



FOOTBALL

DON
SKILES

ISBN: 978-1-938349-20-1
eISBN: 978-1-938349-21-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014908010

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First Pelekinesis Printing August 2014



www.pelekinesis.com

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By early August he was lithe and trim and had even managed to gain some hard-earned pounds in the endless days since school had finished, back on Memorial Day, which now seemed long ago. It would probably not be enough, though. When he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror he still saw a smallish boy, with some, but not enough real muscle bulked on his shoulders and arms and chest. The work-outs had helped, it was true; he no longer looked “skinny as a rail”, as the phrase had it. His neck was bad, though; it looked like the fragile stalk of a long flower. His legs were certainly better than they had been back in early June. He had tried hard to build them up, especially the calf muscles. On real football players these bulged like biceps, heavy-veined, right below the cuff of the padded playing trousers. His were still too much like bony shanks - “chicken legs.” They looked like they would snap easily.

What might save him would be speed. That, and agility. He was smart and felt he could easily learn the playbook given to players to study at night during the two-week Training Camp coming up in the last two weeks of August. But in the pit of his stomach he felt a churning

uneasiness, fear. You could get hurt playing football, hurt badly - a broken arm or leg, or a head or neck injury, although the latter were rare.

His mother was puzzled by his set intention to try out for the team. She queried him increasingly on it as the day got nearer for reporting for the physical examination that preceded the two-week camp.

“Are you still thinking about trying out for football?” she had asked that morning, putting a bowl of cereal with freshly cut peaches in front of him.

“Sure,” he said, nodding. “Couple a weeks, I’ll be out there.” He felt his stomach instantly knot up at the thought of it, and dug fiercely into his cereal.

“Larry... You know... you don’t have to do it. You know that, don’t you?” She eyed him closely.

It always surprised him how much his mother knew, understood. In this matter of going out for football, although she knew very little about the actual game itself, what she did know was that it was not simply about playing the game, or even making the team. It was somehow connected to proving that you were really a man, a guy, one of the real boys.

“I have to do it, Mom. You know what I mean.” He spooned up the last of the fresh cut peaches, sweet and yet tart, and pushed back from the table.

She shook her head. “Just be careful. You mind what I say. You’re a small boy. I wonder about those coaches even letting you boys try for the team at your size.”

He grinned, and mimicked hauling in a pass, giving the stiff arm to a would-be snarling tackler at the same time. He had seen varsity players photographed in this pose, in the newspaper and in the school yearbook.

“We’re small, but mighty. And fast. Fast!”

He had a set routine after finishing breakfast that was in a way his own training camp regime. After he left the old, rambling three-story red-shingled house, he walked over – it wasn’t far – to the big green field where the sprinklers had been turned off, even though it was only 8:30. The sun was already a hot, heavy presence. It would be one of the “Dog Days” of August in Pennsylvania, when the humidity hung heavy in every particle of air but it stubbornly refused to rain. Sweat was already running down the middle of his back as he began his routine, sprinting up and down on the sideline of the big field, doing forty-yard sprints to improve his speed and breathing.

He did not go onto the field itself. It seemed to him some sort of sacred space, filled with an intensity and special light even when it was empty, and no one was there, as it was usually early in the day. Secretly, he liked it best when it was like this, with the wet grass sparkling in the morning sun.

Soon in the autumn months just ahead, the big field would be scarred – torn with the marks of the warfare, the battles, that would take place there every Friday evening. Large hunks of turf would be torn out, leaving muddy swathes that got larger, deeper, despite the efforts of the groundsmen; these parts would increase as the season went

on, marking those areas of the field where the ball was most often in play. The end zones would remain almost pristine, greenly beckoning to the players like the oasis the parched cowboys staggered towards in the movies.

Most prominent, though, were the countless round holes that would appear in the field, the cleat marks from the shoes of the players. When he had been a small boy, he and other boys had combed the field after the practices to find these cleats, which had come free of the ankle-high black leather football shoes - they were hard, rounded pieces of rubber about an inch or so in length. There was something thrilling about finding the cleats, although they had no practical value. He kept an arrangement of them on his desk, like jewels.

He stood at the one end of the field and looked down it. One hundred yards. It was a distance he had run so often, trying to do it as fast as he could and marveling in his mind at the recorded fact that there were human beings who could run that distance in ten seconds. That meant they were covering ten yards in a second. He could not fathom such speed. He had asked his friend, Frankie Malone, about it.

“I wonder how it feels...”

“What? Feels what?” Frankie was walking with him after school, in the aimless scuffling meandering that often occurred after school. They had no money to go to Peter’s, the restaurant where the school kids congregated after school, drinking Cokes and phosphates and some,

who had money, eating the large cheeseburgers, which made his mouth water; he tried not to think of them.

“Running a hundred yards in ten seconds.”

“Running a hundred years in ten seconds!” Frankie often quickly altered something he would say, so that it came out bizarre, fantastic, better. It was a trait he had, and yet he did poorly in Miss Evens’ English class, staring idly out the tall classroom windows most of the time, to her consternation and anger. Now he shook his head violently.

“Fast! That’s what it feels like. Faster ’n you or me’ll ever know. I can tell you one thing, Larry, for sure. Frank K. Malone Jr, yours truly, will never be able to have that experience, because there is no way in hell that I could run that fast. Or even want to.” He nodded vigorously.

“It must be something...”

Larry had never asked anybody to time him because it seemed vain. His mother was against vanity and he felt he was also. It was important not to be vain, although he could not say for certain why. Some people, it seemed, expected you to be vain, and even argued that to not be vain was vainer. It was complicated.

The markings on the field seemed to him almost magical, especially the larger stripes marking the goal line. To cross that was what the whole game was about - making the touchdown. He often ran the hundred yards between the large thick white stripes marking the ten-yard end zones doing a sort of interior timing. Was he even near the magic ten second figure? Of course, he could not be. If

you could run that fast, it would be noticed. Any athletic ability of that magnitude would come out. Such abilities were much more noticed, looked for, than scholastic abilities, for example, although everybody always advised to study hard. There were always smart kids, but there were few who could run really fast. Or catch forty-yard passes. One of the coaches had said that - Mr. Barnes. He had overheard him in the hall outside the coaches' office.

When Larry ran these hundreds, he began to realize some of the true difficulties of running. It was easy, relatively, to burn the first thirty yards, but very soon after that you began to feel heaviness in your body; not just in your legs, but everywhere, a pulling, retarding, slowing down sensation; it resembled the feeling of trying to run in the swimming pool, which they often did in the summer up at the park, since it was said to be good for your leg muscles. At the same time, he had the sensation that he could not really control his legs, that they were without any power or even substance, and yet their jarring contact with the ground made him feel how easy it would be to lose balance, to trip, to sprawl and roll in a terrible fall.

At sixty or seventy yards, all these sensations intensified, especially that of running in a heavy element, like water, rather than air. That was the only way he could fairly characterize how it felt. You began to slow down, although now you wanted to run harder. But you simply could not do it, and the last twenty yards became a great distance, even a taxation.

Afterwards, as he would stand with his head down, chest heaving, gasping in the end zone, or trotting very slowly around the field, it was those last twenty yards he thought about. That was the area where the runners who recorded those incredible times increased their speed, their power, their momentum.

When he talked to Frankie about it, he had a phrase for it.

“You know those jet fighters, those Air Force planes? They got this thing, an afterburner, and they throw that on, and pow! Shit! Straight up! I saw one do that, over in Ohio? At the Dayton Air Show? Sounds like an explosion. There’s a big flame spurt, and that plane is just gone... That’s what those runners got - an afterburner, in their legs. They kick that in, in that last twenty, thirty yards...”

But as Frankie himself pointed out, playing football rarely involved running a hundred yards in ten seconds or even fifteen, for that matter. How long was the longest run he had ever actually seen in a game? About eighty yards. It had been in a late season game the previous year, a simple running play, an off-tackle slant, and suddenly the halfback carrying the ball had popped into the defensive secondary as if he had been shot out with an afterburner. And then he kept going, straight as an arrow, down the middle of the soggy field with a couple of the defensive backs gaining on him. But he had had something extra, something left, and angling over towards the sideline at about the thirty he had made it into the very corner of the end zone standing up, with the last defender taking a

sliding, grasping, desperate last grab at his heels at about the five yard line, but not even touching him. Touchdown!

The crowd of some ten or twelve thousand erupted in a prolonged, wave-like roaring. High school football was a big deal in Western Pennsylvania, a very big deal, and the team, the players, were very good. Everyone said so, it was regularly noted by sports writers in the newspapers, even in the big Pittsburgh dailies - what players made the all-league team, where they were headed for their collegiate careers, their statistics. There had even been the case of a player, some years ago, drafted directly out of a local high school into the pros - and he had made the team, played several seasons. A fullback, a big kid who already weighed 230 pounds, nineteen years old as a senior. There had been some argument about whether he should be allowed to play.

He knew that he, Larry Simmons, was too small to be an effective running back, though, even if he were to somehow magically gain even more weight, muscle. If there was any chance at all for him to make such a run, it would no doubt be as a receiver, an end. But he was not tall, and - again - he was not large enough to be a good blocker, something ends had to be, in addition to their pass-catching role.

What position, then, could he play? That was the thought that had occupied him all summer, as he trotted around the small, quiet town in the humid heat, or swam in the placid Allegheny River wondering if it was true that he would come down with an earache, or something

worse, from the pollution said to be in the river. In the early afternoons when the sun was high in the sky and he lay on a towel in the backyard listening to the Top 40, trying to get a deep, dark tan that would look good when he went back to school in September, he would hear the band practicing over at the field, already getting ready for the season.

In the worst heat, he lay in a dull, sweating stupor in his bedroom on the top floor of the old, crumbling run-down house he and his mother and older brother lived in, in the Lower End of town. A room where, at night, during the fall, he would see the great blaze of the lights from the football field as another Friday night game was preparing to get under way. That went as far back as he could remember, that blaze of lights in the chilly autumn night; that, and the sound of the crowd. Over twice the population of the entire town of Ralston - 5,000 - came to every game. It was the biggest thing in town, no doubt about it. You had to play.

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He had been daydreaming so much in Problems of Democracy – for that matter, in many of his classes – he could not recall much of Mr. Ferris’s discussion. He went to his wall locker in a sort of daze often. What was happening to him? Maybe the football practices were tiring him more than he realized. How could he daydream so intensely, though? Was it normal?

“Smoke a fat one!” cawed a boy named Joe Labrador, banging his wall locker shut loudly. Sometimes kids called out, “Smoke a White Owl!” It was the saying of the year, probably. There was a new one every year, and it got old rapidly so that nobody used it the following year, except a lower grader, trying to be a big deal. That was always humorous. Shoes were the same way. Since he had been in junior high school, there had been a different shoe every year. When he was in the seventh grade, it had been a spade-toed shoe, and this had to be in a color called “oxblood.” When he was in the eighth grade, engineer boots had been in, worn with tight Levis, with the legs rolled up to show the seam, fitted over the boots. As a freshman, but only at Ralston it seemed, white bucks came in, especially for juniors and even more so for

seniors. These could not be white, though; no, they had to be a dirty white, scuffed, used, stained with grass stains. These were a big shoe in colleges - they were expensive, and he had not owned a pair. This year, the shoe was the blue suede shoe, after the song.

Joe Labrador was getting a lecture - a dressing down - from Mr. Sweeney, the mad science teacher who the kids all called (behind his back) "Dr. Sweeney" or "Frankenstein." Mr. Sweeney always wore the same suit - for most of the year, in fact - until it looked like he had slept in it and everything else in between. Stains of his lunches dotted it, along with small holes - burns from chemicals and acids in the laboratory room. Labrador had been caught by him trying to feel up Norma Sterns, a girl who had very large breasts for her age, as she reached up to take books out of her locker shelf. Norma had slapped and kicked Labrador while he laughed, holding his hands up to his face; the fracas had brought Mr. Sweeney out of his lab, where he reigned.

With a red, chapped face and equally rough-looking red hands, Norma Sterns was a plain-looking girl from a large farm on the Kelsey Pike. No boy would have paid any attention to her, but Norma had the misfortune to have "developed" early. The girls' current dressing trend of close-fitting sweaters accentuated her large breasts; it was hard not to stare, wondering what they looked like unconfined. Norma's heavy breasts stretched out her sweaters so tautly you were drawn almost magnetically to try and put your hands on her. Norma was alternatively embarrassed, walking slightly hunched over, or with her books held in

front of her, or she would throw her head back, square up her strong shoulders, and in this mode, defiantly push her breasts forward, like cannons. The sight of Norma coming down a hallway like this was remarkable. Even other girls looked. Boys grinned, nudging each other; some made cupping motions with their hands at their own chests, pursing their lips. Joe Labrador would clutch himself, and stop.

“Hey, Norma! Ooeee! You gotta real set there. How about a squeeze? Gimme me a break!”

At Labrador’s jibe, Norma Sterns’ already red face would turn an alarmingly darker red and her mouth would tighten to a thin, pinched whitened line. Clenching and unclenching her strong hands, she looked like she was ready to slug Joe, to physically fight him right there, to pound the living shit out of him.

Labrador would then hold his hands up, palms outward.

“Hey, hey! No offense. Just kiddin’...”

Norma looked like she could take Joe, that was the thing. There had been discussion of that a couple of times in the locker room, where players generally said they thought Labrador would come off badly.

“She’s liable to rip his nuts off, you ask me,” Harry Gibb said. He rarely offered this sort of opinion, so everybody listened. “Serve the asshole right, too.”

“He’s a jerk,” nodded Dick Atkins. “Guys like him end up pumping gas for the rest of their lives. If they’re lucky, that is...”

“Pumpin’ his bone, you mean,” Berton Jones, the big tackle said, making the well-know motion. The locker room erupted in laughter and hooting.

Joe Labrador was disciplined by not being allowed to go to the Pep Rally that Friday. It was a warm September day, but the players still wore their letter sweaters over clean white tee-shirts. None of them wore the tee-shirts with the short sleeves rolled up, however, with a pack of Luckies or Camels in one sleeve, as Joe did. To smoke was forbidden. Coach Rossi included his lectures and cautionary warnings about smoking in with his talks about masturbation, which he referred to distastefully. “If you’re a masturbator, you’ll never accomplish anything in life. I assure you,” he said, nodding. “Nothing saps your strength, your will, more than that.” He looked slowly and evenly around the locker room. Some players hung their heads, obvious admissions of guilt. Others looked away, to the sides of the room, or up at the ceiling. Some blushed beet-red, and chewed their lips. The coach nodded again, noting this. “Remember what I say. Save it for the next game.”

Pep rallies always took place on Friday afternoons, after the home room period, and the following two academic periods, 7th and 8th. This last period of the day, the 8th period, was in fact given over to the Pep Rally, and this was one of the reasons for its great popularity. It was a Ralston tradition, and the principal probably could not have done away with it if he had wanted to. The entire student body filed into the auditorium, where the Pep Band was already playing.

Always, the rallies followed a set, expected pattern that never altered. The big moment was the beginning of the rally, when the student body president, Charlie Hibbing, would bound out onto the stage and grab the microphone, grinning and waving. The assembled students, roaring, began rhythmically jumping up and down so hard the auditorium floor shook, quivered, like it was alive. He would gesture with his hands, getting them to increase the roaring noise - a cheer known as “The Ralston Roar”, which he had in fact invented the year before. It, too, was rapidly becoming a Ralston tradition, for Charlie Hibbing would go out in front of the crowd at games and lead this roar, with the assistance of the cheerleaders, urging on the crowd, screaming themselves red-faced. The “Roar” was noted by several sports writers in their columns. They commented on the loudness of the Ralston fans, how their enthusiastic support had to be like “an extra player or two”. Some hinted it was unfair, unsportsmanlike.

Larry knew how the rally would begin, he knew most of what would happen, but his heart was still hammering as he sat down at the end of an aisle in the sophomore section, with his home room. Hibbing, full of an inexhaustible manic energy, immediately ran out onto the stage, the great, swelling roar went up, and then the Ralston cheerleaders were right on his heels. Eight of them, wearing dark blue skirts and dazzlingly white sweater tops, with blue and white beanie caps. The two cheerleaders who anchored the line of eight – they were the tallest girls – were identical twins, Linda and Lucy Wood. Many jokes were made about their names.

Donna Charles, the head cheerleader, the Captain, was the smallest in height, and the other girls radiated out from her, to the Wood twins, the tallest, at either end. Larry often saw them practicing in the gym, and on the sidelines of the field. They were very athletic, and put in hours of extra time under the leadership of the girls' gym coach, Miss Lassiter. She had been a cheerleader herself at Penn State, and that was a very big deal. There was a framed photograph in her office in the gym, directly behind her desk, of her in her Penn State cheerleading uniform. She was young, still in her twenties, and still looked exactly like a cheerleader. She was a great favorite of the cheerleaders, who followed and clustered around her everywhere she went in the school.

Charlie Hibbing hushed the crowd with his hand held up. "Hey! Whatta we gonna do to Glassboro?" he yelled loudly into the microphone.

"Smash 'em!" yelled the students, and some immediately began fiercely smacking their fists into their palms. But that was discouraged; several teachers walked the aisles, looked sternly at offenders, wagging their fingers at them, pointing.

A series of loud, banging noises erupted from the rear of the auditorium, and a line of small red childrens' wagons came rolling down the two main aisles. Seated in them were members of the starting eleven - Harry Gibb, Berton Jones, Dago Paretti, Robert Henderson - and the great Dick Atkins himself, the quarterback. They reached the foot of the stage, jumped out of the wagons, and ran

up onto the stage to take the cheers of the crowd. The wagons were brought up and set in front of them; they had paper banners on them, reading “We’re Gonna Fix Glassboro’s Wagon”.

Larry wondered who had thought up the stunt. The sight of the large players, especially the linemen, in the small wagons was comical. Pushing the wagons were other players, which also looked comical. The front row, right below the stage, was filled with senior class boys, many of whom had made large paper cones out of notebook paper, which they now used as megaphones, making hooting and whooping noises, loudly slapping their legs. They were nearly out of control, but Coach Kowalski came down one aisle, behind the wagons, and stood near the aisle, so they did not go too far. Several of the boys took the opportunity to yell comments at the cheerleaders, who looked down at them with mixed responses. The Wood twins smiled broadly - they were always good sports.

Charlie Hibbing pointed dramatically down into the orchestra pit, and the Pep Band struck up the Notre Dame Fight Song. The cheerleaders accompanied this with a series of punching motions of their hands, standing straddle-legged, as they all faced one way, and then quickly the other, and then forward, and then towards the rear of the stage, and then back again. They kept perfect time, in an amazing synchronized unison. Larry wondered how long they had had to rehearse to do this. However long that was, this routine was always impressive.

The players stood ill-at-ease, their hands clasped in front of them, looking occasionally at each other. Dick Atkins looked comfortable, though, even relaxed, as he watched the cheerleaders' routine. He would probably not have to play the whole game that night, Larry thought, so the second string quarterback, Carl Bozeman, was probably the one who was really nervous. Rumor was that even Chad Lewis would get a serious chance to play, getting good time towards a letter, for any time played in a varsity game counted.

The loud playing of the Pep Band made a chill run down your back, there was no question. You couldn't help but get worked up. Frankie Malone had made a cone megaphone of his own and was shouting into it, but Larry could not make out anything, the noise in the auditorium was so loud. Pacing the stage like a cat, Hibbing was now in his element, totally in control. Even the coaches deferred to him at pep rallies. The past year they had awarded him a special letter, with a unique lightening bolt monogram, for his work leading the pep rallies. Coach Rossi himself had made the presentation; it had surprised everyone. No one had ever been awarded such a special letter. Hibbing himself - for once - had been momentarily unable to speak.

Once again, the student body president held up his hand. Almost immediately the students quieted down. "You'd never see a teacher be able to do that," Jimmy Washburn, sitting behind him, whispered.

"Okay! Okay! I see you're getting into the mood for this game. We're gonna go out there tonight, support our

team! And now, here's someone you all know. And respect. The head coach of the Ralston Raiders, Coach Rossi!"

The band crashed into the Fight Song again as the head coach entered from the wings, smiling and nodding. Without his ever-present baseball cap, he was noticeably bald, but his face and balding head were deeply tanned. The hours on the practice field, Larry thought. The Fight Song died down, and Coach Rossi looked out at them seriously.

"This is the first game of this new season. Against Glassboro, our old rivals. I don't take them lightly. No." He shook his head, looking slowly around the auditorium, which had grown completely quiet, like a church. "No. When you do that, you often lose. You get surprised. Especially in the first game of the season, which may be the most important game of the season..."

He had a small piece of paper in one hand, Larry noticed. Notes for his talk.

"What I wanted to say, today, though, is that this is the last year, the last season, for some of the boys you see in front of you here today. I don't have to tell you who they are; you know them well. Some have played varsity now for four years. Four years."

This was an obvious tribute to Harry Gibb, who looked out over the audience towards the balcony, and swallowed. He shifted his hands, clasped them behind him. Taking a deep breath, he rolled his powerful, thick neck, as if loosening up for a game.

“Go, Harry! Kill ’em!” someone yelled from the back of the auditorium. The coach held up his hand; Gibb looked down at the floor in front of him intently.

“This has been a very special group, this team. We are close. Very close. And I know you are close to them, too. I just wanted you to be aware, be aware of how special this game, and this season, the whole season, is for us. For me, for the other coaches - and for them. They represent you on that field. Don’t forget that. Yes.” He nodded.

“But you never do. Your support is a big part of this whole team’s success. Don’t think we don’t hear you out there. Any of the players can tell you, and will tell you - just ask them.”

Larry wondered if this was really true. It was always said. But even in his limited playing experience, he felt what you could hear were the sounds of the players around you. These were loud, and often violent. How would you hear what the crowd was yelling? But as soon as he thought it, he felt guilty. Coach Rossi no doubt knew the truth.

Now Rossi was gesturing to the wings, and the principal - a tall, gangly man whose suits never seemed to fit him - came forward. This was Mr. Abrams. He wore odd wire-rimmed spectacles, which Larry connected with people from another era. His hair style, with his bushy hair parted near the middle, was also old-fashioned looking. But the most obvious thing about the principal was his very prominent Adam’s apple, which rode strenuously up and down as he talked. His neck was extraor-

dinarily long, his shirt collar fitted it unevenly, and the whole sight was unforgettable, one the students talked endlessly about. Larry wondered if anyone had ever talked to Mr. Abrams about his Adam's apple, but it was not likely. He was a stern, severe, humorless man, a disciplinarian, well-thought of, as the phrase had it, but not liked. His nickname among the students was Ichabod Crane.

As the gangly principal reached the microphone, a loud "Boo!" was heard from the balcony. Some students audibly gasped, for to boo Mr. Abrams was unimaginable. Who had done this? But the principal went on as if he did not notice.

"I want to commend Coach Rossi and the fine young men making up our team here today, as we start this season. I am sure – I am certain – that this will be another season to remember. Whatever the record at the end, on the field and off, I know we will always do what will make ourselves, and others, proud of Ralston High School." He stopped, and peered owlshly out at the auditorium, which was now again absolutely quiet. Pushing his glasses up on his nose, he continued. The stagelights reflecting in his glasses made him look even odder than normally, Larry thought. What a strange man he was. It was as if he did not have any blood in his gaunt body. Bloodless.

"...football is certainly emblematic of larger American values, like the good struggle, the good fight. It teaches the players, and us, the meaning of teamwork, the values of cooperation and friendship, even on the gridiron."

“The gridiron,” Jimmy Washburn muttered behind in disgust. Coach Kowalski looked around sharply, frowning; he had heard.

Although Mr. Abrams had not been talking very long, it was already noticeable in the auditorium, there was a feeling in the very air, that he should stop and leave. He was not really part of football, the team, school spirit, all of that. There was a compulsion about having to listen to him felt by all. He nodded at the microphone, seeming to pick up on this.

“I know that this is your time - the Pep Rally is an honored Ralston tradition. So, without any further ado, let me turn this back over to your student body president, Charlie Hibbing.”

Mr. Abrams turned and walked off the stage, while Charlie Hibbing simultaneously ran on from the other side. The two did not like each other; Hibbing had incurred the principal’s considerable wrath - he had threatened to strip Hibbing of his office - when he had played a Little Richard record over the school public address system one morning. Hibbing grinned broadly at the mike, knowing everyone was aware of this.

“Thank you, Mr. Abrams. Yes sir! Has Ralston got a good principal, or what?” he asked, leaning into the mike so that the last words boomed out with a rasping hiss.

“YES!” roared the students back at him, pumping arms in the air, releasing the tension they all felt. “YES!”

“Go team!” he yelled. “Go Raiders!”

Pointing again suddenly into the orchestra pit, Hibbing jumped directly up into the air, seemingly possessed. The Pep Band crashed into “On Wisconsin!”, playing at a frenzied tempo, the cheerleaders ran onto the stage, jumping and flipping all over the place. Larry wondered that Hibbing was not felled by one of their flying bodies arcing through the air. Pandemonium ruled. Everyone was standing, and he could feel the floor underneath him reverberating again.

“Smash the Glassers!” somebody yelled in a side section nearby, but this was lost in the general tumult of the band now marching onto the stage, getting ready to lead them all out of the auditorium. They would snake up through the aisle and out through the front hall, into the street, and then back down the side of the school, playing all the time. Meanwhile, the excited students would try to file in some orderly fashion back into their rooms and retrieve their books and other materials, before leaving the school. Already the big yellow school buses were lined up outside; Larry could see them out there through the opened big back wing doors of the downstairs floor of the auditorium.

There was a glow, a tingling all over his body, and he took several deep breaths. Everyone around him was flushed faced, he could smell the sharp tinge of sweat and odors of perfumes the girls wore. He made out Sandy Stevens’ hair bobbing in a group of students moving up the aisle on the left side, and as he looked, she looked directly at him, and smiled. He felt dazed, and felt wonderful; she

had smiled at him, and he was absolutely certain, it was a very special smile.

The Pep Band was now directly by their row, with Zeb Lewis, a saxophone player, cavorting and honking wildly. Zebulon. That was his full name, Larry recalled, looking at him going on, the horn honking and shrieking as he pulled it back and forth and then up and down. He had a very short crew cut on top, but had a classic DA, a duck's ass, pulled and slicked back on the sides. That was a hair style that had already started to "go out". Zebulon Lewis. A name from the Bible, his mother had said. He loved to play his sax, and lived for it, he said, spending an inordinate amount of time down in the crescent-moon shaped music room. You could often hear Zeb honking away down there, the saxophone sound floating out and down the long corridor.

Larry suddenly felt he was a very lucky person, going to a school that had such a band, such people as Zeb, and Sandy Stevens, and of course their great team. Even Charlie Hibbing. Although he realized, as he began to file out towards the big double exit doors, feeling the cooler air coming from outside, where a couple of maples were already showing some red tinted leaves, that he wondered about a guy like Charlie.



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