

Peewee's Guest  
By GARY GARCIA

The ball cut through the air, like a bull speeding down the streets of Pamplona. Residents dodged it as it neared the nursing station where Nurse Jones snatched it out of the air.

"PEEWEE," she called.

A few feet away, in his wheelchair sat Peewee Matthews. A gentile smile and brief glance at nurse Jones before he turned away.

Peewee had been at the VA hospital for six months. He had his good days, but they were drowned by the bad ones. He was near the end.

"You aren't to be tossing this ball around, Peewee," Nurse Jones scolded.

Peewee's conversational skills were diminished. He drifted in and out of vague descriptions, distant memories, and an ever-changing present.

"I caught that ball a few summers back. County Stadium. The Hammer. I wanted him to sign it. Never got around to it. Next thing I knew, they left for Georgia."

Nurse Jones was curious if it were truly a ball hit by the late, great Hank Aaron. Peewee cherished it like a pet. He would attempt to play catch with a few of the others in the facility, to no avail. But he always got it back. Always had it on his nightstand next to his recognitions from the Milwaukee Fire Department. All his brothers had passed on.

"You don't have any visitors come by here, Peewee. How come? Do you have any kids," Nurse Jones asked as she wheeled him to his lunch table.

"I have a guest coming today."

Nurse Jones looked at him quizzically. He had no information of any living relatives in his chart. No visitors since he was admitted.

"You sure, Peewee? I'd like to meet your visitor if I may?"

"You can. It will be a fine time. We can have sweet potato pie."

Peewee had been off hard food for sixty days. He had a feeding tube attached to his stomach. His teeth were gone.

"No pie, Peewee. It's not part of your diet."

"Just a small one. I like the smell."

Nurse Jones laughed. She supposed she'd be able to pick one up from Mr. Dye's Pies in town. She recalled a hospice patient from years ago requesting a six pack of Schlitz. He took swallows and spit it out. That was his last day.

Peewee was at his table. Recalling his days, like a poet in a town square.

"It was 1955. Willie Mays was in town. So was The Mick, Yogi, Ernie Banks, and Duke Snider. It was marvelous. None of them compared to Hammerin' Hank though. I'll never forget it."

Peewee forgot often. He forgot what time and place he was in; but he always reflected on this memory. Get him to talk baseball, County Stadium, and you'd think he could be discharged any day.

"I'll bring that pie in an hour, Peewee. I'm interested to meet your friend."

It was February 5<sup>th</sup>. The winter cold settled in for a longer stay, likely seven more weeks of winter. When Nurse Jones went out, the wind bit at her face. Hard wind, ice cold, a chill that wraps tightly onto you like a blanket.

She returned within an hour. Peewee had been down for a nap. She put the pie next to his table. She never noticed how fit he was for a gentleman of his age. His hands were long and wide. His forearms were thick. Shoulders bulky. He probably played ball in his younger days, she thought. Before he enlisted.

Snow fell outside. Nurse Jones eyed the clock. She was four hours past her end time. It was fine; the kids were at home with her husband and she was still curious about this guest Peewee was expecting. He had not come out to the dining hall for social time during the dinner service. He stayed in his room.

"How are you doing, Peewee? Did your visitor come through yet?"

"Not yet, but soon," he replied, confidence in his voice.

"Okay then Peewee. I am leaving soon, which is a shame, I wanted to meet your friend," Nurse Jones admitted. Her confidence in his belief was waning.

She tucked Peewee in and turned up his tv. As she exited the room, she thought she heard Peewee's reply, "You've met him."

"What's that, Peewee," she asked. He was already snoring.

The next morning Nurse Jones arrived an hour later than expected. The roads were horrendous. Multiple accidents. The storm pounded the city with snow, leaving people stranded, power outages, and the buses were at a standstill. Nobody was able to come into the hospital as planned. The third shift staff was exhausted.

Nurse Jones reviewed the night notes and noticed a piece written by the evening staff.

“Unusual sounds. Booming laughter, smacking of thick leather, bubblegum popping coming from room 44A. Upon inspection, resident was sleeping. No lights on.”

She walked to room 44A where Peewee Matthews sat in his chair, a smile extending from ear to ear.

“How are things today, Peewee?”

“Thank you for the pie. Ate the whole thing, mmm-mmm! He enjoyed it,” Peewee beamed.

“He? You gave the pie to someone,” Nurse Jones asked, surprised, but certain he gave it to the night staff.

“My guest. I knew he’d come. He told me he would, told me in a dream.”

Nurse Jones was confused, a bit shocked at Peewee’s confidence in his story. The amount of snow, the lack of any close family or friends, for him to have a guest was too far-fetched.

“Who came to you, Peewee?”

He fell asleep. She attempted to wake him and noticed his baseball, dirty with old pine tar. In the middle was an inscription that had not been there before. It was a large H, and the double A in the last name, the first one separate from all the other letters.

“Hank Aaron,” she said, as she fought off a shiver. The magic of it all, elicited a smile.