

Chapter 2

A Loser's Lunch

I didn't want to sit at the loser's lunch table in John F. Kennedy Elementary School, the newly named John F. Kennedy Elementary School. Our school's old name was Rock Valley Elementary in honor of the area's lousy soil. After the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, our school changed its name to honor his memory. So did a park, a shopping center, and Holyoke's wastewater treatment plant.

My memory turned to my friend, Laura Laskey. Every day since third grade I would sit with Laura for lunch at one of the non-loser tables. I'd trade her my dill pickle and a dessert for her peanut butter sandwich, every day until three weeks before when she moved to Louisiana. My mom kept packing pickles in my lunch box even though I never touched them. Since then finding a seat, any seat, in the JFK cafetorium was the worst part of my school day. Oh, it was called the cafetorium because it was part cafeteria and part auditorium. Getting a seat there was always tricky no matter what it was called.

That day was no exception. Since the day Laura left, my plan was to race through the lunch line and claim a seat at the nearest empty table. As the cafetorium filled up, so would my table. But Mr. Enright asked me to clap the erasers after math class. As I entered the lunchroom, it was wall to wall noise. Even the guys at the so-called loser's lunch table, boys who pretended they were astronauts orbiting the earth, looked happy, like NASA had just cleared them for launch.

I worried about lunch. There were no empty tables. There were few empty seats. I put my head down and moved towards the nearest one.

"You can't sit there," Paula O'Connor said. "That seat is saved for Susan Gross." The other girls at the table all worshipped Paula and laughed at everything she said. They laughed. "Don't you get it, Eileen? That seat is saved for Susan."

I got it. Susan Gross talked to herself, loudly. Her family owned a horse farm and she wore giant boots with dried manure on them. Susan Gross was also absent that day. Paula was sending me a message. She had been sending me the same message ever since I beat her by five yards in the 50 yard dash in gym class.

"You can't sit here, Eileen. That's Susan's seat. Why don't you sit with the boys? You can talk baseball." The laughter of Paula's girls drowned out my response.

The boy's table was made up of most of the players from Mitchell's Gas. Joey Mitchell looked at me, a question in his eyes, as I took the seat in between the Flanagan twins. "What are you doing?" he said under his breath.

"Is this seat saved for Susan Gross, too?" I said.

"What?" answered Jimmy Flanagan. "Susan Gross smells like a farm. And girls don't usually sit here, not even you, Eileen."

"It's okay, Jimmy," Joey said.

"Then she sits next to you." Jimmy got up and I slid over to this seat. He moved down to the end of the table.

"So, Eileen, what are you doing here?" Joey asked me.

"She's sitting with you, her boyfriend," Wally "Speed" Miller said. Wally played second base for The Gas. Wally insisted that everyone refer to him as "Speed" because he thought it would make him faster and allow him to steal more bases. Susan Gross wearing her giant, crud-caked boots was faster than Speed. Even Tank Arbuster, the 200 pound right fielder for The Gas stole more bases than Speed.

"I'm not his girl friend, Wally."

"Oh, sorry. My mistake. I forgot. You're not a girl." The other guys did not worship Wally "Speed" Miller and they almost never laughed at anything he said. But they did laugh this time. Even Joey Mitchell laughed.

But then Joey said, "Knock it off, Speed. If Eileen wasn't a girl she'd be our starting second baseman and you'd be on the bench with splinters in your butt."

"Do you really think any girl could ever make The Gas?" Ray Flanagan said. "That's just crazy."

"No, I don't think any girl could make The Gas," Joey said. "But Eileen could."

"What do you say, Eileen?" Tank Arbuster asked. "You think you're good enough to play for The Gas?"

I almost never thought about what I wanted to say before I said it. My grandpa once said, "Eileen, there are no stop signs on the short road between your brain and that mouth of yours." This time I thought for a while. "Do you remember last season when you lost the championship game against The Donut Hole?"

"I just ate three lunches," Tank said. "You want me to puke them all up?"

“It was the very last inning,” I said. “The Hole led 7-6. Ray was on first and Jimmy was on second. There were no outs. Joey was on deck. Eric Cutler pinch hit for Tank so he could get a bunt down and move the winning run into scoring position.”

“I know. I know,” Ray Flanagan said. “Only problem was Cutler popped up his bunt and Jimmy and I got nailed as part of the only triple play in Mighty Midget League history. End of story. End of season.”

“Well, I can’t hit a ball half as far as Tank or throw a fastball half as fast as Joey,” I said. “But I can drop down a bunt. I can drop down a bunt. But all I could do that day was root for you guys. And when The Hole swarmed the mound and lifted up Tank’s cousin, Biggie Bob...”

“Hey, they deserved the trophy just for doing that,” Joey said.

“When they celebrated, going crazy out there, and you all just looked stunned, well, you guys weren’t the only ones wiping away tears.”

“Hey, she cried!” Speed said. “Wow, she is a girl, after all.”

“Drop dead,” Tank said. “She cried. Big deal. So did I. So did I.”