

Papa Kenny

by

Ry Southard

Our all-American, all steel, Oldsmobile growled up the steep, winding hills weighted down further by the six occupants: three adults, three kids and our vacation luggage. One of them was me, Bobby Ventura, age 10, baseball fan.

On the rare downhill, we were slowed by the heavy summer weekend traffic, so we never seemed to get up any speed. I loved the spiffy new Olds Golden Rocket 88 that Dad had bought just before the trip and I wanted for everyone to see me proud with my head out the window whenever we zipped along. Around here, there was no other car like it.

But, it was too hot to be so proud or to give much effort to anything. It was hotter than I ever remembered or imagined possible. And, so much of my pride wilted. Dad said it was 95 degrees and Mom said hotter.

“I should know,” she said without looking at him, “this is my part of the country. I grew up here, remember?” The forest green vinyl back seat had become my second, sticky wet skin like a Magic Slate, the heat was relentless, consuming, a tom-tom pounding on the roof of the car and on my temples.

I tried to focus on yesterday, which seemed like a cool forever ago. At a shaded roadside table, along the Arkansas River outside of Little Rock, we had a picnic. I pretended I was Huck Finn and on a river adventure with my brother, sister, and cousin, Louis. We laughed at the heat from our inner tubes while floating in a quiet eddy of the river. We gobbled up the sun until we were full, then dumped into the cool water and slid our feet over the mysterious, murky river bottom. Lying on the riverbank, beneath the shedding cottonwoods, we scrunched our toes in the sandy dirt. We drank barely cold Dr. Pepper and made miniature twig rafts while Dad barbequed chicken in the park-side pit. My Aunt Marylee and Mom talked, sipping ice tea at the picnic table and left us alone. Boy oh boy, that afternoon made this whole trip worth it. It was as Mom and Dad had promised us, not boring and not missing baseball with the gang from my block back home.

We were on our way to visit Papa Kenny, who was 94 and feeling poorly and maybe he wouldn't make it another year. We kids had never been up in the Ozarks, and only to Little Rock once for a wedding, so my parents fashioned a vacation out of it, visiting various relatives along the 1,200 mile journey. After visiting Papa Kenny, we'd turn the Rocket around and point it back east to some real summer fun.

Planning the trip in May, Mom and Dad had told us that we would be visiting relatives and playing with lots of cousins and eating real southern cooking. It would be so much fun and we would be back in three or so weeks with lots of time left for playing baseball, kick-the-can, and swimming in the quarry.

Mom had dragged out an old box from the closet with four leather bound albums and showed us pictures of Aunts Marylee and Evelyn, Uncle Bobby Joe, Mom's Aunt Mabel and a million cousins. Papa Kenny was there in one of them, a middle aged man in a baseball uniform coaching a minor league team. There were group "ham" shots from the 30's and 40's. One of the albums was newer and not yet full. We got the history and I faked attention except for the Papa Kenny part, who I thought must be the neatest guy of all time to have a life in baseball. I broke my silence and cautiously asked Mom a couple of questions about him. Was he ever a player and did she ever see him play? "Yes, but I never saw him on the field, only coaching." Did he ever try out for the majors? "I don't think so, but why don't you ask him yourself?" He was the only real part of our summer vacation that I envisioned would be fun. Maybe we could play catch together. I was sure he could make me a slugger with some pro batting tips.

Up until yesterday, it had been boring, the food was weird tasting with lots of green collard stuff and my cousins talked so stupid and slow. It was too hot here to play baseball. I felt superior and bored and hot. I was even tired of mocking their southern accents.

I flipped through my baseball cards testing myself on stats. I tried to picture Papa Kenny on a card and I made up some stats for the back under the nickname "Pops."

It was good to be the oldest and always get a window seat, though precious little breeze flowed in going only twenty or so miles an hour through the still hills. My brother, J.D., slept fitfully next to me, while I pretended we were crossing the Sahara and that he had passed out from heat. J.D. kept flopping over to one side or the other and I had to keep pushing his sweaty head and neck off my shoulder. My sister, Sissy, did the same on the other side. We played slow, silent, ping pong with J.D. for what seemed like hours. Sissy bore her misery silently, like

me. Our only relief came from the novelty of examining these foreign, impoverished hills and playing imaginary games back in our distant homeland.

In Fort Smith, we'd picked up one of Mom's cousins, Evelyn, who was another, closer one of Papa Kenny's grand children. Aunt Evelyn was navigating from the center of the front seat. Looking a bit like Mom, she wore too much perfume and lit one cigarette off the other monogramming each one with a coat of lipstick. As she kept busy smoking and putting on lipstick, she was babbling on to Mom and Dad catching them up on all the family news and maintaining the fragile truce between my parents.

Aunt Evelyn droned on. I licked the salty sweat off my upper lip with my tongue and used the moisture to wipe the gritty dust smeared on my teeth. Nothing appeased my thirst, but I didn't have the strength to complain. It would have been futile anyway. We'd already stopped almost every hour for sodas and lemonade, to no avail. My parents drank hot, black coffee from a thermos, because as Aunt Evelyn said laughing with a "My, my, you Yankees just mystify me so." Grandma Venturi had apparently been successful indoctrinating them into "the nothing cools you like hot coffee in the summer" baloney.

We were transient in a fixed land. I could see the heat's permanent scars everywhere. Nothing seemed to move but us and the other cars on the road. Everything sat, lay or stood bolted to the landscape. When there was motion, it was the slowest of slow motions. Bent-up old folks sat fixture-like on their shaded porches, fanning themselves in green metal rocking chairs. The shanty houses lethargically and miraculously held their ground, no place really to go, no place to escape. Dogs sweltered, tethered to trees seemingly dying in their fibrillating pants.

The leaves on huge, somberly-draped, old oak trees were a dull, dust covered, wilting green. If you shook out the tree, I bet it would be like clapping erasers together. The same dust was already gathering on the inside of the car. The remains of last year's forest fire near school back in New York had more life. How could anybody possibly live here?

What a Martian place. Dry, hot, dusty, brown, poor. It seemed like we had been going up hill for hours, passing through broken down towns with wooden sidewalks and filling stations with rusted out hand cranked gas pumps. The weather beaten houses all tilted to one side on see-through foundations. None of the kids anywhere seemed to wear shoes.

"OK kids," Dad wearily said again, "last stop before Papa's." He turned into a filling station. We stumbled out of the car in ritual to pee first and drink lemonade second. Dad

hovered around his Olds, his pride and joy, as the attendant filled the tank and checked under the hood.

With verbal and hand gestures from Aunt Evelyn, we turned off the main road onto a wider hard packed, dirt road and drove a half hour to a town of all dirt streets. Dad parked the car under another dusty oak.

Out of place, sweaty and tired, the adults walked and we kids trudged up to the home, but it was really a shack. Aunt Evelyn ceremoniously knocked on the door and walked in without waiting for a reply.

“Yoo-hoo! Papa? Mize Crawford?”

The photographs had lied.

Papa Kenny sat molded into a rocking chair, the arms of the chair were his. He was frail and shrunken. It was apparent we wouldn't be playing catch. Aunt Evelyn went to him and bent over to give him a kiss. He stared at us with watery eyes.

“Hi Papa,” she said loudly, “It's so good to see you. I brought some of your kin to visit. Hi Mize Crawford, how are you this fine day?” Mize Crawford sat off to a corner reading what looked like a Bible. “Jes fine Evelyn,” she replied and turned her eyes back down to her good book.

“C'mon kids come and meet Papa Kenny. Don't forget to speak up.”

As the oldest, it was my job to lead. I nervously approached. Aunt Evelyn provided the introduction narrative.

“Papa, this is Robert, Jim and May's oldest boy.”

His eyes were floating in red from deep, cave-like sockets, but they still tracked mine. They spoke of eternity and the Rough Riders and the Depression and the depth of time. I leaned over and half put my arms around his bony structure.

“Hi, Papa Kenny.” My lips met his bristly face and I wanted to jerk back, repulsed, but I forced myself to act sincere. He smelled of death and rotting and mold and mildew and his breath was a sulfur pit.

I backed away having performed my duty and sat on a musty, sagging sofa. Aunt Evelyn continued introducing my siblings. I thought about him sitting there. Why was he so old? Why wasn't he younger? Papa Kenny seemed to be staring at me. It was scary, like I had done something wrong, but not saying a thing. In fact he hadn't said anything yet. I wondered if he was too old to speak and that nobody had told me.

I looked around the one room house trying to break his stare. Straight ahead of me, the whole wall, in front of which was a small stove and icebox, was haphazardly covered with yellowed newspaper. It made me want to go over and read the wall. But I just sat there sweating and feeling the springs of the sofa pinching my butt. Sissy and J.D. had joined me and my silence on the sofa. I wondered if the sofa was pinching their butts too.

Mom brought Papa Kenny a meshed bag of oranges. "Here Papa, we brought these for you." Papa Kenny had lost most of his teeth so he could only eat soft foods. I don't know why he didn't have false teeth. Aunt Evelyn took the bag from Mom and took one out and peeled it. She handed the sections one by one to Papa Kenny who slowly stuffed them into his mouth. At least he moved; he was alive. Juice dribbled out over his bottom lip and made a stream down his chin. I tried not to stare.

Mom talked to Papa Kenny telling him about the last time she had visited here sixteen years ago. He stared at me. "You May's boy?" Some orange parts spat out. His voice was a raspy whisper. My heart jumped, terrorized from being cornered by this old man.

I looked at Dad for support because I knew Mom would give me grief. Dad was standing over by the door leaning on a high backed chair.

"Bobby, answer Papa."

"Yes sir," I said still hesitant but looking at the oldest man in the world. Papa Kenny made a gargling type of noise and with the back of his shaking wrist tried to wipe some of the spittle and orange off of his chin. His whiskers made a scratching noise against his wrinkly wrist. He was looking at me, but now seemed to look right through me.

Mom picked up the conversation and started telling Papa about the rest of the extended family. Aunt Evelyn interjected every now and then with a "oh you remember them," and, "you know Papa, they were the ones from Tulsa."

J.D. began poking my side with his elbow and whispering trying to get my attention. On general principle, I ignored him. He tried the same tactic with Sissy, whose real name is Melissa.

“Quit it you brat,” Sissy whispered loud enough for me to hear and hopefully intervene.

“My butt hurts from this stupid old sofa.”

“Shut up J.D., you’ll get us all in trouble,” she insisted.

J.D. played dummy for a while and I was getting really bored and kind of sick from the moldy old shoe smell. I scanned the rest of the broken down, meagerly furnished room. To the left of what once passed for a kitchen, against the wall was a bureau with some old pictures on top. There was a single window with some tattered, faded curtains, a couple of the panes were cracked, but I guess it didn’t matter with this heat. Why didn’t anybody fix anything around here?

I glanced behind me and there were two 8 x 10 framed photographs on the windowless wall. From this distance, it was hard to see more than images. I wondered who was in those pictures. One of them looked like a baseball type of picture with three guys in uniforms with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Was Papa Kenny really a baseball player? Why did he lie to me? I looked at him slumped in the chair like a crazy old drunk man. Could this be the same man? Would I love him if he really were a coach?