

**Something Out of Nothing**  
*Matt Tiano*

For the first time ever, David wanted to flag down one of those in-airport caravans, stick Josh on it, and shut him up. He normally hated those damn things, their purpose only to transport insanely obese people from concourse A to concourse B. They typically whizzed by him, as if the driver were Ricky Henderson on his way to second base, while David was the second basemen, left in the dust.

But David knew that he was not obese. He also knew that his 7-year-old Josh would not have anything of it. He'd continue to complain about where they were going, and where he'd rather be.

“Dad, I don't want to go.”

“It will be fun,” the broken record said. “We're going to see baseball. We have great seats. You've only seen one game in your life, at an indoor park. This is outdoor baseball!”

“But Dad, I don't like baseball. It's boring. And plus, Emily is having a big birthday party that Mom said I'd miss.”

He couldn't do the “take Josh to choir” thing. He couldn't do the “make Josh a lunch” thing. But he could teach Josh how to oil a glove, turn a double play in the park and keep score at an actual game. Time was running out for David to do these things, so he planned this trip – when Josh was three. Kris had said it was much too early to plan such a trip, and maybe she was right, but he'd never admit it. If David was ever going to be a real father, now was the time.

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They were cramped and boarded, and Josh looked up from his chapter book. Kris has him going on those. David preferred *Sports Illustrated*, but whatever.

A couple sat down opposite David and Josh, as if the 757 were their living room couch and they had just got home after a long day at work. They began to argue excessively about, from the sounds of it, their teenage daughter's recent sexual activity. Another reason to preach athletic involvement. Kris, you there?

David didn't understand people like this. You get on a plane ... and argue ... so everybody can hear you ... about your daughter's sex life? Interesting. A bit unfortunate because this plane ride to Chicago could be the most important plane ride of David's life. To become a real father, that is.

"Dad, I don't want to go," Josh continued. "Baseball games are three hours long. Plus we are gone for five whole days. That's a long time."

"We're going to have a great time," David replied. What else could be said. "Can't you just do this for your father."

"I am excited. Know why?" was David's first attempt.

So he told him. Just about everything, in fact. He told him about Grandpa Jim, who had done the same thing for him as David was doing for Josh, to Wrigley and to Old Commiskey Park as well.

"You'll never know my father," David told Josh. "But you'll visit a shrine where my father and I visited."

"What's a shrine?"

"A shrine is a very important historical place that will never be forgotten."

*We're getting somewhere.*

He told him about playing catch with his father, and watching the Game of the Week every Sunday night.

He told him about getting the chance to play on the Dodger Stadium turf, and how his grandfather would root his little league team with one phrase: “Everrrryybbodddyyy batssss!!!!”

“Why do you like baseball?” was offered next.

*We're getting somewhere.*

David thought for 10 seconds or so. People rarely asked him to philosophize, but this may be a first and last chance to be a father, so he pondered.

“I like baseball because of your Grandpa. I like baseball because of its history and the shrines. I like baseball because of the food. I like baseball because it's slower than other sports. I like baseball because it makes me believe and have faith.”

“In what, Dad?”

*Where did this come from?*

“Tradition.”

David knew Josh didn't know what this meant, but he shrugged anyways, seemingly accepting “tradition” for the word and not for the meaning. This was classic Josh. He does this often during his Little League games and practices, pretending to be really into something for a short period of time, but then falling out of that trance shortly after.

David looked out the window of the plane, yet to have taken off, and saw Wrigley Field. He saw the green ivy, patched against the outfield wall, and he saw his father and

that photo of the two of them seated in those hard-as-nails seats down on the third-base line. That particular day in 1976 was etched in Sharpie on a permanent Miller family lineup card.

David woke up, startled by his dream of Wrigley Field and the obtrusive smell of stale Cracker Jacks. He looked to his left, and saw Josh fast asleep, mouth wide open.

He watched Josh sleep while they were in the air, above Denver, according to the pilot. David took out a notebook from his briefcase, opened it, and titled the page, *“Things to teach.”* And so he began his list, half staring at his son, half staring at a photo he secretly kept in his briefcase at all times. It was of him and his father, taken by his mother at a family barbecue years before.

“Just like this,” Jim said with that grin of a teacher, handing over the hardball. “Put your fingers around the ball, just like you’re showing the ‘peace’ sign ... and let it go!”

That was the beginning of a nurtured 87-mile-per-hour maxed out fastball, later executed to perfection in David’s glory days of Division I baseball at Northwestern University that had more movement than a racecar’s tires around Bristol Motor Speedway. That photo was of teacher and student. Father and son.

1. Teach proper way to throw baseball. Peace sign.
2. Keeping score.
3. Significance of ivy at Wrigley.
4. Strategy – e.g., hit and run.

He’d cross each item off one at a time, until Josh was the teacher.

If David were to grade Josh's performance thus far on the trip, he'd give him a B+, but would in no way give him the green light on a 3-0 pitch, nor would he feel comfortable with him taking care of anything at the front desk of their hotel, McCauley Culkin style. Not a chance.

"How long?" Josh asked David on their 'L' ride to Wrigley. Always "how long" this, "how long" that.

"How long what?"

"How long until we get there?"

"10 minutes. Look out the window."

When they arrived, Josh didn't have that I-can't-wait-to-walk-into-the-park-to-hear-the-whistling-and-buzzing sound. He didn't have that look that made a dad smile uncontrollably. He didn't have the look of anticipation. His walk didn't move as if he just *couldn't* wait to hear ball on glove, a sound every bit as enticing as 35,000 on their feet in unison, or "get yourrrr crackkkerrrr jackssss." Josh was suffering from anti-baseball syndrome.

They entered the stadium. Tears welting as the sight of a playful park that could have a swing set, rather than a stadium, hit David's eyes like a bad hop in the infield dirt. He simply wasn't ready, and this vacation, this attempt at fatherhood, was not about sadness, but about tradition. He had to convey that, in some way. He saw the ivy, which had transcended generations yet still looked freshly gardened.

"Do you want to get closer?" David asked.

"I guess," Josh responded. "But I'm hungry."

Good opportunity. There really was never anything quite like a \$5 ballpark hot dog, anyways. He'd do one of those psychological experiments where the experimenter relies on association. Josh would inhale food like the men in the upper deck that requires two seats. Maybe then he'd associate food with baseball – and like food and thus like baseball like any boy should.

So David bought him a hot dog with ketchup and mustard and bought one for himself as well. David looked around and saw other boys and other fathers interact. One boy wore a Cubs hat, while the father wore a jersey. This duo argued over the loud pregame commotion over whether Kerry Wood would ever be the star that he was.

“His fastball was amazing, Dad!” the boy said. “He still has it!”

“C'mon Charlie!” the father said, with a sarcastic smile. “The man is old and is in an ice bucket more than he has a glove on!”

David's teeth clenched. He took Josh's hand, *because that's just what dads do*. He stormed towards section 134, overlooking third base. Row 11, seat 3 and 4; that's where he was headed. He took out that same photo from his rustic Levi jeans, corners crinkled from similar moments where he'd frantically cure loneliness on his business trips with a reach to his briefcase. There'd be that photo, but he'd have to find it, finger it in every way, and touch it countless times with every finger. Sweat oozed from his arm and now onto Josh's hand, and onto the now-damp light cardboard. David's pace hurried.

Josh was being dragged now, only an afterthought.

“Where are we going, Dad?”

“Quiet, Josh.”

“But, Dad...”

The boy knew not to continue. He couldn't win, not against his father who was pulling him as if he were playing a competitive game of tug-of-war.

David pulled Josh behind, the pace quickening to a sprint, as if he had to beat the throw from the cut-off man. Then they came, a waterfall of the past. Tears.

Lots of them. So many that stares came from every direction. David looked down at his red-turned-blood-red polo. He floated in the ocean by his lonesome, while tourists on the sand stared. David couldn't swim to shore.

“We ... sat ... in these ... seats.”

David looked to the blue sky, and gave the photo to Josh for him to see. “3,” Josh said with a whisper. He was referring to the small “3” in the photo on the seatback, barely visible. “You sat in these seats with your dad.”

“Yes,” David managed. So they both sat there, staring, like the rest of them. They were staring at the green patches, as if something could explode from infinity behind the ivy at any moment.

Josh, however, stared at the ground.

No way this could be happening. It was already the third.

“These are our seats,” a voice bellowed from above.

It was so familiar. That day 32 years ago, they had been lucky. The voice from above had remained silent, and they had enjoyed the game from Row 11. This was the art of “buying high, sitting within a cry.” Buying seats in the nosebleed section, then

avoiding ushers, sneaking down to the platinum seats, “seeing facial hair!” and sitting well, “within a cry,” were a specialty.

And now Mr. Fair Weather had to show up late. Who the hell are these people that show up late anyways? The same people that leave between innings to buy a pretzel, or the people that leave early during a one-run game to beat the traffic. Would you show up in the second act of a play? David never understood these people. And now one was taking his (after the second, seats *are* fair game anyways) seats.

“These are our seats,” the voice slightly louder.

“You know what? I heard you. You know what else? You’re here in the third inning. You know what else? Don’t you ever teach my kid that it is okay to show up to a baseball game and show such disrespect for it. Unbelievable.”

Josh continued to look at the ground.

“Sir, you want me to get the usher?”

*Sir, you want me to get the cardiologist? Seems to me you could go away with the three hot dogs you managed to get on the way, but could use a treadmill.*

“Josh, let’s go.”

They got up, and made the walk of shame up to the concourse. No seats in sight, David held Josh’s hand in a tight squeeze. Sweat amassed on David’s prematurely wrinkled forehead, and his legs were rubber.

“I’m tired,” Josh said. “When are we done?”

“Hopefully soon,” David replied. He wondered what the score was, or even the inning, yet couldn’t even recall that – probably for the first time ever.

“Really?”

He nodded, taking the photo out once more. Like an hour before, David glanced over and saw a father buying his son a game program. The son smiled. And David was unbothered.

“Don’t make the game for something that it isn’t,” David’s father told him one morning.

The game wasn’t Josh. The game was Josh through David.

He reached into his sweatshirt pocket, and took out his list made on the 757. He added a number Five.

5. Don’t make fatherhood something that it isn’t.

Maybe Josh was the teacher after all.