

Chapter 22

The Living Is Not Easy

Grandpa had lost weight. Grandma always said Grandpa had “big bones” but he had a pretty big belly, too. At his birthday party at our house, I noticed that his belly was gone and Grandpa looked even older than 77, which was how old he was turning that Sunday in July.

Grandpa loved birthday parties. He would wear the funny hat with the rubber band around his chin to keep it on his large, bald head. His blue eyes would dance with life and light and he would smile the entire day. He didn’t wear the funny hat that day.

The Red Sox were sweeping a doubleheader from the Cleveland Indians. That would usually make Grandpa smile too. The victories stretched our win streak to ten games, all on the road. Jim Lonborg, “Lonnie”, won his 14th game and Carl Yastrezemski, “Yaz”, was getting clutch hit after clutch hit and playing like an MVP. The Red Sox were just a half game behind the first place Chicago White Sox. Later that night at Logan Airport in Boston, 10,000 fans would greet the victorious Sox when they returned home. Something special was happening.

At our house, Grandpa and I listened on the radio to the end of the second game. Grandpa was very quiet. Usually he munched on handfuls of peanuts and cheered each out call from the voices of the Red Sox, Ned Martin and Ken Coleman. By the end of the game, Grandpa’s white shirt would be covered with peanut shells. After the final out that day, he just said, “Kiddo, Grandpa’s going to go for a walk.”

Grandpa’s walks could last for hours. Sometimes I’d go with him and hold his hand, even when I was twelve. That day, though, I knew that Grandpa wanted to be alone.

After the Red Sox post game show, I went into the kitchen. My mom and Grandma were crying and looking out the window. Grandpa was in our backyard. He sat on the bench near the rose bushes where I fell and broke my pitching arm. He stared at the flowers. “Oh, it’s Eileen,” Mom said as she wiped her eyes. “Did the Red Sox win again, honey?”

Grandpa didn't eat his birthday dinner even though it featured all his favorite foods. He sat between Pat and me and kept one hand on Pat's shoulder and one hand on mine. We sang "Happy Birthday" and Grandpa blew out the candles on a birthday cake. Dad told a joke he heard at the police station. Grandpa's eyes twinkled a little like they always did when he smiled or laughed. Grandpa ate a small piece of chocolate birthday cake, the only thing he ate all day, but Mom and Grandma didn't touch theirs.

After dinner, Dad took Grandpa to the hospital.

I had a dream that night. Grandpa and I sat in the bleachers at a baseball game. There were players from The Gas and the Boston Red Sox in the same game. It was very mixed up, the way dreams always are. Joey Mitchell hit a towering foul ball along the first base side and Tony Conigliaro raced in from right field to try and get to it. I wore my glove and I leaned out from the top row of the stands and reached for the falling ball. I lost my balance as the ball found my glove and I felt myself falling from the bleachers. I thought of my right arm and how the bone nearly came through the skin when I fell from the Hillpepper's fence. But I didn't hit the hard pavement below the stands. Grandpa grabbed hold of my wrist and just held me.

"Nice catch, Bill," Tony C. said to Grandpa. I was confused. How did Tony C. know Grandpa's name? "How about if I autograph that baseball for your granddaughter here?" I tossed him the baseball and Grandpa gave him a pen. Just as I knew that my grandpa saved me and that I would never copy over Tony C's signature on another ball and throw the original away, I woke up.

Grandpa was in the hospital.