

Chapter 3

Curveballs

I shattered my arm, my throwing arm, the summer between third and fourth grades. My brother, Pat, and I were playing home run derby in our fenced in backyard. We used a fat, red plastic bat we called “The Bonger” and five wiffle balls. When the last homer soared over the chain link fence, whoever hit it retrieved all the wiffle balls from the neighbor’s yard. That was the way we always did it.

The neighbors were the Hillpeppers, minutes away from spending the last months of their lives in some nursing home. My dad made us promise to get out of the street whenever Mr. Hillpepper drove his Buick in the neighborhood. “Don’t just leave the road,” Dad told us. “Go straight for the backyard. That man is a menace behind the wheel.”

He was a menace in his yard, too. Mr. Hillpepper’s grass was like a golf green and when one of our balls landed on it, it was war. The Hillpepper’s was no man’s land. The rules of engagement were simple. If I could get to the balls before Mr. Hillpepper opened his back door, the battle was mine. If the door opened before I achieved victory, the balls were left as spoils of war.

That day I hit the final home run of my summer.

“You get them, Eileen,” Pat said. “I’ll watch out for Mr. Hillpepper.”

Our neighborhood was a post World War II development called Morris Heights. There were three streets in Morris Heights: Edbert Road, Edward Drive, and Elton Avenue, named after the Morris brothers whose construction company built the small, ranch style homes on quarter acre lots.

I left our fenced in backyard and snuck around the bushes by my parents’ bedroom. I made sure the door of the Hillpepper’s house was shut, and then I raced for the farthest ball. It was a time-tested strategy. Scooping up the first, second and third balls, I pivoted and fired three strikes back over the fence.

“Hurry up! I think he’s coming. The light is on in the kitchen,” Pat said. “Hurry.”

The last balls were Pat’s homers. They had barely cleared our fence.

“Too late, Eileen. Leave them.” The door opened and I was supposed to retreat into the Mitchell’s yard, diving behind the thick wall of shrubs that separated the Mitchell’s and Hillpepper’s properties. Instead, I gathered the last two balls, tucked them into my shirt, and climbed up the fence. “What are you doing? He’s on the steps. Just leave the balls!” The tops of the chain links were V-shaped, sharpened invitations to the emergency room. Careful to not step on the fence prongs, I inserted my foot into an open space just below the dangerous spikes. I turned my head to the sound of Mr. Hillpepper’s cane banging on the metal awning over his door. My top foot came out of its sneaker and I fell from the fence. I crashed onto the stone walkway by my mom’s rose bushes. My right arm was a twisted mess.

I came back home later that day with my arm in a hard cast from my shoulder to my wrist. A shopping bag full of balls: baseballs, footballs and wiffle balls was by my bed. Attached to the bag was a note that read: “Get better and play with these. So sorry. Your neighbor.” Mr. Hillpepper had surprisingly nice handwriting.

The next spring my repaired arm could throw the “crookedest” curveballs in Morris Heights. At first, my arm ached after every pitch but I was playing baseball again and it was worth the pain.

“Two outs, two on, last of the ninth. Speed Miller grabs a bat and digs in against Eileen ‘she can’t really be a girl, can she’ Romanowski.” The voice was Mike “The Microphone” Milkiewicz and he routinely announced our pick-up games. The Microphone would be playing third base or waiting on the bench to hit or even up at the plate and he still would use his “ballgame on the radio” voice to describe the action. It could get very annoying. Mike wasn’t a good enough player to make The Gas but our Saturday afternoon pick-up games accepted anyone, even girls.

“Eileen winds up and delivers. The first pitch is fouled off. Oh, Speed was fooled badly on that one.”

“Shut up, Microphone,” Speed said, “or I’ll hit a line drive off your chin.” The Microphone never completely shut up. He’d just turn down the volume.

“It’s 8 to 7, us,” Mike said, his voice just a notch quieter than before. “The Flanagan twins are on second and third and boy can they motor. A base hit should win it for the bad guys.”

“I can still hear you, Milkiewicz,” Speed said.

Pick-up rules allowed the pitcher to throw as hard as he, or in my case, as she wished; however, the hitter could just refuse to swing at any pitch and wait. There was no umpire and the taking of pitches, waiting for a better, slower pitch, kept flamethrowers like Joey Mitchell and Tank Arbuster's cousin, Biggie Bob, from overpowering the hitters. But my fastball wouldn't get Wally "Speed" Miller out, so I went to my crooked arm curveball.

"Here comes the bender," The Microphone said. "Oh, Wally misses it by a foot. Strike two! The crowd goes wild!" There was no one watching us, just 13 boys and one girl playing the sweet game of pick-up baseball on a cool, Saturday afternoon in April.

"One pitch, one more pitch. Hero or zero, which will Wally "Speed" Miller, be? Everyone knows the curveball is coming. Can Wally do anything with it? Eileen Romanowski tucks her blonde hair under her Sox cap. She glances at the base runners, those annoying Flanagans. She begins her motion andstrike three. Ballgame over! Good guys win! This is Mike "The Microphone" Milkiewicz signing off. Don't you just love baseball?"