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Fatty Batter

Michael Simkins

This is how bad it is.

By some fantastic coincidence of the natural world it's possible for anyone with a full set of teeth and a working upper palate to make the sound of a cricket ball hitting a bat. That unique sound, like the tock of a grandfather clock mixed with a large, overfed trout being released into a lazy stream from a height of about eight inches above the water on a golden, sunlit afternoon.

'The sound of summer', as it's often called.

And because it's so evocative I make it all the time. Standing at the checkout in Tesco, in rehearsals for a play, or in those few blissful moments after my wife and I have made love, and we're lying there enjoying the sense of mutual triumph against middleaged odds. Even as Julia is reaching for my hand across the sheets and framing the words to express her crowded emotions – something like, 'Jesus, I didn't think you still had it in you' – I'll drift off into some reverie, perhaps knocking up in a net on a Wednesday evening, or playing in a proper match against deadly rivals, or even the unexpected call-up for England for the crucial Ashes decider at the Oval.

I'll imagine the bowler trundling in, the sweep of his arm arcing over, that hard red ball hurtling towards me, and then my shot, perhaps a luscious cover drive or a disdainful pull. Whichever it is, as Julia's fingers are touching mine across the creased bed linen, my tongue will automatically slide to the vertical, finding the warm wet roof of the mouth, tightening like the trigger of a gun; and before I can stop myself …

And her fingers will freeze. Or the checkout girl will stop feeding the washing-up liquid past the scanner; or the director of the play will turn his head, convinced I'm tutting in derision at his musings about the importance of symbolism in Shakespeare's verse. And I have to try and explain that it wasn't criticism that just issued forth from my lips, it was an exact vocal replica of a handsome lofted drive into that canopy of trees in the distance.

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But of course they don't believe me. So I'm condemned, like some sporting Tourette's sufferer, to make these curious clucking sounds throughout the day with the constant gnawing knowledge that sooner or later I'm going to startle or upset those around me. Believe me, it's a living hell.

Unless, of course, the ball clears the pavilion and sets a new record for the longest hit ever made at the Oval, beating Dickie Dodds's gigantic sixer in the Whitsun bank holiday fixture there in 1956 …

FIRST INNINGS

One Short

There I am.

Down there. The one standing at the far end of the playground between the two duffel bags acting as goalposts.

No, not him, that's my opposite number, Anthony Hall. Try the other end, by the railings. The one with the plastered-down hair and the scarlet cheeks. The one with his pully tucked into the top of his shorts. The one with the chafe marks on the inside of his thighs, with kneecaps the colour of self-raising flour.

The one who's carefully unwrapping the chocolate bar.

I've been frozen in that pose for some while. The game hasn't been up my end for a bit so there's a chance to concentrate on the thing I'm really interested in. Which isn't standing in goal in a rain-soaked playground during a game of sock football, waiting for the next opposition attack. Rather the unfurling of this new addition to the shelves of my dad's sweetshop: Cadbury's Walnut Crinkle.

Walnut Crinkle. Until now I'd thought it was only something you caught at the swimming baths. But Dad has been persuaded to take two dozen of them this morning by the Cadbury's rep on a special trial offer, so I've got a couple on me. One for now and one for later.

This is the reason – one of the reasons – why Gordon Banks keeps goal for England whereas I only keep goal in the lower playground of Middle Street Primary School in Brighton. The other reason is that with Eusébio bearing down on him in a World Cup semi-final, Gordon Banks would keep his eye on the ball, whereas I would get whacked in the forehead because I'd be too busy gazing longingly at the packet of chocolate digestives underneath the subs bench. Were I to look up now I'd see our playground's own version of Eusébio already barely twentyfive feet away in the shape of ten-year-old Michael Lowe. But of course I'm not looking up. I never do.

Michael Lowe is our star player. His father is PE teacher at the technical college and spends his weekends teaching his son to sail their mirror dinghy on the river Adur. Michael Lowe can swim, life-save, and trains each Saturday morning with Sussex

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under-twelves cross-country squad. He can take an impromptu ball made up of socks and rubber bands bandaged in yards of Sellotape and dribble it effortlessly between forests of thundering juvenile feet, before darting clear of the scrum and racing like a greyhound to the far end of the playground, where all that stands between him and yet another goal is me. The one who's just about to take a big, deep bite out of a chocolate bar on which Cadbury's are pinning their hopes for increased market share in the confectionery and mixed boilings market for 1966, the one whose only claim to sporting excellence is the ability to down a family-size bottle of R Whites Cream Soda in under a minute.

In between us is everyone else. People whose aspirations are to be as similar as possible to Michael Lowe and as different as possible from Michael Simkins: the Nigels, the Stevens and Barrys, the ones with a modicum of athletic prowess, the ones with a distinguishable waistline, the ones who can get on a speak-your-weight machine without it requesting only one at a time please …

I'm joking. Of course I am. I wish I weren't. They've just installed one on the pavement outside the Home & Colonial in Gardner Street and it didn't say, 'One at a time please,' it said, 'Your current weight is eleven stone three pounds,' which, when you're ten years old, is a lot worse, particularly when amplified in a rich BBC accent to a gaggle of sniggering teenagers.

All those other Michael Lowe wannabes trying to back-heel the sock ball out from the foetid drain in which it has temporarily lodged think by touching the hem of his shorts they can become like him. That's why Michael Lowe has all the friends he can handle whereas I've only got the kid in the far corner, the other goalie, Anthony Hall. Although we're nominally on opposite teams, he and I are in fact on the same side. In reality it's the two of us versus the other forty-two players thrashing and charging about in the middle of the playground.

My teeth fasten on the thick, thick outer shell of the bar. With any new taste sensation this is always the best moment: a second to savour the unique feeling of enamel pressing into milk chocolate, and then the bite, in this case severing the walnut from the crinkle in one easy motion. This is the best moment, the second before the act, the delicious half-second before—

A wet sock encased in Sellotape, which has only recently been retrieved from a drain, hits me between the eyes at 30mph.

The bar is dashed from my lips by the force of the blow and drops into a puddle. Meanwhile the compressed sock has ricocheted off my forehead back into the path of the still-advancing Michael Lowe who retrieves it, nutmegs his opponent, jinks inside two other defenders and cannons it past me into the railings, narrowly missing my left eye in the process.

'You spaz!' somebody shouts. 'Why didn't you kick it?'

One of my team-mates retrieves the sock and trots back to the centre circle. 'Pillock,' he says as he passes. I can already feel an ugly welt starting to erupt above my nose.

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The taste sensation is now a dog-turd smear in the goalmouth. Michael Lowe's plimsoll marks are on it. Welcome to my world.

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