



My Father, My Unlikely
Hero: The story of my
father through my own
eyes

CLARENCE BALDWIN
JR.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

Dad vs. Fish (Or Something Else)-1

Dad vs. Spelling Bee-11

Dad vs. NFL Playoffs-22

Dad vs. Little League Baseball-42

Dad vs. Disneyland-59

Dad vs. Marine Corps Graduation-83

Dad vs. My First Love-103

Dad vs. Oakland Raider Fans-112

Dad vs. Fish (The Rematch)-125

Epilogue-133

This is dedicated to the memory of my late grandfather, Clarence Lee Baldwin, who showed me that being a man didn't require many words and that true character comes from the merit of your deeds.

To my son Jaxson, who didn't get the pleasure of knowing his grandfather, but reminds of the man more and more with each passing day.

Finally, I dedicate this to my first love, the late Shawna Alexander. May your memory endure always.

FOREWORD:

This book is meant to be an honest celebration and remembrance of my father, Clarence Eugene Baldwin Sr. He passed away suddenly on August 13th, 2008 at the age of 51. It was sudden not only because of his relative youth, but because our relationship was at its high point when he passed. The sadness I felt was and remains very deep. I wanted to create something that would allow my friends and family insight into some of the stories I have of him inside of me.

My thinking when I started to write this was I did not want to forget the experiences we shared together. But along the way, this book became something cathartic for me to help take the pain away of his loss. At the same time, this book is a way to share my father and a bit of myself with others. 100

percent of the people I know have fathers, even if they have never met them or have a relationship with them. My father and I did not always see eye to eye and he was not always readily available, but I am fortunate to say that it was never due to a lack of love. With his force of personality and bear-like build, he was larger than life to me.

So instead of trying to turn his life into something biographical, I thought it would be much more fitting to show my father through my own lens based on some of the experiences we shared together and with others. These stories, while intended to be a humorous retelling of some of those adventures we had together, also provides a three-dimensional look at the complex man I would grow to appreciate, love, befriend, and still miss to this very day. I hope you enjoy it. It has truly been a labor of love and the best way I know how to honor my father.

Clarence Baldwin Jr.

January 17th, 2010

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

1985. You know, when you are six years old, the world is already a strange place you do not know about. Well, in the summer of 1985, my family lived in the Bay Area. Okay, not the Bay Area, the East Bay. No, not Berkeley either. How about the East Side of Oakland, an area that is still considered to be one of the most dangerous, underdeveloped areas of the United States. Lucky for you, this is not sociology, so I digress.

My father at this time was 26 years old. He looked like a cross between Uncle Phil from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and Yogi Bear. Just kidding. Kind of. Anyway, he definitely still enjoyed to party, carouse, and passed

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

on a love of sports to me. There was not a weekend that passed by that I was not watching the Oakland Invaders of the now long defunct United States Football League (Spring), the Oakland A's (Summer), or the San Francisco 49ers or Los Angeles Raiders (Fall) on television. Dad was a huge fan, but he also got a kick out of how much I had learned to emulate him. By 1985, we had a shared hatred of one person: Marc Wilson of the Los Angeles Raiders.

For the non-sports fans out there, Marc Wilson was the on-again/off-again starting quarterback of the Los Angeles Raiders. Even if you are not a sports fan, it must be hard to wrap your mind around this idea: the Raiders were once a great football team. They probably had the most talent in football in 1985. The only problem was Wilson sucked. Like a

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

Hoover vacuum powered by a Ferrari engine. Most Raider fans were huge fans of the old, yet dependable backup, Jim Plunkett. After all, Plunkett had helped the Raiders win two Super Bowls in the past five years, so the fact he was pushing 40 meant nothing. And if Dad hated the guy, damn it, that was enough for me.

Anyway, there was a new thing my father wanted to share with me: fishing. Understand, at six, I was like a darker Verne Troyer, so most of the equipment was bigger than me. But hey, I absolutely adored my father at this point in time, so I figured he had to know what he was doing...even if I obviously did not. So dad decided it was time I learned to fish. If I remember, the first time we went fishing was with my father's best friend Lester and Lester's awesome wife, Michelle. I appreciated Michelle

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

because she seemed to know about as much about fishing as I did.

What I remembered about that day was that Dad got thought it was funny that I almost kept launching myself and not the pole into the water. Also, after learning to properly cast a fishing pole without leaving my feet, I somehow managed to catch a fish that was probably best used to catch a bigger fish. This experience must have convinced Dad and Lester that I was suitable to go along on one of their more serious trips.

So the next time I would fish with my father was at about 4 a.m. Dad was always a morning person. Maybe that comes from being the oldest of six children and needing to be first all the time. I have no idea, except it did not get passed down. So as we are heading out to the water, well who am I kidding, I fell asleep. I just remember

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

being awoken and it was still plenty dark outside. As it turned out, Dad and Lester had decided on the San Mateo Pier, which ironically is not in the city of San Mateo, but Foster City. Also ironic is the advice Dad gave me. He told me, “If something is pulling on your pole stronger than you, let me know fast”.

All these years later, I’m not sure if he was talking about fishing. Seriously, after he gets me set up, Dad starts talking about how great it is being out with his baby boy (or young blood, sport, champ, etc.) and best friend.

You know, I don’t think Dad ever really cared that much about catching fish when we went out. Well, as long as no one else did, he was okay. But truthfully, he had a sense of peace while fishing. He got to bullshit with his friends, his son, and generally, have a good time. Plus fishing is

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

usually cheap. So if Dad could keep his money inside his wallet, all the better.

After about 15 minutes, Dad starts talking to me. Usually, when he wanted to tease me, he talked about girls. At six, even the best liar knows squat about girls. They are just annoying and smell funny. But hey, you are never too young to be indoctrinated into the male school of macho. So he starts telling me stuff like, “that Atari and cartoons are nice, but wait ‘til you bust that first nut”.

If you must know, at six, I was sure he meant I was finally going to get to open the pecans we used to get myself. That matters when your dad is 275 pounds with a huge appetite.

So after Lester and Dad have a laugh, we settle down to have some food. The poles are pretty secure, so

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

theoretically nothing should disturb. Funny thing about theories though, they are never fact. I say that because Dad's pole, it starts shaking. First it has that rumble like those coin-operated hotel mattresses people still talk fondly about. Then, it jumps around like a seismograph. Since none of us are moving with it, it can't be an earthquake.

Dad runs over and grabs the pole. Except while I'm frozen, he is smiling. He tells me, "We eatin' good tonight young blood!"

This led to the most memorable physical experience I ever saw Dad go through. As he grabs the pole, the pole grabs back. And Dad starts moving as if the water is a gigantic fridge and he is a poor magnet destined to plop upon it. But instead of you know, actually heeding his own advice to me and letting the pole go, Dad seems hell

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

bent on making whatever is under the damn water as if it is Moby Dick to his Ahab. The only problem is he is losing. You know, like Ahab did. At this point, Dad is at the edge of the pier and probably about two or three tugs from tumbling off the side Wile E. Coyote style.

So he does what any real alpha man does, he lets the damn pole go. And with a straight face that I will always admire, looks at Lester and me and says, "That fish better be lucky my hand slipped"

I did not have the heart to tell him that he was wearing his fishing gloves. Not then or pretty much ever. Funny thing is we actually caught quite a few nice fish that morning. That they came off my fishing pole did not diminish the day for Dad. Nor did it stop the embellishment over the years. Anyone with an avid fisherman in

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

their family can appreciate how an unknown mass that was completely underwater became so many different things over the years. First, the mass was a small whale. When I asked what kind of whale, Dad said, “A big ass whale”.

Enough said right? Only problem was my grandfather’s insistence that a whale would be a big deal even in the San Francisco Bay. So after Dad gave up on a whale, it became a shark. It was if he did his homework on that one. Yes, sharks do frequent the area where the San Mateo Pier used to be open at. However, they aren’t quite the Jaws variety, instead mostly bottom-feeders. So science killed another fishing buzz.

By that point, I gave up. Dad had earned his right to make it whatever he wanted. We never did figure out

DAD vs. FISH (OR SOMETHING ELSE)

what it actually was. I decided on the remains of the Titanic.

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

It's always interesting how things that are supposed to be perceived one way get taken completely different by others. 1987 was a year for that, most notably with Al Campanis making comments about black people not having as he put it, the 'necessities' to be managers in Major League Baseball. To this day, people who knew him will explain that he meant well and that Campanis was influential in the decision to sign and play Jackie Robinson in 1947. But those comments ultimately ruined his career and his reputation.

To say that I would approach that level in any way is laughable. But I too had my own forgettable moment in 1987. By this time, my parents had

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

relocated from Oakland to Fresno and weren't together. At this time, I stayed with my father and his new girlfriend, Marilynn. I was in the third grade and at this point, my family was going out of their way to call me a genius. I hated that label then and I hate it now. The only difference between my two younger sisters and me is that I gravitated towards books and newspapers and my family cultivated that. To me, it was nothing more than a positive self-fulfilling prophecy.

To my father though, it was a revelation. He loved nothing more than having a brilliant son. So much so that he considered many things for me to do. First was the piano. Even as an eight year old, I had long fingers which were ideal for playing. Except I have the dexterity of a drunken frat boy with hand casts. Plus, the piano is expensive to learn. You know, paying

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

for the lessons just wasn't Dad's thing. So that was scrapped. Then there was my grandfather's old computer. If I remember, it was a Kaypro. Even in 1987, it was an old computer. But Dad somehow thought that I could take reading at a higher grade level and turn that into Bill Gates like computer programming. I'll say this much about Dad: he always had a very strong belief in what I could do.

Then in the spring, Dad finally found something that was cheap and could demonstrate my intellect: The Columbia Elementary School Spelling Bee. From what he told me, he got the idea from the school's vice-principal one day he came to pick me up. Evidently, she told my father that I was too smart not to enter. That is all Dad needed to hear. It was like Bernie Madoff reading his first get rich quick book. I can remember him actually

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

quizzing me on words that he couldn't spell himself. But the effort was outstanding. This pretty much was the process for about two weeks leading up to the actual event. Was it a big deal to me? No. I was seven. A Happy Meal was a big deal to me. But to my father, this was just short of World War III. As I grew older, I recognized where I got my intense competitiveness from. And it wasn't Mom. My father hated to lose. Losing was probably on some parallel road with a sodium-free diet and celibacy. It was just unacceptable. Like my father, I learned to make excuses for losing and never give the other person their due. This trait would come up for the first of many times at this spelling bee.

As I remember, the kids who were participating got pulled out of class, which for some strange reason was

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

always cool when you know you didn't do anything wrong. I remember not really being too worried or anything like that. Dad said I was going to win, so that was really it. So when my teacher Mrs. Smith told me to head to the cafeteria, it just seemed like a formality. When I got there, it was like I imagined a recital or something would go. There were parents neatly sitting in two rows of seats divided so there was a left side and right side. In between was the man who would give the word the kids would spell. Now, this was in no way like the surreal stuff you see on television. You got a word and you spelled it. No stalling for time or asking if Webster himself had created and defined the word. Just spell it. The cool part was that my parents and my grandparents were both there. In my eyes, that was more proof of what was going to happen. They let my grandparents come too

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

because I was going to win. So I waved to them and sat up on stage with the rest of the kids.

I was the only student from my class, so I didn't know any of the other kids. So I basically did what I usually did to pass the time: I daydreamed about being a member of GI Joe. In my head, Cobra never stood a chance against me. But I digress. My first word was a lob. Okay, it wasn't a lob, it was cracker. But it was still an easy word. I put that in my chili beans. So I spelled it, I was told correct and while other parents politely clapped, Dad would say, "THAT'S RIGHT!"

This process went along for about fifteen minutes. Kids kept falling by the wayside. To his credit, Dad didn't break out in chorus "Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye", but I swore I saw him smiling. I can't quite remember exactly how many kids were left, but I

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

would guess it was about six. By this time, the words were up to about a fifth or sixth grade level. Got to love a challenge right? I came up to the microphone and was given the word sincerely. I was not ready for that word. Sincerely. So I spelled it like it sounded in my seven year old head. S-I-N-C-E-R-L-Y. After I finished the word, Dad got excited because he felt that was the proper spelling. But in the eyes of spelling bee law, I was eliminated. First Dad kind of lost it saying, “What was wrong with that!?!?”

Then I totally lost it. Instead of showing a little class and just walking off the stage like a good kid (and like I was told), I proceeded to filibuster this spelling bee in a way that would make your Senator jealous. First I started by saying, “I got it right”.

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

After being told that the word was spelled S-I-N-C-E-R-E-L-Y, I protested saying that is how I spelled it. No dice. The judge explained that I had spelled it S-I-N-C-E-R-L-Y. Now a mortal spoiled sport would have been had. But I had just begun to fight. I then got louder. “BUT I GOT IT RIGHT!!!”

At this point, the judge actually looked at my family. My mom was actually embarrassed at this point. Dad, while a little flustered, was still in my corner. The best response came from my wise grandfather. He was chuckling. He was actually quite humored by the display his first-born grandson was putting on. Soon, I gave him more to work with. I pulled out the trump card of all sore losers, the tears. I was now crying and screaming, “I GOT IT RIGHT!!!” to the dismay of pretty much everyone still in that old cafeteria. Even as I retell

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

this, it feels like this all took a long time, but in reality, this was about 45 seconds. Finally, my grandfather tells Dad, all while still smiling, “You better go get that boy”.

Dad isn't as much embarrassed as he is disappointed. He gets up on stage and for one of the few times I can remember as a kid, used tact instead of force with his children. Dad just sort of put his left arm around me and say, “It's alright. You're still better than most of the kids here” and whisked me off the stage. I know that isn't the Dr. Spock speech for kids, but it worked wonders for his seven year old egomaniac. I eventually went and sat with my mom, who as always, felt if she smothered her son with love, it would be okay. She just hugged me and said, “You did good”.

The best part about it all was that Dad was firmly in my corner the

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

entire way. I can remember at home Dad picking up the dictionary and actually looking up the word sincerely. I guess he just had to be sure. And when he found that it was spelled with two E's and nine letters, he let it go. I would actually enter one more spelling bee the next year. But it was pretty anticlimactic. I actually won at the school and lost a regional event to so much more dedicated spellers. None of it measured up to the way Dad supported me, even in the face of one of the biggest meltdowns in the history of the Baldwin family. I always got more out of the way he helped me prepare, because my father wasn't much of a diligent student. He had the high school label of class clown to prove it. It didn't matter though because I never forgot how much he tried to help me be what he believed me to be. He wasn't living vicariously through me. Instead, he was helping

DAD vs. SPELLING BEE

to affirm the faith he had found in me
and what I could become. Sincerely.

DAD VS. NFL PLAYOFFS

By the time was 11, a couple of things had changed for me. I no longer lived with Dad, but my mom and two sisters. Before I started the seventh grade, we had moved to a much better area of Fresno. The start was less than nice though. My mom's television had been stolen before we moved so I was forced to listen to the 1990 World Series on the radio. It was as if I was reliving my grandfather's childhood. Truthfully, I'm probably better off not having seen it as my favorite team, the Oakland A's, were being swept away like a tumbleweed in a tornado by the Cincinnati Reds. The odds of a Cincinnati sweep were 40-1. Not that I would ever advise or condone gambling, but Dad used to lament that he could've made some good money

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

there. And hey, the Reds just happen to be the team managed by Pete Rose when he got suspended by Major League Baseball for life for gambling on them. So in a roundabout way, none of that makes any sense. So we move on.

Not everything was bad in this new neighborhood. I started middle school anonymous and a little bit too small for the position, but I learned to adapt. I would meet my childhood best friend Dustin in our apartment complex. My mom would end up calling him my “White Shadow” because we were inseparable for pretty much the next 10 years. I also met my once and current buddy Brandon at school.

Where I looked too small and young, he was 13 with a full beard and well over six feet tall. Talk about a matched set. It was during this time I had really decided that I liked girls. A

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

lot. There was one in particular at this school named Jaimee. She was a very pretty girl, always friendly, and probably the fastest seventh grade girl on the planet. At that time, I figured I would find a way to marry her and even take her last name. That's how big that crush was. Shit, I did the one thing most boys/men/old men do as a last resort to get a girl/woman/lady: I got religious.

There was a program at the evangelical church next to my apartment complex called AWANA. It stood for Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed. It could've stood for Aren't Welcome Any Negroes Anywhere and I would've showed up. So between a best friend, girls, the occasional homework and puberty, life was getting interesting.

However, one development in particular was making life great. The

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

Los Angeles Raiders were winning again. In 1989, they had hired Art Shell four games into the year making him the first African-American head coach in the history of the National Football League. At 10, I could give a damn about social progress. I just wanted to see the team I idolized winning again. They went 7-5 under Shell that year. The best part of that was going to a game at the enormous Los Angeles Coliseum with my grandparents. They played the Cincinnati Bengals. That was relevant because Dad's youngest sister Chandra married a man named Ickey Woods. In 1988, he would become the sensation of the NFL mostly on the strength of a dance called the Ickey Shuffle. The Bengals would actually get to the Super Bowl that year and played a great game. Only problem was, they were playing the San Francisco 49ers who had Joe Montana

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

and Jerry Rice. Before he danced with the stars, Jerry Rice was probably the greatest football player that ever lived. And he proved it as he helped beat the Bengals 20-16.

To make matters worse, Ickey got hurt in the second game of the 1989 season against the Pittsburgh Steelers. So the game we saw in the Coliseum would be without him playing. I got over that about five minutes into the game as Bo Jackson took off on a run down the left side for about 90 yards. I just remember thinking wow, this is incredible. And as much as I loved my grandparents, I could only imagine how great it would be to see a game with Dad.

Well as the 1990 season unfolded, the Raiders surprised everyone by winning their first four games and then winning their last five games to finish 12-4 and win their division for

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

the first time since 1985. Art Shell won Coach of the Year. And I'm almost certain it wasn't given to him because of Affirmative Action. Most importantly, I had the latitude to talk to Dad about football again. By this time, he was actually listening to my opinion more than giving me his own. I told him that the team I was most worried about was the Kansas City Chiefs. On paper it wasn't a contest. The Raiders had more talent everywhere. But for some reason, they always made mistakes against the Chiefs and would lose really close games. As most Raider fans know, losing to the Chiefs is a tradition as consistent as Dick Clark hosting a New Year's Eve party in New York.

As it turned out, two great things happened to allow my father and me to see a great game together. First, the Chiefs lost to the Miami Dolphins 17-

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

16 in their playoff game that year. Then, with my uncle Ickey healthy for the first time in a long time, the Bengals destroyed the Houston Oilers 41-14 in their first playoff game. What that meant was that Miami would go to upstate New York to play the Buffalo Bills and the Bengals would come to Los Angeles to play the Raiders in the divisional playoffs. And my father and I would commence Operation Beg For Playoff Tickets. That is an unofficial title.

As it turned out, begging wasn't really necessary. My uncle was given a small allotment of tickets to the game and gave my father two for us to go. It was like a very early Christmas present. I was the cock of the walk, complete with a strut at school. Dad was stoked because Ickey had paid for us to stay at the Marriott in downtown Los Angeles. I didn't know it then, but I

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

know now what he was thinking: free minibar.

What I remember most was getting impatient with Dad the day we were supposed to be headed to Los Angeles. He had told me to be ready at 5:30 p.m. Since he kept hours like a cable installer, it could've been 5:30 p.m. It also could've very well been 9 p.m. As 6 p.m. rolled around, I was thinking Dad had actually decided to take someone else. I was mad, I was belligerent, and I was plenty of other 50 cent words. He finally showed up at about 6:45 p.m. and of course, my mom tells him everything I was saying and thinking. What struck me unusually interesting was the look he shot me. I actually thought I was going to get a spanking for being mad that an agreement had been broken, something Dad always told me to hold people to. Instead, he initially gave me

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

this furtive look and then he smiled. Which meant only one thing: Dad had just got done laying someone down. He never liked to disclose this stuff around my mom, so I learned to decode the expressions on his face. And like that, we were off.

The drive was great because we talked about everything you could fit into a 2 ½ hour drive. We talked about the game, school, girls, the cold weather, his new job working at a convalescent hospital as a male nurse and girls again. You know the important stuff. Being an alpha male, Dad didn't think much of things like maps or directions. He had been near the Marriott in Los Angeles once, so he knew how to get there. Only problem is, his driving had led us smack in the middle of Compton. Yes, that city of Compton, the city most noted for gang violence and bringing the rap group N.W.A.

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

This was before the Rodney King driven riots. This was the Compton where you might get shot over wearing red and blue in the wrong area. And I was wearing a blue shirt inside of a blue Ford Thunderbird. Best of all, the car was low on gas, so we had to stop. Dad gets out and of course, there are a few teenage kids in red with red bandannas on their heads. As he starts to get out, they slowly start approaching the car. If I had any shit in my system, it was gone. I mean, I had just watched the movie Colors a week or so ago. And movies still depicted everything accurately to me at that point. So blue and red didn't make purple in Compton. But Dad, he looks at them and then says, "Any of you know how to get to the Marriott downtown?"

I think they were more shocked than anything that he asked them for

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

directions. It was like something that had to be processed. But the oldest of the group spoke up and said, “You passed it already pops. Go back on Gage to the 110. It’s on Figueroa.”

Dad nods, pumps the gas, and then peels out so fast it’s like he was told we were in a race for the last room. I had sat super still the entire time we were there. I leaned over to look at him and his forehead was sweating. I asked him, “Why are you sweating?”

He looked at me and said, “Because we almost got shot by some gang bangers. And I don’t have insurance on this car.”

Disaster averted, we headed to the Marriott, took a mutual deep breath upon arriving and finding it free of Blood or Crips, and then got out. Dad had packed a conservative piece of luggage for an overnight stay. I

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

packed what I normally packed for a trip: a Save Mart supermarket plastic bag complete with all the criticals. Dad didn't notice it until we took about 10 steps toward the hotel and was like, "What the fuck is that???"

At that point, he snatched my eight items or less special and stuffed it into his luggage. And that unspoken lesson was burned into my head. If you have to bring a store bag into a fancy hotel, make sure it's paper. Check in was simple since Dad wasn't paying and we headed up. As stoked as I was to be in a hotel that didn't have a number in its name, Dad had died and gone to Heaven. The best part was the all knowing look he gave me when he opened the mini bar. Candy, cookies, chips, sodas, and of course, liquor. Or spirits to those so inclined. The only spirits Jack Daniel's chases away are sober ones. But I digress. Just as I was

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

about to tear into what I assumed were free snacks, Dad tells me we're going to see Ickey.

The cool thing about having a relative that doubles as a professional athlete is that I got a small window into what that kind of lifestyle entailed. Ickey and the rest of the Bengals were staying on the top floor of the hotel, which was totally restricted by security. Not Marriott security, but big ass black man security. We were led along to the room and the door was open. There sat my always awesome uncle Ickey. As usual, he greeted me in the bodacious way only Ickey could. As Ickey and Dad made small talk, I just took a look around and thought wow, this is a big room. It really was. Perks of playing in the NFL I guess. Before I could orgasm or something close, we were headed back to the room.

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

Now having spent enough time with Dad, I knew one thing to be true: if I didn't beat him to sleep, I wouldn't get much sleep. Why, you may ask? Because Dad had a snore that would bring life back to the dead like the Thriller video. It sounded like a mix of the Emergency Broadcast System test, a motorized buzz saw, and the grunt/snort legendary Blues singer Bobby "Blue" Bland would often make while singing. So I was determined to eat myself into a mini coma. The only problem was Dad was already ahead of that curve. He had gobbled down some cashews, two large Snickers bars, a chocolate chip cookie, and a bottle of water. By the time he rested on the pillow, it was already no contest. Asleep within three minutes, the snoring commenced. I tried to ignore it, which is like trying to ignore your house being on fire while watching TV inside of it. It was like

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

death by a thousand cuts. And trust me, I tried everything. I put the pillows on my ears, I tried to make the sensation of popping my ears which creates that weird noise in your head, and nothing worked. So I just sat there and resigned myself to having one night of no sleep. Occasionally, Dad would stop snoring long enough to tease me into trying to force my body to rest, which of course produced the opposite effect. So the night ended with me just laying there to the sound of snores and visions of my very first playoff game.

The next day started pretty easily actually. Cool thing about being 11 is that sleep is important, but not optimal. So we both got cleaned up and ready and the prospect of the game got us both really excited. Dad drove us to the Coliseum and even though by 1991 it was older and

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

looking increasingly run down, it was still an awesome place to see as a kid. The green of the grass was incredible. The red of the track around the football field was impressive to see. And the sea of people in the crowd was just awesome to behold. I could see Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on the Raider side of the field. On television they are big. In real life, they are giants. And we were seated pretty high up in the Coliseum.

I noticed we were surrounded by a lot of blacks and Hispanics in the crowd. One thing that united urban Los Angeles was a love of the Raiders. Everyone was festive. Much more excited than anxious. Some of the talk was less about the Bengals and more about the Buffalo Bills the next week. The Bills had beaten the Miami Dolphins 44-34 and looked like the best team in football. But to most of

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

the Raider fans, we had Bo Jackson. As long as we had Bo, we could beat any team. So that's how it began, Dad making nice with other Raider fans and my eyes focused squarely on the field. I could care less about anything else.

The game itself went according the script for the home team. The Raiders controlled Cincinnati for the most part and put it away in the fourth quarter by scoring the last 10 points and winning 20-10. But what I remember most are two things. First, in the third quarter, Bo Jackson ran the ball to the right side and took off on a really good run. Instead of running out of bounds, Bo ran back towards the field and was tackled. It didn't look like much of anything. Only problem was, Bo wasn't getting up. There was a murmur in the crowd and after what felt like a long time, Bo was helped up

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

and off the field. At the time, we thought maybe he had hurt his leg. It turned out he had hurt his hip. To the point where it would cause him to have to retire from football and the hip would have to be replaced. For the longest time, I actually felt like I had jinxed the Raiders and didn't go to a football game. I eventually got over that, but not the sight of one of my heroes not being able to do something incredible anymore.

The other thing I most remembered happened up in the stands. About halfway through the second quarter, I started to smell what I thought was something burning. It was like leaves or grass. And I was right. Someone had started to pass a pipe around our section of the Coliseum. To my amazement, Dad said, "Can I hit that?"

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

And to my further amazement, it came back to him. He just started smoking weed with everyone else, just as casually as he wanted. The best part was about 30 minutes after it was all said and done. Dad, with his eyes taking on a red tint, looks at me and says, “You hungry?”

Four hot dogs, two Pepsi’s, and a large order of nachos later, I think he was okay. Toward the end of the game, we started talking about if the Raiders could win in Buffalo if Bo Jackson couldn’t play. He told me, “Yeah. And I could win the Lotto tonight too.”

The game ended and we just walked around the Coliseum. It was really an awesome experience. Dad kept telling me this was something we were going to have to do much more often. I just smiled and took it all in. It didn’t matter if that was true or not. It really didn’t have to be because I had the

DAD vs. NFL PLAYOFFS

time with Dad. No snoring, no weed, no tardiness, nothing could diminish that.

DAD VS. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

1991 was a good year for baseball underdogs. The Minnesota Twins and the Atlanta Braves both went from worst-to-first to make it to the best World Series that I have ever seen. Locally, a guy by the name of Bobby Jones was carrying my future alma mater Fresno State to the College World Series essentially by being the best amateur pitcher since Roger Clemens. It was good times all around. Well, except for my own little league baseball team. Team Ventura Market made the Bad News Bears look like Babe Ruth's New York Yankees.

To say we were awful is an insult to awful teams everywhere. We deserved worse. And our assistant manager and my Godfather Chuck deserved better. He is maybe 5'5", but he towered over

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

the baseball diamond with a ferocity that would have made Vince Lombardi cringe. Our team called him “The General” because he was always barking out orders of instruction. The only problem was, we made so many mistakes he always had something to complain about. Players ran in for fly balls, only to watch the ball land about 15 feet behind them. Some of us were absolutely terrified at the plate. I used to bail out of the batter’s box on fastballs a good three feet away. To make matters worse, the guys who weren’t afraid often swung at everything. One of my buddies Lalo actually jumped up at a pitch with his eyes closed, causing Chuck to come about half way down the first base line and cry out, “Lalo!?!? What are you doin’?!?!?”

Granted, many of us had never played organized baseball before, me

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

included. But wow, some of the losses we had basically ensured I would never play any sport competitively again. We once lost a game 23-0. It was called after the third inning. I just remember feeling like a tent stake and each run that scored acted like a hammer just knocking me deeper and deeper into the ground. I was competitive, but didn't have much of a way to inspire or motivate. Hell, I was 11. The seventh grade was proving to be enough to deal with. Then I got a dose of perspective. My Uncle Charles, who many in my family affectionately called Butchie, was dying of Leukemia.

I can't say that I knew Uncle Butchie all that well, but he was always kind to me and told great stories. He also had two sons, Carlos and Alejandro that lived in Texas. What I could recognize was that a man who

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

weighed around 200 pounds normally was about 120 pounds and getting weaker with each passing day. He had come to stay with my grandparents and since I visited them often, I got to see his condition with my own eyes. When I talked to Dad about it, he was unusually abrupt, which was the signal to me that maybe our uncle wasn't going to make it. Which is why it was so surprising for Dad to tell me that he was going to bring Uncle Butchie to one of our baseball games. When I would see him, he would be so weak, he had to keep a bucket with him to vomit. And that simple act caused my uncle tremendous pain. All I kept thinking was, if laughter is the best medicine, our uncle was going to be cured in two hours time, because we were playing the best team in our league.

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

The Saturday morning of the game is one of the most vivid positive memories of my childhood and by extension, my life. I actually traveled to the game with Chuck and just remembered thinking something great was going to happen that morning. Maybe it was because I didn't have to bake in the Fresno heat with the game starting at 9 a.m. Or it could've been that Chuck told me I was starting at second base, which was my most comfortable position on the infield. It was just one of those days where I knew we would do well. Then as we are warming up, I glance up to see Dad helping Uncle Butchie sit down in the bleachers. I look up to smile at them and just missed getting my face rearranged by a baseball being thrown around the diamond. And suddenly, I don't feel quite so good about the game. On the flip side, my face was intact.

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

We were the home team, so the other team batted first. And it took all of about 90 seconds for Dad to get started. It started off nice enough with him telling us, “C’mon now, three up and three down!”

I guess it just wasn’t meant for him to be relaxed at the game. Dad never was. Pretty soon he’s standing in the bleachers shouting encouragement to our pitcher Oscar. “Get this kid! Strike his little ass out!!!”

It’s one thing for a 5’11” and 300 pound man to be loud at a little league baseball game. When you consider there were maybe 25 people there watching, everything Dad said magnified. Maybe it helped, because Oscar might have pitched his best game that year. Truthfully he may have been the only kid that could’ve played for any of the other teams, so it’s not as if he wasn’t any good. But

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

on this day, he was fantastic. And luckily, like Shake 'n' Bake, I helped.

My first action came in the second inning. Oscar got their cleanup hitter to pop-up right to me. It was a simple enough play for anyone. Maybe it was too simple because I felt the need to do a little bunny hop before the ball fell into my glove. Oscar got a kick out of that, so much so that he did a hop catching the ball from me and smiling at me. Dad enjoyed it too, shouting "Great catch Hopalong! That's how you do it blood!"

The first time I came up was in the bottom of the third inning. We were down 1-0 and the bases were empty. But for us, a 1-0 deficit was like the United States hockey team beating Russia in the 1980 Winter Olympics, minus the ice. My job was basically to try and get on base anyway I could, so I did whatever I could. My favorite

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

baseball player then and now was Rickey Henderson. And what Rickey Henderson did was crouch to make himself so small at the plate that his strike zone was about the size of the black delegation at the Republican National Convention. To add on to that, I had found out that if I twitched and spasmed like I had Tourette's syndrome, it either amused or distracted pitchers. So I began moving up and down like I really had to pee while bobbing the bat on my shoulders like it was 10 pounds too heavy for me. It made for a four pitch walk and Dad chiming in, "Great eye blood! A walk is as good as a hit!!!"

Meanwhile, Chuck was screaming, "That's the way! Let's go" as I made it to first base. Then he told me to be ready to run if a pitch got away from the catcher, which happens about every five pitches at that age.

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

Unfortunately, nothing came of it as each of the next three hitters struck out. Going back for my glove, I noticed that Uncle Butchie was smiling. He didn't look particularly strong, but he was definitely enjoying himself and that made me feel fantastic. I think Dad amused him more than anything. Matter of fact, I'm fairly sure of it. The fourth inning was our big inning. With one out and a runner on first, Oscar threw a fastball that was hit right to our shortstop. I ran over to second to get the runner on first then turned and made a great throw to first base. Since I wasn't much of a hitter, I took great pride in my defense and that double play made me feel like a million bucks. Plus it ended the ending and we were still in a spot to win the game. Running back over to the dugout, Dad screamed at me happily, "Great throw! God Damn that

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

was a great double play! Now get some runs blood!”

I really didn't have much control over that seeing as I wasn't scheduled to bat unless five batters came to the plate before me. But I got the classic little league chant of “Rally!” going. I'll be damned if we didn't actually rally that day. Our first batter reached on an error from the third baseman, who made a throw that ended up somewhere on the road. Then Oscar singled to tie the game. At this point, our dugout is going ape shit. Usually, the only thing we had to look forward to was Capri-Sun after the game. But we were fully in this game and had a real chance. I remember stomping my cleats on the ground and hurting my foot because I was so psyched about actually winning.

The next hitter walked and I was on-deck. My buddy Leonard was the

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

hitter. His dad was the manager and I was really cool with Leonard and his two brothers Joaquin and tiny Mando. Joaquin was the only player on the team shorter than me, so we were really tight. But honestly, both of us weren't very good. Leonard though could hit, he just lacked confidence sometimes. I just remembered thinking I couldn't be the guy to kill the rally. That's all I could think about. Then Leonard took the pressure off by hitting a sizzling line drive down the first base line. When their left fielder chucked the ball like a discus past the third baseman's head, Leonard had come all the way around to score. And I was damn near hyperventilating. I had started jumping up and down after Leonard's hit, almost interfered with the catcher at home plate, and then dug into the batter's box without my helmet.

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

Leonard's hit had taken a huge load off my mind. And that was before the helmet came off. We were now up 3-1 and I had no pressure on me. Yeah, I was no Michael Jordan or Derek Jeter. At 11, all I hoped was to be the guy who didn't fuck anything up. I think Dad picked up on that because he was telling me, "Take your time and be a hitter!"

He even did a mock swing from the bleachers, which helped me none because he was left handed and I am right handed. I put on my helmet thinking I had nothing to lose. Well I didn't want to waste any time, so I was swinging on the first pitch. As it turns out, I got a pitch that looked like a softball and got a clean single through the left side. Now, Dad and Chuck were dueling with their yells. Dad got his out first f-bomb shouting,

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

“Fuck yeah Tooter! That’s right. Great swing!!!”

Then as I rounded first and came back to the base, Chuck was in my ear. “That’s the way! That-a-way!”

I always knew how good a kid was not by his swing or the way he caught a ball, but how he would react to a hit. Good kids usually didn’t react much on first because they were used to it. Great kids didn’t stop at first. Now someone like me, I had to duck my head because my grin looked like a slit watermelon. It was one of the best swings I put on a baseball until about 25 and I was determined to score.

I didn’t get a chance to move until there were two outs. Our biggest player and probably the best hitter was a kid named Salvador, Sal for short. Sal is proof that sports breaks down a lot of barriers when you’re a

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

kid. Sal was a big kid, almost as wide as he was tall. Okay, not really, but you get the idea. The reason kids didn't tease him was because he could play ball. He was good first basemen and when he hit the ball, the ball felt it.

Their pitcher had been careful with Sal, but he had struck him out his last time up because Sal tried to detonate the fastball he had got. The first pitch he saw in this at-bat bounced a good five feet in front of home plate and skipped away from the catcher. I wasn't very fast even as a kid, but it didn't matter much and I took second base easily. The next sequence will stay with me until the day I die. Sal hit a changeup right back up the middle for a base hit. Leonard Sr. was holding up his hands for me to stop at third base, but I was having none of that. I flew right by him with the

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

intention of scoring. There was a lot of screaming I'm sure, but I don't remember hearing anything. My focus was squarely on the plate. I noticed their catcher hadn't turned his head toward me, which meant he didn't have the ball yet. But he was blocking the plate great, so I took my chance with a hard slide.

My left leg hit this poor guy's shin guard and I remember him going topsy-turvy, literally head over heels. I slid in and the catcher came toppling over my left side, his face mask drilling me in the left thumb. I was safe at home. And the ball went all the way to the backstop which allowed Sal to get to second base. I got my bat and headed back to the dugout when Dad erupted. He looked like he was trying to hold it in. Seriously, the effort was being made to seem restrained, but there was no chance. He just yelled

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

out, “Hell yeah! That’s right, take his ass out! Take his ass out!”

Dad made me smile with that one, even though my thumb was in impossible pain. But the best part about it was Uncle Butchie. He smile through his eyeglasses at me gave me thumbs up with his right hand. Even Dad noticed that and was digging it. I never forgot that exchange and how much two very different responses can give you the same type of joy. That run basically put the game on ice for us. Up 4-1, we ended up winning 4-2. I couldn’t have been happier. It was the best win we had as a team in my two years and definitely the most sentimental time I had playing baseball. Plus, we got two Capri-Sun’s that day. You’ve got to love that.

I wish I could say this story ended with miracle recovery, but Uncle Butchie died later that year. I took it

DAD vs. LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

harder than I expected because I remembered the game and all of the emotions and joy taken out of it. His funeral was especially tough because it was the only time I ever saw my grandfather cry. Dad told me, “You don’t have to worry because he’s been freed from that pain. Plus, he told me that you gave him a great time. So come to grips and move forward.”

I did, but not until I recognized just how awesome it was to have had our uncle share in a great moment in the first place. If only everything that you accomplish in life can be shared with those special in your life.

DAD VS. DISNEYLAND

By the time the summer of 1995 rolled around, I was a 15 year old on vacation between my junior and senior years of high school. I had the same type of problems most 15 year old boys have. The biggest problem of them all was trying to get the attention of girls my age. I had three things working against me. First and foremost, I was two years younger than most everyone in my class from having skipped a couple of grades in elementary school.

That led to problem number two, which was that I was a lot smaller than the other kids. In July of 1995, I was maybe 5 feet 4 inches tall. Knee high to a grasshopper as my great-grandfather Freeman once described me. And last but certainly not least, I did not have nearly the self-assuredness of my father. The man

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

was built like a grizzly bear yet carried himself with an almost regal air when we went places.

To this day, I'm impressed and in awe of how much he loved himself. I don't mean that as an insult in the least by the way. My problem was that I had grown to believe the things said about me. My family had always emphasized education and intelligence, so I learned as many 50 cent words as I could. There were times I sounded like a miniature Don King, minus the ridiculous shock of hair on my head. Only problem is, teenagers aren't really much into intellect by and large. Worse than that is the idea that too many black kids have bought into that education and intelligence is a 'white thing'. Still ignorant, but at the time, I just wanted to fit in. And it was not working. So needless to say it was a rough stretch.

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

It was a weird time. Dad had decided that his only son needed a father, so I had moved in about two weeks before my 16th birthday. That's like Jimmy Carter deciding America needed to get out of Vietnam in 1978. You know, just a little late. In many ways, it felt like the first rounds of a boxing match. We were feeling each other out and trying to find a comfort zone. I was still very respectful, even slightly fearful of my father. But at the same time, I was much more aware of things, even if I didn't speak on them. I remember him telling me that he had a surprise for me about five days before my birthday. Knowing Dad, it could've been anything from a computer to a big bag of marijuana. Nothing was out of the realm of possibility in my mind. But honestly, I didn't give it much thought.

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

I remember waking up on a Friday, the day before my birthday and Dad telling me to pack for a trip. Not exactly a big buildup, but I didn't exactly give a damn. The funny thing is, as I was packing, I had an image of Ritchie Valens and his brother Bob from the movie *La Bamba*. Bob takes Ritchie to Tijuana as a rite of passage. I honestly thought Dad might be doing something cool like that with me, especially since I was about to be entering my last year of high school.

So needless to say, I was pretty excited. Think of a guy facing life in prison getting a full pardon. Think of a guy who looked like John Merrick (aka The Elephant Man) getting a Brad Pitt face transplant. Yeah, that kind of excited. My mind was racing over the idea of beer, Mexican hookers, motorcycles, and Mexican hookers. Even as I write this, I wish I had

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

taken the STD part of Health class more seriously. That way, Mexican hookers wouldn't have been so damn awesome in my head.

When we left, I made it a point to stay really silent. My job was to let the surprise unfold. So as we headed off, I just smiled this ridiculous smile. Tony Robbins would've been jealous of all the teeth I was flashing. Then I realized we weren't heading to the freeway towards Southern California. We weren't even headed toward the freeway at all. We were headed to my mom's apartment. Which could only mean one thing: we were about to pick up my sisters. I don't know what that sensation is I felt or how it happens, but I am sure it's what hospitals use to treat those erections that last over four hours.

As crappy as I felt, Dad was absolutely ecstatic. This was going to be a

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

Hallmark weekend. My ideas of debauchery and manhood initiations were oh so not going to happen. So at we walk into my mom's apartment, I have no earthly idea how this is going to go, but I'm already feeling pissy about it. My sisters are giddy with excitement, which for me only made it worse. They already knew what was going to happen. My birthday and I don't even know what I'm in store for. See how fast a surprise can change?

It didn't take long because my youngest sister Colette, who is notoriously bad with holding any kind of information, blurts out, "I can't believe we're going to Disneyland daddy!!!"

This was one of those moments where my life was like that movie *The Truman Show*. Because the cameras would've been privy to one of the best "What the Fuck???" faces of all time.

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

Disneyland? Really? I had wanted to go there when Reagan was still President. But I got wind of the fact we were poor and things like food and paying rent took precedent. I didn't mind, because I was and still am a big proponent of both. So needless to say, I was not feeling this very much. And it showed. I almost immediately started sulking, which was never a good idea around Dad. His idea of dealing with stuff like was telling you, "You keep looking like that, I'll give you a reason to look like that!"

I wanted to say something, but you don't bring pebbles to a nuclear war. Besides, there were three very happy people and me. Majority always rules in my family. So we hit the road as Dad made his now infamous proclamation of "We're on a budget!"

For Dad to say we were on a budget meant that we might be sleeping in

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

the car. That's how cheap he was. I love him, but the man should be in Webster's Dictionary squeezing the copper out of a penny next to the word cheap. This trip would prove to be his magnum opus of thriftiness. The first example proved to be in the city of Bakersfield. We stopped about two hours into the drive at a Taco Bell.

No one in this car was of an average weight, so hungry is probably an understatement to describe how we felt collectively. Dad's feelings had not diminished one bit as we walked in. Honestly, I hadn't seen him that happy in a long time. So we walked in and as we got to the front of the line, Dad reminds again, "Remember, we're on a budget!"

I'm sure my sisters and I looked like three cherries, we were so red. The best part was that after we ordered and started to eat, there was a little

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

boy throwing a tantrum. His father was in a nice suit and didn't seem like the type of man that would do much to address it in that setting. Well, he showed me the power of getting stereotypes wrong. The man proceeded to forcefully pick his son and tell him, "You better stop acting like that in here!"

The kid calmed down after that. But not before Dad exploded, "Now that's how you're supposed to handle your kids!!! Whoop his ass!!!"

Dad seemed in awe of a fellow father not worried about being in public and disciplining his child. That may have made his trip right there. I can't lie; it was always amusing to see Dad react like that, even if I was usually embarrassed by it. So we finished and got back on the road. My sisters amused themselves in the back seat and sung along to the music. I could

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

feel Dad occasionally look over at me, but he didn't say anything. We eventually got to Anaheim and checked into a motel about a block and a half away from Disneyland. I got a big kick out of my sisters' expressions. You can see the Monorail and the big Disneyland logo from where we were staying and the look of longing on their faces was priceless. Dad proceeded to take them to a pastrami place while I watched the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Florida Marlins on television. I remember that because the Dodgers' pitcher Ramon Martinez threw a no-hitter and nearly got his head taken off by his teammates in celebration. By the end of it, Martinez looked like he was defending himself.

Anyway, Dad and my sisters came back and brought dinner. I laughed because my sisters were teasing Dad because he had told them we were on

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

a budget again. As you can see, a pattern had been established. Sleep was next to impossible that night because between Dad and my sister Colette, it sounded like air traffic control had been attacked by a herd of rhinos. So I just quietly wished myself a happy 16th and laid there getting ready for the next morning.

The next day I got up first and got clean before anyone really so much as changed breathing patterns. I got a big Happy Birthday from my sisters and a bear hug that I can still feel some days from Dad. We left at about 7 a.m. and stood amongst an already huge mass of people about 15 minutes later. The interesting thing about Disneyland is always just how far people come to experience it.

Dad always had a way of being able to talk with absolute strangers and get their friendliest side to come out. We

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

talked to a family from Denver that was just ecstatic to be there. Evidently they had driven to Anaheim from Colorado, the father was an engineer with the city of Denver and the mom had a knack for making great banana bread. I really think Dad should've been an attorney. People always talked to him. We also met a group of Japanese tourists. Anyone who has ever been to Disneyland, Disney World, Euro Disney, etc. knows that they all attract a tremendous amount of foreign visitors. The extreme irony of talking to them was that their English was better than most of the Americans I knew. After about an hour in line, Dad gets to the ticket booth and starts acting like he's going to negotiate the entrance price. He looks up at the sign, which said "Adult--\$39.95" and said, "That price is for all of us right?"

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

The lady inside the booth proceeded to look at Dad as if he was a mutant and simply shook her head. Undaunted, Dad proceeded to tell her, “Hey, we’re on a budget here. What kind of discounts do you have? I’m a Veteran.”

At this point, the lady just stares and says, “The prices are on the sign sir”.

Watching Dad turn over that credit card was comedy of the highest order. It was literally like watching an internal struggle between a man and his money. Money wanted out but the man was doggedly trying to keep it in. Luckily, money eventually won out and we did actually get inside the spectacle self-described as the happiest place on Earth. Once money was actually out of the way, it was amazing how great a time Dad had. Disneyland does have that effect on many people. I literally saw years come off of his face with my sisters.

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

The best part for me was getting Donald Duck to do the jail pose with me. For those of you not familiar, the jail pose is basically where someone squats and is turned slightly perpendicular to the camera while throwing up some kind of sign with their fingers. Usually smiling isn't happening in the jail pose, but Donald's is surgically grafted onto his face, so I didn't have much choice there. I personally would like to thank the man or woman sweating like a whore in Pentecostal church that agreed to do that with me. You made my 16th birthday and made my father look murderous. It says a lot about Dad that he was big enough to take the picture anyway.

The other enjoyable part about Disneyland for me was that Captain E.O. was still playing. If you remember, Captain E.O. had been

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

released in 1986 and starred Michael Jackson. By 1995, Mike was about four shades lighter and pretty much become fodder for tabloid news and allegations of child molestation. Did that matter to me? Absolutely not. It was Michael Jackson. And not only that, but he still resembled a black man in 1986. Yes, I said it.

There were about five stages of Michael Jackson. You had Motown Michael, the cute kid with four other brothers, chocolate brown skin, and a bell pepper shaped nose. Then you had Off The Wall Michael, with the gawky adolescence, the kick ass afro, and the big bell pepper nose. Still, nothing unusual to report here. Third stage was Thriller Michael. Mike got a perm, his skin looks a little bit lighter and suddenly the bell pepper has been chopped for sautéing. But hey, Mike made Thriller and most of the world

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

was too consumed with the awesomeness of that album and the eccentric personality to really take stock of the fact that he's kind of looking different.

Stage four changed that though. Stage four was Bad album Michael. Bad album Michael's complexion was actually a little lighter than his complexion in Captain E.O. When the Bad video premiered in 1987, I was eight years old, but I could tell that Michael looked way different than before. For one, his skin was the complexion of liquid corn starch mixed with a few drops of chocolate milk. For two, his nose, which had been so prominent on his face, looked like an almond sliver at this point. It was all just a shock to my system. But I digress.

The fifth and final stage was basically 1993 until his death when Mike began

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

to look like a macabre mask, something akin to the Phantom of the Opera. It was sad, but there's something to be said about someone raised essentially trying to please other people and the effect that can have on someone's outlook.

Armchair psychology aside, I am one of the many people that just liked Captain E.O. It was totally 80's with the cheesy choreography and Angelica Huston playing the evil witch. But it's got a different feel than something typically Disney, which is probably why I liked it so much. I remember Dad and me having a conversation about Michael Jackson while my sisters watched. I asked him if he thought Michael Jackson was ashamed of being black. Dad thought about it for a second and simply said, "I think he is ashamed of himself."

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

I never forgot that comment. It was simple, yet very profound. The rest of the day was interesting in that we were actually done with Disneyland by about 4 p.m. and deciding on what else we should do. I had thought about a few other theme parks, but the idea of “We’re On a Budget!” just made me decide on silence. Actually, driving around Los Angeles and talking as a family was actually better than stopping somewhere. That trip also gave Dad an idea of what to do the next day. He simply said, “Kids, we’re going to San Diego tomorrow.”

As a kid, San Diego was like the city of Atlantis. It was technically still in California, but six hours away. It might as well have been six weeks. Going to Los Angeles was always a big deal, but San Diego was still another two or three hours depending on traffic. There was something mythical

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

about it. To compare, if you went six hours north of Fresno, you ended up in Redding, which is a great city if you're a truck driver. So needless to say, we were all happy with this decision.

Sunday had started pretty much like Saturday had, with me lying in bed listening to my sister and Dad having a snoring duel that rivaled the Kennedy-Nixon debates. The only real loser was my body. Needless to say, I made up for it on Interstate 5 heading to San Diego. Dad was really interesting in that he didn't seem to know for sure exactly where we would go. There were two legitimate choices for a family of four: the San Diego Zoo or Sea World. Maybe that dawned on Dad, because he woke me up to say, "Let's go to Tijuana."

I was still pretty much out because I barely managed to mumble an okay and we kept going. I woke up at the

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

border and it is still a surreal experience seeing the people coming in and out of Mexico. Most of the folks I saw as I watched heading back were college age kids. Now that I think about it, getting across was pretty effortless back then. We found a seemingly safe place to park and we got out.

Tijuana is strangely empty during the day. Much like New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina, its biggest streets look like a party that the host has neglected to clean up. That being said, it wasn't long before we found some pretty interesting stuff to do. First and foremost, I saw a vendor who had a donkey you could take pictures with. Photos are much more family-friendly than some of the urban legends I have heard about donkeys in Tijuana. Anyway, we took a couple of pictures with the donkey, who made Eeyore

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

look like Richard Simmons. I even got to break out the oversized sombrero, which was definitely a highlight.

Not so high on the list of good times was Dad trying again talk down the poor guy's price, which I remember being only \$1 per photo. And he wasn't done. My sisters saw a friendly Mexican lady selling drums that reminded me of the ones from the Karate Kid Part II. She was asking for \$1.50 per drum. Dad ultimately got three of them for \$1.50. To make matters worse, he was complaining about paying the \$1.50, telling me "Those things don't cost more than 15 cents to make".

The thing is, he might actually be right about it, but it just felt wrong in principle to be that cheap. I guess it was just something that made us different. But I will say this about it: my father was consistent. He never

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

missed a moment to try to and make a deal. It was one of the things I loved about Dad. No matter what I may have thought about something he said or felt, I usually respected it because he didn't deviate from his core values. That spoke volumes about him considering that most of those values were character driven.

Anyway, after a couple of hours of pseudo-Mexican tourism, we got hungry. So where did we stop? A pizza place. I actually don't feel comfortable calling it pizza. That's like calling one of these major chains authentically Italian. No more than 45 minutes after eating there, we all came down with an extreme case of the bubble guts. If you don't know, the bubble guts are basically the feeling in your stomach right before a huge bowel movement. There can be nothing worse than an entire black family

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

having an onset of diarrhea and struggling to find a place to find relief when many people don't speak the same language. To be honest, I'm still not sure how we managed our way out of that situation. Dad got us into an actual Mexican restaurant, somehow got us into restrooms, and let me tell you, relief is not spelled R-O-L-A-I-D-S.

It was pretty apparent that we should be heading home to the peace and quiet of Fresno. Luckily for us, the drive was anti-climatic and very easy for Southern California standards. And even more of a relief, none of us had any extra bowel issues. So all told, despite spending well over \$750 for two days with a family of four, Dad stuck to his budget. And despite not quite being thrust into manhood, it turned out to be a weekend worth remembering.

DAD vs. DISNEYLAND

Best part was, no STD's were involved. And everybody wins that way.

DAD VS. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

I graduated from high school in June 1996 at 16 years old. To say I was ill prepared for the adult world was kind of like saying the Hatfield's and the McCoy's did not always get along. I tried to get into a couple of good California universities with no success. So I enrolled at the bastion of higher learning, Fresno City College. Okay, I'm being a little harsh, but the combination of not wanting to really be there and the disappointment that comes with college rejection left me uninspired. My first semester was in the fall of 1996. I can remember maybe going to class about 40 percent of the time. This did not sit well with my father. Not only because I was blowing off a chance in college, but because of the Financial Aid money

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

that was coming into his household. For the record, I never claimed the man to be a saint.

Needless to say, we had a huge blowup, which led to me standing up for myself for the first time at 17. Well, more like meekly stating the facts and hoping Dad would not decide that Clarence Jr ala King was on the menu. This led to us essentially parting ways. I went to my Grandmother's house and Dad went back to being Dad. Only problem was, I still did not feel the pull of higher learning. Going to class at that time felt like surgery without the anesthetic. It was painful torture. Doogie Howser I was not.

So I did what any immature teenage kid would do. I blew it off altogether and spent time with my best friend Dustin. Bowling, driving around

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

without a license, fruitlessly trying to pick up on girls, we ran the gamut of PG entertainment. Only problem was around April 1997, my father received a letter from the college essentially saying the Financial Aid still incoming was invalid because his son had to be in school. Vesuvius would have been envious of Dad's eruption.

It took many relatives and his wife to stop Dad from doing a real life Homer Simpson and choking the living hell out of me. As it turns out, the calm after the storm was the tonic to change both of our lives. Since I was still underage, my parents still had dominion over certain things I could do. Dad decided since Fresno was not the place where I was going to grow and become a man, San Diego would. As in the United States Marine Corps. I can remember the day very vividly

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

when a broad, young guy in a uniform named Sergeant Thomas Mertens came into Dad's house. My first thought was, "What the fuck!?!?"

He sat down and Dad almost had this look of a guy that was about to checkmate his opponent in a game of Chess. You would have thought he was stern and tense, but actually it was just the opposite. He seemed almost joyful. It was as if a weight was about to be lifted off of his shoulders. Meanwhile, I felt like a guy in the electric chair after being told the Governor is on vacation without a phone. But then, Sgt. Mertens starts the recruiter spiel about how the Marines are great because they are the toughest fighters in the world, they have the best uniforms and women love them when they are out and about, and how all the money you

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

make you pocket because there are no real expenses for a single guy. All I kept thinking was, “This is my ticket out of this place. If I sign up, I get to leave Fresno and make my own way.”

I could not have agreed fast enough. And I honestly think that threw Dad off. In hindsight, I really think it was reverse psychology gone wrong. He expected me to panic and realize that college was a great opportunity to make my life better, which would have been very valid for most guys my age. However, the truth for me was I had never done anything for myself. There was always someone else’s interest or desire being met. To go from being an aimless 275 pound teen to a fit United States Marine seemed like the ultimate test with a great reward. Except, the real reward ended up

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

being something I could have never imagined: the respect of my father.

Even before I left, I was required to lose about 40 pounds just to go to Marine Corps Recruit Training. That is like having to outrun a cheetah to have the right to fight a lion. And yet from late April to mid August of 1997, that is what I managed to do. Running around a canal right behind the Marine Corps recruiting office six days a week not only took off weight around my very ample belly, but gave me confidence in myself truly for the first time.

I just remember the last time I spoke with Dad before I left. He told me three things. One, do not be afraid to fail because you are going to fail a lot. That is what they expect you to do. Two, do not quit. Not on yourself, not on your platoon, not on the drill

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

instructors. But it was the third thing I have always carried with me. For the first time in my life, Dad told me, “Son, I believe in you. I am hard on you because you can be something I wasn’t. That brain of yours...if I could just take it out and put it in my head son. I know you’re going to do this and we are going to celebrate when you make it home. Because if you don’t, I am going to kick your ass.”

The truth is, I know he was not serious. But he knew what motivated me. Most of my life was predicated on fear. I was afraid of being the person my family believed in and let them down. I was afraid of punishment. But this time, I was afraid for myself. Life had not happened enough for me to understand how many options I had in it. All I knew was that I could not fail. If I did, there was no telling what

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

might happen. So I left for San Diego, California August 24th, 1997 not having a clue what to expect, but knowing that whatever it was, I had to succeed. And I had Dad in my corner.

About three weeks in to training, I got my first letter from Dad. I had mailed him a letter telling him that as nervous as the drill instructors made me, it was more of the mental challenge that was getting to me. Obstacle courses could be done with the body. Understanding what four angry men with park ranger hats wanted was something completely different.

I was rattled and at times, I did want to quit. That first letter helped a lot. He reminded me that Nelson Mandela spent almost 30 years in prison doing something of importance. I know he had looked that up or had watched

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

something before he wrote those words, but damn it, I paid no mind to that. Dad began imploring me to pray before I went to bed, something I had not done since I was a seven year old kid asking God for a Nintendo. Somehow just hearing from him and knowing how engaged he was in my progress helped.

It is hard to quantify how important family support is for someone during a trying time like that. Military training has been likened to brain-washing and other silly things, but the truth is, the overwhelming majority of the men and women that join the Marines have to test themselves in a way that they may never do again in their lives. My test was to become selfless enough to on one hand fit in with 85 other men, yet be strong enough to lead at a moment's notice. All the while, I am

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

losing weight and transforming myself. I am no advocate for the military one way or another, but no one can tell me that sort of rite of passage is not of an extreme value for a young man or woman.

Luckily, the worst for me really was the midway portion of basic training when I hurt my knee in a freezer during what's known as Team Week. During this time, Marine Corps recruits are divided up and do various work around the recruit depot where training takes place. My job was to help with the inventory and storage of food incoming to the dining facility, better known as the Chow Hall. During the unpacking of meat, I slipped and injured the Meniscus in my left knee. The medical staff placed me on light duty and I missed out on a couple of really big events like Final

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

Drill, which is essentially the competition of individual platoons within its company. The only thing more taxing than the events at that time was not being able to do them with my platoon. In many ways, a platoon in basic training is like a family. You fight, you fight some more, you stand up for each other, and there is genuine affection and what the Marines call *Esprit de Corps*. No matter what happens, you remember the crew you endured that time with.

By this time, I received a letter from Dad telling me about rifle qualifications. He must have said “squeeze the trigger” about 15 times in that letter. But it helped because I had never handled a real gun of any sort until then. I had barely used water guns as a kid. So it did feel daunting to me. This time frame was also

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

exciting because rifle qualifications along with the rest of training takes place at Camp Pendleton, located in Oceanside, CA about an hour away from the depot.

I just remember feeling really excited about packing up all the gear and getting in that bus, even if we were told to keep our heads down and could not actually see anything on the trip. It just felt like a moment that represented something different. Once we arrived, my feelings were legitimized. It was different. You knew there was a different feeling to this last third of training. The drill instructors began calling us Private instead of, well anything demeaning but clean you could imagine. To someone from the outside, does not seem like much. For us, it felt like something just sort of emancipation.

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

Rifle qualification was actually a lot more enjoyable than I thought it would be. We were taught by a big, burly Marine named Staff Sergeant Rothrauff. He spoke in a deliberate, deep voice and was like Mother Teresa in comparison to the drill instructors. Not only that, but he provided incentives that only a Marine Corps recruit could fully appreciate. During the practice leading up to the actual basic shooting qualification on Friday, SSgt. Rothrauff told us, “If you get a possible, I’ll get you that Snickers bar.”

A possible is Marine Corps jargon for a perfect score in one of the sections a Marine shoots from. The distances back in 1997 were 200, 300, and 500 yards. So if you hit all the targets in one distance, you have received a possible. More importantly, I had not

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

had a piece of candy since I had started. To put this in perspective, many of the guys in my platoon had taken to buying Halls Cherry cough drops from the Base Exchange as a very weak substitute. Needless to say, I was a little too anxious, but I did well enough to pass as a marksman.

My last letter came from Dad about 13 days before graduation. We were just about to head out into the field to complete what is known as “The Crucible”, a series of about 54 obstacles and events recruits must complete in about 60 hours with little to no sleep to finish. He was so excited and making plans to pick me up from after graduation. The previous letter, I had made him promise me we would go to a great restaurant in San Diego to celebrate. Dad verified that he had found one

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

and also told me how excited the rest of my family was for me. At that point, it was still great hearing from him, but it was actually more exciting because Dad had become a secondary figure. This had become my moment and I owned it. That meant more to me than anything else. The fact that Dad was in full support and partaking in that is what helped me finish.

Needless to say, after we completed the work portion of basic training and headed back to San Diego, I could not have been more excited. At this point, I was 174 pounds. For some perspective, I was 275 pounds just seven months before. 101 pounds lost in seven months and the title of United States Marine. Not only that, but Dad was going to share in the moment. I had no idea how serious he was about celebrating.

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

Wednesday, November 19th, 1997. This would be the first night my platoon and me would be seeing any loved ones in person for nearly 13 weeks. Think about that. Some people have shorter jail sentences than that. We could not have been more excited about it. Personally, it felt like validation. The work I had put in paid off. The faith my family and friends had in me to actually do it was not in vain. I had become a United States Marine and more importantly, a man. But before we marched off, our Senior Drill Instructor, Staff Sergeant Casao had something to say directly to me. “Baldwin, having just met your dad, I expect you to be on your best behavior.”

I shit you not. Dad had managed to even intimidate my freakin’ drill instructors. Needless to say, I broke

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

out into a wide grin and we marched over to where our parents were waiting. What happened next could not have been more enjoyable for either of us. I stride up to my father and say, "How's it goin' old man?"

Dad looks at me with a mix of amusement and bewilderment. He is just staring at me. Then it dawns on me. He does not think it is me! Dad actually starts looking around to see if someone is going to come up and surprise him. Then he tilted his head a little and we hugged. Actually he sort of bear hugs me and lifts me off the ground. It was the closest I had seen him come to crying at that point in my life. He brought his brother-in-law John with him and John grabs my cheeks with tears streaming down his face saying, "It is you!" over and over again.

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

Once everything calmed down, we go over to the man that has pushed me, prodded me, insulted me, and challenged me more than anyone in my life. Sergeant Miller, who I humbly consider to be the hardest drill instructor of all time, proceeds to start gushing to my father about what I had done. He tells Dad about how he told me to quit after I had hurt my knee and that I had refused. Dad has become some kind of demigod to my drill instructors. I never found out what that conversation entailed, but even one of my platoon members comes up and shakes Dad's hand saying, "We've heard a lot about you."

It was a surreal night, even if it only lasted about 60 minutes. The next day allows the families to have an extended time with their new Marines. What happens is the

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

graduating class does a four-mile run around the depot finishing near the graduation area while their parents look on from the stands. I observed that Dad was not there. When we returned from the run, Dad was not there. It was not until I showered and got dressed that Dad arrived. He whispers in my ear, "I met this young lady at the hotel..."

At that point, I could not even be mad. To explain how someone could manage to pull that off with their brother-in-law with them would be too much for my simple mind. I just shook my head and we left. The next day, Dad did manage to be on time for the graduation ceremonies. After we were dismissed, I made a beeline to him and said, "Let me get my stuff and go before they change their minds."

DAD vs. MARINE CORPS GRADUATION

You have never seen so many people move so fast. I only managed to say goodbye to one person. And he just happened to be in my direct line to the exit. We ended up going to a Persian restaurant that I unfortunately never got the name of. It was some of the best food I have ever had. So good that I ate it while still in basic training mode, finishing within 10 minutes. After that, we did what any father and son would do in San Diego. We went to Sea World. I had a blast up there and got my first introduction into how the world treats a Marine. The lady let me in for free. After a great day, we hopped into the van Dad drove down and before I passed out he said, "You will never know how proud I am of you. You did this and you deserved it."

Let's just say that was the best drive of my life.

DAD VS. MY FIRST LOVE

The hardest part about deciding to enter the Marine Corps was not the struggle to lose weight or the fear of going into a situation that most men flat out avoided. No, the hardest part came in June 1997 when I met my first girlfriend Shawna. She had been around my mom's apartment complex visiting her relatives when my cousin Ronald came up to me one day and said, "That girl likes you man."

At this point in my life, having never really been at that level of contact with females and basically being a fat kid, I doubted it. To the point where Shawna had to wonder if maybe I preferred something other than women. The truth was I had no idea how to approach her and just start talking. So we actually got close in this awkward way surrounded by both

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

our cousins and my sisters. Over the course of two and a half months, we became a couple. And all of the time spent only strengthened my resolve and heightened my fears about going into basic training. You wait your whole life to meet someone like this and then you leave for 13 weeks. It just did not seem fair. Making matters even more difficult was Dad and his own unique way of communication.

About 10 days before I left for basic training, Shawna and I visited Dad. This was the first time we would actually visit him together but not the first time she had met him. That had happened about four weeks before when Dad showed up at my mom's house and his presence scared the daylights out of just about everyone there. I can remember vividly both of Shawna's cousins Keosha and Monique in full sprint to the back

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

door. It is still one of the funniest things I have ever seen. Even funnier was that to most everyone else, Dad was the most engaging, flirtatious, friendly man I could possibly observe. So needless to say, this meeting was going to be something memorable.

Shawna and I arrived at Dad's house around 7 p.m. that evening. That worked just fine for me because that meant dinner would be ready. If there is one thing I can safely say I inherited from Dad, it was an appetite. Unfortunately, Shawna did not share my same energy when it came to the cooking of Dad's girlfriend, who was Persian. So while I cut through a plate of rolled ground beef, Persian rice, and lavash with a side of plain yogurt, Shawna poked and prodded at a salad.

Around this time, Dad starts in with the almost clichéd embarrassing child

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

stories. First he tells her about the time I cried when I was about eight months old when he rented a pony for me to take pictures on. Then there was the time I was two and I threw oatmeal all over the kitchen and my mom almost killed me. Evidently, I was not big on the hot cereal as a kid and instead of just sitting in my booster seat, I made like Bob Vila and started using Quaker Oats like putty and trying to make them stick everywhere. To this day, my mom still gets pissed when she thinks about it. Last but not least, Dad went back into detail about the spelling bee. At this point, I feel the need to say something, so I blurted out, "I got it right!"

We both started laughing and the rest of dinner went okay. But right when I was about to get comfortable, Dad suddenly got this stern look on his face. For a minute, I truly thought he

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

was possessed or something. He became almost rigid and then his eyes got as big as snow globes and he boomed, “MY SON IS VERY IMPORTANT TO ME!”

Two things stand out about this in my head. First, it came completely out of nowhere. One minute, we are drinking tea and watching television, and the next Dad is scaring my girlfriend half to death. Which leads to the second thing; by this point, Shawna was almost up my chest when she recoiled away from Dad and closer to me. I literally scalded myself because I was reaching up to take a sip and he shocked me to where I spilled some of the tea on my right hand. I think all of this took about maybe five to seven seconds. It must have felt like an Al Gore speech. You know, long and painful to endure. I think my yelped and cussing without really recognizing

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

it snapped him back into the room or something because he told me to watch my mouth.

After we all gathered himself, Dad tried to continue. I remember him trying to lighten the mood but it was not going to work. Not with me and certainly not with Shawna, who was still about as nervous as a man about to receive surgery from someone with Parkinson's disease. So he returned to what he was saying. First he told us both, "Look, you're going to have sex. I know it, even if you two don't know yet. So wear a condom. Matter of fact..."

Dad then disappears and comes back with what looks like a grab bag of birth control. Seriously, there were various condoms and lubes in a crumpled up brown paper bag. To this day, I'm not sure if I was glad that at least Dad thought I might actually

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

lose my virginity or tripped out that he had a bag at the ready for this. It just seemed too convenient. Needless to say, if either Shawna or I were white, we would have turned redder than two lobsters on a bed of roses.

Before things could actually calm down, Dad continued. He started explaining how had “all the time in the world” to settle down so there was no need to rush. I am just glad he stopped short of actually showing how a condom worked. So anything else was actually an upgrade.

Shawna and I did not say much the rest of the night. Dad had gotten so worked up that he started to sweat. Understand this was not exactly a big deal. He would sweat if he was doing his own taxes. But what had dawned on me was how reluctant Dad seemed to be about the fact that technically I was an adult. Not in the traditional

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

sense though. In many ways, that night was the first time he would try to start making up for the time he missed as I grew up. As it turns out, we were not done talking about the subject of Shawna.

Nearly 15 months later and fully into my time as a Marine, I am on military leave. Dad and I went to a couple of places and then returned to the house. From there, I confided in him that I was starting to feel like I was being smothered and ready to be start seeing other women. In other words, I was just now starting to get some attention and wanted to take advantage of it. And he did not really react. He just looked at me and said, "Don't you break that girl's heart."

I started to try and get some clarity and he cut me off. "Son listen. I know you're excited and feel like you're free and all these women are out there, but

DAD vs. MY FIRST LOVE

remember this: a good woman doesn't come around that much. So if you do break up with this girl, make sure you have a damn good reason to. Not just because you think there's some more ass out in Mississippi."

At 30, I really wish I had listened to that message. At 19, it was classic in one ear and out the other. As it turns out, Dad had much more experience in that department than I did. For one moment in his life, he was hoping to help someone else benefit from it.

DAD VS. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

By the time 2004 rolled around, I had been long discharged from the Marine Corps. I had returned to Fresno City College to pursue a degree in Journalism. Only this time, I was there by choice. Three years of working at places like Applebee's, U.P.S., Food Maxx, and the Internal Revenue Service had told me that it was time to actually attempt to get a college degree. As with most things in my life, this process did not come easily. In May 2003, the apartment I shared with my mom burned down and I was homeless. It was at this time that two things happened that changed the course of my life.

First, my best friend Scott Thomas, a man who is like a brother to me, sent

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

for me from Santa Cruz and allowed me to stay with him during that summer. That period of about three months allowed me to re-evaluate a lot of things in my own life as it related to my family and my life's direction. The biggest thing that I felt needed to change was going back to school and at least giving college an honest opportunity. Failing was tolerable, but not trying was unacceptable.

The second thing that happened was finally re-connecting for good with Dad. Understand that by the time I was discharged from the Marines, our relationship had started to strain. He continued to think that it was okay to just tell me what to do on account that I was his son. Meanwhile, I felt that after spending all that time away and starting the process of growing up on my own, I answered ultimately to myself. Add the fact that I was not

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

under his roof and I had really begun to think of myself as a man. The culmination came when Dad came by to visit on Christmas in 2001. I was feeling under the weather and did not leave the house. Instead of just allowing that to be enough, we both acted irrational. First, Dad told me in no uncertain terms he did not care. Actually he said, "I don't give a damn. Next time, you get your ass over to your Grandmother's house and say hi to your family."

Then I said something I will probably regret until the day I die. But not until I tried to look really tough and sound as authoritative as I could. I contorted my face and wanted to really say something so profound as to stop Dad in his tracks. Instead, I hurt him. I said, "For someone who cheated on my mom and smokes crack, you sure have a lot of fucking nerve!"

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

For a split second, I thought I was literally going to have to fight for my life. Dad's face was angry, then stunned. He was frozen. I felt so bad, I almost started to say something, but there was nothing. The damage was done. Dad actually said something to the effect of, "Just remember what I said" and then he left. That was the last time I would see him for almost 15 months. Ironically though, it was the true turning point for our relationship. About a week after that moment, I moved to Sparks, Nevada. Dad actually broke the ice first. I got a call out of the blue in the spring time. I remember this because it is the only time that Nevada did not absolutely suck when I was there.

Needless to say, I was stunned but glad to hear from him. Most of my life, the effort was mine if there was going to be communication. So I was just

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

happy to talk, even if we both said about 20 words total. We continued on this slow path for about nine months. Then I returned back to Fresno. Dad actually picked me up from the Amtrak station downtown. And all of the words that had been so hard to say over the phone and by extension our lifetimes suddenly came out. To recall all of them would be impossible, but I do remember one specific sentence. Dad said, “Clarence, I never hurt you or your sisters because I didn’t love you. I have always and will always love you. And I know I haven’t been a great dad. But maybe we can try and start now...”

Considering the source, that was the most heartfelt apology in the history of fatherhood. My response, “Well since I can’t trade you in for a Playstation 2, okay.”

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

In typical Dad fashion he responded, “What the fuck is a Playstation and when did they get to part two???”

With that out of the way, Dad and I slowly built our relationship from there. He began to evolve from being a domineering father to someone that gave advice and listened in return. In addition, I got a cool drinking buddy and someone that had been down the block enough to know what might happen instead of telling me what would happen. The first major thing we actually did together was attend another Raiders game.

Things were different this time. The Raiders had moved from Los Angeles back to Oakland in 1995. Being from the Bay Area, Dad was excited to go back to the Oakland Coliseum, which was called the Network Associates Coliseum. Because you know, nothing says football like a virus software

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

company. Anyway, we took off at about 9 a.m. and headed to Oakland. As the usual, the drive was much more enjoyable than the game would be. It took about two minutes for the conversation to zero in on women, namely my girlfriend at the time Amanda.

“Son, that’s a fine young lady there. If I was just a little younger...”

To which I said, “But you’re not. Why don’t you try handling your business at home playa!?!?”

Dad just smirked, let out a little laugh and kept on. We managed to talk about barbecue, Algebra II, sweaty feet, potato salad, and pets during this drive. And that was just to the game. Thanks to some game day traffic on Interstate 880, we got to the Coliseum at about 12:30 p.m. However, neither Dad nor I actually wanted to pay for

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

parking. So in the interest of saving about \$15, we detoured to the other side of the interstate and somehow managed to park in what has to be the worst place for a dentist to set up his business.

The area looked like some extra scenery from the movie, *Apocalypse Now*. Somehow like typical Baldwin men, we arrived late for the game. We settled in to our seats and it did not take long for the action to pick up. Early in the 2nd Quarter, the Raiders scored on a long touchdown pass to a guy named Ronald Curry. Maybe the name triggered something in Dad because he got up and left, only to return with about a Third World country sized amount of food. And so he is basically set for the day. To the point that he looks at me about halfway into it and says, "If we crash

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

because I fall asleep, I'm telling my wife it was your fault.”

That ended up being the least of my worries.

Unfortunately, that touchdown was the only one the Raiders would score in this game. Somehow, they were still winning 13-3 early in the fourth quarter. Right around this time, a guy who had thrown down at least eight beers in front of us is getting progressively louder. He wants the backup quarterback Kerry Collins to come in the game. So much so that he starts to antagonize another Raider fan about five rows below our seats who told him essentially what he could do with that request. So the guy next to us gets up and shouts even louder, only by this time, the fan beneath has been joined by at least three other guys. Being the guy I am, I

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

try to make peace. Dad meanwhile is chuckling and he starts to instigate.

“Go down there and whoop his ass. You can take him man.”

Just as I start to say something else, he says, “I don’t care what y’all do, just don’t come over here and make me spill these nachos.”

For whatever reason, that makes both of the guys laugh. Amazingly, Dad is having a three-way conversation with both of them in 10 minutes time. The drunk guy next to us is still loud, but now he is just a part of an almost neighborhood conversation started by my father. Meanwhile, during this span, the Buffalo Bills decided to actually start playing as well and scored a touchdown that made the game 13-10 Raiders. Oakland Raider fans have a reputation for being violent, ignorant, buffoonish animals

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

that masquerade as men. Yet somehow, a quiet Bills fan sat in our section for almost three hours with his Bills jersey on with no trouble or even so much as a little trash talk directed at him. As if on cue, Dad goes over to the drunk guy near us and tells him, “Why don’t you go and scare that Bills fan down there?”

I honestly thought the dude would look at Dad like he had just shot his dog or something. But I’ll be damned if that man didn’t get up and go over to this lone Bills fan and tell him, “You really better hope the Bills don’t come back and win!”

It would not have been so bad if it was just that guy. But no, that statement seemed to trigger about 20 other Raider fans. Suddenly, this poor guy was like a gazelle surrounded by a pack of wolves. This couldn’t end well. Which I think Dad caught on to. He

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

leaned over to me and said, “Come on blood. The spot is about to get hot!”

The thought that Dad was going to start this flame and then duck out, well it sounded great to me. I just wanted to stay out of the crossfire. But there was no need. Like correctional officers at a prison, the security surrounded our area and nothing came of it. It turns out it did not matter. The Raiders ended up winning 13-10 and the Bills fan left with his bodily functions intact. Turns out we were all winners that day.

On the way home, I asked Dad was he really going to leave that Bills fan there to get beaten down by a bunch of crazy Raider fans. He told me, “I have a wife. He had it better than I do.”

Truthfully, I’m not quite sure if I am supposed to gain anything from that last comment. I guess it just goes to

DAD vs. OAKLAND RAIDER FANS

show you that danger can lurk in the most harmless forms.

DAD VS. FISH (THE REMATCH)

One of the last things Dad and I got to do together was go fishing. Seems ironic actually that fishing had brought us full circle. During our period of growth from 2003 onward, we went fishing often. Those trips were the epitome of manly man time. We talked about all things women, cars, sports, and more women. Sometimes, my stepbrother Richard would be with us, which was interesting in that I got to hear about two married men bitch and moan about married life. These moments never ceased to make me laugh considering how both of them acted around their wives. Which I guess explains how they both stayed married.

This particular trip started at around 4:45 a.m. We headed about 30 minutes

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

away to a spot called Hensley Lake. As we arrived, the sun was just starting to come up. Dad was always an early riser, so this was right up his alley. Richard was not as good, but at least he was conscious. I was “bobbing for nuts” as the Marine Corps would call it, constantly dropping my head in lap and jerking back awake. Right as I was about to crash out, Dad called out, “Hey Hollywood! We made it.”

Just observing him was great. He really seemed to enjoy moments like this. It did not take long before Richard and him were making jokes. “This is a catch and release lake. Wish I could do that with my wife”, Dad starts out.

Richard responds, “Hey you caught her. Good luck giving her back.”

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

Then Dad goes, “Man, I’ve been trying for 10 years!”

At that point, I said, “Is this fishing or The View?”

They looked at each other with a look that suggested that my never being married meant I couldn’t possibly understand what they were talking about. Then they laughed. And we hopped in the boat and headed to the center. About three beers in apiece, Dad starts laughing at the fact that I had yet to even get a bite while both of them had caught and thrown back a small fish. I explained to them that my pole was particular and learned to discriminate a little. To which Dad responded, “I think it’s just small young blood!”

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

I smirked and told him, “Actually, it’s bigger now that I’ve been dipping it in beans.”

Both Dad and Richard looked at me like I had just walked out of a psych ward. “What the hell does that mean, you dip it in beans!?” Dad asked.

“I dip it in beans Pop. Human beans.”

They both lost it. I mean, Dad started laughing so hard, he almost fell out of the boat. Then I said, “Just because I’m big enough to help you now if you go over don’t mean I’m going to!”

We all just kept laughing at that point. A couple of times in the next hour, I could hear Dad mutter with a smile, “Human beans!”

The fishing actually came pretty easy after that. I caught one about the size of a television remote but I was not

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

exactly thrilled about it. Catching a fish means posing in with it your hand in its mouth. I was never comfortable with that prospect. Maybe it was and is because I am a city guy. Whatever the reason, doing that creeps me out. So I asked Dad, “Hey, just take the picture of the fish in the bucket.”

He replied, “So you dip your pole in human beans, but can’t even put your hand in a fish’s mouth?”

Before I even had a chance to respond, Dad was already grabbing my hand and jerking it toward the fish. “Was that so hard Clarence?”

Then he looked up and had to stifle a laugh because I was actually queasy a little bit. Thankfully Dad just let it go instead of busting on me anymore. At that point I decided that I was going to catch the most fish that day, by hook

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

or by crook. Only problem is, Dad got hot. Either that or his fishing pole was on steroids. Every time he cast it out, there was at least a bite. In a period of about 15 minutes, he caught five fish. After about the fourth I said, "To hell with this catch and release stuff! This boat is catch and nobody's watching!"

Without looking, Dad said, "That's easy for you to say single man".

I replied, "Well I am not the one who went and bought the cow with nothing but milk sittin' around!"

That was the last of the wife commentary. Pretty soon we started talking about the Raiders. And Dad was equipped. By this time, the Raiders were pretty much the worst team in football. It got so bad that neither of us even bothered to watch the last game of the previous season.

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

So I listened as Dad morphed it a black Jay Leno. “What’s the difference between the Raiders and Goodyear tires? The tires don’t always get blown out on Sundays.”

“Hey kid, what do a good Raider team and Bigfoot have in common?”

“I don’t know Dad, what?”

“Neither of them is real.”

You get the idea. I would continue but hey, I am still a Raider fan. At this point, it had been about six hours and we were still going strong. Even more amazing, there were only two other boats out in the water. We basically had a public lake to ourselves for an entire morning. The best part about it was that Dad and I were not just father and son, we were friends. I had waited my entire life literally to have

DAD vs. FISH (THE REMATCH)

days like that. And the best part that it did not require money or anything extravagant. The only thing that had to happen was effort. Dad had gone through a lot of changes, but his essence had remained the same. So it was fitting that we had one last exchange before packing up and heading home.

“Dad, when are you going to admit that whatever it was that had a hold of your pole beat you when I was six years old? Just admit it! You lost!”

“Son, I’m only going to say this once. The only thing I lost was a \$5 fishing pole. And that whale better be lucky my hand slipped.”

That’s what I loved most about Dad. Even though some things changed, most things did not have to.

EPILOGUE

The last time I spoke to my father was August 11th, 2008, two days before his death. We talked about a couple of things that night, but the focus was on his grandchildren. I don't have many regrets in life, but the biggest one is that my father never got to meet his first grandson. It lives with me every day.

Because my son Jaxson, never got to meet Dad, I think of this as a way to bridge the gap so that one day when he is old enough, he may read this and understand just how interesting and unique his paternal grandfather was. My father did not die well known, but he will always be a celebrity to me. As I hope I have demonstrated, he was at times crude, sometimes vulgar, and

EPILOGUE

often brutally honest. But not too far underneath that crust was a huge heart and a man that generally made people around him happy.

Like all men, my father was imperfect. And honestly, there were parts of him that I choose not to emulate. But like many men, my father managed to have resolution in most of his life after many moments of crisis. I miss him to this day and truthfully, I probably will until I see him again. But the positive part of this experience is that I have brought him to life one more time and was able to share him with you in a small way.

If nothing else, my hope is that you walk away from this knowing just how incredible my father was to me. Hopefully, you can stop and speak to your father too. Because there is

EPILOGUE

nothing better than a child looking up to their father, no matter how unlikely it is they actually end up doing it.

EPILOGUE



Christmas 1998

EPILOGUE



Oakland A's Game, July 2008

EPILOGUE



Dad with grandson Josiah, Dec. 2007

EPILOGUE

RIP DAD. Your audience just got a little
bigger