

August 1972: The Showdown

Excerpt from the memoir The Road to Cooperstown, St. Martin's Press

The seventh-floor waiting room at Beaumont Hospital looked out over a parking lot that on a Tuesday in early August was wet with rain. Everything about it whispered. There was no television, just cushioned chairs and couches and homey lamps that gave the curtained room a soft, sleepy glow. The reading material consisted of tattered issues of *Highlights for Children* and an abundant supply of *Illustrated Bible Stories*.

Dad had brought my sister Colleen and me to visit Mom. It was two days after her surgery. We stopped first in the fragrant, flower-filled gift shop, where he treated us to a box of Andes mints, thin slabs of chocolate heaven wrapped in Christmas-green foil. "Share, and don't eat them all at once," he said as he headed to her room.

It was her sixth craniotomy, and Colleen and I knew the routine. If Mom felt well enough, she would return with Dad to the waiting room, shuffling down the hall in her slippers and robe, Dad on one side bracing her, the wheeled IV stand on the other, clenched in her left hand, the scepter of the frail. If not, he would return alone and try to sneak us into her room. No one under fourteen was permitted. But occasionally a nurse would say nothing or pretend not to see our familiar faces. Or Dad would plead ignorance.

That evening the nurse at the counter never looked up as I walked tall on my toes and tried to keep my tennis shoes from squeaking on the flecked tile floor. It was a solemn walk to Mom's room. The mournful moans of an elderly man filled the hall, blending with the electronic chatter and canned laughter of several televisions. Colleen toted her Barbie doll and held tight to Dad's hand. I clutched the mustard-yellow transistor radio on which I had hoped to hear the rain-delayed Tigers-Brewers game.

I looked into darkened hospital rooms as we passed, and my eyes met those of a hollow grandmother who was out of bed and silhouetted ghostlike by light from the window behind her. I turned away and stared at the floor and then felt ashamed, realizing too late that she had smiled.

No matter how many times you see your mom with her head shaven, the sight still shocks you. It might have been different if she had been bald all the time, but between surgeries her black hair would grow back — first prickly short, then like a brush cut, then stylish in a Sandy Duncan kind of way, then long enough so she could set a few curlers, and then it would be time for another operation and she would be as bald again as she was that night, with the surgeon's freshly stitched, horseshoe-shaped incision hidden beneath a gauze wrap that favored the left side of her skull.

Here eyes perked when she saw us.

“Happy birthday, momma.”

We eased ourselves between the safety bars on opposite sides of her elevated bed. She pecked us softly on the lips, and we took care not to bump her bandaged head.

It was her fiftieth birthday, and we had made a card of blue construction paper and silver glitter. Dad had brought two cans of Altes beer. He pulled the tab on one, and gave it to her. It was part of the ritual. He brought beer after surgeries. “Hell, she deserves one,” Dr. Latimer had told him.

“How are my hotsy-totsies?” she asked, her voice thin.

“Hotsy-totsies” — the word came from a song she had been singing since we were little. It was babyish but we were in the hospital and didn’t complain.

Mom asked Colleen what she had done that day, about adventures with friends, about stray animals or injured birds she might have come upon. She asked me about my St. Malachy team, forgetting that the season was over.

“Oh, that’s right. Well, how are your Tigers doing?”

“They beat Boston. It was on television. It was the Monday Night Game of the Week. They’re in first place and Mickey Lolich got his eighteenth win.”

“Wow!” she said, trying to sound excited.

“If he keeps that up,” I added, “he could be going to the Hall of Fame.”

Dad’s shoulders tightened. He sensed where this might be heading. I had been pestering him unsuccessfully all summer to take me to Cooperstown, New York, and the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

Mom’s surgeries often brought out the worst in me. Dad probably remembered how during an earlier hospitalization I had slugged Roman Rizzo in the stomach at school while Ron Perkanski held his arms behind his back.

Dad narrowed his eyes at me, trying to will my silence.

I hadn’t planned on pressing the Hall of Fame issue at the hospital. But such things had a way of surfacing. Summer was disappearing and with it any hope of going soon. School would start in a month, and then we’d have to wait a year. That’s a long time when you’re a kid and you can remember most of your Christmases and count almost all of your birthdays on your fingers. With Mom being sick again and Joey having gotten a low draft number, everybody had forgotten about Cooperstown. Everybody except me.

“Maybe when you’re all better and you get out, we can go the Hall of Fame,” I said, my voice perky, as if the Hall of Fame were something she would enjoy, her reward for enduring another surgery.

Dad preempted Mom, his voice hospital-quiet but stern, that mixture parents use when they want you to know they mean business but don't want other adults to know how nasty they can get.

"I've already told you, we can't go this year."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"Un-uh."

"Well, I'm telling you now. We're not going."

Mom danced her good fingers through my hair.

"Tommy," Dad said through his teeth. But he said nothing more.

"I'm sorry it's been so rough on you two," Mom said.

Joey drove us home that evening. Dad stayed at the hospital, sitting in a chair and reading the *Detroit News* beside Mom as she slept.

Rain pelted the canvas room of my brother's red Austin-Healey Sprite, nearly drowning the sound of Three Dog Night singing about Jeremiah the bullfrog. Joey had one hand permanently on the steering wheel and the other going from the wheel to the Kool cigarette pressed between his lips to the tray brimming with butts, where he dropped ashes with a flick of his middle finger. He had bought the car from a guy at the butcher's shop where he worked and had marked its bumper with a MCGOVERN sticker, which was replaced with a MCGOVERN-EAGLETON sticker, which after Eagleton withdrew was replaced with a MCGOVERN-SHRIVER version, which outlived the car itself.

The little vehicle jerked when he shifted gears and shook when he drove fast. Approaching stoplights, you felt as if you might slip under the truck ahead of you. But you also felt cool, driving with your brother in a car that made other people look.

I thought of asking Joey to take me to Cooperstown. But I knew he had more pressing matters in his life. He had become a man and I remained a boy, and it felt as if it would always be that way, that our lives were destined to be unequal, he always ahead of me, I always on the other side of the backstop. In a couple weeks Joey would start art classes at the community college and a job as a custodian at a children's hospital. He and his girlfriend had begun planning their wedding. His life was accelerating as mine stalled. He had gone from being one of us kids playing at Robert Frost School to someone more like a parent, driving and smoking and being in charge of me.

It was dark, and the wipers struggled to clear the windshield. We could barely see through the downpour. But one thing had become clear. I wouldn't be going to Cooperstown anytime soon.