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When there was nothing left to say, we always had baseball

Communicating with my dad was never easy, unless we were talking about the Red Sox.

By **Ben Kissam** Updated October 20, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Johnny Damon leaves home plate after hitting his second-inning grand slam home run during the seventh and final game of the American League Championship Series on Oct. 20, 2004. DAVIS, JIM GLOBE STAFF

Baseball was a common language for my dad and me, a safe place for us to go that kept us connected during hard times. So it was both sad and ironic when he died suddenly just a week before Opening Day this year.

A born and bred New Jerseyan, my dad didn't become a Sox fan until he was in his 40s, when he moved our family to Massachusetts for a job that kept us from being entirely broke. It took little time for New England to feel like home. We saw dozens of games at Fenway Park. I showed promise as a player, so Dad signed me up for a pitching camp we definitely couldn't afford. He even built a pitcher's mound in the backyard for me to practice on.

Then he lost two jobs in three years and started drinking heavily.

After that, there were no more trips to Fenway. Home, especially after 4 p.m., became a place of uncertainty. You never knew when you might find yourself on the receiving end of a drunken rage. We still rarely missed Red Sox games, but we watched in separate rooms.

One of my fondest memories is of Johnny Damon hitting that grand slam in Game 7 of the 2004 ALCS. The family, including my younger brother, who never really caught the baseball bug, watched together for the first time in years. We celebrated and high-fived. Things were still tense, but no one had to walk on eggshells that night. It didn't matter that tomorrow things would all go back to normal. We were finally going to beat the goddamn Yankees.

Eventually, my parents divorced. I finished college, moved to Colorado, and talked with my dad less often. But in 2016, I suggested that we fulfill a childhood pact to go to Fort Myers for spring training. We caught two games, said farewell to David Ortiz, and went deep sea fishing together. It was the cleanest memory I have of him in my adult life.

Inevitably, though, Dad picked a fight with me on the final night of our trip. As I look back, I suspect he was raging against our time coming to a close. And even then, something about his demeanor caught me off guard. He was yelling, but he wasn't angry. His body language conveyed that he was scared — perhaps that the only child of his who still spoke to him would cut him out, too. It was a rare display of vulnerability for my father, and it helped me remember what he was like before he drank. Now, I realized, he was no longer a monster but an old man still living paycheck to paycheck, a cancer and stroke survivor, a diabetic who didn't check his blood sugar, a person

who could always find fault in others but never in himself, a man who would say bad luck was responsible for his position in life.

I decided in that moment to take a mental snapshot of my dad, one that helped me soften his hard angles. I was 24 and knew I couldn't care for him the way he desperately needed. But I could be compassionate. And when I had nothing real to say, I knew we could always talk about the Sox. So it went for five more years.

I was walking my dog on a cold Tuesday evening in Denver when I got the call that my dad had a heart attack.

In the weeks that followed, I thought about our relationship. I also wondered what it was about baseball that had kept us connected.

I came to the conclusion that in sports, there are rules everyone agrees to follow, but in life, so much of what can make a relationship painful is when someone disregards rules. When I was growing up, the rules about how scarce money was spent or how Dad should or shouldn't treat us seemed to be rewritten daily and the transgressor was never penalized. When someone you love keeps letting you down, you tend to stop seeing them with fresh eyes, and that's what happened with my dad.

Part of what makes watching baseball so great is the opposite. The rah-rah ethos, the "We lost today, we'll get 'em tomorrow" optimism with which you approach each new game day. When the home team picks up momentum, you jump aboard the bandwagon without thinking twice. But I couldn't let hopeful thoughts take hold where my dad was concerned, because it usually led to disappointment.

At least we always had the Red Sox. They were a proxy that brought structure and levity to our relationship. They were the one topic about which expressing an opinion

didn't risk leveling everything in its path.

Without baseball to lean on, I might have cut my dad out of my life years before that trip to Fort Myers, and I would never have seen that flash of vulnerability or been reminded of the good times we'd had together. He would have left this world the villain, the perennial disruptor, and the reason why things in my life hadn't gone the way I wanted them to.

More likely than not, I'd have seen no irony in that whatsoever.

Ben Kissam is a writer and stand-up comedian in Denver. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @benkissam.

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