

## *Game of Catch*

Who would've thought a game of catch could capture a lifetime of memories? That's how it was that warm summer day, my Dad & I.

My dad's career as a cross country truck driver materialized out of spite. For reasons unknown, his father would not give him the privilege to drive. Imagine being an 18 year old man and visiting girls on a bicycle while all your friends were driving. As any man knows, 4 wheels are power and freedom. However, the only wheels his father would give him were on a bicycle.

He joined the military after high school with the very lucrative opportunity to work in avionics and computers. Sadly, however, his young mind was full of humiliation and revenge toward his father's prohibition of driving. As a way to spite his father, he shunned the avionics/computers field and chose to drive a truck. As his life went on, he regretted this decision and reminded me of it numerous times.

We lived in a small town, and as a cross country truck driver, my dad made it home about once a month. Our home was part of a 5 acre farm that included a lake in the front and with thick forest around. Peaceful and free of neighbors, we lived off the land and enjoyed nature unspoiled. My Dad loved that place and it was a special oasis to unwind after countless hours staring out a windshield and then sleeping in the small bed in the cab of his semi. He always reminded us to enjoy the simple comforts we often take for granted; a full size bed, home cooked meals with fresh garden vegetables, family, friends, and plenty of nature.

My friends had lots of opportunities to do the usual father & son activities together like playing ball, wood working, car care, fishing, etc. As an only child, I used my time to read, play basketball, and take care of our farm animals. My Dad taught me what he could in his short visits home, but most of the time I had to figure things out on my own. I still remember the first time I fired up a chainsaw on my own; my Mom was scared to death, but I figured it out and still have all my body parts.

Dad owned his truck so he was free to drive for any company, contingent on adequate wages. A couple of times, a driving opportunity appeared locally and my Dad jumped on it. During these times, he really enjoyed having a "normal" life and being together with his family. Small towns and surrounding areas don't have the higher, continuous pay scale that a national company has so these few stints were short lived. Farm and family life were great, but it took two incomes to make ends meet. Mom worked in town, but didn't earn much so a substantial income burden was on my Dad's shoulders.

Years away from home took their toll and my parents divorced when I was 14. It was quite a shock to see my highly religious parents go through what they had previously looked down upon. It was decided I would live with my Mom, which was a relief to me. She had raised me and was the constant I could count on. I don't think I could've handled the divorce, moving away from all my friends and attempting a new life with my Dad. That's a lot of stress for an adult, let alone a teenager.

My Dad moved out of state so our visits were few and far between, much like my childhood. We kept in touch through phone calls and letters. Along the way, we tried to make up the time we had lost, but it was challenging. Like coming in to a movie an hour late; you don't know how the story made it to this point and are unsure where it will go from here.

One visit became very memorable in a special way. It was a warm summer morning in Louisiana. No special plans that day, just Dad & I hanging out. We were sitting outside enjoying the fresh air and clear sky, when he disappeared into the house and reappeared with a baseball, 2 gloves and a big smile. I didn't have much practice playing catch growing up and was terrible at it. During P.E sessions in school, I usually was put in right or left field and prayed nothing came my way. Now at 16 years old, it was a little embarrassing to lack good skills for such a popular boyhood sport. Anyone else I would've said "no thanks", but this was a rare chance to play with my Dad.

As usual, I dropped a few balls and displayed my inexperience quickly. We laughed and he gave me suggestions. A few showoff pitches came from him here and there. He may have been older, but he still could put some heat on a ball. As males often do in sports, there was some trash talk. At one point he said "Didn't I teach you better than that!" and laughed. Sometimes I reply without thinking and this was one of those times. "No!" I said, being funny, but then what I said sank in for both us.

Tears started down our cheeks and grew steadier as we realized this was one of the few games of catch we had played. They were tears full of joy and remorse for unrecoverable time that had passed like water down a drain. Our tears clouded our vision and now we both missed catches, which somehow became even funnier. Every time we threw a ball, it was like a deposit into that empty bucket of father/son memories. I felt an almost other worldly feeling that if we stopped playing we'd lose that father/son connection we had both longed for. Time stood still and we both knew to keep tossing that ball to each other. 16 years and a lifetime of memories, wishes, and hope were connected through that game of catch.

My Father passed away six years ago and I remember that game of catch like it was yesterday. We could've chosen to do anything that day, but what happened was the best of all; we connected as only a father and son can through a game of catch.

*By: Philip Johnsey*