

## Chapter 23

### Breaking Barriers

Grandpa was in Holyoke Hospital. "You kids shouldn't worry," Mom said to us at breakfast the next morning. "Your grandfather is resting comfortably."

"I don't think anyone is too comfortable with tubes sticking in him," Dad chimed in.

"Stanley!" Mom said in a voice and tone I'd gotten used to but rarely heard her employ with Dad.

"But," Dad said, recovering and covering his tracks, "Grandpa was feeling frisky enough to ask a pretty nurse if she'd ever been a colleen." Each year the Holyoke St. Patrick's Day parade committee selected a local high school girl of Irish descent to be "colleen" of the March parade. Tank Arbuster called it a beauty pageant for girls with pale skin and freckles. The colleen wore a gown and sat on her throne on a float and waved to the thousands of parade watchers along the route. The colleen always looked frozen and unhappy by the end of the three hour odyssey through downtown Holyoke, and one year some kids, whom Grandpa called "hooligans", pelted the colleen and her court with snowballs. It seemed a hefty price to pay for some scholarship money for college and the right to wear a green corsage. Being colleen of the St. Patrick's Day parade was definitely not one of my dreams. My only dream was for Grandpa to get well.

"Pat, your grandfather wishes you good luck in the Series," Dad said. "He'd love to be there but he said the pretty nurses would miss him too much if he left the hospital." The Series was the Mighty Midget League championship series featuring the winner of the first round, The Gas, against the surprise winner of the second round, the Nouveau Monde Bakery Bread Men, in a best of three showdown. The Bread Men were unbeaten in the second round and no longer worried about forfeiting games. Three new kids, all from Puerto Rico, moved to Holyoke and joined their team, making them even stronger than before.

"Boys and girls, fasten your seatbelts. It's time to get serious. It's time for the Series," Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz announced. It was a steamy afternoon in late July and we were watching the Pepke kids swim in their pool. "Ah, what a match up! The good guys, the Bread Men of Nouveau Monde with yours truly playing third base, challenge the goliath of the Mighty Midget league,

Mitchell's Gas. Oh, it figures to be a classic battle. Underdog vs. big dog; little guys vs....."

"Microphone, would you knock it off?" Joey Mitchell interrupted. "I'm nervous enough without having to listen to the pre-game show. Your team beat us twice this year, Tank is in an awful slump, Jimmy and Ray Flanagan are on vacation of Cape Cod, and no one has beaten your guy, Ricky Cuevas, all season. We ain't the favorites, pal."

"At least we ain't a team of spics and rejects," said Wally Miller. Speed called Mike Milkiewicz, Pat and me "polocks"; Wee Willie Wintergreen, the centerfielder for The Gas, a "coon"; and every Puerto Rican a "spic". I called Speed a jerk. "That team of yours is the only one in the league where the coach doesn't have to hide his signals," Speed, the jerk, said. "All he has is to do is shout out 'bunt' or 'steal' in Spanish since no one else on the team but you, a polock third-rate, third baseman, speaks English and no one else in the league understands spic-talk."

"Way to go, Wally," I said. "That might be the most ignorant thing you've ever come up with."

"Give him a little more time," Joey said. "He's not done talking yet."

Dad didn't often talk about police work at home but that night at the dinner table he told us about a call he went on earlier that day. "I drove out to Wyckoff Park to one of those big houses with the manicured lawns." Wyckoff Park was the most exclusive area of Holyoke featuring houses that were almost mansions, at least to us. "It was the home of Dr. Cuevas. You know, his son and two nephews play in the Mighty Midget league."

"Yeah," Pat answered. "They're on the Microphone's team. We're playing them in the Series. They're great."

"Why are they on a team from the Flats if they live in the richest section of Holyoke, Dad?" I asked.

"When they moved from Puerto Rico in the spring," Dad said, "the other teams in the league were already into try-outs. The only team with any openings was the one from the Flats."

"That's how the Microphone was able to get on Nouveau Monde," I added.

Dad said, "Anyways, the Cuevas family moved to Wyckoff Park so that Dr. Cuevas could work at Holyoke Hospital. Dr. Cuevas is a surgeon. He and his wife had adopted his brother's son after his brother and sister-in-law died in a car accident. His other brother's family is living with them too while that brother goes to school at the University of Massachusetts. They're good people. But what happened to their home was not good. Last night their place was vandalized. Windows were broken. 'Spics go home' was written in red paint on the front door. Bikes were stolen. They were all very upset, understandably."

"Stanley, I don't think the children need to hear this," Mom said.

"No, Nora, I disagree. They must hear this. This is going to be their town, their world. In all my years as a cop I never felt like this, like I should apologize to those nice people for the ugliness that had been done to them."

Once I asked Grandpa why people were so cruel to Jackie Robinson when he broke baseball's color barrier.

"That's a tough question, kiddo," Grandpa said. "There are lots of reasons, I guess. Fear, ignorance, lack of experience. And you know, it's not like all the people who are afraid and ignorant and inexperienced are bad people, either. Your grandma is one of the sweetest creatures on God's earth but she couldn't see the greatness in Jackie Robinson. She calls black people 'colored' and she just doesn't accept them as equals. But then again, she doesn't like the French much either. But the good news, kiddo, is that people can change. People can change."

"Has Grandma changed?" I asked him.

"Not yet, sweetheart. But we're still working on her. We're still working on her."