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Essay

Forever Stamp

Nancy Luana

It was the glare that first caught my attention. The mid-morning sun slid through my post office door like any other customer, and then each time the door opened and closed it strobed off the plexiglass shadowbox hanging on the wall, the one displaying all of the forever stamps. I was third in line with nothing to do but notice the glare, the way it beckoned like a searchlight drawing attention to a main attraction. The stamps catching the light were dark. They were not my usual wildflowers or hummingbirds.

I leaned in.

Hank Aaron. Hank Aaron stamps.

I was settling into my shiny blue seat at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium when the vendor handed Daddy the tall can of Old Milwaukee beer. I patted the armrests and watched the toes of my blue Keds swing just about an inch above the concrete floor. Daddy's lace-up wingtips were planted flat on the concrete. *When I am seven*, I thought. *Maybe when I am seven my feet will touch*.

"My daughter," Daddy told the vendor as he handed him some dollar bills. The vendor nodded with a smile as he counted out Daddy's change, and I watched with fascination the little silver cylinders attached to his belt that squeaked and spat out nickels and dimes and quarters and pennies when he pushed the tops of them. "Her first ballgame," Daddy continued. "We don't get to be together too much anymore — divorce — you know." The vendor stood there with Daddy's change extended and signaled to someone calling for him that he'd be right there. "Aw, I'm sorry," Daddy continued. "I don't know why I go on like that. No, now you keep that change and here . . ." Daddy pulled some more change from his pocket, handed it to the vendor and then he and his new Old Milwaukee leaned into me. "Now baby doll, these seats, these seats are what you call first base-line seats." He pointed to the dugout and the white chalk line than ran in front of it. "They're the real good seats. I figured if I can't see you no more than what I do, I should just spring for the real good seats." I nodded. "Now you know why they're called that — first base-line seats?"

I realized that he had been gone too long to know how smart I was. He did not even know that I was already a baseball player myself, the only girl on the street that the boys would let play. "Because they're on the first baseline, Daddy," I said smiling and looking up at him in "good grief" disbelief.

It was different with Daddy. There were never tomorrows, not ones that you could count on, not ones that were not years apart connected only by birthday cards and Christmas calls. So, while Daddy watched Hank Aaron, I secretly watched Daddy.

He slapped my leg and laughed his laugh, a laugh that was so big that it always seemed to come from someone else. Daddy was a small man but strong and sturdy like a piece of rebar. "That's right because they are on the first baseline!"

There was a boy sitting in front of me. He was about my age, and he turned around in his seat to watch Daddy talk, and then he looked at me and seemed perplexed as to why a girl was at a baseball game.

The boy eased back around and looked at the side of his own father's face, a man who I thought, just looking from the back, looked like Sarge on the Gomer Pyle show. He had a flat-top and a square head that sat on a thick neck, and he filled up all of his blue seat and then some. The man pressed a handful of popcorn in his mouth and then, maybe sensing the boy staring at him, glanced quickly at the boy but then went back to staring at all that green grass, the players warming up on it, the coaches checking their rosters, the umpire sweeping the plate. It was one of those Georgia July days made quiet by the heat the same way a winter day is sometimes made quiet by the snow, and I could hear the "pop" of the first-baseman's glove each time he caught a ball.

"Daddy," I began, as Daddy started to open his Old Milwaukee. I wanted to tell him about the first baseline we have at home that runs from a pine tree in the yard to a doormat taken from the front porch, but I did not get to finish.

"Yeah, sweetheart," he said. He had just begun to loop his finger into the little metal tab of his Old Milwaukee and pull when it exploded. His beer became sort of a beer water-hose with the nozzle set on that wide, hard spray setting, and it soaked the back of Sarge's neck and head.

The man turned angrily around and looked prepared to hit Daddy, but he stopped when he saw me. His eyes met mine, and then he glared at Daddy.

"Oh, mister," Daddy said laughing. "I am so sorry. I bet that felt good though, didn't it, in this heat?" The vendor was standing in the aisle close enough for Daddy to help himself to the white towel hanging from his apron with which he began dabbing at the back of the man's neck. The man turned this time so violently I was sure he would kill Daddy. It was like David and Goliath that I had been studying in Sunday school, and I knew for certain that Daddy did not have a slingshot. The boy and I were mortified.

Daddy raised his towel in surrender, and then he and his towel turned to me. He began dabbing at me, at my leg wet with beer, my arm. It tickled, and I laughed, and Daddy laughed with me in between repeating, "Sweetheart, if I take you home smelling like beer, Mama really will kill me. She will kill Daddy for sure."

And then Daddy stopped dabbing, and we both watched as a black man emerged from the dugout.

"You know who that is?"

"That's Hank Aaron," I said, too awed to even smile.

"Well how in the world do you know that?"

"Mama told me," I said, still watching Hank Aaron, and Daddy threw his head back and laughed so loud as to almost drown out the announcer.

"Mama told you? Well who in the world told Mama?"

"You did, Daddy."

By now the boy had inched his way around to watch us without being noticed by his father, and I have some vague recollection of sadly letting my eyes meet his and wishing I could share Daddy with him just for the ballgame, wishing that he could crawl over the seat and sit with us.

"Did she tell you that?" Daddy asked as Hank Aaron approached the plate.

"Yes, Daddy. She said you taught her everything about baseball. Now we have to watch Hank Aaron."

"Yes, we do," he agreed, and then he turned from me to watch Hank Aaron take the first pitch.

But I did not watch Hank Aaron. I did not need to see him hit homerun number 468 today. I could see him hit homerun number 469 tomorrow. There would be plenty of times to watch Hank Aaron on TV and to listen to Milo Hamilton announce his at-bats on the radio as Mama and I did each evening just as soon as we'd said our prayers.

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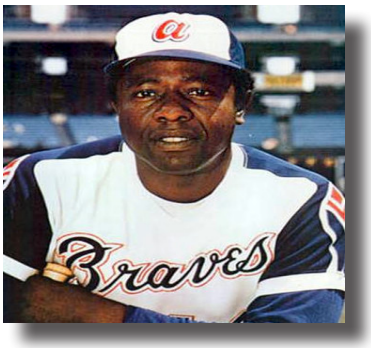

Hank Aaron, 1974

watched Daddy. I watched the side of his face, a face that I'd stood on the side of the bathtub so many mornings to see be revealed from beneath white shaving cream as carefully he'd pulled a razor across it, a face that had smiled back at me all those mornings in the mirror's steamed reflection until one morning it didn't anymore, a face now creased deep with a smile as he waits to see if Hank Aaron will hit this next pitch out of the park.

"Next . . . "

I turned from the plexiglass shadowbox. It was just me now, and an Avondale Estates, Georgia post office worker waiting patiently for me to return to the present moment.

"I just need to mail this," I said, handing her my envelope. "And some stamps. A sheet of those Hank Aaron stamps, please."

Before she could return from her stamp drawer, I changed my mind. "Two," I said. "I'm sorry. I'd like two sheets of the Hank Aaron stamps."

She was a young black woman, me an aging white woman. She had never gone to sleep on a hot summer night to staticky A.M. radio and the sound of the thick, solid crack of Hank Aaron's bat as he launched another baseball out of the park. She had heard neither the wild cheers nor the discernable racists boos. She could not know how a number, the almost daily countdown to it on the T.V. and the radio — the countdown to number 715 — could pause arguments between children and parents over bathtimes and time-to-come-in-from-outside times and time-to-do-your-homework times — how the countdown to number 715 could pause the very idea of a war in Vietnam and the assignation of a preacher and a president, how the countdown to the number 715 could shepherd a fatherless kid through a lonely childhood, divert a kid's mind from things lost to things hoped for.

The woman, still patient, waited before returning with my sheets of Hank Aaron stamps, waiting, I guess to see if I was all finished changing my mind.

I made my decision against the sound of a 50-year-old memory. It is April 8, 1974, and I am 13 years old. Milo Hamilton's voice is gentle in the darkness of Mom's bedroom as I am passing in the hall. It is after nine o'clock. Mom works hard and is already in bed.

We don't listen to the games together anymore. At 13, I think I am too old for that, practically grown really, and besides Mom and I argue more than we used to now that I wear make-up and have boyfriends.

"He's sitting on 714," Hamilton says. I pause. This could be it.

"Here's the pitch by Downing. Swinging."

As if the whole world is listening, as if that baseball has waited its whole life for this moment, you feel it ripping like a missile through the sky . . .

"There's a drive into left center field . . ." tearing the outfield sky wide open as it keeps on going . . .

"That ball is gonna be . . . outta here!"

Against the deafening cheers and applause, Mom claps one solid, definitive clap. And then my dear mom who never utters a mean-spirited word against anyone, says to the Dodgers and to anyone else I suppose who had ever second-guessed Hank Aaron, "You take that, you rascals!"

The nice lady at the post office is still holding up my two sheets of stamps, still waiting for my final decision.

"Three. Maybe we better make it three sheets. For now."

Nancy Luana grew up in Decatur, Georgia, where she lives today and where many of her essays, like this one, are set. She is a graduate of the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Writing at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. Her writing has appeared in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and the *Appalachian Review*. When she is not working or writing, she is actively planning her escape from the big city. She is studying sailing and hopes one day to be writing from her boat on the Georgia coast. Her cat, Charlie Wilkes, is reportedly not onboard with these plans.