollar? All I got is ten!" Everybody laughed. "Get that fatty off of here!" Shakily she groped in her purse, trying to find her wallet, which she finally drew out. She only had a five, so Ralph pulled out his ten and hustled her roughly past him towards the door. She climbed down the steps onto the platform where Tom and Mary Lloyd stood watching. Ralph came down behind her, muttering. The doors slammed shut and the car sped off.

They were on a dark, suburban platform with trees all around, stars overhead; crickets chirped in the shadows.

"Okay, now what? Where the hell are we anyhow, huh? ... What'd'you say?"

"Right track...wrong direction."

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They turned down her street, cruised past parked cars and darkened houses, pulled up at her house. The downstairs was lit up, the porch light on outside.

"This one?"

"Yes." She gathered up her purse.

"Well, okay, sweetheart, now I'll see you Monday, right?" said Mary Lloyd, twisting around in the front seat.

"Yes. Monday. Thank you."

"Everything okay, now?"

"Fine. Yes. Thank you. Thank you, too, Tom. Thank you for everything."

He grimaced and nodded, winking acknowledgement over his shoulder: "Yeah."

Absently fingering the door handle, Ralph watched her from across the seat. She glanced up, but couldn't see his face. He grunted, opened his door, then came around, dutifully, to open hers.

She gave a nodding, parting smile to Mary Lloyd and Tom.

"You got everything, now?"

"Yes."

Ralph took her arm, to help her out, and followed as she stepped between the cars and around the trash cans and stopped at the bottom of her walk.

"That's fine," she said, turning to face him. "It's been nice meeting you."

He rubbed his jaw and smoothed his hair: "Well, sure, that's okay. Nothing at all. Hell. Good meeting you too. We'll try it again sometime, maybe. You just--uh--you take care of yourself. I don't get down here much, now, but you just take care."

"Ralph, c'mon!"

"Well, g'night, now."

Ralph went back; his door slammed and they pulled away with a toot. She stood there alone. Streetlight shone overhead, gleamed

on the leaves and cast shadows on the window of the children's room. She heard the TV sounds. Coming up the walk, she saw Howard pass the doorway inside and start up the stairs, dimly, through the screen.

She climbed the three steps and opened the screen door. Mary called out, unseen, from inside the living room: "That you?"

"Yes." She switched off the outside porch light, stooped down to pick up one of the children's dolls.

"Hey, you're pretty late, aren't you? What'd you get lost or something? How was it, huh? Fun?"

She squinted, stepping into the lighted living room, meeting Mary, who had risen from the couch. The television flickered and spoke loudly from the corner. She put down her purse, the doll, opened the closet door and put away her hat.

Mary leaned on the banister and called upstairs, softly: "Howard!" They heard the toilet flush, steps; he peered down: "Yeah, what?"

"Anna!" she whispered.

He was in stocking feet, coming down, smiling. "Good time?" he asked.

She crossed the room and sank down on the couch.

"It was nice."

Later, upstairs with the door securely shut, having undressed and having explored the fist-sized bruise on her right side, just under the breast, she opened the top middle drawer of her dresser and lifted out an ivory-colored jewelry chest. She carried this to her bed and began again the slow appraisal of item after item: a broken railroad

watch, some folded needle-point, tie-clasps, buttons, the bone-handled razor, a hand-carved wooden comb, a tarnished silver locket with a curl of fine blonde hair.

