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THE YANKEE CLIPPEE

HE BECAME A SCRUFFY STAR IN BOSTON AND THE HEART AND SOUL OF A CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM. BUT NOW THAT HE'S JUMPED TO NEW YORK AND DITCHED THE CAVEMAN LOOK, WHAT WILL JOHNNY DAMON DO?

TOM VERDUCCI

The man who was quite literally the face of the Boston Red Sox lives in a house that remindshim why he is a New York Yankee. From the basketball hoop in the driveway to the infinity edge of the backyard pool that seems to gurgle right into Lake Butler below in this gated slice of central Florida renowned for its jockey aristocracy, it is all furnished and maintained and its tax payments subsidized by Yankee dollars. Johnny Damon moved in a year ago, fresh from helping Boston win its first world championship in 86 years, but from where he sits now—at the big, circular wooden kitchen table, his beard grown thick and his hair shaggy again a month after being famously cleaned up for his introduction as a Yankee in December—his grand home represents how much more New York wanted him than Boston did. "Three million a year over four years: \$12 million," Damon, 32, says, spreading his arms wide to emphasize the gap between what the Red Sox (\$40 million) and the Yankees (\$52 million) thought he was worth over the next four seasons. "A \$12 million difference, which means owning this house free and clear for the rest of my life." The beautiful home, which Damon shares with his wife, Michelle, and his six-year-old twins, Madelyn and Jackson, is tastefully decorated. The framed baseball jerseys, baseball-themed paintings and photos and various other game-related mementos that had filled the main living area of his previous house, about a mile away, are now confined to a conservatory in back with a postcard view of the lake. There are, however, two significant totems of his Red Sox past not consigned there.

The first hangs prominently in the dining room above an arched portal that leads to the kitchen. It is visible, if you look to your left, immediately upon setting foot through the front door. It is a carefully replicated, 40-by-20-inch canvas print of Da Vinci's Last Supper.

Except, wait. Wait just a minute. Is that...? It is. Where Jesus should be, that's ... that's Johnny in the middle of the table with his arms out, palms upward.

And that's not Bartholomew on the far left, it's Terry Francona, the Red Sox manager. And James the Younger is Curt Schilling, the Boston pitcher. The whole lot of them, in fact, are Red Sox. Or used to be, back in 2004 when they were the kind of world champions, like the '55 Dodgers, '85 Bears or '69-70 Knicks, who, no matter what else they do or where else they go, will forever define a civic happening, not just a season.

"Kind of sad. Six gone already," Damon says, gazing at the print and counting off himself, Bill Mueller, Kevin Millar, Pedro Martinez, Doug Mirabelli and Manny Ramirez, who remains with the team despite sporadic trade requests. "Well, he's next. Manny was one of the guys who told me I should go. I asked him, 'Do you want me to tell people that?' He said, 'I don't care.'"

What would Johnny do? For two rollicking years in Boston, when the long-locked, bearded Damon looked the part of the Nazarene, the parishioners of Red Sox Nation joyfully co-opted that popular modern Christian guidepost for the conscience. That very question, which had come to represent the height of their belief, degenerated, however, into their worst fear in December as Damon, a free agent, pondered whether to re-sign with Boston or defect to the Yankees, the same team for which he had said last May he would "never" play.

"Yeah, but people always cut off what I said," Damon says. "The rest of it was that I'd never go to New York unless the Red Sox disrespected me. That's always left out. For them to think my best days are behind me, they've got to be kidding."

On his way out the door in Boston, Damon was praised by Red Sox president Larry Lucchino as "a team leader," "an offensive force," "a cult figure" and "the personification of the franchise." Shorn of his trademark locks and his symbiotic relationship with his teammates and fans, can Damon possibly have the same impact on the properly pinstriped Yankees? What will Johnny do? The answer may have something to do with what is tucked inside a plastic bag in a drawer in his bathroom. That is the other significant relic from his Red Sox career not in his conservatory.

Damon became a cult figure—even a better player—precisely because he did not act like a Yankee. He showed up for spring training in 2004 in Fort Myers, Fla., with the Biblical look after a concussion suffered in the previous postseason left him in no mood to shave or trim his hair. He wasn't sure how the club would react, but general manager Theo Epstein took one look and told him to keep it, with this blessing: "We're not the Yankees."

So began what Millar last October called "the greatest marketing gimmick in the history of pro sports." (Says Damon, "I won't argue with him.")

Damon had been an accomplished player before that—Boston signed him as a free agent from Oakland after the 2001 season for \$31 million over four years—but nowhere near the star and celebrity that he quickly became. Women swooned. Men copied his look. Parents named their children after him. Gossip mongers adored him. (Boston Magazine found that Damon was listed in the Boston Herald gossip column 64 times in 2004, or roughly once every five days.)

He appeared on talk shows with David Letterman and Regis Philbin, made the cover of TV Guide and ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, and was featured in PEOPLE. When he did shave once in May 2004, it was a media event that drew hundreds of people to Boston's Prudential Center and raised \$15,000 for charity. When he stopped in a Lowell, Mass., salon unannounced to get his beard trimmed after Boston won the World Series, hundreds of people filled the street outside, chanting his name.

Damon raised his game along with his profile. A career .284 hitter before the beard-and-tresses, he batted .310 over two seasons with the hirsute look, becoming one of the toughest outs in the league as a leadoff hitter with an ugly but effective chop of a swing, like a man warding off a pesky bee. Meanwhile, he helped imbue the Sox with their fearless frat-boy persona. Damon was famous for soaking naked in a whirlpool five minutes before the first pitch, or six minutes before he was standing on second base after a single and a stolen base. He was a leading man by any definition, and that extended to his self-described "go-to guy" role with the media.

Boston dug everything about his act. And that's what worried Brian Cashman. The Yankees' general manager needed a centerfielder and wanted Damon, but he could not count on Damon's turning away from his cult following there. "I felt all along that all things being equal, or even close to equal, he was staying in Boston," Cashman says. "And it was not out of loyalty to the franchise as much as it was his bond with the fan base. We thought [the Red Sox] would go to 11 1/2, 12 [million dollars] a year for four years."

The Red Sox appraised Damon differently. They worried that his hard-charging style afieidand on the bases would reduce his durability as he aged into his mid-30s. They saw, by their scouting reports and complex statistical analysis, a decline in his defense last season that they feared would accelerate. (Damon blamed the drop-off on playing through injuries to his left elbow and right shoulder.) They assumed that his runs (he scored 240 times in the past two years) could be replaced by someone cheaper as long as Ramirez and David Ortiz anchored the middle of the lineup.

On Dec. 6 the Red Sox offered Damon a four-year contract for \$40 million, the same deal that they had given the year before to free agents Jason Varitek, a 33-year-old catcher, and Edgar Renteria, a shortstop who had never played a day for the team or scored 100 runs in a season in his life. Meanwhile, the Sox were exploring trade possibilities for younger centerfielders Jeremy Reed of Seattle and Coco Crisp of Cleveland. "That's when I began to see the handwriting on the wall," Damon says.

The Red Sox said they wanted an answer to their offer by Christmas Eve. Meanwhile, on Dec. 20, Cashman, who had stayed in the game with loose discussions of a three- or four-year deal, made his move. He offered Damon \$52 million over four years and told his agent, Scott Boras, that the offer would disappear in 12 hours, after which he would announce that the Yankees were done pursuing Damon. The gambit worked. The Red Sox, unaware of the specifics or the urgency of the Yankees' offer, held to their \$40 million bid when Boras probed them for more interest. The \$12 million difference and the lukewarm vibes Damon was getting from the Red Sox pushed the face of the franchise into the hands of the enemy.

"My heart was in Boston," Damon says. "I really wanted to stay there. The Red Sox treated me great while I was there. I'm not bitter at all. Life's too short for that. They got the guy they wanted [Crisp, obtained in a trade on Jan. 27]. It's just the business side of the sport. You grow numb to it."

What will Johnny do? The Boston apostate most likely will bat leadoff in the Yankees' modern Murderers' Row, which will now include five of last year's top 12 run scorers in the AL: Damon, Derek Jeter, Alex Rodriguez, Gary Sheffield and Hideki Matsui. "We're going to manhandle some pretty good pitching," Damon says.

Says Rodriguez, "There was not a player in major league baseball [available this winter] I'd rather have than Johnny. You're talking about a guy who walked into the pressure-packed atmosphere in the New York-Boston rivalry and got an A plus."

Well, yes, but the rules are different on this side of the rivalry, which is to say there actually are rules. The Yankees do not allow facial hair below the upper lip, they do not allow long hair, they do not allow music without headphones in the clubhouse, and, while there are no established prohibitions against naked chin-ups, shaving-cream fights and bold quotes to the media (all among Damon's favorite pastimes), the existence of such behavior in the New York clubhouse is largely unknown.

Roger Clemens, Jason Giambi, Rodriguez and Randy Johnson are among the stars whose production declined in their first seasons in New York, perhaps because of their attempt to fit into the conservative Yankee culture. Cashman says he told Damon, "Just be yourself. The guy in Boston, that's the guy I want. I want the whole package."

Says Damon, "I'll still be there for the media. I won't change." But he also adds, "I know it's Jeter's team. I'm just the piece of the puzzle that's been missing."

Since signing with the Yankees, Damon has been blitzed with endorsement offers for, among other things, automobiles, a marina, razors, shampoo and grooming products, most of which he says he will decline. But last week Damon set the town abuzz during a six-day visit in which he took in a Rangers game, posed for a magazine cover, sat for a television interview, signed memorabilia as part of his endorsement deals with a trading card company and a collectibles company, received a Ferrari Spider as a thank-you from the shoe company he represents and shopped for a home in Manhattan.

Damon reverted to Yankees mode for the New York trip with another haircut and shave. In December, the Yankeeification of his hair had become a subject of such speculation that a casino had offered him a six-figure paycheck to get his beard shaved and hair trimmed onstage in front of a live audience. Instead, Damon prepped for his introductory Yankees news conference at a New York salon, avoiding the paparazzi encamped at his hotel by ducking out a back exit. He left the salon, also by sneaking out a rear exit, looking like ... well, a Yankee.

And that brings us back to that other special keepsake of the Red Sox cult hero that was Johnny Damon: that plastic bag in his bathroom. Inside is the hair that the salon snipped off Damon's head, the hair that used to leap and fly from the bottom of his Boston cap and batting helmet. At first Damon saved it with the idea that he might auction it off for charity.

"Then I thought, that may be kind of cheesy, putting a piece of you up for bid on eBay," Damon says. "I'm in New York now. I can't be cheesy. So I just kept it myself."

It's all that's left of those wild, hairy days in Boston. As a Yankee, Damon starts clean, and the question, What will Johnny do? has acquired a new, if more sober, relevance.

> SI.COM

Photo gallery of key players who switched sides in the Red Sox--Yankees rivalry at SI.com/baseball.

Damon felt "disrespected" by the Red Sox: "For them to think my best days are behind me, THEY'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING."

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

WALTER IOOSS JR. (RED SOX); JUSTIN LANE/EPA (YANKEES); PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SI IMAGING

PHOTO

Photograph by David Bergman

CHANGING STRIPES - A clean-cut Damon was the toast of Broadway during a series of promotional appearances last week.

PHOTO

MARK MANDRAKE/EPA

GOING, GOING ... Damon turned down a six-figure offer for an onstage shearing in December, opting for a private salon visit.

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CENTERFIELD CENTERFOLD

RICK REILLY

THE HAIR. Johnny Damon almost cut his hair. Happened just the other day. The Boston Red Sox' All-Star beefcake centerfielder was getting his long, luxurious L'Oreàl locks trimmed when the stylist pulled them completely back. "I saw someone I hadn't seen in a long time," Damon says. "Me. And I almost did it. But I thought, Nah, I better consult my teammates first." They might have hanged him. After all, a lot of people think Damon's hair won the last World Series.

"Bottom line," says Sox first baseman Kevin Millar, "we'd been cursed for 86 years. Mel Gibson makes *The Passion of the Christ*, and he's taking all kinds of heat for it. Next thing you know Johnny comes in looking like Jesus, and we break the curse."

Worse than that, he'd have been pummeled by the purses of millions of American women, who'd give anything to help him work up a lather. "That's the line I get the most from women--'I'd just like to pull on your hair all night long,'" Damon says. "Sometimes they hit on me right in front of my wife! I mean, women are relentless, man, relentless."

You poor, poor bastard.

THE BEARD. Actual e-mail:

Dear The Red Sox,

I kind of promised this girl I would get her a sack of Johnny Damon's face hair. And, well, she's starting to wonder where that sack of face hair's at. I really like this girl (Suzanne, btw). Appreciate the help.

Can you blame the guy? What relationship isn't immensely enhanced by a bag of another man's whiskers?

This season a man in Oakland asked if Damon would help him propose to his girlfriend. Damon did it. The guy pretended he and his girlfriend had won an onfield picture with Damon, except the ring happened to be in Damon's glove. She said yes, though rumor is she was looking at Damon when she said it.

THE HEART. Damon, 31, leads the American League in hits, is third in average and has become arguably the best leadoff hitter since Rickey Henderson. "You just wind this kid up and let him go," says Red Sox manager Terry Francona. "He plays hurt. He knocks in runs. He sacrifices himself. What manager wouldn't love this guy?"

Exactly. That's why there's talk the Yankees might try to sign Damon when he becomes a free agent this off-season. Would he go clean-cut for Furious George?

"Absolutely," Damon says. "I'd definitely abide by his rules."

You know the stylist will be named Delilah.

THE ARM. "He throws like a girl," says Millar. Some experts think he has the worst arm among major league centerfielders.

One time, Boston leftfielder Manny Ramirez dived to cut off a Damon throw so he could wing it himself--the rare 8-7-4-2 relay.

O.K., so nobody's perfect.

THE FEET. If you are driving in Boston, you may be surprised to see Johnny Damon, on foot, in your rearview mirror, and gaining. Damon does it not to catch the cars but to work on his speed. If he were a dog, he'd be a hairier, of course.

"I think I can run about 25 miles per hour, top speed," he says. "Sometimes I actually pass cars on Boylston [Street]." And their reaction? "They realize they're in the company of either a great athlete, or a criminal running from something."

Born to a Thai mother and a Vietnam-vet sergeant, he's always been a speed racer, challenging himself to run home through a one-mile wood in Tennessee that was fraught with wild boars. "They're mean little f-----s," he says. "You better outrun 'em."

THE MOUTH. As a kid Damon stuttered something awful. That was one reason he took to sports: no talking necessary.

"[The stutter] made me real shy," he says. "I didn't say much. Now you can't get me to shut up."

THE BUTT. Damon's gluteus seems to be of maximum interest to female connoisseurs of same. "That's the line I hear second most from women," he says. "I want to see that ass everybody's talking about."

The Sox see it more than they need--Damon lying on the couch naked, Damon doing his famous naked pull-ups, Damon chowing naked. "The guy is always naked," says Francona. "And then, 15 minutes later, I'll see him standing on second base."

Even Damon's dad brings it up. "He tells me, 'When you're done, you retire with all that money and tell the rest of the world to kiss your ass,'" Damon says.

O.K., ladies, there's no need to form a line. That was a figure of speech.

Women tell Johnny Damon, "I'd like to pull on your hair all night long." Also, "I want to see that ass everybody's talking about."

COLOR PHOTO

PETER READ MILLER