

It's Opening Day

by W.M. Akers



The weather was growing crisper. It was getting dark later, and Matthew had stopped wearing a coat to school. Spring was coming, but that didn't matter to him. What was really important was it was April. April meant baseball. April meant the end of the long, cold off-season. April meant opening day.

The local team was called the Crickets. It wasn't a very tough name for a baseball team, but that was okay. The Crickets weren't a Major League team, with a 50,000 seat stadium, expensive tickets, and big-name players. They were a minor league team, and that suited Matthew just fine. The stadium was small, the tickets were cheap, and the players weren't famous—at least not right now. Some were young players, only seven or eight years older than Matthew, with dreams of playing in the big leagues, and the talent to make it happen. Other players were older, their time in the big leagues finished, but they stuck around the Crickets because they weren't ready yet to let go of the game that had defined them ever since childhood.

And then there were players like Billie Carney, the shortstop. He had manned the space between second and third base for as long as Matthew could remember. Each year he was one

of the two best players on the team, but he never did quite well enough to get called up to the majors. Each opening day, Matthew was shocked to see that Billie was still playing for the Crickets.

"Jeez, Dad!" he would say. "I can't believe Billie didn't get called up to the big leagues this year."

"You think he played pretty well last season?" his father would ask.

"Are you kidding?!" Matthew's face turned purple whenever anybody questioned Billie Carney. "He hit twenty-seven home runs! He had ninety-eight RBIs! He walked more than anybody else on the team!"

Matthew didn't need a baseball card to tell him Billie's statistics. He knew them by heart, from studying the sports page every morning at breakfast, to see how Billie and the other Crickets had played the night before. Over the winter, he committed all of their numbers to memory, and at night he would recite them to himself until he fell asleep.

"How was his fielding?" Matthew's father would ask, teasing him. "I bet he made a lot of errors."

"Dad-are you crazy? He moves like a spider out there. Nobody turns a double play faster than Billie. Nobody's better at tagging runners out. Last season, he didn't make an error for..." Matthew thought for a moment, doing the math in his head. "Forty-seven games!"

"That's not bad."

"Then how come he didn't get called up to the majors?"

"I don't know."

"It's not fair. He's better than most of the guys you see playing on TV."

"It's good news for us, right? Now we get to watch him play live for another season."

"I'm telling you, Dad. He's the best."

Matthew and his father had gone to see the Crickets play every opening day since Matthew was born. Their family celebrated a lot of holidays-Thanksgiving, Halloween, the Fourth of July, not to mention Matthew's and his sister's birthdays-but as far as he was concerned, opening day was the best one. It was usually on a weekday, and his dad always let him skip school to go.

"There are some things you can only learn in school," he told Matthew once, "and there are some things you can only learn at the ballpark."

Each year, Matthew and his dad wore Crickets jerseys and Crickets hats, and they always got to the ballpark early enough to watch the hitters take batting practice. County Stadium was an old ballpark, almost as old as Matthew's dad himself, and it had started to get a little shabby by the time Matthew started going to games. The scoreboard was rusty; the speakers were screechy, and the chairs weren't as comfortable as they could have been. But on a sunny day, Matthew thought, it was the most beautiful stadium in the world. Last year was perfect. The sun was bright, the sky was clear, and there was just enough of a breeze to remind him that summer wasn't quite here yet. The Crickets won 4-2, Matthew ate two hot dogs and a plastic baseball helmet full of ice cream, and Billie Carney bowed to the fans when he ran out onto the field. They went to a lot of games the rest of the summer, but opening day-as always-was his favorite. On the coldest days of winter, when wind cut through Matthew's parka and his fingers turned as pink as Vienna sausages, Matthew remembered opening day, and the outfield grass that was as green and perfect as the Emerald City in the Wizard of Oz.

"I've got bad news," said Matthew's father, two days before the season started. "I can't go to opening day this year."

"Dad," said Matthew. "That is a dumb joke."

"I'm not kidding. Your sister's play is Sunday afternoon."

"Her play is happening for three days. We're watching it at school on Monday. Why don't you just come then?"

"I've got to work, kid. I'm really sorry."

Matthew's father looked sad, but Matthew did not. He did not cry; he did not scream; he did not yell at his father about breaking promises. One of the things that he could only learn at the ballpark is that there's no crying in baseball, so Matthew didn't cry. But he wanted to.

"Why don't we go to the game Monday night?" his father asked.

Matthew wanted to explain that night games were no good, that he had been waiting all winter for blue skies and green grass and sunshine. Night games were fine in the middle of the summer, when it was too hot to sit out in the sun, but it was April. He didn't want to go to County Stadium in his parka, but he didn't know how to put it into words.

"I want to go to opening day," he said, finally.

"I've got an idea," said his dad. "It's kind of crazy but...do you want to go by yourself?"

"What?!"

"You're old enough now. When I was your age I'd go to games alone all the time. I know it's not what we usually do, but it could be fun."

"Go to the game...alone?" asked Matthew. He had to admit: it was better than not going at all.

The sky was blue, the grass was green, and Matthew wore his Crickets jersey and Crickets hat. His seat was right where he liked-along the first base line, behind the home dugout-and all his favorite players were in the lineup, with Billie Carney batting first. He took out his scorecard and carefully wrote their names down. During the game, he would make notes of what happened -who got a double, who struck out, who had the big home run. It was an old-fashioned thing to do, but Matthew liked it, because it helped keep him focused on the game. His father had taught him how to keep score.

It was a perfect day for baseball. So why did Matthew feel so gloomy?

During the second and fifth innings, Matthew bought hot dogs from the hot dog vendor. His dad had given him \$20 to spend, and Matthew was going to spend all of it. He wanted to get a plastic baseball helmet full of ice cream, but he had to go to the concessions stand for that, and if he stopped watching the game, he wouldn't be able to write down what happened on his scorecard. If it were later in the season, this wouldn't worry him so much, but today was opening day, and the scorecard-everything-had to be perfect.

He decided to skip the seventh inning stretch. This was a big sacrifice, because singing "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" was one of the best parts of going to see the Crickets. The mascot-a big green cricket in a foam costume-would run out onto the field and dance around and throw t-shirts. But Matthew already had plenty of Crickets t-shirts. What he didn't have was ice cream.

He waited in line, and paid the last of his money for a plastic baseball helmet full of mint chocolate chip. When he got back to his seat, the sun had gone away. Matthew balanced his ice cream in the cup holder in front of him, and frowned at his scorecard. In the space for "Weather" he had written "Sunny." He changed it to "Sunny/Clouds." He put his scorecard aside and focused on his ice cream, which was beginning to melt. As he ate it, he shivered.

The game was over. The Crickets had won, 6-1. A blowout, but not a very exciting one. According to his scorecard, Billie Carney had a single and a walk, but no runs batted in-a good day, but not a great one. As always, Billie had bowed to the people when he ran out onto the field, and Matthew bowed back. When he hit his single, with a sound like a judge's gavel, Matthew cheered louder than he had all day. He fixed the image in his mind: Billie Carney, hustling down the first base line, right in front of his eyes. He would tell his father about it when he got home, and he would remember it come winter.

Matthew's dad had told him to call when the game was over and he would come pick him up, but now, standing outside the stadium, he didn't want to leave. He sat on a bench outside the stadium, making sure his scorecard was perfect. He erased wobbly lines and redrew them, straight, bold and firm. Flawed letters—a wobbly K, a slouching B—he went over until they looked like they had been put there by a computer. By the time he was finished, nobody could have done a better job.

Matthew looked up, and saw the parking lot was empty. Behind him, the stadium was closed—and with it, the only pay phone. How would his dad know to come pick him up? The sun was long gone now, and Matthew began to wish he had brought his parka. It was windy in the County Stadium parking lot.

He walked around the ballpark, hoping to find another phone, but all he found was cracked concrete and overgrown grass. On the other side from the outfield wall, he saw a battered old baseball—a forgotten home run from the season before. He picked this up and put it in his pocket. A boy can never have too many baseballs. Holding it as he picked his way across the gravel, he felt less afraid. As he completed the loop around the stadium, he heard a door close behind him.

"Hey kid," said a voice, and Matthew's heart leapt. It was Billie Carney. Out of uniform, he looked bigger than he did on the field, like he could crush a rock into dust with one hand. He was smiling, just like he had when he bowed to the crowd that afternoon. "You here by yourself?"

"Kinda," said Matthew. "My dad's supposed to pick me up, but I don't have a way to call him."

Silently, Billie took his cellphone out of his pocket and handed it over. Matthew dialed his father's number, and told him to meet him by the main entrance. When he handed the phone back to Billie, he said thanks, quietly.

"No problem," said Billie. "You want some company while you wait?"

"Sure," said Matthew, as they walked back to his bench.

"Enjoy the game today?"

"It was pretty good," said Matthew. "That was a nice at-bat you had in the sixth, when you drew the walk."

"Thanks. It must have been seven, eight pitches."

"It was nine," said Matthew. "I was counting."

"Glad to know somebody's paying attention. That a baseball in your pocket?"

"I found it on the other side of the center field fence."

"They don't clean back there as much as they should. Want me to sign it?"

Matthew handed Billie the ball, his heart in his chest. As Billie traced his wide, looping signature across the grimy yellow leather, Matthew asked the question that had been bothering him all day.

"Do you ever get sick of playing here?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You're good enough to play in the majors. I know it. You know it. The whole crowd knows it. You hit twenty-seven home runs last year! You had ninety-eight RBIs! You walked more than anybody else on the team! Doesn't it drive you crazy to be stuck down here, in this crummy old ballpark, playing for nobody?"

For a moment, Billie looked hurt. Then a smile broke out across his face, and he started laughing. "Are you nuts, kid?" he asked. "I get to play baseball for a living! It's not much money, but it's enough. And if I can keep the people entertained here, who cares about the big leagues?"

"Yeah?"

"It's opening day. We're at the ballpark. What have we got to complain about?"

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What does Matthew like to do every April?
- A. go for a bike ride in the sunshine and blue skies
 - B. eat ice cream and watch a movie at home
 - C. see the Crickets play on opening day
 - D. see his sister perform in a school play

2. What is the climax of the action in this story?
- A. Matthew eats ice cream at the ballpark.
 - B. Matthew's father says that he cannot go to opening day.
 - C. Matthew commits Billie Carney's statistics to memory.
 - D. Matthew talks to Billie Carney.

3. Matthew is excited to meet Billie Carney.

What evidence from the story supports this statement?

- A. "During the second and fifth innings, Matthew bought hot dogs from the hot dog vendor."
 - B. "Each opening day, Matthew was shocked to see that Billie was still playing for the Crickets."
 - C. "One of the things that he could only learn at the ballpark is that there's no crying in baseball, so Matthew didn't cry."
 - D. "'Hey kid,' said a voice, and Matthew's heart leapt. It was Billie Carney."
4. Based on what Billie says, how does he feel about playing baseball for the Crickets?
- A. Billie is happy about playing baseball for the Crickets.
 - B. Billie is tired of playing baseball for the Crickets.
 - C. Billie is worried about playing baseball for the Crickets.
 - D. Billie does not care much about playing baseball for the Crickets.

5. What is a theme of this story?

- A. the pleasures of winter
- B. the pleasures of baseball
- C. the damage that war can cause
- D. the damage that nature can cause

6. Read the following sentence: "Doesn't it drive you crazy to be stuck down here, in this crummy old ballpark, **playing for nobody**?"

What does the phrase **playing for nobody** mean in the sentence above?

- A. not caring about how well a baseball team plays
- B. not playing in a baseball game on opening day
- C. not playing for very many people or anyone important
- D. playing in a ballpark that does not have any seats

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Billie looks hurt _____ Matthew asks him whether playing in a crummy old ballpark drives him crazy.

- A. after
- B. before
- C. for instance
- D. however

8. For Matthew, what is the best holiday of the year?

9. When Matthew asks Billie whether playing for nobody in a crummy old ballpark drives him crazy, what does Billie say?

10. What do Matthew and Billie have in common? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.