

A LEAGUE OF LADIES

By Claire Kent



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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LEAGUE OF LADIES

By Claire Kent

December, 1996

To my Granddaughter Kimberly:

If you are reading this notebook, I have passed on. In my will, I explain that I have instructed my lawyer to keep custody of this book during my lifetime. He was told never to open it and not even to tell anyone of its existence. In the will, he is instructed to personally deliver it to you within 30 days of my death.

Darling, I'm going to miss you, and I know you're going to miss me, but I hope you won't be too sad for too long. I've had an amazing, wonderful life. We've had some wonderful times together while you've been growing up, and I hope you know how very proud I am of you.

The reason I'm writing this book is to tell you the story of my life... the rest of the story. I've been pleased with your interest in our family's history, and especially my years with the All-American Girl's Professional Baseball League.

You're a perceptive young woman. I think you could always tell that I was just a bit hesitant, and seemed to be holding something back when we talked about my youth. You were polite enough never to press me directly, and for that, I'm grateful. But I don't want to leave this world without passing on the truth to someone.

I hope you're prepared for what you're going to find in the pages ahead... I assure you that as fantastic as the story is, every single word of it is true.

So here it is, my story. Just remember: anything in life is possible, if you want it badly enough.

With all my love,
Grandma Susan

As you know, I was born in September, 1925, in Evanston, Illinois. You also know that I was the second of two children.

What you haven't known, until now, is the name that was inscribed on my birth certificate:

Charles Steven Patrick.

Right now, you're probably asking yourself why any sane parents would give a baby girl a boy's name. The answer is really simple. They didn't. I was born a boy.

Remember when you were putting together a family history scrapbook? I had plenty of pictures of myself from my adult years to give you, but from my youth, there were a handful of infant and baby pictures, and that was about it. From about age three to the time I entered the league, you only found a couple of shots of a sad-looking, curly headed girl wearing some very plain looking dresses, remember? Well, that was me, but I was all boy underneath then.

You never knew your great-grandfather. He was a kind man, a loving man, but also a very weak man. Even though Evanston was then, as it is now, a mostly middle- and upper-class suburb of Chicago, it did have its poorer section, and we were one of those families on the wrong side of the tracks. Your great-grandfather could never keep a job, though he kept getting them. But in the long run, he always seemed to be bullied by the stronger men of this world. I think that's how his drinking problem began. While he drifted from job to job, your great-grandmother managed a laundry service, keeping the sheets and clothes of the better off folks clean, fresh and sparkling white. God, it was hot, steamy, brutal hard work- but it kept food on our table and a roof over our head.

Your great-grandmother, my mother, was truly the strong one in our family. Money was always in short supply, and it became even scarcer once the Great Depression began. What all of this is leading up to is that she couldn't see wasting money on boy's clothes, not when there were perfectly good dresses hanging in the closet that my older sister Mary had outgrown. She also couldn't see any point in wasting money on hair-cuts, so my hair was allowed to grow. "Besides, he has such pretty curls," she would say, stroking my forehead, a wisp of a smile crossing her otherwise sad face.

This was one of the few things my parents used to argue about. Normally, my father couldn't find the fortitude to stand up to my mother, but he put his foot down, or tried to, on this issue. I think he really began to worry when he saw Mary and I having a tea party with a couple of Mary's dolls. "You're going to make the boy into a sissy!" he exclaimed. But my mother insisted that wouldn't happen. "We'll dress him as a boy once he starts school," she said, "and you can get him interested in something manly, like baseball."

What a gift of an idea that was. Little did she know that baseball was to become my passion and such a key part of my destiny.

My father must have skipped a couple of trips to the bootlegger's, but somehow he came up with a couple of slightly-used gloves, a couple of bats, and some baseballs. We began playing catch in the yard, then advanced to hitting and fielding practice. It seemed that I had a natural talent for it. "Maybe you'll be in the big leagues one day, son," he said.

The big leagues! I had started following the adventures of the major leaguers on the radio and in the newspapers. Once or twice a summer, as a real treat, father and I would take the train into Chicago, and I would get to watch my heroes, the Cubs, play at Wrigley Field.

Well, mother kept her word, and I was able to put aside the dresses when I started first grade. As the years passed, I forgot about my flirtation with girlish things and baseball grew into the all-consuming force in my life. I played from the time I got home from school until dinnertime, and when there was enough light, I went back and kept playing until it got too dark. In the summertime, the other kids on the block and I would play 12 hours a day. By the time I was in the mid-teens, I had set my life's goal: to be a star in the major leagues. The baseball Hall of Fame had opened in 1939, and I resolved to earn a place there someday. If I was going to dream, why not dream big?

After all, I was the best player on just about any team I was on. I didn't have size or power on my side. My mother was 5-foot-9, my father was just 5-foot-5, and I ended up in between at 5-foot-7. I couldn't hit the ball out of the park too often, but I could spray it to all fields, I could run like the wind, and I could catch any ball that was hit within a country mile of me.

By the time I finished my junior year in high school, in the spring of 1942, the professional scouts were beginning to look me over. The country had gone to war, and my father was dying. Too much alcohol had finally ruined his liver. When the chance came for me to play professional ball, concern about money was greater than ever in our household, so my mother was more than happy to allow me to quit school and get started in pro ball.

My first contract was with Springfield in the old Three-I League. I was, if I may say so, something of a sensation that summer. I won the league batting championship at .397 and led all outfielders in putouts, assists and fielding average.

As I mentioned, there was a war going on, and when 1943 rolled around, I figured I was headed into the Army. I went in to sign up before being drafted... imagine my excitement when I was declared 4-F due to a ruptured eardrum.

So it was back to the ball fields for another season. This time I moved up to Class A ball, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in the Eastern League. I was just three points shy of the league batting championship and was second in the league in stolen bases. By 1944, when I signed a contract with Milwaukee in the American Association, one of the very top minor leagues, I figured I was on my way to the majors for sure. I was only 19 years old.

I batted .302 that summer, fielded well and stole plenty of bases. I figured I had my ticket to the big leagues for sure in '45. After all, that was the year the St. Louis Browns signed a one-armed player. But I guess my size and lack of power worked against me, and I was sent back to Milwaukee.

I hurt my shoulder in spring training, was on the disabled list for the first six weeks of the season, and never got on track after that. I only got into 98 games that summer, and finished the year hitting only .259. For the first time, I found myself feeling discouraged. They were sending teenagers to the big leagues that summer, and bringing back old men who had retired years before, but I never got a shot.

I came to spring training in 1946 with a renewed attitude. I was starting my third season in Milwaukee, but my shoulder was healed, and I was still just 21 years old. I told myself that it was just a matter of time before I got my shot at the bigs. But I had a lousy spring training and started the season on the bench.

The first week of the season, I got into just two games, both as a pinch-hitter, and struck out both times. I had a feeling of dread about what was coming... and I was right. Do you remember that scene in the movie, "Bull Durham," where the player gets released? The manager asks him to come into his office, has him close the door, and tells him to sit down. "This the toughest job a manager has," he begins, then clears his throat, stammers, and continues, "The ball club had decided to go in a different direction..." Well, that was the speech I got, almost word for word.

I remember fighting back the tears as I cleaned out my locker; the next several hours after that are a hazy dream. Suddenly, it seemed like my real shot at the big leagues was gone. After all, the war was now over, and all the regulars who had been in the service, like Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams and Bob Feller, were back to reclaim their jobs. What's more, it looked like baseball was going to become racially integrated; that was the year Jackie Robinson signed a minor league contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. I was all for everyone getting a chance and knew that racism was totally wrong. But, damn it, that meant more guys going after the job I wanted more than anything! I don't know how long I just sat in front of my locker, dreading having to take off my uniform for the last time, trying to sort things out, trying to figure out what to do next.

I know that I left the ballpark in a cab and ended up in one of the seediest parts of Milwaukee, drowning my sorrows in a bar. I got thrown out of a couple of other places, not just because I was too drunk, but I was so damn mad, snarling at bartenders, breaking glasses.

As I was wandering, or maybe it was staggering along, looking for one more watering hole, I spotted a small sign propped in the dirty window of a little storefront. It said something like: "Fortune Teller- Your true destiny revealed by Madame Mazurka." I don't know why I felt compelled to step inside, but I did. It looked like something out of an old horror movie. There were cobwebs and dust everywhere, and the old wooden floorboards creaked loudly. At first, I could hardly see a thing in the dim light, but as my eyes adjusted, I saw this wizened old woman who wore long flowing robes and a turban.

She looked like she belonged in a movie, for sure... her eyes were like a couple of black marbles. She had a deeply lined, craggy face with a long, beaked nose. I swear that nose had a wart on the end of it. A couple of wisps of gray hair were sticking out from under the turban. Her fingernails were inch-long talons painted a gleaming black. She wore a series of bracelets on each arm. I thought they were so heavy, she must find it difficult to lift her arms. But she could... and did.

The old woman beckoned to me with one of her long, bony fingers, and said in a creaky voice, "Sit down, son, I have the answers to your troubles." There was actually a crystal ball on the table, but she didn't make any kind of show of gazing into it. "You're troubled, and you've been drinking to forget your troubles," she said. I chucked and replied, "That's not too hard to figure out." The words were slurred just slightly.

"You've lost your job," she continued. "Yes? Go on," I muttered, thinking that maybe she was on to something after all.

“You’re a baseball player, and your team has let you go, and it’s breaking your heart. Your desire to make good in baseball burns deeply in your soul.”

I had been slumped in the chair, staring off into space, but now I sat bolt upright. “You’re right, you’re absolutely right,” I agreed, surprised. “Ever since I was a boy, it’s been my dream to play in the big leagues and earn a place in the Hall of Fame.”

She eyed me steadily. “Your goals are not modest ones, young man.” She paused, and then asked a fateful question. “Are you willing to do anything to attain them?”

I figured it was worth playing along. “Sure, why not?” I said. “But I have to warn you, I’m just about broke.”

“Money is not a problem,” she said. “I just need two dollars to cover the cost of the herbs and other ingredients I will need.” I shrugged, reached into my pocket for two crumpled dollar bills and tossed them on the table. “Go to it,” I said. She disappeared behind some thick, musty curtains and was out of sight for at least ten minutes. I heard her muttering to herself in a strange language I couldn’t understand. She finally launched into some sort of odd chant. I probably would have left if I hadn’t given her the two bucks.

When she finally reappeared, she handed me a heavy, wooden cup with a thick, greenish potion in it. “Drink this,” she ordered. “It will make it possible for all your dreams to come true.”

“What will it do, make me the second coming of Babe Ruth?”

“Not exactly,” she said. “But I guarantee it will make it possible for your wishes to be realized.”

What the Hell, I thought. I had put away enough beer to loosen any inhibitions I might have had, so I lifted the cup to my lips and began to drink. The stuff tasted terrible- cold, bitter and spicy. I choked it down, thanked her and left.

I stumbled back to my hotel room about 1 a.m., took off my clothes, and climbed into bed. I almost immediately fell asleep, but it was a troubled sleep, filled with strange dreams. I was playing ball, then I was back in my childhood wearing dresses, then I was playing ball in a dress! I came to briefly a couple of hours later, and I figured these dreams were the product of all the beer I had consumed plus the weird potion. I rolled over and went back to sleep.

I had anticipated a hangover when I came to, but the thing I remember is how good I felt. Rested, refreshed, and as I was about to find out, reborn.

I sensed that something was different, but didn’t know exactly what at first. I reached up with my left hand to rub the sleepiness from my eyes and felt my arm brush against something that hadn’t been there when I went to bed a few hours before. The left hand reached down, the right one shot up; both began exploring. They were at first tentative, then with agitation and surprise I discovered that I had grown a pair of breasts overnight!

By now, I was wide awake. When I sat up, my hair fell across my face. That was the next big shock. I had gone to bed with a crew cut. It was still dark in my room; I hadn’t turned on any lights, and the shades were tightly drawn. I remember thinking it must

be some kind of dream, or nightmare... but something inside told me that it was all real, that it was truly happening.

When I threw the covers back and got out of bed, I felt, well- I wish I could find a better word to describe it- different! I'm not sure how exactly to explain what it was like compared to my former body, except kind of top heavy. "This is so strange," I muttered to myself, loudly enough to realize that my voice was suddenly a few octaves higher. I groped toward the bathroom, still in the dark.

I flung open the bathroom door, flipped on the light and found myself staring into the mirror and what I had half-feared, half-expected to see: the face of a young, attractive girl staring back at me. A girl who seemed to be about my height and coloring; who had some of my same features, but most definitely a girl.

My hair was now shoulder-length, which accentuated its natural curliness. My eyes looked the same, but now they were topped by thick black lashes and delicate, arched brows. My cheekbones were more prominent, my nose was smaller and now was up-turned. My lips seemed to be fuller and a deeper pink.

"My God, this couldn't have happened," I muttered to myself, while I stared at the evidence of what most undeniably had happened.

At this moment, I realized that I needed to pee. I turned toward the toilet bowl, reached inside my pajama bottoms, and found nothing. My manhood was gone. "Of course," I sighed, pulling the bottoms down as I sat. I tried my best to relax, and soon heard a reassuring stream against the bowl. "At least the equipment seems to work," I remember muttering to myself.

After fumbling around with a wad of toilet paper and doing my best to clean myself up, I pulled up the bottoms and stood up. I washed my hands and unbuttoned the pajama top. Two firm, round breasts were staring back at me from the mirror, with large, pink, erect nipples in the middle of them. "What a pair of hooters!" I thought. "Too bad they're mine."

I staggered back to the bed, sat down, and tried to think this through. I knew it had to have been the potion from Madame Mazurka that had done this... but how? And why? I hadn't really expected anything at all, and if the concoction had worked, why wasn't I suddenly six and a half feet tall with a build that would allow me to bash 50 home runs a season? Why the hell was I a girl?

Not knowing what else to do, I took a shower and discovered new sensations of pleasure as I felt the warm water running over my breasts for the first time, and then the roughness of the towel as it rubbed against them while I was drying off. All of this was very interesting, but it was only a momentary distraction from my main quest-trying to figure out what had happened to me and why, and finding out if the change was a permanent one.

I didn't have any girl's clothes, of course, but I found that a pair of my jeans and one of my sport shirts would fit after a fashion, though the jeans were pretty baggy at the waist and too tight around my suddenly widened hips. I left the motel and caught a cab back to the street where I thought Madame Mazurka's was located, intending to confront her and demand to be changed back.

Imagine my shock when we pulled up to the storefront and found it to be empty. “Are you sure this was the place you wanted, miss?” the cabbie asked as I stood on the sidewalk, a dumbfounded look on my face. I pushed open the door, which was unlocked and seemed to be ready to fall off its rusty hinges. The place was empty, dark and thick with dust and cobwebs. It looked like no one had set foot inside in 20 years. “Well, I- I thought so,!” I stammered as I walked back to the cab, a bit unsteadily, as my shoes were now too big for my feet. The reality began to sink in... I was going to be female for the rest of my life.

I got back in, momentarily wondering why the driver had gotten out to open the door for me. Then I realized it was because I was a girl now. It was my first exposure to the fact that I had lost something, but I had also gained something. It was all going to be a matter of perspective in the challenging days ahead.

I thanked the cabbie for his courtesy, and asked him to take me to the train station. I had to get home... home to Mother. She would know what to do. On the train back to Evanston, I took a spare pair of socks from my suitcase and stuffed them into the feet of my shoes. I figured that would at least keep me from walking out of them. For the rest of the trip, though, I mostly stared out the window, trying to figure out what had happened to me. And what was going to happen in the rest of my life.

I only had the one suitcase. Wanted to keep thinking, I walked the mile-plus from the train station to our house. I hoped Mother would be home from work, as it was getting on toward evening. Ever since Dad had died in the fall of '43, she had lived alone in the place during the baseball season; I still spent the winters with her. I was walking up the porch, about to reach for the front door and step inside, when I realized that I'd better ring the bell. This was, to all appearances, a stranger standing on my mother's doorstep.

“Yes?” she said pleasantly as she opened the door. “Can I help you, miss?”

“Mother!” I exclaimed, “It's me, Charles.”

“Is this some kind of sick joke?” she demanded. I was able to give her enough details of our private family history to convince her that I was her son, now her second daughter. I filled her in on the amazing past 24 hours: my getting released, my trip from bar to bar, finally winding up at Madame Mazurka's, waking up in a new body... “And that's all I know,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. At this point I dissolved into tears.

She held me and tried to soothe me for a long time, gently stroking my hair and saying, “There, there,” again and again. It was an unusually tender moment from a woman who hadn't shown her softer, maternal side very often when I was growing up.

When I was cried out, the resolute common sense I had known best returned. “Now, Charles... I guess we can't call you Charles anymore. You're going to have to get a hold of yourself! You know what I've always told you about life- you have to play the hand you're dealt. That means making the best of things. If you're a girl, you're going to have to figure out how to make a new life for yourself.” She helped me push the stray strands of hair out of my face. “Don't worry, I'm going to be here to help you as best I can.” She was thoughtful for a moment. “This is pretty amazing. I still find it a

bit hard to believe myself- and I wouldn't believe it, except for the evidence of my own eyes."

"But what will I do?" I wailed, the tears beginning to flow again. "My baseball career, obviously, is over."

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, how about the girl's league?"

I thought for just a moment, then realized she was talking about the women's professional baseball league, which had been started in 1943 by Philip Wrigley, the chewing gum magnate who owned my beloved Cubs. He feared that men's professional baseball might disappear during the war, and saw the league as providing an alternative.

The men kept going after a fashion, with the over the hill and 4-F players, but the girls developed a following all their own. Soon the league was thriving. The players had come from all over the country, although the teams were concentrated in a handful of smaller Midwestern cities.

"We'll make some phone calls tomorrow," Mother said. "But first, I'm going to have to go shopping for you. Your sister's married and living 500 miles away. That means she's not here anymore to give you her hand-me-downs."

For the first time since I had awakened that morning, I smiled and laughed. My eyes were swollen from so much crying, but now, I wiped away the tears. "No, I guess she isn't, Mom," I said with just a bit of hesitation. "I think things are going to work out, somehow. I don't know how to explain it to you, but I've just got the strongest feeling that it's all going to be okay."

Now she smiled. "We call that feminine intuition, honey," she said. "It's sort of a sixth sense that provides you extra awareness of things that are happening around you."

"I've been thinking about a new name," I said, continuing to feel my spirits build. "How about Susan?"

"Sounds good to me. Any particular reason?"

"No, I just like it." I paused, then said a bit sheepishly, "And I thought maybe I looked a little bit like Susan Hayward."

She eyed me carefully. "You know, you do," she said, smiling. By this point, she had followed me to my bedroom. I opened my suitcase and began putting my clothes away. "I guess I'm not going to be able to wear these things anymore," I said. "No," she agreed. "Like I said, I'll go shopping for you tomorrow."

I unzipped my shaving kit and held up my razor and shaving mug. "And I'm not going to need these anymore," I declared.

"Wrong, dear," she said.

"What?" I asked, stroking my soft, hairless chin and cheeks. "I don't find any trace of a beard."

She smiled, a bit wearily. “No, you don’t have a beard anymore, dear,” she said. “But you’re going to have to shave your legs, and under your arms.”

I sighed and said, “I’ve got a lot to absorb.”

The next day, mother went out to a women’s shop in our neighborhood and came home with four dresses, a couple of blouses and skirts, a couple of pairs of shoes (one casual, one pair of high heels), some panties, and my first bra and girdle.

I recall asking Mother if she really had to wear these things every single day. Kimberly, you’ve got to understand that lingerie in the ‘40s was nothing like it is today—soft, silky, colorful, lacy and lightweight. These things were plain white cotton, the bra cups were cone-shaped, and the girdle was oh-so-heavy! About all mother had to say as I tried the girdle on for the first time was, “Get used to it, dear, get used to it.”

Then she help up the bra, my first. “This is a brassiere, dear.”

“I know,” I answered. “I have seen one before. But how do you put it on?”

She showed me how to bend forward and let my breasts fall into the cups, then stand up and fasten it. Not too tough.

I stood looking at myself in my Mother’s full-length mirror; I was clad only in bra and girdle. The garments were different, and not all that comfortable. I had to admit that they molded my body into an attractive shape, though. I thought, if I were still a guy, I wouldn’t mind dating this girl at all. First I sized myself up head on, then turned from side to side. Not bad at all, I thought. Mother caught me admiring myself and warned, “Don’t fall in love with yourself, Charles, er, Susan, dear.”

“You can read my mind, can’t you?” I said, laughing. I absently fingered the garters at the bottom of the girdle and asked, “What are these for?”

Mother said, “I’m glad you brought that up.” She reached into one of the shopping bags and pulled out a pair of nylon stockings. “Those are garters, and they hold your stockings up.”

I started to protest, but she said, “Now look, Susan, you don’t know how lucky you are! Nylons are just back on sale, now that the wartime restrictions are easing. I only had a couple of pairs before the war. Ever since, we’ve had to make do with cotton or rayon hose, and they’ve been terrible. They bag and sag. Nylons are great.”

My mind wasn’t fully prepared, but my legs were ready at least. I had showered that morning, and as Mother had instructed, I had shaved the fine hair off of my legs. I only nicked myself once. That aside, I had to admit that I enjoyed the new, sexy feeling of my smooth, hairless legs rubbing together for the first time.

Mother showed me how to roll the stocking, bend my foot, slip it over my toes, unroll it, smooth it, and attach it to the gathers. I felt a tingle of excitement in my legs as the sheer material caressed them for the first time.

I didn’t have too much trouble figuring out how to put on a slip and a dress. It was a simple pullover, with no back zipper. The high heels gave me some trouble. I think being an athlete helped me adapt fairly quickly, though. It was a lot like suddenly having breasts. I just had to get used to the shift in my center of gravity.

As I examined myself critically in the mirror, Mother said, "I think you've dealt with enough for today, Susan. We'll save makeup for tomorrow."

"Makeup?" I said, a little incredulous. "Now, Mother—"

She cut me off again. "Now Susan dear, you may not wear it every day- or very often at all, like me- but it's something that you need to know."

I sighed. "I supposes so."

Mother began to fix dinner, while I surveyed the rest of the purchases she had made. Before I knew it, she was calling me to eat. I sat down, remembering to smooth my dress as I sat, and looked at the half-empty plate of hamburger steak, mashed potatoes and peas she had placed before me.

"Uh, Mother..." I began.

Once again, she was reading my mind. "I know, I know, you want to know what I've done with the rest of your dinner. There's more if you want it, Susan, but if you give it a chance, I think you will find this to be enough to satisfy you."

I guess my stomach was smaller than it had been, because I even found myself leaving a few bites on the plate. "Not that it wasn't delicious, Mother, but for some reason—"

"You're full, right?"

"Right."

She smiled, then reached across the table and patted the back of my hand. "Trust me, dear, I'm going to be right here for you." After dinner, I tried to unwind with that day's sports page but found myself dozing off, and agreed with Mother's suggestion that I head to bed early.

The night before, I had slept in one of my old pairs of pajamas. Now they were just too bulky. So, somewhat reluctantly, I put on one of the two nightgowns Mother had purchased for me. It was an ankle-length, white cotton one with a pattern of small pink roses and a small pink satin bow on the bosom. It had elbow-length flutter sleeves with lacy trim. I walked down the hall to Mother's bedroom to wish her a good night.

She looked up at me and smiled. "What is it?" I asked.

"Don't get upset, dear," she said. "It's just that I think you're really pretty. And even if this isn't what you wished for... well, I was proud of you as my son, and I'm equally proud of you as my daughter."

I found myself blushing- a new experience. I stammered a thank-you and headed off to bed. I was about to climb under the covers, when I remembered Mother's suggestion that I brush my hair 100 times before going to bed. I didn't see the point, but something compelled me to do it. And besides, I didn't feel as sleepy as I had before getting undressed.

I sat down in front of the vanity that had once been Mary's, and that Mother and I had moved into my room that afternoon. I looked at the strange assortment of cosmet-

ics, jewelry, perfumes, brushes and more that was laid out before me. For a moment I felt overwhelmed, but I picked up the hairbrush and told myself to go ahead.

As I counted off the strokes, I noticed it getting progressively easier to bring the brush through my hair. I realized this would make it easier to take care of this new, longer hair; I also noticed it was developing a nice luster. The repetitiveness of the action was helping me to relax, and by the time I was into the nineties, I was fighting to stay awake. Before I knew it, I mumbled, "One hundred" to myself and tumbled into bed, I pulled up the covers and immediately fell into a deep, contented sleep.

That next morning I began making some phone calls until I reached the offices of the women's league. The secretary I talked to told me that normally a girl had to make the cut in a local tryout before earning an invitation to the league's spring training. But the league's tryout camps were over for now, and the spring camp was set to start the following Monday, in Pascalousa, Mississippi. I got passed along to a scout, and talked myself up as best I could. I finally won agreement to be allowed to come down. I would have to pay my own way and would only be reimbursed for my expenses if I earned a place on one of the teams in the league.

The scout handed me back to the secretary, who filled me in on the travel and lodging arrangements. "There's one other thing I need to tell you, dear," she said. "I hope you understand that this league puts as much stress on femininity as it does on ball playing. Frankly, it's part of how we get the fans into the parks. They want girls who can play like boys, but who still look like girls. Do you understand?"

"Oh, sure," I said, thinking back over everything Mother had shown me, and how much I still had to learn about being female. I realized that I was absent-mindedly wrapping and unrolling one of my curls around a finger. The secretary continued: "But don't worry. We have a few days of classes before the season starts; it's sort of a charm school to help you polish your social graces."

I thanked her and hung up the phone. "Mother!" I called. "I've got a tryout next week. And we better get started as soon as we can on teaching me about makeup."

Right after lunch I found myself sitting before my vanity, as Mother showed me the basics of applying lipstick, mascara, powder and more. I felt another of those electric shudders as I coated my lips with the creamy red wax for the first time and blotted them on a tissue. "You know, Susan," Mother observed, "you're kind of lucky."

"How's that?" I asked.

"You could have become a homely girl, but you're not. Like I said last night, you're really quite pretty."

I gave her a stern look and said, "I hope you're not going to be trying to find a boyfriend for me just yet." We both laughed.

"No, you've got enough other things to deal with right now," she said. Then she pulled out a small box. It was wrapped in plain brown paper.

That was my introduction to feminine protection.

Kimberly, you wouldn't believe what a hush-hush subject that was in those days! And remember, I had been a 21-year-old male, and only had the vaguest idea of how

the female reproductive system worked. Thank God Mother was open and patient. Things have changed a lot in a couple of generations. By the time your Mother was a girl, a lot of the taboos had already faded- but let me ask you this: Did your mother ever tell you about sanitary napkin belts? Lord, they were a pain! They dug into your skin, especially if you were a bit bloated; they never kept their shape, and turned gray after a couple of washings... and they didn't even hold the napkin in place too well. She had to deal with these things until she was a teen. I really think that when I went through menopause, the thing I was most relieved about was getting rid of the damn belt!

But I digress. My mother spent the next few days trying to teach me everything she knew about being a lady. As I said, she was a working woman, so she usually didn't have much time for all of what she sometimes regarded as frillery, but she always got dressed up and made up for church every Sunday, for weddings and funerals, and other special occasions.

Sunday morning arrived before we knew it; it was time for me to catch my train south. I put on one of the simple dresses mother had chosen for me, a basic blue one-piece, took one final check of my makeup, and carried my suitcase and equipment bag to the door.

Mother got her brownie camera and took a few pictures before I left. I know you have them now. You see me standing there a bit stiffly, suitcase in one side, bats, glove, balls in the open bag on the other side. You've know that I was on my way to spring training, but what you haven't known, until now, is that I had been female for four days. Are you surprised I looked kind of nervous and uncomfortable?

You can fill in more of the story here from what you already know; how I tore up spring training and soon found myself assigned to the Rockford team.

What I haven't shared with you, though, were my true feelings as I put on the uniform for the first time. First, I had to get used to the name on my chest, or, if I was honest with myself, my bosom. The circular emblem read, "Rockford Robins."

So I was a Robin. Not a Giant, or a Cub, or a Tiger, or any of those other, mostly masculine names proudly displayed across the front of uniforms in the men's major leagues. I was a Robin. Okay, I thought, this I can get used to, but playing baseball in a dress?

As you know, they were simple, one-piece garments with off-center buttons. There was a wide belt at the waist, and at the time I joined the league, a skirt that ended well above the knee. A bit risqué for 1946, yes? When the league had started three years earlier, the skirts had been much longer. However, the needs of the game (and the gate receipts) won out over modesty. The pitchers, especially, had a tough time dealing with those long skirts. I took a deep breath as I stood before my locker. "Oh, well," I thought. "At least the cap and spikes are the same."

A question from the girl changing next to me snapped me out of my deep thoughts. "Have you played much baseball?" she asked.

I smiled. "A little," I said.

I tried to go out on the field without a superior attitude. Yes, I had spent two years in triple-A ball, and yes, these were a bunch of girls, but I could see most of them were very serious about the game and committed to playing it well.

I didn't have too hard a time adapting to this new league, and my new body. Even if I was a half-step slower than I had been before the change, thanks to my new pelvic structure, the bases were only 72 feet apart, instead of 90 feet. The ball was larger, somewhere in between a real baseball and a softball, which made it a more inviting target, though harder to hit for distance. But since I had been a line-drive, spray to all fields hitter of singles, doubles and triples anyway, that didn't matter too much to me.

There were even some famous ex-big league players managing in the league, which lent it an air of credibility. Rockford's Manager, Bob Wellington, wasn't one of the famous, but he was more successful than his better-known competition. He was a skinny, silver-haired, wily guy, who I quickly took a liking to despite his no-nonsense approach. We established sort of a distant father-daughter relationship, I guess.

If Bob was our surrogate father, Mary Parker, our chaperon, became my surrogate mom. I've told you a bit about the chaperons. They really had charge of us for all our off-field hours. They had to approve where we lived, any public appearances outside the ballpark, any dates and the like.

I was first introduced to Mary at charm school that spring. Ah, the charm school... one of the most ridiculed memories of the league, but for me, it was a small Godsend. Not that I didn't take some ribbing over it. A lot of the other girls were on the tomboyish side, and a lot of them had come from unsophisticated small towns, but at least



they had 20 years or more practice at being girls. I was still brand new to it and needed all the help I could get!

We learned how to walk while balancing books on our heads, were taught how to apply makeup (I learned a lot of things Mother hadn't known about or had time to teach me); how to get in and out of a car gracefully while wearing a dress, which fork to use when at a formal meal... all kinds of things.

They were quite explicit about things. For instance, I find in a copy of the charm school guidelines that we were told that our "beauty kit" should always contain the following: "Cleansing cream; lipstick; rouge-medium; cream deodorant; mild astringent; face powder; hand lotion and hair remover."

And in case we didn't know how to use these things, we were given a step-by-step beauty routine for after the game that included showering, applying and removing cleansing cream, washing the face, applying astringent, applying rouge "moderately but carefully"; applying lipstick "with moderate taste"; applying eye makeup "if considered desirable"; and applying powder.

But if you think this was just a detailed beauty handbook and course, consider what the booklet had to say about the eyes: "They bespeak your innermost thoughts... Perhaps no other feature of your face has more to do with the impression of beauty, sparkle and personality which you portray." Similar approaches were given to our hair as well as our hands, face and teeth. Advice on putting together a basic wardrobe, and a condensed course of etiquette completed the handbook.

As I write this, more memories of that week are coming back. Once we had mastered walking with the books on a level surface, we had to walk up and down stairs with them. And I remember now how much importance they put on sitting in a chair gracefully! As I said, I had to be reminded to smooth my skirt before being seated, but at least I didn't just throw myself into the chair like a lot of those farm girls.

Besides learning about cutlery, there was another lesson that I found valuable when we had to go to Rotary and Kiwanis luncheons, and the like. That was how to eat more daintily. My table manners weren't bad, for a male, but I had to break myself of the habit of diving in so aggressively with knife and fork. "Take smaller bites, dear," and "Chew, for goodness sakes, chew," I recall them telling me over and over.

Charm school was also where I was introduced to wearing gloves. I'm not talking about the big, bulky, padded things that keep your hands warm when it's freezing outside. I'm talking about simple, elegant white kid gloves that covered your hands and sent a message to others that you were, or at least aspired to be, a lady! I'm still kind of sad that gloves have gone out of style. I guess their last real heyday was during the years when Jackie Kennedy was first lady.

I discovered during spring camp that although my height was unchanged, my weight had dropped from 175 pounds to 135. My muscles were smaller, and the weight was also distributed differently, of course. I stayed at that weight all through my nine years in the league, and I'm proud to say that 50 years later, I'm only three pounds heavier.