

Chapter 19

Holy Mary

Grandma came alone to Sunday dinners at our house the next two weeks. Grandpa wasn't feeling well. The Red Sox were in fifth place with a record of 19 – 20, despite the great start by pitcher Jim Lonborg, who had already won six games. The Gas had played six games, winning five in a row by a combined score of 55 – 7, since the loss to the Bread Men of Nouveau Monde. Joey Mitchell had seven homers and had pitched another no-hitter against Mr. and Mrs. Woo's Dry Cleaners. My brother Pat had been given a game ball after hitting a bases loaded triple in a win over Food Town. I was playing again in the neighborhood games at Robinson Park but most of the kids, the guys on The Gas, weren't playing too often because Mr. Mitchell didn't want them "messing up their swings".

"I wish you could play for us," Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz said to me after I struck out Crazy Arm Dunn to end one of those games. It was rare to hear the Microphone speak like a normal person. It was kind of nice, too. "The Bread Men could really use you, Eileen. Every time we pitch anyone but Ricky Cuevas we get murdered. One more good pitcher like you and we would be at the top of the league with The Gas and the Donut Hole."

"Nice game today, Mike," I said. He had a couple of good hits and he'd made a great play in the field in the last inning. Mike was really improving.

"I'm serious, Eileen. We've only got ten players on our team. We even forfeited a game the other night when only seven of us showed up. We're desperate for players and it makes the league look bad. I'll bet the board of directors would change their minds. Think about it, Eileen."

"Hey, you guys going to look for UFOs tonight?" Duane Bennett asked. UFOs, unidentified flying objects, were very popular in our neighborhood. It wasn't like spaceships were visiting Morris Heights in 1967, but that didn't stop our imaginations from thinking that every flashing airplane light at night wasn't some spacecraft from another galaxy. Duane Bennett read every book about UFOs and in 1967 there sure seemed to be a lot of books about UFOs. Duane was convinced that an alien invasion was coming before school started in the fall. We obviously had no restrictions on who played in our neighborhood baseball games.

"Hey, I've got it, Eileen," Mike said. "Maybe you can get scooped up by a UFO tonight. The alien doctors could put you on a table and perform weird experiments on you. Maybe they could even turn you into a boy. A boy! Then you could play for Nouveau Monde and we'd win the Mighty Midget League championship. Cool idea, huh?" And just when I was thinking Mike Milkiewicz was almost normal.

Grandma helped Mom make spaghetti dinner that Sunday. "Does that make it Irish spaghetti?" Pat asked me during dessert, which was in fact, Grandma's Irish apple pie. After dinner Dad and Pat went into the living room and I helped Grandma and Mom do the dishes. It was our usual Sunday routine, except that Grandpa wasn't there that day. Usually Grandpa would work on a jigsaw puzzle with Pat while my dad read the newspaper. The "women folk" would clean up from the meal. There was no feminist movement in our house in 1967.

"Holy Mary, mother of God, your father is driving me absolutely crazy," Grandma said to Mom. Grandma was short and plump and had the whitest hair I had ever seen. She waved a wooden spoon in the air to help make her point. She continued, "When you were a little girl and complained of a cold, he'd say he had pneumonia. When I was pregnant, that man got morning sickness. He's just a big baby. Sweet mother of Jesus, grant me patience." Grandma had a whole collection of sayings connected to the Blessed Mother. Pat and I once counted seventeen different ones that Grandma used on a regular basis. Dad called her "Holy Mary" because of that, but never so she could hear it. Pat's favorite was "Oh, virgin mother, most blessed, most benevolent". My choice was, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph". Grandma would only call on that one when she was really angry.

"Isn't that a swear, Grandma?" I once asked her.

"It most certainly is not," she said. "Why, it is as if I were saying Stanley, Nora, Pat and Eileen. I'm merely listing the members of a family, the holy family. Mother of God, what do they teach you in Sunday school?" I didn't point out that she only listed the members of the holy family when the crust on one of her pies crumbled or the heating bill came in the mail or Grandpa stayed too late at the Turn Hall. It wasn't a good idea to try and win an argument with "Holy Mary". Grandma was actually five years older than Grandpa but in 1967 we didn't know

that. Grandpa didn't either. No one ever found out her true age until years later when she died and Dad looked over her birth certificate

"She was one stubborn woman, your mother was," Dad said to my mom. "She waited six extra years before she started collecting social security just so she could keep up a lie she made over fifty years ago."

Despite the seventeen different references to Mary, mother of God, Grandma wasn't really a religious woman. Except for Pat's and my first holy communions, I had never seen her in church. I asked her about that once. "The good lord knows that I have the arthritis. He certainly should; he gave it to me. And Jesus, Mary and Joseph, someday I'm going to let him know that I never could see the infinite wisdom of that part of his plan."

Grandma finished washing the last of the dishes. I dried them. Mom's job was to be the one Grandma complained to about Grandpa. "I asked him to help me peel some apples for the pie. Do you know what he said? He told me that even the sight of food makes him nauseous. This from the man who once ate a dozen pickled eggs. Oh, immaculate mother, it's like I gave birth to four children, you, your two sisters, and him."

"Could he really be sick, Mom?" my mother asked.

"Your father drives me crazy, Nora, but I do love him. I phoned Dr. Bob the other day and he told me that your father is fine. Perhaps he has a flare up of his ulcers and some heartburn but that is all." Dr. Bob was Dr. Bob Butcher, a pal of Grandpa's and a fellow member of the Turn Hall. It was obvious why he called himself Dr. Bob.

"Holy Mary, mother of God, your father is driving me absolutely crazy."