

Just Grass

Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a sunken meadow. Can you picture it? Go ahead, lose yourself in the wide, spacious grasslands. Feel the warm breeze whisper past you. Smell the sweet scent of those gorgeous wildflowers, showing off their eye-catching colors. I, personally, like to add mountains, humbly looming in the distance. Maybe even throw in some butterflies. Serene, isn't it? Who wouldn't want to be here? I would.

The sunken meadow I went to wasn't as enjoyable. No grasslands. No pretty wildflowers. No butterflies. No peace. Sunken Meadow State Park is, if anything, absolute *hell*. Nowhere else on Long Island will you witness the gathering of so many anxious, shaking, distressed runners. It's quite a site, really. Luckily for me, I was one of those fear-ridden teenagers who graced the Sunken Meadow 5k trail.

Did I say *graced*? My bad. I meant ran, tripped, cried, sweat. Died.

Maybe for someone who runs religiously, the privilege to live the Sunken Meadow experience is a dream come true. If you are able to conquer all the hills, turns, and mud and finish with a time only God himself could have manipulated, then you finish a New York State hero. But I wasn't a varsity standout. In that imaginary meadow exploding with blooming, beautiful wildflowers, I was just the grass.

As if the course wasn't enough, the officials who ran the meet really hated us. If anything, they should have felt sorry for us. Prayed for us. I guess having us go to the line fifteen minutes before the race started seemed like a way better idea, though. It gave us enough time to pass along our thoughts and prayers and tell our families we loved them and we would see them in a better place. Rumors accompanied our grievances, floating up and down the mass.

HAND-PICKED CLASSICS FROM THE START LINE:

"People crawl up Cardiac Hill. Last year, someone next to me was crying."

"I heard that last year, someone had a heart attack on that hill. All the other races were cancelled."

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Ironic. *That hill* is named Cardiac for a reason. It's the one thing everyone dreads most on the course. A nice, relaxing walk (or jog, if you're superhuman) up a nearly vertical low-grade mountain. Or so I'm told. But don't focus on that,— my coach insisted,— focus on the *scenery*. Because in the midst of my mid-race crisis, I was going to stop and take the time to admire that *breathtaking* blade of grass. Good one. My mind fixated more on the imminent facts that I *cannot* do this, I don't *want* to do this, and (my favorite) *I am going to die*.

The official raised his gun. *Goodbye, world*.

When the sound of the shot tore its way through the sky, runners exploded off and into the woods, their trembling souls being dragged with them. Arms and legs pushed and pumped their way through the woods. Machines worked to bring the tortured souls they carried to the sweet release of the finish. The sounds of human flight, though soft and humble, reflected intense drive and pain. They faded with the souls that fell behind. I wanted to join them. But, as if indifferent to my mind, my legs kept moving, and I continued with my tour of hell. Sweat stung my eyes. Flies and dirt made their way into my mouth and across my body. But hill after hill, turn after turn, I somehow continued on. With every stride I made, my hatred for what I was doing grew. I decided at that moment that this was the worst thing I've ever done. Of course, I was wrong. The worst was yet to come, and sure enough, there it stood. Emerging over its subjects, terrifying them. Taunting them, it pierced its victims' hearts. A feeling of willingness unknown to my soul sparked. Gagging violently, I attacked Cardiac Hill, my legs succumbing to a violent, raging fire unique only to those who dared to challenge its might. The spark was fanned to a flame. I wound my way up through those Cardiac Hill defeated. And at the top of that hill, only one thought crossed my mind:

A blade of grass never looked so beautiful.

Madison Matamzzo

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