

DESIGNATED HITTER

“Fuck me harder you fucking son of a bitch!” Katherine shouted at Ralph. It wasn’t a request. Ralph closed his eyes and lurched forward, pushing his pelvis as far as he could up and over Katherine’s belly. “Unh unh unh,” he said, as Katherine’s muscles squeezed against his straining cock.

Katherine liked to curse in bed, something Ralph wouldn’t have predicted four hours earlier when they met for tapas on Squirrel Hill. The little Spanish restaurant was frequently named as a harbinger of something called “gentrification,” a term that was really starting to become a topic of conversation among some of Ralph’s friends and colleagues in Pittsburgh. Some of them seemed to be against it, others didn’t really give a shit. All Ralph knew was that tapas were delicious, and this place had a terrific happy hour. You just had to park close to the restaurant so your car wouldn’t get broken into.

He had taken dates there before, and when he proposed “how about tapas?” to Katherine he winced for a moment at the fear that one of his previous dates might be there. Those tapas really were good, he wouldn’t blame them for wanting to come back. Good—and cheap. For every glass of happy hour wine, they’d bring little bites. “This is the only food in Pittsburgh you can get without fries or cole slaw on top,” Ralph had said. It was the same joke he made on every date. Katherine laughed, rolling her eyes. “He’ll do,” she had thought, exhausted, when she saw him waiting for her outside the restaurant in his Dockers and tucked-in Old Navy gingham.

Even with the free tapas, they got tipsy. Ralph made sure to ask her a lot of questions about her life: where she grew up, what her favorite neighborhoods in Pittsburgh were, what her undergraduate education had been like. Sex had been on his mind from the moment he woke up that morning, but it only appeared as a tangible possibility when Katherine, as she was returning from the bathroom, ran her hands across the back of his neck and shoulders. “Let’s go have a nightcap,” she said. “We’ll go to my place and watch some *Filmstruck*.” Ralph didn’t know the show *Filmstruck* but he wasn’t so obtuse that he missed his cue.

Back at Katherine’s, she made a show of logging into her *Filmstruck* account. “Do you like Paul Verhoeven’s later work?” she asked. Ralph leapt on top of her on the couch, jabbing his tongue into her mouth. She flinched at first but then met his kiss and kissed him even more forcefully, pushing his tongue out of her mouth, and out of the way, so she could explore his gums and palate with her slippery wet tongue. They made out for a few minutes before she pushed him back. Grabbing him hard by his collar with both hands balled into a fist, she spoke, half-panting: “Forget *Repo Man*, take me into the bedroom and fuck the living shit out of me right now.”

“Fuck me harder you fucking son of a bitch!” Katherine shouted again. Ralph vaguely wondered if her neighbors could hear them. Katherine lived on Polish Hill, a neighborhood she described earlier as “cuspy gentrified.” Ralph had almost asked her if she had Polish ancestry, but felt shy. They hadn’t exchanged last names. His own, Mlynarczack, had long been a source of confusion and shame for him. “It’s pronounced Muhlinnerzuck” he had said countless times, on countless second and third dates. “With the accent on the *zuck*.”

He had never been with a woman who cursed in bed as much as Katherine. Some of what she said legitimately disturbed him. He had been taught by his Polish mother never to use the word “cunt” in any situation, but Katherine freely referred to her junk as her cunt. “Stuff my cunt and fuck me until I can’t breathe.,” she said at one point, biting Ralph’s earlobe. But he had to admit it turned him on. In fact, it turned him on a little too much. He could feel his control over impending orgasm loosen. Orgasms for Ralph started in the backs of his knees, then slowly crawled up his sturdy thighs before erupting through his cock. He had hoped that all the wine and tapas would act as a sort of buffer against it, but within thirty seconds of intercourse the grim finish line hovered in front of him.

“Don’t you ever stop fucking me until I come all over your fucking shit,” Katherine said. It didn’t seem like she was really talking to Ralph anymore, but he didn’t mind. He was engaged in a desperate conflict within himself. Do. Not. Come. He tried to visualize his nervous system as a third party which he *commanded* to stop. He demanded it immediately cease feeling the overwhelming pleasure which saturated his lower body and was rapidly moving towards his perineum and balls. Once it reached his ass he was done for. Ralph started to feel desperate, even as he witlessly humped away and Katherine started shouting “Shit! Cunt! Fuck! Bitch! Tits! Dick! Damn! Heck! What! The! Fuck! Motherfucker! Motherfucker! Motherfucker!”

When Ralph was a kid, his mom read a lot of Stephen King novels. She would bring them to the lake during the summer and read while Ralph swam with his friends. When she had finished, she’d line them up, dog-eared and warped, on a little shelf in the den. Sometimes Ralph would go into the den and open one, skimming for the dirty parts. He sort of learned about sex from those novels. Some of the details had proven unforgettable. In one of them, and he couldn’t remember which novel, one of the characters is having sex and is faced with a premature orgasm. The character’s strategy for delaying the orgasm was to think about baseball statistics.

The memory of this passage returned to Ralph as he plunged in and out of Katherine, pulling back until just the head of his cock remained between her labiae and then plunging fully back in. “Goddamn you motherfucker!” she shouted at him, digging her fingernails into the top of his ass. “WHY AREN’T YOU FUCKING ME?” she screamed at him in desperate accusation. “I don’t know!” Ralph thought. “I thought I was!” he suggested silently to himself. He didn’t say

either of these things out loud. He just said “Unh unh unh.” But he was in trouble. He was going to come any second. Baseball stats, he thought. Baseball stats.

Almost everybody knows what “baseball stats” are but nobody really considers that it’s difficult to actually think of *a* baseball stat. It’s hard to do whether you’re having sex or not having sex. “73 home runs 73 home runs 73 home runs,” he thought frantically, recalling Barry Bond’s tainted record. “61 home runs 61 home runs 61 home runs,” he corrected himself, Roger Maris’s magic number sans roids. He knew lots of baseball players but couldn’t think of any of their stats. He thought of the great Pirates. Willie Stargell, Honus Wagner, the great Roberto Clemente. He remembered Clemente’s tragic death in a plane crash, but couldn’t recall that Clemente had exactly 3,000 major league hits when he died or that Wagner stole an astonishing 722 bases, good for tenth all time.

Desperate, Ralph just started thinking about baseball terms of any kind. Bunt sacrifice infield fly happy birthday pitch intentional walk slugging percentage on base percentage on base plus slugging percentage balk Texas leaguer designated hitter. Ralph internally scoffed at the words “designated hitter.” As a Pirates fan, he had grown up accustomed to the idea that the pitcher always had to bat. Most of them were bad hitters, of course. They were paid to get outs, not hit home runs. Some of them were just enough of a threat. Rick Rhoden hit .333 in 1984 with 6 doubles. The whole strategy of the lineup, and when to take a pitcher out for a reliever, hinged on the fact that the pitcher was part of the batting line up. During the World Series, Ralph watched with scorn when the American League team hosted and a non-fielding batter stepped into the box.

The rationale for the designated hitter rule arose comparatively early in the history of baseball. It was first raised by Philadelphia Athletics manager Connie Mack in 1906, and in the late 1920’s National League president John Heydler made many attempts to introduce a 10th batter who did not play in the field as a way to speed up the game. It wasn’t until the late 1960’s, when pitching became so dominant that the league leader in batting hit only .301, that the movement picked up steam. It wasn’t adopted as a permanent rule until 1973, when Athletics owner Charlie O. Finley and the other American League owners voted 8-4 to approve the designated hitter for a three-year trial run.

Ron Blomberg of the New York Yankees became the first designated hitter in Major League Baseball history, facing Boston Red Sox righty Luis Tiant in 1973. Ron Blomberg was nicknamed “Boomer,” but that at bat he was quietly walked. Blomberg hit .329 that year with 12 homers. The DH was a hit. Not only were AL batting averages higher than NL, attendance went up. This persuaded National League owners to seriously consider the proposition. They held a vote on August 13, 1980 to determine whether or not the league would adopt the designated hitter. A

simple majority of the 12 member teams was necessary to pass the rule, and it was for a time expected to pass.

Some drama ensued in the process. A late breaking clause in the proposal indicated that the rule would not come into effect until the 1982 season. Philadelphia Phillies president Bill Giles wasn't sure how the team owner would want him to vote. The owner was on a fishing trip, and it was years before cell phones would ensure his availability while angling. Giles abstained from voting. Pirates GM Harding Peterson had been instructed to do whatever the Phillies did, and so the Pirates abstained as well. The final vote saw four teams voting for the DH, five against, and three abstentions. One wonders if the Phillies' owner hadn't gone fishing whether or not the NL would have adopted the designated hitter rule, which would ostensibly still be in effect today.

But, Ralph realized, to ask that question was to engage in an inquiry into parallel universes. When Ralph was 22, he and his buddy Kevin got too stoned at a Hoobastank concert. Just as the band launched into "Crawling in the Dark," the music formed a sheer wall which Kevin's consciousness couldn't endure. He made Kevin walk out to the parking lot, despite the firm rule against ins and outs. Slumped against the car, so stoned he was almost seeing stars, Kevin went on a long interior journey, which he narrated to Kevin in great detail. "Just imagine it, Kev. It's 1909 and you're in a youth hostel in Vienna. You meet a young painter. He's broke, his mom has just died, he's got extremely radical political views. You go out for drinks, and get into an argument. You get so enraged you start beating the painter with your fists, just punching the shit out of him until he dies. That painter? Adolph Hitler."

Kevin, according to Ralph, didn't fully appreciate the sophistication and nuance of the argument, if that's what Ralph was making that night. Since then, however, the thought had obsessed him. He often appropriated the storyline of his favorite film, *Back to the Future*, as a way to imagine his own disappearance from the world. His parents had met at a dance in Pittsburgh in the early 1980's. Both were first generation Polish kids, with big hair and Marlboro 100s in their mouths. It's lucky they were both Polish, Ralph thought. He knew well that trying to explain how to pronounce "Mlynarczack" could effect sexual suicide. His mom later told them that she hadn't gone home with him that night, but that they started dating soon after. They were married, and two years later she was pregnant with Ralph.

When he asked what stopped her from going home with his dad that night, mom demurred. But she finally admitted that she had been seeing someone else, a nerd who went on to make many millions of dollars in the tech industry. "You can see his name on the great buildings of Pittsburgh," she would always say, pretending that she was happy with her life and how it

turned out. This fact gave rise to infinite speculation for Ralph. What if she had stayed with the dweeb and my dad had moved on to someone else? Would he have still been born, just with worse eyesight and less agility, a greater proclivity for the STEM fields? Would he still be *him* though, in that case? Who was he? What does it mean to be alive?

But she didn't stay with the nerdy programmer. His wealth would be bestowed on another wife, on other kids. His mom and dad dated, married, copulated and she had given birth to Ralph. He had grown up in their house, in a quiet suburb of the city, where on hot weekend days his dad would work on the car in the garage and listen to the Pirates game on the radio, drinking beers. Sometimes, when the sun started to sink down behind the big beautiful wooded hills surrounding their suburban little village, his dad would toss him a glove and tell him to run out into the yard. He'd smell the beautiful warm aroma of freshly mown grass, and toss the ball and catch. Even now, he would sometimes turn on the Bucs game on the radio in the car, reveling in the lush baritone of their announcers and remember his dad and those games of catch. When Ralph was a sophomore at the Community College of Allegheny County, his dad keeled over behind the wheel of his car and drove off an overpass into a ditch and died.

Could he have saved his dad's life? Tom Walker was a pitcher who pitched in 191 games in the 1970's. He was playing winter ball in Puerto Rico with Roberto Clemente. On New Year's Eve, Walker helped Clemente load supplies into a small plane for a relief mission to help earthquake victims in Nicaragua. Walker offered to go, but Clemente reasoned with him: Tom, you're young and single, it's New Year's Eve. Go back to town and get drunk, get laid. The overloaded plane then crashed into the ocean not long after takeoff, killing everybody on board. His son, Neil Walker, also a Major League Baseball player with 522 career RBIs said that Tom remembered it feeling like the Pope had died. "There were people on the beaches for days and weeks, looking out, waiting for something to rise up from the depths."

After he hung up on his weeping mother, Ralph had called his girlfriend, Cassandra. They had just had sex for the first time a week before, after petting got too heavy to turn back. "Hey sexy man," Cassandra said when Ralph said hello. "My dad died," he said, despite the stirring in his groin prompted by Cassandra saying the word "sexy." Cassandra wanted to come over right away of course, but was hosting her first cousin from Hershey. Could she come too? It's awkward honey, I know, but after all, she is family.

Half an hour later, Cassandra and her cousin Priscilla knocked on the door. Ralph had been a mess, sitting in the small apartment he shared with two of his peers at CCAC and crying. He should have said something to his dad about cigarettes and drinking. About eating a vegetable here and again. Cassandra gave Ralph a big, hard hug and he felt her loins pressing against his.

Suddenly he felt alive! He thought of his dad lying there in the morgue, the decomposition process arrested slightly by the cold air and then, and the thought passed over him like the shadow of the moon, all the sex he would have in his life. So much sex and so many times. He pressed the top of Cassandra's ass as they embraced.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Priscilla said politely. "Oh god, I mean, hi I'm Priscilla." Ralph and Priscilla awkwardly shook hands, and then Priscilla pulled him in close as well for a half hug. The girls took him out to Primanti Bros, the home of the Primanti, Pittsburgh's most famous sandwich. Essentially it is meat topped with cole slaw and fries. Ralph vaguely wondered if his father's body contained semi-decomposed remnants of cole slaw and fries, Pittsburgh's famous relish. Priscilla regarded hers quizzically, and then took a nibble. She had been talking for a while now about a recent trip she took with her best friend to Spain. "Spanish guys are hot," she said, as if Ralph's father were still alive. What she really liked, though, was the nightlife. You go out to the bars she said and they bring you a little snack every time you order a drink. Little stuffed pimento peppers, for instance, or roasted potatoes with a spicy mayonnaise. They call them *tapas*, she said. They are delicious.