

At A Ballgame

By: Greg Gisolfi

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I was having a tough time keeping myself composed. There was so much anxiety and tension filling up the cockpit of my car that morning. I looked over in the passenger's seat and saw Ryan just staring out the window, blankly: like nothing mattered. He looked depressed, and being a patient of clinical depression myself, I don't use that word lightly. His behavior disturbed me, I'll be honest. He wasn't the type to just stare at things like a zombie. He'd always been a happy kid- at least, he *was* before his dad passed. My husband Ken died last summer after a long battle with colon cancer. It's weird, you know, of course I was upset and I missed him more than anything, but in a way it was almost a relief because he wasn't suffering anymore, and Ryan didn't have to see his dad lying weakly in a hospital bed. Ryan didn't think that way though. I mean, why would he? Christ, he was only 12 years old when it happened. I could just hear Kenny in my head saying "Gina, give him space." Well that didn't work for me. I had to communicate with him. I couldn't let him think I just didn't care. "Excited, bud?" He hardly turned his head toward me. "Uh huh. Thanks mom". Ryan thanking me for reaching out was so indicative of the type of person he is. He is mature, grounded and polite. He has so many qualities his dad had and I had to thank God for that. I don't think I could have handled any other type of kid. See, I was taking Ryan to a ballgame. I loved baseball when I was a little girl. Living in an hour out of New York City and in Connecticut was weird for a sports fan. Ken was a Yankees fan and I always liked the Red Sox. There was always conflict. My dad always took me to Hartford Hound Dog games. They were a middle ground between Boston and New York, and they were independent- so there was never any rivalry between the Sox and Yankee fans. Ken always took Ryan to football games, but A: it was July, and B: I don't know anything about football. "Here we go, bud! This is our exit!" When the stadium was in sight, Ryan's eyes lit up

in a way I hadn't seen them light up since- God, I can't even remember. I felt like I was finally doing something right. I felt like I was being a friend, not just a mom.

One thing you gotta know about my mom is that she always thought the worst thing ever was always gonna happen to her. It was the same thing the day we went to the baseball game. She kept asking me "Ryan, are you ok?" "Ryan, do you need to stop and go to the bathroom?" Jeez, mom. We were only going like forty-five minutes away from home. She was a really good mom, though. She always made dinner for me, helped me with my homework, all kinds of stuff that my dad did with me before he died. She went to work every day too. I hear the guys at school say really mean things to their moms and I just never got why they did it. My guidance counselor at school said I was "mature for my age", but I was just doing what I learned in school and from my parents. I just wanted to be a good person. I was feeling very sad around the time we went to the game that day. It was the first summer without my dad and all I could really think about was how much I missed him and going to the beach and getting ice cream after with him. Mom knew I was feeling bad, and she was trying to help. I didn't really know that much about baseball. It always bored me, kinda. Just seemed like a bunch of guys standing around waiting for something to happen. I liked football a lot more. I couldn't tell mom that, though. She was doing something nice for me, so I was gonna do something nice for her, and at least *pretend* I was having fun. I gotta say, when we got off the exit, the stadium looked really cool. I saw a lot of people out in front taking pictures with the Hound Dogs' mascot. There were a lot of dads with their sons. I felt really jealous at first, but I kept telling myself that it was ok: that it was going to be a good day.

I couldn't find a parking spot in the lot. I had to park on the street and the neighborhood wasn't exactly the best. We had to walk quite a way to the park, but thankfully it was a 4:00

game and it wouldn't get dark until at least 8:30. Plenty of time to get back to the car before the sun set. We got up to the gates and I reached into my bag to get the tickets. "I know they're in here. I put them in last ni-". I stopped myself. I couldn't believe what an asshole I was. I put the envelope on the kitchen table, not my bag. I switched out pocket books last night, so I decided to keep the tickets on the table because I would have just had to take them out again. I was so angry, especially at myself. "God dammit!" Everyone around us stopped and stared at me after I shouted like a damn fool. I looked down at Ryan and he was so embarrassed. What the hell was wrong with me? I had to learn how to not make such a huge deal out of everything. The usher understood how frustrated I was and led us down to the will call office. "Sir, are there going to be any tickets left?" The Hound Dogs were only a rinky dink indy league team, but even so, we were only 15 minutes away from first pitch, and as I mentioned before, the parking lot was completely full. "Ma'am, I assure you we'll find something! Let me just talk to the gal down here. I'll be right back." After he led us down to the ticket window, I had to address the elephant in the room with Ryan. "I'm sorry, Ry." He looked back up at me and said "For what?" "I forgot the tickets and I lost my temper... and I'm sorry". All he said was "Mom, don't worry about it. It's not a big deal." It's amazing, because even though I knew he was just entertaining his old mother, him saying that relaxed me. It made me feel better. The ticket taker was walking back over to us at that moment. He was a very curious looking guy. Older, big gut, losing his hair, but he had a smile that was just infectious. He looked like he genuinely enjoyed his job and his life, which is so much more than a lot of people in this day and age could say. "Ma'am, we found 2 tix for ya! Why don't you come on over?" "K, come on, pal, let's go." The lady behind the window said "alright guys, you're all set! Enjoy the game! Go Dogs!" I stared at her, confused for a second. "Thank you, uh, how much do I owe you?" She began to speak but before she

could, the usher interrupted. “These are on me, ma’am. You folks enjoy the game!” Ryan looked up at me and smiled, genuinely. This wasn’t just a polite smile. He was actually happy. “Oh no, sir, I can’t. Please, let me give you some money.” “No, no, ma’am. I insist. Just accept the tickets as a gift.” I couldn’t get over how friendly this man was. It was so foreign, so odd, so refreshing. I had to ask: “Thank you so much, but why are you doing this for us?” He chuckled, put his hand on my shoulder and said: “You seem like nice people. Sometimes nice people deserve a nice surprise.” At that point, it felt like I knew this man. He seemed so familiar. Not necessarily his appearance, but his personality and disposition were just uncanny. “Thank you so much, I can’t even begin to tell you how much I appreciate it.” He stuck his hand out and said “No, no, it’s quite alright. My pleasure. You guys just have a great time, ok?” I thanked him again and asked him what his name was so I could email the team site and tell them what a good experience we had. “Oh, well thank you, ma’am! Name’s Kenny.” God, I needed a drink right there. That’s what was so familiar about the ticket taker. He was just like my husband, and he having the same name was what made the light bulb turn on. “Kenny… ok. Thank you so much, again!” Ryan chimed in with a “Thank you, Kenny!” He nodded his head with that ever present warm smile on his face. “Have fun, folks!”

That ticket guy was just like my dad. I kept looking at him to see if he knew who I was, just cause he was so familiar to me. He wasn’t like a lot of people. He was a good guy who thought other people deserved to be treated the way he wanted to be treated. I wasn’t really excited for the game today, but everything that normally would go really, really bad, was going really really good. Stuff like the ticket thing? If it were any other day, we’d have been out of luck and the tickets would be sold out, or something like that. Today just felt different. Today felt like a new day. It felt like it was time for me and my mom to finally get back to normal. So far,

anyway, it sure felt like that was what was happening. As soon as we got into the park and saw guys watering the grass and brushing the extra dirt off the diamond, I felt like there was so much going on in front of me and I had to slow down just to see it all. We walked down to our seats and there was another nice old guy who wiped them off for us. It was like something you'd see in a movie. Nobody wiped your seats off at school, or at the movies, and those places have more people in them all the time. It didn't make a lot of sense why more people didn't do stuff like that. Right after we sat down, the Mayor threw out the first pitch to the catcher and everyone cheered so loud. It was louder than anything I'd ever heard at a football game, and this game hadn't even started yet! I looked up at my mom and caught her looking down at me to see my reaction. I didn't have to pretend anymore. I was actually excited and I think she noticed that.

Ryan and I went up to one of the concession stands so we could get some dinner. I wasn't crazy about him eating junky ballpark food for dinner, but what the hell: it was summer, it was a Saturday, and it was his day. Whatever he wanted, I'd get him. He didn't ask for a lot anyway. He never got caught up with material things. He didn't get that from me. That was all Ken. "What are you thinking?" I said, looking at the menu. "I think I want the "Hound Dog Red Hot", he told me. I'm not sure what it was, but I caught him taking in a huge inhale through his nose, and then nodding his head ever so slightly. It was like he was so enthralled by the smell of hot dogs that he could hardly contain himself. Weird behavior, but I couldn't complain. He was content, and that was good enough for me. We ordered our food and went back to our seats. It was just as the game was starting. As the first strike was thrown to the opposing team, I became so overcome with emotions. It was just everything hitting me at once. Memories of me and my dad coming to the park on Sunday afternoons during the summer, the trips for ice cream on the way back from games. It was unreal. I was such a basket case to begin with. I certainly didn't

need any help from ghosts of ballgames past to help me in that department. I was struggling, yet again to keep my head on my shoulders. Jesus, what was wrong with me?

Mom was looking so upset and so nervous. I didn't know what the hell was wrong with her now. Every time I looked at her during the day she just seemed more and more bummed out. I felt so bad for her. I know she was taking me to the game to make me feel better and everything, but I think she was the one who needed today most. She never wanted to show how sad she really was. That made *me* sad. I was having fun for the first time in weeks on a day when I was ready to sorta just fake it for a few hours to make mom feel better. The game and everything about it was just so cool to me. It was different from anything I knew. The cheering, the smell of hot dogs, the organ music... just everything. It was great. I had to keep looking over at mom to see if she was crying and I didn't want to do that. Why should I be the only one having fun? She deserved to too. I tapped her on the shoulder and told her I loved her. She didn't look like she knew what to do... in a good way, if that's even possible.

Right then and there I realized that I had the best son in the world. He wasn't like a kid. He was like a man. At first, I thought it was so unfair for him to have to deal with something like his father dying at such a young age, and yes, I still do think that, but it gave Ryan character. It gave him something that few people his age have: humanity. I looked back at him and said: "I love you too, baby". I must have said that to him about 5,000 times a day, but this time it was different. I was saying so many different things with 3 lonely words. It was my way of expressing my love, as well as my gratitude and appreciation for him not being a jackass like so many other 13 year old boys. The game waned on. It was a clean, well-pitched game. Reminded me just like the 70's when I'd come with dad. It was so much more about the pitchers back then. This park was small, so there wasn't a bad seat in house but these were really, really good ones. I

looked on with delight as Ryan's eyes glowed with each crack of the bat. His excitement and concentration was nice to see, and it made me feel like I was doing something right for once. The Dogs won by a final of 3-1. We were able to see everything from our seats. I took him to the team store and bought him a t shirt with the team logo on the front. He kept looking at it in the bag, like it was the Holy Grail or something. I told him I probably had an old hat with the Dogs' logo on it down in the basement. Ryan, with such confidence said he was going to go hunt for the hat when we got home. We walked back to our car without any trouble and got on the highway. I finally felt calm, and my heartbeat was back to normal. I looked at Ryan and he was doing that "staring out the window" thing, but this time he looked at the stadium. I asked him if he was ok, just to be sure. He looked back and said: "Mom..." I looked at the road and back at him: "Yeah, Hun?" He cracked a smile and asked "Can we come back next weekend?" I laughed. God it had been so long since I had laughed. "Of course! I'll check out tickets as soon as we get back." As Ryan laughed too, his face got red and he turned his head forward, so that he was looking out the windshield. The sun was just about down. It was getting cooler, and the breeze was picking up, and as I took a deep, refreshed breath I thought to myself: Today was supposed to be a day for Ryan to be happy. It was for him... but it finally occurred to me that I needed it more. I needed to see my boy be happy in order for me to be happy. That's what I got. So now, when I'm feeling lonely or sad in the future, I'll think of Ryan, and our day together at the park. I'll take everything that's making me upset, throw them up in the air, and hit them out of the park.