



Buzz (left) and Zach Bissinger at home.
Photo by Chris Crisman C'03



*On the road with Zach and Buzz,
Peggy Lee on the car stereo,
and the meaning of life.*

It's not easy to get the better of Buzz Bissinger C'76, the famously combative writer for *Vanity Fair* and *The Daily Beast* and author of *Friday Night Lights*, *A Prayer for the City* [*"Officer Down,"* Feb 1998], and other books. Just ask anyone who's gone up against him on a debate panel or been on the receiving end of his Twitter feed. But on the evidence of his new memoir, *Father's Day*, one person who can is his son, Zachary. In his professional life Bissinger exudes a swaggering confidence, but his relationship with Zach involves much self-questioning and doubt. He also can't find his way out of a parking lot without his son's help.

Zach is a savant. He can recall just about any person or fact that he's ever been exposed to, is a master map-reader with an unerring memory for directions, and effortlessly calculates things like the day of the week for any given date. In addition, he is widely beloved for his forthright truthfulness and affable disposition (in marked contrast to his tightly strung father, aka "The Incredible Sulk"). But these gifts have come at a terrible cost. Born 13-and-a-half weeks prematurely weighing only one pound, 11 ounces, and deprived of oxygen for three minutes at birth, Zach suffered trace brain damage. As a result, "his comprehension skills at the age of 24 are roughly those of an eight- or nine-year old" and his IQ, "which has been measured far too many times, is about 70, with verbal scores in the normal range of 90, but with performance skills of about 50," Bissinger writes. "I love my son deeply, but I do not feel I know him nor do I think I ever will."

Still, he was determined to try.

AN EXCERPT FROM *FATHER'S DAY* | BY BUZZ BISSINGER

IS THAT
ALL THERE IS?

Father's Day—which is subtitled *A Journey into the Mind and Heart of My Extraordinary Son*—describes, with dark humor and self-lacerating honesty, Bissinger's efforts to examine his own feelings of shame and guilt about Zach and to arrive at an understanding and acceptance of his son for who he is. The means to that end is a 10-day road trip the two of them took in 2007, beginning in Philadelphia and "stopping at all the places we've lived or know well—Chicago; Milwaukee; Odessa, Texas; Los Angeles," an itinerary chosen in deference to Zach's love of familiarity, but comprising, "by any ordinary standard, the worst cross country route ever contemplated."

Along the way, Bissinger writes about Zach's twin brother Gerry GEd'o8, born a crucial three minutes earlier, who grew up to become a teacher, and his failed marriage to the boys' mother, Debra; recalls his own childhood and the deaths of his parents; and revisits some of his professional triumphs, frustrations, and frustrations over triumphs (*Of the two million-selling Friday Night Lights*, published in 1990 and later the basis for a film and TV series: "It was a wonderful thing to be known for something that had lasted so long. It was a terrible thing to be known for something that had happened so long ago").

But the heart of the book is Bissinger's quest to have a "conversation with my son. A conversation making him aware of his own reality," he writes. "I had never told him what had happened when he was born. I never mentioned the term brain damage. I never mentioned the reason he went to special schools. Did he know that he would never marry or have a family of his own? Did he know what sex was? Did he know who I really was ..."

In the following excerpt, Bissinger comes to learn, with both pride and sadness, something of what Zach understands about his fate—and about the young man's courage in facing it.

We wake up. We dress. We eat the free continental breakfast. Zach finds a computer in the lobby and checks his email. His roster of contacts is impressive and ever-expanding. It is one of the reasons he compulsively collects business cards, to find email addresses. If that doesn't work, he takes to the Internet with relentlessness. He has taught himself to search exhaustively, part of his intrinsic process, as Oliver Sacks has said, to make himself whole and connected to the universe of people he likes. Because of his prodigious memory he often knows more about their lives than they do themselves. Waiting for the train one day, Zach saw a reporter for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* he had befriended. He asked him why he was there: it was his day off. Zach was right. The reporter went home.

Some email exchanges continue for months or longer, until Zach cuts them off abruptly and without warning. A few gently ask if I can find out what happened, maybe get them reinstated. I feel like the father of the maître d' at a hot new restaurant, whom friends ask for reservations because of my perceived pull. I have none.

He doesn't even let me read what he writes. I've only seen a small sampling that a few of his correspondents occasionally share with me. He writes in caps and always asks questions. Punctuation is optional.

DEAR ART WHEN CAN WE GO FLYING IN YOUR PLANE AGAIN HAVE YOU EVER BEEN UP TO NANTUCKET MEMORIAL AIRPORT OR TO THE NEW BEDFORD MASS AIRPORT OR TO THE HYANNIS AIRPORT

DEAR STEVE WHAT COLOR SHIRT PANTS SHOES TIE ARE YOU WEARING TODAY AND IM GOOD BY THE WAY AND WHEN ARE YOU TRAVELING NEXT FOR WORK AND WHO HAVE YOU TALKED TO FROM THE INQUIRER THESE DAYS AND DO YOU EVER TALK TO VERNON LOEB OR BILL MARIMOW OR MIKE LEARY OR PAUL MOORE OR TO JONATHAN NEUMANN

DEAR KEVIN HAPPY HAPPY BIRTHDAY AND BEST WISHES LOVE ZACH WHAT DID YOU GET FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY DINNER TONIGHT

I try to take a peek at his current roster. He immediately shuts down the computer.

—How come you never let me look at your emails?

—I don't know because I don't.

—You like to keep them private?

—Yeah.

—They should be private. You're an adult now.

—Yeah.

—Are you happy?

—Yeah.

—Are you sad?

—I'm good.

—Did you have any dreams last night?

—No.

—Do you ever dream?

—No.

—Are you having a good time?

—Pretty good.

We find the minivan in the parking lot and climb inside. I still feel slightly blurry from driving the night before but I am determined to be upbeat.

—Ready for takeoff, captain.

—Yeah where are we going?

—*Chicago, Chicago, a helluva town, a helluva town.*

I repeat the chorus. I repeat it again, hoping in vain that Zach will sing along with me, just as I am hoping in vain that I will rejuvenate. I can't get out of the parking lot. I take lefts when I should be taking rights. Arrows only take me in circles. We have not driven one-one hundredth of a mile yet today.

—WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS? HOW THE FUCK DO YOU GET OUT OF HERE?

—There's an entrance over here yeah yeah here's the entrance.

Zach guides me like a good Samaritan helping a blind man cross the street.

—Sorry Zach. I shouldn't have gotten mad like that.

—Yeah.

—I love you Zach.

—I did good didn't I Dad I helped you get out because the parking lot was you know you know dad it was kind of hard to get out of.

—That's because your father's a moron.

—Yeah.

Up ahead a sign proclaims, WELCOME TO OHIO! Here is an opportunity to make amends. I will yell the word *Ohio* with the ending slightly varied so Zach can correct me. We started playing this game 16 years ago when he was eight. He always finds it an invigorating dose of concreteness and reacts with uproarious laughter. His giggles are like hiccups at first, intermittent and inconsistent, then they start peeling off in rolls if I seize on a word that particularly strikes him. I have tired of this, but I feel repentance is necessary for the parking lot crackup. I must do a better job of controlling emotions.

I won't.

Let the games begin:

—WELCOME TO OHIEE!

He gleefully responds.

—WELCOME TO OHIO!

Now it's war.

—OHIEE!

—OHIO!

—OHIEE!

—OHIO!

—That's enough!

Zach's voice goes soft. But he persists.

—It's Ohio. Not Ohiee.

—I know, Zach.

He persists.

—It's Ohio. Not Ohiee.

—What did I just say? That's enough!

His laughter stops. I go quiet with my own duplicity. I am the one who always starts the game and then turns it off because I can no longer stand it because of the feeling of perpetual stasis. Then the guilt.

—You're right. It is Ohio.

—Ohio.

—Yes Zach, Ohio.

The fun has been drained out of the minivan. About 75 miles outside of Cleveland, Zach pulls out the Rand McNally road atlas and turns to page 91. He traces the blue line of the Ohio Turnpike in the northern tier of the state with his forefinger. The finger moves past the old iron and coal port of Ashtabula, and the Geneva-on-the-Lake amusement park with bumper boats and batting cages, and Conneaut with the four covered bridges that are always part of the annual County Covered Bridge Festival each fall. He notes that we are closer to Akron than we are to Cleveland. The car floods with nothingness.

I slip a disc into the CD player: Peggy Lee's "Is That All There Is?" She sings in a melancholic, tuneless voice, the music simple except for some odd circus-like refrain in the middle with noxious calliopes. It is the kind of song that the Sex Pistols would have covered with more cheer. Or Frank Sinatra in some detached croon as destructive as his rendition of "Macarthur Park." Here comes the famous refrain.

Is that all there is/ If that's all there is my friends ...

—What does it mean to you Zach?

—What?

—When she says that's all there is my friend.

I rarely ask Zach to give his interpretation of something. It makes him nervous. His hard drive stores information only. But I vowed on this trip to probe Zach's mind, find what is there, what is not there, and what never can be. He considers the question. He starts to answer. He stops. He answers.

—That's life I guess.

For the first time I wonder if he understands on some level what he and I have been through to get here. His birth and near death, my two divorces and broken engagement. All our moving around. An ongoing earthquake of adjustment for somebody who craves stability and hates change.

That's life I guess.

I guess it is. I guess it was.

There is no way for a couple married a little over two years to have twins born 13 and a half weeks prematurely, each weighing less than two pounds, and not crumble. All marriages go through a tectonic shift when a child is born. But there generally isn't constant fear if it is a term pregnancy. There isn't the reality that at any second your baby can die, those noble breaths not enough to outpace death. No matter how good the outcome, you can never ever get over what has happened. You may try to block it out as I have tried to do for much of my life. But you can't. You will still have flashbacks. You will still hear the alarms of the monitors. You will never forget holding your child with what seemed like a thousand different wires attached to him to record all the different vital signs: move an inch too far and all the connectors dislodged and the nurses came running. You will never forget the look on your child's face, beseeching you to *please, please get me the hell out of here* or at the very least to *please, please just leave me alone*. You will remember the helplessness, which was even worse than the fear, because you could do nothing but watch and wait.

It felt after several months as if Zach would never get out of the neonatal intensive care unit. He would gain momentum. A steady breathing rate. Then his chest started heaving up and down, so frantically grasping for breath you could see the exhaustion on his face, a natural act we so take for granted, breathing, not natural at all in his case, only depleting him. He would have to re-intubated.

Neonatologists were vigilant. The nurses were even better, as much psychologists as highly skilled technicians. They exuded optimism. They never showed fear. They became friends you could laugh with and cry with. They offered eternal hope whether they believed it or not. But the isolettes still reminded me of being in the hole of solitary confinement but without any infraction of the rules. One day a baby would be there. The next day he or she would be gone without a word, because there was no need for words; everybody knew what happened. The isolette, padded with a new white blanket, awaited its next inmate. The parents dressed in the blue medical gowns, who had kept silent vigil hour after hour, vanished along with their infants.

Debra and I were in the shower one night when the song “Every Breath you Take” started playing on the radio. The daily ritual of seeing Zach in the hospital, watching for hours as he struggled to take his own breaths, had beaten us down despite our outward stoicism. Debra sobbed in my arms. It was one of the most intimate moments of our short marriage. Yet at that moment I felt a shift. It was ever so subtle, like the touch of a spare summer breeze. Her arms around me loosened slightly; my arms around her felt out of place, suddenly as useless as flippers. The hot, soothing water was the only mercy I felt. It was only that tiny release of pressure from around my waist, but she was beginning to let go. I believe now she was suggesting that the negative narcissism and the constant fear of failure, the first cousins of the unquenchable neediness that were embedded within me, could no longer be given out in limitless supply.

We have a son who may live or die. We have another son who may have problems as well despite his progress. I don't have time anymore to reassure you about your career. I don't care about your career. I don't have time to reassure you about anything.

I loved every inch of my boys. I worried 24 hours a day about them. I cried when I saw Zach in the hospital with those milky brown eyes struggling to stay open, the silent message of *I'm fighting as hard as I can*.

But I lived inside my head and I could not get outside. Work and the pursuit of success formed my only true identity. I was terrified of what I would be without it. Now I was scared about everything—my career, my children, my notion of fatherhood that had been obliterated. I had always been scared. My self-confidence was a come-on. I hid my insecurity and fear behind a barrage of angry outbursts at editors and friends and wives and waiters. I was tender and kind on many occasions, but then darkness prevailed. Success had been the only constant in my life. It was an addiction. My drug. Until like all drugs it wore off suddenly, and you needed some more.

The birth of the twins only multiplied my sense of inadequacy and yearning for success. We knew they would be premature, but still I fantasized that they would be buoyant, healthy babies handed over to mom and dad in soft blue blankets. I wanted congratulations instead of condolences. I wanted the joy of new life, not the threat of sudden death. This was a disaster. This was complete fucking failure. It could have happened for only one reason. I deserved it. Without ever intending it, I lived to destroy. My pessimism had become lethal. In the heat of that shower I knew without ever knowing it that my wife and I would never last.

I guess that's life.

We leave Ohio and enter Indiana, making us at a minimum the one hundred millionth traveler to not notice any difference between the two. Zach and I pull into a rest stop off the Indiana toll road. Cars search for empty parking spots with territorial disease. A brown Soviet-style building sells potato chips and Life Savers and warm bottles of Diet Coke and compressed turkey and cheese white bread sandwiches. The bathroom is overlit. Travelers recede in slow motion, then disappear. There is only Zach and I.

—Did the divorce make you sad, Zach?

—A little yeah.

—Was it hard going back and forth?

—A little hard yeah.

—Was it hard not being with both parents?

—A little hard yeah.

—It makes me sad. I'm sorry I did it. I'm sorry I did that to you. I cried a lot about it. Do you forgive me?

—Yeah.

—I felt very guilty. So did your mom.

—Yeah.

—You know why I think we got divorced?

—No.

—Because you guys were so sick.

—Yeah.

—The marriage changed. There was a lot of tension. You came home on oxygen. You were really sick and it was so hard. You should have died, Zach. Do you know that?

—I didn't.

I pause here. It feels like the longest pause of my life. Should I go further?

—Do you know what brain damage is?

—No.

—What do you think it is?

—When your brain isn't right?

—Do you know your brain is not a little right?

—Yeah.

—How do you know that?

—I just know from my brain.

—Does it make you sad?

—Yeah a little.

—How does it make you sad?

—Because I'm not sure how.

—Is it because of certain things you can't do?

—Yeah.

—Like what?

—Not go to school like Gerry I can't do.

It was the continued vow I made before the trip, to go with my son to emotional crevices we had never gone to before. I can tell when Zach's answers are short and truncated because he does not understand. But I can also tell when Zach's answers are short and truncated because he does understand, at least some portion, and is feeling pain.

I was not prepared for him to say that he knew his brain was not right. I was not prepared at all. It was the risk I took by asking. And yet I feel gratified. He does not always float in some ether of happy ignorance. He is aware of himself. But to have a child, your child, any child, say *my brain isn't right* is still unimaginable. I have lived with that knowledge since he was born. But how does he live with it? The words repeat and repeat in my head. *My brain isn't right*. I can't get away from them and neither can Zach. He knows his life will lack so much. But he will not succumb to self-pity. He acts the way he usually does in a situation like this: he enters the rest stop to get some Combos and maybe a Kit Kat that he can eat without me knowing and ferret out as many maps and brochures of Indiana as he can find. ♦

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