

## Chapter 12

### *Spring Fever*

Fridays in Mr. Enright's sixth grade class were a real test: spelling test, math computation test, reading comprehension test, geography test.

"Enjoy your weekend, boys and girls," Mr. Enright said as the dismissal bell blared and we cascaded past him into a weekend of sweet freedom. "I'll be grading those tests all weekend." We'd be playing baseball all weekend. "You know, teachers can have spring fever, too."

Friday afternoon pick-up games were held at Muncie Park because it was close to the neighborhood. The players assembled by four o'clock and we quickly picked teams, limiting the "choosing of sides" debate to a reasonable half hour. We had only two hours to play before the sound of dinner bells would summon us home.

Muncie Park was more dirt than grass and a solidly stroked fly ball to left field could easily sail over the high, chain-link fence and reach busy Westfield Road. Hitting a homer in our bandbox was always a possibility. So was hitting a car. Joey Mitchell once hit the roof of a house clear across the street. I was not a slugger though; I had never knocked a ball out of Muncie Park.

Laura Laskey once asked me, "Eileen, how can you even stand baseball? I mean, it's just so boring." Boring? I wasn't able to tell her just how wrong she was, that from the moment I understood baseball, really understood the game and the game within the game, I was hooked.

I certainly didn't dare tell Laura about the voice. It wasn't a voice like the play by play of the Microphone but when I played baseball I heard the voice inside my head. It was so distinct and penetrating that I thought the other ballplayers must hear it too, spilling outside my ears.

"There's one out and Joey's on second base," the voice instructed me. Joey Mitchell had lined a double down the left field line. It bounced back off the top rail of the fence, just missing a game winning home run. "Tie game. Last inning," the voice set the stage for me. "This is it." Crazy Arm Dunn's mom had given him the five minute warning ten minutes ago. The voice continued, "If Tank grounds to the right side of the infield, Joey will be going on the hit. But Tank is a pure pull hitter and is more likely to send it to left." The first pitch from Cody "Catfish" Reynolds was outside the strike zone. "Catfish is working Tank away, trying to get him to pop up or hit a weak ground ball somewhere." The crafty Catfish's next pitch was in the

same place and an overeager Tank took the bait, trying to pound the outside pitch to left, but without success. The shortstop, Ray Flanagan, fielded an easy, high hopper off Tank's big bat and threw him out at first base by three steps. The voice moved on, "Two down. Joey is on second base. Last inning. I'm up. Wind is blowing out. Big deal; I've got no pop in my bat and all I want is a single anyways. The outfielders are moving in. Smart. On a single they'll have a shot at getting Joey at the plate."

"We're moving in," Wally "Speed" Miller shouted. "Way in."

My head had a filter too, along with the voice. The filter was usually quite efficient at blocking out distractions. It filtered out the crystal blue, cloudless sky and the little kids on the swing set in right field, and the cars flying over Westfield Road. It just never seemed to work with the stinging remarks of Speed Miller.

"We're moving in because you can't reach the outfield. Because you hit like a girl!"

"Shut up, Wally," an inner voice screamed. "Shut up." I swung weakly at a pitch over my head. Strike one.

"Give us two more swings like that, honey," Speed said. "I should just get on my bike right now and start going home. You look silly up there, girl. Girl!"

"Shut up, Wally! Shut up!" This wasn't my usual voice. That voice was measured, reasonable, aware of all the angles, and always looking to gain an advantage. This voice had feelings, was angry, was injured. I swung at a pitch that actually bounced in front of the plate. Twice. Strike two.

"Hey, Ray," Wally yelled to Ray Flanagan. "Do you still think she can make The Gas?"

"Sure," Ray answered. "As a bat boy."

"Good joke, Ray," Speed said. "Bat BOY."

"Block it out, girl." My helpful voice was back. "Concentrate on the situation. Two outs. Two strikes. If the outfield moves in any closer they'll be in the infield. Forget the single. Get the ball in the air. Over their heads. Wait for a strike. And then strike."

I struck the ball with the fat of the bat and elevated a fly towards the fence in left field. The outfielders sprinted back but they had no chance. One more Speed Miller remark slipped by my head's filter. It was a curse word. Wally flung his glove at the fence.

A gust of sweet wind from some magical place perhaps, caught hold of the ball like it was a feather from an angel's wing. It floated clear out of Muncie Park and bounced between two cars flying over Westfield Road.