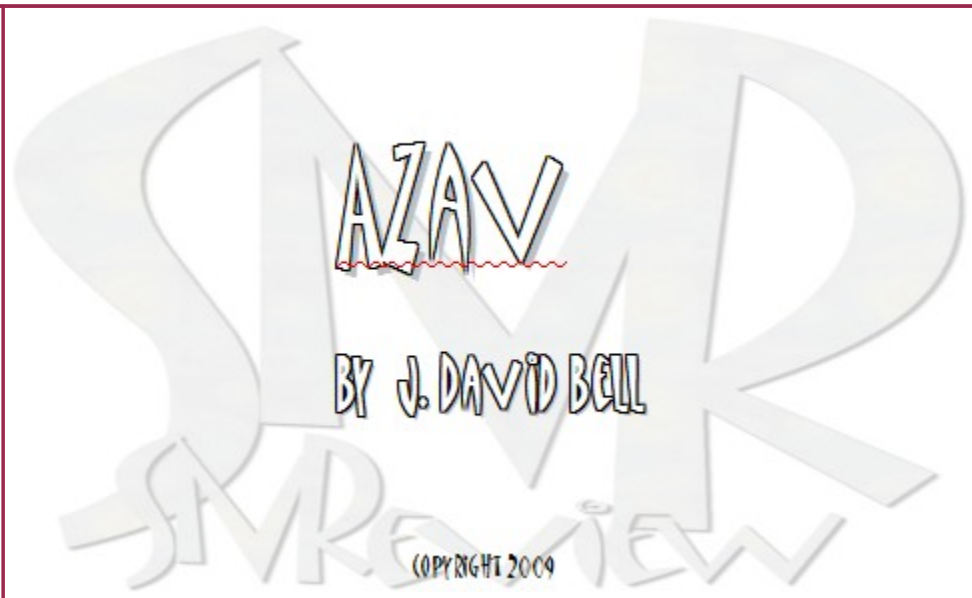

Nathan's team climbed the short incline from the parking lot and looked out over the field. Their eyes took in a broad, horizonless expanse of brown dirt, waved and pitted, stippled with gleaming streaks of oil, to keep the dust down their coach said. Steep streets rose on either side, crowded with brick rowhouses that seemed to hang precipitously over the hollow in which the field was laid. Telephone lines and TV antennae tangled against the pale blue sky. On the left field side a steel gray bleacher, massive as a battleship, hugged the foul line. The chain link backstop was the color of rust, its top bowed like a net. The dugouts were mere benches to either side of the backstop, the pitcher's mound a minor bump, barely more evident than the other bumps and ripples in the field's surface. There was no wall, no fence even, in the eternity of dirt. A ball through an outfielder's legs would roll forever, a sure home run.

Nathan's team paused on the level of the field, smiling self-consciously. "Jesus," someone whispered. Dr. Levine had warned them that some of the city fields were nothing like their soft, crisply lined, green field (with new banks of lights on tall poles), but they had expected at least a hint that grass might have grown here once. This was not a baseball field but a desert. One could imagine wars fought here, survivors wandering through waves of heat, but it evoked no more familiar scenes than that.

There was nothing to do, however, but haul their equipment bags to the visitors' bench (marked conspicuously with a spraypainted white "V"), tie on their cleats, and stare sullenly as the home team appeared, winding their way down cement steps etched into the left field hillside. Where they had come from in the chaos of houses above Nathan found it impossible to tell. Their uniforms, though, were brilliantly white, standing out against the dark shale that draped the hillside. Nathan's team, bent over to loop long laces between jagged spikes, stole glances from under their caps as the home team deposited their equipment on the opposite bench. They were relaxed, or seeming so, but there was something about their casualness that made one doubt it, something that wound the visitors' insides tight. Then Dr. Levine and the small, older looking man in a windbreaker and cap, coach of the home team, approached each other and shook hands behind the backstop. They held the handshake for a moment, which made Nathan think they knew each other from past years.

His cleats tied, Nathan leaned back, working his glove open and closed, and studied the rival bench. His opponents seemed uniformly large and mature. One, a tall, dark boy with black hair, had a mustache. Nathan had imagined them, as they made their way down the hill, to be clownish and awkward, with loose-fitting uniforms and doughy red faces, but they were sleek and compact, at home in their jerseys, with their pantlegs pulled almost to their shoetops in the latest fashion of the local major league team. A few, when they turned, revealed a canister of chewing tobacco tucked into their back pockets. This was a little shocking, Dr. Levine having

strictly forbidden it. Their talk was low, almost a mutter, broken by an occasional faintly lewd laugh or a nonsense sound as some team member became the butt of a joke. Looking out over the field and watching them sidelong through the links of the backstop, Nathan noticed that they paid no attention to the visitors; with the loose discipline of professionals, they seemed absorbed in horseplay while their faces revealed the inner focus of preparing for the game.

‘‘Let’s loosen up,” said Nathan’s teammate, Andrew Dinewitz, slapping him lightly in the ribs with his glove. They rose and walked down the right field line. Andrew took his position on the line while Nathan loped to where second base would be when the home team tied the bags down. Turning briefly for a look at their opponents, Nathan saw that from this distance the home team had become white shirts and dark faces. No one, so far as he could tell, was watching the lone players positioned in the empty expanse of field.

Nathan and Andrew tossed back and forth lazily, windmilling their arms between throws, bringing their gloves down in big careless arcs to intercept the ball, flipping the ball from glove to hand and throwing without striding, merely snapping their wrists. Soon they were joined by their teammates, in pairs, and balls began to zip and crack in their gloves. Behind him, Nathan was aware of the home team warming up on the third base line. He imagined what the matched warm-ups would look like from those towering streets, someone in an upper story window peering down on what must seem from that distance an intricate but senseless weaving motion. He had gone early to major league games, had watched from field level players sprinting down the base paths then pulling up into a broken jog once they passed some imaginary finish line. By all appearances oblivious to him, they were certainly aware of being, in the great green pie wedge of the field, idolized, unapproachable, with the power to do anything and make it seem miraculous. And he had watched, from the cheap seats high above the outfield wall, a ball appear from the invisible arm of a player hidden by the wall itself and float with no apparent aim or hurry toward the waiting, dwarfish cut off man, behind whose back another dwarf scooted around third and headed for home. It was then he would catch his breath and long to be on the field, where the perspective changed, where the thrown ball was a bullet and the runner a bright spot burning in the back of the cut off man’s brain. It was why Nathan loved baseball: because it required you at once to be aware of things you couldn’t see and to eliminate everything from your mind except the one split second in which you must act. It made you live simultaneously outside yourself, in the pattern, and inside yourself, in the absolute core of your own being.

Nathan’s team began to talk, to cheer each other, coax each other: “Nice catch!” and “Fire it in!” and “Hewego, hewego,” the meaningless sounds of their unity. They were a good team, unsensational, but a bunch who had played together since Pee Wee League, learning each other’s names as they learned to swing a level bat at a plastic ball balanced on a tee. Nathan had been to his teammates’ birthday parties, their fathers’ company picnics, their older sisters’ weddings, and, in the past year, their bar mitzvahs, where he had followed the ceremony as best he could from the few English translations in the prayer book and his father’s whispered explanations. They were starting to break up, some to private schools, some to new groups of friends, some to the crushing, unequivocal fact that Pony League was beyond them. Nathan, still firmly a member of the team, a .300 hitter and a hustling if not dazzling leftfielder, had started to feel himself closed out of the bonds off the field—not, as sometimes happened, from any irrecoverable loss of coolness, and not, as in those cases, abruptly and wholly, but gradually, and from forces he did not understand. Maybe it was that no one held birthday parties anymore, and company picnics were for little kids, and all the older sisters were married off. He had begun to think of those bar mitzvahs as farewells, as events whose purpose was to convey to him that he would not be invited to future events. But he had dutifully attended each one, sitting in the back of the temple and gagging at the foreign sounds that came from his teammates’ strangled throats. He wished at those times that he had thought to be more than a careless observer at the Passover Seders held by his aunts and uncles, his father’s family. And he wished his father, a nonbelieving Jew, had made Hanukkah into more than another occasion to hand out goodies. He wished for the gift of tongues, so that at the receptions, when he worked his mouth into the shape of the words *mazel tov*, he would not always be forced to

say “congratulations” instead. The English word always sounded foreign on his lips, and he seemed to himself like a person at the wrong address, seeking a familiar glance among the averted eyes of hosts and guests too polite to tell him his error.

Once, in some vague hope, perhaps, of coming down with Hebrew, he had gone to the neighborhood synagogue on his own. Seated in a back pew, feeling upon—or more accurately above—his head the light pressure of the yarmulke he had scooped from the bin outside the temple doors, he watched the congregants’ heads bow as if in response to some silent tune. It startled him, this motion as subtle and unexpected as breathing. It seemed to him as if the room had remained still while he had shifted. He felt that if he turned his head, or even caught his breath, the moment would shift again. So he closed his eyes and wondered how to pray. It seemed futile, the space poised to receive his prayer too big to heed it, the air too thin to carry it. He felt God to be a great emptiness, and he knew this was his own fault, for his desire to pray had been insincere and he had created the God he deserved. He felt shame, and his shame turned to anger, so that he opened his eyes to see a temple strangely altered, the heads bowed in doltish obedience, the stiff backs a choreography of intolerance. He scooted from the pew and left, dropping the yarmulke atop its brothers in the waiting bin, vowing not to return.

After that his teammates began to seem even more distant, as their distance began to seem their own doing, a function of their pride and foolishness. He still joined in the chatter, still enjoyed the momentary sparks of communication engendered among the outfielders as they told each other how to play a bounce, where to throw when one’s back was turned to the play. But he no longer looked forward to the postgame rituals, no longer participated in the ribbing and consolation, the harvesting of statistics, the dissection of victories and defeats. The field, he had come to believe, now defined the outer edge of their relationship.

And soon, if he couldn’t learn to hit a curveball, the field would be closed to him too. He remembered afternoons knocking his father’s underhand whiffleballs with fat plastic bats, then graduating to aluminum and slamming rubber coated hardballs as fast as his father could throw them. But what he remembered most, with disgust and anger, were his father’s feeble attempts to twist his arm into the approximation of a curveball motion, and the lazily spinning gopher balls his efforts produced. These Nathan could blast to kingdom come, but in games the breaking balls always seemed to squirt beyond reach. So far, curveballs had been few and undependable; Dr. Levine, and apparently other coaches, refused to allow pitchers to throw them for fear of permanent damage to still malleable bones. But older brothers, victims of the breaking ball, had warned their kid brothers that Pony League was one thing, Colt another. There, curves (and sliders and forkballs) weren’t aberrations but the norm.

‘‘Let’s bring ‘em in!” Dr. Levine (who couldn’t throw a curveball either, who couldn’t throw much of anything, who was just a big friendly pediatrician whose son played first base) was hollering from the backstop, his hands cupped over his mouth. The bases were spiked into the ground, the umpires chatted behind home plate. Nathan’s parents, who never missed a game, had set up folding chairs a few paces up the right field line. The boys clustered around Dr. Levine as he read the starting lineup, quite unoriginally, for he hadn’t changed the order once this season, with the exception of the pitching rotation. The home team had taken the field, the tall, dark haired boy with the mustache assuming his position on the mound. A righty, he fired the ball in with a fluid sidearm motion. Behind him the field was alive with zigzagging balls, fielders swiping grounders and rehearsing double plays. On the field, the home team had shed both their laziness and their ease. They played with precision, not joy, the lines of their movements clean, free of clutter and exaggeration, spontaneity and surprise. Their warm-up was silent too, so silent Nathan could hear the scuffle of their cleats on the dirt, the powdery sound of feet stamping bases, and the clear ringing of balls in gloves, a sound almost metallic, like echoes from the empty bleacher.

Nathan’s stomach tightened, as it occurred to him that they could not beat this team. It came to him as strongly as if the game were already over and lost. The field told him as much as

anything else, the field half bathed in sunlight and half checkered with looping shadows from the backstop and stands. It was a wilderness field, treacherous with hidden depths. It would never give up what it knew.

‘‘Play ball!” the home plate umpire hollered, snapping down his mask. The leadoff batter, Mark Grossman, took a couple extra practice cuts by the cage and stepped up to the plate. Nathan gripped a bat and sat on the edge of the bench, awaiting his turn. The pitcher, big and loose, his body bent forward with the ball cupped in his mitt, studied his catcher’s signs before twisting back into his delivery. Nathan watched his arm curl behind him then snap forward. From beside the cage the ball’s movement was apparent, the catcher straining sideways as it nicked the outside corner. The infield erupted into chatter, lively and crisp, like a marching band behind its drum major. Mark struck out looking on two more pitches, the final strike spinning him a foot off the plate before settling with ferocious quickness into the catcher’s glove.

The big pitcher leaned back, his glove on his hip, and watched approvingly as the ball made its rounds of the infield. Nathan slipped a weighted donut over his bat and took his position in the on-deck circle. The next batter, Eddie Sholes, tried a drag bunt on the first pitch and popped the ball innocently into the pitcher’s waiting mitt. Dr. Levine, standing in the coach’s box on the third base line, clapped encouragingly, looking helpless. He smiled and clenched his fists, one on top of the other, as Nathan planted his right foot in the batter’s box. Nathan, without power but a good contact hitter, had always looked up the line to see Dr. Levine’s “swing away” motion, his coach’s trust giving him confidence and a secret pleasure. Now Nathan watched him with anger, realizing how foolish Dr. Levine was, a coach who gave no signs, who knew no signs to give, whose runners trusted their own instincts rather than look to him to wave them home or signal them to slide. Nathan turned from his coach in despair, set his left foot in the soft dust, and looked out at the pitcher.

He was struck by how lonely the boy looked. Maybe it was his own loneliness that made him feel this way. Baseball was not, he thought then, truly a team game. It was only an illusion, a trick of the infield chatter, the clasped hands at home plate, the brief moments of sharing when the ball in flight was neither one’s own nor another’s. But those shared moments were only empty space, a cry across a distance, always resolving into the selfish mine or yours that marked the true life of the game. As the pitcher reared, the shaft of his right leg pinning him to the endless swath of field, Nathan felt a moment’s pity for him, for his greatness. What combination of accident, fate, hard work had stranded him there, where fame would forever be measured by his ability to elude, to send messages never meant to be received?

Nathan connected weakly, and the second baseman scooped the ball and easily beat the runner to the bag.

* * *

Dazed beneath the sun and without a baserunner in five trips to the plate, the visiting team took the field for the bottom of the fifth. The field was not, after all, so bad as it looked; it undulated like water, but was relatively clean of rocks and divots. The home team, however, had found the gaps in the outfield, with the expected result. The score had risen steadily with each inning, crossing into double digits by the close of the fourth. Nathan’s legs felt weak from running hopelessly after the ball, but he knew it was the hopelessness more than the actual running that made them feel this way. He had caught, on the run, a fly ball or two, but he had ceased to think of aggressively defending his territory. His job he had come to consider one of appeasement, of salvage. He had begun to play prayerfully.

From the first inning on, he was aware that in a perfect seven inning game he would be the one to make the last out. As each of his teammates fell—strikeouts, pop-ups, squib grounders—he cursed them inwardly, demanding that someone save him. Now, with the bottom of the lineup coming to bat the next inning and the pitcher showing no signs of distress, the full force of his

shame settled in his stomach, tightening it like a cord. The lunatic smiles of Dr. Levine, the pitiful cheers of his parents and the visitors' few other fans—who seemed, alternately, outraged and unsurprised that this could happen—sickened him. The field, huge, engulfing, was nonetheless a cage from which he could not free himself. For the next four half innings, it represented the limits of what he could do or be.

During the top half of the inning, as his team expended their three futile at bats, Nathan noticed a small group gathering in the left field bleachers, far from the main knot of home team fans huddled gleefully behind their boys' bench. This new group seemed to have come from the hillside above, moving leisurely, with no apparent interest in the game, to the lowest level of the stands, where a guardrail stood three feet from the foul line. They were still there when Nathan's team took the field, three boys about his age lounging in the stands. Except for their street clothes, their long hair, and their cigarettes, they might have been members of the home team, lanky and dark, athletic looking behind their studied poses. Nathan's stomach churned when he saw their eyes following him as he took his position. He kept well clear of the line and tried to block them from his mind, but he couldn't help being aware of them, as of something malicious standing out from the drab scenery behind them.

He watched his team's second relief pitcher toss his last few warm-ups and trudge to the side of the mound as the catcher threw to second base. Unwillingly, Nathan saw one of the boys in the stands lean forward and loop his arms over the railing. A second before the boy spoke, Nathan felt the coming of his voice, like a pause in the heat-laden air. "Hey," the boy said. "Hey, you."

Nathan ignored him, fixing his attention on his pitcher, hoping, yet knowing it to be a foolish hope, they would take his silence for concentration.

‘‘Hey," the boy said again. "Hey," and now it was, "Hey, Jew," yet he said it just like "Hey, you," and Nathan had a moment's doubt. Then the others laughed, and he knew. "Hey, Jew," the boy repeated, "you from the Jew team?"

Desperately, Nathan focused on the mound, dropping into a fielder's crouch, his glove and throwing hand on his knees. "Fucking Jew," a voice came from the stands, a different voice this time, from one of the reclining boys. "Don't stick your ass out at me, you fucking kike."

‘‘Fucking Jew," the first voice said. "Get the fuck out of here, you kike."

‘‘We're gonna fuck you up," the third boy picked up the thin, almost inaudible taunt. "You fucking kikes, coming here, fucking Jewboy. After the game, kike, you better run."

Blindly, Nathan looked toward center field, miles away it seemed, and beseeched the dark blur of his teammate. He tried to edge away from the line, but Dr. Levine, jumping up from the bench as if he had suddenly discovered purpose in a life and death contest, violently waved him over, yelling faintly, "Play him to pull!" Nathan stood paralyzed for a moment, thought to explain, but knew he couldn't. He wondered why it was that Dr. Levine, whom it seemed to him he had never respected, should have such power over him. But he obeyed, taking a few shaky steps toward the boys who kept up their old, unfamiliar, almost wordless chant. Dr. Levine, angry it seemed, kept signaling, and Nathan felt himself swept as if by waves, bracing against each shock and surge, step by step toward the stands. He was so close now their words seemed to touch him physically, to wrap and hold him in intimate, obscene sound. His stomach clenched unbearably. Then the cocoon they were spinning was broken by the crack of a bat, and he looked to see the ball leaping joyfully toward left center field.

‘‘Better run, kike," they murmured, and for a wild moment he imagined they were his fans, exhorting him to greatness, the knifelike word a fond nickname. He spun, breaking free, it seemed, from a shell, and in the moment of freedom and the tugging of his reluctant body he

felt his stomach collapse and his bowels turn to mud. He tried to hold himself, but he was already running, and a sudden sharp, sickly smell and the warmth down his right leg brought tears to his eyes. He kept running, slowed by the unendurable weight in his underpants, and watched as the center fielder finally gathered the ball in and launched an impossible throw for the plate. His own smell nauseated him, the lump in his pants burned, and he felt, irresistibly wringing his stomach and squeezing from his ass, a trickle of moisture. The effort not to cry sent pain shooting through his middle.

He returned to his position, far from the stands, holding himself rigid and awkward, straining to keep his damp uniform from making contact with his flesh. The boys in the stands, not daring, perhaps, to raise their voices, were silent. He wanted to call time, flee the field, but then he knew he would become evident to all. He could only wait for the end of the inning and pray it would not soak through by then. But he had little hope; the innings had been getting longer as their players tired. The bathroom, a cinder block square at the end of the bleachers, would shield him but also conceal him from sight. As if to punctuate his fears, the boys in the stands stood and came lazily to the railing, pretending to look out over the field but murmuring, almost below his hearing, the endless sound of their hatred.

He watched, sickened by himself, as the inning dragged on, the home team cockily stealing bases, stretching singles to doubles, eluding rundowns. Luckily, the ball did not approach him again. He had lost track of the score, had long since stopped caring, when finally a runner was caught between third and home and this time, enjoying the play too much to take it seriously, was tagged out. As he turned toward the bathroom, trying to keep his bad side hidden, he saw the home team's normally placid coach berating the guilty runner, whether for running up the score or for carelessness he never knew.

He approached the bathroom, found the door, and entered. The small room was stale with the smell of beer and vomit. The door to the stall had been removed or ripped off. Touching his pants bottom, he found that the heavy uniform had contained most of the wetness, but the smell and the sight when he tugged his pants down were overwhelming. He staggered across the room with his pants around his knees and turned the crank on the paper towel dispenser, but it was empty. He returned to the stall and, tearing off long strips of toilet paper, began to clean himself. But then he knew he was no longer alone, and he shrank back in panic.

They laughed when they saw him, crouching over the toilet as if guarding it, and their laughs echoed in the windowless room. One of them grabbed him by the jersey and pulled him up. He reeled, constricted by his pants, his cleats ringing on the floor. When they saw how dirty he was they shoved him back, and he fell to the floor beside the toilet.

‘‘You fucking Hebe," their leader said. "I ought to fuck you up good. I ought to make you eat your own shit."

‘‘He'd probably like it," another one said, savagely

This seemed to amuse the leader, who laughed uncontrollably. Then, suddenly sobering, he grabbed Nathan's hair and forced him to look into his eyes. "You tell your fucking Jew friends if they come here again we'll kill them."

‘‘I'm not Jewish," Nathan said, feeling, as he said it, utter revulsion for his teammates.

The leader tightened his grip, forcing Nathan's head back. "Don't fuck with me, Jew," he said. Nathan held perfectly still, feeling the boy's hatred in his breath, wanting, with a dizzy confusion of mind, to plead with him, to convince him of the truth of what he had said. Then the boy released him, and the three, laughing and shoving each other, acting as if all along they had thought of this as a joke, left the room.

Nathan rose quickly and painfully and, not caring to clean himself, squirmed into his pants. He waited an intolerable minute, holding his breath to listen for their return, then ran from the room, forgetting his glove and cap. After their brief at bat, his team had taken the field again, the space where he was supposed to be a conspicuous hole. He ran from them, down the third base line, overtaking his tormentors who seemed not to notice him, then cutting through the infield in his hurry. All eyes were on him, in confusion or in fun. Dr. Levine rose from the bench as he neared his parents.

‘‘Nate!” he called. “You okay, buddy? Where’ve you been?”

He ignored the coach and threw himself at his parents. He didn’t want them, or anyone, but he felt his helplessness, alone, miles from home, with the livid bruise marking him for the world to see. He knew he would never be able to explain, would only be remembered, at first vividly and then dimly, in locker room jokes on two sides of the city, neither of them his own. A word came to him from his father’s impromptu Hebrew lessons: *azav*, forsaken. He started to cry, and his mother rose in alarm.

‘‘Nathan!” Then, seeing his need, she removed her coat and wrapped it around her son, shielding him and moving him toward the car. Behind him, his father collected the lawn chairs with a clattering noise. Nathan looked back once and saw the field frozen, uncomprehending. Only Andrew Dinewitz caught his eye and, in exaggerated pantomime, raised his thumb and forefinger to his nose. As Nathan turned away, he saw that the boys from the stands had congregated behind the pitcher. They told him the story, laughing, while he relaxed on the bench and looked up at them with a calm, cruel smile.

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