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“Heading for Home” (original title and length)

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While thumbing through the Fort Myers yellow pages on a sunny Sunday morning in January, I knew that I was at a pivotal moment in the week to follow, if not the rest of my life. My father had passed away from a heart attack a day earlier while working overtime at his shop in Florida. Dad had put in a lot of overtime since my mother’s stroke a few years back, trying to make ends meet in their working retirement. He was never afraid of hard work, but his body had finally surrendered a long battle with a weak heart.

As I sat at my parents’ kitchen table making a list of crematoriums in the area, I knew that several short- and long-term responsibilities would now fall to me as the oldest child. However, I was so focused on the extraordinary exchange my father and I had found during the month before he died, my mind just kept drifting back to dad.

My first memories of him came from a courtroom. I remember sitting on the witness stand when I was four years old and telling the judge at my adoption hearing that I wanted Bob Harris to be my dad. My mother and father divorced when I was an infant, and my stepfather — a term I only used as an angry teenager — was the only father I ever knew. In fact, my teen years were marred by several acid-tongued exchanges that nearly severed our relationship permanently.

Long before those tumultuous times, I had a pretty typical working-class upbringing in Alliance. My parents both worked, we knew a steady meat-and-potatoes diet, and when the sun shone on our back yard, dad and I would put on our gloves, grab a baseball and go play catch. It’s amazing how simple things get in retrospect, but that is the life I remember before my two brothers and sister were old enough to walk — fast balls with dad out back.

I’m sure he wasn’t trying to do me any harm, but with his strength, every throw felt like a missile bearing down on the bridge of my nose. I remember playing catch with dad for years, before Hot Stove League games, on the weekends, after work... just about any time. They were great times, but our family’s needs were growing faster than its income. As the last of the four kids reached school age, financial burdens forced dad to

take a second job at another factory across town.

I was in junior high at the time and began noticing my father's increasingly surly attitude. He worked a full 16-hour day, five days a week to supplement my mother's full-time housekeeping job at a local nursing home. Though his short temper was certainly understandable, those years took a severe toll on the entire family.

Unfortunately, we drifted apart as I started high school at St. Thomas Aquinas. My mother decided to ship me off to the parochial school to keep me out of trouble in Alliance. It would prove to be the best thing my parents ever did for me, but it created a painfully divisive atmosphere at home.

Those memories would taint my relationship with my father for most of the following 10 years. My parents decided to move to Fort Myers when it looked like most of the factories in Alliance were going to fold. After mom and dad sold the only house we ever knew along with the majority of its contents at an auction, I was inconsolable. It was that event, however, that probably best facilitated the healing process between dad and me.

Time passed, and we took our lives in new directions. Then, during my parents' annual visit to Ohio 10 years later, he orchestrated a brief one-on-one talk with me to get a few things off his chest. His simple message was that he was sorry for not having more time to spend with me as I was growing up, and that he had learned from his mistakes in raising my brothers and sister. I told him that I understood, and little more was said.

I didn't really think about that conversation until I was up late one night just before the next Christmas. A favorite movie of mine reminded me of dad and touched off a string of events that will follow me forever. After seeing the movie at least a dozen times, I felt compelled to buy a copy the next day and send it to my father as a Christmas present along with the following letter:

"Whenever I watch the movie *Field of Dreams*, I think of my childhood in Alliance. Specifically, I remember playing baseball. From practices at Early's Hill and Roadside Park to games all over the area, memories of breaking in a new mitt or connecting on a long fly ball are as vivid to me as any I have. You are a big part of most of them, dad. I see myself standing in the backyard in front of the lilac bushes waiting for my father the steel worker to load up and whiz a fast ball at my head. The loud crack of that throw as it found the pocket of my glove still resonates in my ears, echoing off the

garage and through the yard. It is a sound so amazingly sweet that I can still hear it some 25 years later and feel just as good as I did then.

“It’s no secret that you and I had our share of pain in the years that followed, and there are some things that life simply tries to reconcile the best way it can. I just wanted to give you a moment that I have experienced time after time in my memory and even more vividly through the years since *Field of Dreams* was released. It’s that wonderfully honest moment when a father and son walk out into the back yard on a summer afternoon and take the time to play catch. Grounders, fly balls, and line drives. No one else is around. No one else matters. It’s just you and me, dad.

“I see us playing catch back by the garage—probably around my fourth- or fifth-grade year. I feel the sting of your first liner in my palm and pretend it’s just another in a series of routine snares and returns. Of course, inside I really want to thrust my glove into the air like a championship trophy, displaying my success for anyone—or just you—to see. My hand would ache with a deep crimson throb for hours afterward, but I was as proud of that pain as any 10-year-old boy could be.

“I watch this entire movie—and it is a good one—waiting for the final scene, knowing my emotions will overcome me. Each time I watch, I tell myself I won’t cry as the father and son have a simple game of catch at dusk. And each time I fail, sobbing straight through the credits. I can’t claim to fully understand my reaction, but I know that moment is ours, and so I thought I would share it with you. I hope this helps ease some of our pain. If you ever want to revisit it with me, just play the tape, then close your eyes, and I’ll be there in front of the lilac bushes waiting for you. I love you, dad.”

That was my Christmas present to my father.

It dawned on me that he had no idea that I thought of him so fondly every time I watched that closing scene. So, in the wee hours of that December morning and after all those years, I was drawn to my home computer to put those thoughts on paper for him. The phrase “ease his pain” echoed in my head from the movie as I wrote through a steady stream of tears. I was determined to let him know that I had moved on, so he could move on. He sent me a wonderful response two weeks later, writing how sorry he was that he lacked my eloquence. Despite those apologies, he told me that he was proud of all my accomplishments, and that he felt grateful to be able to call me his son.

Ironically, he followed those thoughts by remembering our games of catch, and promising that we would do it again soon in my backyard. This emotional exchange would be a precious keepsake for any son fortunate enough to be part of it—let alone just weeks before losing his dad to a heart attack—but as I was writing my father’s eulogy exactly one month after penning my original letter, dad did me one better.

My wife phoned me the day before dad’s memorial Mass in Fort Myers to tell me that a parcel had just arrived at our Wadsworth home from my dad. It turns out that the day before he died, dad decided to surprise me with a care package consisting of one baseball and a brand-new glove for our next game of catch. He included a simple note that read, “For the memories.”

I was dumb struck.

After years of pain and suffering at the hands of our respective egos, my father and I had generated two of the most touching gestures in our entire relationship in a span of one month. We had effectively settled our emotional accounts and, to borrow from the movie, eased one another’s pain.

Two weeks after I had returned to my routine in Ohio, my wife went out of town for a couple days to attend a surprise party for a friend. I opted to stay home for a quiet weekend alone with our dogs, but the solitude quickly turned my thoughts to dad and the house I grew up in back in Alliance. By Saturday evening I found myself heading east down old Route 62 for a look around town and a little closure.

I stopped by Alliance Machine and remembered talking with my dad on his lunch break through the green chain link fence outside gate number four. I drove past the various baseball fields we had practiced or played on for years, remembering circus catches and silly errors. Finally, after hitting a number of the old haunts in neighborhoods that reminded me of him, I turned down the narrow alley that runs behind our house near the city hospital.

As I shifted the car into park, I looked out the driver’s side window at the bare remnants of our once-proud lilac bushes. The branches were only a few feet away, but the emotions they summoned traveled a full generation before materializing as steady, silent tears, crossing my nostalgic grin. I turned the car off and killed the headlights. I just wanted to sit there in the darkness and recollect.

The garage was long gone, and the bushes had been trimmed well back from their robust prime during the Reagan years. Under the midnight sky the old house didn't look so bad. There were a few less trees and a few more toys, but the place still looked very familiar. At the same time, that wonderful backyard seemed to have withered from its expansive role in our glory days.

It warmed me to know that our little patch of grass had assumed and satisfied the awesome burden of serving as a football, baseball, or any other surrogate field of dreams we wished for as children. I could hear the distant sounds of cheers and tears as a flood of images cascaded through my mind's eye. I smiled in wonder at how such a tiny little parcel could be home to so many overwhelming memories of my father, encapsulating my youth in this awesome pause. I sat in my car hoping not to be discovered, waiting for some sort of emotional release or spiritual sign from my evening's sojourn to this hallowed ground.

None would come.

It was getting late, and I didn't want my little trip to lead me past those cherished memories into a genuine depression. I touched the brake to start the car, and the glow of the red taillights broke the darkness with a fiery hue. The engine turned over and I drove slowly away from the house, the alley stones crackling under the tires. As I headed north out of Alliance on Route 183, a train lumbered along the tracks running parallel to the little two-lane stretch for several miles.

The locomotive held a steady 35 miles per hour, and I matched it, floating down the road next to a white tanker car. I rolled down my windows so that I could hear the hypnotic sound of the wheels rolling down the tracks in the still night air. A flash of headlights in my rearview quickly interrupted my gentle trance as an old pick-up came up from behind and then passed me with ease.

The faintest smile crept across my face, knowing that the tracks crossed the highway a few miles up the road. I just kept pace with my tanker, watching the trees pass between us in the moonlight. A mile or so further along I shifted my gaze and saw the truck stopped in the distance at the railroad crossing. That little piece of local savvy gave me a great sense of familiarity and comfort about my life and my hometown. And just like that, I seemed to find some peace with dad's passing.

Until then, I had always assumed that the inability to “go home again” referred to the fact that people and places change enough over time to make the trip metaphorically impossible. Yet, while approaching the railroad crossing just then, it dawned on me that the relief I sought in that alley required a slightly different perspective.

I realized that my resolve would come as I continued my life, carrying my dad with me in the things I do, the person I am, and the knowledge I have acquired. I can’t answer for anyone else, but I know the reason I can’t go home again is because deep down, I realize that the better part of me – maybe the best part – never really left.