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A Man Named Don Larsen

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Baseball has always held that special magic for me. From the time I was a little girl, I loved hearing about the heroes of the game and listening to Phil Rizzuto on the radio. My grand father first introduced me to the game before I could even talk. My mother often tells me of the times when he would change my diapers and talk about Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio."

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LAURIE WARD

A Man Named Don Larsen

Baseball has always held that special magic for me. From the time I was a little girl, I loved hearing about the heroes of the game and listening to Phil Rizzuto on the radio. My grandfather first introduced me to the game before I could even talk. My mother often tells me of the times when he would change my diapers and talk about Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio.

"She understands," he would assure everybody around him. "One day she'll love the game as much as I do."

I remember crawling up on his lap, which seemed to be a mountain high, and listening to him tell me of specific games, inning by inning. My favorite story was about a man named Don Larsen, who in 1956 pitched a perfect game in Game Five of the World Series.

Poppa had Don Larsen's baseball card. He kept it in the parlor, on top of the big, wooden radio in a picture frame. The background surrounding the card was the infamous pinstripes. The card looked as crisp and unbent as the day he bought it.

It was in the parlor that we listened to a man named Phil Rizzuto talk about these new Yankees and say "Holy cow" a lot. I'd get a kick out of that. Everytime someone hit a homerun, I'd sit and wait for him to say it, and then I would burst into giggles.

Every Sunday we'd go to Poppa's house "for coffee," as the grown-ups put it. I would run into the parlor as soon as we got there and I would stare at Don Larsen. He seemed bigger than life. I was never allowed to touch the picture frame with the baseball card in it. I just looked at it. Soon Pop would come in and scoop me up into his lap.

"Who do you want to hear about today?"

I'd giggle and smile. "Don."

He'd roll his eyes. "Again?"

"Tell me about Don, please, Poppa."

He'd start the story slowly, trying to be more dramatic with each telling of it. I must have heard that story fifty times by the time I was five.

"It was cold in New York. Game Five of the World Championship Series. I was excited just to be there. It was my first World Series. Don Larsen was starting the game for the Yankees against the Dodgers.

I'd stare at the card throughout the entire story. I could almost feel the wind at my back and see my breath in front of me. I smelled the peanuts and popcorn. As each inning passed and the possibility of a perfect game neared, I felt the excitement of all the men and women in the stadium.

I squirmed in his lap, as the story stretched. "Skip to the ninth inning, Poppa."

"There were two outs in the top of the ninth." He hushed his voice, building the suspense, even though I knew the outcome. "With one last batter, the crowd was on its feet. No one dared breathe. We sat back with each pitch, breathing a sigh, once the ball pounded in the mitt of the catcher. Dale Mitchell was the last out. He never broke any records, but he'll forever be an asterick in any baseball encyclopedia.

"There is nothing to compare to the feeling of watching history take place. It might not have been as important as a peace treaty or the assassination of a president, but I watched history. I never saw any president get shot or any peace treaty get signed — I heard about 'em, read about 'em, but there is nothing like being there."

I never forgot those words. They never changed with each telling of the story, but they grew more impassioned. It was as if he were a young man again, sitting in the cold New York weather, rooting his team on and getting not just a win, but a spectacular show as well.

When I was about eight or nine years old, I went through a phase when I wanted to act like a little girl. I stopped listening to Phil Rizzuto on the radio, and I traded in my Osh Kosh over-alls and baseball hat for frilly dresses and ribbons in my hair.

I look back now and see the love my grandfather had for me. It was a conditional love — not that he meant to hurt me in any way. But Poppa was from the "old country" and was set in his ways. He wanted another grandson, and when I was born, he molded me into the boy he wanted. When I turned into a "little girl," he didn't stop loving me, but he stopped paying so much attention to me. Things were never the same between us. I still enjoyed baseball, but there were other things in my life that were important, too. I guess, I was just growing up.

I thought about my Poppa as I made my way through the crowd, past the smell of hot pretzels and stale beer. It was July 4, 1983 — a day when most families were sitting around the grill in the backyard — but I was on my way to my first Major League baseball game with my brother. The Yankees were playing Boston, and Dave Righetti, a tall, skinny kid from California, was starting for the Yankees. He had been the 1981 Rookie of the Year.

I don't remember who the last batter was or even what the people around me were doing during the ninth inning. I thought about Don Larsen and wondered if he was watching. He had been the last Yankee to pitch a no-hitter, and on this day in 1983, Dave Righetti became the first Yankee in twenty-seven years to pitch a no-hitter. I felt all the excitement my Poppa said he had felt. I had watched history. It was a common bond my Poppa and I had. I felt like his "buddy" again. The distance that had grown between us was

now gone, with the final pitch of the game. As the catcher ran and hugged Dave Righetti, I felt that my Poppa and I were on the same level once again.

When my Poppa died in 1980, he left me his 1956 Don Larsen card. To me, it meant that we never really grew apart entirely, just a short separation. The card sits on my dresser next to another card — a 1983 Dave Righetti.



LYNN ZICARI: *Lloyd's Barroom*