

CHAPTER 8: Wildflowers

After Grampa Jack died I started to wonder if cancer was contagious. I had spent so much time with him and hugged him all the time and I didn't know if it was like the flu or something that I could catch. My mom told me that cancer is never, ever contagious. She talked to me a lot after Grampa Jack died because she knew how much I loved him. I also started having bad dreams after he died.

If my mom dies, which of course I hope she doesn't and which I really don't think will happen now that they have this new drug to get rid of her cancer, I'll have to remind myself again of what she said to me when Grampa Jack died. "A person never really dies if you don't forget them," my mom said. "They never die if you keep them alive in your heart and in your memories. They stay with you always."

I've learned this past year that you have to love people as much as you can when they're still here, and you have to tell them you love them every chance you get and never ever forget them after they're gone. It sounds easy, but it's not, not always. In fact, sometimes it's as hard as hitting a knuckleball pitch, which takes concentration and focus.

I'm thinking now that maybe my mom knew she was sick for a while before she told anyone. But she's always seemed to understand a lot about dying and how to cope with that kind of stuff. As she told me



SNOWMAN ON THE PITCHER'S MOUND

after Grampa Jack died, “Dying wasn’t your Grampa’s choice, Tyler. It’s not like people leave you on purpose when they die. Sometimes people just die.”

But I still couldn’t help but feel like he left me on purpose. I’ve been trying to tell myself over and over that he didn’t. It’s hard to convince even yourself of things sometimes. I blamed myself for Grampa Jack leaving. I didn’t think he would have left me if I had been a better fielder or made my bed more when I spent the night at his house or got better grades in math. My mom kept telling me over and over that it wasn’t my fault and that Grampa Jack did not leave me on purpose, he didn’t want to die.

I still miss him. He had time to go to almost all my games, even when I was in T-ball. I still cry sometimes when I think about him, even when I’m not dreaming, but I never cry in front of anyone because I’m a baseball player and baseball players are tough. As the actor Tom Hanks said in that movie *A League of Their Own*, about the women who played baseball when their husbands were off fighting World War II, “There’s no crying in baseball!” It was a funny movie, we watched the DVD a while ago. My mom loves it. And it’s true. There is no crying in baseball and I like that about baseball. There’s nothing wrong with being tough sometimes.

Mom kept telling me after Grampa Jack died that dying is a “natural part of life” and that it’s OK even for a ballplayer to cry. But I’m trying to be more like my dad. I’ve never seen him cry, except at Grampa Jack’s funeral. That was the only time. It’s weird to see your dad cry, but I understood why he was crying. His dad was lying up there dead. It must have been so hard for him. I just didn’t look at him when he was crying and I think he appreciated that.

There were a bunch of flowers at Grampa Jack’s funeral and at their house afterward, but I hardly noticed them because I was so sad that day. I notice flowers now, all the time. I stop and smell them but so many people don’t. Especially guys. Like it’s sissy to like flowers. That’s stupid. Flowers are cool. It’s important to notice and smell flowers and



appreciate how cool they are, especially tulips because they're so funky and different from the other flowers you see. And how cool are leaves? Oak leaves, which there are a lot of around here because Iowa has lots of oak trees, are especially cool.

Even though dying is a part of nature, I still think nature is so unbelievably cool. There are these amazing wildflowers growing in the vacant lot behind the Little League park that bloom in the spring and summer, and usually before games I take a minute or two to just look out there while the other guys are warming up or taking batting practice. They're yellow and purple, mostly, and they stand out because they're totally surrounded by all these ugly weeds. I like it when the wind kicks up and blows the flowers back and forth. They look like they're dancing, or like waves of water, and the weeds just seem to follow the flowers back and forth.

I don't tell the other guys I'm looking at the wildflowers because they'd probably just laugh and give me a hard time about it. But every time I look out at those wildflowers it gives me a good feeling. Even though they don't live long, wildflowers don't complain. They make the best of things while they're here.

My mom is like a wildflower. She's pretty and carefree and she doesn't let any ugly weeds get her down and she doesn't complain. She makes the best of it. I think she's actually handled the fact that she is sick better than anyone else in our family has handled her being sick. When the wind starts to blow in my mom's life she just dances with it like those wildflowers at The Yard.

