

Chapter 27

Tony C.

The Red Sox won again Friday night, beating the California Angels 3 -2. The impossible dream, that the lowly Boston Red Sox could have a magical season, was real. That night it became a nightmare.

Pat and I were in my room listening to the ballgame on our radio. Dad was at work and Mom was on the telephone with Mrs. Glassman discussing meat loaf recipes. It was a close game but I wasn't paying much attention. When it happened I was sprawled on my bed reading Sport magazine, eating barbecued potato chips and drinking Hires root beer. I was in heaven but that was all about to change.

"Eileen! Eileen! Something bad just happened," Pat said.

The something bad that had happened was a bean ball striking Tony Conigliaro in his left cheekbone, just below the eye socket. Pat and I moved to within inches of the AM radio. Tony C. wasn't moving so they put him on a stretcher and took him out of a stunned and silent Fenway Park.

"He's going to be okay," Pat said. "He's got to be okay, right?" I didn't say anything. "Remember when Ray Flanagan got hit in the butt by one of Biggie Bob's fastballs?" Pat said. "Ray thought he'd never be able to sit down again but on the next pitch he stole second base. He even slid into the bag."

Tony Conigliaro had 20 homeruns and 67 RBI at the moment that Jack Hamilton, the Angel's pitcher, lost control of the fastball that nearly killed the Red Sox right fielder. Tony C. would lose sight in his left eye and he wouldn't play another baseball game in 1967. He couldn't play in 1968 either, and although he would come back in 1969, Tony Conigliaro would never again be the same, wonderful ballplayer. Of course, I didn't know any of that in 1967. I didn't know that he would retire from baseball in 1975 because his eyesight was permanently damaged. I didn't know that in 1982 Tony C. would have a heart attack at the age of 37 and then a stroke that would be put him into a coma. I didn't know that the coma would last for eight years before he would die at the age of 45.

I went to bed that night without knowing any of that or anything more about Tony C's condition. Mom came to check on me. "Eileen, have you been crying?" she asked.

"No," I lied. "I'm okay."

I didn't shed one tear when Grandpa died. At the wake and at the funeral, I held it all in. I felt like I was watching someone else in a movie and that that someone else moved in slow motion. That someone was me. I saw other people crying. Aunt Rose, Aunt Mary, Mom, Grandma, even my brother Pat all cried and I wondered, "What's wrong with me?"

That August night in 1967 when Tony C's season ended, I cried long and hard. Yes, I cried some schoolgirl with a crush tears for Tony Conigliaro, but even at twelve I knew that he wasn't who I was really crying for. I cried for Grandpa.

The Boston Red Sox went on to win their next seven games.