

Chapter 14

This Is My Life

"This Is Your Life" was a popular television show that ran from 1952 – 1961, but the reruns were still on TV in 1967. The premise of the show was simple. A celebrity like Bob Hope or Jack Benny would be "surprised" by a TV crew and the show's host Ralph Edwards. A collection of friends from the star's past would be paraded on the set and they would reminisce about embarrassing moments and memorable times. Sometimes the star would be reunited with an old third grade teacher or a childhood friend. The celebrity was always good-natured about it, enjoying the spotlight, comfortable as the center of attention. I would have run to the nearest bathroom and locked myself in, and the TV cameras out. In kindergarten I was the only kid who didn't do show and tell. In first grade I pretended to be sick on my birthday so I didn't have to go to school and sit in the special chair while the class sang "Happy Birthday to You" to me. I preferred the back of the room, the back of the bus, and the end of the bench.

That Sunday it was if the whole world was watching my life unfold, watching me; everyone at the Blessed Sacrament Church on Sunday morning, everyone at the Donut Hole after church, everyone in Morris Heights. Grandpa and Grandma didn't come to our house that day. Grandpa wasn't feeling well. Grandma said to my mom on the telephone, "He's such a baby when he's sick. You'd think he was dying." The Red Sox lost their game, 1 – 0, to the Kansas City Athletics. Joey Mitchell came over and we traded baseball cards and talked about school, the Red Sox and Yankees, and everything but the board of directors meeting that was going on that afternoon. We had roast beef and scalloped potatoes for dinner. Pat and I played Monopoly in the basement but my mind wasn't on passing go and collecting two hundred dollars.

"Dang it!" Pat said as he landed on Baltic Avenue. I had a hotel on it. "Don't look so sad, Eileen. I'm the one getting crushed here. Look, I know how you feel. I'm worried too. I'm afraid I'm not even good enough to play for The Gas. You are definitely good enough, Eileen. And there's no way they can say no. I mean, this is America! And it's 1967!"

I rolled the dice and we waited for the phone call from Mr. Mitchell, but the phone call never came. Mr. Mitchell came instead.

"Pat! Eileen! Coach Mitchell is here to see you both," Mom called from upstairs. I was debating whether to purchase Marvin Gardens when Pat knocked over the game board and took the stairs, three at a time. I moved more slowly, weighed down by the uncertain verdict that soon would be delivered. At the top of the stairs I could hear the words of Coach Mitchell.

"You should be proud of these kids, Stan. They're two fine ballplayers." I moved faster, the weight was lifting. Entering the living room, I could see that he had two Gas baseball caps on his lap. "I want to apologize to you, Eileen," Coach Mitchell said. "I didn't think any girl could ever be good to play for The Gas; but I was wrong. You are good enough. And Pat, you're good enough, too." Pat sat on the sofa between Mom and Dad. Pat didn't yet realize that he had made the team, that he would be a part of the 1967 Gas.

"I just heard from our league director, Dick Ford," Coach Mitchell continued. "It's why I'm here, to tell you that in no way do I agree with the decision the board came to this afternoon. I wish they could see you play, Eileen. I wish they would let you play." The weight returned. It was enormous.

"Coach Reynolds and I wrote a letter on Eileen's behalf, but in the end the board voted that girls are not allowed to play in Holyoke's baseball leagues. Dick Ford said some dads are looking to start a softball league for girls, so maybe that's an option for Eileen. Pat, you need to know that both you and Eileen made the team before the board's decision changed it. You didn't make it because of this. You earned your place on your own."

"But can't we do something for Eileen, Dad?" Pat said.

"Vern, is there an appeal process, or someone else we can talk to?" Dad asked.

"No, the board's decision is final, Stan. I don't like it any more than you do. Eileen, I don't know what else to say," Coach Mitchell continued. "Except that I brought this baseball cap for you. You deserve it. And you are welcome to come and practice with The Gas anytime you want to. Would you like that?"

I didn't answer. I didn't think he really expected an answer. When I was six, Mom and Dad took us to the Catskill Game Farm. The Catskill Game Farm was a zoo in Catskill, New York, a three-hour drive from Holyoke. Dad didn't get many days off in 1961 so that trip to the Catskill Game Farm was a big deal for the

Romanowski family. The Catskill Game Farm gift shop proved to be a disaster for me. Mom said that Pat and I could each buy one souvenir, plastic animal. I wanted all of them, the lion, the tiger, the elephant, a hippopotamus, a gorilla, the giraffe; and I loudly campaigned for the entire collection. Mom gave me a few chances to change my mind but I insisted on having all the animals. "Then you'll get none of them," Mom informed me. Pat went home with a yellow alligator; I went home angry with my parents. A dim awareness that perhaps I screwed up came upon me as I silently and sullenly sat in the backseat during the long trip home. Mom called me "spoiled". Dad said, "No, not spoiled. Just stubborn. Romanowski stubborn."

"You'll be a superstar in that girls' softball league, Eileen," Coach Mitchell said. "I'll come by and cheer you on."

"I'm not going to play in a girls' softball league," I answered. "Not ever!" I ran from the room before anyone could see my tears. And I was right; I never played in the softball league. Stubborn.