

Chapter 24

The Series

Finally, it was the opening game of the Series!

But before the game that opening night, I had to endure the ceremonial festivities. The reigning colleen, Meg O'Connor, Paula's big sister, threw out the first ball. Actually, she tried to throw out the first ball. Wearing tight, green shorts that certainly got the attention of players from The Gas and Nouveau Monde, Meg rolled the baseball towards The Gas's catcher, Jeff Baker, and laughed in that way that Paula did when she was flirting with Joey Mitchell. "Must be a family thing," I thought. Paula pranced around with a look of adoration that told everyone, "I want to be just like my big sister someday".

Games were usually umpired by a teenager wearing blue jeans and a backwards baseball cap but this game had real umpires, four real umpires wearing official umpire regalia. Zipper Zwick, the photographer for the local newspaper, patrolled the sidelines with his camera. Cindy Boulware brought her new baton to the game and every time Zipper Zwick walked by she'd fling it up into the air. Cindy had the same "look at me" laugh that Paula and Meg O'Connor had. Was I the only girl in Holyoke who didn't want everyone to notice her? Commissioner Dick Ford, Grandpa's friend, urged the big crowd to buy raffle tickets. Mrs. Tweed, the high school chorus teacher, sang the national anthem. At last, it was time to play ball!

Joey Mitchell was still nervous and he did something I had never seen him do before. He threw eight straight balls, walking Ricky and Hector Cuevas, the first two batters in the opening inning. Their cousin, Jose, strode to the plate and from where I sat in the front row of the bleachers, his hulking bulk blocked out the sun. Little Timmy Mitchell sat on my lap. "Stwike out dis' guy, Joey," Timmy said. Joey didn't want to walk another hitter so he grooved a fastball and hoped for the best. Jose's eyes got huge, his swing was mighty and the ball soared out to right field. He watched it elevate one, two long seconds and uttered, "boom, boom". My brother Pat was the right fielder and he played way, way back. Before he heard Jose's cry of boom boom, Pat sprinted back another fifteen yards. That wouldn't be enough but Pat kept running. He covered more territory and just before he reached the riding lawn mower that was parked by the tool shed, he stretched for the ball, his back facing the field, three hundred and fifty feet from

home plate. The ball found his glove and Pat spun around to show us what he had done, holding the ball up high. Ricky Cuevas tagged up from second base, sprinted to third and kept right on going to home. He made it easily and the Bread Men scored the first run of the game. It would be their last run of the game for Joey settled down and blazed fastball after fastball by the Nouveau Monde hitters. The Gas scored four runs on a grand slam homer by Joey and won the opening game of the Series, 4 – 1.

Two nights later The Gas and Nouveau Monde played in the second game. The good news for The Gas was that Jimmy and Ray Flanagan returned from the Cape. The bad news was that Jimmy had gotten carsick on the way and Ray had a serious sunburn. There was more bad news for The Gas. A big part of the Bread Men's success in the second half of the season was that a new pitcher joined their team. His name was Roberto Rojo and he spun a gem in game two. Tank Arbuster broke out of his slump and got three hits but Jose "Boom Boom" Cuevas smashed two "silent" homeruns and Roberto Rojo held The Gas to one run. Boom Boom's blasts were "silent" because he didn't say a word when he launched them. He learned a lesson in the opening game. The players on the Nouveau Monde bench were not silent, however, and they shouted "boom, boom" as he circled the bases. The Series was tied up.

"I thought you weren't going to watch The Gas games this year," Muriel White said to me later in the championship week. She jumped rope and chatted and she was not the least bit out of breath. "You said you didn't care if they lost every game and now you're like their biggest fan."

"Well, I tried to not care about them," I said. Watching her flying feet elude the darting rope left me dizzy. "At the start of the season I didn't go to their games and I even wanted them to lose. Then my grandfather told me that it doesn't make me taller when others fall short. And it doesn't make me a success when others fail. And anyways, how can you root against your brother? And your friends?"

"And your boyfriend?" she asked. I gave her a smirk instead of an answer. "How's your grandfather doing, Eileen?" Muriel said.

"My mother says he's going to be okay, but I don't think so. She's really sad and when she's on the phone with her sisters, I hear her talking about cancer. I think it's pretty bad."

"Can I go to the game with you tonight?" Muriel said. "I won't even bring my jump rope."

"That'd be great."

Muriel didn't bring her jump rope to the game but she did bring a cowbell from her uncle's dairy farm. "What are you going to do with that?" I asked.

"I'm going to whack it and make a ton of noise and use it to inspire The Gas and probably embarrass you a whole lot," she answered.

"That's what I figured."

Muriel got to bang the cowbell in the first inning. Ray Flanagan and Speed Miller got on base on a couple of errors and then Joey Mitchell brought them home with a triple. Tank Arbuster singled in Joey and Jeff Baker hit a two run homerun. The Gas jumped ahead 5 – 0 and my ears hurt from the clanging bell. Joey Mitchell pitched for The Gas so it wasn't going to be easy for Nouveau Monde to get back into the game. Speed Miller's dad told anyone who would listen that the game was all over. He was wrong.

The Bread Men pecked away at the lead by scoring single runs in each of the next four innings. Joey Mitchell didn't have his tornado-like fastball and Ricky Cuevas settled down and used his curve and change up to keep The Gas hitters off balance and off the bases. Muriel's cowbell went silent but Speed's dad yelled at the umpire so much he was asked to leave the field. The Microphone got his first hit ever off of Joey in the last inning. With Hector Cuevas on third base and Jose Cuevas on second and The Gas one out away from winning the Series, Mike hit a line drive single to centerfield to drive in the tying and go ahead runs. Nouveau Monde were ahead 6 -5 and just three outs away from winning the championship of the Mighty Midget League.

"Can I borrow your cowbell, Muriel?" I asked. "I can't just sit here. It reminds me too much of last year."

I noticed that Timmy Mitchell watched the last inning with his eyes closed. "I can see da' game wit my eahs," he told me. The first thing Timmy heard was a groan from Speed Miller. Ricky Cuevas struck him out on a slow curve. One away. Joey Mitchell drew a walk and immediately stole second base. The tying run was

in scoring position. I banged the bell for Tank Arbuster who once told me that the only time he ever got nervous was when he noticed that the school cafeteria was running low on cinnamon buns. Tank hit a twisting, sky-high pop up that Mike Milkiewicz caught in foul territory. Two away. Jeff Baker stepped to the plate, our last chance. I knew how hard The Gas worked and played and dreamed for this moment and I prayed for them. I prayed for The Gas and I prayed for Grandpa. And I rang the cowbell on every pitch. On a 2 – 2 count, a curveball that didn't curve struck Jeff Baker in the shoulder. The winning run went to first base and my brother walked unsurely into the batter's box. His knees shook and he dropped the bat.

"Time out!" the umpire called. "You can pick up your bat, son" he said to Pat. Pat had not played much during the Series. The rules stated that every player had to get in each game, but Pat played only a single inning per game and had not even gotten one at bat. I felt sick to my stomach and too nervous to bang the cowbell. Pat looked even more nervous, like Dad had brought out the whip.

"Why don't you watch da' game wit' you eahs, too, Eiween?" Timmy said.

Grandpa once told me that his happiest moments in life were when he got to see the people he loved be happy. I knew what Grandpa meant for I was never happier than when Pat roped a curve ball just inside the first base bag and out into right field. Timmy Mitchell's ears told him to open his eyes and watch his big brother score easily and behold the plodding Jeff Baker as he picked up speed, rounded third base and charged hard for home plate. The throw from the cutoff man in short right field was on line but it bounced once before it landed in the mitt of Hector Cuevas. Hector pivoted around and reached for some part of Jeff Baker to tag for the out but Jeff slid beneath him, gliding past the catcher and reaching out for the back corner of home plate. "Safe!" the umpire shouted.

Grandpa would have been deliriously happy watching us.