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Be With Me

by Joseph O'Day

"Kris, I can't believe he doesn't want to be with me. We've had so few chances to spend time like this together."

"Kids are like that when they're thirteen, Joe. It's not personal. They'd rather hang out with friends."

Thirteen is the age I started hanging out with my father at his carwash, and when he took me bowling on Sundays and dinner afterwards at the restaurant across the street from the bowladrome. The Massachusetts Blue Laws prohibited the carwash from staying open Sunday afternoons, so bowling and dinner became our weekly routine. It gave my father a chance to relax and me a chance to be with him. I remember sitting across the table at those dinners. He'd have a beer or two with his meal. I'd have a boneless chicken dinner. Depending on the season, there'd be a Patriots or Red Sox or Celtics game playing on the wall TVs. If a major golf tournament was on, like the Masters or U.S. Open, we'd watch and root for Jack Nicklas, one of his favorites. A few years after my father died, I brought my son to the Senior U.S. Open at Salem Country Club to see Nicklaus. We stood alongside the fairway rope line, and as Nicklaus walked by, he gave the spectators a smile. My father would have loved that.

I loved being with my father, even at his carwash. I got to see how he allocated his workers and fixed damaged equipment, how he handled difficult customers. After closing for the evenings, we drove around Salem and Marblehead and listened to political talk shows and sports radio, discussing athletes of his day and those of my day—Louis, Williams, Cousy; Ali, Yastrzemski, Havlicek. We talked about Nixon and Vietnam and about those who avoided the draft. I regret now that eventually my time at the carwash felt like an endless drag.

Though my father worked at the carwash seven days a week and spent nights cleaning up and maintaining the equipment, he always made time for family events—

graduations, parents' days, athletic performances. I can still picture his car idling in the parking lot at my high school on cold November evenings with the headlights on because it was getting dark and he wanted to see how I was doing at football practice. I played football to be like my father, and I was damned if I was going to let the roughness of the sport stop me. Still, the rough stuff sometimes made me nervous, so it felt good knowing he was around. No on else's father was there.

Like my father had done for me, I made time for my own son's activities. I coached his basketball teams in Cartoon and Rec leagues, attended his Little League baseball and grammar school basketball games and band concerts and science fair presentations. I guided his assembly of a wooden racecar for the Pinewood Derby. I stood at the back of class with other parents when the first graders showcased the rainforest and he presented the jaguar. We even visited a Harvard museum so he could see the stuffed jaguar up close. As wonderful as these events were, they lacked the one-on-one intimacy I'd had with my father, that I wanted my son to have with me.

So, on a warm and sunny Saturday morning in June, when my son was thirteen, I decided to take him for a car ride and a walk around Salem and Marblehead, to Marblehead Neck, a hilly peninsula with the world's best views and a park and lighthouse at its tip. Years before, we'd visited that park with my father. I have a photo from that day, of my eighty-year-old father, hand-in-hand with his two-year-old grandson, both of them looking out at the boats in Marblehead harbor, my son's tiny blue shorts twisted sideways.



“Hop in the car,” I said. “Let’s go for a ride.”

We headed southbound, towards Marblehead. About a half mile in, at the first intersection, we stopped at a red light and sat silently, waiting for green. Then, out of the blue, my son looked at me and asked, “How long will this take?” I knew by his tone he wasn’t complaining about traffic lights.

“Let’s just make a quick stop at the lumberyard. For some plywood. Okay?”

“You’re wasting my time!” he said.

My heart sank. I turned the car around and headed home, hoping he’d notice my anger, wondering whether he was totally oblivious to my feelings, or just didn’t care. Then, suddenly, I thought of my father and how he must have wondered the same about me, long ago, during a time when he needed me most at the carwash. I must have been sixteen or seventeen, and I believed I was being dragged to work without recourse. My father woke me those mornings by banging a stainless steel kitchen knife against the forced hot water pipe leading to my room, and my life became an endlessly repeating cycle of awakening to the sound of banging pipe, cleaning cars, staying after closing to clean up and prep for the next day, arriving home with him and eating supper, and then washing off the day’s grime and finally getting to bed, only to be awakened yet again to the next morning’s dreaded, rhythmic banging of the pipe.

My father kept me with him when business was slow and when we were closed due to bad weather. I washed and dried towels, painted concrete walls, held flashlights while he fixed equipment. One blustery winter day, I cleaned out the reclaiming system, lowering myself into a muddy pit, handing him shovelfuls of muck as it splattered onto my head and down my neck, my boots sticking in the sludge, my socks becoming sodden with the coldness.

My father kept me with him when there was nothing to do. I swept the office floor and walkways while he wandered around with his hands in his coverall pockets, inspecting the place. He loved the carwash, built with his own hands, cement block by cement block. After we closed evenings, he drove us around, sometimes stopping at his favorite plumbing supply store, to discuss carwash projects. I complained when I dared, that he didn’t really need me, and besides, I had my own stuff to do. He got angry, said I was selfish, but he always let me go.

As I drove home this day, I tried to see myself through my son's eyes. He had no idea where we were going or how long we'd be because I didn't tell him, didn't give him the respect he deserved, that of an informed choice. No wonder he wanted to get away.

Then I thought of my father. He spent so much of his life at the carwash that there wasn't much time for anything else, including his hobbies—he was a fabulous pool player, a terrific golfer, a great athlete (he'd been a starting lineman for the University of Miami football team). It never occurred to me that my presence might have made him feel less isolated, that it might have given him joy like he'd given me during my football days. I was so trapped inside my resentful mind that I couldn't see that helping him was loving him. I only could see that my carwash gig would never end. But the end came soon enough. I'd give anything to have those carwash days with him back just as they were.

And I finally understood why my father had held me so close. It wasn't because he was trying to give me a hard time or trying to show me he was boss. Just like I wanted my son with me on this sunny Saturday morning in June, my father wanted me close to him the only way he could manage.



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