

The Hanging Curve

By Gardner Dozois

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IT WAS A COOL OCTOBER night in Philadelphia, with a wet wind coming off the river that occasionally shifted to bring in the yeasty spoiled-beer smell of the nearby refineries. Independence Stadium, the relatively new South Philly stadium that had been built to replace the old Veteran's Stadium, which still stood deserted a block or so away, was filled to capacity, and then some, with people standing in the aisles. It was the last game of a hard-fought and bitterly contested World Series between the New York Yankees and the Philadelphia Phillies, 3-2 in favor of the Phillies, the Yankees at bat with two out in the top of the ninth inning, and a man on third base. Eduardo Rivera was at bat for the Yankees against pitcher Karl Holzman, the Yankees' best slugger against the Phillies' best stopper, and Holzman had run a full count on Rivera, 3-2. Everything depended on the next pitch.

Holzman went into his slow, deliberate windup. Everybody in the stadium was leaning forward, everybody was holding their breath. Though there were almost ten thousand people in the stands, nobody was making a sound. Even the TV announcers were tense and silent. Hey, there it is! The *pitch*—

Some pundits later said that what was about to happen happened *because* the game was so tight, because so much was riding on the next pitch—that it was the psychic energy of the thousands of fans in the stands, the millions more in the viewing audience at home, every eye and every mind focused on that particular moment. That what happened was *caused* by the tension and the ever-tightening suspense felt by millions of people hanging on the outcome of that particular pitch....

And yet, in the more than a century and a half that people had been playing professional baseball, there had been many games as important as this one, many contests as closely fought, many situations as tense or tenser, with as much or more passion invested in the outcome—and yet what happened that night had never happened before, in any other game.

Holzman pitched. The ball left his hand, streaked toward the plate....

And then it froze.

The ball just *stopped*, inches from the plate, and hung there, motionless, in midair.

After a second of stunned surprise, Rivera stepped forward and took a mighty hack at the motionless ball. He broke his bat on it, sending splinters flying high. But the ball itself didn't move.

The catcher sat back on his butt with a thump, then, after a second, began to

scoot backward, away from the plate. He was either praying or cursing in Spanish, perhaps both. Hurriedly, he crossed himself.

The home-base umpire, Kellenburger, had been struck dumb with astonishment for a moment, but now he raised his hands to call time. He took his mask off and came a few steps closer to lean forward and peer at the ball, where it hung impossibly in midair.

The umpire was the first to actually touch the ball. Gingerly, he poked it with his finger, an act either very brave or very foolish, considering the circumstances. "It felt like a baseball," he later said, letting himself in for a great deal of comic ridicule by late-night talk show hosts, but it really wasn't that dumb a remark, again considering the circumstances. It certainly wasn't *acting* like a baseball.

He tried to scoop the ball out of the air. It wouldn't budge. When he took his hand away, there it still was, the ball, hanging motionless a few feet above home plate.

The fans in the stadium had been shocked into stunned silence for a few heartbeats. But now a buzzing whisper of reaction began to swell, soon growing into a waterfall roar. No one understood what had happened. But *something* had happened to stop the game at the most critical possible moment, and nobody liked it. Fistfights were already beginning to break out in the outfield bleachers.

Rivera had stepped forward to help Kellenburger tug at the ball, trying to muscle it down. They couldn't move it. Holzman, as puzzled as everyone else, walked in to see what in the world was going on. Managers flew out of the dugouts, ready to protest *something*, although they weren't quite sure *what*. The rest of the umpires trotted in to take a look. Soon home plate was surrounded by almost everybody who was down on the ballfield, both dugouts emptying, all shouting, arguing, making suggestions, jostling to get a close look at the ball, which hung serenely in midair.

Within minutes, fights were breaking out on the field as well. The stadium cops were already having trouble trying to quell disturbances in the seats, where a full-fledged riot was brewing. They couldn't handle it. The fans began tearing up the seats, trampling each other in panicked or angry surges, pouring out on to the field to join in fistfights with the players. The city cops had to be called in, then more cops, then the riot squad, who set about forcibly closing the stadium, chasing the outraged fans out with tear gas and rubber bullets. Dozens of people were injured, some moderately seriously, but, by some other miracle, none were killed. Dozens of people were arrested, including some of the players and the manager of the Yankees. The stadium was seriously trashed. By the time the umpires got around to officially calling the game, it had become clear a long time before that World Series or no World Series, no game was going to be played in Independence Stadium that night, or, considering the damage that had been done to the bleachers, probably for many nights to come.

Finally, the last ambulance left, and the remaining players and grounds crew and assorted team personnel were herded out, still complaining and arguing. After a hurried conference between the police and the owners, the gates were locked behind them.

The ball still hung there, not moving. In the empty stadium, gleaming white under the lights, it somehow looked even more uncanny than it had with people swarming around it. Two cops were left behind to keep an eye on it, but the sight spooked them, and they stayed as far away from it as they could without leaving the infield, checking it every few minutes as the long night crept slowly past. But the ball didn't seem to be going anywhere.

Most of the riot had been covered live across the nation, of course, television cameras continuing to roll as fans and players beat each other bloody, while the sportscasters provided hysterical commentary (and barricaded the doors of the press room). Reporters from local stations had been there within twenty minutes, but nobody knew quite how to handle the event that had sparked the riot in the first place; most ignored it, while others treated it as a Silly Season item. The reporters were back the next morning, though, some of them, anyway, as the owners and the grounds crew, more cops, the Commissioner of Baseball, and some Concerned City Hall Bigwigs went back into the stadium. In spite of the bright, grainy, mundane light of morning, which is supposed to chase all fancies away and dissolve all troubling fantasies, the ball was still frozen there in midair, motionless, exactly the same way it had been the night before. It looked even spookier though, more bewilderingly inexplicable, under the ordinary light of day than it had looked under the garish artificial lighting the night before. This was no trick of the eyes, no confusion of light and shadow. Although it *couldn't* be, the goddamn thing was *there*.

The grounds crew did everything that they could think of to get the ball to move, including tying a rope around it and having a dozen hefty men yank and heave and strain at it, their feet scrambling for purchase, as if they were playing tug-of-war with Mighty Joe Young and losing, but they could no more move the ball than Kellenburger had been able to the night before.

It was becoming clear that it might be a long time before another game could be played in Independence Stadium.

After two days of heated debate in the highest baseball circles, Yankee Stadium was borrowed to restage the potential final out of the series. Thousands of fans in the stadium (who had paid heretofore unheard-of prices for tickets) and millions of television viewers watched breathlessly as Holzman went into his windup and delivered the ball to the plate at a respectable ninety-five miles-per-hour. But nothing happened except that Rivera took a big swing at the ball and missed. No miracle. The ball thumped solidly into the catcher's mitt (who'd had to be threatened with heavy sanctions to get him to play, and who had a crucifix, a St. Christopher's medal, *and* an evil-eye-warding set of horns hung around his neck). Kellenburger, the home-plate umpire, pumped his fist and roared "You're out!" in a decisive,

no-nonsense tone. And that was that. The Philadelphia Phillies had won the World Series.

The fans tore up the seats. Parts of New York City burned. The riots were still going on the following afternoon, as were riots in Philadelphia and (for no particular reason anyone could see; perhaps they were sympathy riots) in Cincinnati.

After another emergency session, the Commissioner announced that entire last game would be replayed, in the interests of fairness. This time, the Yankees won, 7-5.

After more rioting, the Commissioner evoked special executive powers that no one was quite sure he had, and declared that the Series was a draw. This satisfied nobody, but eventually fans stopped burning down bits of various cities, and the situation quieted.

The bizarre result went into the record books, and baseball tried to put the whole thing behind it.

In the larger world outside the insular universe of baseball, things weren't quite that simple.

Dozens of newspapers across the country had independently—and perhaps inevitably—come up with the headline HANGING CURVE BALL!!!, screamed across the front page in the largest type they could muster. A novelty song of the same name was in stores within four days of the Event, and available for download on some internet sites in two. Nobody knows for sure how long it took for the first Miracle Ball joke to appear, but they were certainly circulating widely by as early as the following morning, when the strange non-ending of the World Series was the hot topic of discussion in most of the workplaces and homes in America (and, indeed, around the world), even those homes where baseball had rarely—if ever—been discussed before.

Media hysteria about the Miracle Ball continued to build throughout the circus of replaying the World Series; outside of sports circles, where the talk tended to center around the dolorous affect all this was having on baseball, the focus was on the Miracle itself, and what it might—or might not—signify. Hundreds of conspiracy-oriented internet sites, of various degrees of lunacy, appeared almost overnight. Apocalyptic religious cults sprang up almost as fast as wacko internet sites. The Miracle was widely taken as a Sign that the Last Days were at hand, as nearly anything out of the ordinary had been, from an earthquake to Jesus's face on a taco, for the last thousand years. Within days, some people in California had sold their houses and all their worldly possessions and had begun walking barefoot toward Philadelphia.

After the Gates-of-Armageddon-are-gaping-wide theory, the second most popular theory, and the one with the most internet sites devoted to it, was that Aliens had done it—although as nobody ever came up with an even remotely convincing

reason *why* aliens would want to do this, that theory tended to run out of gas early, and never was as popular as the Apocalypse Now/Sign from the Lord theory. The respectable press tended to ridicule both of these theories (as well as the Sinister Government Conspiracy theory, a dark horse, but popular in places like Montana and Utah)—still, it was hard for even the most determined skeptic to deny that *something* was going on that no one could even begin to explain, something that defied the laws of physics as we thought we knew them, and more than one scientist, press-ganged into appearing on late-night talk shows or other Talking Head venues, bumbled that if we could learn to understand the strange cosmic forces, whatever they were, that were making the Ball act as it was acting, whole new sciences would open up, and Mankind's technological expertise could be advanced a thousand years.

Up until this point, the government had been ignoring the whole thing, obviously not taking it seriously, but now, perhaps jolted into action by watching scientists on *The Tonight Show* enthuse about the wondrous new technologies that might be there for the taking, they made up for lost time (and gave a boost to the Sinister Government Conspiracy theory) by swooping down and seizing Independence Stadium, excluding all civilians from the property.

The city and the owners protested, then threatened to sue, but the feds smacked them with Eminent Domain and stood pat (eventually they would be placated by the offer to build a new stadium elsewhere in the city, at government expense; since you certainly couldn't play a game in Independence Stadium anyway, with *that* thing hanging in the air, the owners were not really all that hard to convince). Hordes of scientists and spooks from various alphabet-soup agencies swarmed over the playing field. A ring of soldiers surrounded the stadium day and night, military helicopters hovered constantly overhead to keep other helicopters with prying television cameras away, and when it occurred to somebody that this wouldn't be enough to frustrate spy satellites or high-flying spy planes, a huge tent enclosure was raised over the entire infield, hiding the Ball from sight.

Months went by, then years. No news about the Miracle Baseball was coming out of Independence Stadium, although by now a tent city had been raised in the surrounding parking lots to house the influx of government-employed scientists, who were kept in strict isolation. Occasionally, a fuss would be made in the media or a motion would be raised in Congress in protest of such stringent secrecy, but the government was keeping the lid down tight, in spite of wildfire rumors that scientists were conferring with UFO Aliens in there, or had opened a dimensional gateway to another universe.

The cultists, who had been refused admittance to Independence Stadium to venerate the Ball, when they'd arrived with blistered and bleeding feet from California several months after the Event, erected a tent city of their own across the street from the government's tent city, and could be seen keeping vigil day and night in all weathers, as if they expected God to pop his head out of the stadium to say

hello at any moment, and didn't want to miss it. (They eventually filed suit against the government for interfering with their freedom to worship by refusing them access to the Ball, and the suit dragged through the courts for years, with no conclusive results.)

The lack of information coming out of Independence Stadium did nothing to discourage media speculation, of course. In fact, it was like pouring gasoline on a fire, and for several years it was difficult to turn on a television set at any time of the day or night without finding *somebody* saying *something* about the Miracle Ball, even if it was only on the PBS channels. Most of the players and officials who were down on the field When It Happened became minor media celebrities, and did the rounds of all the talk shows. Rivera, the batter who'd been at the plate that night, refused to talk about it, seeming bitter and angry about the whole thing—the joke was that Rivera was pissed because God had been scared to pitch to him—but Holzman, the pitcher, showed an unexpected philosophical bent—pitchers were all head-cases anyway, baseball fans told each other—and was a fixture on the talk show circuit for years, long after he'd retired from the game. “I'm not sure it proves the existence of God,” he said one night. “You'd think that God would have better things to do. But it sure shows that there are forces at work in the universe we don't understand.” Later, on another talk show, discussing the theory that heavenly intervention had kept his team from winning the Series, Holzman famously said, “I don't know, maybe God *is* a Yankees fan—but if He hates the Phillies all that much, wouldn't it have been a lot easier just to let Rivera get a *hit*?”

In the second year after the Event, a book called *Schrödinger's Baseball*, written by a young Harvard physicist, postulated the theory that those watching the game in the stadium that night had been so evenly split between Yankees fans wanting Rivera to get a hit and Phillies fans wanting him to strike out, the balance so exquisitely perfect between the two opposing pools of observers, that the quantum wave function had been unable to “decide” which way to collapse, and so had just frozen permanently into an indeterminate state, not resolving itself into *either* outcome. This was immediately derided as errant nonsense by other scientists, but the book became an international bestseller of epic proportions, staying at the top of the lists for twenty months, and, although it had no plot at all, was later optioned for a (never made) Big Budget movie for a hefty seven-figure advance.

Eventually, more than four years later, after an election where public dislike of the Secret of Independence Stadium had played a decisive role, a new administration took charge and belatedly declared an Open Door policy, welcoming in civilian scientists, even those from other nations, and, of course, the media.

As soon became clear, they had little to lose. Nothing had changed in almost half a decade. The Ball still hung there in midair. Nothing could move it. Nothing could affect it. The government scientists had tried taking core samples, but no drill bit would bite. They'd tried dragging it away with tractor-hauled nets and with immense magnetic fields, and neither the brute-force nor the high-tech approach had

worked. They'd measured it and the surrounding space and the space above and below it with every instrument anybody could think of, and discovered nothing. They'd hit it with high-intensity laser beams, they'd tried crisping it with plasma and with flame-throwers, they'd shot hugely powerful bolts of electricity into it. Nothing had worked.

They'd learned nothing from the Ball, in spite of years of intensive, round-the-clock observation with every possible instrumentation, in spite of dozens of scientists working themselves into nervous exhaustion, mental breakdowns, and emotional collapse. No alien secrets. No heretofore unexpected forces of nature (none that they'd learned to identify and control, anyway). The Ball was just *there*. Who knew why? Or how?

More years of intensive investigation by scientists from around the world followed, but eventually, as years stretched into decades, even the scientists began to lose interest. Most ordinary people had lost interest long before, when the Miracle Ball resolutely refused to do anything else remarkable, or even moderately non--boring.

Baseball the sport did its best to pretend the whole thing had never happened. Game attendance had soared for a while, as people waited for the same thing to happen again, then, when it didn't, declined disastrously, falling to record lows. Several major-league franchises went out of business (although, oddly, sandlot and minor-league games were as popular as ever), and those who were lucky enough to survive did their best to see that the Ball was rarely mentioned in the sports pages.

Other seasons went into the record books, none tainted by the miraculous.

Forty more years went by.

Frederick Kellenburger had not been a young man even when he officiated at home plate during the Event. Now he was fabulously old, many decades into his retirement, and had chosen to spend the remaining few years of his life living in a crumbling old brownstone building in what remained of a South Philadelphia neighborhood, a couple of blocks from Independence Stadium. In the last few years, almost against his will, since he had spent decades resolutely trying to put the whole business behind him, he had become fascinated with the Event, with the Ball—in a mellow, non-obsessive kind of way, since he was of a calm, phlegmatic, even contemplative, temperament. He didn't expect to solve any mysteries, where so many others had failed. Still, he had nothing better to do with the residue of his life, and as almost everybody else who had been involved with the Event was dead by now, or else tucked away in nursing homes, it seemed appropriate somehow that someone who had been there from the start should keep an eye on the Ball.

He spent the long, sleepless nights of extreme old age on his newly acquired (only twenty years old) hobby of studying the letters and journals of the Knights of St. John of twelfth-century Rhodes, a hobby that appealed to him in part just

because it was so out of character for a retired baseball umpire, and an area in which, to everyone's surprise—including his own—he had become an internationally recognized authority. Days, he would pick up a lightweight cloth folding chair, and hobble the few blocks to Independence Stadium, moving very, very slowly, like an ancient tortoise hitching itself along a beach in the Galapagos Islands. Hurry wasn't needed, even if he'd been capable of it. This neighborhood had been nearly deserted for years. There was no traffic, rarely anybody around. The slowly rising Atlantic lapped against the base of the immense Jersey Dike a few blocks to the east, and most of the buildings here were abandoned, boarded-up, falling down. Weeds grew through cracks in the middle of the street. For decades now, the city had been gradually, painfully, ponderously shifting itself to higher ground to the west, as had all the other cities of the slowly foundering East Coast, and few people were left in this neighborhood except squatters, refugees from Camden and Atlantic City who could afford nothing better, and a few stubborn South Philly Italians almost as old as he was, who'd been born here and were refusing to leave. No one paid any attention to an old man inching his way down the street. No one bothered him. It was oddly peaceful.

Independence Stadium itself was half-ruined, falling down, nearly abandoned. The tent cities were long gone. There was a towheaded, lazily smiling young boy with an old and probably non-functional assault rifle who was supposed to keep people out of the Stadium, but Kellenburger bribed him with a few small coins every few days, and he always winked and looked the other way. There were supposed to be cameras continuously running, focused on the Ball, part of an ongoing study funded by the University of Denver, recording everything just in case something ever happened, but the equipment had broken down long since, and nobody had seemed to notice, or care. The young guard never entered the Stadium, so, once inside, Kellenburger had the place pretty much to himself.

Inside, Kellenburger would set up his folding chair behind the faded outline of home plate, right where he used to stand to call the games, sit down in the dappled sunlight (the tent enclosing the infield had long since fallen down, leaving only a few metal girders and a few scraps of fabric that flapped lazily in the wind), and watch the Ball, which still hung motionless in the air, just as it had for almost fifty years now. He didn't expect to see anything, other than what had always been there to be seen. It was quiet inside the abandoned stadium, though, and peaceful. Bees buzzed by his ears, and birds flew in and out of the stadium, squabbling under the eaves, making their nests in amongst the broken seats, occasionally launching into liquid song. The air was thick with the rich smells of morning-glory and honeysuckle, which twined up around the ruined bleachers. Wildflowers had sprung up everywhere, and occasionally the tall grass in the outfield would rustle as some small unseen creature scurried through it. Kellenburger watched the Ball, his mind comfortably blank. Sometimes—more often than not, truth be told—he dozed and nodded in the honeyed sunlight.

As chance would have it, he happened to be awake and watching when the

Ball moved at last.

Without warning, the Ball suddenly shot forward across the plate, just as if Holzman had thrown it only a second before, rather than nearly half a century in the past. With no catcher there to intercept it, it shot past home plate, hit the back wall, bounced high in the air, fell back to Earth, bounced again, rolled away, and disappeared into the tall weeds near what had once been the dugout.

After a moment of silent surprise, Kellenburger rose stiffly to his feet. Ponderously, he shuffled forward, bent over as much as he could, tilted his head creakingly this way and that, remembering the direction of the ball as it shot over the faded ghost of home plate, analyzing, judging angles. At last, slowly, he smiled.

“Strike!” he said, with satisfaction. “I *knew* it would be. You’re out.”

Then, without a backward look, without even a glance at where the famous Ball lay swallowed in the weeds, he picked up his folding chair, hoisted it to his shoulder, went out of the ruins of Independence Stadium, and, moving very slowly, shuffled home along the cracked and deserted street through the warm, bright, velvet air of spring.