

Chapter 10

High Hopes

I wanted to phone Grandpa for advice but our telephone was on the kitchen wall, and Mom ruled the kitchen. Mom always seemed to be preparing the next meal with a big spoon in her hand, or cleaning up the last meal with a dish towel in her hand, or on the phone gabbing with a friend. Our home was tiny too, so any phone conversation could be heard throughout the entire house. Wednesday afternoon was my first chance. Mom went across the street to Mrs. Glassman's for what she called coffee talk. Mrs. Glassman could take an hour and a half to recount a five-minute conversation she had with the milkman, and my mom was pretty good at milking a story, too. I had my opportunity.

"I was hoping we could talk about this, kiddo," Grandpa said. Grandpa's hearing wasn't great so he was very loud on the phone. "I really thought you had gotten permission from your father," he practically shouted. "This past Sunday, I wanted to ask you how try-outs were going but it just didn't feel right."

"I couldn't ask him, Grandpa. Dad never changes his mind on anything."

"You didn't even give him a chance, Eileen. He changed his mind on the accordion, didn't he?" In fact, Dad changed his mind twice on the accordion. When I was in fifth grade, my friend Laura Laskey's fingers would fly over her accordion as she played Beatles' songs and polkas. I was so jealous. I begged Mom and Dad for the chance to take accordion lessons from Laura's Uncle Chet.

"They're just too expensive, Eileen," Dad said. "We can't afford it." For two months he didn't change his mind. Then one day Dad came into my room playing some noise on a used accordion. "I got a great deal on this old thing," he told me. "And we signed you up for lessons with Chet Laskey. I can't wait to hear you belt out 'The Beer Barrel Polka' someday." I hugged my dad. "There is one condition though. You can't do this a couple of times and quit. You have to make a commitment and stick with it for a year. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal!" I answered and I hugged him again.

Two lessons with Laura's Uncle Chet and I knew I had made a colossal mistake. Chet Laskey's breath smelled like the mysterious animal that died under our shed one summer and he kept his face right next to my accordion, and my nose, while I played. Worse than that, it was spring. The guys in the neighborhood were playing ball on Saturday mornings and it was at the same time my accordion lessons were going on in

Chicopee, a whole town away. The first and only song I ever learned on the accordion was a simple tune called “Batter Up”. Playing “Batter Up” in the Laskey’s paneled studio with a moose head on the wall was not in the same league as playing pick-up baseball at Robinson Park. I begged Dad to let me give up my music career. Amazingly, Dad agreed. I think maybe he didn’t like driving me all the way to Chicopee.

“Maybe you’re right, Grandpa,” I said. “What should I do?”

Grandpa thought for a moment. “Well, kiddo, the first thing I would do is to apologize to your dad. He needs to know that you’re really sorry for going against his decision. He’s disappointed in you. I’m disappointed in you, too.”

“I am really sorry, Grandpa, and I’m sorry I put you in a bad spot with Dad. I know he blames you a little for this, too.”

“See how well it works? You told me you were sorry and now I’m no longer disappointed in you. It works like a charm, but only if you’re sincere.”

“You said that apologizing is the first thing I should do,” I continued. “What’s the next thing?”

“You’ll think of the next thing, kiddo,” Grandpa said. “You’ll come up with something. You’re a smart girl.”

I had not yet thought of the something but I did sincerely apologize to Dad that evening after dinner. At first, he looked at me as if he were waiting for me to blurt out, “So, can I play baseball with The Gas now?” When that didn’t come he hugged me and apologized to me, sort of.

“I’m really sorry, Eileen, that girls can’t play in the Mighty Midget League. If they could, sweetheart, you’d be a star.” That was when I knew what the something was going to be. When Pat and I were little kids, Dad told us bedtime stories about a boy named Peter Peterson. Dad was an accomplished storyteller, too. No matter how tired we were it was impossible to fall asleep during a Peter Peterson tale. So, I decided to tell Dad a bedtime story, too, but in a letter.

Dad,

I loved the Peter Peterson stories you told us. Better than “Little Red Riding Hood”. Better than “Cinderella”. Better even than “King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table”.

Mom told us that Peter Peterson was really you and that his adventures were your adventures, but Pat and I figured that out on our own way before. “Peter Peterson and the Monster Under the Bed”, Peter Peterson: Lost in the Department Store”, “Peter Peterson’s Lie”; those stories always seemed to teach me just what I needed to learn just when I needed to learn it.

Peter and I had so much in common. When I didn’t want to go to school and leave Mommy, Peter Peterson was starting school, too, and afraid to leave his mom. When I broke my arm, Peter fell out of an oak tree and broke his leg. When I was in a fight with Pat, Peter was in a fight with his sister.

Do you remember your last Peter Peterson stories, Dad, the ones where he grows up? Peter was in high school. He was a starter on the football team, just like you. Peter dreamed of going off to college and playing football and studying engineering. It was what he wanted more than anything. Then his father died and Peter had to quit the football team and get a job at the grocery store to help his mom pay the bills. He never played football again. After high school, Peter joined the marines and went to war. He came home, got married, joined the police force and never went to college. Peter didn’t become an engineer.

Do you remember how I asked you if that all made Peter sad? You said, “No, honey, Peter is very happy even though he wishes that some parts of his life could have turned out differently, that some parts of his story could be retold.” I was only seven but I knew exactly what you meant, Dad.

Someday I want to be just like you. I want to tell my own kids the story of my life. I know that some parts of it won’t turn out exactly the way I want them to. Still, I’ll want to tell them I did my very best to follow my dreams, even if they seemed impossible.

Love,

Eileen