

Chapter 25

The Lighthouse

The Gas had been champions of the Mighty Midget League just a few days when Pat asked me, "Eileen, what's a death bed?" We were playing wiffle ball in the backyard and we were angled away from the Hillpepper's house.

"Why do you want to know that?" I had just slammed another homerun over the fence into the Mitchell's yard.

"Mom was on the phone this morning with Aunt Rosie and she said that Grandpa is on his death bed." Pat's face told me he knew exactly what the expression meant. Later that night we would visit one.

Before dinner Mom said she wanted to speak with each of us separately. That was a tactic that Dad, veteran cop, used with us when a jello was missing from the fridge, or one of Mom's ceramic creations was broken by our "rough housing", or some kid from the neighborhood had stolen one of the fourteen gnome statues from the Hillpepper's perfect front lawn.

"Eileen, you're going to have to do a lot of growing up tonight," Mom said when she isolated me. "This will probably be the last time you'll see your Grandpa, and it's going to be very hard for you. We're going to the hospital and you and Pat are going to say good-bye."

I didn't eat any dinner that night, not even dessert which was red jello with pieces of fruit cocktail floating in it. I was in no hurry to grow up.

"Is that the kiddos?" Grandpa whispered when Mom ushered us into the hospital room. On the nightstand near Grandpa's bed there were photographs of each of his seven grandchildren. Grandma sat in the only chair in the small room. She tried to smile at us. I moved behind Mom. Pat went directly to Grandpa and

held his hand. Grandpa had thick wrists and strong hands from decades of hard work but I noticed that even his hands were old, tired and gray.

Grandpa couldn't say much so Pat spoke to him about the Series and his game winning hit, about the neighborhood gossip and how Mrs. Mitchell was going to have another baby, even about a jigsaw puzzle he started that morning. It was a scene of a lighthouse on Cape Cod. I thought of Grandpa and Pat and how they would work on a 500 piece jigsaw puzzle every Sunday and how Grandpa once told Pat that even though many puzzle pieces looked the same that each piece was different, each one was special. "Just like people," he said. Maybe Pat was thinking of that, too, for he smiled. I had always figured that I was the brave one in our family but I couldn't move a muscle.

My mother nudged me towards the hospital bed. Grandpa reached for my hand and when I took it, he squeezed. I wanted to smile but I couldn't. I didn't tell Grandpa about the Red Sox, how Yaz and Lonnie and Boomer and Tony C. were playing amazing ball. I didn't tell him how everyone was calling this "The Impossible Dream" year. I didn't tell him that for the rest of my life every time I would watch or listen to a Sox game that I would think of him. I didn't tell him that I loved him.

"Don't you worry, Eileen," Grandpa said. "I know."

Pat and I went home from the hospital that night. We stayed awake late and put together the lighthouse puzzle. "This reminds me of Grandpa," Pat said as he snapped in the final piece of the old lighthouse. I thought he meant all the many puzzles and all the sweet Sundays he and Grandpa shared but Pat surprised me yet again. "Grandpa will always be my lighthouse," he said. Our grandfather died the next afternoon.

In the days that followed, at the wake and at the funeral, no one said to me, "Your grandfather will always be there like a lighthouse, like your guardian angel. You will see him in your dreams and hear his words forever. It will be like he never died. He will never leave you." If someone had said that to me I would have been spooked by it and I would have gotten as far away from that person as I could. But they would have been right.