Glory Days

The ‘Bad News Bears’ had nothing on us. We were bad. Well, we started out bad anyway. Over the span of a few years we improved dramatically. In the late 70’s I joined a women’s softball league in Wildwood Crest. Our team consisted of Sandy Glock, Bernie Olson, Mary Vey, Amy Bianca Russo, Terry Donovan, and myself, just to name a few.

Our team went through our share of coaches, understandably so. The season always started in the spring and the weather was beautiful for playing early evening games. The league was great. We knew, and were friends with, all of our opponents. Peggy Kelly, Patti Steiger, Maria Mattera, Dot Carano, and Janice Tomlin, gave us a run for our money. But my all time idol was Marie Flacco. She had the most powerful arm and hit the ball with much power.

Although our team went on to win some championships in those years, my fondest memories remain in the early years, when it was just a bunch of women out to have a good time. Yes, Mr. Buttermaker would have been proud.

This story is dedicated to the memory of Bernie Olson and Peggy Kelly

The Empty Lot

I was warned not to go there and I did not listen. “You don’t want to see it,” people said (which was an obvious sign sent to protect me). But I ignored it because I wanted to see it for myself, to know for sure that it was really gone. Thus, I came to a stop on Park Boulevard, got out, and leaned against my truck for a minute while I processed the sight of the empty lot across the street. Nothing remained but three support beams sticking out of the ground, a stark reminder of what used to stand there. After taking a couple of pictures for posterity I debated: should I walk around it, or was this good enough?

My morbid curiosity got the better of me. I stepped onto the lot, rather, onto the dusty slab of terrazzo, which was all that remained of a dining room that bustled with activity all of my life. How many times did I walk across it in various capacities - family member, dishwasher, busboy, cook, bartender, and patron? Now it was cut in half, chopped off at the east end, and I stood at the edge and looked over, as if on a cliff. I spotted a chunk of the terrazzo protruding out of the dark sand and stooped to pick it up. Turning it around in my hand, I thought about pocketing it, but instead returned it to its previous resting place.

“Don’t you want to save a piece,” said a voice behind me.

Startled, I turned to see a man standing behind me, dressed in khaki pants and shirt, with the sleeves rolled up, revealing muscular arms. He was older, of medium height, and deeply tanned, which suggested to me that he was someone who enjoyed working out of doors. His features bore a striking resemblance to my own.

“What did you say?”

“Don’t you want to save a piece,” he repeated.

“What for?” I said. “I didn’t even want to come here in the first place.”

“Oh, you’re looking at this all wrong,” he said, his voice rising. “You’re looking at this all wrong.”

“Don’t you want to save a piece,” I repeated.

“You’re looking at this all wrong.”

“Do you know that I saw this empty lot once upon a time?”

“Not it isn’t,” said the old man. “Like I said, I had a family. My wife and I raised six children in the house next door. They all worked here and then raised families of their own. We got to see some of our grandchildren go into medicine, law, and education and all of them passed through here at one time or another while going to school. And, many of them stayed and helped to run our business. I like to think of all of them as my legacy. This business was a proud accomplishment, but it’s not the only thing I would like to be remembered for.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I finally admitted.

“Let’s have a hard time understanding why they didn’t leave the building alone. Because it contained so much history, why couldn’t it have been left to stand as it was?”

“No, it hasn’t taken away the history or the memories.”

“But it hasn’t taken away the history or the memories.”

I swept my arm in an arc around the lot. “Now, your legacy is gone.”

“No, it isn’t,” said the old man. “Like I said, I had a family. My wife and I raised six children in the house next door. They all worked here and then raised families of their own. We got to see some of our grandchildren go into medicine, law, and education and all of them passed through here at one time or another while going to school. And, many of them stayed and helped to run our business. I like to think of all of them as my legacy. This business was a proud accomplishment, but it’s not the only thing I would like to be remembered for.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I finally admitted. “But I am having a hard time understanding why they didn’t leave the building alone. Because it contained so much history, why couldn’t it have been left to stand as it was?”

“The change was inevitable,” he answered, “but it hasn’t taken away the history or the memories.”

He reached for the piece of terrazzo and placed it in my hand. “Here,” he said. “Take this home with you. There is nothing wrong with having some physical memento. You deserve that much. I just want you to remember one thing; the memories - yours and those of the people who loved this place, will endure, and you can visit them whenever you want. The building was nothing but brick and mortar.”