

I Hate the Dallas Cowboys

tales of a scrappy New York boyhood



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Graveyard Cough

*It's just a slight clearing of my throat,
but to Dad's ears it's the death rattle
of his tuberculosis-afflicted father.*

I'm 12. It's right after dinner on a school night in early December 1966. I'm in the living room, and I clear my throat a little.

"Get another sweatshirt!"

"Oh, crap," I thought, and grabbed more clothes and presented myself for my father's review.

He counted my garments and said, "OK, be back by nine."

Dad and I were at war. All my life, if I got the slightest cold, a little tickle in my throat, it turned into a graveyard cough. In his mind's eye, it would start in my feet, travel through every chamber in my pulmonary system, and build in pressure and size until it burst out of my mouth like the death rattle of a tuberculosis victim who was simultaneously taking a series of bullets to his lungs. If Dad heard my tiny cough two rooms away he'd ambush me and sandwich me with two T-shirts, two of his old sweatshirts and a giant jar of Vick's VapoRub. He put three fingers in the jar, take out enough yuck to cure a choir of sore throats, and rub it into my chest and neck like I owed him a lot of money.

My Dad's dad, Thomas E. Pryor, died at age 40. He had advanced tuberculosis. They called it Pott's Disease. Whenever I coughed my Dad probably saw pictures of the sanatorium where my grandfather spent seven of his last ten years, a hundred miles upstate.

On my way down the stairs I started undressing. By the time I got to the first floor I was down to a T-shirt and a light sweatshirt, optimal clothing for touch football. I put my extra sweatshirt, my peacoat, and my scarf behind the radia-

Dad's Promise

Dad finally makes good on his pledge to get me to a Giants football game. My ticket is another guy's hangover.

I was a fanatic for the football Giants, with an indelible lowercase “ny” scratched onto the wall of my heart. But, tickets were scarce for home games at Yankee Stadium, so although they needed my support I couldn't get there to give it to them.

My frustration was bursting. I would beg Dad to take me, but all pleas met the same answer.

“Hon, I'm sorry. When you're older, I promise.”

Fast forward a few years. I was playing football for the Our Lady of Good Counsel Rams, the local church team, and our home field was the dust bowl just inside Central Park on 97th Street off Fifth Avenue. Dad never missed a game and came to many of my practices. Walking home along Madison Avenue from the dust bowl one day in 1967, we talked.

“Dad, will I ever get to a Giants home game?”

He delayed answering. “How's the subway been?”

“Not bad.”

I had just started riding the subway alone that past year (at least as far as he knew).

“You know five Loftus regulars have season tickets and they keep the tickets under the bar's register,” Dad said. “And you know that these guys spend a lot of time in the bar.”

Of course I knew. I could walk into Loftus Tavern blindfolded, go to the back of the bar and put a dime in the jukebox without making contact with a stool, wall, or table. Dad was such a regular himself, he could have taken his mail there. I nodded.

He continued, “Well, sometimes one of those guys doesn't feel too well on Sunday morning, and Jack Loftus gets a call. Then somebody else gets a call, and that person gets to go to the game.”

helped me to my feet and guided me to a seat. When I was steady, he let me go and I went home. I went directly to a doctor who said my appendix was ripe and had to come out. The next day I was in St. John's on Queens Boulevard. It was my first time in a hospital and I was feeling really down. Whatever I might have decided to do that weekend—Woodstock or the Yale Bowl—I would have missed it. I knew 35 people from our group going upstate and Dad had already bought the football tickets.

While waiting to be prepped for the operation, an orderly came in and said, “A nurse will be in shortly to shave you.”

“What?”

“You need to be shaved from your belly button down to the top of your thighs.”

“What?”

“It's standard,” he said and left the room.

I loved my hair down there. It made you a man. At 15, everyone was aware of who was hairy and who was not, and for the majority of girls and guys, hairy was better than not hairy. I did not want to be bald. I liked being furry and warm. It looked good! A quick review: I was in pain, I could not leave, and now I was going to be sheared! I needed to make something good out of this—and I did.

A nurse was going to touch me. Yes, that was it. A pretty nurse, with a hat and a white dress, was going to address my stuff. In a few moments, my privates were going public for the first time, and I was picturing the lady who would have the pleasure: Barbara Feldon, Agent 99 on *Get Smart*. Now I was sitting up, almost eager to lose my pelt. Anxiously, I watched the door for Florence Nightingale's entrance. I heard noise in the hall. “Here she comes,” I said to myself.

In walked a male nurse who looked like Robert Strauss, the actor who played “Animal” in the film *Stalag 17*. This Flintstone-like character with a three-day growth was going to manhandle me. He approached my crotch like a barber, with a razor, a towel and a pan of soapy water. Chit-chat was minimal because all of my focus was on the act. I wanted