I feel the need to start this out like Chevy Chase on *Saturday Night Live*:

I'm at spring training and you're not.

I always promised myself I wouldn't be that guy. LIke when you're a freshman and you're treated like crap by the seniors. As you spend second period digging chunks of Slushee out of your ear, you swear you won't be like that when you're a senior, that you'll be gracious and friendly and helpful because you will remember what it's like to be on the small man on the totem pole.

Then you get to 12th grade and think, "To hell with it. I deserve this." And thus commence the wedgies.

So in that spirit: nyah-nyah.

But I'm not alone in my shallowness. Before the Indians' Cactus League opener on a Saturday afternoon that could have been framed and hung in the National Gallery of Art, the jovial PA announcer at Goodyear Ballpark read the Cleveland weather forecast. As he did - "38 degrees and scattered snow showers" - giggles tittered through the crowd as if somebody's underpants were showing.

I'd always heard it was a completely different environment at spring training, a more laid-back, relaxed atmosphere. And it certainly was. Everybody's just happy to be there and anybody who says anything negative gets beat to death with tubes of sunscreen.

Goodyear Ballpark looks and feels like a folksy, minor-league stadium straight out of a Disney cartoon. The concession stands are manned by the friendliest bunch of octogenarians since *Co coon*
. Nobody cares who wins or loses. Half the players aren't wearing pants. And while a few didn't even have their names stitched on the back of their jerseys, you felt pretty sure everybody on the field was who they said they were, not actually Roberto Hernandez.

The ratio of cute girls to old people was surprisingly high and the whole thing was like a groovy Doobie Brothers song. There was a marching band to give it that high school football feel and a hairy-legged dude in a skirt playing the bagpipes to provide simulated culture like EPCOT. At one point I turned around and SportsTime Ohio ambassador Bruce Drennan was sitting in the seats right behind me, just hanging out in a golf shirt and shorts and taking it all in like every other fan.

As for the players, the starters have two primary missions in spring training: sign autographs and not get hurt. Thus, with the stakes lowered and the pressure off, their interactions with the fans become like opposite day in Bizarro World. For instance, I saw Justin Masterson genuinely talk to a fan for 15 minutes. Finally, the guy made up an excuse about needing a chili dog just to get away, obviously shaken by a professional athlete treating him like a fellow human being.

Aside from the aberrations of Chris Perez's rage cracking his ribs in his first bullpen session and Grady Sizemore's back exploding like a piano dropped from a balcony, the first-stringers go balls-out making sure they don't injure themselves. You see fielders' indifference that makes Roger Dorn look like Brooks Robinson.

Best of all, when the regular starters are pulled after a couple innings, they just leave. Bail. Literally pick up their shit, walk across the field, and jump on a shuttle bus back to the training facility, leaving the game in the hands of a bunch of guys even Mark Shapiro has never heard of.

Yet there were also little things reminding you that this was indeed big-league baseball. You had to pay to park - $5 in an abandoned quarry across the street or $10 for a special spot in the Bonneville Salt Flats. Everybody in the crowd keeps one eye on their cell phones. Slider and Cincinnati's creepy Mr. Red mascot doe-c-doe to Lady Gaga atop the dugout, while a disturbing, dildo-shaped mascot for the ballpark itself leers around the concourse.

But for all the familiarity, the new environment still takes some getting used to. At first, the visiting midwesterners bark and throw rocks at that unfamiliar round thing in the sky that somehow provides heat and light to everything below. Accordingly, our porcelain, Ohio winter-toned skin sizzled like wood-fire grilled ribeye and soon our legs looked like buffalo wings wearing tennis shoes.

But who cares? It's the first weekend in March and we're sitting in the sun watching baseball. Sure beats sitting on the couch watching the Cavs try to not make the playoffs.

Put simply, this is one of the few instances of life that turns out just as good as advertised. It's a veritable baseball garden of Eden, where even the ugly is beautiful.

Before you can roll your eyes at Matt LaPorta unsuccessfully trying to check his swing, you look up and see this cavalcade of natural wonders all in the same sightline: mountains, palm trees, and a pure, robin's-eggshell sky that makes you forget what clouds look like.

You can't help but think back to that time you sat in your grandparents' basement as six inches of snow piled up outside while listening to Herb Score broadcast an Indians' exhibition game on the radio and wondered, 'Do we live in a world where baseball is possible right now?

I'd always envisioned spring training as an oasis of reality - a mythical, unreal paradise that's difficult to imagine existing in the same dimension in which we look out our windows to see freezing rain caking on yellow grass.

Turns out, I was right. There is such a place.

And I don't want to come home.

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