

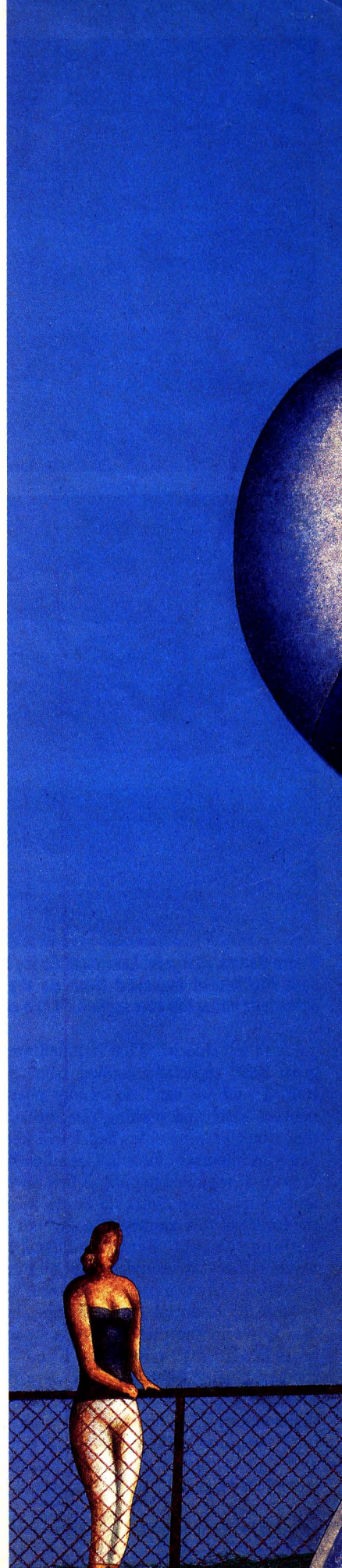
BY WENDY DENNIS

THE GIRLS OF *Summer*

Our correspondent
takes a heartwarming look
and finds that the
Boys of Summer really are
larger than life

YOU COULDN'T CALL IT EVERY GIRL'S dream, but it's been mine, certainly, for as long as I can remember. It goes back to the first baseball game I ever saw, the one my father took me to when I was 9, at the old Maple Leaf Stadium. I don't recall much about the game, but I remember Frank Funk and the way he looked, so handsome and dark and friendly, the way my father did then, and I recall the way he sort of lolled against the stands in the sunshine, signing autographs, and chatting up a gaggle of ponytailed girls. I can still see the light in the young girls' eyes when he posed for a picture with them, and their shyness gazing into the camera, and I remember Frank Funk's shiny, boyish smile and how the silky breeze blowing in off the lake kept tousling his hair, and how my father insisted on giving me pointers on the game, but I was only half-listening because all I wanted to do was curl up inside that moment and wrap it around me forever.

ILLUSTRATION BY BLAIR DRAWSON



I have this theory about why girls like baseball. It all comes down to the players. For girls, the players are reminiscent of every guy they ever fell for, starting with Dad. Oh sure, they love the artful grace of the pitcher's windup and the poetry of the double play and the thrill of the grass. They love it all. But in a way no other sport does, baseball evokes, for the female fan, every mysterious, elusive, palpably erotic association to the Otherness of men. Baseball is not merely a game, to girls. It is a riveting psychodrama. It is pure sex. It is life lived in a Harlequin romance. And the players are not merely cogs in some steely machine. They are people—living, breathing, struggling human beings. All those stalwart, unutterably alluring Prince Charmings out there on the field! All those vulnerable, enchantingly brave little boys! All those remote, egotistical, dangerous men you can never own! All those suffering, exalted fathers and husbands and brothers and sons!



They're good dressers, too. There is, after all, something about a man in a uniform, and, in uniform, baseball players appear so dashing and stylish, so devastatingly manly. In fact, baseball is the manliest of sports. Hockey players are such dorks when they brawl. What's the attraction if you can't see their bodies under the bulky outfits? In an interview they always come across like escaped convicts: bad teeth, lousy diction. Helmeted, football players are much too inaccessible: anonymous armored androids ricocheting off one another on the field. But baseball players are men of honor. Gallant in the face of adversity, genteel to the final moment. When they strike out, girls love them just as much, for there is nothing to do but quiver with admiration at their stoic self-possession on that long walk back to the dugout.

Inevitably I have a hard time explaining my point of view on baseball to men. They're always so busy checking out the scoreboard. Guys miss a lot about this game, I've come to realize. It first dawned on me that men and women approach this game from different planets several years ago, at a game that Dave Stieb was pitching. The Jays were down, Stieb was giving up hits, and the man I was with began to boo like a demented primate. I cheer a lot at games, but I never boo. In fact, I hate booing. It seems so *insensitive* to me. So I asked him to cut it out. Didn't Stieb know he was choking on the mound? Didn't he feel lousy enough already? How was Stieb's mother going to feel if she was watching on TV and had to listen to her son being

razzed? He stared at me as if I were on hallucinogens.

Soon then-manager Bobby Cox strolled to the mound for the ritual huddle. I wondered what he was saying. I always wonder what the manager is saying at those moments, imagine he's making encouraging noises, advising his pitcher to calm down and do what a man's got to do. So, just to talk ball, really, I asked this guy what *he* thought. He went nuts. He said he had never heard anybody talk ball like this before, that Blumenthal, his partner, never asked such dumb questions at the game, that that's what you got for going to a ball game with a *girl*. Then he barked: "Ya wanna know what he's saying? He's saying 'Get your ass in gear, you overpaid, useless twit, and start pitching.' Whaddaya think he's saying? 'Dig deep, like Ty Cobb?'"

The fact is, I *can* talk ball with a guy. I get the game. Maybe I'm a little weak on stats but I can hold my own on strategy and trades, the SABR baseball newsletter drops through my mailslot regular as bad news, I have a position on the Dome, and I've made the sacred trek to Cooperstown. But, as I buckle up for takeoff on Air Canada Flight 902 this crisp March morning, destination Tampa, on from there to Dunedin and the Blue Jays' spring training home opener against the Phillies, my head is somewhere else, where it's always been with baseball, obsessed with unravelling the mysteries of manliness, dreaming dreams of hanging out with The Guys, of leaning lazily against the dugout to catch the badinage, of marching right past the "No girls allowed" sign that has barred me, until now, from those places where men go to be boys.

You get to Grant Field by taking U.S. 19 north from the Ramada Inn Countryside in a bumper-to-bumper crawl through a landscape periodically punctuated by the leering stare of Colonel Sanders, and the garish monotony of strip plazas swarming with sausage-faced women in lime calypso pants. When I pull into the parking lot on Saturday, around 10 o'clock, the skies are overcast and the smell of mustard hangs in the air. A few old-timers are milling about, stubbornly oblivious to the threatening weather, while a lineup of fans shuffles impatiently at the ticket booth. I check in at the press office to meet Howard Starkman, Blue Jays' PR director. He has a Friar Tuck haircut and the churlish aura of a man forced to deal, in his time, with one too many sports reporters. Starkman questions me suspiciously about the angle of my piece. I tell him, merrily, that I am here to do an atmospheric story, to get the girls' side of this game. He throws me a look that lands like a Pershing missile: *Who the hell sent a broad down here?*

The grass smells as fresh as a first boyfriend as I make my way past the stands and walk out onto the field. There is a slow drizzle coming down now, the camera crews are setting up near the dugout, and relief pitcher Tom Henke is leaning idly against the fence, chatting amiably with a garrulous Danny DeVito look-alike oozing out of a white sweat suit. A couple of the players are jogging at a casual clip around the outfield past the old-fashioned scoreboard and the signs advertising Coca-Cola and Sonny's Real Pit Bar B Q, and Frenchy's Cafe, where you can get fresh seafood at its best. The head grounds keeper—a fit, tanned young woman whose name turns out to be Stacy Stangle, and who is wearing a tank top pulled tautly over breasts as firm as baseballs—is supervising the raking of the mound.

I wander over to the stands where sporadic clusters of fans are huddling under umbrellas and begin chatting with Judith Barr, an engaging woman in a Blue Jay cap, from Chatham, Ontario. She and her husband, Leo Girard, have been dividing their time in Florida between the Blue Jays' and Detroit Tigers' training camps. So far, their marriage has survived the split loyalties. As girls do, we begin talking ball. "I'm way more emotional about the game than Leo is," she says. "Oh, he knows the stats, and is very analytical, plus he takes it very seriously if his team doesn't win. But I'm more emotional about the players. I take it to heart if one of them gets injured."

We chat about shortstop Tony Fernandez, her favorite player, my own as well, and indeed, a darling of many female fans, including my 7-year-old daughter, Sara, who has sent me to Dunedin with strict instructions to return with his autograph. According to Judith, Fernandez is "a melody on turf. He's made

We've gotta think about the game, the game, the game. . . . That tune from *Damn Yankees* keeps running through my head. But I'm not thinking about the game. I'm thinking about the locker room. In fact, since arriving, I can think of almost nothing else. I want to be a girl spy in the boys' tree house, to see the players at their most elementary level, to observe them performing what I imagine to be the primitive rites of men without women. It's romantic purity I yearn for. Myth in its quintessential form. I also wouldn't mind seeing them naked.

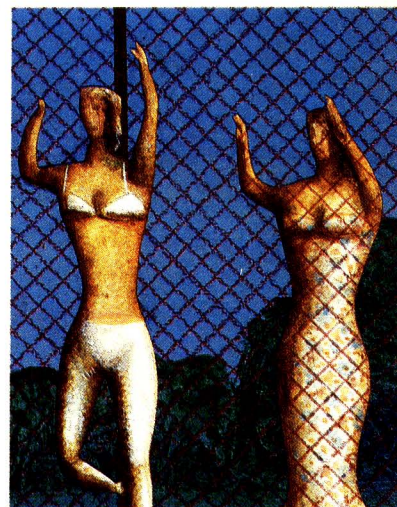
Trying to explore this theme with men, I soon discover, will get me nowhere. Before leaving for spring training, my publisher, on most matters except baseball an individual of temperate judgment and himself a veteran of many locker room scums, had been slightly bemused at my expectations, assuring me I'd find no Holy Grail, just a bunch of sweaty jockstraps and the sound of snapping towels. "The players will try to gross you out.

BASEBALL IS NOT

MERELY A GAME, TO GIRLS. IT IS A RIVETING

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LIFE LIVED INSIDE A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE



like spaghetti! What I like about him is that he just excels, doesn't put on airs, doesn't have the ego problem that some of the other players have." But she has a soft spot for catcher Ernie Whitt too. "I love his swing. And I find him terribly charismatic—so warm and fatherly."

Outfielder Lloyd Moseby's name comes up. We exchange knowing smiles. Moseby's name always comes up with The Girls. It is widely agreed that The Shaker is one of the sexiest players on the team. During a game last summer, I developed a momentary kinship, as one does in a ball park, with a young woman sitting beside me in the stands. Moseby went into his signature shake at bat, inspiring appreciative moans from us and launching several other female fans nearby into a passionate yap on the theme. For a girl, there are certain transcendent moments in baseball; savoring the pristine beauty of Moseby's tush as he wiggles at the plate is surely one of them.

For a while we yadda on about George Bell (for whom she stuffed the ballot boxes in Tiger Stadium last year on the MVP vote), right fielder Jesse Barfield and a few of the others. Since the game is about to start I say my goodbyes and prepare to take my seat. Judith grows suddenly pensive.

"You know what I like best about spring training? You get to see the players full-length, right up close, and then you come to realize that they really are larger than life."

"They'll pull the old 1-2-3 trick on you," he'd said, abandoning me to fret anxiously on that one. A buddy with whom I'd been having an ongoing and somewhat fractious debate about third baseman Kelly Gruber had thrown another grounder. "Listen, I hate to disillusion you, but you think we're talking about Rhodes scholars? All you're going to discover is a bunch of bad-assed Latinos who spit a lot and rearrange their genitals."

Sitting in the press box during the home opener (which gets called, because of a downpour, after three and a half innings), I meet Dan Turner, a congenial journalist from Ottawa who is in Dunedin researching a baseball book. In a weak moment I confess my desire.

"There's a real primeval thing going on in there," he tells me, "and even though *Toronto Star* reporter Alison Gordon broke that taboo long ago, the guys are still real protective about letting anybody tamper with it. What are you expecting to find?"

"Dunno. I just know I'm really hot to case the joint. I think it has something to do with growing up in a household with four girls and longing for a brother." Dan smiles a wicked smile.

"Aw, I think you should just go in there and disgrace every female journalist who ever fought for equal access. Say that now you know why the hell Rick Leach can't steal bases, that you can't believe the stretch marks on some of those guys' asses."

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George Bell comes sauntering into the Ramada coffee shop on Sunday morning, as I am finishing breakfast and about to head out to Jays' batting practice. He is shoehorned into a pair of faded blue jeans, wearing a neon-pink polo shirt and sparking so much Bad Boy charisma I nearly choke on my scrambled eggs. At the next table, two fair-haired young men in their mid-20s spot him, at which point one of them begins bobbing crazily in his seat and chanting a gleeful, hysterical mantra to his buddy: "That's George Bell! That's George Bell! The MVP! George Bell!" He races over and furiously begins pumping Bell's hand, as if the monumental prestige, the power by association, will somehow insinuate itself into his being. I am struck by this gesture, since I, too, have been seized by the desire to realize several baseball fantasies at that moment, but shaking George Bell's hand is definitely not one of them.

"You're George Bell, aren't you?" he says, utterly oblivious to the fact that he may be belaboring the obvious.

"Yeah. How ya doin'?" Bell replies.

"Fine. Great. Hey, you had a terrific year. Congratulations!"

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

The smitten fan sails like a pop fly back to the table. "Well, let's go," he says, grabbing the tab and thumping his friend playfully on the back. "The day can't get much better than this, can it? Shit man, I can say I had breakfast with George Bell."

At batting practice later that morning, Bell turns up again. He's horsing around on the field, stealing Kelly Gruber's cap during a Citytv interview, shouting wise-cracks at manager Jimmy Williams, who calls him a "big turkey" and advises him to pick up a bat. When he does, he just about decapitates a sign hanger straddling a ladder against the fence in left field. In the cage, Ernie Whitt mutters "lousy double" under his breath each time he cracks a long one into centre field. Occasionally, an incoherent outburst emerges at counterpoint to these theatrics from Tony Fernandez, who is babbling in Spanish to no one in particular.

In the stands I meet Lauren and Cathy, hotel receptionists in their early 20s from Toronto, in Dunedin to spend their two weeks' holidays watching spring training. They're up on the game, and can outtalk their brothers and most of the guys with whom they work on the subject of ball. The ushers at Exhibition Stadium know them well enough by now, because they're regulars, to let them sneak down to two perpetually empty reserved seats by third base where the pitchers and catchers

warm up. Consequently, they've come to know many of the players. Lauren has some prized pictures of herself with her favorites—Mark Eichhorn and Rob Ducey. Cathy likes Jeff Musselman, Greg Myers and Nelson Liriano.

"Aw, Liriano's just as bad as Stieb," Lauren pipes up. "He's always rearranging his jock."

I ask the girls whether they know George Bell, since he seems, from the field, to be smiling and making eyes at them and generally taking an undue interest in our conversation. They exchange sheepish glances.

"Well," says Lauren, "he comes into the hotel a lot. Always asks for a king-sized bed."

What about Kelly Gruber? What do they think of him?

"Don't know him," says Lauren. "He seems quite nice. He's pretty cute, that's for sure."

Our conversation meanders to the Bellas-DH controversy, which is the issue of the moment.

"A lot of the guys here are saying that Bell is being a spoiled brat, and that, with what he's making, he can damn well sit on the bench. What do you think?" I ask.

"Well, I think if he wants to play left field, they should let him play," answers Cathy. "He'll play better if he's doing what he wants to do, and then it will be better for the team."

From the field, Bell is still flirting with them. They return his attention with shy smiles, the same kind of smiles I saw on the faces of those fresh-faced teenagers at my first ball game. I recall the young man in the coffee shop this morning, wonder how much his story has grown in the telling by now, consider how differently a great ball player's magic works its strange spell on girls.

The moment seems appropriate to ask them whether they've ever had any romantic fantasies about the players. Cathy shoots me a *get serious* look. For the first time, I spot the simple gold heart locket dangling from a chain around her neck. "Aw, sure. Come on, let's face it, some of these guys are pretty good-looking."

Later, on the field, when I am hanging off the batting cage, George Bell wanders over.

"Do you know those girls?" he asks.

"I just met them," I tell him. "But they seem to know you."

Ernie Whitt is hunched over, a few feet away, rummaging for his mask in a sports bag. He overhears our exchange, and glances over his shoulder with a conspiratorial smile.

"George knows everybody," he says.

On my way down to the hotel bar that evening, heading to meet Dan Turner and his brother-in-law, Terry Vollum, after watching the Blue Jays defeat the Philadelphia Phillies 2-1 at Jack Russell Stadium, the Phillies' Clearwater home, I run into Cathy and Lauren in the lobby. They are tawny from the sun, softly made-up and dressed prettily for the evening in earrings and pumps. They seem less than delighted to encounter me. I ask them what's up. Lauren begins shifting nervously from one foot to the other and casting her eyes downward. There is an awkward silence, broken, finally, by Cathy.

"We're having dinner with one of the players."

"Oh, how exciting! Which one?"

They exchange anxious glances.

"George Bell," says Lauren.

"Wow. You girls are going to have quite a story to take back home. Dinner with George Bell. Your brothers will be envious as hell."

"Yeah, no kidding" says Lauren.

I ask them where they're planning to eat, but they don't know yet. They're waiting for George to come down from his room.

"If you find out, c'mon in the bar and let me know, OK? I'm meeting some friends for dinner and George can probably suggest a good restaurant around here."

Dan and Terry are waiting in the bar. We order Michelobs and begin shooting the breeze when the door to the bar opens. In walks Lauren. "I know where we're going for dinner now," she says, drawn to me as if I were some mother-confessor.

"Where?"

She begins stammering out the name of the restaurant. "A place called Nickel . . . Nickel. . . oh God, I forget."

"Don't worry about it," I say gently. "Just go. Have a good time."

When she leaves Dan shakes his head. "She looks like a girl about to go out on her first prom."

Monday, the day of my last game at Grant Field. I am sitting on a bench in the warm-up area, propped against the fence, lounging in utter contentment in the mid-day sun, surrounded by several ball players. Their sports bags are lying in open disarray at my feet. Ernie Whitt's catcher's mask is so close I can see the sweat stains.

Kelly Gruber strolls by. "It's such a lazy day I could fall asleep," he tells out-

fielder Juan Beniquez, who ignores him, chomps rhythmically on a piece of gum and stares off into centre field. A few feet away a couple of CBC reporters are tossing a ball back and forth. "Wind had that one, didn't it?" "Don't know how the hell they throw these things."

"Billleeee. Billleeee." Tony Fernandez is looking for first base coach Billy Smith. Billy Smith is nowhere to be found. Directly in front of me outfielder Geronimo Berroa is leaning casually against his bat, one leg crossed in front of the other, in that unspeakably graceful ball player stance. I am savoring this sublime frieze when the Blue Jays' color commentator Tony Kubek comes over to sit beside me on the bench. "What've you got in there?" he asks, sneaking a look at my notebook, joking that maybe he can use my notes instead of making his own.

"Oh, I don't think my notes will be much use to you."

"Why, what've you got?"

"Oh, just detail stuff. I've been snooping in their sports bags."

"You've gone through their sports bags?" His voice takes on an aggressive, sarcastic edge. He looks at me as if I am an axe-murderer.

"What're you looking for in there? Condoms. . .? Diaphragms. . .?" *I have*

violated the temple.

"I don't know. I just feel compelled to look."

"Look," he says, pointing to one of the bags spilling over with equipment at our feet. "See. Over there. That's a bat. Get it? A bat. And that's a ball. That's all there is to it. A bat and a ball."

Just as I'd always dreamed, I watched the game from beside the dugout. I wanted to catch the banter, and to get as close to the action as I possibly could, but if the truth be known, it was the ideal vantage point from which to get a really good look at the players' behinds.

The Rangers won, 6-5. A father had brought his 2-year-old daughter, who kept cheering for the "Bwoo Jays," down close to the fence by the dugout in order to instruct her on the finer points of the game. She had a mass of curly blond ringlets and pink runners and shorts with tiny dinosaurs on them. When one of the Rangers got hit by a pitch, she registered typical feminine concern and told her father that the injured batter would need "his blanky" that night. I turned around and asked her the name of her favorite player. Even at 2, she was already beginning to draw the familiar, comforting associations that ball players evoke in the minds of female fans.

"Sean," she said.

"No honey," laughed her dad. "Sean's your brother."

When the game was over, I did what I had to do and went into the locker room. Knew I'd kick myself for the rest of my life if I came this close and blew my chance. With the self-assured air of someone who did this sort of thing every day I strolled right by the fans and the autograph hounds milling near the fence and the sign that said "Take spikes off before entering." It was all an act. I was terrified. My mouth felt like clay and my palms were clammy and my heart was kazumping in my chest. I thought of Lauren and Cathy and of *my* first prom.

I only stayed for a few minutes. Dan had warned me that it would be bad form to hang around, and since I had no desire to violate the sacred code of the inner sanctum, but just to be there for a while, I played by the rules. There were no tribal drums. No one mooned me. No one pulled the old 1-2-3 trick either, which, my publisher later confessed, was "an elaborate, stylized flash." When I walked in, a couple of the players were sitting in various stages of undress on a long, flat bench, staring at me in a mildly curious way. Someone made a wisecrack about

having to hide his jock, but that was the extent of it. They were all gallant and genteel to the end.

I wasn't disappointed. Not in the least. I was touched, really, by the sight of them off the battleground, away from the maddening crowd. They look so different out of uniform. On the field there's this romantic readiness about them, a kind of towering, knightly presence, but, undressed, they just seem as vulnerable and fragile and helpless as little boys. Because Dan had counselled me to behave like a beat sports reporter going after the postgame quote, I walked up to Jimmy Kelly, the 17-year-old wunderkind shortstop from the Dominican Republic whose name was being bandied about during spring training as someone to watch. He was standing, naked from the waist up, by his open wooden locker, a chaotic riot of gear and spikes and clothing, and he looked so skinny and nervous about the prospect of an interview because his English is still pretty choppy that I felt an overwhelming urge to put my arm around him and tell him it was going to be all right. I asked him about his family, whether they were proud, and he got this clear light in his eyes, and he said yes, so proud, and all I

could think of was that somewhere back in the Dominican his mother must be wondering about him and worrying about him, telling stories to her friends, and somehow I wanted to know her then, and call her and tell her that I'd seen him and he looked great, not to worry, that he was doing just fine, and that, in the absence of anybody else to do the job, I'd be happy to pack his lunch.

The stands emptied out pretty quickly after the game. It was around 5 o'clock and the sun was low in the western sky, but it was still blazingly hot, so I walked over to the dugout and sat there for a while. The dugout seemed so still. No reminders of the players except discarded Bazooka wrappers and sunflower seed shells and orange-and-green Gatorade cups turned on their sides. Two Louisville Sluggers were lying propped against the middle step. I picked one up. It felt heavy to me. Then I walked out onto the field and stood for a moment at home plate. Everything looked so green. A couple of sea gulls were swooping lazily over the covered stands. There was nobody left in the ball park now except Stacy, the head grounds keeper, and me. She was driving her Toro Workmaster, which was dragging a long rake, around and around and

around the red clay by the bases. The park was silent except for the rhythmic rumble of that engine. I walked over to the pitcher's mound and stood there, surveying that little league ball park, thinking that all the wheeling and dealing and high-level trading and building of airless stadiums might erode the charm of this game, but that the men who run baseball could never rob from me the feeling of well being I had at that moment. I thought of Tony Kubek and how he'd tried to make me believe that baseball was just a game, "a bat and a ball," nothing more, and I realized that guys grow up with this game, that they take so much of it for granted, that it's not just a game at all, but a miracle, a contest of bravura and strength played by men of courage, men who *are* larger than life—the last true heroes on earth.

I stood on the mound for a few minutes. It seemed so far to home plate. Then I walked across the field, rounded the stands, stepping over discarded hot dog wrappers on the way, headed for the parking lot, got into my car and drove out of the stadium. I never looked back. Not once. And, just for the record, I never tried a windup on the mound. Why would I? It's not *my* dream to pitch a no-hitter. I throw like a girl. ■