

## The Strike Zone

### The grass

What grew in that vast setting, grass and violet wildflowers and occasional clover leaves, might shine resplendent, as if eternal. No one could tell me otherwise on that brilliant August day as I looked out at my lawn, Jacob at my side. We stood smack dab in the center of the yard, father and son, the summer's hot stillness sharing in our delight, with but one word shared between us: *Awesome*.

I saw their history, those delicate blades of grass. Craning their young necks to the sun, pushing their narrow roots into the earth, laboring against entrapment by gnarling and sinuous

vines of clover, they kept on keeping on. People don't see that struggle, the fight of the weak against the bullies for their fair share of what this earth has to offer. And look, the grass can ultimately win. Maybe it can sense the need to survive; you never know. Consider what they say about trees. When one tree dies in the woods, the whole family of survivors bends their trunks and branches inward toward their fallen kin. There is something about survival, the absolute need to exist, even when all around the sisters of despair hover close. Sadness, Mistreatment, Violence and Death – how they tempt the whole species to fall but never win out.

This perseverance of spirit is what makes the open space of lawn so fascinating. Each blade of grass, each leaf upon each weed is not the same as it was yesterday. Change happens. The key is to pay attention and to care.

Not caring, now that is how change will come upon you, show up in front of your face as if you had nothing to do with it, when in fact, you did, and deep down inside you know it. You could have watered the lawn evenly, for example. You could have gone the extra step and put down fertilizer. In the spring, when white clover flowers and thick crab grass appeared in ugly crops about the green, you might have considered bending down and picking out the weeds.

You also have choices when it comes to cultivating that space. Save a portion for a flower garden, or grow vegetables. Maggie insists that vegetables are “greener”—so her third grade teacher says. She begged me to start a vegetable garden this year, which I obliged, and now she is convinced that she has personally contributed to the overall health of our neighborhood. I cannot deny that, particularly when you take a look at the ear to ear smile on that young lady's freckled face when she picks her own collard greens, and rinses them, and places them one next to the other on a blanket of paper towels. If only we knew what we were

doing when it comes to cooking them. Anyway, you could plant small trees or blueberry bushes if you can keep the deer away.

Or not. We're all busy.

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### Regret

I was a decent ball player as a kid. I was lucky because I had some bulk to me, and I could throw. I was about Jake's age when baseball started to slip into my bones, to become a part of me. It was no fanciful obsession; it was real, as much a part of my constitution as the cells on my skin and the nerves that coursed into my heart. I watched the greats like Ryne Sandberg, Cal Ripken, Jr., Kirby Puckett with the constancy of a hawk. I wanted to throw and field the ball the way that they did with such splendor. I wanted to dash around the bases like them. I imagined myself as Sandberg walking into the clubhouse after a game and jumping up and down with my boys in victory. I played and I played and I played, usually by myself in our little yard, but also with any team that would take me. I rode my bike to games. I lied to my mother about where I was going if the games were in sketchier locales. The baseball itself, my glove, and my favorite Cubbies T-shirt became my uniform. That hard ball was practically an extension of my hand, except when I was pissing off my father.

On an occasional Saturday, baseball takes me in all over again. I stand in the center of my yard with my ball in hand. The logic of the game clears my mind, so I think. The problem is that I forget how easily baseball takes me in. It frames my world crystalline blue and everything makes sense—to me. But for some, like my son, it's just a game.

“Jakie, come on. Let’s go!” I say. I slap the ball into my mitt for the tenth time. We’ve been playing for less than a half hour and already he’s struck out, he’s been hit by a pitch, he’s had to pee. Once again he’s too close to the plate and I know I’m going to hit him if I’m not careful. His lower lip slides under his front teeth, concentrating, and meanwhile my strike zone is filled with a pastel yellow t-shirt with white lettering advertising Camp Firefly.

“Jakie, stand back, stand back, I’m gonna hit you my man!”

Jake steps a full foot back and I roll my eyes.

“Jake, how are you going to be able to make contact from there? Come on, let’s do this, OK?”

His mother comes out.

“Would you leave the kid alone?” Marla yells across the yard. “For Chrissake! You want him to hate baseball for the rest of his life? Then keep it up! Geez, God!”

She slams the door and disappears into the kitchen as quickly as she had shown up five seconds earlier.

From the miniature pitcher’s mound that I’ve fashioned in the yard, I look across to home plate and to Jake, his fists still clenching the bat with all his might. A film of sweat covers his face. His freckles glisten in the sun. Then I feel like shit and sink into myself and I get overwhelmed with gratitude for Marla, who is always there to save me, even from myself.

What’s with the people in A. A. who say that they have no regrets? Really? You drank away your family’s nest egg, tossed aside the well-being of the only people you ever loved, and you took them for granted. You boozed away your afternoons while your son stood in the

sweltering heat on the baseball mound, pitching one strike-out after another. I can tell you some thing for sure; when that kid eyed his batter, each and every strike zone reminded him of you. The strike zone: that empty space where the ball speeds through unscathed, where the batter's swing misses every time. And you're saying you don't have any regrets? Yeah right.

"No regrets" is some defense mechanism they use in AA to keep it real and to stay cool. I'd like to tell them all that they're all a bunch of deluded a-holes, and they should stop drowning in coffee and suffocating in cigarette smoke and think about what they should be regretting. Like what might be happening in the minds and hearts of their wives and children during their never ending recovery, not to mention relapses, which of course are always forgiven by your buddies in the church basement.

Back to the strike zone. It is narrow and made of nothing and framed by nothing, but there's no mistaking that it is there as clear as day. In fact, sometimes everything around you can remind you of that roughly 20 inch by 36 inch rectangle of air. There are those times when you'd like to up and throw the closest baseball-sized object at the zone that just popped up in front of you at the spur of the moment, just to see if you can hit it hard and fast.

There is a strange comfort in that empty space. It nearly swallows up all of you as it takes in your pitch. It would be nice, after your arm releases the ball, and when your right leg and then your whole body propel forward, if you could just fall to the ground instead of breaking the momentum by twisting sideways and standing straight. Not in front of anyone, but if you happen to be standing in your own backyard on a Saturday when everyone is out running errands. I tried it once, and it worked. I could have stayed on the grass for hours.

We went to visit the old man the other day. Marla dragged the kids along, not that Maggie needed the encouragement, but Jacob, well, it goes without saying. I wished he would have put up a fight, but instead he gave Marla this pathetic look, his eyebrows raised like half-moons and crunched toward the center of his forehead, like a beaten dog, defeated and complacent.

In the belly of the Hillcrest Arms Adult Nursing Facility, that unquestionable presence of human piss and gravy dulled our senses by the time we made it to my father's room, 238, bed B. 238 B. You can hear the nurses and ward secretaries and aides yell out stuff about your father and anyone else's parent using their number. It makes you wonder if they even know your old man's name. And couldn't they at least wait for the family, like us on this particular afternoon, to be out of ear shot? "238B isn't going to PT. Family's here." "All right, so do I have to downstairs and let them know?" "I don't think so." "Hey did you change 226 A's bed? She called a minute ago." "She called? What d'ya mean she called?" "I mean, she *called*. Sitting in her own *yoo-reen* again." "Oh Lord." (Laughter).

My father sat at a 45 degree angle on top of his neatly made bed. Last time, Marla had brought over a fleece blanket made by Maggie's Brownie troop because the only one that Hillcrest gives the guy is nothing short of flimsy. Marla and Maggie's blanket, a classic Southwestern-motif beige and brown number, was folded neatly in a rectangle at the end of the bed, and my dad's heels just touched its edge. His socks, these over-the-ankle brown comfort socks that we'd picked up at Yellowstone Park on a family vacation last summer, for some odd reason stopped me in my tracks. He always had those things on his feet, and he always had these funny looking, corduroy old man's slippers in the exact same place on the floor, right at the edge

of the bed. I think the scene made me wonder if he ever moved from that position on his bed, or maybe he just loved those socks because they reminded him of us? Who knows.

We barely conversed. We sat around my father's bed in mismatched chairs and then the nurse suggested that we bring him to the common room. Of course not a one of us wanted to do that. We'd have to get the guy out of bed, fumble around with his clothes and touch his flaking skin that he and everyone else in this bacteria-laden place ignore. Marla said, "OK Pop, on the count of three," but he fell down when he was readying himself for the "three!"

He plopped down, and the bed squeaked and bounced in embarrassment. "Ah the hell with it," he said.

Thank God. Marla and I helped him back to his half-mast position. She did most of the work, swinging his legs back on the bed and straightening his slacks. I had hold of an elbow.

That's when he noticed Jake, who was still sitting in a hard plastic chair that we'd dragged from the hallway. The old man took a long look at him with his gray eyes, and his mouth frozen in a barely open position. A greasy section of his hair stood over his forehead, and he exhaled and slumped into himself.

"You're just going to sit there, kid? Look at your mother here, huh? And her." The old man didn't look at Maggie but he waved his arm, atrophied and covered in a rust-colored cardigan, in Maggie's direction. Maggie, it should be noted, was not helping per se but looked the part with her stance at Marla's side and her eager wide-eyed expression. But as soon as my dad let his tired arm drop to his side, Maggie's smile faded.

Jake's head sunk to his chest. He was holding a Cardinal's cap, and he wrung it like he was about to wash a car with it. Round and round it rolled in his hands, and the rest of his body stiffened, not so much as one muscle twitching, not even his eyes, save for an occasional blink.

I have never once had a drink in front of that kid. He is 11 years old. He is pudgy. His skin is doughy and his hair shoots straight up in the air. Marla keeps it short in a spiky crew cut, although he might be a touch too old for the style; he looks adorable. He has little red bumps on the side of his eyebrows and his cheeks, and, when my father decided to be the asshole that he is, Jakie's red bumps lit up cherry red.

Marla dropped my father's legs. She stepped over to Jake and played with his hair, and then she bent at the waist and kissed his head. She closed her eyes when her nose touched his hair. I watched her take in the smell of his sweat.

Marla straightened her back, and then bent her knees to bring herself face to face with Jake.

"Hey," she said. "Do you want to see what's going on in the common room? Maybe the old people will let us in on a game of bingo."

You've never seen anything as beautiful as my wife bringing herself to eye level with her son. Yeah, there is the ethereal tenderness of mother tending to child, a sight indeed. But there is so much more with Marla. Marla, thirty-three years old and in the prime of her femininity. Her hips have widened from carrying our two children, giving her the Quintessential Curves. Her body moves with a fluidity that could ease the tiniest ounce of anxiety that any man or any child might possess. She had me in a trance as she took care of our son, her blue jeans following her every move, her red sweater holding on to her torso in a graceful dance. Marla's dark, thick



hair played against her shoulders. Love poured out of her body. I am telling you, I could have cried.

After a moment I took a glance over at my old man and I had this odd sense that he might have been looking at my wife in the same way. This freaked me out and disgusted me so much, but how could I feel grossed out in the presence of Marla, whose name, by the way, is actually Marlene but she doesn't like it because of *her* old man, long gone and occasionally unforgotten. I have never called her anything but Marla.

“Maggie go with your mother.”

That was all I could say. It was the only fucking thing that came out of my mouth, barking out some bullshit orders. Poor Maggie. Away she went, though, no complaints. She took Jake by one hand, and led him and Marla out the door. Marla turned to me before she disappeared. She opened her mouth and pretended to laugh.

“One good woman,” said the old man. He exhaled a couple more times, staccato-like. Then he said, “That boy of yours. What’s wrong with him anyway?”

He coughed. It was a fake cough, very familiar to me, the exact one that he used with me and my mother when he didn't want to talk and knew that he shouldn't but then went ahead with it anyway, and maybe regretted saying whatever he said a second later. Sometimes he coughed before he told her that she sucked at housework, sometimes after he told me that if I would take that fucking baseball out of my hand and help out around here maybe there wouldn't be ants climbing all over the counters. By the way, we didn't have ants climbing all over the counters. I think he was always hung over and saw ants climbing all over the counters.

I have this memory that I can't shake, and it always seems to pop into my head at times like this, when it's just me and my father and heavy air trying to suffocate us.

He came back just before my mother turned super-ill. To say that he came back is kind of funny. I mean, they'd been together and not together over and over throughout the years. They loved each other and that was the bottom line, and whether or not he technically lived under her roof at any particular point became irrelevant. Who knows what happened; maybe she told him that she was visiting the female doctor. All I know is that he was suddenly showing up every morning in my mother's kitchen, waiting for her to come downstairs in fresh clothes and make-up. He took her to the doctor, to the grocery store, to Starbuck's. When she was getting weak and thought that fresh air would do her some good, he took her on little walks around the block.

One day, toward the very end, I stopped over at my mother's house with some supplies that Marla had picked up. I could tell straight away that my mom was sleeping by the silence, that humming, ticking quiet of a house breathing without its people. So I went straight to work. I put away the eggs that either I or my father would throw in a blender with some fruit, the quart of whole milk that my mom put in her coffee. Bananas.

I about screamed when I turned from the cupboard and my father was standing in the middle of the kitchen, no more than four feet away from me.

"Dad, Geez! Where did you come from?"

He didn't respond and instead took a look at the two brown King's Groceries bags on the counter. After he paced a couple of steps, he stopped in his tracks and honed his eyes on the groceries. Then he coughed.

“The wife send you?”

I’d learned a long time ago about the joys of internal conversation. My response, internally, was, *no you bastard I sent myself but yes, my wife bought the stuff. And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m here every day too, pal.* Externally, I took a deep breath in and out, and another and another, and I concentrated on the task of emptying the bags. I felt like a yogi, taking note of the things in themselves, like the purple cardboard of the Raisin Bran box, the red lettering of the name *Kellogg’s*, the give of a brown bag of freshly ground fair trade coffee (This briefly brought me to thoughts of my wife, who took such care to remember my mom’s favorite little things like gourmet coffee and to actually buy breakfast for my father).

I peeked inside the second bag and decided to leave the adult diapers and the pale blue “chux”—those plastic on one side, cloth on the other pads that keep the bed clean—for later.

He was watching me. I could have sworn it by the complete silence that had taken over the kitchen. It was only after I’d finished with the bags, making that noise of a large man retrieving groceries in a fall jacket from a thick paper bag, that I took notice. There was nary a sound. And it kind of ticked me off, because I could have sworn that his eyes were on me criticizing my every move. I turned, don’t ask me why. Every thread of control within me threatened to loosen if I turned to face my dad, but I did anyway. A part of me wanted to say something to him about having a little respect, including a little self-respect. But hadn’t the opportunity for those types of conversations long since passed? In my mind they had. So I turned and I leaned against the counter top.

My father was not watching me. Bent over the kitchen table, he held his head in his hands. Bulbous veins sagged on the backs of the hands, and his pale and speckled forehead

rested gingerly in his own hold. He seemed to sag into himself, to age in a flash. He looked crumpled and gray, sinking into his denim shirt turned white at the seams from too many trips through the washer and dryer.

“She’s sleeping now. But she has a lot of pain,” he said.

He let his hands fall to the kitchen table, and then he leaned back in his chair and looked to the ceiling. At a point between the coiled fluorescent light above and my shoulder, he fixed his gaze.

“She needs medicine for the pain,” he said. “The problem is, she can’t swallow pills anymore. Yesterday, I asked the doctor to get me a liquid...”

“Yeah, Marla picked it up, right?”

“We tried the liquid last night. Good God, you could make a pretty penny out on the street with all the narcotics she’s got in that room. Nothing works. She choked on the very first sip. Couldn’t get so much as a half a teaspoon in her. The fuckin’ syrup is too thick and she’s too weak. So much for your bananas there.

“I called the doctor again today. He said I could bring her into the hospital for an IV and of course we know that your mother won’t go for that.”

For one second he took his eyes off of his staring space and looked at my face, and then he returned to that safe spot of nothing.

“The doctor called in a suppository,” he said. “I went over to Henninger’s and picked it up about an hour ago.”

He tapped his fingers on the kitchen table, two times—tap, tap.

“So I administered the suppository.”

He closed his eyes.

“And she’s sleeping now.”

That’s my memory. All of it happens in a flash. The walks, my mother’s entry into the kitchen in jeans that enveloped her as she shrunk in size, the anger, the tapping of my father’s fingers on the kitchen table under the fluorescent lamp of her light blue kitchen, the love.

And here we sat, in a yellowing room with a plastic container of pudding and a day old pitcher of water between us.

“So no common room, Dad? You sure you don’t want to go?”

“For what?”

“To visit. Just to visit, Dad.”

My father turned his head and looked out the window. My eyes followed to the steel-framed section of outside that you get when you spend down all that you own and Medicaid foots the bill. The window overlooks a parking lot, and beyond that a small lawn dotted with a couple of dogwood and cherry trees, which is nice enough, but it really doesn’t matter. From my dad’s vantage point, the view consists of a square of sky and one branch of a dying elm that taps at the window in the wind.

We let it grow quiet, which was great because it gave me a chance to breathe. I noticed that my fists were clenched and that I hadn’t taken off my jacket. I reached into the pocket and

realized that I'd left my baseball at home. To my good fortune, my father dozed off, and I seized the opportunity to get the hell out of there and go home, back to my suburban life with my wife and two children, my three bedroom home and my own problems. Back to my own backyard.

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### How grass seed works

It's called DNA. Grass has it easier, albeit more boring than mammals, when it comes to reproduction. Sprinkle the seeds on your yard, give them some water, and you're good to go. You don't even need to bury the seeds in a quarter inch of soil.

You'll need plenty of water, and your grass will grow for you, like a weed, but make no mistake, grass is no weed. My father was a gardener of sorts, and if you asked him what constitutes a weed, he'd say, "It's anything you bloody well don't like." And then he'd say not another word on the subject, the point being: if you don't like it, pull it out.

You can easily contemplate such issues when seeding a lawn, because you've got nothing but time and ample sunshine and a long afternoon ahead. Much can be achieved in the quiet of the mind on a Sunday afternoon, on the muddy plot that will one day be your lawn.

Grass is not a weed because it is graceful and straight, but it quakes gently with the wind, all shades of green undulating in whispered rhythms. Deep greens, hedging close to black, light greens approaching a dark yellow, all move as one lush, stately lawn. By summer's peak, you feel that you've triumphed at the sight of a healthy back yard.

There is no need to beat yourself up, however, if, come July, you have a lawn problem on your hands. That grass has to fight a formidable battle underground. Clover is the worst enemy.

Deep and serpentine are her roots, honey-laden her flowers. She multiplies with ease and will strangulate your grass if you turn your back for too long, so don't. Get on your knees and pull at the flowers. Follow the stems to the root, then the root to its depths in the earth, and pull with enough force to take out a whole patch. Take care as you pull not to break the root, or you'll be back at the same clover patch the next day. Take heed of the clover, and you should be OK. That's what I did anyway, and it worked for me.

Jakie and I had our fun times over the summer. I wished he would have had a catch with me, but he seemed to like it better when we seeded, planted, weeded. He grew a row of tomatoes and they multiplied like rabbits—who, by the way, attempted to eat all of his fruits. He was thrown into a quagmire, because he loved to watch the little animals show up in the yard, but how distraught he was when whole plants were gone after his hard work. Marla convinced him that the only solution was a fence.

The lawn grew into a family affair in no time at all, with Marla leading the fence project, me with the damned clover roots, and Jakie with his tomatoes. Maggie picked collard greens—the absolute hardest green to grow—but grow they did. Girls always pick the complicated projects, but, alas, who am I to complain.

You should see the backyard now, as September has passed. The sky makes no promise of sunny days, and the lawn quickly turns Indian summer oranges to brown. Wet stakes stand crooked, chicken wire trembles in the wind. You can't see our efforts, you can't feel our glory. One of these days I'll get out there and clean it all up, maybe think about next year's lawn. This one was a beauty.

