

Are You Dead, Father?

By John DiFelice

Five hundred million years ago, at a place on the border of what is now Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the Delaware River cut through a ridge of the Appalachian Mountains to form a water gap. It was there that Nickels, Diggs, and Johnny Ballgame decided to start the tradition of an annual canoe trip.

“It’s going to be great,” said Diggs.

“I can’t wait,” said Nickels.

“I can’t wait,” said Johnny Ballgame.

They decided to drive to the Delaware Water Gap on the third Friday of every August.

“We’re going to drive to the Delaware Water Gap on the third Friday of every August,” said Diggs.

“Sounds great,” said Nickels.

“Sounds great,” said Johnny Ballgame.

The first year they went, it rained.

“Too bad it’s raining,” said Diggs.

“Maybe it’ll stop,” said Nickels.

“It’ll definitely stop,” said Johnny Ballgame.

That weekend received a historical amount of rain.

The three men made the best of it.

“Pass me that beer, Ballgame,” said Diggs.

Ballgame passed Diggs a beer and then drank two himself. Johnny always drank twice the volume of the other two and drank until he was blackout drunk. He taught the other two that blackout drunk is different than passed-out drunk.

Every canoe trip, someone would comment on how long it took to get there. Every year, someone would look at the darkening sky and place odds on the chance of rain. Every year, they would stop by the side of the road to take a picture of Johnny Ballgame saluting the billboard for Hickory Licks Rib Shack that showed a man eating ribs with BBQ sauce smeared all over his face and his hair on fire. Every year, they talked about the trip they wanted to take to Dublin. Every year, it poured down rain.

“It’s going to rain.”

“It always rains here.”

“Why do we keep coming here?”

“It’s tradition.”

“Oh, right.”

One year, like any other, Johnny Ballgame died.

Nickels and Diggs decided to carry on the tradition of the canoe trip because “That’s what Ballgame would have wanted.”

Diggs and Nickels told everyone in town that they had decided to spread Johnny Ballgame’s ashes around their campsite.

“We’re going to spread Johnny Ballgame’s ashes around our campsite,” said Diggs. Everyone in town thought it was a wonderful idea.

On the third Friday of the next August, Diggs and Nickels set out for their usual campsite in the Delaware Water Gap with a coffee can that contained Johnny Ballgame’s ashes.

“We have to make a few stops first,” said Diggs.

“Where?” asked Nickels.

“Smackey Jack’s,” said Diggs, which was one of Ballgame’s favorite bars.

“To toast Johnny?” asked Nickels.

“You got it,” said Diggs.

They took their usual seats at the bar and engaged in breezy conversation with Stew, an anemic-looking bartender who usually solicited advice from his patrons instead of giving it. Stew served them their usual: a Pabst pounder and a shot of Jim Beam. They toasted Johnny, then threw back the shot and guzzled the beer till the cans were empty.

“Hey, Stew?” asked Diggs.

“Yeah?”

“Can you put the ballgame on?”

“There’s no ballgame on right now—

“BALLGAME!” yelled Diggs, and with that, he threw a handful of Johnny Ballgame’s ashes right in Stew’s face. Diggs hopped off the barstool, grabbed Nickel’s by the front of his shirt, and dragged him out of the bar.

“Why did you do that?” asked Nickels.

“That’s what Johnny wanted us to do.”

Diggs explained to Nickels that Johnny left very clear instructions about what to do with his ashes.

“So, we’re not going canoeing?” asked Nickels.

“We are. But we have to do this first.”

“Well, save some ashes for the river.”

Diggs and Nickels visited ten of their favorite bars before driving to the Water Gap, and in each one, Diggs and sometimes Nickels threw Johnny Ballgame’s ashes into the bartender’s face.

On the road to the river, the weather turned, and Diggs put bets on the darkening sky.

When they came upon the Hickory Licks rib Shack billboard with a picture of a man eating ribs with BBQ sauce smeared all over his face and his hair on fire, Nickels took a picture of the coffee can next to it.

From there, they drove to the place where they rented their canoe. They talked about their trip to Dublin and how great it was going to be.

They placed their gear into the canoe, and the sky opened up.

"Why do we keep coming here?" said Nickels. "It always rains."

"It's tradition," said Diggs.

"Right."

It poured down rain until they pushed the canoe ashore at their usual spot to set up camp.

Diggs told Nickels to build the fire, since Johnny Ballgame had done so in the past. Nickels started by getting one piece of wood at a time and carrying it from the woods to the fire pit. All of the wood was wet. Nickels went through a pack of matches trying to light it.

"Hey," Diggs said. "You keep doing the same thing over and over again, and you can see it doesn't work. Are you stupid?"

"Do we really need a fire?" asked Nickels.

"We always have a fire," said Diggs.

"Right."

They never did start a fire, and later, as they pounded beers in the dark, Nickels asked: "So do you think that what we did in those bars was wrong?"

"It's what Ballgame wanted," said Diggs. "He told us to shout his name and throw his ashes in the face of every bartender in every bar we used to go to, and that's what we did."

"I really miss him," said Nickels.

"Me too, Nicky. I really do."

"I wonder why he wanted us to do that. What does he have against bartenders? They gave him all those free drinks. They used to pour whiskey down his throat. Man, were they pissed at us."

"Ballgame was kind of weird sometimes," said Diggs. "Remember our last trip up here with him? That was really weird."

"Yeah, he wouldn't drink."

"Yeah. Weird."

"Yeah. You really gave him a hard time about that."

"Not that bad," said Diggs.

"No, you really rode him about it the whole weekend until he caved."

"You were riding him right along with me."

"But I wasn't like you."

"Didn't you say that his not drinking was like Superman not being able to fly?"

"I said that?" asked Nickels.

"You did."

"That's pretty funny."

"Then you told him he should be his own superhero named Drunk Man with his own costume? Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Can you imagine Johnny Ballgame not drinking?" said Diggs.

"That's too weird to think about," said Nickels. "The world wouldn't make sense."

"Remember that crazy stuff he said on his last trip?" asked Diggs. "Do you remember? I can't remember it exactly."

"He said something like, 'Guy's, I'm barely hanging on here.'"

"Yeah, yeah, that was it! Craaaaazy stuff!"

"Crazy."

"Yeah, and then remember that other stuff, how he said that if he started drinking again, he was going to kill himself?"

"Yeah."

“Yeah.”

“That was crazy.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. I guess he was serious about that.”

“Yeah,” said Diggs.

Neither man spoke for a while, then Nickels added, “That was classic Ballgame.”

“Wasn’t it, though?” said Diggs.

“Totally classic,” said Nickels.

“There will never be another Johnny Ballgame.”

“I really miss him.”

“Me too. At least we have Dublin.”

“I can’t wait till Dublin.”

“Dublin will be great.”

Diggs and Nickels never went to Dublin, but they spent their lives talking about it anyway.

Word got out about how they threw Johnny Ballgame’s ashes in the bartenders’ faces, and they were forever banned from every bar within a fifty-mile radius.

Many years later, on their annual canoe trip, Nickels asked, “So what do we do now?”

“What do you mean?” said Diggs.

“Should we go home?”

“Why would we do that?”

“It’s going to rain.”

“It always rains here.”

“Why do we keep coming here?”

“You know, I have no idea.”