

Impossible Dreams

“A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.”

Jackie Robinson

“My grandfather always said that living is like licking honey off a thorn.”

Louis Adamic

Chapter 1

The Perfect Place for Losers

Dreams came true in 1967; wonderful dreams, bad dreams, impossible dreams.

I was 12 and my dream was baseball. Even in winter. Even in February, the frozen heart of winter. If you haven't lived in New England, Holyoke, Massachusetts to be precise, you might not know that winter lasts about 12 years.

My best friend, Joey Mitchell, and I were dreaming about spring and baseball as we piled up blue-ice snowballs.

“Eileen, I'll bet I can hit the chimney on my house 10 times before you hit it 5,” Joey said. “I'll even keep my mittens on.”

“You're on!” I answered.

Joey peppered the chimney white, hurling 9 straight strikes before I got my first hit. But then I got in a groove.

“Strike two,” I said. You got to throw until you misfired. “Sandy Koufax takes a deep breath,” I continued. “A cold breath.” I wasn't left handed like the great pitcher Sandy Koufax. Heck, I wasn't a boy either but it didn't stop me from pretending to be him. “Strike three!” My pitch clipped the chimney top, barely. “Koufax checks the runner on first base.” There was no runner at first base so I looked at my brother, Pat, building a snow fort in our backyard. My snowball scored a direct hit. “Strike four! Get nervous, Joey. You're about to become a loser.”

“Don't slip up, Eileen,” Joey said. “Don't slip.”

I didn't have a rocket arm like Joey so I had to wind up to reach the roof top. And maybe I was a little too excited to beat him because I never noticed the slick ice beneath my boots. On the pivotal throw my feet slid out and up and I landed on my bottom. Joey laughed. My ice caked missile didn't hit the chimney. Not even close. Instead, it found the center of the Mitchell's picture window shattering glass onto Joey's grandmother who was knitting a scarf.

"You know you're going to have to pay for this," Mr. Mitchell said to me later that day when he got home from his filling station. Today we call them gas stations. "But that's a pretty good arm you've got. For a girl. Too bad your brother, Pat, can't throw like that. I could use him on the team."

The team was Mitchell's Gas. Every kid in Holyoke laughed at that name, but the boys in the neighborhood who played little league baseball for "The Gas" didn't care. They got free cokes from Mr. Mitchell's filling station every time they won a game. And they won a lot of games. The team's uniforms were battleship gray with a tow truck hooked to a red sports car on the jerseys. Even my mom thought they looked cool. She called them the "cat's pajamas".

Joey pitched and hit clean up for "The Gas" and it wasn't because his dad was the coach. Joey could mash the ball into the monkey bars past left field at Robinson Park and heave a ball from center field into the swamp behind home plate. I would have given my right arm to play ball for "The Gas", but without it I wouldn't have been able to strike out half the boys in the neighborhood. Right arm or no right arm, girls did not play baseball in the Mighty Midget League in 1967. That was just the way it was. I, Eileen Romanowski, did not like the way it was.

I also didn't like losing my 25 cents a week allowance. I wouldn't get it back until springtime, April. If you haven't lived in New England, you might not know that April isn't exactly spring. But the chilly weather and the muddy fields did not stop us from playing baseball. On one of those crisp April days, after playing baseball and still broke, I wanted to buy a pack of baseball cards and a vanilla cherry coke from the soda fountain at Glickman's Drug Store. Joey Mitchell had a pocket full of dimes from cleaning windshields at his dad's filling station.

"I could lend you some money, I could," said Joey. "The homework that Old Man Enright gave me, I just don't get that dividing decimals stuff. Not like you, Eileen. You're a math whiz. It wouldn't take you 15 minutes to do it for me. Now I'm not talking charity here either. I'd pay you for it, a pack of baseball cards and a vanilla cherry coke. Eileen, it's a sweet deal."

“It’s a deal,” I said too quickly, forgetting how much Joey hated math. I could have gotten a Hershey bar or a Mallo cup, too, if I held out a little longer.

A pack of baseball cards cost 5 cents, five cards and a pink rectangle of sugared bubble gum for a nickel. Some kids scaled their cards against the brick wall at school. The owner of the card closest to the wall scooped up the losers. Other kids clothes pinned cards to their bicycles, the cards “wap, wapping” against the spokes of the wheels when the bike moved. My baseball cards were like sacred relics. I didn’t much go for girlish things, but I carried a purse my grandpa gave me. I’d put my cards in the purse and know with confidence that they were much better off there than in my pants pocket. My baseball cards always looked brand new. If they didn’t, I’d throw them away.

When I was 9 my grandpa gave me a page of autographs from the 1963 Boston Red Sox. Grandpa’s friend, one of his many friends, was a janitor at Fenway Park, home of the Red Sox. His janitor friend got the autographs and I’m guessing that my grandpa won it from him in a card game or bought him a drink. Grandpa certainly knew how much I loved baseball. He and I worshipped the Red Sox, and so he gave me what he thought was the perfect gift for a 9 year old baseball fanatic. I received his perfect gift with vexing uncertainty. The paper the autographs were on was stained and wrinkled, creased like a baseball card from a back pocket. What was even worse was that some of the players, Bill Monboquette, Dick “The Monster” Radatz, Carl Yastrezemski, and Frank Malzone, had signed their names quickly and with poor penmanship. My third grade teacher, Mrs. Haller, stressed neat loops and “con-tin-u-it-y, boys and girls”. Bill Monboquette, Dick Radatz, Yaz and Frank Malzone obviously never met Mrs. Haller.

I copied over, with continuity, every one of those autographs onto a clean, white page of paper and threw away the flawed “perfect” gift. Grandpa smiled when my dad told him I ripped up the imperfect autographs. I think it made a good story for Grandpa to tell his friends at his club.

“You know why I hate the Red Sox?” Joey asked as we sipped our vanilla cherry cokes at the counter of Glickman’s. I did know why he hated the Red Sox; he had informed me many times.

“Because their socks are actually blue and not red?” I replied.

“Really? They can’t even get that right,” Joey said. “But no, I hate them because they always lose. They’re losers, Eileen. My dad says you shouldn’t waste time with losers. He says losing is a choice and rooting for losers is a choice, too. I mean, they finished in next to last place last year. Are you kidding me?”

Joey was a New York Yankee fan and I could have reminded him that his Yankees actually finished dead last the year before but then he would have just told me, again, about the 22 championships his Yankees had won since 1918, the year that the Sox had won their last championship. Are you kidding me? I wasn't going to go there.

“Do you know why I love the Red Sox?” I said. Joey did know why I loved the Red Sox. I had informed him many times. “Because they're our team. My dad likes them. My grandpa loves them. Even my mom roots for them. Well, mostly because she thinks Tony C. is cute. They are a part of this place, Joey, just like “The Gas” is a part of our neighborhood. And by the way, “The Gas” didn't win the Mighty Midget League championship last year, did you? That must make you a loser, too.”

“Yeah, but a loser with a good arm,” Joey said and he lobbed a balled up napkin at my head. Mr. Glickman scowled at us and then winked. That was the day I got a Tony Conigliaro in my pack of baseball cards.

Tony Conigliaro, Tony C., was my favorite player. My mom thought he looked like Elvis Presley but I loved him because he hit 32 home runs for the 1966 Red Sox. Tony C. was only 21 years old and already had 79 career home runs! And my mom was wrong. Tony C. was much cuter than Elvis.

“Even if Tony C. hits 50 homers, the Red Sox are still going to finish last,” Joey said. “Last place, the perfect place for losers.”