

Visitation Hours

It was the third inning, and I was focused on the doughy retard next to me banging his helmeted head on the stadium handrail. This was back in 1982, when you called a retard, a retard. He was always there and I was always there. The right field bleachers. Mom got season tickets from work and she took me to every game, even when she had to work. See, she was a saleswoman back when women were only supposed to be waitresses, nurses, secretaries, and whores. But Mom said all women's jobs meant you had to be a whore sometimes — if you wanted to keep your job or move up. I was glad I was a boy. Wouldn't have to worry about whoring. Every game was the same routine, Mom would bring her customers for a tailgating party and a baseball game while I got to hang out with my dad.

I was eight years old, and those baseball games were the only time I got to see Dad. I mean, I saw his picture a lot. Three times a day, I ate off a placemat with his face and stats on it. I had a tumbler with his portrait on one side and the Milwaukee Brewers baseball-glove-logo on the other. I had all his baseball cards. The 1979 Topps card was my least favorite, he didn't look like *him* with that downward glance and coy smile. The 1979 Kellogg's card was a good one, but the sun was in his face, and the squint made him look like a stranger. The 1980 Topps card was my favorite. He looked fatherly like he was teaching me his batting stance. He wore the Brewer's baby blue uniform. I'd look at the card and pretend he was holding the pose for me so I could hold the pose for him until I could match it perfectly. And he'd throw me a pitch and I'd hit it so far and we would never see the ball again and he'd come over and ruffle my hair — jet black — just like his.

The 1981 Donruss card made him look frumpy and shorter than he really was, but I liked it because it seemed like the kind of picture that would be in the family photo album. The best pictures in a family album never had smiling faces because those pictures always got hung on the wall. That summer, the cop that drove through my neighborhood and passed out baseball cards also scored me a '81 Topps of Dad sitting in the dugout looking tired and hot. His light-colored eyes were satisfied. Even though he wasn't looking at the camera that smile said something funny was going on, proving I might just end up as clever as him someday.

Mom and her groping customers would be up top. Drunk and not even watching the game. I'd run down to the field any time Dad was up to bat or in right field. In between, I'd collect bets and pocket most of the money. Usually made about thirteen dollars every game that I'd save and use to buy more Paul Molitor memorabilia. Summers past, I used to get all that stuff for free. Mom would say *looks like Dad sent you another present*. But then after I took it all to show and tell and the teacher called my mom, the presents stopped coming. One game I had thirty-seven dollars and I was going to buy a signed baseball or a mounted and signed photo. I thought the more stuff I bought with his name on it, the more they'd probably pay him. And that, if anything, would make him happy.

Number of next inning's hits, what do you got? Cash cash cash — Mom would tell me he was coming up to the plate. Adults screamed at the retard because he was in the way. I'd run down to the rail where he was pacing and I'd walk him back to his handrail so he wasn't in everyone's way. He'd start banging his head behind me, and I'd encircle my hands around each eye to try to focus on Dad up to bat. I'd wish with all my heart that he'd hit one straight to me. I still had that ignorant childhood belief that we were all Jedis deep down, that we just had to

harness it, focus and *poof*, we could control the physical world. Freeing myself of those intangible emotions that seemed to tear everyone apart. I'd wish and wish and I'd see the *The Ignitor* blast balls over my head. The crack of the bat moved slower than the ball itself. Yet it was the sound that everyone loved. The sound everyone reacted to. The sound made everyone have simultaneous feelings of elation and fear — homers vs. fly-outs. Most wouldn't know until it was announced. Dad would run, the ball would sail. He'd round second base and *roooooaarrrrr*. It was out of the park. The crowd would propel him home and I'd stand there with tears in my eyes. So proud.

I knew he'd do it, and I knew he needed my help. That's why I couldn't miss a game. It was bad enough I could only go to his home games.

But those were the rules.

Walking back up the stairs to my mom's group, I'd beam. A few of them would look away from me. *Did you see that hit* I'd gloat and they'd pat my head, sober up and suddenly need to *head home to the family*. Mom would get frantic because leaving early meant they weren't having a good time and if they weren't having a good time, she wasn't doing her job ("*sales*"). *Don't go* she'd say to them and then she'd stand closer than she ought to and flip her hair like she did. *You gotta tell him sometime* one of them would always say to her. And she'd touch his hand, more like graze it, while her eyes would slowly move up to meet his. *Some kids believe in ghosts, this isn't any different* she'd tell them.

I'd listen, but not hear.

Still beaming, I'd take a sip of someone's beer. Wince at the sharpness like a cowboy knockin' back a glass of whiskey. But I wouldn't wipe off my mouth, I liked to let the foam sit

and dance on my upper lip. It felt like summer, smelled like men, and tasted like adulthood—bitter and hollow. My mom said it was my pitch black hair, my light eyes, and my bushy eyebrows so akin to the Number Four that reminded the adult men of their own nearly-fatherless children. Mom would charm some more. Eventually, they'd say *he does look a lot like him*. She'd close the sale. They'd stay and drink. And eventually, next game perhaps, maybe they'd buy something.

When Mom had to use the can, it was my job to entertain the intoxicated customers. It was easy. I was a ham. I mostly did impersonations of them. I'd act drunk, pretend not to notice that my hand was on a lady's boob, then act surprised when I'd realize and still continue to squeeze the imaginary air-boob. I'd get them rolling on the ground laughing. Right in the spilled beer and tipped over peanuts, chili dogs, and popcorn. Before Mom would come back, I'd take bets on how long the retard would keep banging his head. Four to one odds usually on him banging until the end of the game.

Mom would come back just in time for Dad to jog out to right field. I'd sprint down the stairs and get snagged by the rail. I'd lean over and scream *Hi dad* as loud as I could. He'd turn and wave at me or at least in my vague direction. Our time was precious. I felt like he knew it too. He wouldn't just wave and turn back around. He'd wave, smile, and smack his hand into his glove. The crowd would cheer but in that moment, it was just me and Dad. Doing father-son stuff. I'd think *I bet he'll give me that mitt someday*. I'd smile and feel hot like I would explode with the unreality of the moment. Like my imagination was on fire and my brain could only allow displacement for so long. I'd turn and see my mother smiling back at me. But what I

refused to see were the tears in her eyes or the sadness that would overcome her group of drunken engineers.

The retard would bang his head on each handrail coming down the steps, usually running into me. One time he called me a “moron” which was probably his dad’s nickname for him. Mom would wave me up. Visitation hours were over. We went to two more games that season and with each game, I was pulled away from my father earlier and earlier. And then it happened, much like when I stopped believing in Santa. We just didn’t talk about it. I didn’t put milk and cookies out and Mom didn’t write *From: Santa* on the presents. Mom was right, it wasn’t any different than believing in ghosts. Dad wasn’t dead, but there was an opaqueness he’d left behind.

Once in awhile, I’d take out an album of pictures that had two of my real dad and I’d grab one of Paul Molitor’s baseball cards and I’d compare. There was a close similarity. I wasn’t entirely delusional. My mother fed my fantasy, and I don’t blame her for it. She too had to navigate the world without my dad. I had built him up for so long in my head. My dad, *Molly* of the Milwaukee Brewers. I had so much pride. So much respect. It was hard for me to find somewhere else to put that energy, those emotions. I missed the games. The retard. The connection I thought I had with that batter, that outfielder, that MVP.

Mom kept climbing ladders, breaking glass ceilings, and whoring less and less. She was the boss of men, and I was the boy of a woman. I started smoking too young. I skipped class. I felt the bitterness and hollowness of adulthood too soon. I never looked for another father like my mom never looked for another husband and when I received a letter in the mail from the Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution, I had just turned sixteen. It read:

Hey Son - looks like I won a two year all inclusive holiday here in the beautiful Kettle Moraine forest. I'd love to see ya. Visitation hours are M-F 3pm-8pm and weekends 8am-3pm. Can't wait to see you, I could use the company. Dad

I didn't tell my mom. I grabbed the shoebox under my bed. The one with all the baseball cards. Not many actually. But I had all the Brewer's players from '79 to '82. The Paul Molitor cards were on top, barely held together by an aged rubber band. I took the box and the letter out back and squeezed a whole bottle of lighter fluid into the burn barrel. I dropped the letter inside. I grabbed the stack of Paul Molitor cards and stuck them in my pocket. I threw the rest in the barrel. I dropped my cigarette inside and only had to wait a moment for it to ignite. I stood by the flames and felt the only warmth my real father ever gave me.