

Chapter 17

Green Monster

Dad was worried. I hadn't so much as touched a baseball in two weeks. Dad knew that I was the girl who played catch in snowstorms and that I once knocked over the Christmas tree while practicing my swing. When I was little I slept with my baseball glove and a teddy bear, Teddy Ballgame, named after the greatest hitter of all time, Ted Williams. In 1967, my bedroom was like a shrine to Tony Conigliaro and the Red Sox, and I had memorized the starting line-ups for each of the ten American League ball clubs. No baseball for two weeks? This was serious.

"Get ready for the best day of your life, Eileen," Dad said to me on a Sunday morning. It was Sunday, May 14th, 1967. "We're skipping church and going to the ballpark." The ballpark was Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. It was a two – hour drive from Holyoke to Boston. Dad and Grandpa sat in the front seat of our Kingswood Estate station wagon with real wood paneling on the sides and Pat and I rode in the far back, facing the cars behind us. My brother and I had never gone to a big league baseball game. Dad always worked seventy hour weeks and Mom drove only to the hairdressers or to Food Town. Grandpa, who was blind in one eye, hadn't had a license for twenty years. Boston wouldn't have seemed farther away to us if it were on the moon.

"I've never seen the Red Sox in color," Pat said. Our TV set was black and white and only some of the weekend games were on TV anyways. Pat and I followed the Sox on our transistor radio. We listened to almost every game. Ken Coleman and Ned Martin, the radio announcers, were our ticket to those games, but today we had tickets to Fenway Park to see and hear and smell and taste and feel the game of baseball. But they were games actually – the Boston Red Sox vs. the Detroit Tigers, a doubleheader.

"Do you think that you can stay interested for eighteen innings of baseball, kiddos?" Grandpa asked.

"Grandpa," I said. "I'm hoping at least one of those games goes extra innings."

Dad drove up and down every street and alley within a mile and a half of Fenway Park. "I'm not paying three dollars just to park the car. No way," he growled. "That's highway robbery." In Holyoke, Dad could leave the car in a loading zone or in front of a fire hydrant. "Police privileges," he called it. In Boston, Dad didn't have those privileges. We paid the three dollars.

"Can I get a scorecard, Dad?" I asked as we went through the turnstiles into Fenway. Dad didn't answer. He was still grumbling about the three bucks he spent for parking. Grandpa winked at me and put some money in my pocket.

Holding my scorecard and Grandpa's calloused hand, I inched along with the crowd through the cavernous dark of the passageway, past the bathrooms and the concession booths and into the brilliant light of the ballpark itself. There's a scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, my favorite movie of all time, where Dorothy opens the door of her tornado – tossed house and steps from the black and white world of Kansas out into the stunning colors of the Land of Oz. I was Dorothy in the land of baseball.

"Keep it moving, Eileen," Pat said. "There's a guy with a tray full of beers right behind me and I don't want to swim in that stuff."

"It's just so green!" Pat said to me as we settled into our seats twenty-three rows behind the Red Sox dugout on the first base side.

"Yeah, where are the worn out patches of dirt like on Robinson Field?" I said.

"Or the broken glass in the outfield that makes Jackson Park so charming?" Pat added.

The infield grass, the expanse of outfield, the tall and inviting wall in left field called the Green Monster, all were green, green, green.

The Detroit Tigers were one of the best teams in the American League. They had terrific hitters in Al Kaline, Norm Cash and Bill Freehan, and with their two best pitchers Denny McLain and Mickey Lolich going that day, it didn't look good for us especially since the Tigers had already beaten the Sox on Friday and Saturday. But this was Sunday, and on that day the Detroit Tigers would not beat us in either game of that wonderful doubleheader.

The Red Sox won the opener 8 -5. Carl Ystrezemski, "Yaz", hit a homerun; Rico Petrocelli our shortstop, hit two; and our big first baseman George "Boomer" Scott, not to be confused with Jose "Boom Boom" Cuevas, knocked in three runs. Boomer Scott called his home runs "taters" and it was said that he ate fried chicken in between innings of games. Tank called him a colorful figure. Pat and I didn't leave our seats even once during the whole ballgame. The best thing of all was that there was another game to follow it. After a short intermission which featured hot dogs, coca colas and peanuts, we were ready for more.

The second game was even wilder than the first. We knocked out the Tigers' ace pitcher, Mickey Lolich, in the second inning. With the Sox holding a comfortable 11 - 3 lead in the fifth inning, Dad was thinking about heading back early to Holyoke. "It's a long drive, kids," he said. "And the Sox are in good shape. Do you want to take off?"

"No way!" we answered.

"Did you really think she'd say yes, Stan?" Grandpa said. "She's never even left a St. Patrick's Day Parade until the cleaning crew has swept up from the horses." Every year as far back as I could remember, Grandpa had taken me to the Holyoke St. Patrick's Day Parade, a three hour long celebration of Irish pride. Even on the coldest and dampest of March days, Grandpa and I would stay at the parade until the last band played the last notes of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling".

"We're staying until the last pitch, Dad. Okay?" I said. Pat agreed. That last pitch wouldn't come for another hour and a half as the Tigers roared back to make a game of it. They fell short in the end and the Red Sox won 13 - 9. Yaz hit another homer in that second game and the Sox third baseman, Joe Foy, hit two. That day the Tigers and the Red Sox broke a sixty - two year old American League record for the most extra-base hits in a doubleheader with twenty-eight. The Red Sox hit six homers, nine doubles and a triple, blasting balls over and against the Green Monster all day long.

During the ride home to Holyoke, I fell asleep. I dreamed that I was pitching in Fenway Park against the Detroit Tigers' best player, Al Kaline. My long hair was in a ponytail and I wondered if the umpires would notice that I was a girl. Would they even let me throw a pitch? I looked out at my left fielder, Yaz, and noticed that the towering wall behind him was indeed a green monster with a spiked tail

that wound through the entire outfield. The monster roared at me and winked. Al Kaline stepped to the plate. He winked at me, too.

"Hum you, chuck," said George "Boomer" Scott.

"We need an out, rookie," shouted Tony C. from his post in right field.

I spun a curve to Kaline and he lined a bullet to left field. Yaz raced back to the belly of the Green Monster and casually snared the drive for the third and final out. The crowd erupted. Joe Foy and Rico Petrocelli patted me on the back.

"Way to hum, chuck," Boomer Scott said.

"Nice pitch, rookie," said Tony C.

No one cared that I was a girl.