

Chapter 4

Sunday Dinner

Grandpa and Grandma ate Sunday dinner with us at our house every week. Grandpa and Grandma, William and Mary Donahue, were born in Dublin, Ireland but they met in a factory in Holyoke, U.S.A. Working side by side on machines that made paper, they fell in love and got married in 1923.

Grandma was from a large family. She had seven brothers and three sisters and she loved to tell stories about how she and her sisters all slept in the same, small bed. Pat and I found that hard to believe; Grandma was a very big woman.

Grandpa was an orphan. His mother died in childbirth, and just a few days after Grandpa was born, his heartbroken father hanged himself. Grandpa loved to tell stories, too, but he never told us that sad one.

“A tattooed man came into the Turn Hall yesterday,” Grandpa said, starting one of his stories over Sunday dinner. The Turn Hall was a bar or “club” in Springdale, a section of Holyoke close to the Connecticut River. Grandpa was a bartender there before he retired and many of his stories were about the intriguing characters who visited the Turn Hall.

“Who is the tattooed man?” Pat asked.

“Ah, kiddo, it’s not so much who he is but what he is.”

“What do you mean, Grandpa?” I said.

“He’s a visionary, Eileen. Do you know what a visionary is?”

“Sure, someone who sees stuff, like into the future,” I answered.

“Like Nostril-damus,” Pat added.

“Nostradamus,” I corrected.

“The tattooed man isn’t quite like Nostradamus,” Grandpa said, “but he does see into the future. And then he tattoos his visions all over his body. He has one from the Depression and one of Pearl Harbor. He’s got the war in Korea and assassination of JFK, a space capsule orbiting the earth. Even a color television set. And that’s just on his chest. We wouldn’t let him take his pants off.”

“The only problem, Bill,” my dad said, “is how do you know he didn’t do those tattoos after those things happened?”

“The lie detector test,” Grandpa answered. “I looked him straight in the eyes when he told me.”

“Did he have any tattoos of things that haven’t happened yet, Grandpa?” I asked.

“Sure, kiddo. On his right arm he’s got the words *Red Sox* and the year *67*. That means that this year is our year.”

“Dad, you say that this year is our year, every year,” my mom said.

“And one year I’ll be right, sweetheart. So tell me, what’s wrong with believing?”

“There’s sure nothing wrong with these mashed potatoes,” Grandma said. We all eyed the bowl of mashed potatoes and even Pat understood that Grandma was doing her United Nation’s thing. I let the peace last for about ninety seconds.

“I’m going to next Saturday’s tryout for The Gas,” I said.

“That’s great, honey,” Mom said. “I know how much you love to watch the boys play.”

“No, Mom. I’m not going to watch the boys play. I’m going to play with the boys. You know, try out for this year’s team.”

Pat coughed up some of the mashed potatoes. “She can’t, Dad!” he said. “She can’t. She’s a girl! You can’t let her!” Pat was trying out too. The night before I saw him making a list of the kids he’d be competing with for one of the precious spots on this year’s team. My presence would not help his chances.

“I think he’s right, Eileen,” Dad said. My father was an ex-marine and a present policeman for the city of Holyoke. Dad didn’t call himself a policeman though; he was simply a cop, an ex-marine, cop who upheld rules and lived by the rules. If Dad said bedtime was nine o’clock, he didn’t mean five minutes after nine. “There are no girls in the Mighty Midget League, Eileen. I’m pretty sure the rules say ‘no’. I know you’re a good player. I know you love baseball, but rules are.....”

“I know, Dad. Rules are rules. But maybe the rules can be changed,” I said.

“Like Jackie Robinson,” Grandpa said. “Eileen could be Holyoke’s Jackie Robinson.” Jackie Robinson was Grandpa’s hero. The first black ballplayer in the major leagues, he changed the face of baseball.

“I don’t think so, Bill,” Dad said. “I don’t want my daughter to take the abuse Jackie Robinson took. I don’t want my daughter laughed at. I don’t want her hurt. The league has been around for a long time and no girl has ever played.”

“I could be the first, Dad.”

“No, and that’s final.”

“Stan, why don’t you let me talk to Dick Ford,” Grandpa said. “He’s the league president. Dick stops in at the Turn Hall a lot and I....”

“Bill, I wish you wouldn’t encourage her, okay? I’ve made up my mind.”

“Would anyone like more mashed potatoes?” Grandma asked.