

OUT OF THE PARK

by Janet M. Ruth

Dad had a chance to sign with a Triple-A ball club.
My brothers played Little League for the Cubs and the Lions,
my sister played softball for the Jox—
dark green wooden backstop
 with a roof to shade fans from the sun,
 chain link to protect them from foul balls,
 rough bleachers full of splinters,
two steps down into
 cool sunken cinderblock dugouts,
no fence to keep home run balls
 from rolling into the street
 in small-town Pennsylvania.

Perhaps it was preordained
that Dad, my siblings and I would love baseball—
with Ruth for a last name—

*George Herman Ruth—
The Babe, The Sultan of Swat,
The Colossus of Clout, The Bambino.
Thousandth cousin twice removed—
Dad looked it up in the Ruth genealogy.*

All of us played and practiced in our back yard—
grass worn to dirt at three bases and home plate,
over the picket fence into the cemetery an automatic home run,
Mom's flowers and mint patch suffered the consequences
 of grounders hit past third base,
wire nailed over the garage window behind home plate.
My brothers needed pitchers and fielders for practice,
Dad, in spite of his otherwise traditional views,
 never thought it strange to teach daughters
 to hammer a nail, or hit, pitch, and catch
so, my sister and I played hard ball.
Mom was a more long-suffering fan of the game.
She had a front row seat
 when Dad hooked his cleats sliding into home plate—
 the sound of snapping leg bone
 carried all the way to the stands.

*For The Babe, all the teams and ball parks,
the mythology—exaggerated mix of fact and fiction—
RBI and home run records,
autographed ball and promised homer*

for a bedridden boy
hotdogs—drinking—women—
larger than life.

Ash bat-strong, leather-stitched memories—
driving up to Philadelphia once a year to
 sit high in the stands at Connie Mack Stadium
 gobbling Cracker Jacks,
 feet sticking to spilled-soda-tacky cement floor,
cheer for Richie Allen
 even as notoriously mean Phillies fans
 booed all around us,
playing softball in Uncle Ralph's stubbly field
 during the Ruth reunion,
 my prize moment—
 striking out one of my male cousins,
the time I stabbed myself in the leg with a scissors—
 by accident—in all the excitement—
 during a World Series game
 between Phillies and Royals.
Dad took the game seriously into his fifties,
played cleanup for the church league—
 reliably powering one over the heads of the outfielders,
 then it didn't matter that he could no longer run.

Memories slam from the past
 into the well-worn glove of the present—
I watch the Albuquerque Isotopes,
 from behind third base with beer,
 brats and fries, Orbit the mascot, and good friends,
watching television, I grudgingly cheer
 with Dave for the Dodgers, since the Phillies
 are already out of the playoffs—
 again.

We miss you Dad—Babe—
I tip my Cookie Rojas-signed ballcap toward
 the obstacles you loved to breach.
Things were simple then—
 just squint, point over the picket fence,
 hitch up your pants, spit into your hands,
 take the stance, and smash one
 over the fence into the cemetery.

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