The Given Day

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Published by Black Swan,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

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The

GIVEN DAY

BABE RUTH *in* OHIO

PROLOGUE

Due to travel restrictions placed on major league baseball by the War Department, the World Series of 1918 was played in September and split into two home stands. The Chicago Cubs hosted the first three games, with the final four to be held in Boston. On September 7, after the Cubs dropped game three, the two teams boarded a Michigan Central train together to embark on the twenty-seven-hour trip, and Babe Ruth got drunk and started stealing hats.

They'd had to pour him onto the train in the first place. After the game, he'd gone to a house a few blocks east of Wabash where a man could find a game of cards, a steady supply of liquor, and a woman or two, and if Stuffy McInnis hadn't known where to look for him, he would have missed the trip home.

As it was, he puked off the rear of the caboose as the train chugged out of Central Station at a little after eight in the evening and wound its way past the stockyards. The air was woolen with smoke and the stench of butchered cattle, and Ruth was damned if he could find a star in the black sky. He took a pull from his flask and rinsed the vomit from his mouth with a gargle of rye and spit it over the iron rail and watched the spangle of Chicago's skyline rise before him as he slid away from it. As he often did when he left a place and his body was leaden with booze, he felt fat and orphaned.

He drank some more rye. At twenty-three, he was finally

becoming one of the more feared hitters in the league. In a year when home runs in the American League had totaled ninety-six, Ruth had accounted for eleven. Damn near 12 percent. Even if someone took into account the three-week slump he'd suffered in June, pitchers had started to treat him with respect. Opposing hitters, too, because Ruth had pitched the Sox to thirteen wins that season. He'd also started fifty-nine games in left and thirteen at first.

Couldn't hit lefties, though. That was the knock on him. Even when every roster had been stripped to its shells by the players who'd enlisted in the war, Ruth had a weakness that opposing managers had begun to exploit.

Fuck 'em.

He said it to the wind and took another hit from his flask, a gift from Harry Frazee, the team owner. Ruth had left the team in July. Went to play for the Chester Shipyards team in Pennsylvania because Coach Barrow valued Ruth's pitching arm far more than his bat, and Ruth was tired of pitching. You threw a strikeout, you got applause. You hit a home run, you got mass eruption. Problem was, the Chester Shipyards preferred his pitching, too. When Frazee threatened them with a lawsuit, Chester Shipyards shipped Ruth back.

Frazee had met the train and escorted Ruth to the backseat of his Rauch & Lang Electric Opera Coupe. It was maroon with black trim and Ruth was always amazed by how you could see your reflection in the steel no matter the weather or time of day. He asked Frazee what it cost, a buggy like this, and Frazee idly fondled the gray upholstery as his driver pulled onto Atlantic Avenue. "More than you, Mr. Ruth," he said and handed Ruth the flask.

The inscription etched into the pewter read:

RUTH, G. H.
CHESTER, Penna.
7/1/18–7/7/18

He fingered it now and took another swig, and the greasy odor of cows' blood mixed with the metallic smell of factory towns and warm train tracks. *I am Babe Ruth*, he wanted to shout off the train. And when I'm not drunk and alone at the back of a caboose, I am someone to be reckoned with. A cog in the wheel, yes, and you bet I know it, but a diamond-crusted cog. The cog of cogs. Someday . . .

Ruth raised his flask and toasted Harry Frazee and all the Harry Frazees of the world with a string of lewd epithets and a bright smile. Then he took a swig and it went to his eyelids and tugged them downward.

"I'm going to sleep, you old whore," Ruth whispered to the night, to the skyline, to the smell of butchered meat. To the dark midwestern fields that lay ahead. To every ashen mill town between here and Governor's Square. To the smoky starless sky.

He stumbled into the stateroom he shared with Jones, Scott, and McInnis, and when he woke at six in the morning, still fully clothed, he was in Ohio. He ate breakfast in the dining car and drank two pots of coffee and watched the smoke pour from the stacks in the foundries and steel mills that squatted in the black hills. His head ached and he added a couple of drops from his flask to his coffee cup and his head didn't ache anymore. He played canasta for a while with Everett Scott, and then the train made a long stop in Summerford, another mill town, and they stretched their legs in a field just beyond the station, and that's when he first heard of a strike.

It was Harry Hooper, the Sox team captain and right fielder, and second baseman Dave Shean talking to the Cubs' left fielder Leslie Mann and catcher Bill Killefer. McInnis said the four of them had been thick as thieves the whole trip.

" 'Bout what?" Ruth said, not really sure he cared.

"Don't know," Stuffy said. "Muffing flies for a price, you think? Tanking?"

Hooper crossed the field to them.

"We're going to strike, boys."

Stuffy McInnis said, "You're drunk."

Hooper shook his head. "They're fucking us, boys."

"Who?"

"The Commission. Who do you think? Heydler, Hermann, Johnson. Them."

Stuffy McInnis sprinkled tobacco into a slip of rolling paper and gave the paper a delicate lick as he twisted the ends. "How so?"

Stuffy lit his cigarette and Ruth took a sip from his flask and looked across the field at a small fringe of trees under the blue sky.

"They changed the gate distribution of the Series. The percentage of receipts. They did it last winter, but they didn't tell us till now."

"Wait," McInnis said. "We get sixty percent of the first four gates."

Harry Hooper shook his head and Ruth could feel his attention begin to wander. He noticed telegraph lines stretched at the edge of the field and he wondered if you could hear them hum if you got close enough. Gate receipts, distribution. Ruth wanted another plate of eggs, some more bacon.

Harry said, "We *used to* get sixty percent. Now we get fifty-five. Attendance is down. The war, you know. And it's our patriotic duty to take five percent less."

McInnis shrugged. "Then it's our—"

"Then we forfeit forty percent of that to Cleveland, Washington, and Chicago."

"For what?" Stuffy said. "Kicking their asses to second, third, and fourth?"

"Then, then another ten percent to war charities. You seeing this now?"

Stuffy scowled. He looked ready to kick someone, someone small he could really get his leg into.

Babe threw his hat in the air and caught it behind his back.

He picked up a rock and threw it at the sky. He threw his hat again.

"It'll all work out," he said.

Hooper looked at him. "What?"

"Whatever it is," Babe said. "We'll make it back."

Stuffy said, "How, Gidge? You tell me that? How?"

"Somehow." Babe's head was beginning to hurt again. Talk of money made his head hurt. The world made his head hurt—Bolsheviks overthrowing the Czar, the Kaiser running roughshod over Europe, anarchists tossing bombs in the streets of this very country, blowing up parades and mailboxes. People were angry, people were shouting, people were dying in trenches and marching outside factories. And it all had something to do with money. The Babe understood that much. But he hated thinking about it. He liked money, he liked it just fine, and he knew he was making plenty and he stood to make plenty more. He liked his new motor scooter, and he liked buying good cigars and staying in swell hotel rooms with heavy curtains and buying rounds for the bar. But he hated thinking about money or talking about money. He just wanted to get to Boston. He wanted to hit a ball, paint the town. Governor's Square teemed with brothels and good saloons. Winter was coming; he wanted to enjoy it while he could, before the snow came, the cold. Before he was stuck back in Sudbury with Helen and the smell of horses.

He clapped Harry on the shoulder and repeated his estimation: "Somehow it'll all be fine. You'll see."

Harry Hooper looked at his shoulder. He looked off into the field. He looked back at Ruth. Ruth smiled.

"Go be a good Babe," Harry Hooper said, "and leave the talk to the men."

Harry Hooper turned his back on him. He wore a straw boater, tilted back slightly from his forehead. Ruth hated boaters; his face was too round for them, too fleshy. They made him look like a child playing dress-up. He imagined

taking Harry's boater off his head and flinging it onto the roof of the train.

Harry walked off into the field, leading Stuffy McInnis by the elbow, his chin tilted down.

Babe picked up a rock and eyed the back of Harry Hooper's seersucker jacket, imagined a catcher's mitt there, imagined the sound of it, a sharp rock against a sharp spine. He heard another sharp sound replace the one in his head, though, a distant crack similar to the crack of a log snapping in the fireplace. He looked east to where the field ended at a small stand of trees. He could hear the train hissing softly behind him and stray voices from the players and the rustle of the field. Two engineers walked behind him, talking about a busted flange, how it was going to take two hours, maybe three, to fix, and Ruth thought, Two hours in this shithole? and then he heard it again—a dry distant crack, and he knew that on the other side of those trees someone was playing baseball.

He crossed the field alone and unnoticed and he heard the sounds of the ball game grow closer—the singsong catcalls, the rough scuff of feet chasing down a ball in the grass, the wet-slap thump of a ball sent to its death in an outfielder's glove. He went through the trees and removed his coat in the heat, and when he stepped out of the grove they were changing sides, men running in toward a patch of dirt along the first base line while another group ran out from a patch by third.

Colored men.

He stood where he was and nodded at the center fielder trotting out to take his spot a few yards from him, and the center fielder gave him a curt nod back and then appeared to scan the trees to see if they planned on giving birth to any more white men today. Then he turned his back to Babe and bent at the waist and placed his hand and glove on his knees. He was a big buck, as broad-shouldered as the Babe, though not as heavy in the middle, or (Babe had to admit) in the ass.

The pitcher didn't waste any time. He barely had a windup, just long goddamn arms, and he swung the right one like he was unleashing a rock from a slingshot meant to travel an ocean, and Babe could tell even from here that the ball crossed the plate on fire. The batter took a nice clean cut and still missed it by half a foot.

Hit the next one, though, hit it solid, with a crack so loud it could have only come from a busted bat, and the ball soared straight at him and then went lazy in the blue sky, like a duck deciding to swim the backstroke, and the center fielder shifted one foot and opened his glove and the ball fell, as if relieved, right into the heart of the leather.

Ruth's vision had never been tested. He wouldn't allow it. Ever since he was a boy, he could read street signs, even those painted on the corners of buildings, from distances far greater than anyone else. He could see the texture of the feathers on a hawk a hundred yards above him, in hunt, streaking like a bullet. Balls looked fat to him and moved slow. When he pitched, the catcher's mitt looked like a hotel pillow.

So he could tell even from this distance that the batter who came up next had a fucked-up face. A small guy, rail thin, but definitely something on his face, red welts or scar tissue against toffee brown skin. He was all energy in the box, bouncing on his feet and his haunches, a whippet standing over the plate, trying to keep from busting out of his skin. And when he connected with the ball after two strikes, Ruth knew this nigra was going to fly, but even he wasn't prepared for how fast.

The ball hadn't finished arcing toward the right fielder's feet (Ruth knew he'd miss it before he did) and the whippet was already rounding first. When the ball hit the grass, the right fielder bare-handed it and didn't so much as stutter-step before he planted and let her loose, that ball leaving his hand like he'd caught it sleeping with his daughter, and no time to blink before it hit the second baseman's glove. But the whippet, he was already standing on second. Standing tall.

Never slid, never dove. Waltzed on in there like he was picking up the morning paper, stood looking back out to center field until Ruth realized he was looking at him. So Ruth tipped his hat, and the boy flashed him a grim, cocky smile.

Ruth decided to keep his eyes on this boy, knowing whatever he was going to do next, it would have the feel of something special.

The man on second had played for the Wrightville Mudhawks. His name was Luther Laurence, and he'd been cut loose from the Mudhawks in June, after he got into a fight with Jefferson Reese, the team manager and first baseman, big-toothed, smiley Tom who acted like a perfumed poodle around white folks and badmouthed his own people in the house where he worked just outside Columbus. Luther heard the specifics one night from this girl he ran around with some, fine young woman named Lila, who worked in that same house with Jefferson Reese. Lila told him Reese was pouring soup from the tureen in the dining room one night, the white folks going on and on about uppity niggers in Chicago, the way they walked the streets so bold, didn't even drop their eyes when a white woman passed. Old Reese, he piped in with, "Lawse, it's a terrible shame. Yes, suh, the Chicago colored ain't no more'n a chimpanzee swinging from the vine. No time for churching. Want to drink hisself outta Friday, poker hisself out of Saturday, and love some other man's woman straight through Sunday."

"He said that?" Luther asked Lila in the bathtub of the Dixon Hotel, Coloreds Only. He got some froth going in the water, swept the suds up over Lila's small hard breasts, loving the look of them bubbles on her flesh, flesh the color of unpolished gold.

"Said a lot worse," Lila told him. "Don't you go 'fronting that man now, though, baby. He a cruel one."

When Luther confronted him anyway in the dugout at Inkwell Field, Reese stopped smiling right quick and got this

look in his eyes—a hard, ancient look that spoke of not being far enough removed from sun-torture in the fields—that made Luther think, *Uh oh*, but by then, Reese was on him, his fists like the butt end of a bat on Luther's face. Luther tried to give as good as he got, but Jefferson Reese, more than twice his age and ten years a house nigger, had some fury in him gone so deep that when it finally let go it came out all the hotter and harder for having been kept down in the darkness for so long. He beat Luther into the ground, beat him fast and mean, beat him till the blood, mixed with the dirt and chalk and dust of the field, came off him in strings.

His friend Aeneus James said to Luther while he was in the charity ward of St. John's, "Shit, boy, fast as you are, whyn't you just run when you see that crazy old man get that look in his eye?"

Luther'd had a long summer to consider that question, and he still didn't have an answer. Fast as he was, and he'd never met a man faster, he wondered if he was just heartsick of running.

But now, watching the fat man who reminded him of Babe Ruth watching him from the trees, Luther found himself thinking, You think you seen some running, white man? You ain't. 'Bout to see some now, though. Tell your grandkids.

And he took off from second just as Sticky Joe Beam came out of that octopus throwing motion of his, had a hair of a moment to see the white man's eyes bulge out big as his belly, and Luther's feet moved so fast the ground ran under him more than he ran over it. He could actually feel it moving like a river in early spring, and he pictured Tyrell Hawke standing at third, twitching because he'd laid out all night drinking, and Luther was counting on that because he wasn't just settling for third today, no sir, thinking that's right, you best believe baseball is a game of speed and I'm the speediest son of a bitch any ya'll ever see, and when he raised his head, the first thing he saw was Tyrell's glove right beside his ear. The next thing he saw, just to his left, was the ball, a shooting star

gone sideways and pouring smoke. Luther shouted "Boo!" and it came out sharp and high and, yep, Tyrell's glove jerked up three inches. Luther ducked, and that ball sizzled under Tyrell's glove and kissed the hairs on the back of Luther's neck, hot as the razor in Moby's Barbershop on Meridian Avenue, and he hit the third base bag with the tiptoes of his right foot and came barreling up the line, the ground shooting so fast under his feet he felt like he might just run out of it, go off the edge of a cliff, right off the edge of the world maybe. He could hear the catcher, Ransom Boynton, shouting for the ball, shouting, "Hea' now! Hea' now!" He looked up, saw Ransom a few yards ahead, saw that ball coming in his eyes, in the tightening of his kneecaps, and Luther took a gulp of air the size of an ice block and turned his calves into springs and his feet into pistol hammers. He hit Ransom so hard he barely felt him, just went right over him and saw the ball slap into the wooden fence behind home at the exact moment his foot hit the plate, the two sounds—one hard and clean, the other scuffed and dusty—wrapping around each other. And he thought: Faster than any of y'all even *dream* of being.

He came to a stop against the chests of his teammates. In their pawing and hooting, he turned around to see the look on the fat white man's face, but he wasn't at the tree line anymore. No, he was almost at second base, running across the field *toward* Luther, little baby's face all jiggly and smiling and his eyes spinning in their sockets like he'd just turned five and someone had told him he was getting a pony and he couldn't do nothing to control his body, had to just shake and jump and run for the happiness of it.

And Luther got a real look at that face and thought: No.

But then Ransom Boynton stepped up beside him and said it out loud:

"Ya'll ain't gonna believe this, but that there is Babe Ruth running toward us like a fat fucking freight train."

* * *

Can I play?"

No one could believe he'd said it. This was after he'd run up to Luther and lifted him off the ground, held him over his face, and said, "Boy, I seen some running in my day, but I ain't never—and I mean ever—seen anyone run like you." And then he was hugging Luther and clapping him on the back and saying, "Me oh my, what a sight!"

And it was after they'd confirmed that he was, really, Babe Ruth. He was surprised so many of them had even heard of him. But Sticky Joe had seen him once in Chicago, and Ransom had caught him in Cleveland twice, seen him pitch and play left. The rest of them had read about him in the sports pages and *Baseball Magazine*, and Ruth's eyebrows went up at that, like he couldn't quite believe there were darkies on the planet who knew how to read.

Ruth said, "So you'll be wanting some autographs?"

No one appeared too interested in that, and Ruth grew long in the mouth as everyone found reasons to look at their shoes, study the sky.

Luther thought about telling Ruth that standing here before him were some pretty great players themselves. Some bona fide legends. That man with the octopus arm? He went 32–2 last year for the Millersport King Horns of the Ohio Mill Workers League—32–2 with a 1.78 ERA. Touch that. And Andy Hughes, playing shortstop for the opposing team of the hour, this being a scratch game, man was hitting .390 for the Downtown Sugar Shacks of Grandview Heights. And, besides, only white folks liked autographs. What the hell was an autograph anyway, but some man's chicken scrawl on a scrap of paper?

Luther opened his mouth to explain this, but got one good look at Ruth's face and saw it wouldn't make no difference: man was a child. A hippo size, jiggling child with thighs so big you'd expect them to sprout branches, but a child all the same. He had the widest eyes Luther'd ever seen. Luther would remember that for years after, as he saw them change

over time in the papers, saw those eyes grow smaller and darker every time he saw a new picture. But then, in the fields of Ohio, Ruth had the eyes of a little fat boy in the school yard, full of hope and fear and desperation.

"Can I play?" He held out his St. Bernard paws. "With you-all?"

That just about busted everyone up, men bending over from the snickering, but Luther kept his face still. "Well . . ." He looked around at the rest of the men, then back at Ruth, taking his time. "Depends," he said. "You know much about the game, suh?"

That put Reggie Polk on the *ground*. Bunch of other players cackled, swiped arms. Ruth, though, he surprised Luther. Those wide eyes went small and clear as the sky, and Luther got it right away: With a bat in his hand, he was as old as any of them.

Ruth popped an unlit cigar in his mouth and loosened his tie. "Picked up a thing or two in my travels, Mr. . . . ?"

"Laurence, suh. Luther Laurence." Luther still giving him that stone face.

Ruth put an arm around him. Arm the size of Luther's bed. "What position you play, Luther?"

"Center field, suh."

"Well, boy, you don't have to worry about nothing then but tilting your head."

"Tilting my head, suh?"

"And watching my ball fly right over it."

Luther couldn't help himself; the grin blew across his face.

"And stop calling me 'suh,' would you, Luther? We're baseball players here."

Oh, it was something the first time Sticky Joe whiffed him! Three strikes, all right down the pipe like thread following the needle, the fat man never once touching cowhide.

He laughed after the last one, pointed his bat at Sticky Joe

and gave him a big nod. "But I'm learning you, boy. Learning you like I'm awake in school."

No one wanted to let him pitch, so he subbed for a player each inning in the rest of the field. Nobody minded sitting for an inning. Babe Ruth—Lord's sake. Might not want no sad little signature, but the stories would buy some drinks for a long time.

One inning he played left and Luther was over in center and Reggie Polk, who was pitching for their side, was taking his sweet time between pitches like he was apt to do, and Ruth said, "So what do you do, Luther, when you're not playing ball?"

Luther told him a bit about his job in a munitions factory outside of Columbus, how war was a terrible thing but it sure could help a man's pocket, and Ruth said, "That's the truth," though it sounded to Luther like he said it just to say it, not because he really understood, and then he asked Luther what had happened to his face.

"Cactus, Mr. Ruth."

They heard the crack of the bat and Ruth chased down a soft-fade fly ball, moving like a ballerina on his stumpy little tiptoes and throwing the ball back into second.

"Lotta cactus in Ohio? Hadn't heard that."

Luther smiled. "Actually, Mr. Ruth sir, they be called 'cacti' when you talking 'bout more'n one. And, sho', there's great fields of them all over the state. Bushels and bushels of cacti."

"And you, what, fell into one of these fields?"

"Yes, suh. Fell hard, too."

"Looks like you fell from an airplane."

Luther shook his head real slow. "Zeppelin, Mr. Ruth."

They both had a long soft laugh over that, Luther still chuckling when he raised his glove and stole Rube Gray's shot right out of the sky.

The next inning, some white men straggled out of the trees, and they recognized a few of them right off—Stuffy McInnis, no lie; Everett Scott, Lord; and then a couple of Cubs, dear

Jesus—Flack, Mann, a third guy no one knew by face, could have played for either team. They worked their way along right field, and pretty soon they were standing behind the rickety old bench along the first base line, wearing suits and ties and hats in the heat, smoking cigars, occasionally shouting to someone named "Gidge," confusing the hell out of Luther until he realized that's what they called Ruth. Next time Luther looked, he saw they'd been joined by three more—Whiteman of the Sox and Hollocher, the Cubs shortstop, and some skinny boy with a red face and a chin that stuck out like an extra flap of skin who no one recognized, and Luther didn't like that number—eight of them plus Ruth comprising a full team.

For an inning or so everything was fine and the white men kept mostly to themselves, couple of them making ape sounds and a few more calling out, "Don't miss that ball, tar baby. Coming in *hot*," or "Should've got under it more, jigaboo," but shit, Luther'd heard worse, a lot worse. He just didn't like how every time he looked over, the eight of them seemed to have moved an inch or two closer to the first base line, and pretty soon it was hard to run that way, beat out a throw with white men so close on your right you could smell their cologne.

And then between innings, one of them said it: "Why don't you let one of us have a try?"

Luther noticed Ruth looking like he was trying to find a hole to climb into.

"Whadaya say, Gidge? Think your new friends would mind if one of us played a few? Keep hearing how good these nigras are supposed to be. Run faster'n butter on the porch in July is the rumor."

The man held out his hands to Babe. He was one of the few no one recognized, must have been a bench warmer. Big hands, though, a flattened nose and axe-head shoulders, the man all hard boxy angles. Had eyes Luther'd seen before in the white poor—spent his whole life eating rage in place of

food. Developed a taste for it he wouldn't lose no matter how regular he ate for the rest of his life.

He smiled at Luther like he knew what he was thinking. "What you say, boy? Maybe let one of us fellas take a cut or two?"

Rube Gray volunteered to sit a spell and the white men elected Stuffy McInnis as their latest trade to the Southern Ohio Nigra League, haw-hawing in that donkey laugh big white men seemed to share, but Luther had to admit it was fine with him: Stuffy McInnis could *play*, boy. Luther'd been reading up on him since he'd broken in back in '09 with Philadelphia.

After the inning's final out, though, Luther came jogging in from center to find the other white men all lined up by home plate, the lead guy, Chicago's Flack, resting a bat on his shoulder.

Babe tried, at least for a moment, Luther'd give him that. He said, "Come on now, fellas, we were having us a game."

Flack gave him a big, bright smile. "Gonna have us a better game now, Ruth. See how these boys do against the best in the American and National Leagues."

"Oh, you mean, the white leagues?" Sticky Joe Beam said. "That what ya'll talking about?"

They all looked over at him.

"What'd you say, boy?"

Sticky Joe Beam was forty-two years old and looked like a slice of burnt bacon. He pursed his lips, looked down at the dirt, and then up at the line of white men in such a way that Luther figured there'd be a fight coming.

"Said let's see what you got." He stared at them. "Uh, suhs."

Luther looked over at Ruth, met his eyes, and the big baby-faced fat boy gave him a shaky smile. Luther remembered a line from the Bible his grandmother used to repeat a lot when he was growing up, about how the heart be willing but the flesh be weak.

That you, Babe? he wanted to ask. That you?

* * *