

## "Daddy, Grass, and the Afterlife" by Joey Madia

(Note: this essay won the *Very Special Arts New Jersey Wordsmith Contest* in 2003, and was read by members of the Unlimited Potential Theatre Company at the Stephen J. Capestro Theater in Edison, NJ, January 18, 2003.)

My office is a monument to Effort. Crammed and sagging shelves full of well-organized projects, books, research materials, and neatly labeled folders stand as sentinels in a Dilapidated House of Hope, where miniature statues of deities and mythic figures guard the wise words of Motivators, Philosophers, and Poets tacked to the walls, while working their mojo on the cackling hills of sterile rejection covering the carpet.

As I type, trying to "make things happen" in the 20 minutes I have before the next scheduled endeavor, I see a knobby purple ball coming toward me. Behind it is an eclectic mix of clothing consisting of a swimsuit, two sun dresses, and a cockeye denim cap with little flowers embroidered on it. The two scabbed and knobby knees beneath the ball identify its owner as Jolie Anne, my 2-year-old daughter. She wants to play.

Great.

Getting away is difficult these days. Lots of deadlines, books to get to agents and publishers (the Toothy Mouth of Rejection needs its weekly feeding), stacks of *National Geographics* to read for "research," plays for my children's theatre classes to write, and all the clerical work that comes with the usual papyrus paraphernalia involved in running a house and home-based business. There is a box full of software for project organizing sitting on my desk that has been there for two months. "Water water everywhere..."

On some days I might encourage Jolie Anne to go in her room and play, or huff-and-puff to the video shelf to pick out and put in one of her favorite tapes or employ some other diversion, but it's a beautiful day and quite frankly, her Cuteness Quotient has been amazingly high lately, so I hit the Save button and we make our way outside.

If today were the last day of my life, at least weather-wise, I wouldn't complain. The sun is behind the clouds somewhere, making its presence known in a magically subtle and yet powerful way. The wind is following suit, kissing the day with the slightest of breezes barely capable of ruffling my hippy-chic bangs. Beyond a row of newly bloomed tulips, the grass looks so fat and lush I swear I could sit here for half a day and actually see it grow.

On days like these, I find myself wishing that myths of the Afterlife were true, so I could relax a bit and concentrate on securing my place somewhere other than Here. That's the point of religion, right? To make you feel better about not accomplishing much in your life cause it Doesn't Matter Anyway.

I'll explain that to the in-laws next time they ask, "When you are gonna get *steady* work?"

Jolie Anne calls me to the "road" (her name for the network of sidewalks in the open space in front of our apartment complex), and we begin to play with that big purple ball. It's the antidote to pressure--she has no expectations at all. We

kick it, throw it, bounce it, all as we see fit, and just as I start to unwind a bit Jolie sees a pile of rocks on her way to the grumpily dribbling ball. Game's over. We're on to the next thing.

She brings me a big pile of rocks, her eyes pushed open to their considerable limit as though she has found splinters from Noah's Ark, or gems from the Grail, and we sit and examine them for a while.

Then she announces how hungry and thirsty she is.

We've been outside for about three minutes.

Trundling inside with the knobby ball and a binder full of research (I admit it--I had brought it with me, just in case she remained engaged in something for more than 30 seconds) I grab some leftover pizza and a plastic juice bottle and we head back out. I amaze myself by not looking at the clock or for the telltale red light that signals a message on our answering machine. I am In the Moment, just like the self-help books suggest.

We find a comfortable spot near the flower bed and unwrap the pizza, triggering some extended negotiations on who gets which piece and working out the details on pepperoni allotment and we begin to eat, my eyes never straying far from the open bottle of juice Jolie is straddling as she gleefully savors the thick slices of pepperoni she swindled from me. The abandonment of the trusty sippy-cup recently enacted (a move engineered by my wife while I was off teaching one night), I am feeling that familiar anticipation of disaster waiting just behind those vibrant, pink tulips.

I'm not the Relaxed Type. Strung like a tennis racket is more the analogy for me.

Lunch is progressing well, and Jolie begins one of her Verbal Essays on the State of Everything, which never fail to engage me in their complex nothingness. As the litany moves to the subject of birds, she begins to call to them:

"Come here birds. I have to see you. You come here to this road." Then, after picking some weeds that have cleverly disguised themselves as flowers, she continues with, "I have your food here to eat. You know Daddy," she says to me, assuming the tone of a tenured college professor, "flowers are just birdy food." Whatever collection of sounds, gestures, and floral enticements she has managed to produce mystically starts to work and little birds begin alighting on the branches all around us. Giggling loudly at the success of her invitation, Jolie goes running toward them, yelling over her shoulder with well-practiced confidence, "I'm going to pet them now, Daddy. Be right back."

On her way to the birds, she is waylaid by a straw-colored branch and a stubby stick, both of which she grabs, changing direction toward the house. I turn my attention to the expectant birds lining the trees and sidewalks and find myself channeling Hitchcock, turning my mood to thoughts of terror as Jolie's bare feet enter my frame of vision. She is now holding the weed-flowers, stubby stick, dried-out branch, and a small straw broom my wife has decorated with plastic flowers and displayed on the porch to brighten the days of passing neighbors. With her arms full of nature's amputated extremities, Jolie reminds me of a Wiccan readying for a Spring rite, gathering her wares in preparation of Potions.

Before I can remind her of the rule against playing with the broom (my wife decorated it the first time--I have subsequently redone it half a dozen more), Jolie starts sweeping the wood chips out of the flowerbed.

This is the instant in which Paradise is re-Lost.

Urging her to return the pile of wood chips to the garden they supposedly enhance, I watch as her foot knocks over the plastic juice bottle, turning her lunch into a pile of pepperoni (some of which used to be mine!) and soggy dough. Realizing what she has done, Jolie throws the broom to get it out of the way, spreading the decorative flowers all over the grass, spooking the birds and creating a miniature Wonkaland of vibrant plasticity. I am tempted to just leave them, but in fear of the scheduled appearance of the landlord, I begin to collect them, watching Jolie run once more toward the house. She returns an instant later with a napkin and makes an honest effort to clean up her mess. The juice, enjoying its recent liberation from its plastic prison, will play no willing role and the napkin winds up shredding on the little stones that supposedly hold the concrete sidewalk together.

Though we've been outside for all of fifteen minutes and I've run the near gamut of human emotion, I find myself draped, not in anger or frustration at the disarray of the garden area, but in a weird awe of Jolie's connection with Nature. I notice the pink of the napkin shreds complementing the tulips and the still-spreading puddle of yellow juice dancing along the concrete in a mystic reflection of the hidden sun, and I think, "She actually made it look *nicer*."

Whatever they're paying the landscaper, it's too much.

Heading back into my office after passing custody of my little Wicca to my wife, I glance around at the piles of paper and books that represent the many roles I play--some days I think about buying a 30-pack and inviting Ollie North over for a shredding party--and my eyes track, independently of my will, to a picture of Jolie taken about a year ago. She is standing near a tree, bare-armed and wild-haired beneath overalls, and her smile, even beneath the dusty glass, is palpable and calming, and none of those other roles seem to matter at all. I am Jolie's Daddy, and there is nothing more important or more indicative of my success than that.

At least until my in-laws come over again.