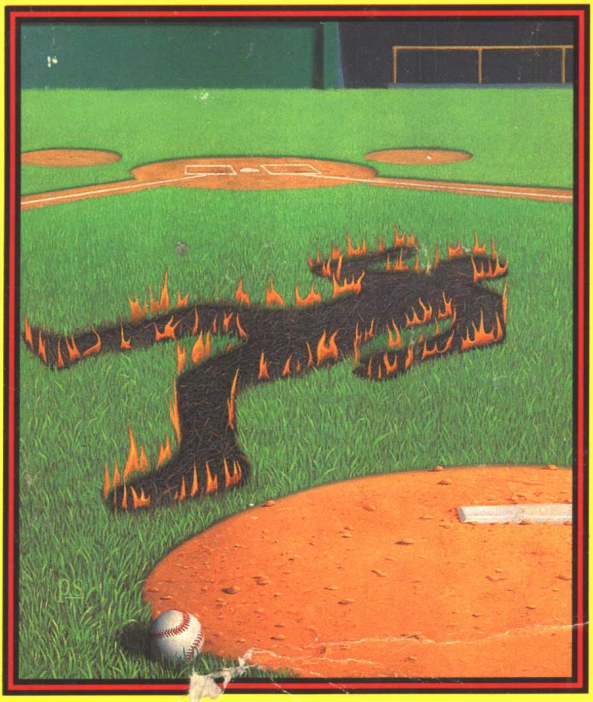
A DUFFY HOUSE MYSTERY

Motown's team is really on fire...

TIGERS BURNING



ABBE EVERS

TIGERS BURNING

A DUFFY HOUSE MYSTERY

CRABBE EVERS

AVON BOOKS NEW YORK

AVON BOOKS
A division of
The Hearst Corporation
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10019

Published by arrangement with the author
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-43125
ISBN: 0-380-71866-9

Published in hardcover by William Morrow and Company, Inc.; for information address Permissions Department, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019.

First Avon Books Printing: March 1995

AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

RA 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the Detroit Tigers Baseball Club and spokesman Greg Shea for their kind cooperation. We are also indebted to Monica Vitlar for her hospitality, pith, and an unforgettable midsummer night's ride down Michigan Avenue in her convertible.

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

—WILLIAM BLAKE, "The Tiger"

"De-troit now, they had the Wolves, the De-troit Wolves," Biz said. "And the Stars, 'cept they weren't around long 'cuz the money run out."

I had snuck up on Henry "Biz" Wagemaker's sentry post in the lobby of the overpriced Outer Drive sardine can that passes for my residence. Wagemaker, formerly of the Chicago American Giants of the Negro American League, is a cotton-haired dodger who ran with Satchel Paige and called Jackie Robinson "rook." He serves as my joint's bow-tied doorman, traffic cop, and social historian. He and a panoramic fifteenth-story view of the Sheffield Avenue entrance to Wrigley Field had sold me on the place.

"Wasn't no *De*-troit colored team ever got goin' good, Mr. House," Biz went on. "Not like the American Giants here. Good job town like *De*-troit. Lotta colored up there. Cool Papa played for the Wolves, I think he did. And Pete Hill. Pete was up there. He was with me on the American Giants too. Lotta people don't know that."

You could prime Biz's pump with an eye dropper. Get him going on the minutiae of the Negro leagues, which have been gone forty years but which exist like crystal in Biz's mind. Biz was an outfielder. Little guy, even littler

now, likened himself to Jimmie Crutchfield, the mite from Moberly who played for those good Pittsburgh Crawford teams. If you lingered too long, Biz would go into all that too, then recite some poetry of David Malarcher, his fine Louisiana-born American Giant manager. He had a portfolio, Biz did.

"Why you goin' to *De*-troit, Mr. House?" he said as my cab pulled up in front.

"See an old ballpark and talk to a fellow who lost his job," I said.

"Don't have to leave town for that," he said.

It had been early A.M. when the call came in. The light was low, a table lamp with a green glass shade, but enough to illuminate the prose. I was rereading Bill Veeck's horse-racing book, a memoir he fragrantly titled *Thirty Tons a Day*. A very good recording of Mahler's Symphony Number Two was Sturm und Drang-ing on the stereo. It was music a tone heavy perhaps for Veeck, a man who once stocked his Seeburg phonograph with ten different cuts of Bunny Berigan's "I Can't Get Started with You" when he was courting his second bride.

I was sipping a serviceable brandy, and the windows were shimmying with late October gusts. It was the kind of chill wind that makes most people pull up the comforter and dream winter dreams. My lids, however, were light. Sleep at my age is an afterthought, especially when the reading is rich. Wrote Veeck: "I always had a lively interest—precocious, my daddy thought—in chicanery, the uses and abuses of power, the flashing arc of the knife into the underbelly, and the dull thump of a body in the alley." And after that line, I didn't put the book down until the phone rang.

"Duffy," the voice said, "I'm out."

Only three words, but offered with timbre and precision. It took but a moment to know they came from Jimmy Casey, a man who had made a career out of chatter. I muted the record player.

"They canned me—I'm through," Casey said. "It'll

break tomorrow morning. Thirty-five years, and I'm out the door like a pitcher with a dead arm."

"Shit, Jimmy," I said. Not too eloquent, but from the heart.

A silence draped the line. I could hear Casey's breathing, then a swallow of something probably harder than I was nursing. It was one A.M. my time, which made it two in Detroit, where Casey was calling from. I could see the spot in my mind: the wet bar in his Dearborn basement, a room festooned with mahogany plaques and black-and-white photos and quaint mementos from his three and a half decades as the voice of the Detroit Tigers. And Jimmy himself, a little guy with pipes, the Tigers' radio and TV play-by-play guy, a tenor-voiced natural, who was as much a part of the Detroit franchise as the famous Gothic *D* on the uniform. Was.

"I'd take the shitcan if I deserved it," Casey said, his words slowed some by the alcohol. "If I blew calls . . . or couldn't tell a curve from a slider. . . . "

I could feel the chafe. Casey was my peer, sixty-five years old, and he'd never lost a job in his life. In broadcasting, a business where they measure you by the moisture your presence puts in a viewer's palm, that's saying something. He'd perched himself in the WJR booth and peppered Tiger baseball out to Kalamazoo, Petoskey, and all points within earshot of the Great Lakes like a fog-cutting clarion.

"Worse, if the fans were just sick of listenin' to me," he went on. "But they love me. Got the numbers to show it. Goddammit, I'm as good as I ever was, Duffy. *Better* than I ever was."

The light over my shoulder flickered, and I could hear the refrigerator kick on. All was still except for the anguished throb in a friend's chest.

"The bastards settle with you?" I offered.

"I don't wanna settle," he said. "I don't want a package. I don't want a sweetheart annuity and a fairway condo in Sarasota. That's what *they* want."

He was bitter and plaintive all in the same beaker, like

Canadian whiskey and 7-Up, his last-call libation.

"You gotta help me, Duffy," he said.

"How do you mean, Jimmy, how in hell—?"

"Listen, Duffy," he said, "this is me, not the booze talking. They canned me because of what I *know*, not because I'm washed up. The ballpark, Duffy. I now what they're doing. I know whose pockets they've stuffed and the phony engineering study—"

"Hold it. Slow down, Jimmy," I said, even though I knew what he was talking about. The current Tiger owner wanted to abandon Tiger Stadium. It was a familiar flap in yet another town. Except that Jimmy sounded like an assassination nut. Conspiracies. Grassy knolls, all that celluloid intrigue. But he beat me to it.

"Think it's horseshit, don't you?" he said. "Drunk talk. Stuff that goes thin in the light of day. . . ."

My silence agreed.

"I'm sober as a judge, Duffy. Pissed off, sure. If I had a bat in my hands, I'd measure somebody," he said. "But I'm not wrong, dammit. What's wrong is over there in the front office. They took me out because I called them on it. Called them frauds and thieves. And they nicked me."

"You wouldn't be the first, Jimmy," I said.

He snorted something unintelligible at that.

"And you didn't ring me at two A.M. for sympathy."

"That's right, Duf," he said. He leaned into the phone like a play-by-play announcer calling a ninth-inning rally. "You got an audience, Duffy. People who count still read you. That piece you did when Jack Remsen was killed in L.A. ran in every paper in the land—"

"Jack was *murdered*, for godsakes, Jimmy! The story wrote itself."

"No, it didn't. You know it didn't," he said. "You wrote it. *You* got inside Jack like nobody else. *You* made us ache for him. That story, Duffy, it counted."

I suddenly felt very tired. Sportswriters are not in the business of deliverance. We don't save souls. I can't remember when we even saved someone's job.

"Your guys will rally around you, Jimmy. Joe Falls, the TV guys—"

"Sure, they will," he cut in. "They'll raise hell here. All over Michigan. Even into Canada. Tempest in a teapot. But you, Duffy, you can reach out."

That was code. Casey knew I'd worked for the office at 350 Park Avenue. The commissioner of baseball. I'd investigated murder and treachery in the national pastime—in both leagues. Never say the game is old-fashioned.

"Do this one for me, Duffy. I'm on the carpet. Don't wait until they kill me."

"Come on, Jimmy."

"They threatened me, Duffy."

It was my turn for a swallow. Jimmy Casey was either a wracked, desperate man, or he was piping me like a pro.

"Do it for me and for that old ballyard on Michigan and Trumbull, if that's what it'll take," he said. "I haven't asked you a favor in a long time. Come out here. See it for yourself. At least give me that."

He did not have to say anything more. I told him to get some sleep and I'd call him over his eggs. But he knew he had me. I taste blood in my throat when I hear of old friends being kicked around. Or old pros, for that matter. Jimmy Casey was an original, so authentic and rare that he would not stand a chance of getting hired for the same job today. He was that good. And now, having been cut loose, he was tossing in a cruel Detroit wind. At least I could be there to help stem the gale.

The next morning I had a satchel packed and a reservation made on the morning train to Detroit. Biz Wagemaker waved over a cab with that good right arm of his.

My Amtrak crept out of Union Station, made the bend around Lake Michigan and the tip of Indiana, then pushed east across the autumn-colored flatlands of lower Michigan. It was a six-hour trip if the lead car didn't hit anything en route. I could have flown. I could have driven. The train, however, even in the context of Jimmy Casey's dire straits, was my speed.

It was midweek, and the coach cars were lightly populated. I spread out with a pack of newspapers and my copy of Casey's memoirs. A few years back he'd put them together in a low-priced volume called *Casey at the Mike* and peddled it like red-hots at banquets, grand openings, and baseball-card conventions. The copy he sent me was inscribed "To Duffy, my good, good friend and fellow traveler." This trip, I feared, might test that friendship. As I opened it to the first chapter, the spine cracked.

But I was glad to be headed into the fray. I needed a scrape. The season was over. A Canadian franchise had beaten an American squad in a World Series conducted in domed stadiums. Not a blade of grass or a cloud came into play. Grown men spit on carpet. It was baseball, played at the same distances with wooden bats and mud-rubbed balls, but it was painful for this old purist to watch.

Nevertheless, the Series' conclusion left me with the offseason, the hot stove, that frost-lined, stationary time when the system is likely to grow listless and die. I've long believed that box scores keep the chambers pumping. A good pennant race can sustain the terminally ill, keep them hanging on until it's clinched. But when the umpires take off and the bases are pulled up, well, things go morbid in a hurry.

Jimmy Casey's firing—and I had to rely on his version of the details—stirred the pot. That and the fact that he was tying his demise to his public affection for Tiger Stadium, a wonderful old ballpark at death's door. In the decade before the twenty-first century, only three originals remained: Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, and Tiger Stadium. I've watched a lifetime of baseball in each one of them. I would not go so far as to say they are temples. Or maybe I would.

Of the three, the Detroit park, a post-ridden double decker with massive light towers and an outfield roof, is least appreciated and most vulnerable. Built of concrete and steel in 1912, its modern owners have lately yearned to tear it down—for all of the usual, fiscally responsible but repugnant reasons. Like Casey, I always liked the place, its

character, how it gave grit and texture to the Tigers in their linen-white uniforms. I'm a sucker for old ballparks, zealous in my hatred of the wrecking ball.

Casey wrote passionately about the place. "This ragged, charming den of lower decks, upper decks, posts, poles, and overhangs," he said, turning a phrase better than your average raconteur. "A park to lose yourself in as a child, and savor as an adult." He could not conceive of its demise. Of course, he is of a generation that does not comprehend private suites or seven-million-dollar salaries.

Lost in his memoir, with the jostle of the train a kind of background music, my eyes played easily over those sentiments, and even more easily over the horsehide stories and radio-booth anecdotes Casey fed the reader like hot chestnuts. I knew most of the characters and crumbums he wrote about; I even saw myself every so often. Casey was kind to me, gave me good lines I didn't remember uttering. His were soft, I-can't-believe-they're-paying-me-to-do-this strokes, and, given his current status, were bittersweet to read.

After a couple of hours of reading and riding, a tuna sandwich on wheat bread and some ice cream, I dozed off like a pensioner who'd been up most of the night before. The clack of the wheels and the swaying of the train's huge carriage put me under. I was always a customer of vibrating beds back in the days when they came with the motel room and hummed to life with a quarter. Alone or not alone, I loved them.

I don't know how long I slept. I don't know if I was jostled awake by a lurch of the train or the kick of a clumsy passenger. I do not know if I was still unconscious and dreaming, only that I suddenly was aware of people all around me huddled at the train's windows. They were young and old, black and Asian families with babies, students with backpacks, a soldier, a bird-thin, rouged lady with a green wig, and they were all staring open-mouthed into the now darkened terrain as the train groaned on. I sat up in the seat, or maybe I was already sitting up, and felt grit in my throat.

I turned with the others and saw a sky aglow with an orange collar, a filmy, other-worldly emanation. I blinked and began wiping the window with my forearm when a dank, acrid gust of air filled the car. One breath of it was enough. It was fire, a massive, organized blaze somewhere near the tracks. Then the train moved around a bend and into a level open area, and suddenly the distance was a bed of flames.

"The Hawk," someone said. I turned to the perspiring face of a redcap, a black man with glistening skin and a look of total dismay. "The damn Hawk," he intoned as he stared into the fury.

In Chicago, the Hawk is the icy, unforgiving wind off the lake. In Detroit, however, the Hawk is the night of the devil, a single terrible evening in late October when the city burns. I'd read of it, seen newsreels of the city lit on fire. Anything flammable is ignited. Abandoned automobiles, some with junkies inside, bubble with flames and toxic smoke. Tenements, abandoned or occupied by terrified families, are torched. Wooden porches are stuffed with gasoline-soaked rags and go up like dry brush. Sheets of flame slither up clapboard. Tar-paper roofs explode with black smoke and white-hot gases, then collapse into roaring, angry infernos.

Unless I was dreaming it all, this was a night of the Hawk like no other. Everywhere I looked, on both sides of the train as it groaned on into Detroit, there were outlines of flames and billowing smoke. I blinked and swallowed and clutched my chest. I heard muted explosions and shrill sirens. People gasped and children cried. The smell was undeniable. The train seemed to slow, and my gut ached at the notion of being stranded in an aluminum tube while flames nipped at the ties, but then the wheels quickened again.

Suddenly a massive, magnificent structure came into view. And it was familiar to me. It was Detroit's old Union Station, a grand central depot for decades of train travel into the city but which I knew had been abandoned for years. I had come and gone with visiting baseball teams

through its ornate doors. At fifteen stories, it was a proud, imperial building full of windows and cornices, the brick-and-stone craftsmanship of a century ago. And now it was aflame.

Though our train followed a track that took it hundreds of yards from the old station, we had a startling view of it. Pennants of fire shot out from windows on every floor as if the entire building had been ignited at once. The sight was breathtaking and awful, and neither I nor my fellow passengers on this train ride through hell could take our eyes off it.

The flames reflected in our eyes. We were speechless witnesses—maybe victims—of the Hawk. The train kept on like a slow, metal mole, moving relentlessly by its past, the besieged, incinerated old station, and edged deeper into the present, the inferno that was Detroit.

Jimmy Casey hugged me, he did. Gave me one of those extended, lost-relative embraces that told me plenty about his condition.

"This is a *friend,*" he said into my neck as his paw slapped my back.

The embrace was accompanied by fumes of Old Spice and Stroh's. He'd been waiting for me at the entrance of the Dearborn Inn, the colonial, white-pillared hotel in Henry Ford's suburb. It was nearly ten o'clock; it had taken hours for me to get from the downtown train station back out to Dearborn. The fires had turned Detroit on end. There was not a cab or a limousine to be found. It took a double sawbuck to get the station manager to get one for me.

The cab arrived with its dome light dark. The driver was a chunky black guy with white hair and a dashboard full of tiny plastic saints. He motioned me over. "Gon' cost you," he said. I'd have mortgaged the condo. Once I was inside his jitney, he hurtled into the street. "The fires," I said. "What in *hell* is happening?"

"Hell," he said. "Madness. I pray to God for deliverance."

We ran into police everywhere. Apparently in an effort

to keep the Hawk out of downtown, they were blocking just about every main thoroughfare. The cabbie spat curses, rattling his saints. He finally got on the Lodge Freeway and was waved off before he could cut over to the Fisher Freeway. It went like that forever, with the cabbie getting more and more exasperated. His anger, my money. Somehow he caught an open ramp onto the Edsel Ford Freeway heading west toward Dearborn. He drove like a man running from a fire. In the skies beyond the concrete walls of the freeway we could see the glow, the cinders, the smoke. The taxi fairly flew. When it landed, it cost me.

"Why didn't you get off here in Dearborn?" Casey said.

"Wish I had—I must have snored through Dearborn," I said. "The fires, Jimmy. I've never seen anything like it."

"It's a nightmare. Worse this year than ever. Firemen get shot at. It's like the Third World, Duffy."

"Union Station, Jimmy. Good Lord. And no firemen, at least none—"

"They let the shells burn," he said. "Firemen, the poor bastards, they try to keep what's still good from going up. It's unbelievable, and I've seen it now for years."

He leaned down to hoist my satchel. He was a slight man, and I could see he was exhausted.

"Makes my situation trivial, doesn't it?" he said.

I wiped a smudged hand over my face. I smelled of smoke—even out here everything smelled of smoke—but I followed Casey inside the hotel.

"What happened today?" I asked.

He handed me the *Free Press/News*, the amalgam of what had been two competing Detroit newspapers. The story of his firing and his doleful mug were at the top of the front page. He'd probably spent the day in front of television cameras. He braced himself against the counter.

"I've talked all day. Feel like I've just called an extra inning doubleheader," he said as I checked in. "And I'm supposed to go live on the eleven o'clock news."

We moved into the lobby, but did not move far. Casey was spotted immediately. People stopped him, gathered

around him, reached out to pat his shoulder, and to get in a word of sympathy and encouragement. On better days Casey would have reveled in the attention, in the confetti and the kudos. He was a short, utility infielder kind of a guy with thin hands and quick feet. Tonight, however, he seemed overwhelmed by it all, his smile weary, his eyes sunken behind the bifocals.

As we were about to break free, an elderly lady in a chartreuse jogging suit and makeup to match hustled over and hugged Casey as if he were a member of the Publishers' Clearing House giveaway team. She clung to him. A cloud of Jungle Gardenia blew over us. She withdrew with tears flowing, then kissed him heavily on the cheek. "I'm Stella from Livonia, and I've loved you all my life," she said.

He held her hands and thanked her and used all his might to pull away. He turned to me with a smear of lipstick on his cheek.

"The Stellas love me, they really do," he said.

I saw that his eyes had clouded.

"God, I want my job back," he moaned.

I let him have that for a beat, then motioned toward the bar.

"Got time to grab a drink?" I said.

"I want a bed, Duffy. I'm whipped. Been on the air all day, and I'm still not through," Casey said. "Now these fires. That's the story now. Bigger than me."

"Go home then, Jimmy," I said. "Recharge. I can take care of myself. New game tomorrow."

"Okay," he sighed. "But we go at it first thing. I asked you here and I want you to get into it. It's more than just my job, Duffy, like I told you."

"I don't follow you, Jimmy. All your fans . . . Stella from Livonia—"

"I know all that. How it looks—poor, pitiful me," he said. "I apologize for being in my cups last night. But I'm only part of the story here. It's the worst situation you can imagine."

With that, another pair of fans approached.