

IVAN MILLEN

THE DAY THE BABE CAME TO TOWN

HE APPEARED AT THE CREST of the street, the evening sun just then casting a glow over the horizon and catching his outline in a backlight. His hat skewed to the left, a jaunt in his step made some people want to hit him on sight. From a distance, people thought him a young boy. The roll of his shoulders and the swing of his arms caused them to shake their heads, purse their lips and wonder at the youth of today, before they got close enough to see who it was.

Mrs. McKearney had only now left her yard for the store. It was an act of will to leave the step with her cane and consider the fifteen-minute walk for milk and bread, a walk of five minutes for the young. Whether it was the slope of his shoulders, the topographical lines of his face or his steady stare that gave him away, no one was ever sure. The brief surprise at the mistake forced them to forget. His eyes examining, questioning.

“How are you today?” Left Mrs. McKearney and everyone else he met wondering: well, how am I?

“I’m okay, John. Well, the truth is my legs are about done. I can’t seem to keep them under me sometimes.”

“It’s good you’re out. You got to keep going.”

“Yes, I know.”

“But if you need. I’ll run up to the store for you. Any day.”

“Not today, but maybe some day.”

They parted and she was for a moment more able.

For his part, he looked back to see her go, turning his head as if he were gazing up a tree. His body had a permanent twist from too-hard work on a too-slight frame. His shoulders turned in and down and his five-foot height continued down Park Street.

John Bartholemew moved along Park Street. Along the street the houses leaned forward on the right and back on the left like couples ready for the dance, but the music never sounds. Each home holds lives and stories. Poloski sits in the window over a book, must learn the English, as his eight-

year-old daughter schools him as she is schooled. Ruler under her arm, chin jutting and sharp words to her father, whose hands, larger than her head, cup the book in search of meaning. Reader Number 1, while Lise has mastered Reader Number 3 to her Normal College Teacher's delight and pride.

McDonald's house has curtains drawn and no child plays in the yard, although children are in the house. Thompson's house is open front to back. Doors swinging as children drift in and out with molasses-stained fingers and fresh bread jammed into their mouths.

John knows each one. Mrs. Carmichael is next to his house. Her son died in the mine while her husband was overseas in the Great War, and she pines away, but for tea and prayer and more tea. Her husband is back and forth shift to shift more ghost than man. Guilty to outlive his son. Even after eighteen years, their son's absence defines and holds them in time and place.

On his own step the evening light glints through the stained glass red, green and yellow of the front door. The house is a simple French Gable with two dormers and suspicious roofing, but the high pitch runs the rain off. He had the stained glass put in the windowpane to scatter light through the house.

Francis (18) and Luke (17) are at the table ready for supper. He has said time and again for them to eat before he arrives home, but other than a bite to sustain them they wait. Ruth would not allow they should eat before the man who worked to put the food on the table.

"Hi Dad."

"Francis, Luke."

He had showered at the pit so gave his hands a scrub and sat down. They were ready to eat and ravenous.

Ruth was as large as John was small. She was not fat, but tall, with broad shoulders and bread-making forearms. She plopped bowls of potatoes and turnips on the table and did not sit until they were served and underway.

Some people joked about their lovemaking: her so large and him so small. But she was confident and content. She was in her nature always aware of what others thought and said, but none of it held any sway. Her fear and worry was about him as he went about his way. He was unaware of himself. He did, it seemed, what he believed needed to be done and she feared if he went too far the company would strike back at him.

Managers had speculated about removing him from the workforce, but his support seemed insurmountable and the miners were not, in the managers' collective opinion, an intelligent lot. The miners would follow their

hearts against their own interests. They would strike to support him. And he was one of the best: loaded more coal, avoided risk, never missed a shift and caused no trouble in the pit other than his presence. So, not following their hearts, the managers acted in their own interests.

She did not guide or lecture him or even make suggestions about how he should conduct himself. She felt only that if she remained close to him, the closeness might soften and protect him. The idea sustained her and defined her love.

When he was arrested for sedition and shackled for transport to Dorchester Penitentiary, she was at the train with the others to show support and they released him. The authorities saw the group as a mob and since they thought him a small potato, they released him with warnings. He was cheered as he alighted from the train and the crowd quickly took him to themselves.

“Will you come to the ball game?”

“Francis.”

“It’s alright, Ruth. No, Francis, not after what I’ve been saying all these years.”

“It’s special this time.”

“I know. As long as you are doing what you believe, Francis.

“I’ll hit one for you.”

They all burst out laughing at this, Francis at the end because at first he was serious.

The smell of tea wafted from the kitchen. John sat at the table with the steam rising around his face. His hands looked like they belonged to someone else. The hands were like pans, shaped for the pick and shovel. Ruth wheeled around the kitchen, her arms like two spring salmon. He watched her work at the breakfast. Scrambling the eggs in the skillet so that bits of the yellow fluff sprayed up from the black skillet. The toast piled and laden with butter, and bacon fried crisp waited for the boys to rise. She would come to the table soon.

“More tea.” It wasn’t a question, for she began to pour his cup before she asked.

From the table she looked to the darkness in the backyard. “I’m going to hoe the garden today.” She smiled to the darkness like it was a sea of green. She thought of the flowers and the first cucumbers and tomatoes. The early-morning search beneath the leaves for the first signs of life: a tiny lime-green globe or the prickly beginnings of a dark green cuke. She nursed

the garden, gentle with each plant and vicious with the hoe along the rows, hacking the weeds with such ferocity that they gave up and moved to someone else's garden. After the first week of July, the weeds would peek up like a neighbour's dog sneaking through the backyard, watching the house in case they were seen.

"It's a beautiful garden."

Ruth treated the garden as she did her sons. What was good and kind and valuable she nurtured; what was evil and mean and worthless she vanquished. John for his part never touched his sons. The boys knew most fathers beat their sons, sometimes for what they had done and sometimes because they needed someone to beat. The boys had grown up with the curses of their friends, but they had never cursed their father. Some people laughed at his anger at the company, and the boys were embarrassed, but they were as big as their mother so most spoke well of their father.

"Is there anything to eat out there?"

"You ate the beans last night."

"Okay. Delicious."

They agreed that no tubers would be planted. They bought potatoes, carrots and turnips from the farmers. Nothing would be eaten from this ground if it grew beneath the surface of the earth. They had saved every extra dollar and finally bought the house. It sat on beams settling on the surface of the earth, but the company held the mineral rights and therefore everything below the surface belonged to the company.

They laughed about how crazy this was, but he liked the idea of conceding nothing. Render unto Caesar.

"How did you know when to plant?"

"The frost is long past."

"But how did you know when to plant?"

"I do."

"There could be a rogue frost, an unexpected frost?"

"You don't know any more about gardening than how to eat a tomato."

"True. But you do. So I wonder how you know."

"It's something you don't know. It's something you feel."

"Now I understand."

"More tea?"

"No, I'll be going. I feel it's time to be at work."

He walked along the hallway to the front door. Ruth watched his small frame in the doorway as the first hint of morning light shaped him. In

twelve hours he would be home, tired and worn but the same. He was always the same. As sure as she was of the passing frost, she was sure of him. She remembered all the advice from her friends when she showed interest in him. They thought it a silly match. She so tall and him like he was. There was something else for her. She saw the passion. The way his voice rose and fell with the rhythm of certainty, and how he cared about everything. He never said that's the way it is or the way it has to be. There was a smell about him that made her heart quicken. His quick laughter. She thought it was love or at least lust for she wanted to lie with him and try to contain his energy and maybe save him from himself.

Along the ballpark fence the morning sun threw his shadow like a spectre following him to the mine.

The miners arrived early. If they rose late they might not go to work. The half hour or so before the shift, they spent in conversation. The benches at the mine were occupied in order of seniority, with each miner in particular spots.

"Morning, John." It was Henry Thompson, who was as big as John was small.

"Morning. How are you?"

"My back's about broke."

"You'll need to strap it."

"I'll try that."

More had gathered, and Charlie Williams, a nervous mosquito-like boy of fifteen, had a story and couldn't sit still.

"So the ball game's tonight. Boy, that's something. Just imagine, right here in little Westville. Babe Ruth coming to town. Going to be something to see the Babe hit a ball. He has hit more home-runs than anyone. Just imagine. Hey John, are you going to the ball game?"

Henry Thompson looked at Charlie like he might squash him on the spot. But it was too late. John would not have said anything if he hadn't been asked. Henry had heard it all before, but knew he was going to hear it again.

"No, I won't be going to the ball game. You might not know who built that ball park. The ball park was built shortly after Dominion Coal started mining here. Can you tell me why a mining company would go to the expense of building a ball field when they would likely let your family starve rather than pay you a decent wage? You know why? Because it occupies your mind. You think about playing and watching ball and for awhile you think everything is right with the world. Makes you feel good, with everyone in town gathered

in one place and talking about this hitter or pitcher and how the home team is doing against Springhill, Glace Bay or Stellarton. Every town has a mine has a ball field. It occupies your mind. Takes your energy. Maybe you think if only I had a chance I might get out of the mine and play ball. Or you are just entertained like a dog playing in a pen. The dog knows he's not free, but he has a little room to run around and jump so he fools himself.

"I remember when they built the field. Fancy bleachers, eight-foot fence, bringing in American players to show the local boys. Cost them a pile of money. We went to negotiate a living wage. No money, coal prices down, our productivity didn't match other areas. No, they weren't showing a profit. The mother company was skimming off money for each ton of coal we mined. They were taxing themselves. You can't spend your life watching ball games and thinking about ball games and looking forward to ball games and know what's happening to you."

It went on like this until everyone wanted to squash Charlie.

"The company is smart. They want to keep you thinking they're the good guys. They provide you with work, help the community, but all the time they get rich on your back and the moment you're broken you're gone. Or maybe if you get killed they'll give one of your kids a job—especially if you owe them money.

"You need to find ways to gain control and that isn't going to happen when you're sitting in the bleachers watching a ball game. So whoever is coming to town is here to do one thing: entertain you and make you think life is good while they take another potato from your plate."

Henry had heard them all. The role of the church in suppressing the people, the corruption of government officials, the collusion of politicians, the integrity of the brotherhood, the need for strong unions, the oppression of the individual for company profit. They burned in John-like brush fires that burst up when poked or an ill wind blew.

John stood and walked over to the tool shed.

Bill Duggan spoke to Charlie: "I have a notion to smack you."

"What? I just asked about the ball game. He doesn't need to get so wound up."

Henry stood over Charlie. "He's done more for us than anyone."

Then the whistle. It was time to begin.

It was evening. John had worked over with the horses, rubbing them down and salving their backs where the low seams had scraped them red and raw. The street was silent and the clatter of voices drifted from the ball field.

The Babe had arrived in a long black car. The Babe was cradled in the back seat, alone, waving and grinning at the crowd along Drummond Road. For their part, children ran along the street, not wanting to miss a glimpse or a bit of whatever was going to happen when the titan stepped from the vehicle. Adults maintained some dignity, hurried their step, craning their necks like gulls as they stepped along lugging infants and mysterious parcels to smooth the excitement.

They had only heard him on the radio or read the exploits in the Halifax paper. The Babe was the sultan of swat. Larger than human were his exploits at the plate. He had hit more home runs than any other living creature. He was contracted to the New York Yankees when Boston let him go, and even his curse on the Bean Towners for trading him was part of mythology. He was retired now and a hall-of-famer. His wild life of parties and spending were legendary. He wanted to be a manager, but the owners kept him in his place.

The driver rolled through the open gate and onto the ball field. People were shocked to see even this. An automobile driven up to home plate, but this was The Babe and there were no rules that couldn't be broken. He stepped from the car. The chatter and hubbub ceased. Even babies seemed to sense something of import as everyone waited.

The Babe stepped out. Rotund. His heavy jowls and sad eyes scanned the crowd. He was dressed in a suit and tie. The crowd mustered a cheer, a miniature of what he might have heard in Yankee Stadium: The House That Ruth Built. There were only a thousand or so, but it was better than the jeers and boos he had come to expect in his final years. A flogged shadow spitting blood and thumping around the bases.

He was all smiles as he greeted the mayor and councillors who were as effervescent as decorum would allow. They would remember and report over and over to their grandchildren. I met The Babe. Shook his hand. Each person would begin with the grand "I" to place themselves in history.

The local team was on the field. They were ready. The pitcher poised to get one by him. Each fielder hopeful, they might be the one to catch a fly ball or line drive, forever written from that day. The younger players thought maybe just maybe they could spark an interest. Maybe from the man in black

who marshalled The Babe about, leaning to whisper in his ear, asking people to step back, while The Babe giggled and glad-handed everyone he met.

He removed his jacket and made a fuss about the quality of the bats, finally selecting the biggest available. He hit a few fly balls and grounders, complained about the bats and growled at the pitcher to throw some heat. Then he hit one out a looper to centre that dropped just beyond the board fence. The local boys hit a few like that. No big deal. But this was The Babe and the crowd cheered.

John thought about the house and how it would need a new roof by next spring. He remembered the young man from the morning. What was his name? Charlie Williams, that was right, he knew his dad, died in the bump. Shouldn't have gone on about the ball game. Why expect young men to understand, when old men didn't? Have to treat him right. He looks after his mom and sister. Should think before you speak. Can't go back. Go forward.

The ball bounced sharply on the packed cinder street like a big hailstone and bounded toward John's house. He gathered up the ball from the shards of glass and walked up to the open corner of the right field fence.

The Babe had finally caught one flush on the fat part of the bat and the catcher was up shaking his hand and patting the thickness of his back. Beads of sweat had appeared on The Babe's forehead and a sudden chill had him thinking about a drink. That made them happy; look at them, they're all happy now. He made eye contact with his handler, who nodded.

The crowd was jubilant. People looked at one another as if they were now a part of history. Did you see that? Of course they had seen it. Did you see that? Maybe it wasn't real, just an individual dream that each person had to confirm with his or her neighbour.

They looked again to right field. It was now a shrine to their memory and would travel through the history of the town. But a small figure stood at the opening where the board fence ended, briefly looking in. A thin, sloped-shouldered boy. He threw the ball and they watched the ball return to the field. Like rewinding a newsreel. The ball bounced once back of first base and bounced again along the first base line before the catcher caught it at home plate. He seemed unsure whether he should catch it. It's what catchers do, but this ball wasn't suppose to come back. It was hit a ton. It was a goner. It was outa here, but now it was back.

Attention had moved from The Babe and many people squinted from the stands to see who it was.

Then the Babe roared: "That kid's got some arm, somebody should sign him up." He headed for the car with one last glance to right field, but it was empty.