

THE BABE



Alan Sincic

For Mom—the only girl I ever knew who could throw like a man.



WHEN THE GREAT Babe Ruth dropped dead in the middle of the base path between second and third, the first thing that occurred to Feddering was how to call the play. Since the rules of Baseball made no provision for the death of Babe Ruth, the Red Sox Catcher suggested that they climb into the stands to retrieve the home run ball. It was the Catcher's opinion they should go get the ball wherever it was and run the Babe down with it, he suggested that the Babe would have wanted it that way, *That's the way the Babe would have wanted it*, he said.

“To give up on a home run ball? That doesn't sound like the Babe to me.”

“Fed. Fed. It's not a homer till he touches home. That's why they call it a homer.”

“But it cleared the fence. It counts as a homer.”

“Not in my book.”

The Catcher said it was a matter of pride: did Feddering think that at the end of his career the Great Bambino would want half of a home run and wouldn't it be sort of an embarrassment for people to think that that was all he could manage? Fed disagreed. It might be a fraction when you wrote it down, but it was a ball out of bounds and that was what made the Babe into such a killer with the ladies. The two skirts last summer, remember? In Chicago? Who caught him in the hotel lobby with a ball they wanted to return and how brave and dangerous he was and how glad they were and etcetera into the sack?

"Granted, granted," said the Catcher, "but that was the old Ruth, Fed. This is the new Ruth, this is a different kind of guy entirely."

"The Babe would quit on a homer?"

"Sure he would. Look at him. He wants us to take it from him."

Fed shaded his eyes and traced an imaginary line from the rim of second base to the tips of the Babe's kangaroo-leather cleats. There were no skid marks in the soft clay, no signs that the body'd been tampered with. The Babe's pockets bloomed out from the seat of his pinstripe uniform and sprinkling down the slopes of his white flannel blouse were ticket stubs and billiard chalk and the crumbs of vanilla wafers. Go Babe go.

"Feddering . . ."

"I'm thinking."

"So call it a double. Ground-rule double."

“But he hit the ball over—”

“Granted. Granted. So give him second. Second base.”

“But he just—”

“And keep him. Keep him in. So he’s in the game but then—”

“But he’s—”

“But then *boom*. You resume play. *Play ball!* Pitcher gets the ball, steps off the rubber. *Hey. Where’s the Babe? Oh. There he is. Over there. The Babe’s off the base.* Pitcher flips the ball to short—*boom-boom*, tag play: the Babe’s out of there. We caught him off the base.”

Yes. *True*, thought Feddering. In the baseline but off the base. Not *in* the baseline exactly, it not exactly being a line, but . . . wait. Strictly speaking, even though the baseline’s the direct line that connects the base to the base, the truth is that the line bellies out when you’re rounding the bases, and depending on how fast you go, how wide you swing when you do the rounding, you get a circle. Circle on a square such that if you staple the circle to the corners of the square (the square being the diamond if you tip the damn thing up on its vertices), then you could calibrate the distance, if you wanted to, so long as the perimeter of the circle at the designated point intersects with. But no. Not a circle. A mushy sort of a roundish . . .

Feddering pressed his fingers up over the sockets of his eyes, up onto the circle of the bone of the brow that aspired to the same circularity. Yes. To shrink the world down to a circle, to a circuliciousness, that would be . . . He closed his

eyes. For the first time since the homer cleared the fence, he heard the crowd. A wave upon wave of words, that's what they were, like the ocean when it smacks the shore, the words like a surf that shatters itself against a cliff, the syllables obliterated by the brick and the iron, the oak and the stone and the steel of the House That Ruth Built. It was a sound of a crashing that never seemed to come to an end, a kind of a perpetual shrapnel.

“Make the call. You gotta make the call.”

“Not yet. The runner—”

“The hell with the runner. What about her?”

Go Babe go. The Babe's widow stood tiptoe on the narrow back of her box seat halfway up the slope of the grandstand and shouted down at the players waiting at the plate for the Babe to arrive:

“Seven hundred and fifteen homers, boys! Sew that into your silk underwear, boys—seven-fifteen!”

With one hand she gripped the netting above her head and—as if it were a waffle iron and she were the waffle—pulled it down to press her face against it. It cut her cheeks into little red squares and parted her white hair into ten separate segments.

“And keep your hands off of that bat! Feddering! Get those boys away from that bat with those cleats! Lazzeri, Lazzeri! Talk to Feddering, tell Feddering, you tell Feddering—”

The wind dropped out of the blue sky, hit the roof of the grandstand, skimmed down the netting to the widow's

red knuckles. Up and down the netting bounced, into and out of her seat she popped, but she hung on. In her other hand she waved a pair of pruning shears, swung them out wide in a sweeping arc that managed to take in:

(a) the Bosox infielders
staked out round the body
rummaging through the wallet
making the *out!* sign
with the down-curved bottoms
of their thumbs

(b) Gehrig in the batting circle
dusting out the metal belly
of the groundskeeper's wheelbarrow
hail and hail the honor of this
boat with which
to ride the Babe home

(c) the hotdog vendor third row
pointing a mustard knife
to the point where
the homer cleared the fence
the hungry sailor thinking
mustard! mustard!
and missing the point
the way a dog misses the point
when he stares at the bones of

your fingers instead of the bones
to which your fingers point

(d) the crowd calling out to the field
to the Babe
to the head
to the ears
on the head
of the Great Babe Ruth
and oh that he would hear
the true emotion that they felt
that they were feeling
that his many athletic endeavors
had awakened in them:

boos/cheers/jeers/shouts diced and spliced into an
uncategorizable static. Crackle. Zap. Pop.

Lazzeri shoved the Bostie Catcher aside, grabbed
Feddering by the necktie, and pulled him toward the
clump of players—Yanks and Sox alike—gathered outside
the Yankee dugout.

“Fed, Fed, Fed, Fed.”

“But the ball—”

“Think of it this way, Fed. The ball’s like the gunpowder
and the Babe’s like the bullet.”

“But the bullet is the ball.”

“No-no. The bullet’s the Babe.”

“But the ball—”

“Forget the ball. The Babe is the one—can’t you see? What he hit was a homer and what he is is a homer, Fed. You got to let him run the damn thing out. Homer. A homer. That’s what makes the Babe the Babe that he is.”

Fed tried to imagine what the Babe would be like without the home run ball. Pudgy. Pudgy kid. Zoom to Babe. Hair. Hair across the ankle bones. Boxer shorts, plaid. Zipper guards, raspberry jelly down the. Nose of B. Ruth: big, red, pulpy. Pigeon toes. Chicken grease across the knuckles. Chocolate under the fingernails. Cookie crumbs. Barbeque sauce.

The huddle hatched open to admit the Ump and the Yankee Shortstop, then slammed itself shut. All eyes turned to Feddering. He began: “Here’s the key. The Yankees designate a substitute runner—”

“For the Babe?”

“Babe Ruth?”

“She’ll kill you.”

“We could carry him,” said Lazzeri.

“Interference.”

“But we’re on the same team, Fed.”

“Interference.”

The Catcher rubbed the flats of his palms together. “Then he’s out then.”

“Like hell. What do you got to tag him with, Bozo?”

“Shut up, Lazzeri. We nailed him.”

“What? You gonna hop the fence to get the ball?”

“Simple enough.”

“But you can’t—”

“We go get the original ball.”

“It’s a dead ball.”

“Bring it down from out of the bleachers . . .”

“A dead ball. A dead ball?”

“Get him in a run down, see, get him in a pickle . . .”

“But you can’t—”

“We run him down.”

“On a homer? Tag him on a homer?”

“Half a homer. That ball is a live ball and—”

Boom. The huddle shook. Koreblesky—chunky guy with a face like a burnt potato—sledge-hammered his way in with a packet of French postcards cradled in his mitt. “You get first pick, Feddering. You would not believe this stuff.”

“The Babe’s?”

“Don’t let the old lady see you.”

They all knelt as Feddering broke the pack open—the cards had been pressed into a curve the shape of a thigh—and cut the deck. He peeled off the top card, a girl about nineteen sitting at a typewriter with a pair of glasses on her nose and a tray of crumpets on her lap. She was smiling. She had two big breasts. And smiling. Smiling up at Fed with no recognition on her face that the clothes she wore had done this amazing thing, had abandoned her body to the naked air. Fed cleared a spot in the clay and spread the cards out like a batch of cookies set out to cool—the soft and the bendable, the upendable, the girls inside the pics who lounged in the lounges and parlored in the parlors

and had no idea that their clothes had done this crazy thing, who smiled like it was the tray of lemon crumpets that the camera wanted.

He divvied them up. The back of the Fed's card read:

To the Babe Ruth my Hero.

He make the Large Run.

Best Wishes,

Yvette.

Yvette. Fed slid his thumb across a licorice-colored thumbprint in the right hand corner. "Print of the thumb of the Great Babe Ruth."

"That crazy kid."

The stadium still boomed but now the crowd in the grandstand stumbled as they spoke, choked on their curses, stared up at the widow as she cast off her pruning shears and boosted herself up into the gash that she'd cut in the netting. Her legs dangled as she thrust her head up through the opening. She twisted her arms and her shoulders through and then hung there, half in and half out, as the hole snapped shut around her waist, as the net cinched up around her like a corset.

Snagged. But it didn't matter. Even here, out beyond the orbit of the game, she seemed to radiate this invisible charisma out of all proportion to her tiny frame. A kissing doll is what she was, a bobble-head, Betty Boopity-Doop augmented by the Army Corps of Engineers with some

kind of a fender-rending, roof-ripping, bone-breaking junkyard electromagnet sucked down to the size of a cherry and smuggled up under those bosomy lips. Nothing that walked, ran, swam, floundered or flew across the face of the earth escaped her attention. And having sucked in, with a flip of a switch, that little sliver of tin, Nickie the Batboy, she now reversed the polarity to send him shooting off the backstop fence, out across the clay and up under the huddle on his back, face up, like a mechanic.

Fed felt the tugging down there between his ankles but he was busy, he had a job to do. Down the slopes of Yvette's milky whiteness he glided, up over the peaks and then down again into the narrow valleys, up again over the nipples and into a slalom over the powdery softness of the neck *and again the tugging* as he zig-zagged out over the drift of the bare shoulder and onto the margin and into the jump, *the tugging and the tugging* as up the curl of the border he zoomed—and out over the blue empty—to land on the big baby face of Nickie there peering up at him, yammering away, tugging at the cuffs of his pants.

“She said to put the numbers up, Mr. F.”

“Asking or telling?”

“Telling. *Get that damn hunchback up off-a his crookedy little hunch-backy ass* is what she said.”

“What's she got against Bennie? Everybody likes Bennie.”

“It's the scoreboard, Mr. F. She says the homer should be up there by now.”

The scoreboard high up on the wall in center field read *Yanks 7, Sox 7, two outs, bottom of the seventh*. A goose egg hung in the home run column but Bennie the hunchback had already broken out the giant porcelain-coated pressed-tin *one* and shuffled out onto the iron ledge beneath the numbers. There he sat with the *one*—half again as tall as he was—laid out like a keyboard across his lap.

“You don’t want to cross her, Fed,” said Lazerri.

“*Er hat das Mädels zu sehr geliebt,*” added Gehrig as he snatched up the last of the cards and tucked them away.

“Like hell.” Koreblesky bit down on the loose end of his glove lacing and pulled it tight. “I do not give the damn of her, that she-male. Without that the Ruth she nothing. She gristle. She get the gristle is what.”

Is what she get, yes. Gristle to spare and gristle to share: the skin as thin as an onion and crackled at the neck and chafed at the knuckles, brickled red at the joints and at the knees and at the ankles, at the elbows and even (as if it were a joint itself, like the pinions of a puppet) the collarbone. The cables that held her buzzed and squeaked as she bounced, as the iron rubbed the steel where the lynchpins pulled. Her whole body seemed to buzz as she hung there, as she twisted there like a sail a quick wind catches, as she kicked up against the invisible air—the taut torso and the clamped hands and the husk of the white hair. Even her voice seemed to vibrate as she shouted down at the diamond. “Feddering!”

The Catcher whispered in his ear: “Listen, Fed, listen.

Whatever you do, don't let her speak."

"I don't care what she says."

"But if she tells you to—"

"Nobody tells me what to do."

"But if she tries to—"

"Tries to what? Tries to what? Nothing happens without my say-so."

"But that's what the Babe said. That's what the Babe thought."

"You're trying to tell me the Great Babe Ruth—"

"You think fatness was what the Babe wanted? In the beginning, I mean. Fatness? What about that skinny kid we used to love because he was so skinny? What about him? She's the one mailed the double-barreled frankfurters to his Cincinnati hotel room, she's the one ordered up the chorus girls we found him with in the laundry room at the Ritz, she's the one stuffed him with the crullers, the ribs, the fancy Cohibas."

"So okay so, so what? So she loves him. So the bigger the Babe, the bigger the love."

Behind them the widow kicked her way up through the hole.

"You think she gives a damn?" Grabowsky slammed his fist in his palm as he spoke. "I mean the game. I mean, look what she did to the Babe when . . ."

The widow gathered herself together, assumed the tucked position, and then cannon-balled down the sloping net. She bumped and bobbed and slid above the cabbage-

headed crowd just out of reach, just high enough to paint them with her shadow, to powder them with flinty little shavings of herself and of her connection with the Babe—sawdust and sen-sen, gunpowder and cinnamon, cannoli bark and grated cheddar, Baker's yeast and Alka-Seltzer, rust and rosin and snuff.

“ . . . and even that Vaudeville thing, Vaudeville? You ever heard the Babe sing?”

Hallahan broke into a laugh. “Heard him kind of yodel one time when—”

“That was her. She put him up to it. The straw derby, that was what? Her idea. The three-chicken dinners, the alligator shoes, the white cotton spats and the paisley shirt studs? Her idea. And what about the, about that little pigeon-toed shuffle round the bases—you think that was his idea?”

She tumbled as they cheered and the cheering grew as she tumbled, as she shook herself, showered herself out like a sieve. Somebody in the wooden bleachers in right field began to stamp his feet, others picked it up, and before Fed could raise his hands to call for quiet, the whole right flank of the stadium joined them chanting *Babe Ruth! Babe Ruth!* in time to the stamping. *Babe Ruth! Babe Ruth! Babe Ruth!* By the time she clanged into the chain link fence that separated the stands from the field, the crowd belonged to her. The sound was so big it took the steel girders that held the stadium together and struck them again and again like a tuning fork.

The posse turned to face the wall of sound. The Catcher dug down into his crotch with his bent left finger. “This is all a part of the Babe’s personal charm, Fed,” he cried out over the snap crackle pop. “This is what makes the Babe the Babe that he is.”

Lazerri scratched his privates, rocked up onto the balls of his feet, sharpened his whole body up into an exclamation point. “*Bigger than life* is what she said, Fed. *Big and wide and bright as the big silver screen.*”

“You gotta call it,” said Koreblesky.

“Call it,” said Lazerri.

“*Manchmal muss man seinen Kopf vergessen, und dann sagen einem die Eier wo’s langgeht,*” said Gehrig.

Fed dug under his belly and into his own crotch to break the suction that, over the years, had vacu-formed the rulebook to the curve of the cup. He freed it with a yank so violent, so seismic, it flubbered up through that rubbery gut of his and into the pouch of balls at his waist. Out they tumbled. Go, balls, go!

Halfway to the mound, on his belly in the grass, lay the Bostie Pitcher Flynn. Flynn the Slim. Flynn the Lady-Killer. Flynn the Inimitable Mick. He was watching a beetle no bigger than a butter-bean shimmy its way up a single blade of grass. Straight up into the tipping point it climbed, paused to let the wind bend the blade, maneuvered itself into an upright position, and then—like a hazel nut, like a pocketwatch—split itself open at the seams. And then it happened. Just as Flynn pursed his lips to blow into the

wings, just as he launched the creature out into the larger wind, as it disappeared into the blue, along came the ball to—gently, like the tap at the heart of an egg—tap him on the kneecap. To ping him, as it were, awake. Just the thing that he'd been waiting for, it seemed, the tap, the word from the world of the beetles, the sign from the Great God of the Beetle Who Intervenes in the Affairs of Men. Flynn picked up the ball and rose to his feet. Before the crowd could even register what was happening, he was striding out across the diamond toward the Babe.

“Flynn!”

“Put the ball down!”

The Yanks surged up as far as the foul line but no further. To step into fair territory would be against the rules.

“What the hell does he think he’s—”

“Go Flynn!”

“Dead ball, Flynn.”

“Dead. Deadie-dead-dead.”

“Like hell.”

“Go Flynn, you go!”

“Gutless wonder . . .”

“ . . . what a dick.”

Rule #47: The Umpire alone shall be the sole judge of when a new baseball shall be inserted into play as a replacement for a lost or damaged ball. Feddering’s arm shot up, the rulebook in his fist and his thumb on the spot, but the pages were crackly with age and the binding rotted. Like a struck match the

book flared open when the wind caught it, flourished for an instant, and then exploded, like a dandelion, into a flurry of white.

“Go go go!”

“That’s a live ball!”

“Dead ball!”

“Live ball!”

“Dead!”

“Get him, Flynn, get him!”

Ten feet shy of the body Flynn stopped to adjust that self of his, that Flynnishness of his, all sleekish and keen like a slab of ice sheared off with a chisel, like the chrome on the hood of a racer, like the greyhound on the hood of a Lincoln Phantom all sanded down to a sliver by the wind. Bastard. The bastard. He held the ball out at arm’s length, then gradually lifted it, one-handed, up into the heavens. As the crowd booed he held it there, open-handed, palm-up against the blue sky, and then—gently at first, then with greater alacrity—began to dance round and round in a circle, like a brave counting coup.

Go Babe go. The crowd pressed forward in their seats, shouting and booing and hissing. Fed clogged away at the loose pages that swirled in the wind around his knees, that leapt up and clung to his ankles.

Chink by chink the widow scaled the chain link fence that shot straight up, three stories high, atop the green concrete of the backstop wall. The stilettos that gave her such fits when she’d tangled with the netting now served

her well. Step by step she jammed the tip of the toe into the gaps between the links—the boot to the stirrup—and then hauled herself, ratcheted herself upward by degrees. It was the air itself she had to climb now, the chinks the people looked through when they were looking at the field, chinks invisible as a window made of air but solid now, like the chinks in a cliff.

The sun clicked another millimeter westward. As it did so it stirred—all at once, and ever so slightly—yet another million shadows eastward. A shift. A tilt.

And it was a different kind of stir now as well, the stir of the crowd. Sprinkled here and there, like hot peppers stirred into a salad, virulent little knots of Bosox fans in their blood-colored caps and jerseys sang out, *Out! Out! Out!*

Feddering snatched a page from out of the swirl that surrounded him, then dropped to one knee to grab at the wad that was stuck to the heel of his shoe. *Section 4.09. How A Team Scores.* Crunchy like a bone, branded now by the imprint of the cleated Oxfords he wore, it broke off in the middle of *if the runner refuses to advance to and touch home base in a reasonable time, the umpire shall . . .*

The Yankee fans burbled onward, percolated from top to bottom in search of a word to contain this something that was seeping its way into the game—this wonderment, this puzzlement.

“ . . . should be a time limit then.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. Me. You damn Okie, whatdidya bring your PJs? You think we’re gonna—”

“I don’t see a clock.”

“Center field, Einstein. You’re staring at it.”

“It’s not a game clock.”

“The big hand and the little hand and the—”

“Not a game clock you can set.”

“Time is time.”

“But you can’t *call* time, see? No. No. Not without a game clock that you can—”

“Then you got the sun. You go by the sun.”

“The sun that shines, right? That sun? Like for like a billion years, right? Without stopping? You make my point.”

“When the sun sets.”

“But the sun don’t set. Not out in space it don’t.”

Babbled, as it were—the sharpies and the swells and the codgers all crookedy in their seats, the kids and the dogs and the cuddly beaus, the chunky farm families and the sailors up under the press box, snug as a pack of smokes, who jostled the pudgy usher and jeered at the Ump. Jabbered. Babbered. Bubbled at the clouds. Babbled at the air, at the bleachers, at the Babe. They crumpled up the program with the pinstripes and the logo and the Babe’s face fat across the back cover—shred it or chunked it or cupped it into a megaphone to magnify the sound of their own breathing, to catapult that argle-bargle of theirs another fifty feet higher. Here and there they clustered round a

program pulled out to a page that carried the score—the hits and the runs and the errors—and like a band all bent now to the same strip of sheet music, they scanned back over the old innings. Note by note it played across their silent faces, note by note they remembered themselves back into the game. And argulated. And gestaculated. And jabbed at the chest and the belly and the bright beery sun-burned noses of their neighbors.

But nobody could agree on what to say. Nobody except the women that is, the secret cohort, the thousand or so who were in the know, who—well out with it then: the pepper-pots, that's who they were, the prim minnies, the sly debutantes and yes, even the dithering biddies who, at some point in their life, had been touched by the Babe, moved by the Babe, bothered by or fathered by, fingered or fondled, pressed or caressed—not a burglar but a guest—and who rose now, all as one, to their feet waving white handkerchiefs above their heads and calling down to the field with their wavering white voices, *Get up, Babe, get up!*

The Babe? At this distance he was the size of a kernel of popcorn. Face down in the baseline, stubby arms outstretched above his head, cap spilled open, shock of black hair pointing up at the wind in the flag on the clubhouse roof, the wind across his flannels to the ends of his sleeves, the loose clay running like a dozen red streamers between his fingers: the big bright togs of the Great Babe Ruth, the big bright bag of major league popcorn uniform of the Great Babe Ruth. No reaction from the Babe.

No reaction, that is, until the clock in center struck six. Flynn froze as the bell tolled. Not like a statue, no, but like a man keeping time, counting out the measure of a dance, waiting for all the clocks to catch up, for even the bells in the steeples of the Bronx to gong out their agreement. And that glimmer in his eyes? Just the hint of a grin.

Carried in by the wind up over the battlements, the hour tumbled out in rivulets, not in single notes but in a carillon, unsyncopated, random as rain. But not to Flynn. No. Right down to the snap of the second he knew where the hour was going to break because he, Flynn, was the one who broke it. Coiled. Pounced. One-handed, square between the shoulder blades of the Babe he stiff-armed the ball, drove it and ground it down into the white flannel like a cue stick down into a lump of white chalk. Like a lump of white chalk, yes, that was the Babe's reaction, the reaction of the Babe that crazy kid. White chalk!

"Out!" said Hallahan. "The Babe's out!"

The Sox fielders came streaming in to converge on the play.

"Out!"

"We got him!"

"Call it now—quick, Fed, quick! The Babe's outta there!"

Out of the corner of his eye Fed could see the spidery imprint of the widow as she made her way up the fence.

"Fedster!"

"Ump!"

“He’s out!”

“Ring him up!”

“Call him out!”

The crowd boomed up to second, the Yanks charging out the dugout and over the bullpen railing.

“No, no!”

“Cheater!”

“*Nein, nein,*” growled Gehrig at his ear.

“Good call, Flynn,” cried the Catcher. “Good call!”

Fed wheeled on the pair, wheeled on the crowd, pressed back with his palms out at this invisible mountain rolling down on him, at the pebbly heads in their thousands and thousands. From the belly of his shirt he tore at the pages that remained, the shreds of paper all tangled up around his knuckles now like ticker tape, like a set of pom-poms that raked at the air as he waved his arms overhead to call for quiet. “Flynn is not the one who makes the call.”

“But he made the play! He made the—”

Play would’ve, could’ve, might have been the next word out of the Catcher’s mouth had it not been intercepted by the fist of “Tater” Tommy McDowell, Yank Center Fielder and all-around swell guy (lifetime RBI 847). Intercepted/smashed. *Play/fray*: it was a rhubarb, a hullabaloo, a fista-cuff-a-rama. Both teams spilled out onto the field to join in: the players in the lead, the bench-warmers at their heels, the fat Manager chuffing up out of the stadium tunnel like a walrus up onto a beach in the season of mating. The heads butted, the bodies banged, the knuckles

popped. Out came the batboys and the grounds crew, the go-fers and the roadies, the vendors and the sweeps and the bellboy with the special delivery bag of hotdogs for one B. Ruth, Yankee Stadium.

Fed waddled into their midst with what scraps of the book he'd managed to salvage, but the only player willing to listen to the voice of sweet reason was the Bostie Shortstop, Bottomly. "So what I'm saying is—Bottomly. Look at me, Bottomly. *In Jeopardy is a term indicating that the ball is in play and . . .*"

Out came the chaplain and the bookie and the stooge, the cabbie and the call girl, the mistress and the wife and the ambiguously intimate drinking buddy, out the steno and out the bouncer and, bobbing up out of the cupboardy darkness like a marshmallow on the rampage, the Certified Public Accountant—ledger clapped to the chest, blade of the green visor slicing into the sun, sharp as a talon the nib of the pen.

" . . . and obstruction. *Obstruction is the act of a fielder who, while not in possession of the ball and not in the act of . . .*"

Framed in the vice of Koreblesky's armpit, Bottomly's face—red as a radish and speckled with turf—rolled up out of the earth again to meet the sky, rocked back and forth, painted Fed with those lovely liquid eyes of his and then, like a linotype freshly inked, rolled back under the press.

" . . . but the *person* of a player? *The Person of a player or an umpire is any part of his body, his clothing or his equipment that,*

in the judgment of . . .”

Out and out and out came Gimpy the spittle-wipe, and Spunky the Clown Prince of Baseball, and Madge the garrulous carhop, and Judge R.T.W. Landis the Commissioner of Baseball, and even—tumbling up over the bullpen fence in left, led astray by a broken compass and a mistaken belief in the ancient art of augury—Boy Scout Troop number ninety-seven. Everybody from the little lame boy who picked up the locker-room towels to—pungent as a Slim Jim in his greasy brown suit—good old Louie the legacy hire, that leathery old doorman with the crackly spats all patched up with celluloid and red India rubber, southpaw with a gawky kind of hip-hopping I-just-split-the-seat-of-my-britches stance and a jab as sharp as an ice pick.

Meanwhile the widow swung her leg up over the top rung and heaved her pink pearl handbag onto the field. A strand of banners ran across the top of the fence from one end to the other, and every few feet was a pennant stapled to the crossbar, a little triangle shouting (not the verb but the noun) . . . *Yanks!* . . . *Yanks!* . . . *Yanks!* The widow shinned herself into position, grabbed the tag end of a strand, twined it twice around her wrist, then launched herself out into the air. *Pop* went the staples. *Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*. She rode it all the way down, Tarzanned her way across the face of the crowd in a huge sweeping herkity-jerkity pendulum, rappelled her way down the fence and into the heart of the hubbub.

Louie kept chip-chipping away at Feddering's chin, chin, eyebrow, chin. Fed bobbed, weaved, fended off the jab with a couple crispy lefts of his own, but that hard right of his was out of commission. He had to fight one-handed, hindered by the bouquet of pages cupped up under his chin, had to fight and had to read:

“When the occupants of a player's bench, Louie—KA-POW—show violent disapproval of an umpire's decision—KA-POW, KA-POW—the umpire shall first give warning that such disapproval—KA-POCKETA-POCKETA-POCKETA—shall cease. If such action continues, the umpire shall order the offenders . . .”

. . . and there the page ended, bitten off by the wind; by the snippity-clip of the fist/of the fist/of the fist; by the brittle weight of the years. Fed staggered back to foul territory, tripped on a roll of tarpaulin partway peeled open by the crew before they fled, latched onto the hem of the green fabric as he fell and, like a scoop of ground round all scrolled up into a cabbage leaf, like a pig in a blanket, rolled himself up into the canvas.

And still the battle raged on. Butt-up against the backstop was the massive steel drum they'd wheeled out to flatten the grass in the seventh-inning stretch. Fat as a hoghead, rolling pin the size of a howitzer, it took three men to pull it out across the turf, to iron out the nicks and the divots that threatened the geometry of the game.

A Tag is the action of a fielder in touching a base . . . Fed whispered in the dark, Fed recited from memory.

It was a piece of clockwork, the park and the widow together, the tick and the tock. She rebounded off the drum and onto the turf, her fall broken by the groundskeeper cowering there in the shade of the curve where the barrel sank into the sod and where, in the crush of the green, in the sweet smell of the grass, he nursed his broken nose. A shovel, bloody with use, lay on the ground beside him.

. . . or touching a runner while holding the ball securely and firmly . . .

Tick. The shovel she commandeered to crowbar the rusty grate off the wall of the backstop, to free up the triple set of fire hoses stacked there accordion style.

. . . not a tag, however, if simultaneously or immediately following the touching, the fielder drops the ball.

Tock. She grabbed the center hose by the heavy brass nozzle, yanked it free, raveled it out over the drum and through the loop of the pull-bar—the thread through the eye of the needle—and pulled it tight. Then she reached up under her dress and, in a single one-handed move, like a farmer husking corn, shucked off her girdle.

Fed peered out through a single grommet hole—round like the eye of a rabbit—to watch her work. How much

alike they were: that air of command, that *je ne sais quoi* in the moment of stress. He flashed back to the good old days—his rookie year, the semi-pro circuit out of Scranton, the night he saw her for the first time there, up on the screen at the Nickelodeon, in the herkity-jerkity of the newsreel, and trim as a T-bone the Babe there, gawky and raw, gunned out at third in a bang-bang play, slap-tag in a puff of red dust, and the rhubarb after the play, and jaw-to-jaw the Ump and the widow—six hours into the honeymoon that very day—the widow the bride all slick as a peach up under the gown, all toasty and fresh up under the veil, all bitchy and fierce up under the chin of the ump. How she'd rolled her hips on her way down the baseline! Quite the cupcake in her day, quite the little magnet there between her thighs.

With a twist of the elastic girdle she anchored the center hose to the pull-bar. Then she opened up the three valves. The other two hoses tightened, leapt out of the nest, struck out wildly in every direction. Governed by the torrent that pounded its way through them, they vaulted up and then hatcheded back down, again and again; sickled left and right; snaked and pummeled and torqued out across the diamond to the edge of the outfield grass. Through the center hose the water surged like a solid thing as well, like a giant whip, but the widow was ready. She straddled the nozzle and held on with both hands. She rode it. Wrestled it. Slammed it down onto the target of her wrath. At the back of Koreblesky's head. At Lazzeri's little peg legs. At

Flynn. At Flynn. At the unconscious body of Flynn, rolling and rolling in the orange mud and over the baseline and into the dugout.

Inside the widow's purse, that would be the place to be, thought Fed. Snug as a pug inside of that portable darkness she carried around with her wherever she went. He tucked the canvas in around his shoulders. Or not even born yet maybe, that would be the place—tucked up inside of the widow herself.

The water ricocheted off the glaze of the clay, off the slickery turf, off the skulls and the kneecaps and the shoulders. It rebounded off the butts and the bellies, the shredded flannel and the buttery flanks and the cocked elbow slicing out to parry the blow. It geysered up to paint the sky and as it caught the sun, it crowned with a kind of a halo the puddley scrum all skittling around down there in the muck.

. . . of the tag, the fielder shall hold the ball long enough to prove that he has complete control of . . .

Within minutes, from foul line to foul line, the water—the lovely, the gentle, the merciful water—had worked its magic, had managed to sweep aside every last little tidbit of ill will that remained.

. . . and drops the ball while in the act of making a throw following the tag, the tag shall be adjudged to have . . .

Tock.

Only after the widow had shut down the valves did Feddering turtle his head out from under the canvas. The fingers of his left hand he crimped into a vaguely comb-like shape and ran them up over his shiny scalp. The whole stadium steamed in the aftermath of the spray, in the heat of the crimsony dusk. The blades of grass all bristled up now to drink in the damp air.

The Bosox who hadn't already been blown clean out of the park regrouped out on the warning track in the shade of the right field wall. Like a mess of red pepper all griddled up on a Hibachi and shoved to one side to await the arrival of the steak, they sat, they steamed, they spit, they sizzled.

In the silence that followed, the widow marched straight to home plate, planted her feet in the batter's box, chipped at the clay with her stiletto heels, dug in with the back foot, then—like a spa patron conjuring up a manicure—motioned Feddering over with a little waggle of her pinky. The crowd booed as he unpeeled himself from the tarp. Their booing grew as he, with all the dignity he could muster—here a skid, there a skid, everywhere a skid-skid—strode back onto the infield to meet her.

“The Babe was here. Am I right?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Right on this spot?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“So hand me the bat.”

He picked up the Babe’s bat and barrel-up, shotgun style, placed it in her hands. A sprinkling of applause now as she choked up, gave it a little practice swing, a 1/24th of a Babe Ruth swing, and then pointed the barrel at the Bull Durham Tobacco sign in right field. LOCK HORNS WITH THE MASTER said the red words in a blowtorch out the snout of the bull with the one nostril open and the one nostril closed, with the head down and the hoof cocked and the body tense.

“He beat the bull, Fed,” she said as the bat wavered in her spindly grip. “That’s the way you beat the bull.”

The bull didn’t look so beaten to Fed, but it did look, well, traveled maybe: the flame frozen by time to a solid; the hard smoke broken now by only the slam and the bang of the fielder in the leap for the liner, by the balls that ding the tin cladding, by the pebbles that, chucked up by the mowers, chip-chip-chip at the paint as the seasons roll by.

“How did he do it, boys? Boom-boom. This is how he did it.”

She cocked back on the bat to give it another swing, a full swing now, a 1/17th, a 1/16th of a Babe Ruth swing as the crowd whistled and clapped.

“Number 715, Feddering. Number 715 for a lifetime home run total of 715.”

“No-no-no. Not so fast. I’m the one who—”

“Give me your hands.”

The shammy cloth she pulled from the holster of her

garter belt smelled of bacon and ginger snaps, buttermilk and turpentine. She wiped the tar from his fingers, from her own fingers, twisted the red cloth into a corkscrew and then stuffed it, like a pimento, down into the pouch at his waist.

“You realize that the final authority for . . .”

She shushed him.

“When it comes down to . . .”

Shushed him. She reached into her purse and pulled out a folded square of yellowed paper. “This way.”

Feddering wiped his hands on the back of his pants as he followed her back toward the stands. “So do you think that—”

“Tell those boys to get back to their positions.”

“No can do.”

“Yes can do.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

The widow unfolded the sheet—graph paper, old school, hand scored as if by a scrivener—and pointed to what looked like a diagram of a half of a blueberry pie with hundreds of slivers cutting through it. As she pressed it and smoothed it down over the curve of the drum, she hooked Feddering by the belt loop to pull him closer.

“This is where the ball went out.” She walked her thin hands across the wrinkled edge. She had to be careful not to tear it. “And this shows the path of his other home runs. Here’s where the Babe is now.”

She pointed to a speck of red near the center of the pie. Though the homer lines ran straight as blades in all directions—she must have done it with a ruler—the speck of red didn't seem to connect with the other markings. Fed blew on it. It was still wet. Go Babe go.

“Nail polish?”

“The special one. Number 715.” Something about it did not seem right to Feddering. He had a kind of an instinct about the game. He leaned in, but before he could even touch the edge of the paper, she clapped it shut again and launched out in the direction of the right field bleachers. “715.”

Feddering had never in his life hit a homer, whereas Ruth had a lifetime total no number of lifetimes could change, 715—it was frozen in his eye like the naked girl at the typewriter—and when Fed was dead, his grandchildren, holding in their bodies some speck of Fed's missing flesh and maybe imitating him in the eyebrows or in the particular shape of the jaw, his grandchildren would say 715 was the Babe's total, 715 when they were dead too and all the specks of Fed's flesh were turned to new careers completely—ashtrays, fire ants, pine needles, printer's ink, gun butts, bark or green scum at the bottom of the ocean. 715 was a lot of homers. The Babe should be proud.

He broke out into a jog behind her. “But he's halfway out on the field! You say that this is the field, right?” He tugged at the tube under her arm. “Right?”

The widow kept walking. Her heels made a clicking

sound as she ticked off, taut as a banjo string, the yardage from the plate to the point where, on the x-y-z axis, the ball cleared the fence. A few grains of baby powder sifted out through the threads in her black mesh stockings. Fed had to run to keep up.

“But how can you count it as a homer if he doesn’t even make it to third?”

“It doesn’t matter. The Babe could be anywhere. What matters is that the ball travels cleanly off the page like these others here.”

She stopped to trace one of the purple lines to the edge of the page where, according to the directions her fingers gave it, it shot out through Fed’s elbow, through three Bostie pitchers in the bullpen, through the stadium wall and onward into space. Fed had to admit that the purple line did not simply end on the page. Whoosh.

And not that there was any argument from the stands, either. Hundreds of spontaneous tributes littered the field: beer bottles, hats, scarves, cigars, coins, apple cores, marbles, all of them tossed into the game and all of them now in orbit around the great Babe Ruth to whom they now belonged and who was now their center of gravity.

“This home run makes it 715 for the lifetime total. And according to this chart here . . .”

She flashed the bright flesh on the innerside of her arm: the purple tattoo there, tally of the seasons, the stats of all the sluggers that undulated whenever she flexed. “There’s nobody alive today to match it.”

“Homerun Baker?”

“Not even close.”

“He’s still playing.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve figured it in. If he hit a dozen a year for the next twenty years, he’d be about where the Babe was six years ago. You see this asterisk, looks like a liquor bottle? Baker’s got a flask buried somewhere out there in the outfield, digs it up and nurses it, by the time he gets to the seventh inning he thinks the bases run clockwise.”

Fed didn’t realize that Baker was in such bad shape. He remembered the Viking king who got drunk at a banquet and fell into a vat of mead and drowned. It was sad about Baker.

Sanders the Sox Manager finally caught them but—swept on by that savage limp of his—overshot the mark, slammed on the brakes, slid to a halt. His shirt hung in tatters at his waist. “Feddering. Feddering. You gonna let her get away with this?”

“Show some respect, Junior.” The widow drove her elbow into his soft gut, dropped him to his knees and, without missing a step, moved on. “I’m a widow. You’re talking to a widow here.”

Feddering stayed with her, matched her stride for stride. “But what about the runner? If the runner’s not running, then—”

“Show me where it says the runner can be tagged out by any ball other than the ball he hit.”

“But the ball he hit—”

“It’s a homer.”

“But it’s not a homer.”

“It is if you define your terms.”

“What?”

“What do you mean by *homer*?”

It was not a comfortable thing to define a homer. Fed made a vague gesture toward the infield.

“A homer is when you go around the bases without getting caught.”

“Caught by what?”

“What? Caught on the bases caught.”

“By the ball? Caught by the ball?”

Fed did not think that caught by the ball was what he meant. Since the Babe had not held up at second where they could call in a pinch runner, but instead had held up at a place that did not exist, or did exist but was not a place, or was a place but was not a safe place, then whatever the Babe was, he was not safe.

“It all depends.”

“*Depends?* Depends is a woman’s word.” She blinked at him like he was a spot on a window she was trying to see through.

“You’re not a woman, are you?” She fixed him with a stare. “No. You’re not a woman. Then play ball. That’s what a man would say. *Play ball.*”

“I was just wondering if—”

“Play ball. Say it. *Play ball.*”

“You’re not here to tell me what to do or what not to do.”

“What are you talking about? What would you not do?”

“I wouldn’t do anything you’d tell me not to do. I’m not going to have you telling me whether I should or not.”

“Should or not what?”

Feddering’s eyes strained shut at the corners as if he were trying to squeeze something into them. The left valve cover of a 1926 Hupmobile bounced across the grass and rolled to a stop at his feet. The crowd was running out of things to throw.

“Should or not listen to you telling me how to do my job.”

“Then do it. Do it then.”

“That’s what I’m doing. I’m doing it.”

Out from under the wispy bra, from between that set of rhyming couplets, out from under that pair of poached eggs that bobbed when she walked, she pulled—crisp as a biscuit and all folded up into a perfect square—a silky white handkerchief embroidered with the letters *B.R.*

“Then explain to me how”—she dabbed his face with the square as she spoke—“you can ignore something as obvious as a baseball thirty thousand fans were looking at when it cleared the fence.”

Not since he was a child had anyone touched him on the face. No, not like this. Not the Barber with the caliper fingers, not the Dentist with the knuckles all knit to the grip of the drill, not even the Optician adjusting the

apparatus to administer the finishing touch, the shyish, the solicitous, the tender (like a pastry chef) poke-poke-poke.

“That ball is long gone,” she said as she soothed him, as she stroked his eyebrows and the bridge of his nose. “It’s a home run because nobody can get to it. The Babe’s got himself a home run.”

“But he’s got to touch all the bases under his own power.”

“In a pig’s eye. Nineteen-aught-nine. Oats hits a home run in the bottom of the ninth that wins the game and the pennant.”

She shook the handkerchief open. A scent of jasmine filled the air, filled his lungs, buoyed him up with a sweetness he held just long enough to miss when it was gone. Down into his breast pocket she tucked the handkerchief, pressed and patted and teased it up into a triangular white blossom like the kind the big bandleaders flash when they take the stage. Benny Goodman. Count Basie. Louis Armstrong.

“He gets only as far as second base before the crowd catches him—”

Her hand hovered for a moment.

“—catches him and carries him off.”

Hovered, without touching, just up over the sandpaper ridge of his chin, as if waiting for him to exhale, as if to warm itself in the heat of his breath.

“Oats got the home run. He got the homer. So what if he didn’t . . .”

She tapped his lower lip with just the tip of the finger,

tapped as she talked.

“ . . . run it out? They carried him home, didn’t they [*tap-tap*]? They put him to bed [*tap-tap*]. They put him to bed because that’s what you do when it’s bed-time [*tap*], Feddering [*tap-tap-tap*], Fed. You climb into bed.”

Fed felt a stirring down below, up under the protective cup, like a little chick now stirring inside of an egg.

“But the homer you’re talking about was a game-ending home run—not the case here. If this were the last run of the game I might let it pass, like they did with Oats, but we’ve still got another two innings to play.”

“Unless you call the game.”

“What?”

“Call the game. Call it. On account of the rain.”

Feddering pictured the infield erased completely. The green tarp throwing geometric shapes to the sun. The Babe beneath it all as calm as a melon.

“After all, we’ve already played seven innings. Seven innings makes it a complete game.”

“But you have to complete the play to—”

“Complete the play then. Complete it. Call the play.” She was so close now he could feel the heat of her thigh as she pressed it up against the flank of his torn trousers, against the narrow strip of skin that bloomed there. “Bottom of the seventh. B. Ruth: home run. Eight to seven and the Yanks win. That’s it. Game over. Lights out.”

Her knee nudged up a little higher. “Lights out.”

As if triggered by the surge of blood that ran through

him, a cry went up from the bleachers.

“We got him! We got him!”

Fed rebounded back onto the grass. *Who? Where?*

“We got it! We got it!”

There. Where the heads were already turning, and the widow already spritzing up the wall in pursuit, halfway up the slope of the bleachers—there. A clot is what they were, a clump of Bostie fans all decked out in a red-on-a-red: the cinnamon red of the Bosox (logo of the Bostie Nine, the Fighting Footies) but all bloodied up now with—Shriners on a spree—the Masonic bowtie, the fez and the cape, the sash and the banner with the scimitar and the sphinx and the *Roburet Furor* (“Strength and Fury”) rampant on a field of velvet red.

“We got him!”

Over their heads they held—a dozen hands all gathered up under to hoist it skyward—a kicking, squirming little bundle of white.

“We got it! We got the ball!”

At almost the same moment a section of the right field fence—the rear-end of the Bull Durham bull embossed with the words OLD RELIABLE—suddenly peeled away and, like a rump roast the size of a panel truck, came crashing down onto the warning track. The Bostie bullpen crew—still bristling with flakes of rust and Chiclets of brittle paint—clamored up out of the splintery dust and onto the corrugated steel with their sledgehammers and hack-saws and screw-drivers at the ready.

“Mooo . . . moooo . . .”

“Arriba! Arriba!”

“Olé! Olé!”

Strictly a sideshow. It was the bundle that mattered and the bundle was a boy, not half the size of a cracker barrel, dressed in Yankee pinstripe and clutching two-handed, tight to his breast, a baseball.

The Sox, the Yanks, the fans—the hawkers and the vendors and the scouts—even the pigeons up roosting in the girders overhead—took it for granted that the ball was real. The Babe’s ball! The proof was the boy himself and how fiercely around it he coiled, how he’d locked it up into his nutcracker mitts and pressed it up under his chin. Surely the bribes had been offered, the threats had been made, the bullies had tried to pry it loose, but still he hung on. He even tried to kick, to swim uphill against the current as they passed him, pitched him, skittered him down the bleachers toward the field, down this hill made of people all thick with fingers. It was no use. The more he squirmed, the faster he tumbled. Like a bar of soap down a bathmat all bendy with rubber nubbins, he slid.

The crowd roared as the Yank fans surged up to save him, as the Bostie fans surged down to meet the Yanks, as the two mighty waters all clapped together. And that’s when it happened. Just as Fed had managed, with a boost from the Catcher, to tumble up and over the gap in the wall, up and over the bent rebar and the splintered pickets and into the lap of the fans, it happened. Son of a bitch.

The ball popped loose.

If he'd had a slingshot he could've zinged her with a rivet across the knuckles. Or a javelin to buzz down out of the blue and spindle her—*shhh-thump*—like a rotisserie chicken. Or a blow-gun. Or a grappling hook, or a boomerang, or a falcon to swoop in, snip at her gizzard, pluck the ball from her bony fingers. Even a tiddly-wink maybe to flutter up into the Babe-a-sphere, paint a perfect parabola, butterfly down to lodge in her windpipe.

But all that he had was himself. Not that she had much more than that, than her own sorry self, but still. And not that there was any rule against it, either, but still. It came as a shock to see the ball shoot up and over the rim of the bowl like that, up into the blue and then out of the park. Gone. Hell of an arm, that widow. Not at all like a girl.

As the mob surged in to swallow her up he stared at the slit in the sky, the invisible incision that the ball as it traveled inscribed. So much for the bubble that held the game. But then he looked back at the break in the fence and saw that it was perfect: a breach in the boundary of the game just big enough to contain not only the Babe but also the ball there bounding down the cobbled streets of the Bronx, the ball spinning into and out of the broken sunlight to spank the hood of the roadster, to rainbow up over the boaters and the derbies and the bonnets, to nip the tip of the stogie and ping the arm of the hydrant and hop the stoop and shatter the window and clatter the spoons and splatter the pans in a rebound, in a ricochet, in

a bank shot to the bedroom where the widow would be waiting, all crispy and frisky and fried.

It was the ball, in the ball that all the random particles of the game cohered, and as long as the ball was out there on the loose, on the rampage, then the field of play . . . he looked back at the broken fence, then back out across the jagged teeth of the city . . . then the field of play would be the whole damn planet and the play would be whatever it was that was happening upon it.

In play, all of it in play. And all of it unstoppable—the run, the over-run, the spillage of the broken sun. Unclockable. He thought back to the moment of conception when the ball met the bat in the blast that shot it out of the park, and back before that to the Pitcher when he blew on the ball, when he tendered it up to the gods, and before that to the cow when it munched and it munched and it curdled the grass up into the leather that would eventually become the ball, and back and back to the first of the amphibious fish up out of the sea, when they squirmed and they glistened and they daydreamed the apes and the fodder and the cow to come, and back even to the Voice up out of the deep—

Wham!

The arc of the shovel as it swung through the misty moisty twilit air, as it accelerated in direct proportion to the length of the handle and the foot-pounds of force generated by the hickory-twisted limbs of the widow, the steel blade as it kissed the back of the head of Feddering at the moment of impact, was, in the words of all who

witnessed it, who told the tale in turn to their children and to the children of their children, a thing of beauty.



FED WOKE IN the darkness to the sound, inches from his head, of the shovel cleaving into—*chunk . . . chunk . . . chunk*—the thick of the clay beneath him. “What . . . ?”

“Lucky boy.”

“But what . . . ”

“You should be glad I saved you.”

“I—”

“Goddamn Redbirds.”

“Yes, but—”

“You win,” said the widow. She leaned on the shovel for support as she looked down at him. Around her rose the enormous empty shell of the stadium, jagged as a hatched egg, big enough to blot out everything but the stars. “I surrender.”

Above her the moon drifted up to glaze the infield, to trim the rim of the stadium with a phosphorus ice.

“Here.” She loosened her grip and then stood by as the shovel teetered, clanged against the wheelbarrow that held Feddering, then landed with a thump on the rubbery white of the plate. In the moonlight, the skin around her eyes sagged. The skin tightened, the skin held its own, the skin was like wax on the rim of a candle. Go skin go.

“Dig.”

“What happened?”

“You win.”

Fed rocked the whole wheelbarrow as he struggled to suction himself loose.

She offered him her hand but he brushed it aside. A somersault up into a handstand is what he ought to be doing. Scissor-kick up into a headstand and then a . . . what do they call that? A backward catapult. Yes. That would do it. And think of the look on her face. Nickel-spin up into a double-twisting—think of it, if only they were on the moon—aerial polonaise with a half nelson on top.

“Okey-dokey now, Big Boy. Rise and shine. Chop-chop.”

Goddamn gravity. Chop-chop. He carried the wheelbarrow with him as he log-rolled over to—lithe as a pumpkin—smack the planet back. Only when he sprang up again did he realize his mistake. He clutched at the back of his skull, the pain at the back of the brain that, like the bent blade of a fan, clanged and clanged with every turn of the rotor.

“Maybe another foot, foot and a half deeper,” she said. He scraped the mud from his cheeks. Shivered off the last of the scraps of paper. Rubbed his eyes. Tottered.

He looked down at the hole—half a hole, crack in the crust of a pie—and caught the angle she seemed to be aiming at, the excavation already underway inside of that flywheel of a brain of hers. That was odd. He fell back a step, felt the full weight of the earth reaching up to anchor

him in place. The curve of his gut almost exactly matched the curve of the hole. He pictured himself tucked up under the crust, the widow tamping down on him with the blade of the. . . .

But then he remembered the Babe. There. Yes. He could just make out the shape, out there beyond the infield grass and out across the clay where the break in the stride began, the break in the seam of the game, where the Babe bubbled up now a mushroom in the moonlight, all creamy and speckled with beige.

“Let’s go. Let’s get with the program now, Pumpkin. Here.” She reached up under her skirt to un-holster the hip flask and press it into his hands. Her breath smelled of whiskey and Dentu-Creme. “Couple coats of varnish never hurt, don’t you know? Smooth out the splinters.”

It burned on the way down but by the third sip or so the clanging died down to a steady *ping-ping-ping*.

His big hand closed around her wrist when he handed back the flask. The thread of a pulse ran just beneath the surface and her skin was hot and dry, as if her bones were hollow, as if she were made of bamboo. With one hand he could lift her if he chose, loft her up into the air like a kite.

“Slow down, Sailor.” She glared up at him. “The shovel—remember?”

Yes. The thing to be done. It was obvious.

They took turns digging, and as they dug, the widow talked. Out loud, yes, but to no one in particular.

“The Babe likes it too,” she said as she stroked the arm

of the shovel with the sandpaper that the Babe had used to roughen the grip on his bat. The splinters made a crackling sound against the dry wood. “Likes it more than I do, actually.”

“What?”

“Butter Brickle. The Babe really likes it.”

Feddering said that it didn’t surprise him. There was not much you could fit between your lips that the Babe hadn’t already tried.

The widow again: “Butter Brickle.”

“What?”

“That crazy kid ate a whole tub of it once.”

That crazy kid. And he was not being very helpful. He was a pretty big fellow. He was lying there like Gulliver the giant in the book where the squashable little people run up and down that barrel of a body and pin him to the ground.

At last they were done. They’d had to root down deep to finally shiver the plate and its anchorage loose, then loop a length of hose around it, then drag the whole assembly up out of the hole. Another lift then, another heave and—Voilà. They stood panting together and stared down at the darkness as if it were full, as if it were a bushel of shadows they’d been laboring to fill.

“Hell of a hole.”

“Damn straight.”

“You know, Fed, you put a scuff coat on those shoes they wouldn’t get that way.”

Fed looked down at his shoes. The importance of little things. And his shoelaces, strange and again strange, how they came untied at the oddest times, how he had to keep tying his shoes, like they would escape if he didn't tie them down, how even sometimes his bones were uncomfortable inside of his own body.

She reached up to flatten the cowlick behind his ear. The shovel they drove into the mound of loose clay that bordered the hole, then they launched out into the night to rendezvous with the Babe. Side by side they walked the wheelbarrow up the baseline to third, shoulder to shoulder with the widow at the helm, the Fed at the flank and just brushing, as if by accident, the skin of her arm with the back of his hand. Strange that it was this little flicker of skin that he noticed as they trundled along—not the plate, not the diamond, not even that whole continent of fire up there wrapped around the moon.

They stopped just short of third to pry the bag loose and lift it into the wheelbarrow. Or rather, since the Umpire was forbidden to interfere with the elements of the game, the widow did. So long as she took the lead he could help her, not as an Umpire (that would be cheating), but as a lover . . . what would be the word? . . . of humanity. Yes. A philanthropist. Yes. But then wait. Shouldn't he be charging *her* with interference? Yes, possibly yes, but then again, wasn't the widow herself an element of the game, no less than the pebble the ball chips up at the shortstop or the glare that blinds the rookie drifting back to snag the fly?

Take the ball that, in a hard liner to left, skids up off the turf and into the glove. That fleck of clover crushed up under the red thread of the seam of the ball: you don't accuse it of interference, do you? And wasn't the widow like the clover, that sweet smell in the wet leather, that little nip of green, the clover that comes with the territory? Rain or shine, the field of play is the field of play, and whatever wild thing blown in by the wind takes root there, that also will be in play: the pebble or the plague or the Hindenburg toppling over to kiss the ground; the comet or the blizzard or the chiggers in the grass; the tsunami or the sirocco or the cinder cone; the pigeon poop or the bolt of lightning, the prairie dog popping up out of the on-deck circle or the foundling in the wicker basket parachuting down from out of the clouds. It was all of it in the field of play and all of it, right down to the grit up under their nails, bound by the protocols of the game.

Not that the bond wouldn't be broken any minute now, broken by the game, and he would be back to himself again, singed by the wind alone and not by the widow, but until then, until and up to that final moment, the widow? The widow was in play.

“So what do you like for breakfast, Boo-ba-loo?” She lifted the whisper up now into a tuneful lilt. “Workin’ up a appetite?”

Liar. The little liar.

“Keep it in the baseline.”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

Out onto the broad orangey expanse of the clay they rolled the wheelbarrow until they reached the Babe. Fed knelt down beside the body. All the women who'd slid down the skin of that arm. He reached out to touch the Babe with just the tip of his finger. Cold. Cold, the Babe Ruth skin.

The Babe had pitched out his left arm to meet the ground as he fell, and as he lay there now, facedown in the clay, the fingers at the end of the arm seemed to stiffen, to curl slightly upward in the direction of third, the tips all stirred into a swirl like the petals of a rose but the trigger finger shooting up, shooting out the center of the mass like a strand of taffy pulled or the tether of a blimp—the Babe the taffy, the Babe the blimp, the Babe a Michelangelo Adam all twistied up to try to touch the finger of God.

“Sixty-two feet if we add a few feet for the rounding of the base.” She motioned for Fed. “Let me see your whisk broom.”

She snatched it from his back pocket and carried it to the far end of the Babe's body where his pigeon toes met in a little *v*. She began to work away at the bottom of the Babe's cleats. “He wears these everywhere, look at that!”

She flicked the steel nubs with the glossy tips of her nails. *Click-click-click*. “I told him not to kick sparks with those. He likes to get them out on the concrete and kick sparks with them.”

Clean and sticking up in the air like that, the cleats looked like the ground had never touched them, like

they'd pointed up for years, like the spikes had slowly melted in the sun.

"You tell Koreblesky you saw this," she added in that sucking voice she used when her teeth were beginning to slip, "you tell him where the Babe went."

Fed followed her eyes. Though her face pitched up in his direction, she was no longer looking at him. It was as if she were looking straight into him, into and through, the way you scour a shadow to find the something tucked up inside of it. The number was what she wanted, the 715. And he? What was he?

He was the match that you baby, that you coddle right up to the second it touches the tinder. He was her Bennie, Bennie the hunchback in that billy-goat climb of his up the iron scaffolding—*clop, clop-clop . . . clop, clop-clop*—to pin the score up onto the tally-board, tin number tucked into his shaggy armpit and the crowd calling *Bennie Bennie*, and the ladder in a tremor and the porcelain cracking and the rivets all cinnamoned with rust as he reaches up to—everybody cheering—hook the number into place.

So long as that last millimeter of air, that exhalation of breath between the hook and the number remains, it's Bennie, he's everybody's baby, but the second the number clicks into place—*phitt!*—it's all about the number. There! Up there on the board! Behind that puff of chalk that maybe used to be Bennie, that hangs in the air beside it—you know, like you smack an eraser upside a doorpost you get a cloud, hint of a cloud—but Bern, Bernie, Barney . . .

what's his name? *Poof.*

Fed watched as she pulled the third base bag from the wheelbarrow, cradled it in her arms, carried it to the Babe. She centered it above the steel nubs of the Babe's cleats, then waved him over to witness the touching of the base. SHARP WID SNAGS HUBBIE'S UMP: BABE GETS BAG.

It took the both of them to heave the plate up out of the wheelbarrow. He could hear the catch in her breathing beside him, pick up the tremor that ran through her as they bent to the task. They slid their fingers up under the rubbery rim and lifted it whole. The plate itself flexed from the load it carried, the concrete affixed to the underside all pebbly with age, the chalky ballast all chunky as a molar and dusted by the red of the clay and scored by the orange of the diamond and fluorescent, and brittle, and basted as if by fire. Eighty pounds easy. They thumped it down onto the earth and then got behind to push it, side by side, across the slick infield.

The wind fought them as they nudged the plate along but the widow stiff-armed it, rocked up onto the balls of her feet, flexed like a bow to bear down on it from above. Feddering crawled on his hands and knees to shove it one-handed, inch by inch to within a widow's-length of the target. Then he lowered his shoulder to tip it till the creamy surface finally canted over and rocked to a halt at a right angle to the crust of the earth itself. There it was, just within reach of the outstretched fingers of the Babe.

There it waited.

She insisted that he stand to witness the slide. He insisted that she be the one to give the final push.

And that was it. That was all there was to it. She braced herself against the chunk of earth and shoved. Slide, Babe, slide!

The sky swept in like a sandblaster to strip them down to a gesture each. The widow angled herself on all fours to mark the point of impact, her head down and her squirrely tail up and her eyes fixed on the tip of the finger of the Babe there pressed into the skin of the plate. Above her stood the Fed in the crouch he'd been trained to assume, the head clicked in over the target, the tag in the crosshairs, the left hand cupped to the knee but the right hand cupped to the brow now to fend off the grit in the air, the papery chaff up off of the Jersey harvest, the fizz of the caps of the waves in the river, the pepper of the coal and the salt of the harbor.

Somewhere in the distance a bell began to chime but Feddering held his ground. The wind picked up as if to compensate for the stillness, as if to hurry the world along without him, but he was busy, he had a job to do. He crouched with his arms at the ready. High tide was where his heart was, here in the dark with the widow at his feet. Above them floated the air that the Babe had held in his lungs. Seven hundred and fifteen homers in a lifetime! Out of the park! Babe Ruth! The air from inside the Babe—the Babe Ruth air—moved and had moved and was moving

above them like it was in a hurry to go somewhere. It made a stir, it made the flags that rim the stadium snap, it carved a private sky beneath the tiers where the struts and the arches like the ribs of a dirigible swayed; it ran between the dented pages of the programs and occupied the box seats and took the field and split the grass into blades; it filled the gap inside the sleeves of Feddering's uniform and it found the intersection of the widow's thin legs. Everywhere, it was everywhere and touched everything at once, the insides of things, untouchable surfaces, the caverns of the face.

“Fed.”

She was looking up at him, her face to the ground, tincture of the clay just brushing the parchment of her cheek. She narrowed her eyes. Above him roared the sky. Inside him—beneath the hiss of the wind across the surface of the skin—a roaring as well, a riptide, as if the crowd were inside him now, still booming away at him to choose a thing that they themselves (the orchestra that tunes and tunes but never finds the note) could never manage to name. He knew it but could not quite place it. The sum of a thing, the something he was supposed to remember, that was supposed to happen next. Something simple. Something like breathing. He searched her face for an answer, but watching him is what she was doing, clinging to his face with her eyes, waiting, open mouthed, for him to . . .

And then he remembered.

“Feddering.”

Yes. The note—yes. He stood to dust himself off. “Seven-one-four, Babe. So far . . . seven-one-four.”

“Tick-tock, Feddering, tick-tock.”

He stepped over her and started walking—lumbering—off the field.

She called out after him. “It’s the simplest part of the play, Fed.”

“The simplest part,” said the Fed as he threaded his way through the skidding debris.

“Fed.”

The wind rolled off into the red sky when he reached the stone arch where the steps descend. In its wake it left a silence. Down he went, without pausing, into the green tunnel that ran under the stands to the street.

“Fed.”

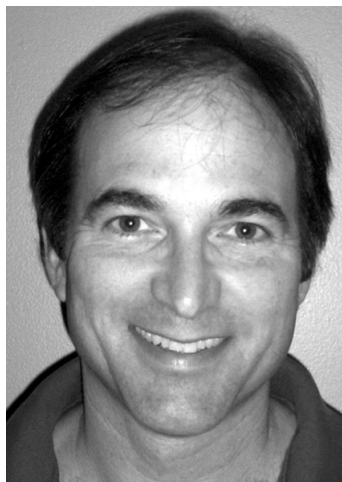
He could hear the *zip zip* sound of her embroidered dress behind him. Coffee, steak, scrambled eggs.

“Fed?”

The Fed looked back over his shoulder and smiled. The widow opened her mouth but the only thing that came out of it was air.

“The play is not a play,” he said as he spun around once, a little upright roundelay as he swept onwards, “until I call it.”

The city smelled of breakfast and there were fresh lights in the windows. Tick-tock, tick-tock. They had all the time in the world. ☺☞☺



For years now in his fiction, ALAN SINCIC has been roaming the borderland between children and adults, poetry and prose, the page and the stage.

His children's chapter book, *Edward Is Only a Fish* (Henry Holt), was reviewed in the *NYTimes Book Review* and elsewhere; in 2000 ArsEdition Munchen produced a German edition with color illustrations.

In 2001 he left Manhattan to teach at OCSA and Valencia College, where he continues to write, produce, and perform, most recently at The Orlando International Fringe Festival. *American Obsessions* was a high-energy experimental ensemble piece; *Breaking Glass*, an evening of story-telling in the form of a one-man show.