

KNOCK-KNEED, Graham Gordy

You can't talk about who you are and where you come from until you understand who your dad was and who your mom was. And I'm not sure you can truly understand who they were until after they're gone.

My dad asked me to go outside and throw a ball around one day. A football. This might've been less surprising had I not been 16, he 68, and had he ever asked me to throw a football around before. My mom was out of town, and he was clearly seeing this as an opportunity to make up for something we hadn't done when we probably should've, 10 years before.

It's not that my dad wasn't an athletic guy. He had been, I think. But he was retired now. Retirement, I suppose, being a time for reflection between all those "Matlock" reruns. As for me, I was gawky and narrow, with a big mouth of teeth. If someone had referred to me as 'pubescent' I would've considered it lavish praise. Emotionally, I was a distressingly tender thing. Painfully aware of my father's age, embarrassed that he wasn't like the other dads, but also living in fear of how quickly he might be gone from me.

So I took him up on the offer. This would be one of those beautiful moments I could remember when he was gone.

But there's nothing Kodachrome about liver spots, or grey, hairy arms, or translucent skin. And there are no Kodak commercials based on a quickly-devolving argument about someone's throwing technique.

"You gotta follow through on your throw more."

“Get your feet set.”

“Get your elbow up higher.”

I stopped, seething all too quickly, tucking the ball into my side. “I’m having trouble taking direction from a guy who throws like a girl.”

“I don’t have full range of motion in my shoulder!,” he snapped back.

We went back inside. So it seems to go with 16 year-olds and their fathers.

This wasn’t our first fight about things athletic. When I was eleven, I’d asked for a basketball goal in our driveway because I wanted to try-out for our middle school team. Never one for numbers - or accuracy in most tasks for that matter - Dad “eyeballed” how high the goal should be. I actually went back and measured it years later. A regulation goal is 10 feet. Dad put ours at a solid 10 feet, 8 inches. All the neighbor kids were utterly baffled as to why I was the Reggie Miller of west Conway while in front of my house, yet, in try-outs, every shot I put up hit the backboard at least half a foot above the rim. And so went my otherwise-assured career in the NBA.

It was events like these that colored my opinion of my father at the time. A typical teenager, I was having all sorts of crises - the existence of God, of justice, of romantic love - but if there’s one thing I felt certain about, it was that my parents were complete imbeciles. I loved my dad. I mean, this was the man on whose lap I fell asleep every night until I was eight years old. ...But a pretty big gulf can grow between eight and sixteen.

Sixteen was also an age in my life when I was particularly want for identity. And why wouldn't I be? All jutting elbows and concave thighs, the idea of escaping into someone else seemed pretty appealing.

As far back as I can remember, I was a Zelig, able to take the shape of my surroundings. I was a young actor, but a young mimic more than that. Like a politician, suited at the podium but with sleeves rolled up at the bar-b-que place, my southern accent was on an "as needed" basis and my inflections changed according to whom I was speaking. As for talents, my most marketable skill was that I was a smartass. I was a good one too. So much so that, in my sophomore year in high school, some senior football players asked me to come along with them on Friday nights and pick fights for them. ...I wish I weren't serious.

Up to then, my social life was fledgling at best. My best friend, Will, was a year younger than me and we spent our Friday nights foisting horrible practical jokes on people we either liked or didn't.

It being Conway, Dixie Flags were as ubiquitous on trucks as the cartoon Calvins pissing on Ford, or Dodge, or Chevy, take your pick. Will and I weren't educated per se, but we knew enough that the artifacts of a lingering Confederacy frustrated us and became our adolescent cause celebre. ...So we removed them. On Friday nights, these trucks would gather in a couple of parking lots in town. Mulletted owners would open their tailgates and drink beer, all the while, Will and I would be under them, crawling from truck to truck, our phillips-head screwdrivers in-hand, removing their Rebel relics. At last count, I think the collection in Will's closet was up to 40. My most prized came from a truck that had a giant New York Yankees sticker on the back

window. ...Apparently, the owner didn't see the contradiction. North and South - unified at last - on a late-model Silverado.

But it was my first year of high school now, and suddenly, I was invited into a group of influential guys where I could do the two things I loved most: entertain and incite riots. It was simple really. They would drive up to a car full of other guys. I would lean out the window, mock their appearance enough to trigger a fight, then I would stay safely in a locked Bronco while my 200-plus pound confidantes would bludgeon the poor marks into oblivion.

One night, after a particularly triumphant round of this, these seniors invited me to a party. They had a weekend ritual of taking a 40 oz. - of Colt 45, or Olde English malt liquor - in each hand. Then they would have someone else wrap the bottles and their hands in Saran Wrap so you couldn't do anything but - tink, tink - them together. The rule, then, was that you couldn't get anyone to remove the 40s until you finished them both. Now, I wasn't good at math, but even I knew that 80 ounces of beer in my juvenile, 160-pound frame wasn't going to end well. But I forged on. And I drained them.

Considering the majority of my drinking to this point consisted of finishing my parent's friends' drinks after parties, I was at this point, to quote my father, "knee-walking, pecker-waving drunk." Yet I somehow found myself in line with my new friends at the keg waiting for more beer.

"Keg's tapped out," came a voice at the front of the line. There was a chorus of groans. "This sucks!" said one of the football players I was with.

In front of us in line were three long-haired rednecks. The group started dispersing. Wobbly, slurring, and full of Dutch courage since I was getting used to traveling with the Conway Wampus Cat's offensive line, my task became clear.

“Yeah, and if that's not bad enough, just take a look at these guys. I mean, just as human beings.”

The room went completely silent. In my mind there was a record-scratch but we were into the era of CDs by then so I guess that's impossible. My football-playing friends were the first to burst out laughing, then the rest of the room followed. The three rednecks approached me.

“What'd you just say?,” the biggest of them asked. No turning back now, I looked at the back of his head, flipping his hair. “Sweet Kentucky Waterfall you got goin' back there. Achey-Breaky-Big-Mistakey.” Another big laugh from the room. The redneck's jaw tightened and his eyes didn't move from mine. Then, one of my senior guardians leaned in to me softly and whispered, “Duuude...those guys are big.” And then he laughed. And then he, and my other defenders...left the room.

...In that moment, any number of lives took a different direction, but mostly just mine. Having never been one to run from a fight, I stood my ground. Then I realized that I'd never been in a fight, so I ran. Out of the kitchen, through the living room, jumping the couch.

I made it to the driveway before the biggest of them caught me. His buddies needed not join in. His two punches landed swiftly. Blood filled my mouth. I don't remember hitting the ground, but I know I didn't start there. The rednecks yelled a couple of taunts, then got into their truck, their headlights shining on me. Through the front windshield, I could see the outline of a large, inverted New York Yankees emblem on the back window as they backed away and then took

off. I looked at the front license plate. Empty. I managed to smile a little to myself...and then I bled more.

The football players were nice enough to take me home that night, and even apologized for not stepping in. I was still so drunk I could barely walk through the front door, then made the bad decision to take a seat on the couch even though my dad, a book open on his lap and ESPN playing, was asleep in his chair across the room. I leaned my head against the arm of it and my eyes began to close when he sputtered awake and looked at me.

“Son? ...Son.” ...He looked closer. “Did you get in a fight?”

“Lil’ bit,” I mustered.

“Are you drunk?”

“...I’m sorry, Dad. I’m sorry.” My eyes closed again. I started drifting off to sleep.

Then a strange thing happened. I felt two gangly arms lift me up. Torn rotator cuff. Restricted range of motion, and this 68 year-old man picked me up, Pieta-like, as if I were eight years old again, and carried me a good fifty feet from the living room to my bedroom.

As he carried me down the hall, I muttered, “I...I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time, Dad.”

“That’s most of us, Son.”

He put me in my bed and pulled the covers up. It was as close to falling asleep curled up on his lap as I’d done in almost a decade.

“Little fatherly advice?,” he asked.

I managed a half-grin back.

“You can’t grow up in one night.”

Then he kissed me on the forehead, said ‘I love you’, and turned out the light.

That night, despite whatever distance, I understood better who my dad was. He treated me like a man, even if I was just flailing toward being one.