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Take Me Out

I Becky Bingen: Summer, 1964.

With a regularity surpassed only by her violin lessons and Sunday church, Becky Bingen went to every home game that was played on a Saturday afternoon. With her father and two brothers, she would sit in the grandstand, and from the moment she entered she was taken in fully by the spectacle. The perfect, deep green grass, cut through by the leisurely strides of players taking infield practice; the milling, buzzing crowd filling the seats; the huge sky above; the familiar smell of her father next to her, the park, the team, the organ music, the scoreboard, the sound of the announcer's voice, the wails of the vendors hawking peanuts and beer and ice cream: she welcomed it all. She felt bound to the crowd around her, united as they were by their love of the team and their faith that the game itself belonged to them. She even looked forward to the awkward singing of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" that the fans would offer in the seventh.

Becky knew baseball well. She took pride in her neat and accurate scorecard. She was captivated by the notion that the numerical symbols, 6-4-3, could by themselves tell the story of a lightning fast double-play. She read the

box-scores every morning, and collected baseball cards. She and her father would chat about the team most nights when he came to kiss her goodnight. When he left, she'd turn on the radio, even though she wasn't supposed to, and listen to the steady stream of chatter that is the talk of baseball. She'd often fall asleep at night, comforted by the fact that, because it was baseball, because it was not constrained by a limit of time, the game might, just might, still be going on when she woke up.

Becky's interest in baseball peaked in the summer of 1964, when she was 11. The team, as usual, was pretty good, but wouldn't win. They were in contention for the pennant as late as August, but their September slump left them in third place at the end of the season. Several of the Saturday games that year had been particularly eventful. The 14 inning marathon win against the Tigers in June, the heart-breaking ninth inning loss to the Yankees in July, the glorious thrashing of the Red Sox in August, when the team hit 5 home-runs and the Red Sox got but 2 hits. Even the September slump did not affect Becky too badly, for by then she had fixed her attention firmly on the shortstop, Ron Carlson.

Carlson, a career .250 hitter, was, during the summer of 1964, having a season of personal triumph. He was averaging over .300, he was virtually error-less in the field, he had stolen 22 bases, and hit 18 home-runs. All of

these statistics were by far his best. And, through August, he seemed comfortable as the core of a team on the rise.

Becky had long accepted her father's view that defense was more important than hitting (but less than pitching) to a winning team, and that good defense begins up the middle. The shortstop, he told her, is the key to it all. She believed him, and so even as a little girl, even before Carlson was traded to her team in 1963, her eyes had been drawn to the shortstop. He was called upon to patrol so much territory, his throw from deep in the hole was so impossibly long, he took such risks in facing the flying spikes of a baserunner trying to break up a double-play. She loved best the backhand stab. Hard ground ball to the shortstop's right, he lunges with his gloved left hand, his arm extends, the ball is swallowed by his glove, and then a moment, for Becky almost pictorial, of stillness: the shortstop plants his left leg, reaches back and fires the ball to the first baseman. Oh, what a distance the ball must travel. A hard throw, like a white line, no lift, no deviance, just straight to the first baseman's waiting glove. The runner might be only a couple of strides from the bag, but the throw, if strong and true, would beat him there and the runner would be out. The shortstop's throw seemed able to defy the magnitude of space and defy the passage of time.

Ron Carlson started at short in the Spring of 1963, and while Becky was of course aware of him and his past years in

the majors, he did not make much of an initial impression. He was taller than many shortstops, a good 6′, 2″, and had broad shoulders. He was blonde and his hair was a silky, unself-conscious mess. He, like Becky, was freckled, and his face was quietly cheerful, almost serene. His stance at the plate was slightly awkward, his large frame seemed to crouch uncomfortably over the plate, but he made good contact with the ball, rarely struck out, and was especially good at the hit-and-run. He was a good bunter, too. His defense was reliable, but not extraordinary. Indeed, in general he did almost nothing exceptionally. Other than throw the ball. He had a huge arm, and was able to deliver the ball from the deepest hole, from short left-field even, to first base like a bullet. His arm was as accurate as it was powerful. When he had played in the minors he had been tried as a pitcher, but he couldn't master the curve. Still, he was kept in reserve in case a game should go deep into extra innings, or become a meaningless blow-out.

Carlson was a soft-spoken, modest man from a small town in Iowa. He was polite and mechnically articulate with reporters, but never flashy, never a star. He was seemingly well liked by his teammates, but was not a leader. For the entire 1963 season, and the first two months of 1964, he was just one of the guys for Becky Bingen. She was devoted to him, but only as she was devoted to them all.

But then something happened. It was a Saturday in early June, her team was behind by a run with two outs in

the bottom of the ninth. There were runners at second and third, and Carlson was at bat. With a count of two balls and a strike, he took an outside fastball deep to right center. It looked like a certain double and a victory. But the right-fielder got a great jump on the ball, never broke stride, ran it down deep in the outfield, and ended the game with a lovely long-armed catch.

Like everyone else in the stadium, Becky had leaped to her feet at the crack of the bat, and had followed the trajectory of the ball flying toward the outfield. She had glimpsed the right-fielder speeding to meet the ball, and seen the catch as if it were in slow motion. For some reason, one she would never be able to fathom, as soon as the catch was made, her eyes, instead of crunching together in dismay or dwelling on the triumphant right-fielder, darted immediately back to the infield. In a flash, she saw Carlson still running towards first: he hadn't yet realized the ball had been caught. When he did, he was stopped instantly; as if he had been shot, his soul was breathed out of his body. His legs went slack, he slumped to his knees, his hands clasped the sides of his head, then gradually moved to cover his eyes, nose, and mouth. His torso bent so low that it touched the infield. Then, Ron Carlson, in a gesture Becky Bingen felt sure she alone witnessed, took his hands off his face, put them flat on the ground, picked up two handfuls of dirt and rubbed them onto his own forehead and then back into his lovely blonde hair.

For a second, he rocked back and forth on his knees, in gentle agony. But then, as if he had just remembered something he had left behind in the dugout, and then had reprimanded himself for forgetting, he rose to his feet, shook his head, wiped his pants, picked up his helmet, and trotted, head down and with dignity, off the field.

At that moment, Becky Bingen founded the Ron Carlson fan club, thoroughly content if its membership should never rise above one.

Becky liked to believe, although not dogmatically, that Carlson's great year in 1964 was caused by her devotion. For as soon as she began her scrapbook, Carlson really started to hit the ball. Left, right, center, he was spraying it all over the field. Home runs, too. And his cannon of an arm was unfailing. His batting average soared, and in July the team was actually in first-place.

Becky was not only fervent, but scrupulous with details. The scrapbook, ensconsed in a large red binder, had a loving elegance. News stories from the summer, geometrically arranged, filled the dense but never cluttered pages. Publicity photos, obtained from the team, were reverentially placed on the most prominent pages. Baseball cards were surrounded by Becky's own handwriting-- "RON RON RON"-- on pages by themselves, and newspaper pictures were surrounded by the black bold of clipped headlines-- "CARLSON HOMER WINS IT!" "CARLSON AVERAGE REACHES .340." The whole season was chronicled in Becky's book, even that

portion of it that followed the team’s fading in September. Everywhere there were pictures of a blonde, serious, occasionally smiling, Ron.

Most cherished of all her possessions was a letter from Ron Carlson himself. Becky had written him, telling Ron that she was going to give a speech about him to her 6th grade class. She wrote to ask if he had ever given speeches when he was a boy. Had he taken speech classes, perhaps? Ron Carlson wrote back. His handwriting was practiced, so intensely neat as to look unsophisticated and even a bit feminine.

> Dear Becky:
>
> Thank you for your kind letter. I truly appreciate all the support you and the rest of the fans have given me this year. I believe that your support has helped me have the good year I am having.
>
> No, I never had a speech class. I do like to speak to groups, especially in schools and churches. Good luck with your speech at school!
>
> Sincerely,
> Ron Carlson.

This letter was the penultimate page of the notebook. The last page was a single piece of Becky’s pink, flower embossed, stationary. On it was Ron Carlon’s signature, obtained on September 18, the annual autograph day the team held for children. But there was more than just the signature, for Ron Carlson had actually spoken to Becky Bingen before signing.

"Hi, what's your name?"

"Becky Bingen."

"And what grade are you in, Becky?"

Becky, realizing that Ron did not remember her letter and feeling a twinge of pain she knew was both irrational and unfair, answered, "Sixth grade."

"And what else do you like to do Becky? Besides watch baseball."

"Well," she hesitated and through her thick glasses looked to the ground, "I play the violin."

"The violin? Really? Well isn't that something. Do you practice a lot."

"Every day," Becky said proudly.

Ron Carlson smiled and said, "so do I." And he wrote:

For Becky Bingen, a great fan. Keep rooting and don't forget to practice that violin! Ron Carlson

In the March, 1965, Ron Carlson tore a ligament in his right knee while sliding in a spring training game. He would not return to the starting line-up until August. He was slowed by that injury and finished the year batting an anemic .219, a statistic he did not rise above for the remainder of his career. But he always had a cannon for an arm, and could be counted on to make some contact at the plate. He was traded in 1966, and hung on in the majors

until 1968 when he retired, after 9 years in the majors, and returned to Iowa.

Except for the mad time of adolescence and her early 20’s, which coincided with the madness of the late 60’s and early 70’s, Becky never lost her affection for baseball. But with Carlson’s injury in 1965, she did lose her passion. When he returned to the line-up in August, 1965, the Ron Carlson fan club no longer existed, the scrapbook had been put away, and she frequently chose not to accompany her father to the Saturday games.

II Ron Carlson: Fall, 1995.

He is driving one of his trucks, substituting for one of his men who is out sick. Ron Carlson owns a diesel delivery service in Centerville, Iowa. His small fleet of trucks bring fuel to the many tractors and combines in his part of the state. Ron’s glad to be on the road. Office and telephone work, which he does adequately but mechancially, is, even after these many years, still uncomfortable for him. He, especially in his hands, is never fully relaxed while sitting at a desk. He taps his fingers, continually rearranges items on his desk, strokes his hair and his clean shaven face, or grips and then tosses one of the several baseballs he keeps in a drawer. When he writes, his hand grips the pen too tightly, and although his handwriting is precise and clear, he cannot sustain

producing it for very long. Ron's business is successful, but not extravagantly so, and his job is not terribly absorbing.

It's a clear day early in October, unusually benevolent by Iowa's harsh standards. The air is mild, there is no wind, the sky is untouched by cloud, the fields on both sides of the two lane road are brown with corn stalks and beans. It's a good day to be driving.

Ron turns on the radio, hears the familiar sounds of the country-western station he and his drivers favor, but then spins the dial counter-clockwise. He wants the public radio station, emanating from the state university, for he wants to hear Pete McGinnis read the crop reports. The farmers he serves chat constantly about the price of corn and beans and hogs, and Ron likes to keep up. When he arrives at the bottom of the dial, instead of Pete McGinnis he runs into the voice of Harold Brown. Harold has been at the station for 24 years. He is the manager, he reads books on the book-club-on-the-air, and he hosts the afternoon classical music program. But Ron knows Harold Brown's voice not from his music show or his readings, but from the wrestling meets broadcast on the college's public TV station. Harold announces them, too. Iowa is mad for wrestling. Ron himself had wrestled, as he knew he must, when he was a sophmore in high-school, but his lanky frame and his love of baseball led him to quit. But he never lost

his fondness for the sport, and even now he attends most meets at Centerville High and at the University.

Ron is slightly disappointed not to find Pete McGinnis, but Harold’s familiar voice lures him into listening. A new composer will be featured, a woman from Boston, Elizabeth Bingen, who composes in a medieval style. Although her works use many of the same polyphonic techniques and melismatic phrasings as the medievals, hers is a distinctly contemporary sound. She employs both male and female voices, something impossible during the segregated, cloistered life of the middle-ages. The combination of upper and lower voices allow for an underpinning drone to background the women’s voices up front. She’s fond of the modal scale-- “think white keys on the piano,” Harold urges his listeners-- for with it the second note of the scale is only a half step above the first. The result seems unfinished and sounds exotic. Her music is of the Seraphim, the highest order of angels. She writes in Latin, but her poetry is unmistakably of her time.

Ron understands barely a word Harold is saying and his hand reaches for the dial to spin it clockwise and back to the familiar territory in the middle of the band. But as he nears the radio, the music begins, and Ron, for a reason he will never fathom, pulls his hand back to the steering wheel.

A few notes of what sounds to Ron like a banjo. Then a chorus of several voices. Something like church music,

although the hymns at his church don't really resemble what he is hearing. Women's voices, soaring voices, words he can't make out, except for the palpable fact that they want to fly. Gliding, gentle, but also urgent with longing. After a minute or two, Ron is able to separate the voices; there are some deeper ones which seem to be just humming, while the higher ones sprout wings.

Such longing in these chants. The words, like the finest particles, hit Ron in his chest. Whatever this feeling, which is neither pleasure nor pain, it transfigures him. His hands frozen to the wheel, he drives effortlessly. After a minute, his trance is broken by his awareness that he wants what he is feeling. He is vaguely embarrassed at himself. But when he looks out the window and to the sky, when he sees the subtle colors of Iowa in October beyond him, he is pleased. And then, mysteriously, he feels so terribly sad that he must choke down a sob. Ron Carlson, a straightforward businessman who regularly arrives in his office before 8:30, an ex-ballplayer who does not to fail to take his family to church on Sunday, a satisfied man who is never entirely comfortable sitting at his desk, has no idea what he is listening to or why.

The music surrounds him. He's taken out of the cab of his truck, and he finds himself in a church, a dark place he's never been before. There are candles, and the warm smell of incense. Colored light filters in from the stained glassed windows, and there are faded paintings of Jesus and

Mary and angels on the walls. It’s not his bright, thoroughly clean and plain, Lutheran Church, that’s for sure. But he’s not afraid and he’s willing to explore. He walks around a bit, but doesn’t see the women singing, nor the few men who seem only to be humming. He steps towards the altar where the presence of the singers is even stronger. Their voices gently echo off the walls and when they reach him, they are steady and firm.

His fantasy is interrupted by a moment from the past. A ballgame 30 years dead. He’s at the plate, men at second and third, bottom of the ninth, two out, team down by one. He’s not nervous at all. He’s focused on the pitcher, a big left-hander whose name he can’t remember. He’s ahead in the count, so he can afford to guess where the pitch will arrive. He anticipates a fastball outside, where the lefty had pitched him all day. He crouches over the plate, waits for the ball. He doesn’t hear the crowd, even though it must be roaring; in fact, he hears nothing at all, for he is silent even inside. The concentration of his body takes him out of his body and allows him to focus only on the ball. There is no past, no regrets; there is no future, no worries. He is presence and for such moments Ron Carlson lives his life.

The pitch, a white dot whose trajectory he sees with ease, arrives exactly where he expects and wants it, and he swings without trying. The ball is huge. He makes such

easy, beautiful, hard contact; he knows just what to do, where to put it.

Night after night, year after year, Ron puts himself to sleep by generating images of fluidity and immersion that are precisely like this one. He hits the ball with the meat of the bat, hits it square and solid. The sound of contact is like no other. It is pure affirmation and tells him that he’s creamed it. He feels the follow-through, and knows without seeing that the ball is flying, that it’s a line drive, a rope, that it’s right center and will fall between the outfielders. His team will win and Ron will soon be a hero.

He runs towards first, but not very fast. After all, he knows that the ball will roll past the right-fielder, who he glimpses speeding in futility. He knows that the runners from second and third will score and thereby end the game. Watching the right-fielder running such a hopeless race, he feels, in a piercing flash, a pang of pity. But the right-fielder has no regard for Ron Carlson. His stride is determined, long, fluid. He reaches his right arm towards heaven, and, with barely a lunge, steals the ball from the sky.

Ron feels like he’s been shot, he can almost see the life rushing out of him like a mist. He slumps to the ground and is buried in grief. What he thought he knew he did not. He covers his face with his hands, and then pushes his helmet off his head. Then he reaches for the dirt

beneath his hands, grabs it hard, feels its lifeless particles, knows he is of the same stuff, and that he belongs right where he is. He's a loser; he is of the earth, and no more than that. His limbs loosen and unfold, he is sinking, he wants to be lost in, to become, dirt. He feels it on his face, wants it in his eyes, wants to taste it.

The dirt is in his hair-- he doesn't know how it got there-- and he can feel it sprinkle down his forehead and toward his eyes. A bit actually reaches his eyes and he has to blink back the biting sensation. A tear begins to develop, and right then Ron knows he's in the wrong place. He is not a man of the dirt. No, he is a man who, just seconds ago, had sent a ball screaming towards the wall in deep right-center. He had given the ball wings. Just seconds before his heart had raced in delight as his eyes watched the baseball, his baseball, fly through the air, propelled by his bat. He had been a hero, ready to be worshipped by his fans.

Ron Carlson can make baseballs soar and even disappear. He can send them so far, so fast. Because of his bat, space does not much matter; with his arm, he can make time stop. No, this dirt does not belong in his hair, on his forehead, or in his eyes. No, he must stand, head held up, eyes clear so that he can keep them on the ball. Ron realizes that his grief will soon end, and that even had the ball rolled to the wall for a game winning double, even had he been a hero,

that feeling too would have soon ended. He is touched again by a pang for the right-fielder: his joy will not last long. Tomorrow he'll be the loser. The baseball flies, yes, but it must land back in the dirt, to be picked up, thrown back to the infield, back to the pitcher, and then thrown yet again by the pitcher's huge left hand. His bat will swing once more.

Ron tells himself to stop fussing, to get the hell up, and his body listens. He dusts his pants, picks up his helmet, and walks back to the dugout. There he receives the pats from his teammates congratulating him on doing everything a hitter, a man, can do, and sharing with him the recognition that sometimes, maybe even often, that just isn't enough.

Ron leaves his memory and returns to the music on the radio. The chanting continues. ***Arcanae*** (mysterious ones), ***Seraphim***, ***Cantatores pulchri caelestes*** (beautiful singers of the heavens). ***Cor Dei scire gestistis?*** (Do you long to know the core of God?) Ron cannot discern the syllables of the Latin and, of course, even if he could he would not be able to translate them into English. But he is taken by these women and their gently powerful voices. They are urging him upwards, to some place he's already been, and in their presence he feels at home.

The music ends and Harold Brown, with his usual soft-spoken enthusiasm, returns to describe the composition. For

a few seconds Ron strains to listen, but he chuckles at himself for trying. With a flick of his left wrist, he snaps the radio off. Ron’s hands are perfectly still, as his left hand joins his right on the steering wheel. No part of his body feels pressure to move. The cab of his truck is now enough. He can’t quite remember the tunes he has just heard; he doesn’t whistle or hum, and he wouldn’t know what to sing. But he smiles. He smiles at the huge, blue sky. With only the slightest turn of his head, he looks out the side window to see the Iowa landscape, as well tended and predictable as the baseball fields of his past, rolling by. He drives down the arrow straight road to deliver his fuel. He can’t see where the road ends, and he thinks that it might, just might, not end at all. And that suits him just fine.

Dedicated to Patricia Van Ness