

OMINNOUS ANTICIPATION

The Spirituality of Playing Catch

A fatigued Grampa Jake poured a fresh glass of Chianti, then slowly sank into his massive recliner, which he affectionately referred to as Beatrice. It was a warm and sunny Saturday afternoon in August 1969. Jake lived in base housing at Fort Dix, New Jersey with his daughter-in-law and grandson, while his son, Joseph, was serving in Vietnam. He had just finished an extensive “honey-do” list for his daughter-in-law, and he was ready to relax and watch the Mets game.

Jake took a long, slow sip of his Chianti, then briefly closed his eyes as he oozed into a well-deserved nap. As he zoned out, he felt a presence nearby. He opened his eyes to see his nine-year-old grandson, Kirk, standing next to his chair. He wore the Mets baseball cap Jake had bought for him last Christmas and held two baseball gloves and a ball.

“Hey, buddy, what’s up?”

Kirk smiled. “Do you want to play catch with me, Grampa?”

Pretending to frown, Jake teased, “With *you*?”

Kirk laughed, the beautiful sound warming Jake’s heart. “Ha ha. Come on, Grampa, let’s go.”

Jake reached over and tousled Kirk’s hair. “Do you know that you’re a cool dude with an attitude?”

“You always ask me that, Grampa.” He then tossed the bigger glove in Jake’s lap and hurried out back, yelling, “Come on, hurry up.”

Jake shifted mental gears, laboriously parted ways with Beatrice, then turned the game off. He headed out to the backyard with Kirk, and they immersed themselves into one of the most satisfying spiritual rituals known to mankind—playing catch. To an outsider looking in, it probably appeared to be boring. But, for those involved, it was like being part of a synergistic symphony. Accurately throwing the ball back and forth to each other, with that unique sound of the glove popping when the ball was properly caught right in the pocket, was special. You could also mix it up.

“Grampa, throw me some ‘Texas Leaguers’ so that I can make diving catches.”

“I’m worried you’ll get grass stains on your clothes, buddy. Then we’ll have to face the wrath of your mom.”

“It’s okay, Grampa. You’ve seen me doing my own laundry. I’ll take care of it.”

He reached down to scoop up a low throw from Kirk. “Okay, I remember.”

Rhythmically, they threw the ball back and forth.

“Nice scoop, Grampa. You remember what Dad told me before he left for Vietnam, right? He told me to step up and help Mom out. I need to make my bed every morning, take out the trash, help Mom wash dishes, and stuff like that.”

Grampa Kirk acknowledged that wisdom. “And that was sound advice. Okay, then, let’s do some Texas Leaguers.”

Laser-focused in the defensive fielding position with his gloved hand on his left knee and his bare hand on the right, Kirk shouted, “Hey, batter batter!”

Jake then tossed a variety of fairly difficult-to-catch high balls, and Kirk was up for the challenge. His grampa’s throws were coming back at him quickly. A good healthy sweat going, Kirk raced back and forth and side to side. He caught a few and missed a few diving attempts, getting grass stains on his t-shirt and shorts. It was a beautiful sight to see a vibrant and hopeful young boy, enjoying what would certainly be a profound memory later in life.

After about thirty minutes, a panting Kirk yelled, “Hey, Grampa, let’s go get a lemonade.”

“That’s a great idea, buddy. Let’s do it.”

They headed inside to grab their drinks, then sat out back on the family picnic table on the deck.

Reflecting Over Lemonade

“Grampa, was my dad a good baseball player?”

“He sure was. He had talent, but he worked hard at hitting, catching, and throwing.”

“Am I a good ball player, Grampa?”

As Kirk patiently awaited this critical evaluation, Grampa Jake paused with purpose, put on a stern-looking face, crossed his arms, then grimaced slightly. “Well, Kirk, you’re at least as good as your dad was at nine, maybe a little bit better. And the sky’s the limit if you work hard at it like your dad did.”

Kirk's facial expression shifted from concern to absolute happiness with a wide smile. They sat silently for a few minutes. Then Kirk said, "I can't wait until Dad gets home from Vietnam. I miss him a lot."

"Me too, buddy, on both counts."

"Why is he fighting in that war anyway?"

"Well, he's a career soldier, and he's fighting for our country, and us. The military is stopping the spread of Communism."

Nervously, Kirk tapped the table as he slowly took another sip of his lemonade, pondering what Grampa just told him.

Kirk's mom yelled out the back door, "Come on in and wash up, guys. Dinner's ready. I made meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans."

Upon heading into the kitchen, Kirk and Jake faced a stern greeting from Mom. "Kirk, you got grass stains all over your clothes. I hope we can wash them out. Go ahead and change and bring them back to me so I can soak them."

"I'm sorry, Mom. Grampa was throwing me Texas Leaguers, and I had to dive to catch them."

Mom asked, "What's a Texas Leaguer, buddy?"

"It's a high blooper that can fall between an outfielder and an infielder for a hit if I don't catch it. I made a bunch of great catches on them today, didn't I, Grampa?"

"You sure did, Kirk. You have a great glove."

Mom smiled. "You're an awesome baseball player, buddy. Now go ahead and change your clothes and wash up for dinner."

Military Death Notifications

After taking a quick peek at the meatloaf in the oven, Mom said, "Thanks, Jake, for playing catch with Kirk. He's missing Joseph so much, and it's nice to have a male presence in the house."

Grampa Jake walked over to his daughter-in-law and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay, Tina? I know you're feeling a high level of stress while Joseph is in Nam, but you've seemed different the past few days."

Lip trembling, Tina took a deep breath. “There’s a neighbor down the street who I really don’t know. I was driving home from the commissary the other day, and as I passed her house, a military vehicle pulled up. Two soldiers in full uniform got out and walked up to her front door. I found out later she received a formal death notification. Her husband was killed in action. I don’t think I could handle that, Jake.”

Tina sobbed, and Jake stood silently as he hugged his shaken daughter-in-law. Every family awaiting the return of their soldier fighting overseas feared the thought of a military vehicle pulling into their driveway, followed by two soldiers walking up to their door. The military went to great lengths to ensure they were done with the utmost dignity and respect, but they *were* death notifications.

Interrupting that silent moment, Kirk entered the room and yelled, “How’s your potassium level, Grampa?”

Grampa Jake shrugged his shoulders and smirked. “It’s actually kind of low, buddy. Looks like I may need to have some ice cream after dinner.”

Whenever he saw an opportunity to eat ice cream with his grandson, Grampa Jake claimed his potassium level was low.

“Hey, Mom, can me and Grampa have ice cream after dinner?”

“You sure can, buddy, but you have to eat your green beans, okay?”

Kirk nodded with a big smile on his face.

Ice Cream and a Boy’s Curiosity

Since Kirk’s dad left for Vietnam about nine months ago, his mom and his grampa did their best to shield Kirk from the ominous sense of fear they were experiencing. After a great dinner at which Kirk ate his green beans, Mom prepared two identical double scoops in sugar cones—one scoop of vanilla and one scoop of chocolate. They sat together on the picnic table, thoroughly enjoying their guilty pleasure.

Kirk told Grampa Jake, “I’m glad you, me, and Dad are all Mets fans. Do you think they can win the World Series?”

“It’s going to be tough, Kirk, but you never know. Maybe a miracle will happen.”

“So, you were a soldier too, Grampa?”

“Yes. I was in World War II.”

“Was it scary?”

“It sure was, but we were trained and confident. We felt like we had the best military in the world.”

“Were you trying to stop the Communists like Dad is doing?”

“No, buddy, we were fighting the Nazis, and we beat them soundly just like your Little League team did against the Giants last week.”

“Did you have to kill anyone while you were in the war?”

Grampa looked up, then carefully responded, “Let me just say that we all did what we had to do to win and get home safely.”

Although he was only nine, Kirk could sense he touched on a difficult subject. “That’s good, Grampa. I’m glad you did.”

They both nodded as they finished up their delicious ice creams in silence.

The Power of Words

Kirk broke the silence. “Thanks for playing catch with me. It was fun.”

“Anything for you, Kirk.”

“Anything? Okay, give me a million dollars.”

“If I had a million dollars, they’d be all yours, buddy.”

They both laughed. Then Kirk asked, “Can we go inside and do the Word Jumbles from today’s paper?”

“Sounds like a great idea.”

Once indoors, Grampa Jake refilled his wine glass with a fresh pour of Chianti, grabbed that day’s newspaper, and returned to the comfort of Beatrice. Kirk joined him in the chair with a fresh lemonade in hand. They then began their challenging but fun mental workout, a ritual since Jake moved in with Kirk and his mom. Although just a young child, Kirk developed an impressive proficiency at finding words from the jumbled letters. The first combination was: C U R I C S. Kirk and Grampa Jake fumbled for a few minutes; then Kirk shouted, “CIRCUS!”

“Boom, you got it, buddy!”

The next combination was: Y A K K A, and after a brief think, Jake said, “I got it! KAYAK.”

Kirk clapped his hands, pumped his fist in the air, and shouted, “Yes!”

They then finished the final two scrambles and relaxed for a few minutes.

Kirk told his Grampa, "I love words. It's so much fun figuring out the Word Jumbles."

"Yes, it is fun, and I think we're getting pretty good at it."

"Yes, we are, Grampa."

Grampa Jake reiterated an important life lesson for Kirk. "Just remember words are powerful—both positively and negatively. What you say and how you say it are important. And once you say something, it's hard to take it back. The old adage 'Silence is golden' is a smart way to go. The best way I can put it is to treat people with dignity and respect."

After a silent pause, Kirk asked, "Do you miss Gramma?"

"I sure do. She was my wife for thirty-one years when she got sick. She was also my best friend. I think about her every day."

"Do you think she's in heaven, Grampa?"

"I know she is, buddy. She's probably playing BINGO with a bunch of angels."

At that point, the doorbell rang, and Kirk's mom yelled, "Kirk, Robbie and Nick are here. They want to play baseball with you for a little while before it gets dark."

Kirk hugged his Grampa, then yelled, "I'm coming, Mom!"

Kirk grabbed his bag with his baseball stuff: several balls, his bat, and his glove. He put on his Mets hat, then hopped on his bike and headed out to the park down the street with his buddies. Focused on getting to their destination and playing as much baseball as possible, the boys were oblivious to the ominous military vehicle headed to Kirk's house.

A Soldier Returns Home

Kirk and his buddies played for about an hour when it started to get dark. They had a great time, and they were feeling good as they headed back to their homes on their bikes. That same military vehicle passed them again, but in the opposite direction.

Kirk's house was the closest to the park. As he approached, his friends shouted their goodbyes. Kirk pulled into his driveway, then put his bike and baseball equipment in the garage. He entered the house and saw Mom and Grampa sitting in the living room. Mom was crying, and Grampa was nervously clenching and unclenching his fists.

"What's going on?"

His mom and Grampa Jake looked up at him but did not respond.

Kirk yelled, “What happened?”

At that point, a voice from the hallway quietly said, “Hey, buddy. I missed you. Come on over here and give me a hug.”

It was his father, dressed in his formal military uniform, wearing a patch over his left eye and leaning on a crutch.

Kirk ran to him, shouting, “Dad! Are you okay? What happened?”

As his son hugged him tightly, Kirk’s dad cried tears of joy. “Your mom chastised me for not calling ahead, but I wanted to surprise you. I’m home for good, Kirk. I was injured in battle, and they sent me home early, and it’s so great to be home. I love you.”

The End