



who killed
COACH

by Walt Sautter

Who Killed Coach?

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Smashwords Edition

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2010

Prologue

The Story

“Coach” takes place in a small, rural town in the mid-nineteen fifties. It is the story of the town, the high school football coach and his players.

As was with most small towns of that time, Highburg was its own little world. Everyone knew everyone else and they all knew Coach.

Coach Carter has been at Highburg High for many years and had built a legendary program. His teams never fail to reach the heights of success, year after year. He has molded star players out of farm boys and has sent many on to notable colleges and some to professional careers.

The town’s people and his players idolize Coach. The opportunity to have played for Highburg and Coach Carter is savored by all who have done so. To be a

football player for Coach is the ambition of every Highburg boy. It is worn as a lifetime badge of honor. It demands the respect of all.

Where and When

The story begins in nineteen fifty-six. It was a time when World War II was a recent memory for most and the Korean War had just ended. Civil rights were yet to be claimed by American minorities and communications were primitive by today's standards. Authority figures at all levels stood tall and endured little if any, questioning, criticism or confrontation.

Television was in its infancy and entered each home as a small, fuzzy black and white picture on a huge, unreliable machine. Touch-tone dialing was the latest telephone innovation and mobile phones were nonexistent. Radios were often plagued by static and poor reception. Portable radios were large, heavy and not easily carried in spite of

their being sold as “portable” and recording devices were rare. Local communication relied primarily on newspapers and word of mouth. Rumors were relentlessly conveyed, either correctly or incorrectly, over backyard fences or at the town watering holes.

This is the setting of Highburg, its inhabitants and the story of “Coach”.

Disclaimer

As is the case with most writers, “Coach” incorporates many personal experiences of the author. The characters are all fictional, however many are based on real people. Actions and incidents contained in “Coach” are also fictional, but again frequently based on actual occurrences. As you read, please remember that the language and biases in the book reflect those of rural, small-town America in the nineteen fifties. In no way do they portray the views of the author himself.

Thanks for reading “Coach” and I sincerely hope you enjoy it.

Coach

Chapter One

“Holy shit!” I thought to myself over and over through my deep, labored gulps of air. My lungs and throat were burning as I felt my chest rise and collapse in rapid cadence. My legs ached, and I could feel the stream of sweat pouring down the small of my back as I ran.

“God damn! It sure wasn’t my fault.

Shit! I sat the bench for the whole fucking game!”

It made no difference. Up and down the field we raced, full speed, in response to the shrieks of Coach’s whistle.

In the background chanted the hometown spectators who remained, flailing their arms and posing gestures of ridicule as they shouted.

“You losers!”

“You’re a disgrace to everyone in Highburg.”

“My grandmother could have played better!”

Coach stood stoically by the sideline, chewing incessantly on his half-lit cigar and all the while barking commands at us, his defeated players.

We ran and ran. An hour of wind sprints on the victor’s field while our hometown fans continued booing and catcalling from the stands.

How did it all happen?

Well, here’s the story.

Our team had remained unbeaten for years. The streak was legendary in Highburg. It lasted seventy-two straight games.

Today was our first loss in five seasons and through no fault of my own, I had become part of it.

The date was October tenth, a Saturday. It was the day of our third game of the season and the first day of deer season. Hunting was a big deal in the rural town of

Highburg. During the season, kids regularly brought their shotguns to school and kept them in their lockers, so they could go hunting immediately after school. Football players couldn't; they went directly to practice when the school day ended. As a result, most of the team hunted at every other possible opportunity.

Today's game against Burton High was predicted to be a usual pushover. The only players eager to participate in the game were those on the second team. They thought themselves assured of ample playing time. The score would likely be at least thirty to nothing before the second half and then the JVs would get their turn through the rest of the game.

Well, things didn't work that way. That morning our best players arrived at the field house exhausted from the morning hunt. They struggled to even pack their equipment before the ride to the field of the opposing team.

At the conclusion of the game, we had endured a stunning thirteen to seven loss!

We had disgraced Highburg and all who lived there!

The anger of the town seemed unending.

For weeks, the town's people shunned us. Adults would routinely turn their backs as they passed us on the street.

Several of the players received beating from their parents.

We had sullied the town and all of its inhabitants! We had stabbed a knife into the heart and spirit of the community.

Chapter Two

Let me introduce myself and my friends, all of whom are part of this story.

My name is John Crane. They call me Whody.

In my day every kid had a nickname and Whomy was mine and I was thankful for it. Some of the names were far from kind and Whody was certainly not even close to the worst. The source of many was easily discernable, others not so obvious.

It was the fifties and the War was a very recent memory.

One day, someone decided that Bart Craig, a friend of mine, who wore heavy black-rimmed glasses and squinted frequently, looked Japanese. His chronic squinting was probably the result of the lens prescription becoming too weak and his parents couldn't afford to buy him new ones. As a result of his supposed oriental look, Bart was dubbed Tojo.

My friend Larry's overweight brother, Ronnie was named "Lard", short for "Lard Ass" and Larry himself didn't escape the nickname curse. He was "Stinky".

Stinky was constantly pulling at the seat of his pants, why I'm not sure but it earned him the title Stinky. In retrospect, Stinky's family like most in Highburg was poor and it was likely he had outgrown his underwear thereby giving him constant wedgies. That's my best guess anyway but in any case, he was burdened with the moniker of "Stinky" throughout his boyhood years.

Then too, there was Frankie Albo, a.k.a., "Banana Nose". I don't think I need to explain this one.

"Johnny Cromag" was one of the best nicknames. Crows can be tamed, and Johnny Freed had one. It was huge, about the size of a full-grown chicken. Everywhere Johnny went he took the crow with him. The crow had a name, but I can't really remember it.

Well, anyway, Johnny always wore a black leather jacket and carried the crow on his shoulder. He looked great

coming at you, tall, slim, shoulders back, the black leather glistening in the sun and the crow perched regally on his left shoulder. As he passed, a less august sight came into view. The back of Johnny's shiny, black leather jacket was streaked with streams of white crow shit from the shoulder to the waist.

One of the guys was in Latin I. He was the only one of us with the kind of grades that qualified him to take Latin. Of course, he thereby became a Latin scholar in our eyes and who were we to question his authority in the arcane intricacies of that ancient language. So, when he told us that "Cromagma" was Latin for "big crow shit", who amongst us could challenge him. No one, that was for sure and thus "Johnny Cromag" was born.

Why was I Whody?

It arose from the time that I walked across the rotted rafters of the old mill down by the river. The mill had long since been abandoned and it was a favorite playground for many of the town's kids. The outer shell of the

building was barely standing and inside; many of the floorboards of the three levels were missing or weakened by age. Below, through the wide gaps, could be seen the racing waters which once powered the mill wheel.

Tag was the game of choice at the mill. We spent any hours climbing from one precarious landing to the next. During one such adventure, while my being "it"; I spied Jackie "Straw Man" Strawbridge. He was on the same floor as me but separated from me by a wide gap of several missing boards.

Impulsively, I ran towards Straw Man across the narrow-rotted rafter, which separated us. As I reached the other side I heard the sound of the falling timber splashing into the raceway waters thirty feet below. It was the rafter I had just run across.

Every kid in the mill that day froze, looking downward, as the wooden fragments were swept away by the turbulent rush. All of us were simultaneously struck with the reality of the dangers of playing in the old mill.

“How did you do that?

You’re like fuckin’ Houdini!” Straw Man exclaimed in a loud startled voice.

As the days went on and the story spread I became known as “Houdini”. It wasn’t long before my title degenerated into “Whody”.

That was the last day we ever played at the mill and the day I became Whody.

Well, anyway, I’ve got more of a story to tell. Let me go back to the very beginning.

I was born in the forties, the exact year, well forty-three.

My father was elderly, sixty-four when I arrived. I guess I was his last chance to carry on his DNA although I don’t think he actually realized that was what was happening.

DNA hadn’t even been discovered yet! I’m sure it was just primitive biological urges that prevailed and lead to my existence.

My mother was over twenty years his junior but certainly not young. She was in her early forties.

The reason that I'm telling you this is to help explain what happened next.

When I was four, my father, much to the dismay of my mother, decided that we would move to our country home to live full time. Let me define "country home". A two-room shack set off the nearest dirt road by a mile or so, with no electricity, running water or indoor plumbing. Our water source was a spring about fifty yards from the house. I can still see my mother carrying pails of water to the house.

As I think back, I remember my mother mentioning that my father had worked as a hatter in his younger days.

Mercury poisoning of hatters by the chemicals used in felt making was well known. The symptoms were commonly dementia and delirium. This led to the expression "mad as a hatter". I often think that this helped to precipitate my father's confusion.

Why this decision was made, I'll never truly know. I do believe however in any case, it was the onset of dementia.

Why my mother went along with this scheme, again, I'll never know. I never asked, and she never offered a reason for her cooperation with this absurd plan. I guess, I can only surmise, that in those days women generally did what they were told by their husbands and she acted accordingly.

Well, we moved, lock stock and barrel to our "country home" and lived as if we were existing in the nineteenth century. We did so for the next seven years. During this time, we went to a small, nearby town, Highburg, for our weekly shopping. It was always on a Saturday. My mother would go to the food store for the groceries, I would be given twenty cents for the movie matinee and my father would park himself on a barstool at Tiny's. Once the shopping was completed and the movie ended we would all meet at Tiny's and spend the remaining two hours of the afternoon with my father getting loaded while watching professional wrestling on the bar's small, snowy TV. Then we would pile into the car, a fifty Ford

with a shimmy in the front end and zigzag the ten miles back to the “Lilac Inn”. There was a lilac bush down by the outhouse and so that was my father’s name for our hovel.

I attended the local public school, beginning in first grade. When I say local school, I may be exaggerating. It was seven miles away. Each morning, three other children from the nearby farm and I would walk out to the dirt road and board a school bus for the hour journey to the school.

The school itself was as tough as the hick town in which it was located. The town’s tiny population included two local, notorious families, their legitimate children, and their more prevalent illegitimate offspring. It was hard to tell which group was dumber or more pugnacious than the other.

Needless to say, school life was a survival experience.

Recess was like the yard at Attica. I began to think fighting

was just one more school subject like reading and arithmetic because it occurred as part of the daily routine. Well, after three years of torn shirts, scrapes and bloody noses it was decided that I was to give up hand to hand combat and attend parochial school. So, after about three years into my father's country living experiment, I was transferred from my local school and enrolled in the parochial school at Highburg.

It was here that I first learned about football. Most of the kids in my class were crazy for the game. The lore of Highburg football was a constant topic of conversation at the school. Players both past and present were revered as demigods and the coach was held as the supreme authority who guided them brilliantly year after a successful year. Most all of the boys played what they inappropriately called "Midget Football". To be honest, I never really met any midgets. I guess the true midgets or 'little people' as we now call them began to protest the term, so today it's called Little League Football.

After two years of the daily ten-mile commute to my new school, I think my father became weary of the back and forth shuttle to town and decided that we would give up our 'back to nature' existence and move to town.

My parents bought a lot on the edge of town and my father began to build our permanent home there while we lived on Main Street.

We moved into a small, two-room apartment, which was really a converted office space, above a cleaner's shop. It was cramped quarters, to say the least, even tighter than our country house but it had electricity, indoor plumbing and maybe, maybe TV!

For me, it was a dream come true. Electricity, indoor plumbing, and even television! I could hardly wait.

Then, it finally happened. I can still remember seeing my first show on "my TV" - Rocky Mariano in a fifteen rounder. I was transfixed in front of the set, staring intently at every black and white pixel. Even the Gillette commercials held me awestruck.

It was during that first few weeks of living in town that I began to really understand my classmate's fascination with football. I discovered their enthusiasm for the sport to be well justified.

The town itself was football insane. The high school team was revered, as was its coach. Good players, of which there were many, were cast as local deities. The team had earned a litany of successful campaigns, undefeated seasons and state titles.

Several of the boys who had graduated, played for big-name colleges and a couple had even made it to the pros. "Coach" as he was called had been at the school for twenty-five years and never experienced a losing season, not even close. The loss of even one game was viewed as a catastrophic event by the town folk and rarely did such a catastrophe occur.

Coach ran a tight ship. Both practice sessions and punishments for the poor play were the stuff of local lore.

The incident of a star halfback who was disciplined for finding the wrong hole in two successive carries during a practice session was repeated many times over the years. The punishment - "take a lap" - Coach commanded. After forty laps and ten miles, with full equipment in the September heat, the punishment ended. That story was often told and served as a strong deterrent to poor performance.

Coach was the only Physical Education Teacher in the school. During football season and sometimes even after the season, PE, physical education that is, was comprised of watching game movies in Coach's office.

Coach's grading system for PE was simple and unique. Played football, A, played any other sport B, came to class and caused no trouble C, caused any disruption F. There it was, simple and efficient.

It was just like his coaching philosophy, no-frills. The game was blocking, tackling and hard-nosed play. Those were the only things that mattered in achieving success.

In 1953 the town took up a collection and bought Coach a brand-new Cadillac. I can still see it in my mind's eye.

Grey with a grey interior, rear fins, the large, tooth-like chrome grille and Coach behind the wheel, cigar clenched tightly between his teeth, driving up to the field house to begin the day's practice session.

Well, in any event, this is the environment into which I was cast when I arrived on my first day of football practice as a freshman in September of 1956. I was being given the opportunity to play on the same team as the town's heroes and I was thrilled, to say the least.

It was here that I met a kid with whom I would remain friendly throughout my high school days, Ricky White. Ricky and I and another boy, Bart Craig, a.k.a Tojo, whom I knew from grade school became friends as we toiled our way through the grueling, two sessions practices of the first September days.

The torment was both physical and psychological. After a two-hour period, just when the end was anticipated,

Coach always seemed to identify a player who performed poorly or a play that was run incorrectly.

“A team is only as good as its weakest link,” he would announce through the bullhorn, which he carried at each practice. Everyone knew what that meant, practice would be extended for another half hour, at the least.

Stress was even greater for the freshman. The team trainer frequently used a menthol-laden liniment, which smelled and felt like Ben-Gay. It was customary for upperclassmen at the beginning of the season, to get to practice early.

They would then scoop fingers full of the irritating salve into the jocks of the unsuspecting freshmen before they arrived. The first day of football was made unforgettable for most Highburg freshman! Needless to say, every day thereafter, each of us was sure to check all our equipment with the utmost of care before donning our uniform.

Five punishing days passed, classes began, and football practice was mercifully reduced to only single after school

tortures. Practice began at two-thirty every afternoon, long before school was officially dismissed.

Period eight at Highburg was designated as club period for the entire school and of course, we were in the football club thereby allowing for our early release. Eighth period began at two o'clock, providing a half hour to get to the field house, dress and be on the practice field by two-thirty. Failure to be there at that precise hour was met with series consequences, those being multiple laps or the 'pit'.

The 'pit' as it was notoriously called, was the sawdust filled depression at the far end of the field. It actually was the high jump site for the track team in the spring.

When one was ordered to the 'pit' it meant at least an hour of blocking and tackling, generally two on one. The sawdust was invasive. It crept into every nook; cranny and crack bringing its rasping irritation to every part of the body, both public and private.

After a drill in the 'pit', it felt as if a hair shirt had been covering the body. It must have been how medieval, penitent monks had suffered.

The high school itself was small. It enrolled less than four hundred kids in total. Out of the about two hundred boys in the school, seventy-five of them played football. It was more or less a required activity at Highburg High.

The school building was a one-hundred-year-old structure, which housed the town's grade school on the first floor and the high school on the second. The basement contained the gym, cafeteria and boiler room. Upper-level classmates explained the location of the boiler room to us on the very first day. It was right next to the detention room. Detention required those who were incarcerated, be assigned to that room during lunch hour or after school. If one was an athlete, it would be during lunch so as not to miss practice.

Unfortunately, the warnings of the upperclassmen failed to sink in and that location became well known to me and most all of my friends throughout our years at H.H.S.

During detention time, complete silence was to be maintained and only the rhythmic sound of the janitor's coal shovel was heard as he fed the school's boiler. There we sat, the heat pouring through the walls from the adjacent room, with sweat dripping while listening to the cadence of the shovel ticking off the hour of our stay.

Well, anyway, as for football, the days crept forward towards our first game. Then it arrived. To me, it was spectacular. The stands were packed, the band played loudly, and the cheerleaders pranced provocatively about the sidelines as we entered the field. It was the thrill of a lifetime. It was even better than the day in eighth grade when Nora Simpson let me feel her up in the coat closet.

In was grand!

We romped as usual. The score was thirty-five to seven at the half. At the start of the second half, the field was a sea

of mud. The night before the game the temperature had dropped into the mid-twenties and the turf had frozen into a concrete hard surface. Every tackle and every block resulted in bruises and abrasions.

As the day warmed so did the field turning it into a gooey, slimy quagmire. Bruising and scraping were replaced by twisted ankles and wrenched knees. At the start of the third quarter he had sent in all of the second team and the score still continued to mount.

Coach was not one to run up the score if he could help it. He always said that he didn't want to discourage kids on the other teams. He had the ultimate respect for any boy who was willing to play the game on any team. I had even seen one game when he purposely sent in the third team on a series of downs so as to let a boy from an opposing team break his school's scoring record. This was of course, after we were so far ahead, that it was impossible for us to lose.

As the clock ticked down to the final four-minute mark, I saw Granger go down. My name was called.

“Crane, in for Granger, forty-eight right” Coach barked and waved me onto the field.

I scurried towards the huddle at top speed.

“Okay, guys, Granger out.

Coach said forty-eight right” I stammered.

“Jesus Christ, I think he said right,” I thought to myself.

In all the excitement I was unsure. All I could do is hope as I ran to the line of scrimmage.

“Red eighteen, red eighteen!

Signals, down, ready, set, hut one, hut two” and the play began.

I roared from my starting position straight towards the other skinny fifteen-year-old on the opposing team. My block was precise, executed just as I had been trained during the four preceding weeks of hell. My man fell to the ground and Benny Dragos picked up ten yards.

I walked back to the huddle, relieved that my instructions from Coach had been correct. I was imagining myself like Roosevelt Grier at the Polo Grounds on a Sunday afternoon.

As the game concluded we left the field amidst a flurry of cheers and congratulations. I can still clearly hear the clacking of the metal cleats on the cement floor as we entered the field house and sat down awaiting Coach's words.

"Well boys, today was a good day. I liked what I saw but don't get too cocky. We got a bunch of games left and a lot of work to do.

Go home and get some rest and I don't want to see anybody uptown, hanging around the bowling alley or Snookie's after ten o'clock.

Now, take a shower and get out of here" and with that, he walked into his cubbyhole office and slammed the door behind him.

I, as well as all the others, dutifully obeyed Coach's command and immediately began to undress and head to the shower room. Once cleaned, I went back to the freshmen dressing area and finished drying myself.

Then, as I began to dress, I suddenly realized, "Where was my other shoe?"

I scurried around the locker room looking for it without success. After ten full minutes of searching a voice called out.

"Is this what you're looking for Sonny?"

It was Howie Green waving my shoe over his head.

Howie was a junior, starting halfback and last year's leading scorer.

"Come and get it" he shouted as he continued to wave it.

I moved towards him and as I did, he threw it.

"Blue forty-two" he yelled. That was one of our favorite pass plays.

Jake, another junior player, caught it and continued the taunting.

After several minutes of back and forth, Howie took the shoe and threw it into a crevice near the ceiling. With that, they both walked down the hall towards the exit, laughing as they left.

I went to the other dressing room, got a chair to stand on so as to retrieve my shoe. It was a struggle but after a few minutes of reaching and stretching, I reclaimed it from its hiding place.

I walked down the hall, passed Coach's office as I left the field house. The door was slightly ajar, and I remember hearing Howie's voice in a low whisper and then Coach's reply, also in a low whisper. I couldn't really make out what was being said but I could tell it wasn't football talk. Coach's warning about the bowling alley and Snookie's, the two favorite hangouts for all of the town's teenagers was unnecessary. None of us would be there tonight. Our right tackle was Harry Barnes. Everyone called him Zip. Zip was the slowest of the slow. He never placed any better than last in every wind sprint or running drill thus

the paradoxical nickname, Zippy. Although slow, he was big, tough and agile, an All-Stater.

After every win, there were never any losses; Zip's father always would hold a football party at his house. There was a full keg of beer and the entire team and cheerleaders were invited. Most often, it turned into a drunk fest with guys throwing up in the backyard or lying semi-comatose in a corner.

At one such event, Willie, our star fullback, vomited in the toilet. It was not until the next morning that he realized that his dental plate with his two front teeth had been subsequently flushed into Zip's septic tank.

Zip lived near the outskirts of town and rarely was there any complaint. The police were called only a few times. Most all of the town cops had played for Coach and when they arrived, they generally had a beer or two with the rest of us and talked over the day's game. Much of the conversation however usually centered around their playing days at Highburg, the championships they had

won, their great respect for Coach and what he had done for the town.

After the exalted their tales of bygone football prowess, they would call back to the station.

“Everything’s okay here Chief.

Just a little noise problem!

We just had to quiet ‘em down a little.”

Then, they would jump back into the police car and drive off leaving us to continue our drunken escapade.

Monday morning found a dozen players hobbling about the school with injuries sustained on Saturday’s inhospitable playing field.

The pungent odor of “pink stuff” filled the air throughout the school on Monday morning. “Pink stuff” was the concoction of Doctor Haller, the team doctor. Every injury and ailment imaginable was treated with this magical goo. It was spread on the afflicted area with a tongue depressor in copious amounts and then bandaged with wrappings of white gauze, topped with layers of adhesive tape.

Most often, its vivid color oozed through; staining the bandages and everything they touched. Its smell was unmistakable and everyone so medicated was immediately identified by its stringent vapors. Everything from mild scrapes to torn ligaments got a slather of the potion. The odd thing about it was that it actually seemed to work. Most of Docs patients returned to practice within days of the application. Was it a true medical miracle or merely psychosomatic? Who knows but it worked.

Doctor Haller was known to go on an extended vacation in the spring of every year. He had severe allergies to plant pollen and to escape the torment of the symptoms; he left the area during the days of high pollen count.

The story, which circulated, however, was that he actually went to Africa to visit a witchdoctor friend and obtain his yearly supply of “pink stuff”.

Weeks passed and Highburg remained unbeaten as usual. Thanksgiving Day was the culmination. It was a cold, sunny day and the entire town turned out. Every seat in

the stands was filled and every inch of the fence surrounding the field was packed five deep. As usual, Coach and his team gave the fans what they were accustomed to, a serious beating of the opposition, forty-two to fourteen.

At the conclusion of the game, we all herded into the field house amongst the cheers of the wildly enthusiastic crowd. Once seated, Coach stood before us, granting us almost begrudging praise for another stellar season. At the conclusion of his brief accolades, Howie rose and delivered a short but emotional statement as to how Coach had been the one responsible for our success and without his wisdom and skill we would have been lucky to win but one game. As he finished his exultation, the team stood and applauded excitedly for several minutes. There, for a moment, I felt as if I was one of the Russian Commissars, applauding Stalin and being afraid to be the first one to stop.

Well, that was it. Football was over for another season. We all left the field house that day feeling both relieved and nostalgic. Relieved that the days of daily grinding practice sessions were over but missing the excited anticipation of the weekly games.

Fall turned to winter and the thoughts of football faded, except for the daily hour of films in Coach's office during PE. The snow was on the ground and the air was cold. It was hard hanging around Lefty's Hot Dog Stand as we did during the warm weather since the only seating at Lefty's consisted of outdoor tables and benches.

In this kind of weather, everybody was forced into Jack's Bowling Alley or Snookie's Luncheonette. Several of the guys were pin boys at Jack's and were always found sitting their nightly vigil at the back of the alleys waiting to be called to set a game. The going rate was fifteen cents a game. When one got to set two alleys with four bowlers on each, big money was to be made. It could add up

rapidly, with tips, sometimes three or four dollars for a nights' work.

If you were on Jack's good side, you could even work the Leagues. Now we were talking five dollars or more.

The guys who were the hang-around were usually found crowded around the town's sole pinball machine at the corner of Jack's lobby. They all gazed incessantly at the silver ball under the glass as the player attempted to "rack up" games on the machine. The machine awarded free replays for exceptional scores and every player sought to register as many replays as possible.

Replays allowed the current player domination of the machine while the others were forced to continue watching. Even better, those with high scoring ability could sell the remaining free plays to the highest bidder when they became tired of the game. There were always willing customers. The going rate for pinball was a nickel a game however replays could often be had for a two or three-cent bid.

Players would push and shove the machine, left and right, back and forth to put 'english' on the ball without invoking the fateful "tilt" sign. Whenever the "tilt" appeared a roar would arise from fans and a plethora of curses from the player.

Many players went to extremes in their attempts to obtain free pinball, often carefully placing the legs of the machine on the tops of their shoes so as to level the machine without "tilting". Others simply, day after day, used a penknife to surreptitiously, bore a small hole in the side of the machine so as to insert a wire against one of the bumpers and rack up the score. Still other resorted using a wire through the coin return to trigger instant replays. Jack himself was an old man and paid little attention to the machine or its eager crowd so he rarely noticed the holes gnawed into its walls. That discovery was left to the repairman who came once every other month or so. As soon as he alerted Jack to the tactics used by the assault of pinballers, Jack would screw a small metal plate over the

hole. He would then unplug the machine for a week as punishment for the violator and non-violators alike. After years of repair, the machine bore dozens of these plates along its sides, each one covering a tiny entry into the machine's internals. I never understood why he didn't just cover the entire side with a large piece of metal, but I certainly wasn't about to suggest it either.

During these periods of withdrawal, when the machine was unplugged, Snookie's Luncheonette became unusually crowded, not with paying customers but with teenage hang-arounds exiled from Jack's. Most sat around playing matchbook football on the tables near the front window waiting for the day when the machine at Jack's would be reenergized.

Snookie was an older woman who ran her business right next to Jack's Bowling Alley. Her trade was generally takeout. The bowlers would order hamburgers, sandwiches and the like during their play and carry them

into the alleys. Aside from this, the business was thin. I often wondered how she paid the light bill.

Well anyway, there we sat hour after hour engaged in our mindless pass time while volumes of unattended to schoolwork accumulated.

Needless to say, all these activities fell out of the purview of my mother. As I have always said, "If I would have gone to the library even half the times that I claimed, I would surely have become president of Yale University".

The town library itself was a one-story building, the size of a small gymnasium. It housed on the order of five hundred to a thousand books at most. I am quite sure that my mother must have believed that I had read all them, at least twice, based on the number of my supposed visits.

The only thing that possibly could have given my deception away was the reek of cigarette smoke that followed me everywhere after my trips to the 'library'.

The foul stench completely enveloped me. It arose from

my own use of the “devil’s weed” and from the heavily laden air that constantly surrounded me.

In those days, tobacco smoke was an acrid perfume found in every nook and cranny.

If you went for a haircut at Dee’s Barber Shop – Dee was smoking as he cut your hair.

If you went to Dan’s Diner – the cook was smoking as he worked the grill.

If you went to Manley’s Army Navy Store – Mr. Manley was smoking while he fitted your new Keds.

I was surprised that Father O’Brien wasn’t smoking as he said Sunday Mass, although I did see him puffing outside the door of the sacristy just before and after service on many occasions.

Smoking was everywhere. So, knowing that my mother had never been to the town library when I was questioned about the odors, which I was emitting, I promptly replied that the librarian was a smoker too!

Often, the boredom of Snookie's and Jack's became unbearable. This was especially true when another pinballer was having an extremely successful run and your chances of claiming the machine were slim or when the bowling leagues were on their summer break. During those times, pinsetters were only needed by a few transient bowlers and Abe, the head pin-boy and his brother got the jobs.

The tedium most often led to a vigil where Main Street was continually surveyed for the sight of Moose and his forty-nine Merc or even Flash in his brand new, light green, two-toned, fifty-eight Chevy. Sighting either might ensure the opportunity to "cruise" for the rest of the evening.

Cruising held numerous advantages. Firstly, it was a search for adventure. One could travel far and wide, well at least two or three miles anyway, looking for action. The action usually meant repeatedly riding up and down the

half-mile long Main Street for the entire night or until Moose noticed the gas gauge approaching zero.

Another great part of cruising was the car radio playing. You got to hear the “top ten” over and over and over. On a hot summer night, the breeze from the cranked-out vent window was the closest thing to air conditioning that one could get unless you had the thirty-five cents for the Strand. The Strand Movie Theater was the only movie in town and it always played the same feature for at least two consecutive weeks. So, even if you had the money, and we didn't, it wasn't a good air conditioning option until the new feature came to town.

Cruising during the week was cool but the weekends were the best. It frequently involved the search for a twenty-one-year-old or someone with a good fake ID. It meant the action could include booze. If the quest for a buyer proved fruitless we could always fall back on Floyd.

Floyd was one of the town 'queers', as we called them then. The more appropriate term, of course, is homosexual

or in Floyd's case probably a child molester. It was well known that he had had encounters with several of the kids in town. Everyone knew Floyd's reputation and avoided him at all cost, except of course when another of age person couldn't be found.

Floyd was easily cajoled by the promise of a future encounter with one of us. To my knowledge the promises were never kept but that never seemed to stop Floyd from continuing to serve our requests. I suppose, "Hope springs eternal" must have been Floyd's motto.

"Hey, here comes Moose!" Stinky yelled as he peered out through Snookie's grease-laden front window.

Upon hearing that, Stinky, Bogie, C-Man and I raced out to the sidewalk to flag him down.

As I said before, in those days everyone had a nickname. John Byer's was Bogie. How it came to be, who knows? I never asked him, and he never mentioned its origin. He had already been christened "Bogie" when I first met him.

As a matter of fact, it was months after that before I found out his real name.

The only thing I can possibly conclude in retrospect is perhaps someone thought that he looked like Humphrey Bogart who was a legendary movie star of the day. If that was the case I certainly didn't see it.

He was short, stocky and well built. His facial features in no way resembled those of Humphrey Bogart but then again, his persona certainly did. Bogie was one tough kid and almost everybody knew it. Those who didn't know found out real fast if they got into any kind of confrontation with him.

As for C-Man, his actual name was Barry Newhouse. He always considered himself to be a big deal with the girls and continually bragged of his exploits and conquests. Whether they were real or merely his flights of fantasy, once again, who knows? In either case, I don't think any further explanation of his nickname is required.

Moose pulled up to the curb, rolled down the window, poked his head out and shouted, "Hop in Jerkoffs!"

Many nights he would ride passed all of us pretending to be oblivious to our shouts but tonight was not one of them. He must have been low on gas!

"Front shotgun" yelled Stinky.

"Rear left!" I yelled.

"Rear right!" came immediately from Tojo.

Everyone piled into the car.

"Looks like you two got the squeeze play," Moose said addressing C-Man and Bogie, the other two guys who failed to call their spots quickly enough.

The car doors slammed. Moose sat silently, and the car stood still. Ten seconds passed and not a word or a motion occurred.

"What the fucks with you guys?" Moose announced.

No one said a word, but everyone knew.

"Gas money! Let's go.

Shotguns, it's a quarter each. Squeezers twenty cents.

Do I have ta ask ya every fuckin' time?

You should know by now. I can't run this thing on piss"

Moose said in an irritated tone.

"Why can't we just go up to Littleton and gas up there?" I suggested hoping to avoid paying.

Littleton was the next small town to the north of Highburg. It housed about five hundred citizens and the township's gas pump with a broken lock. It was common knowledge with most of Highburg's teenage drivers, that for the past three months, a nighttime visit to Littleton meant free gas.

"Aint working no more" piped C-Man.

"Didn't ya hear about what happened to Hooky the other night?"

"No! What?" I replied.

"Well, he went up and gassed up like usual and then all of a sudden his car started runnin' real shitty and all kinds of black smoke came out of the exhaust. About three miles down the road the cops got him. They saw all the smoke.

What happened is that they put some kerosene in the tank with the gas and then waited for somebody to fill up.

Then all they had ta do was look for the smoker. His father had to go and get him outta jail. Cost him seventy-five dollars and his old man beat the shit outta him”

answered C-Man.

With that, we all reached into our pockets and extracted the requested tolls.

Moose was stupid but not that stupid, not when it came to gas money. Moose was also big, very big and not the kind of guy anyone would want to give any shit. His two favorite pass times were football and fighting. It was hard to tell which he enjoyed the most.

Wednesday nights during the summer were sometimes better than weekend nights. That was the night that the C.Y.O. dances were held in the neighboring town of Crockton.

Moose would pick everyone up at Snookie's, seven o'clock sharp, collect the gas money of course, and drive the ten miles to Crockton.

The dance itself was usually uneventful. The boys stood on one side, girls on the other and few brave souls attempting to show off their jitterbugging skills in the center. Only the slow dances yielded a crowded floor with most of the guys trying to chat up the girls hoping for a quick feel in the parking lot after the dance.

Actually, the highlight of the evening happened at about ten-thirty when the dance was officially over. It was then that Moose and Frankie Haller met outside behind the building. It happened like clockwork, every Wednesday, without fail.

Frankie was about five feet nine, one sixty at best. Moose, he was six-two, maybe two-twenty. In spite of the size differential, Frankie had one big advantage, he was nuts! That was what allowed him to hang in the fights week after week without actually being killed.

It generally lasted fifteen or twenty action-filled minutes with Frankie being pummeled by Moose over and over. Every once in a while, Frankie got in a good shot or two but it was only statistics that allowed it to happen. He kept coming and coming until either Moose became bored and walked away or the cops arrived and sent everyone home.

As I said before, Moose had two favorite pass times and they were football and fighting. His older brother, Big Moose had played for Coach at Highburg five years earlier and was recruited by South Carolina. While there, he achieved All-American status but never graduated. In the very last game of his senior year, he sustained a permanently crippling injury to his left ankle. He would carry a limp for the rest of his life and never play again. He was given a 'Certificate of Attendance'. Despite his failure to graduate and play in the Pros, Big Moose remained a hero to the town's people of Highburg and a

credit to Coach who had bestowed his playing skills upon him.

Moose had two other siblings, Little Moose, and Minnie Moose. Little Moose gained his nickname not only for being younger than the others but also for being quite a bit smaller. He never took up the game of football and generally spent most of his time smoking, drinking and being a roustabout.

His failure to play football was an embarrassment to both Big Moose and Moose and they openly mocked him for it. Apparently, their mockery had little effect because Little Moose never did don the Red and Black of Highburg High.

Minnie Moose was the big sister of the Moose family. She bore the tough, dykish appearance of a man complete with broad shoulder, large stature, and sporadic facial hair. In spite of her guise, she was actually quite amiable and far more intelligent than the rest of the Moose clan.

Out of the four, Albert, that was Moose's real name, was probably the dumbest although in retrospect he might have been a trendsetter.

During every huddle, he could be seen removing his helmet. The reason being that inside was taped a list of his assignment for each play. Actually, we only ran about a dozen plays or so, but Moose was unable to recall them without constant referral to the list. Today players wear wristbands citing their assignments. I still wonder to this day if Moose might have been its inspiration.

Chapter Three

It was a chilly fall evening, Friday, October thirtieth to be precise, “Mischief Night”. All the guys were out in front of Snookie’s intently looking for Flash to drive by.

Hiking a ride with the Moose was out of the question. We hadn’t seen him riding around town for over a week. He had broken his leg in the game against Johnsville. Of course, to our disappointment it was his right leg, making it very difficult for him to operate the gas pedal. That probably meant no Moose Mobile for at least another four more weeks, until he was out of the cast. In the meantime, Flash was the only game in town.

Flash was an older guy, maybe thirty or so, who often hung around Jack’s with the younger kids. He was a short man with curly red hair and a pockmarked face. It was rumored that he was homosexual, but I never met anyone claiming to have been solicited by him. It was most likely

that he was a bit immature and just felt more comfortable with the younger crowd, but who knows?

Anyway, Flash was always around and always willing to drive us around town for the entire evening and unlike Moose, not even attempting to shake us down for gas money.

One of the problems when riding with Flash was the source of his nickname. He drove ever so slowly. Top speed was twenty miles per hour on the open road. The car was a stick shift and rarely taken out of second gear. A shift into third resulted in bucking and stalling because of his painfully slow speed and when that happened he instantly shifted back into second.

In addition to that, the rumor of his homosexual tendencies, whether true or untrue, always resulted in the relentless teasing of those seen riding with him.

But, as my mother used to say, "Any port in a storm", and when Flash pulled up that evening three of us piled in!

“Hey, Flash - How about we go over to Henderson Town and pick up Ricky?” I asked.

Henderson Town was about four miles to the east of Highburg. It was a “colored” town as we used to call it, populated almost exclusively by African Americans.

“Aint so sure I want no black folks bein’ seen ridin’ with me. I don’t really mind but I’m kinda worried about what people are gonna say, you know what I mean?” answered Flash.

“Awe, come on Ricky’s a cool guy. He’s no city Negro. He’s one of our guys. He’s on the team ya know. He’s a football player like us” I replied.

“Yeah, pretty good too!” came from Bogie in the back seat.

“You know that black halfback from Waring, he’s probably gonna be better than him before he’s done” chimed in Tojo.

“How come I ain't never seen him play?” asked Flash.

“He’s only a sophomore like us,” I answered knowing full well that was not the real reason.

Ricky had more talent than most all the starters on the team but of course, one major flaw - black skin. Coach never came right out and said it, but everybody knew that Ricky was never going to play much varsity football at Highburg. The only chance he had was if Coach absolutely needed his talent to finish an undefeated season. At this point, it didn't look as though that would happen. We had already won the first four games by thirty-five points each time and there were no really tough games on the horizon for the rest of the season.

I don't think Coach's unwillingness to play Ricky came from bigotry, not his own personal bigotry anyway. It came from Highburg itself. He probably felt that the town would be affronted by the presence of a black player on the Highburg football team despite his talent. There had never been one and Coach wasn't going to be the first to have one. Looking back, he probably assessed the town's mentality exactly right.

“Well, okay but when we come back to town he’s gotta slide down so nobody don’t see him when we go down Main Street” demanded Flash.

So off we went towards Henderson at a snail’s pace with the engine revving in second gear all the way. We finally arrived at Ricky’s house and Flash blew the horn. Ricky emerged from the house donning his well-worn, brown and orange, Cleveland Browns hat. That hat was part of him, part of his persona. He wore it religiously as a visible tribute to Jim Brown, his black hero. He had followed his career right from its beginnings at Syracuse, on through to the pros at Cleveland.

He knew everything about Jim Brown and the Cleveland Browns right down to their shoe sizes. When the Browns played on TV the telephone was off the hook at Ricky’s house. He sat transfixed by every play, especially when Jim had the ball. Whenever they played I knew what the conversation of the following day would be. We would

meet by our lockers and pull the required books and papers needed for the school day.

He would immediately start with “Did ya see the game?” Then, with total disregard of my reply, he would begin a blow-by-blow description of every last detail of the entire event. Nothing was ever left out, not a single minute nor was a single play omitted.

He wasn't one of the best students at Highburg High, far from it and I always wondered why. His power of recall was exceptional, but I guess it was reserved exclusively for Cleveland Browns football. For that, his memory paralleled that of Univac.

His narration of the game rivaled that of a Movietone newsreel. His banter ceased as we entered the first class of the day and then continued between classes, during lunch and until he finally related the recap of the last play near the end of the school day.

Ricky slid into the back seat with Tojo and Bogie and we ground our way, ever so slowly, back to town.

Up and down Main Street we rode, over and over, looking for excitement. Every time we passed the other hang-arounds in front of Snookie's and Jack's, Ricky crouched down as he was instructed while the rest of us endured their shouted jeers for riding with Flash. All of us, as if in one coordinated motion flipped them the finger as we rolled by. They obligingly returned the same gesture as we passed.

"You know I'm getting' sick of this shit!" Ricky suddenly announced from the rear seat.

"This is boring as shit!

Let's have some real fun!" he continued.

"Like what?" I replied

"Nothings goin' on, nowhere" I added.

"Tonight's Mischief Night and we ain't done no mischief at all" he replied.

"Like what kind of mischief do you want?

Knockin' over a couple of garbage cans or pushin' over Old Pete Pouter's outhouse again?

That ain't no fun anymore!

We already done that kinda shit last year and the year before that and the year before that” said Bogie in a resigned voice.

“Yeah!

Same old bullshit. Count me out” added Tojo.

There was a long silence in the car as we continued our creep down Main Street.

“I got a great idea!

Let’s go up to Coach’s house and soap up his windows. I bet nobody’s ever done nothin’ to Coach’s, ever on Mischief Night!” suggested Ricky excitedly.

There was another long pause. It was as if he had proposed the assassination of the President.

“Are you fuckin’ crazy?” blurted Bogie.

“What if we got caught?

No tellin’ what would happen”.

Silence again.

“I don’t think I’m in for that,” announced Tojo.

“Me neither” added Bogie.

“Pussies!” shouted Ricky.

“You’re all bitchin’ about nothin’ to do and I come up with this great fun idea and you guys chicken out right away.

Pussies” shouted Ricky again.

“Maybe we’re pussies but we ain't crazy. If you guys are really gonna do it, drop me off by Jack’s” replied Tojo.

“Me too”, said Bogie.

After a brief quiet, “What about you?” Ricky said to me.

I knew the whole idea was probably foolish but what fun it would be to know that we had the guts to actually do it.

If we did it, Coach would be pissed and probably address the team about it before the next practice. That would

surely elevate our reputation to “the kids with the biggest balls in town”. This could be an opportunity to earn the respect and deference of all our peers in Highburg.

“Yeah! Count me in Ricky. I’m no pussy,” I said as I turned towards the back seat and looked straight at Bogie and Tojo.

“Flash, will you drop these two pussies off and drive Ricky and me up by Coach’s house?” I added emphatically.

“Sure, but I ain’t waitin’ for you guys. You’ll have to walk back!” he replied.

With that, we dropped off Bogie and Tojo at Jack’s and then stopped at Pete’s Minimart to pick up the soap. Ricky emerged with the soap and a half dozen eggs too just in case we got really gutsy.

We drove to Coach’s house at the outskirts of town. Flash parked about two hundred yards down the road from the driveway. He wanted to be sure no one spotted him and could link him to the travesty that was about to occur.

“Don’t you guys ever tell nobody that I drove you up here, ya know what I mean?” he said as Ricky and I exited the car.

“Never” I replied.

We stealthily crept back up the road towards the driveway as Flash’s taillights crept away into the darkness. We moved across the lawn to the side of the building being careful to stay in the shadows cast by the tall pine trees in the moonlight. The house was in complete blackness save the light emanating from one rear basement window.

“Beautiful!

Nobody home!

We can probably get every window in the house,” Ricky whispered.

We both pulled the bars of soap from our pockets and tiptoed towards Coach’s house. Halfway there, we suddenly heard muffled voices come from the lighted basement window.

We stopped cold in our tracks. We stood like frozen statues as the sounds continued.

Ricky silently pointed to the source and then slowly stooped down on all fours. I followed and we both inched

up to the window with excited curiosity. By the time we got there, we were on our bellies pulling ourselves along the ground with our elbows and knees, army style.

The pane was almost completely frosted with the evening dew however a small portion in the lower-left corner remained clear.

Ricky peered into the basement. Within seconds he recoiled with a look of horror and slowly rolled to the side of the window opening.

“Holy fuckin’ shit” he mouthed and pointed to the small transparent opening through which he had been looking.

“Look” he mouth again excitedly waving.

I crawl over and peeked in, excited as to what I might see.

After a few seconds, I too recoiled from my viewing point and moved to the other side of the window. I looked at Ricky with my mouth hung open, unable to speak.

Ricky then moved back to the window for one last look, probably to reconfirm for himself, what we had just seen.

I motioned to him as he pulled away from the opening for a second time and we both crawled back into the shadows of the pines. Once there, we arose and carefully walked back across Coach's lawn and back to the road.

For the first few hundred yards of the journey back to town we said nothing. We walked solemnly and mute. Suddenly, the sound of an approaching car came from behind. Instinctively, we both ran into the brush adjacent to the road and crouched down.

It was a fifty-five Ford. It was hard to be sure, but it looked to be a red and white two-tone in the dim moonlight. We could hear the pop, pop, pop of the glass pack muffler as it coasted down the hill passed us.

We turned and looked at each other as we emerged from our roadside hiding.

"Howie!" I said.

"Sure be" replied Ricky.

"Man, I can't believe what we just saw," I said.

"Me neither" replied Ricky.

“What are we going to do?” I asked hesitatingly.

“I’m not doin’ nothin’. I’m just pretending that I never saw shit,” Ricky answered.

We continued our two-mile walk back towards town.

The night quiet was again broken by the sound of an oncoming car. We immediately recognized it with its broken left headlight and a loud muffler. It was Moose.

He pulled over ahead of us, rolled down the window and tapped the horn.

“What are you guys doin’ out here?” he yelled.

“Come on! Get in!”

“Hey Moose, we thought your leg was all fucked up,” I said as we opened the passenger door. Ricky jumped in the back seat. I slid in the front and pulled the door closed.

“Yeah, it is” he replied.

“But I can still work the gas with my toes. Ain’t easy but I can do it” and with that, he pressed unevenly on the accelerator. The car bucked forward and off we rode.

“So, what are you guys doin’ out here?” Moose repeated.

“Nothin’” I exclaimed.

“Nothin’? You walked all the way out here to do nothin’?”

Moose questioned.

“You know Harry Raines. Somebody said that he hid a case of beer out here by Shady Road and we came out looking’ for it” came Ricky’s reply from the back seat.

“Ain’t never heard of any Harry Raines,” answered Moose.

“He’s from Henderson. He’s a friend of mine” Ricky responded instantly.

“Did ya find it?” asked Moose.

“No, we didn’t. Guess he was just bustin’ balls” Ricky answered.

“I might be doin’ some bustin’ on his face when I see him again” he added emphatically, attempting to make his story even more convincing.

I sat silently, amazed at Ricky’s impromptu excuse. It was a pretty weak story, but it certainly seemed to satisfy Moose’s curiosity and that was what counted.

Moose dropped us off at Snookie's. I exited the car with a sigh of relief. Not only had Moose's inquisitiveness been erased but also, we had made it back to town safely in spite of his severely limited, broken leg driving skills. We stood out front and again spied Flash snailing towards us.

He pulled over and rolled the window down.

"Well boys, how did it go?" he queried.

"Not that good" I replied as we got in his car.

"What do ya mean?"

There was a long pause. I really didn't know what to say. I certainly wasn't going to say a word about what had happened.

"Ah, we chickened out!" Ricky blurted.

"Yeah, we lost our balls" I instantaneously added with all the conviction that I could muster.

"But Flash, you're not gonna tell anybody are ya?"

"No! Not no one" he assured us.

“Thanks, Flash. You’re a real pal not makin’ us look like chicken shit in front of everybody” I thanked him.

Suddenly, Ricky cried excitedly.

“Holy shit, my hat!”

I turned to see him frantically scouring the back seat, searching for the missing hat.

“Look under the seat” I answered.

“I am” he replied while lying on the car floor and raking his hand back and forth under the front seats.

After several minutes of vain exploration, he sat erect.

“Can’t find it. Musta lost it up by Coach’s.

I kinda remember puttin’ it in my back pocket so I wouldn’t lose it, but I guess I did” he said dispiritedly.

With that Flash drove Ricky and me home.

I flopped on the bed, fully clothed, staring at the darkened ceiling. The details of the night rolled over and over through my mind.

Ricky’s words echoed.

“I’m not doin’ nothin’. I’m just pretending that I never saw shit!”

I’m sure he was right. I was just hoping that I could keep it all bottled up inside of me.

“Who would believe us anyway and even if they did, then what?” I thought.

The ringing of the telephone in the living room startled me out of my trance.

“John, its Kathy. It’s for you” my mother called down the hall.

Kathy MacIntyre was my girlfriend of about six months.

She was in my math class and pretty hot stuff. I never really even thought that I had a chance especially when I saw Howie Green walking her from class to class.

I guess, however, either my charm or Howie’s lack of charm sealed the deal because a month after I started talking to her, Howie was nowhere to be seen. I don’t think he took to the situation well. Every time after that, whenever I saw him, he peered back at me with a

threatening, “I’d like to kill you” scowl plastered across his face.

Back in the fifties, girls all wore long, camouflaging skirts but very tight sweaters. Kathy’s sweaters were certainly of high tensile strength. Every fiber was stretched to its elastic limit without tearing. It was a miracle of fifties textile engineering.

In those days, girls too, had nicknames, most unbeknownst to them. They were generally assigned by the boys and usually used to describe a specific physical characteristic or activity. Kathy was known as “Kathy MacTits”. I’m pretty sure it was Stinky that came up with that moniker and in light of the fact that MacDonald’s was unheard of at the time; I’d say it was quite avant-garde. Well, in any event, after I started going out with her she was never again referred to by that pseudonym, not in my presence anyway.

Kathy had many other obvious assets as well. She had a cute rosy face and curly blonde hair, an enticing smile,

which exposed her snow-white teeth at every delight. Most importantly she had an oversupply of hormones. She had all the things that an adolescent boy could want and even more.

She knew how to type, fifty words a minute. That meant my hours of hunt-and-peck term papers were over.

Unfortunately, however, she, like everyone else, also had her flaws, the main one being her father. He was a large man with a commanding presence and outwardly appeared good-natured and friendly.

Do you know how you sometimes get a feeling about someone despite his overt manner? Well, that's the way it was with me and Mr. MacIntyre.

I just knew that if he ever found out that I had defiled his daughter in any way he would tear out my heart and have it for supper. With that in mind, I knew that I had but two choices, pussy or life! I chose life!

I took the phone from Mom and she obligingly left me and went into the kitchen.

“Hi, Kathy.”

“I thought you were coming over tonight for ‘Night Lab’” she answered in a terse tone.

‘Night Lab’ was her term for a smooching workout in her basement. When I first met her, we began by doing our biology homework together in her cellar. I was pretty good at the science stuff and as I said, she was good with the typewriter so the whole thing started as a symbiotic relationship. After a few nights of homework at the downstairs table we began completing the assignments on the basement sofa. One night while we were finishing up our work on the sofa her father called down the stairs.

“Kathy, how’s everything going down there?”

We both instantly sat up, ramrod straight and hurried to straighten our clothing.

I felt the immediate urge to call back “Everything was going just fuckin’ great until you called!” but the thought of instant death kept me silent.

Kathy yelled back, "Fine Dad, we're just finishing up our biology lab write up".

Thus the "Night Lab" term was conceived.

"Why didn't you come over? You didn't forget me, did you?" she asked in a kittenish voice.

I had completely forgotten in the excitement of the evening.

"Well, ah - no, I know I didn't forget. I kinda got involved in something" I stammered back.

"Something more important than me?" she replied in a comely tone.

"No! No!" I again stammered, "Of course not".

"Well, what then?" she replied.

I didn't know what to say. This could be the opportunity to unburden me. Should I tell him the whole story or just make up a feeble excuse?

"Ricky and me, we" I began and then hesitated.

"We went out, it's Mischief Night you know," I continued.

“And you guys were out all night? You musta had a real good time, huh. It must have been great fun to forget all about me. What did you guys do?” she interjected.

“We went to soap some windows” I answered.

“That’s all? And that kept you out all night?”

“No, not really, there was a lot more” I added in a low voice.

“If I tell you, you can’t tell anybody. Nobody!

You gotta promise” I said.

“I promise! I promise!” she answered with strong sincerity.

With that, I burst out with the whole sordid tale in one nonstop sentence. It felt like air leaving a balloon as the pressure within me drained with each word.

I wasn’t sure if it was the smart thing to do but it felt good, relief from my nagging thoughts and a release of the internal turmoil.

Kathy said nothing. I felt as if I could almost see her face, startled and perplexed, as I spoke.

“This isn’t just a story, is it Whody?” she finally replied in a disbelieving tone.

“Do you really think I would make this kind of thing up?” I answered spontaneously.

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t but it’s just so hard to believe” she concluded.

As I hung up the phone I felt plagued by the uncertainty of my decision to tell Kathy all that I had.

“Oh well, too late now. It was done” I thought.

At least I felt better for having told someone, kind of like after you leave the confessional box.

Chapter Four

Monday came much too soon. That afternoon it would be practice as usual and we would have to face both Howie and Coach, showing no evidence of our knowledge. We could show no signs of the turmoil within.

Two o'clock finally came and off we went to football with nervousness and foreboding that we might do something, or say something, even the slightest thing that revealed what we had seen.

My apprehension was overwhelming. I struggled to remove the entire incident from my mind. I was so anxious that I actually began to feel that if I thought to intensely, others in my presence might be able to read my mind and discover our secret.

Neither Ricky nor I even glanced at Coach or Howie fearful that our expressions might tell a tale. As the

practice came to an end, I was at the point of exhaustion, not from the physical rigors but from the emotional drain. As the days wore on the pretense became easier although the thoughts of that Friday night never left my mind. They raced to the forefront during each and every practice session in spite of my efforts to repress them. Every once in a while, when Ricky and I were alone, we would talk about that night and again agree to remain silent.

The Thanksgiving Day game was just around the corner, a week away. The humiliation of the year before at the hands of Burton High had been forgiven and forgotten. The team had regained its winning ways. We were at the end of an unbeaten season and had won almost every game by thirty or more points. Howie was having the season that the dreams of high school football players are built on. He was the leading scorer in the state and had the most yards rushing in the illustrious history of Highburg High. He had been offered several Division I scholarships despite his poor academics. All the town folks agreed that

he was on a sure path to meet, or most probably exceed the football legend of Big Moose. Many went as far as to predict the Pros, even a place at Canton.

It was a hard day of practice; we were worked to the bone even though everyone knew that our final game would most likely be another business as usual, thirty-point win.

We all knew why. Coach was eager to see Howie break the state scoring record and he was doing everything possible to make sure that would happen. That

“everything possible” involved us, the second team running full-contact defense against the varsity for play after endless play. No huddle was even called between plays. Coach merely barked out a code number known only to the offense as they immediately lined up to inflict the next round of punishment on us.

When it was finally over we all walked back to the locker room. As we walked, Howie’s loud bantering eclipsed everyone’s conversation. He was on the ultimate high

anticipating the record-breaking performance that he was sure would come on Thursday.

We entered the locker room and began to undress. Ricky removed his shoulder pads, hung them in his locker and issued a great sigh of fatigue as he did so.

“What the fuck are you tired about Sambo?” came a shout from the far end of the room.

“You didn’t do shit today. I ran over you like a bulldozer. You didn’t give a shit for defense. We shouldn’t even let guys like you on this team.

Not only are you a horseshit player you’re a nigger.

You’re lucky we even let you in this locker room with us” he continued scornfully,

Stillness spread over the room. Everyone instantly became motionless and mute with a look of astonishment.

Ricky froze too, but only for an instant. Everyone knew that he was not the kind of guy who would take shit from anyone, but no one expected what happened next.

“You mother fuckin’ queer!” exploded Ricky.

“I know all about you and Coach. I saw you. You two guys blowin’ each other. You’re not only the best football player on the team you’re the best blow job!”

With that Ricky shot towards Howie like a lightning bolt, eyes flashing and fists flying. Within seconds Ricky was on top of Howie who was lying on the concrete floor being hammered by a flurry of punishing lefts and rights.

Several team members immediately jumped in and attempted to pull him off.

Seconds later, with Ricky restrained, Howie lifted himself from his prone position, blood streaming from his nose and silently walked to his locker to continue removing his equipment without so much as a word. The entire team stood agape and then, they too silently turned and continued their undress.

“What are you gonna do now?” I whispered to Ricky as he returned to his locker which was next to mine.

“I’m outta here. I shoulda quit playin’ for these fuckin’ homos right after that night” he whispered back.

I hesitated. Then I replied conclusively

“Me too!”

We both showered and dressed. The room was still silent as the others on the team did likewise.

When we prepared to leave, Ricky gathered his equipment and walked to Coach’s cubbyhole office and knocked. The door opened with Coach standing in the entrance.

Ricky looked Coach straight in the eye and threw the pile of equipment into the office at his feet.

“Done!” he said, turned and walked away.

I myself lacked his courage. I just left my equipment in the locker and never again went back to practice.

Coolness enveloped the entire school the following day.

The thermometer read seventy-two, but the mood was well below freezing. It was unusually quiet in the

hallways. Everyone seemed to be speaking in whispers.

They all glanced back and forth as they spoke seeming fearful that they might be overheard.

As Ricky and I walked the halls the small groups became silent and parted widely to allow our passage as if to avoid some lethal contamination. It was obvious that the news of the confrontation between Ricky and Howie had spread.

Lunchtime finally arrived, and we hurried from the building towards Jack's so as to be the first to claim possession of the pinball machine. This was the usual drill. Everyone raced at lunch break so as to stake his claim.

With speed and some lucky one could control the machine for the entire lunch period. Luck was required because in order to continue playing after the first game, only games that were "racked up" were allowed. A loss without additional games being won required one to relinquish the machine and allowed the next player in line to deposit his nickel and test his pinball skill.

We entered Jack's and quickly realized that the race had been lost. Several guys were already crowded around the machine, coins in hand, watching Vincy Lombo

successfully nudge the machine into submission. The clack-clack of the machine indicated accumulated replays being racked up in rapid succession.

As we approached, uneasy stares met us followed by very unenthusiastic greetings. Within minutes the crowd dissipated. Vincy finished his game and then he too left with five replays remaining. No one said a word, as they ebbed away, except for Vincy who claimed he had to catch up on some homework before lunch was over and that was why he was leaving the replays. Knowing Vincy to be the proud “anchorman” of the class, I was sure his excuse was a guise to justify his leaving our company as quickly as he could.

We were both sure we knew why we had become the pariahs of Highburg High. There we stood, abandoned, just Ricky and I and the machine with five free games. The games were hardly compensation for ostracism, but we played them anyway.

The school day wore on and the chill in the air intensified. It was all about Ricky's outburst in the locker room. The story had spread throughout the school like the flu. Although I cowardly had said nothing at the time, I had quit the team with him that day and therefore tacitly condoned what he had said. I thereby became equally guilty of the accusation against Coach and I was also shunned like Ricky.

At the end of school, I walked to Kathy's locker to meet her as usual.

"I can't see you anymore," she said with a dejected voice.

"What do you mean 'you can't see me'?" I exclaimed.

She looked downward and spoke.

"Dad said I can't be with a guy that would lie about Coach like you and your friend Ricky did. He said he played for Coach and he knows that he would never be any kinda queer like you guys said.

He called both of you 'lying little fagots'. He said you two are probably the queers, not Coach."

“Do you really believe that?” I asked.

“No” she whispered.

“But I still can’t see you anymore” she answered tearfully.

She then turned and walked away and out of my life.

So far, an attempted Mischief Night prank has cost me all of my friends and my girlfriend.

“What else?” I thought.

Several days passed and the climate was no friendlier than before. If anything, there was a greater iciness. The rumor had now made its way through all of Highburg itself. I could even feel the disdain of adults as evidenced by their cold stares as I passed them on the street. I often thought it would have been so much better if I hadn’t gone with Ricky that night. I really couldn’t blame him for his response to Howie, but it sure did cause a shit load of trouble for us both.

Maybe what I could do was just get Ricky to tell everyone that what he had said was just a lie and he only said it in anger. He was only trying to reply to Howie’s taunts and

none of it was true. Then I would add that I had only quit the team because Ricky was my friend and I was trying to be loyal.

“Sure! That’s what I’ll do and the whole thing could be smoothed over.

Why should I give a shit about what Coach and Howie do in their spare time anyway?

Ain’t really none of my business. If they want to be queers, so be it as long as they ain’t queerin’ me why should I care?” I thought.

It was the day before Thanksgiving and school was out for four days. What a relief!

Four days without anxiety or reduced anxiety anyway! Of course, then too, it was four days with nobody to hang around with. Jack’s was out. So was Snookie’s. I was an outcast at both.

I was pretty much condemned to stay at home. It became so monotonous that I actually began to do some schoolwork.

Even my mother asked several times why I wasn't "going to the library" as usual.

I simply replied with a wisecrack.

"They ran out of books. I read them all" I answered. That ended her questioning, but it also got me one serious scolding. It was worth it because I certainly wasn't about to explain the real reason.

As we left school that day, Ricky and I met in the hallway and walked towards the front door.

"What's ya doin' tomorrow?" he asked.

"Probably nothin'" I replied.

"How about we go to the game?" he said.

"Are you nuts?" I quickly blurted.

"No! I wanna see if Howie breaks the record. I sure hope he don't.

We'll stand by the far end zone and watch. Hardly nobody ever watches from there. If somebody sees us, so what?

All we're gonna be doin' is watchin' the game. No law against that!" explained Ricky.

I hesitated.

“Well, I guess. I’d like to see if he does too.

You hitch a ride over to town tomorrow and I’ll meet ya at about nine o’clock by Snookie’s and we’ll walk down to the field. Game starts at ten.”

“Yeah” he replied, “I think my father might even drive me over. I’ll see ya tomorrow at nine” and with that, we left the school.

“Ah, tomorrow will be the perfect opportunity to talk with him about my idea of his retraction. I’ll try to get him to say it was just a lie in the heat of anger” I thought to myself as I walked home alone.

Chapter Five

I met Ricky at the coffee shop as planned and together we walked towards the football field. It was a long walk, about a mile and a half, but we had plenty of time. The game didn't start until ten and it was only nine-fifteen when we set out.

"Hey, Rick" I began, in the most tactful tone that I could muster.

"What do ya think about takin' back what ya said to Howie?"

"Why do we care what Coach and Howie do? It really ain't none of our fuckin' business ya know.

So, they wanna queer each other. So, what!" I said as convincingly as I could.

There was a brief silence. Ricky stopped walking, as did I. He turned and looked at me.

“Are you shittin’ me, Whody. You know what we saw. You know how Howie got all over me, callin’ me a nigger and shittin’ on me in front of the whole team. Do you really think I should just suck all that down without sayin’ a word?

Especially, knowin’ what I know about him and Coach and you know it too!” he responded excitedly.

I looked back at him for a moment, feverishly trying to compose a persuasive reply.

“You’re right! I know you’re right and you know you’re right but nobody else thinks you’re right.

This whole thing ain’t doin’ either of us any good.

We got no more friends. They’re all afraid to be seen with us. Even the old people in town hate us.

Everybody!

I was standing outside of Jack’s the other day by myself and Moose came ridin’ by. His foot’s all healed up I guess cause he was drivin’ okay.

He just went right by pretending that he didn't even see me. I know he did cause I could see him givin' me like a sideway look but he just kept on pretendin'.

Even Flash don't stop anymore.

Nobody, Man nobody's gonna hang with us anymore.

We gotta get this over with and you sayin' that the whole thing was just somethin' you said when you were mad is the only way that's gonna happen!"

I waited nervously, looking at Ricky, waiting to see how convincing I had been.

He looked down at the ground as he spoke.

"Well, maybe you're right" he muttered, and we continued to walk.

After a quarter-mile or so his answer came.

"Yeah, you're probably right" he repeated.

"I'll do it. I'll just kinda tell a few people that what I said wasn't true and I'm sure that will get around quick and maybe everything will get smoothed over after a while.

I really don't wanna do it but like you said, I guess I gotta. I'll do it Monday in school."

"Thanks" I replied, and we continued to the field.

It was a great game, great for Highburg and Howie. The score was forty-two to zero at the half and Coach kept Howie and the first team in for the entire game and ran up the score. In the end, the final score was sixty-two to seven and forty of those points were Howie's. He not only broke the state scoring record, but he also demolished it.

After the game, both he and Coach were rushed by reporters from both local and state-wide newspapers.

Even several radio stations sent reporters with portable tape recorders. Flashbulbs popped like fireworks as Howie and Coach spoke. It was an end of a season like Highburg had never seen. The entire town was in a state of euphoria, enraptured by the gridiron accomplishments of Highburg High and its star halfback.

After a half an hour or so, the crowd at the center of the field began to dissipate and the jubilant spectators left the

stands. The team led by Coach then headed to the field house. Ricky and I left our end zone spot and began a slow walk back to the center of town.

We had walked for a half-hour or so, stopping frequently to skim stones across the nearby pond on the way.

Suddenly, the sound of a roaring car engine approached from the road behind us. A red and white Ford flew passed. It then came to a screeching halt thirty yards ahead of us. Five guys piled out of the car each wearing a Highburg red and black football jacket. They walked towards us, led by Howie with eyes flashing.

“What are you two punks doin’ here?” he yelled with an angry snarl.

“Yeah! We don’t want no losers and quitters like you two even near our field” contributed Jake.

With that, they moved even closer.

“You know the other day that shit you said about me, I shoulda killed ya for that, right there. I didn’t cause Coach

was right next door and I didn't want him comin' in and hearin' all that lyin' shit you was sayin' about him too. But now Coach knows what you said so I can beat the shit outta you with no problem" threatened Howie.

With that he lunged towards Ricky, tackling him to the ground. I reflexively grabbed Howie around his neck, trying to pull him off Ricky only to feel a solid blow to the back of my head. I immediately rolled off the pile to the side onto my back. Lying there I saw Jake's booted foot in front of my face.

"Stay right there. Don't ya move an inch or I got another shot for ya and this one's gonna be right in your ugly fuckin' face" he said as he cocked his foot back in preparation for the next kick.

Meanwhile, Ricky handled himself well. He managed to get back to his feet and deliver several punishing blows to his aggressor. Howie stepped back, wiped the trickle of blood from his nose on the back of his left hand and waved to the others with his right.

Then the others stepped into the melee, dragged Ricky to the car and pinned him against it allowing Howie to fire at will. When his anger was satisfied he and Jake pulled Ricky to the pond and threw him in headfirst.

“That’s the end of that. Say somethin’ else and the next time you won’t be able to get outta that pond” yelled Howie as Ricky struggled to scramble to his feet in the waist-deep, icy water. He waded over to the shore and pulled himself up the bank.

I sat up and got to my feet as the five climbed backed into the car and sped off. Ricky emerged and stood by the edge of the road shivering violently in the brisk autumn breeze.

“That’s about it for that idea of yours,” he said in a quivering disgusted voice.

“I’d rather die than give that prick any satisfaction now. I don’t give a shit what he thinks he’s gonna do to me.

Fuckin’ queer!”

“Hey man!” I replied, “We gotta get you some dry clothes before you freeze to death and patch up your eye and

your lip. Let's go over to my house and we'll get you changed."

My house was about a quarter-mile away and we hurried in a jog to it with the squish - squish of Ricky's waterlogged sneakers keeping time all the way. When we arrived, my mother met us at the door.

"What happened?" she exclaimed.

"How did you get soaked and what happened to your face?"

"Ah, well we were skimming rocks on the pond down by the field after the game and he slipped on a log by the edge and fell in" I quickly interjected.

She took another look at Ricky.

"And your face? What about that?" she continued this time looking for Ricky to answer.

A moment of silence persisted.

"I hit it on the log when I fell."

She turned to me and I immediately knew by her look that our answers were far from convincing.

Then, she said with raised eyebrows “Well, okay! Go and get some of your old clothes for him.”

“You go and dry yourself off and change” and she motioned to Ricky.

Dried and changed he emerged from the bathroom.

“Let me see if I can fix up some of those cuts that you got from hitting that log,” Mom said sarcastically.

“Sit over here” she commanded, and he complied.

He winced and groaned as she dabbed the wounds with alcohol saturated cotton swabs. She worked like an expert cut man in a boxer’s corner between rounds. When the job was done, the blood flow had ceased and swelling began to dissipate. The black eye was still apparent, however.

The ice pack that he held against it was doing little to diminish its discoloration.

“Can I use the phone to call my father?” he requested.

I handed it to him and a half-hour later a horn blew in front of the house. I watched out of the front window as he got into the car. I could see a heated conversation ensue

almost immediately. They stayed parked for several minutes and then drove off.

Chapter Six

Monday morning came much too soon.

Back to the icy atmosphere of Highburg High I went; back to the glares, sneers and cold shoulders.

I went to my locker. I crammed my coat into it and pulled out the stuff for the day's classes. I slammed the locker door, twisted the combination dial and looked up.

"What the fuck happened to you?" I said in a startled voice.

"What happened to your other eye?" I exclaimed.

Ricky's left eye was still a bit blackened looking as if it had started to heal but now his right eye was swollen and cut too.

"God damn log again" he replied.

"Come on man, what happened."

I kind of thought I knew after having witnessed the confrontation between him and his father in the car. He

probably gave his old man the same story that he gave my mom, but the old man didn't go for it either. The difference was, however, when Ricky's father didn't believe his stories, instead of just blowing it off; he just proceeded to beat the truth out of him.

"My old man didn't like my log story" he replied.

"I get it" I answered.

"That's not all of it," he continued.

"I had to tell him the whole thing."

"What do you mean 'the whole thing'?" I asked nervously, afraid of what I thought I might hear.

"You know! The whole Coach and Howie thing we saw" he blurted.

"I had to. Not only cause he was beatin' the shit outta me but cause I didn't want him to keep thinkin' I left the team because I was a quitter."

He paused.

"You know, now I'm glad I told him. At least I got a chance to tell somebody who really believes me, and I

know he does. He knows that I never lie when he's whippin' me."

"So, what did he say when you told him?"

"He was real surprised like us. He almost couldn't believe what I was tellin' him but like I said, he knows I never lie to him when he gets to the whippin' part. He knows too that I would never make up a story like that if it wasn't true.

Then he got plenty pissed, not at me or you but at Howie and the guys that beat me up, especially when I told about him callin' me a nigger and all".

"Then what?" I asked.

"Well, he went out, got in the car and drove right to the cops. He said he told the cops exactly what happened and ..."

"He told the cops the whole story, about Coach and all?" I interrupted anxiously.

"No, I don't think so. He said he just wants those guys picked up for beatin' me up. He said the cops didn't seem

too eager to do it, Howie bein' the town hero and Jake bein' the sergeant's nephew you know.

The cops didn't say they weren't gonna do much but that was what he thought from the way they all acted. They did say 'they would look into it' whatever that means.

Dad said he wants them to get back to him and tell him what they find out, so we'll see. I know my old man. He was pissed and when he gets pissed he stays right on stuff. He'll be on them cops like flies on shit until he finds out what's goin' on."

The school late bell began to ring and we both scurried out in opposite directions to class.

It was ten twenty-five exactly. I know because the third period had just begun when there was a knock on the classroom door. Miss Rupert opened it revealing Mr. Robertson, the school principal. He whispered quietly to her and then he motioned me to come to the door.

"Mr. Crane come with me" he commanded, and I followed down the hall to his office.

He opened his office door and there seated before his desk was Ricky and Howie with Police Chief Simpson seated between them.

“Sit down son” and he pointed to the empty chair next to the Chief.

“We seem to have a problem here boys” he started.

“First we want to find out what’s going on here and then we’re going to straighten it out once and for all”

announced Mr. Robertson, sternly. He then cast a solemn stare at each of us, one at a time before continuing.

“Let me hear from you first,” he said looking straight at Ricky.

“What do you mean?” he replied vainly feigning ignorance.

“What do I mean? Did you look in the mirror this morning?”

“Yes” -answered Ricky.

“Then you certainly must have seen what I mean!”

Now, what happened? I want to hear your story. Let's go," snapped the principal.

"I got beat up" replied Ricky.

"I kind of thought so" again snapped Mr. Robertson.

"We, that is the Chief and I, want the whole story. Now, let's have it, the whole thing. No more stupid one-liners."

Ricky leaned back in the chair, with his hands folded in his lap, nervously tapping his left foot quietly on the floor. He began to speak with eyes cast downward.

"Whody and me were walking home after the football game".

"Whody and I were walking" interrupted the principal instinctively correcting Ricky's misused grammar.

"Right!

"Whody and I were walking home after the football game and Howie and a bunch of guys pulled up in a car and they all jumped out, beat me up and threw me in the pond down by the field. That was it. Then when I got home my dad made me tell him about it" Ricky concluded.

“Is this all true?” said Mr. Robertson looking straight at me.

“Yes,” I stammered.

“Is that what happened?” he questioned Howie.

Howie silently nodded.

“There’s got to be more to it than that!

Why?” he continued asking Howie.

“He deserved it after what he said” came the reply in a low tone.

“What did he say?”

Silence persisted.

“I said, ‘what did he say?’” ordered Robertson.

“I was only foolin’ around one day after practice. I was only teasin’ him” Howie began.

“Callin’ me a nigger!

Teasin’!” erupted Ricky.

“That ain't teasin’ where I come from, that fightin’ stuff!”

“You be quiet!” Robertson addressed the outburst and then continued to interrogate Howie.

“Did you call him that?” he asked.

“I don’t remember” came the halfhearted answer.

“Did he?” and Robertson looked at me.

“Yes, he did” I answered meekly.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure” I replied with a bit more courage.

Robertson leaned back, raised his hand to his chin and gazed into the distance for a moment. Then he addressed Howie.

“If you called him a name, why did you and your guys then beat on him? I would think it should be the other way around? I don’t quite get it.”

“Well, that isn’t all there was to it” replied Howie.

“He called me a queer!”

“‘Called you a queer’ So that’s a reason to beat him up?” queried the principal.

Howie looked down at his hands folded in his lap.

“That ain’t all he said. He said Coach and me were queerin’ each other. That’s what really made me mad.

Everybody loves Coach. Look what Coach did for me. I can't just let him say stuff like that about him. All the guys in the locker room heard him say it too.

Then after the game we was ridin' home down by the field and we saw these two guys alongside the road. Somebody in the back seat, I don't remember who said 'There's those two. Let's teach that one a lesson for what he said'.

Everybody in the car was pretty pumped. We just won the game, so I slammed on the brakes and we all got outta the car and just did what we did. That was it."

"And what do you have to say about all this?" Robertson pointed to me.

"Pretty much true, what he said" I responded.

"And you" and pointed to Ricky.

"Pretty much true" came the answer.

Again, Robertson sat back and thought.

"I can understand why you would call this boy a name after what he said to you" he started as he pointed to

Howie, “but why did you drag Coach into it?” he continued while then pointing to Ricky.

What’s he got to do with this?

Unless you were just mad because you weren’t starting.

Could that be it?”

Ricky hesitated and then looked up.

“No, that ain’t it Mr. Robertson. That ain’t it at all.”

“Then what is it?” asked Robertson sternly.

With that, Ricky blurted out the entire story of Mischief Night.

Everyone in the office sat agape as the words slowly left his lips.

I myself was stunned because I never expected that he would disclose the events of that evening so openly. But he did!

Several times during the account he was interrupted.

“That’s a lie. That’s a fuckin’ lie” shouted Howie.

“None of that language here” Robertson shouted back silencing Howie until his next outburst.

“Go on” he addressed Ricky and the story continued until the next eruption by Howie had to be quelled.

At its conclusion, Robertson addressed me.

“Is this all true?”

“Yes,” I answered solemnly.

At long last the Chief, who had said nothing during the entire meeting, finally spoke.

“I hope none of you boys are telling any lies. This is all very serious stuff.

Not a word is to be said to anyone and I mean anyone about what went on here today. I don’t want a word said about any of it. If I hear that any of you say anything there will be really serious consequences for you of that you can be sure” he emphasized sternly.

The meeting ended and we each were sent back to our classes five minutes apart.

Chapter Seven

The phone rang. I rolled over and looked at the clock alongside the bed. It read five A.M. Minutes later Mom came into my room.

“No school today” she announced and shut off the alarm clock.

“What?” I replied with surprise.

It certainly couldn't be a snow day, not with the temperature being fifty-five as was predicted. I sat up in bed and looked out of the window to be sure. No snow!

“Why? What happened?” I asked.

“I have no idea. The caller just said, ‘this is the high school calling - no school today’ and hung up. That’s all I know, so go back to sleep and we’ll find out later I’m sure” and she closed my door.

I reawakened at about nine, washed and hurriedly dressed. I was eager to find out why school was closed for the day. I left the house and raced uptown to Snookie's. As I walked I noticed a grey overcast even though the sun was shining brightly through a crystal blue sky. It wasn't the weather that was grey; it was an aura that seemed to hang over the town. There was solemnity in the air.

When I arrived, several guys were in the luncheonette. All sat like statues in forlorn poses. No banter, no smiles, no matchbook football on the tables, just somber stares met me.

Tojo sat in the corner with his chair back tilted against the wall.

"What the hell is goin' on? It looks like somebody died" I asked.

He looked up at me for an instant and then immediately cast his gaze downward without a word.

"Is anybody goin' to tell me what's goin' on?" I announced in a raised voice.

Silence continued. I left Snookie's more perplexed than when I had entered.

As I walked, I spied Flash inching down Main Street. I waved and yelled as he approached attempting to flag him down. He continued to look straight ahead, both hands glued to the upper portion of the steering wheel completely ignoring my gestures. I continued my unheeded frantic beckoning until at last, I stepped into the street forcing him to stop.

"Flash!

Come on open the door and let me in. I gotta talk to ya."

If anybody knew what was going on, he would know. He always had the town gossip on the tip of his tongue. He made it his business to know everyone else's business. He had the title "Hedda Hopper of Highburg" and he wore it proudly. That and his driving style were his only claims to fame.

He maintained his straight-ahead gaze pretending not to hear my pleas.

“Come on Man, just for a minute” I persisted.

Then, without a word, he reached over and unlocked the passenger side door. I raced to the side of the car and slid in.

Without a word, still staring ahead, he took his foot off the brake, set the car in gear and we began to ride.

“Flash, what the hell is going on? Everybody looks like somebody died and nobody will say a word to me. What happened?” I began.

“Somebody did die” came his somber answer.

“Who?” I blurted.

“Coach!”

“Are you shittin’ me?”

Coach!” I repeated.

“How?”

Flash took a deep breath and sighed.

“Well, they found him late yesterday afternoon, about six o’clock, in his car in his driveway. He was just layin’ in the front seat with the engine runnin’. From what I heard his

wife was at Bingo over at Saint Clare's all afternoon and when she came home she found him."

"How'd he die?" I asked in a consternated voice.

"Don't know yet. Guess the cops are tryin' to figure it out. Could be he just died. He wasn't any kid and he did like the booze. He usta be down at Sally's Place all the time. I usta see his car there a lot.

They say he use ta get really shit faced. I heard the cops stopped him lotsa times and one of them would get in his car and drive him home while the other one followed in the cop car.

A couple of times they found him in the car pulled off the road, passed out and they would just drive him home again like usual.

So, who knows what killed him, it coulda been the booze or somethin' else. Who knows?"

"Man, that's some shit. Coach is dead. Hard to believe" I replied.

"How come nobody would tell me?" I added.

Flash hesitated and then looked over at me.

“Guess they all heard about the story you was telling’ about Coach. You know the whole of Highburg loved Coach and when you and your buddy Ricky start tellin’ stories about him like you did, well, most people don’t take too kindly to it. Some of ‘em might even think that the things you said might have had somethin’ to do with him dyin’”

“Something to do with him dying?” I repeated.

“What the fuck could that have to do with him dying?”

“I don’t know. I’m just telling ya what I hear. That’s all” he answered.

“Heard where?” I asked anxiously.

“Well” he started, “I was over at the Hayloft Bar, over on Route Twenty last night and I ran into Minnie Moose and she told me a lot. She works at the police station in an office right next to the Chief. She’s a clerk there; been there ever since high school.

She said that the cops picked up Coach night before last and brought him in for some questions, I guess about what you and Ricky said to Mr. Robertson the other day.”

“How did she know about Ricky and me meetin’ with the principal?” I interrupted, with surprise.

“That’s what I said. I asked her who told her all this stuff.”

“And she said?” I interrupted again.

“Chief Simpson”

“Jesus Christ” I muttered to myself.

“He’s the guy that told us not to say a word to anybody,” I said out loud.

“Well, he didn’t really tell her straight out. The heat in the station doesn’t work so good. The Chief’s office is always hot as hell and hers is always cold, so they leave his door open all the time to kinda balance the heat out. She hears a lotta shit.

She just kinda heard it all through the door” answered Flash.

“Alright, then what’s the rest of it?” I queried.

“Well, according to her, they asked Coach a bunch of questions about the whole thing and he just said it was all a lotta bullshit and that was it. They said they believed it was bullshit too and told him the only reason that they hadda bring him in, was CYA for them. Then they drove him home.”

“And that was it?” I continued.

“No! Chief said he knew it was a lotta shit right from the get-go. Coach could never be a homo. He was sure of what he said. He played for Coach and so did the other two cops in town and they all knew Coach was the best. He’d never do that kinda queer stuff, never.

Minnie said he was pretty pissed at you and Ricky for spreadin’ that story and if he even sees you guys spittin’ on the sidewalk he’s gonna bring yas in and arrest yas.”

“How does any of that get us involved in Coach’s dyin’?”

I asked.

“People said that maybe what you guys said got him so upset that he had a heart attack or maybe even that it

caused him to kill his self. I don't know if that kinda thing could be true or not and I didn't think so but that's what some people are sayin'."

"Some people - who?" I questioned.

Flash paused.

"Most people, I'd say.

You know when a guy like Coach that everybody loves, just dies all of a sudden like that, everybody gets pretty upset. Maybe they just gotta blame somebody to get the upset out.

I don't know, maybe that's it or maybe that's really what they think or maybe it's true, who knows?

I'm just tellin' ya what I been hearin'. That's all."

"So, what's gonna happen now?" I replied.

"Minnie says the cops are investigating. When they found him, they took a shit load of pictures and then called the County Sheriff to come down and look the whole thing over before they even moved him.

I heard they might even do an autopsy on him. They asked his wife about it and she said okay.”

“Hey Man, wanna do me a favor? How about drivin’ me over to Ricky’s. I wanna tell him about all this. I’m sure he doesn’t know.”

“Okay, I guess so,” replied Flash reluctantly and we headed towards Henderson Town.

“Bang! Bang!” I knocked on Ricky’s front door.

“Bang! Bang!” again.

The curtain at the porch window parted open ever so slightly.

“It’s me, Whody. Is Ricky home?” I called at the unopened door.

“Not home” came the muffled voice of Ricky’s sister.

“Don’t know where he went. He went with my dad,” she added.

“Okay,” I replied and walked back to Flash’s waiting car. Together we rode back to town. He dropped me off at

home where I spent the rest of the day pondering all that Flash had told me.

Chapter Eight

School reopened the next day. When I arrived, the doorways were draped in purple and black bunting.

School was ended at one o'clock, so everybody could go to Coach's wake over at Mallon's Funeral Home.

I didn't go. I figured that me being there would only start more trouble.

I walked by Mallon's at two-thirty and the line was wrapped around the block. The whole town was in mourning. Purple and black bunting was hung not only at the school but also at the police station and the firehouse.

Flags were at half-staff all over town and many of the shop windows bore signs of lament.

"Coach - We will miss you"

"Coach - We love you"

"Coach - You'll be a winner in heaven too"

Every storefront pronounced words of sympathy and grief.

The viewing was to be for five days. Many of the same people attended night after night. Coach had no family. He had always referred to his players, past and present, as his family. He had no children and no surviving brothers or sisters; no real family save his wife Annie. She was an only child and was also without relatives.

Big Moose stood by Coach's wife through every afternoon and evening of the five days. At the first viewing, he had brought his All-American trophy, placed it in Coach's arms and asked Annie that it be buried with him. She agreed.

Mourners came from everywhere. Former players from far and wide crowded the small Highburg Hotel at the center of town. At the mayor's request, Mallon had agreed to extend the awake for the two extra days at his own expense to accommodate the multitude.

The day of the funeral came. Ten o'clock on Saturday at St. Clare's. The procession, led by Highburg's two police cars with lights flashing, extended two miles to the cemetery at the outskirts of town.

A mob two hundred strong crowded the gravesite as the casket was brought from the hearse carried by Big Moose, the assistant coach - Coach Ryan and four other former players. Coach's wife followed attired completely in black, save the white handkerchief she had pressed against her teary face.

The coffin was positioned, and the words of Coach Ryan echoed across the graveyard as his departing tribute to "the greatest coach the game has ever seen".

His despondent uttering was followed by the less eloquent but equally sorrowful intonations of Big Moose. At the eulogies' conclusion, a woeful sigh rose from the crowd and Coach was lowered to his final rest.

The next day, Mr. Robertson again appeared at the door of my English class and promptly marched me down the hall

to his office. Standing at its entrance were the Chief and Ricky.

“Boys, I want you two to go with the Chief” and with that the three of us walked to the waiting police car at the front of the school. When we arrived at the station house, I was seated in a side room and Ricky in the Chief’s office. The doors were closed and there we each sat alone, in nervous solitude. After a half-hour or so, my door opened, and the Chief accompanied by Officer James entered.

“Do you know why you’re here, son?” the Chief asked.

“Not really, unless it’s somethin’ to do with the last time you talked to me at school” I stammered back.

“Well, yeah it is” he answered, “That and more.”

“Ya know we kinda found out that Coach didn’t really just up and die.

The county ME says it looks like he was choked.”

“ME?” I interjected.

“Medical Examiner! He’s the guy who checks out to see if someone just died or if maybe they were murdered”

Officer James answered.

“Murdered?”

Coach was murdered!

I don’t know nothin’ about that. I just know what I told ya last time. That’s all. Nothin’ else” I exclaimed frantically.

“We’re not sayin’ you do, but we still wanna ask ya some questions, just in case,” said the Chief in a voice as reassuring as he could muster.

“Now let me see if I got all this stuff straight from last time. You and Ricky went to Coach’s house on Mischief Night to soap up his windows just for fun, right?”

“Yeah” I replied.

“You walked all the way out there, almost two miles just to soap some windows?” he continued.

I hesitated.

"I didn't want to get Flash or anybody else into this but if I were to lie and get caught, well that won't be too good for me or Ricky," I thought to myself.

"No. We got a ride" I confessed.

"From who?" asked the Chief.

"Flash - Don Wheeler. He rode us out and then dropped us off. He said he didn't want no part of it so he just dropped us off" I reluctantly explained.

"Okay, then you guys when up to the house and when you were getting' ready to do your stuff you looked in the window and saw Coach and Howie like you said. Is that right so far?"

"Sure. That's right" I agreed.

"Then, after seein' what you said you saw, you both ran out to the road and walked on back to town, two miles?" the Chief continued.

"Well, not quite. We got a ride from Moose when we were about halfway back" I explained.

"You mean Al Marovich?"

“Yeah, Moose” I replied.

“Then what?” he asked.

“We came back to town and hung around Snookie’s for a while and then Flash came by again and he gave us a ride home and that was it” I answered.

“Let me ask you a little bit about your friend Ricky. When you and him went to Coach’s that night what was he wearing?”

I paused and tried to think.

“I’m not really sure. Probably just blue jeans and a sweatshirt like usual. I’m pretty sure it was a hooded sweatshirt cause it was kinda chilly and I remember both of us havin’ the hoods up. Now that I think of it, yeah, that was it.”

“Was he wearin’ a hat?” asked Officer James.

“Sure! He always wears his Brown’s hat.”

“Was he wearin’ that night?”

“I don’t remember him not wearin’ it but I remember him sayin’ that he lost it right after we got back from Coach’s

house. He thought he lost it in Flash's car and he looked all over for it in the back seat, but he couldn't find it. I remember that real good because he got pretty upset when it got lost" I replied.

"Did Ricky ever say anything else about that whole thing at Coach's?

Did he ever say anything about talking to Coach or seein' him after that?" again asked the Chief.

"Not to me. No!" I answered nervously.

"Alright, that's about it. Officer James, take him back to school. Again, remember son; I don't want you saying anything to anybody about this.

Understand?"

"Yes sir" I replied meekly.

We left the room, passing through the slightly opened door of the Chief's office and by Minnie's adjacent desk. I glanced in to see Ricky, hands folded and foot-tapping, anxiously awaiting his interrogation.

James drove me back to school.

Chapter Nine

It was two days after my trip to the police station. School let out at three o'clock like usual. I left through the side door. I was alone as usual.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps hurriedly approaching behind me.

"Hey Whody, wait a minute."

I turned to see Tojo running to meet me.

"Yeah. What?" I answered disguising my surprise.

Neither he nor anyone else had spoken to me in weeks, ever since the "incident" as I liked to call it, in the locker room with Howie.

Tojo stopped next to me and hesitated. Then we both started to walk together.

"Hey man, I never wanted to stop hangin' with you and Ricky but after what happened I just didn't have the guts to hang with you guys. Everybody was sayin' stuff about

ya. You know what I mean?" he began in an apologetic tone.

There was a brief silence and I then replied.

"Well, how come you're talking to me now?"

"To tell ya the truth, I kinda believed that shit about Coach. I couldn't say nothin' because I didn't wanta get myself or anybody else in trouble."

I stopped and turned to him.

"What do you mean 'anybody else'?" I asked.

Tojo bowed his head a bit and spoke.

"My brother Hal," he said softly.

"But you can't tell nobody this, right?"

"I won't tell nobody" I answered with conviction.

"Promise?" he replied.

"Promise!" I answered.

"You know Hal played for Coach about four or five years ago. He was wingback, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

“When I came home from practice that day after Ricky and Howie got into it, I told Hal the whole thing. I thought he would get all upset and start sayin’ ‘no way, Coach not never’ but he didn’t say shit. He didn’t even act surprised or pissed off or nothin’.

So, when I saw that I asked him how come?

Then he told me about when he was on the team, how he heard one of the guys talkin’ with Coach in the office all alone, one day. He said it sure didn’t sound like any football talk. He didn’t say exactly what he heard but he said it sure made him wonder about Coach’s maybe bein’ queer.

He never said nothin’ about it cause he sure didn’t wanta start no trouble and besides the guy Coach was talkin’ to would definitely have beat the shit outta him if he did.”

“What do you mean? Hal’s a pretty tough mother. Who’s gonna beat his ass?” I interrupted.

“I don’t really know who he was talkin’ about but evidently he was a lot tougher than Hal, cause Hal didn’t want any part of him.

Even right now, five years later, he still wouldn’t tell me. No way! I asked him a couple of times who it was and he got pissed off at me. He said if I asked one more time, he was gonna kick my ass, so I shut up.”

We continued to walk.

“Somethin’ else I gotta tell ya” he began.

“They got Ricky in jail.”

“In jail!” I shouted.

“Yeah, jail. James, the cop, is my cousin and he told me. He said they got him there and they’re keepin’ it real quiet. They don’t want no town’s people comin’ around and makin’ trouble and all, so they’re really not sayin’ anything about it out in the open.”

“Why do they have him locked up?” I replied excitedly.

“Well, they’re sayin’ that they think he killed Coach.”

“Killed Coach!” I exclaimed.

“I didn’t even know Coach was killed. I thought he just died regular like!” I continued in surprise.

“From what my cousin says, the people from the county investigated and they found marks on his neck and blood spots in the back of his eyes and that means somebody choked him to death” Tojo explained.

“Holy shit!” I was stunned.

Again, there was a brief silence.

“So what’s Ricky got to do with it?” I asked.

“Freddy says they found Ricky’s hat in the car with Coach.”

“Freddy? Who’s Freddy?” I questioned.

“He’s my cousin, Freddy James, the cop like I told ya” he replied.

“Oh! Why do they think he did it, besides findin’ the hat, I mean?” I continued.

“They’re not really sure but they kinda think its got somethin’ to do with you guy’s sayin’ that you saw Coach and Howie that night” explained Tojo.

“Got what to do with it? How would they think that made Ricky kill Coach?” I stuttered.

“Here’s what Freddy told me they’re sayin’.

They’re sayin’ that when you and Ricky were at Coach’s that night, he lost his hat, so the day Coach died he went back up there to find it and Coach saw him. Then him and Coach got into a fight about the whole thing and Ricky choked him.”

“And so why were they in Coach’s car?” I asked.

“They said probably Coach was gonna give him a ride back to town and then the fight started in the car.”

“Give him a ride back? Why would Coach do that after all the shit Ricky let out about him?” I thought to myself out loud.

“I don’t know. I’m just tellin’ what Freddy told me” answered Tojo.

“And why would Ricky leave his hat there? I’m sure he wouldn’t leave it again after he just went up there to get it” I again thought aloud.

“I don’t know. I’m just tellin’ ya what I heard.”

“Do they have anybody sayin’ any of this is true?” I asked.

“The Chief had Flash in his office for about an hour the other day. Flash told ‘em that Ricky said he lost his hat up by Coach’s the night you guys went there. He said Ricky was all upset about losin’ it.”

“Why did the cops bring Flash in, in the first place?” I asked.

“I think they said that Flash was tellin’ everybody how he drove you guys up there that night. You know the Flash, how he likes to tell stories about everything, including himself.

Then too, you know, Flash always has a thing goin’ around about him that maybe he’s a queer so the Chief kinda used that to get him to say what he wanted him to say. He just said if Flash didn’t cooperate he’d get some kids to say that he queered ‘em and then Flash would go to jail. So, I guess it worked and he told ‘em about Ricky losin’ his hat and all.

So, I don't even know if it's true. Did he leave his hat at Coach's like Flash said?" Tojo asked.

I paused.

"Yeah, it's true but Flash promised he wasn't gonna tell anybody" I replied.

"You shoulda known better. Flash tells everybody everything and besides, he had the cops pressuring him."

"I guess" I replied recognizing my obvious foolishness for having believed Flash's promise.

"You don't really think Ricky would kill anybody, do ya?"

I asked Tojo.

"Not really! But what I'm thinkin' don't count. It's what the cops think that counts.

I guess they figure, first of all, he's a nigger and second, he moved up here from the city. They probably figure any nigger comin' from the city like that wouldn't have any problem killin' somebody."

He paused his conversation.

“And they do have some guys sayin’ that he might of done it” he continued.

“Who?

Flash? He didn’t say Ricky killed anybody, he just said about him losin’ his hat up at Coach’s” I replied.

“Well, yeah but they got Moose too” he answered.

“Moose! What the fuck does he have to do with it?” I exclaimed.

“They brought him in and talked to him too. He told Chief that he picked up Ricky right by Coach’s just around the time his wife found him. He said he picked him up and gave him a ride back to town. Then when Moose asked him what he was doing out there he says he went to get his hat.”

“Went to get his hat!

Then why didn’t he have it with him when Moose picked him up?” I asked rhetorically.

“I don’t know man, I don’t know. That’s just what he said” replied Tojo.

“And by the way, doesn’t Moose’s sister, Minnie work for the police?

She works right in the Chief’s office there, right?”

“Sure does,” answered Tojo.

“Think maybe that’s got somethin’ to do with what Moose said?” I continued.

“Could be,” answered Tojo again.

Again, a long pause in the conversation persisted.

“Well, no matter what, Ricky’s got a shit load of trouble goin’” Tojo sighed.

“Sure does!” I agreed.

The next day was a Saturday and I had decided that I would go to the town jail and visit Ricky. I walked uptown and stopped at Ralph’s Drugstore and bought a pack of Camels. I knew Ricky only smoked a little but every movie I ever saw showed the visitor offering the guy in jail a smoke. I figured that was the way it was done, and it would make my visit more official-like.

When I got to the police station I went to the front desk and asked to see Ricky White.

“Ain’t no Ricky White here” came the reply from the chubby woman behind the desk.

“Was here but they moved him” she continued and picked up a smoldering cigarette from the ashtray for another drag.

“Yeah, he’s up at County now” she added, with an exhale of smoke slipping out between the words.

“If you’re gonna go up there you better call ahead. You just can’t show up any old time and see him. They got visitor’s hours up there.”

“How come they took him up there?” I asked.

“Don’t really know. Somethin’ about security and stuff” she answered.

“You a friend of his?”

“Yeah!” I answered.

“You shouldn’t be admittin’ that so easy. He’s got a mess of trouble and a lot of people in this town aren’t taken too

kindly to him after what he's been charged with. I think that's why he's up at County. That's just my guess from I what been hearin'. But then again, like I said I don't really know" she concluded and took another long drag.

I left the police station and went to the closest payphone back at Ralph's. I got the number of the county jail and dialed it. Visiting hours were two to four on Saturday and Sunday.

The clock across the street on the bank read one-thirty. I left Ralph's, walked to the edge of town and stuck my thumb out. Several cars passed. Within minutes, a blue Chevy pulled over and the driver waved me forward. I ran to the waiting car, jumped in and began the fifteen-mile ride to the jail.

It was a gray, stone building with barred, steel-framed windows. I hesitated for a moment and then ascended the steps through the large double metal doors to the main desk.

“I’m here to see Ricky White” I announced with a slight stammer.

The man at the desk said nothing, just began to shuffle through the deck of file cards before him. After several seconds, he stopped, withdrew one of the cards, examined it carefully and then spoke.

“Relative?” he recited in a mechanical voice.

“No, friend” I replied.

“He knows your comin”? he asked in the same abrupt monotone.

“No” I again answered and with that, he arose and motioned for me to follow him.

We walked down a long corridor, through a chain-link gate, which slammed ominously behind us and into a dingy visiting room. My escort silently motioned for me to be seated in front of one of the several plate glass windows which lined the rear wall of the room. About ten minutes had passed and then Ricky appeared and seated himself on the other side of the glass. He bent forward and

spoke through the round, mesh-covered opening in the glass partition.

“What the fuck are you doin’ here?” he asked with some surprise.

“I should ask you the same thing” I answered attempting to be as laid back as I could.

“I’m getting’ a bad rap hung on me that’s what I’m doin’ here.”

Then he continued soberly “You know I could never have done what they say. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know” I replied.

“What kinda stuff did you hear Whody?”

With that, I relayed the entire story that was told to me by Tojo the day before. Ricky sat silently, behind the heavy glass partition, nodding his head periodically in agreement as I spoke.

“Yeah, that’s all about right. What Tojo told ya is pretty much it” he replied at the end of my story.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Don’t know! They charged me and I guess a trial is next. I got a lawyer they gave me. My dad says we can’t afford a lawyer on our own so we gotta take what we get. His name is Harrington Gerity. Name sounds like he’s pretty smart, huh?”

“Yeah, sounds smart to me,” I said in wishful agreement. He hesitated for a moment and cast his eyes downward. “Sure hope he’s a good one” he added.

Chapter Ten

“Crowd Demands Highburg Trial Venue” the headline of the weekly Highburg Herald read. The article continued.

“A protest drawing over two hundred local residents marched in front of the town police station demanding that the trial of accused murderer Richard White be held in Highburg. The present plan is to hold the trial at the county courthouse in Stanton.

One of the signs carried by the protesters read, ‘Coach Lived Here, Coach Died Here, We Want the Trial Here’.

Another said, ‘Justice for Coach, Justice for Highburg, Justice in His Town’.

An unnamed official said that in light of the fact that county elections are to be held next month, the demonstration is having a definite effect. Political expediency will move the trial to Highburg after all.

Additionally, the source indicated that jury selection will be made from Highburg citizens.

White's father vehemently objected to the suggestion that the jury be made up of town residents.

'I fail to see how a jury made up of the victim's ex-players, friends and idolizers can yield a fair assessment of the facts in my son's case', he stated.

The final decision as to the venue and jury pool will be revealed by the end of the week. In the meantime, the suspect Richard White is being held in the county jail at Stanton."

"Hey kid, you gonna buy that paper? This ain't no library!"

The voice came from behind the drugstore counter at Ralph's.

I quickly refolded the newspaper and placed it back on the rack.

"Give me a coke - small" I replied. I walked over to the counter and wrestled a nickel from my pocket.

I sat sipping the soda, thinking about what I had just read.
It didn't sound good!

I was sure Mr. White was unfortunately correct.

In spite of Mr. White's complaints, it was as the 'source' had said.

At the end of the week, it was officially decided that the trial was going to be held in Highburg and with jurors selected from the town's people.

Upon hearing the news, I walked to the firehouse which was mentioned in the article as the site for the trial.

It was a strange sight. A huge tent covered the doors of the firehouse. It was the tent that was erected every year in the park for the Fourth of July celebration in the event of rain. They had secured its opening against the outside wall of the firehouse and parked the fire engines at the side of the building so as to convert the interior into one large room.

I walked up and peeked in through a small opening in the canvas. Two men were busily arranging row after row of

folding chairs. Tomorrow night it would be packed. From what I had heard, not a soul would miss being here. The trial would begin at six o'clock sharp and only two hundred people would be admitted, first come, first serve. A contingent of state cops would also be present as security and the trial itself was expected to last for several days at least.

The next day arrived and I arose anxiously and unnerved. I had been called to Principal Robertson's office the day before and told to be at the firehouse by four o'clock. I was to be a witness.

School ended at three o'clock and I went to the firehouse immediately. I didn't want to be late.

When I arrived, a dozen or so people had already lined up, most of them elderly, retired souls eager for relief from the daily boredom. They queued up and waited at the tent entrance. By the time five-thirty arrived and entry began, the line was well down the block.

I peered out from the door of the room to which I was assigned. I watched the first few enter as they raced, as quickly as they could, to obtain the seats at the front of the makeshift courtroom.

A primitive railing had been constructed using a series of sawhorses, each draped with black cloth. It separated the sitting area from the area occupied by the judge, lawyers, and jury. The judge was to be seated on a raised platform consisting of old wooden pallets and plywood, again fitted with a black cloth covering. On each side of the railing stood a rigidly erect, motionless State cop both of whom bore somber, emotionless stares.

The room filled, and the banter of the crowd elevated. As the time of the trial approached, Ricky lead by his attorney, the prosecutor, the court officials, and the jury entered and took up their respective positions. The din became even louder.

At six o'clock precisely, one of the cops shouted over the noise of the crowd, "All rise for the Honorable Judge Jacob Somers".

Silence instantaneously enveloped the room and the judge entered from the door of the fire chief's office. The judge, a short, balding, older man in black robes stepped up to his perch, slammed his gavel and the trial began.

The prosecutor moved from behind his improvised desk and began to address the court. He was a portly man, appearing to be in his mid-fifties, sporting an obvious toupee. His pants were belted well below his large protruding belly and he wore an open sports jacket and tie of ancient vintage. His voice rang loud and clear throughout the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will prove that this person before you, Richard White, did on December first of last year, travel to the home of our beloved Coach Myron Carter. At that location, he encountered Coach Carter and during an argument, proceeded to murder Coach Carter.

We will present evidence and witnesses to show clearly the undeniable guilt of Mr. White.”

With that, he pointed directly at Ricky who was seated behind the defense’s improvised desk and continued.

“At the conclusion of this trial, no one will be able to dispute his actions and you will find him guilty as charged.”

With that, he ended his opening address.

“Thank you, Mr. Hartly” announced the judge.

“And now, Mr. Gerity” and he nodded to the defense table.

Gerity was Ricky’s court-appointed lawyer, a young man looking to be but a dozen or so years Ricky’s senior. He was tall, on the slim side, almost skinny and displayed a gawky presence as he walked from his seat. He was attired in a black suit, neat, clean and up to date which appeared to be a Robert Hall special. Peering out from underneath his pant cuffs were dark brown, unpolished loafers.

“Judge Somers, members of the jury, we intend to prove that Mr. White had no part in the demise of Coach Carter. We will show that he had no motive or opportunity to commit such a horrendous crime. We will show him to be guiltless and the unwitting victim of a hysterical and an inferior investigation by Highburg police and the County Sheriff’s Office.

Mr. White was charged with this crime as the last-ditch suspect that could be found and no substantial evidence or witnesses can convincingly link him to it. I am positive at the end of this trial you will find him not guilty and will respectfully return him to his family.”

The prosecutor then again addressed the court.

“I would like to call Doctor Gordon Fink to the stand Your Honor”.

A tall, gray-haired, bespectacled man in his fifties took the stand.

“Doctor Fink, you are the county medical examiner, is that correct?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You were called to the home of Coach Carter on the Sunday afternoon of December first, is that correct?”

“Yes, I was “again replied Fink.

“What did you find when you arrived there?”

“I found Coach Carter in his car.”

“Was he alive when you found him?” continued Hartly.

“No!”

“Did you determine the cause of his death?” Hartly asked.

“Not immediately but after a close inspection, I noticed bruising in the neck area which meant he had been strangled. Later at the county morgue, we found that the hyoid bone had been broken and noticed petechiae in the eyes which fully substantiated strangulation as the cause of death.”

“Doctor Fink would you please explain petechiae to the jury?” asked the prosecutor.

“Petechiae are tiny red spots due to ruptured capillaries and are a signature injury indicating strangulation” Fink replied.

“Did you determine the time of death?” Hartly continued to question.

“Based on the body temperature of the deceased it would appear that he died about two hours prior to my arrival.”

“At what time did you arrive?”

“Six ten in the afternoon” Fink answered.

“Are you sure of the time?” questioned Hartly.

“Of course, I always record the exact time when I am called to any death scene” answered Fink with certainty.

“So, then we can assume that Coach Carter was murdered at about four o’clock in the afternoon, right?”

“Yes, that’s about right” agreed Fink.

“Thank you, Doctor Fink.

No more questions Your Honor” Hartly concluded.

“Mr. Gerity, do you care to cross-examine the witness?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Honor.

I have but one question for Doctor Fink.”

Fink nodded.

“Doctor Fink - Are all the statements made by you in this court correct and uncoerced?” asked Gerity.

“Most certainly” replied Fink.

“Thank you. No more questions” Gerity concluded and retook his seat next to Ricky.

The prosecutor then called Chief Simpson to the stand who testified at length about investigating the crime scene and how Ricky’s hat was found there. As he spoke, he frequently interjected words describing the love that Highburg had for Coach and the devastation the town had suffered from his loss. Gerity rose to object each and every time he did so but he was continually overruled, and the Chief continued his embellished testimony.

When Hartly finished the judge responded.

“Mr. Gerity, do you care to cross-examine the witness?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Honor.

I have but one question for the Chief.”

The Chief remained seated nervously pumping his right leg up and down as the question was asked.

“Chief Simpson - Are all the statements made by you in this court correct and uncoerced?” asked Gerity.

“Yes, absolutely” responded Simpson.

“Thank you. No more questions” and Gerity again returned to his seat.

Moose’s testimony followed that of the Chief. He explained how he had picked up Ricky near Coach’s house on the day of the murder and had driven him back to town.

Hartley began his questioning.

“Mr. Marvich - Moose - They call you Moose? Is that correct?”

“Yes. They call me and the rest of my family Moose. I’m Moose, George my older brother is Big Moose, my little brother is Little Moose and Marlene my sister is Minnie Moose. We’re all Mooses”

A mild snicker rose from the crowd acknowledging Moose's legendary simplicity and the judge's gavel sounded obliterating the brief humor.

"You picked up Mr. White near Coach Carter's house the day of the murder, is that true?" asked Hartly.

"Yes"-replied Moose.

"About what time was that?"

"I'd say four o'clock."

Moose paused for a second.

"Yeah - four o'clock. I'm sure. I remember the guy on the radio sayin' it was four" he added emphatically.

I knew that he was feigning sincerity and I was sure that Prosecutor Hartly had worked hard with Moose to ensure a credible sounding response. I had ridden with Moose many times and his radio rarely worked and when it did, it could hardly be heard over the roar of the glass packs on his car's exhaust system.

"What day was that?"

"A sunny and warm day" came the answer.

“No – what day of the week was it?

Sunday, Monday...?” Hartly interrupted.

“Oh! It was a Sunday” Moose replied.

“Did he say what he was doing out there? That’s about two miles from town, isn’t it?”

“He said he went to get his hat” Moose again answered.

“Get his hat?” asked the prosecutor sounding as incredulous as possible.

“Yeah” answered Moose.

“What was his hat during there?”

“He said that he had dropped it there the night he and his friend went to Coach’s house, on Mischief Night, to soap Coach’s windows for fun” Moose replied.

“Did he tell you exactly what happened on Mischief Night?”

“No – but everybody knows what he said about that night,” Moose said nervously.

“And what is that?” asked Hartly.

Gerity leaped to his feet.

“The prosecutor is asking for hearsay evidence” he protested.

“From what’s been said here so far I’d say that what he’s about to say is common knowledge and I am therefore allowing him to respond” cited the judge with a slam of the gavel.

“Go on Mr. Hartly.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.

“What happened on Mischief Night based on what you have heard?” continued Hartly.

“Well sir, Ricky, I mean Mr. White and his friend said they saw Coach and one of the guys doin’ some bad stuff.

Queer stuff, ya know,” answered Moose timidly.

“Do you believe that?” asked Hartly.

“No - Coach would never do that stuff. He coached me and my brother really good. He was a great guy, Coach was.”

“Why do you think they said that then?” continued Hartly.

“I don’t know. Maybe they just didn’t like him, and they wanted to get him in trouble.

I don’t know!” Moose added.

Hartly ended his interrogation.

“Mr. Gerity, do you care to cross-examine the witness?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Honor.

I have but one question for Mr. Marvich.”

Gerity paused, looked at the jury and then turned towards Moose. Moose sat uneasily awaiting Gerity’s question.

“Mr. Marvich - Are all the statements made by you in this court correct and uncoerced?” asked Gerity.

“You did somebody tell me to say the stuff I said?” asked Moose.

“Yes” answered Gerity.

There was a brief silence.

“No - Nobody told me nothing about what to say” replied Moose.

“Thank you. No more questions.”

Moose rose to leave the witness chair. As he did, Gerity turned back towards Moose and exclaimed.

“Oh, excuse me Mr. Marvich! I’m sorry, I do have one more question.”

Moose sat back in the chair.

“Is it true that your sister Marlene works in Chief Simpson’s office as a matter of fact, right next to the Chief?”

Moose hesitated.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Thank you. No more questions” announced Gerity.

Moose again rose from the chair, this time very slowly; unsure if another challenge might come from Gerity. None came, and he left the stand.

As he left the stand I looked up and down the row at the faces of the seated jurors. Most all were familiar, people who had lived in Highburg their entire lives. Several were ex-players, one was even known to be Coach’s golfing partner.

All appeared somber, stoned faced to be precise. It was as if they were at Coach's funeral all over again. One of the women stared straight forward in a trance-like state with her tear-filled eyes about to overflow. Another's eyes darted back and forth in the direction of the defendant while a third appeared to mutter obscenities under his breath.

"Your Honor, I would like to call Donald Wheeler to the stand" announced Hartly.

"Mr. Wheeler, are you also known as 'Flash' to your friends?"

"Yes" answered Flash meekly.

"Is Mr. White one of your friends?"

"Well, urr, sorta, I mean I know him pretty well."

"How do you know him?"

"I've given rides many times, him and some of the other guys" Flash replied more confidently.

"Did you drive Mr. White and his friend to Coach Carter's house on Mischief Night of last year?"

“Yes! He asked me too.

But I only dropped them off there. I didn’t stay around at all,” he nervously added.

“Why did they go there?” continued Hartly.

“To soap Coach’s windows.”

“Did you see them afterwards?”

“Yes!”

“How did they say they got back to town?”

“They didn’t” replied Flash.

“What did they say happened?”

“They told me they didn’t do nothin’ and they asked me not to tell anybody about it. They said they didn’t want anybody to know that they chickened out” Flash stammered.

“But you did drive them there?” Hartly repeated.

“Yes.”

“Was Mr. White wearing a hat when you took him there?” Hartly continued.

“Yes, he was wearing the hat he always wore, the Cleveland Browns hat.

He loved that hat and I don’t ever remember seein’ him without it” answered Flash.

“Was he wearing that hat when you saw him later?”

“No.

He was very upset when he discovered that he’d lost it” Flash again stammered.

“When was that?”

“When he was in the back seat of my car after they came back from Coach’s house” replied Flash.

“Did he say he lost it at Coach Carter’s house?”

“No. He wasn’t sure where he lost it but from what he said I kinda got the idea that he thought he lost it there.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wheeler. No more questions.”

“Mr. Gerity, do you care to cross-examine the witness?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Honor.

I have a question for Mr. Wheeler.”

Gerity approached Flash.

“Mr. Wheeler - Are all the statements made by you in this court correct and uncoerced?” asked Gerity.

“Yes”-replied Flash appearing to be relieved by the simplicity of the question.

“Thank you. No more questions and Gerity once again took his seat.

Your Honor, I would like to call Mr. John Crane”
announced Hartly.

The words shot through me like bullets. My knees felt weak as I lifted myself from the chair and approached the stand. I could feel the sweat break out across my forehead and under my armpits.

“Mr. Crane, did you accompany Mr. White on the Mischief Night, October thirtieth of this year to Coach Carter’s house with the intent of playing a practical joke on the Coach?”

“Yes,” I stammered.

“Have you heard the testimony of the witnesses about the evening?”

“Yes,” I again stammered.

“Do you believe all their statements to be correct?”

“Yes, but I don’t believe Ricky, I mean Mr. White ever killed Coach. I just know he couldn’t” I spontaneously blurted.

I immediately heard the sharp crack of the gavel and the judge’s voice.

“That’s not the question and you are not to give opinions unless asked. Only facts are required” he bellowed.

“Yes sir” I murmured in timid reply.

“No more questions,” said Hartly and he turned away from me towards the judge.

“Mr. Gerity, do you care to cross-examine the witness?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Honor.

I have a question for Mr. Crane.”

I sat fidgeting with the button on my shirt cuff, hoping that my question would be the same as the one asked of the others. It was.

“Mr. Crane - Are all the statements made by you in this court correct and uncoerced?” asked Gerity.

“Yes” -I answered.

“Thank you. No more questions.

Gerity then addressed the judge.

“I have no more cross-examination Your Honor” and he reseated himself.

“Do you have any additional witnesses Mr. Hartly?” asked Somers.

“No, Your Honor, I have no more witnesses at this time” answered Hartly.

The judge then looked at his watch.

“At this time, we will conclude the day’s session. Let me remind the witnesses and the jurors that they are to speak with no one about these matters.

Court will reconvene tomorrow at six o’clock.

Court is adjourned!” and with that, he cracked the gavel.

Chapter Eleven

It sure didn't look like much of a defense, not to me anyway. Ricky's lawyer hadn't even asked one question of the prosecution's witnesses except if they were telling the truth.

What did he expect them to say, that they had lied?

Even the judge seemed to have been confused by Gerity's questioning.

As I left the courthouse all I could do was hope that he had something better to offer at tomorrow's hearing.

The next evening the firehouse and tent annex was again filled to capacity. Again, Judge Somers made his regal entrance at six o'clock sharp and the trial resumed.

"Mr. Gerity, would you like to call your witnesses?" asked the judge.

"Yes, thank you, Your Honor. I call Mr. Richard White, the accused, to the stand."

Ricky arose, walked to the chair next to the judge and was sworn in.

“Mr. White, did you kill Coach Carter?”

“No, I did not” asserted Ricky forcefully.

“Do you know who did?”

“No!”

“Do you know of anyone who might have a reason to kill Coach Carter?” Gerity continued to question.

“No, most everybody I know liked Coach a lot.”

“Did that include you?” asked Gerity.

“I didn’t really like him, and I didn’t really not like him,” answered Ricky.

“Did you go to Coach Carter’s house on Mischief Night to soap his windows as a Halloween prank?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you go alone?”

“No, Whody went with me.”

“Whody?”

“John Crane” Ricky answered.

“Did you soap the windows?”

“No, we never got to do it”

“Why not?” asked Gerity.

Ricky paused for a moment and looked over at me.

“We chickened out.”

It was obvious to me that Ricky was not about, to tell the truth about what had happened that night at Coach’s. He was smarter than that. He knew it would only serve to antagonize the jury against him.

“You mean you got scared?” added Gerity.

“Yeah, we got scared.”

“Were you wearing a hat that night?”

“I was always wearing my hat” replied Ricky.

“What kind of hat was it?”

“It was my Cleveland Browns hat.”

“What’s so special about that hat?” asked Gerity.

“Well, that’s my favorite team and Jim Brown’s my favorite player, so I always wear that hat to show that” replied Ricky enthusiastically.

“Did you have the hat when you left Coach’s house that night?”

“I’m not sure” Ricky answered in a certain voice.

“What happened after you left Coach’s house that night?”

“We started walkin’ back to town. Flash, I mean Mr. Wheeler, drove us up there but he wouldn’t wait so we hadda walk back” explained Ricky.

“So, you walked all the way back?”

“No! When we was about a quarter way back, Moose, I mean Mr. Marvich, picked us up and drove us back” Ricky explained.

“Did you have your hat when he picked you up?”

“I thought I did. I don’t know.”

“When you got back to town, what happened then?” continued Gerity.

“We kinda hung around Snookie’s for a while and then we rode with Mr. Wheeler for a while.”

“Did you have the hat then?”

“No. That’s when I realized I lost it. I looked all over the back of the car and I couldn’t find it,” answered Ricky excitedly.

“You didn’t know you lost it until then?” Gerity prompted him.

“No. With all the excitement of running away from Coach’s house and all, I didn’t even know it was gone.”

“You know that Coach Carter was killed on the Sunday afternoon of December first, right?” asked Gerity.

“Yes.”

“Where were you at that time?”

“I was where I always am on Sunday afternoon during football. I was home listenin’ to the Browns on the radio” answered Ricky.

“Who was with you?”

“Nobody, just me.”

“What about your mother and father?” Gerity continued to question.

“My mama goes to the church on Sunday and Dad; he’s no Brown’s fan like me. He goes down to Harold’s Place to watch the Giants on TV. Our TV’s been broke for about a month now, a tube or somethin’, so he’s goes there”
Ricky answered.

“What about your brother? Was he around?”

“He’s little. He goes over to his friend Jason’s house on Sundays and Jason comes over to our house on Saturdays.”

“So, you were there by yourself most of the afternoon?”

“Yeah, that’s right” answered Ricky.

“Thank you, Mr. White. That’s all” concluded Gerity.

“Mr. Hartly, would you like to question the defendant?”
announced the judge.

“Yes, Your Honor” as he walked towards Ricky still seated in the witness chair.

“Mr. White, when you and Mr. Crane went to Coach Carter’s house on Mischief Night did you witness

anything that caused you to have animosity against the Coach?"

"What does that mean?" asked Ricky.

"Did you see anything that made you hate Coach Carter?"

"Hate? No not hate him", Ricky answered.

"Well, what did you see?"

Ricky glanced over at Gerity for an instant and then replied.

"I'd rather not say."

"You've got to say, young man," the judge ordered.

A long silence filled the room.

Ricky looked downward began to fidget nervously pondering the answer he was about to give.

Then he finally replied.

It appeared that he could no longer constrain himself and the truth blurted from his lips.

"I saw him doin' queer stuff with one of the guys in his basement."

A loud gasp issued loudly from the crowd.

Suddenly, a man stood up in the audience, red-faced, with spittle spraying from his lips as he shouted.

“That’s bullshit!

That’s bullshit!

That’s a lie!

Coach is in his grave because of you and now you’re calling him a fag!

We ought to hang you right now!”

Then another jumped up, equally enraged.

“Coach wasn’t no queer!

He wasn’t no queer just cause some nigger kid that killed him says so” he yelled.

The gavel pounded incessantly while the cops wrestled the two men from the court and within a few minutes, the crowd quieted.

“Mr. White continues” ordered the judge.

“We saw it just when we were gonna soap the windows.

When we saw that, we ran and never did soap any

windows. We were scared," answered Ricky in a low, almost inaudible voice.

Then he continued, "I didn't like what I saw but I didn't hate him. I just felt embarrassed and ashamed for him. That's about all I can say."

"Embarrassed and ashamed enough to kill him if you had the chance?" Hartly quickly interjected.

"I could never be an embarrassed or ashamed enough for no one to wanta kill 'em" Ricky replied tearfully.

"What about the day when you went back to get the hat you had lost that night?" asked Hartly.

"I never went back to get no hat!"

"According to Mr. Marvich, he picked you up the day of the murder walking down the road from the house towards town" stated Hartly loudly.

"If he picked up somebody that day, it wasn't me. I already said I was home listenin' to the Browns game on the radio.

Moose always used ta tell us he was a big Giants fan and he always saw every game. They played that Sunday too. I know, cause like I said, my dad went to Harold's to watch the game. So why wasn't Moose watchin' the game like he says he always did? Why would he be out drivin' around like he said?" answered Ricky.

"Is it possible that he was listening to the game on his car radio? You told us that you listened to your game on the radio, didn't you, Mr. White?" questioned Hartly

"I been in Moose's car lots of times and his radio never works, only once in a while and even then, you can't hardly hear it. It keeps goin' in an out. He would never take a chance on hearin' the game on that, especially when it was a big game like the one that day against Green Bay" Ricky answered without hesitation.

"So, you're saying that Mr. Marvich isn't telling the truth?" responded Hartly.

"I know he's not" answered Ricky sharply.

“Why would he lie about picking you up? He was your friend. You’ve ridden with him many times before hadn’t you? He certainly couldn’t have mistaken you for some else. You’re one of the few colored kids around here.”

“I don’t know why he’s lyin’ but he is” came Ricky’s again sharp retort.

“Well, I don’t think he is lying. He’s got no reason to lie. No more questions.

Thank you, Your Honor,” said Hartly and he dismissed Ricky from the stand.

“Mr. Gerity, your next witness please,” asked Judge Somer.

“Your Honor, my next witness could not be here today. He has agreed to travel a great distance to come to testify for my client and there has been a delay in his arrival.

I beg the court’s indulgence and ask that court be adjourned until tomorrow when he is sure to be here.”

“Is this witness vital to your client’s defense Mr. Gerity?” asked the judge.

“Most vital!” he replied.

“In light of that fact then the court will be adjourned until tomorrow at six o’clock.”

“A witness for Ricky coming from a ‘great distance’?” I thought to myself.

“I never heard of Ricky knowing anyone outside Highburg and Henderson Town except maybe a few people from the city. Even then, he had left the city when he was just four, so how many people could he know there and how they could possibly help his case?”

Again, I left the courtroom perplexed by the actions of Mr. Gerity but praying for his success.

Chapter Twelve

Six o'clock, the next evening and once again Judge Somers entered the courtroom to begin the third day of testimony.

"Court is now in session" he spoke, and the gavel sounded.

"Mr. Gerity has your witness arrived?"

"Yes, Your Honor and I will call him to the stand in a moment but first I would like to present to the court some additional evidence in behalf of Mr. White" and with that, he stepped forward and handed a large manila envelope to the judge.

"Your Honor, would you please examine the seal on the envelope and then its contents?"

Somers adjusted his glasses and carefully perused the seal.

"This is the seal and signature of a notary dated the day before yesterday" he announced as he read.

He opened it and withdrew three sheets of paper and began to read quietly to himself while the hushed crowd waited.

“This looks like a list of questions and answers” stated Somers in a bewildered voice.

“How does this pertain to this case?” he asked.

“Your Honor, this is a list of two dozen questions about the game between the Cleveland Browns and the Los Angeles Rams which was played on the afternoon of Coach Carter’s murder.

These questions were presented to Mr. White at the county correctional facility in the presence of the County Sheriff and the notary whose name appears on the envelope seal.

Mr. White was asked to write his answers to each of the questions as you can see he did. The envelope was then sealed and stamped by the notary as you have seen.

Now, Your Honor, I would like to call Mr. James Brown to the witness stand.”

Then emerged from behind judge's platform, the large dark figure of a black man, which nearly filled the entire doorway from which he entered.

My jaw fell open and I glanced over at Ricky who appeared equally, if not more stunned than I, by the entrance of the witness. The judge vainly attempted to disguise his astonishment. The jury and the prosecutor also were justly astounded.

A loud chattering rose from the audience as he made his way to the witness chair. Again, the gavel sounded to silence them and he was sworn in and seated.

"Mr. Brown, you are most often known as Jimmy Brown of the Cleveland Browns Professional football team, is that true?"

"That is correct" came the gravelly voice in response.

"Mr. Brown, would you please tell us why you are here with us today?" asked Gerity.

"You called the team office and explained about this trial you're having here today. You talked to one of our

coaches, Ken Franklin. I was in the office with him when you called, and he told me the whole story. When I heard it I knew I didn't want to see any kid get convicted of something that he didn't do.

When I grew up I saw that kind of stuff happen a bunch of times, so I decided if I could help to show that he was really innocent I would do my best to help. So, I called you back and here I am."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Brown, for being here" answered Gerity and then he continued.

"Did you play in a game against the Los Angeles Rams on the afternoon of December first in Cleveland?"

"Yes, I did."

"At what time did the game start?"

"Let's see, kickoff was at three o'clock, that's our time so here it was two o'clock" answered Brown.

"How long did the game last?"

"It was pretty long, about three hours, so probably about six by us and five here" he answered.

“When you play, do you pretty much remember the game afterward?”

“Do I remember? I remember every last little thing. I keep it going over it in my head trying to figure out what mistakes I made and how I’m going to fix them next time. Sometimes I think I could tell you what blade of grass I stepped on when I ran the ball. It’s like I got a movie of it going in my head.”

“So, then you will remember the Browns versus the Rams game pretty well?” asked Gerity.

“I’m sure I can” Jimmy answered confidently.

“Great! I’d like to ask you some questions about that game.”

“Go ahead.”

“Judge Somers, may I please have the papers so that I may ask Mr. Brown about the game?”

The judge handed the sheets to Gerity and he began his litany of questions.

“How many times did you run the ball?”

Brown looked up towards the ceiling, mentally counting.

“Twenty-six” he replied.

“Your Honor would you please read the answer to this question as written by Mr. White” and he handed the first sheet back to Somers.

“Twenty-six” read the judge and returned the sheet back to Gerity.

“Mr. Brown, at one point during the game your team was on the five-yard line and it took four plays to score. Is that true?”

“Yeah, that was in the third quarter” Jimmy immediately verified Gerity’s claim.

“You carried the ball on every one of those plays and was stopped by the same Ram’s defense player on three of those attempts. Who was that player?”

“That’s easy, man, that was Herschel Forester” replied Brown instantly.

Again, Gerity handed Somers the sheet.

“Yep, it says Forester.”

“How many first downs did you have in the second quarter?”

“Only two, it was a very bad quarter for us.” Again, the Somers looked down at the sheet and confirmed the answer.

The questioning continued covering a dozen or more details of the game. Each time, to everyone’s astonishment, Ricky’s answer matched that of the witness. At the conclusion of the interrogation, Gerity asked one final question.

“Mr. Brown could all the questions that I have just asked you be answered by someone who heard the game on the radio?”

“I think so, but he would have to be one hell of a fan.”

“Mr. Brown do you know of any way these questions could be correctly answered without having heard or seen the entire game on December first, the day on which it was played?”

“Like I just said, even if you heard or saw it, you would really have to be a great Cleveland Browns and a Jimmy Brown fan.”

“Thank you. No more questions” said Gerity.

“I would like to call Sheriff Peter Gray to the stand.”

Gray was sworn in and Gerity began.

“Sheriff Gray were you present when the list of questions pertaining to the Browns Rams game was submitted to Mr. White?”

“Yes.”

“Where was that done?”

“In the warden’s office at the county jail.”

“Who else was there?”

“Only Carolyn Jade, the notary sent by you to authenticate the procedure” replied the Sheriff.

“What do you mean ‘authenticate’?”

“Be sure that he couldn’t cheat. That there was nobody there to tell him the answers.”

“Do you think he could have cheated?”

“No, I don’t see how” stated the Sheriff.

“Sheriff Gray, please tell the court our meeting at the county jail on December eighth.”

Gray squirmed back in the chair, folded his hands in his lap and spoke.

“That day you had come to the jail to visit with your client Mr. White. After the meeting, you came to my office with a very unusual request.”

“And that request was?” interjected Gerity.

“Well, you asked me if I knew any serious football fans and I said, ‘I know lots’”.

“And then?” again interjected Gerity.

“You wanted to know if I knew any Browns fans specifically.”

“And did you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And that was?” asked Gerity in an anticipatory tone.

“I said ‘Believe it or not my Uncle Martin had been a Cleveland fan most all his life. He once played for the

Browns back in forty-six when they first started. He only played one year but it was a great year for the Browns, thirteen and two. He considered that year of play a badge of honor and spoke often of how he had been on the same team as Otto Graham and Marion Motley.

He never misses a game. When Cleveland plays he's glued to the TV and when it isn't on television he's got his ear stuck to the radio. Never misses one."

"Did your uncle meet with you and me at your office subsequent to our conversation?" Gerity continued to question him.

"Yes. You asked if I would call him to meet with us the following day" answered Gray.

"And for what purpose?"

"You asked him if he had listened to the Browns game of December first."

"And did he?"

"Yes."

"What happened next?"

“You asked him to write down a series of questions relating to the game he had heard on December first and he did” the Sheriff explained.

“Did I or you have access to the nature of those questions?” Gerity asked emphatically.

“No. Uncle Martin wrote a bunch of questions about things he could remember from the game and then put them in an envelope and I sealed it right there.”

“Did your uncle know the answers to those questions when he wrote them?”

“He said he didn’t remember all of it but he did remember stuff he wrote down being said during the game at one point or another. Like he remembered that the announcer had said how many yards Mr. Brown got in the game, but he couldn’t remember the exact number. And he remembered him being stopped down around the five-yard line three times before he scored, and he knew it was the same guy that stopped him each time but he couldn’t remember who” Gray replied.

“After you wrote all those questions and you sealed them up what happened next?” asked Gerity.

“We met the next day, you, me, the notary lady and the defendant in my office.”

“And what happened there?”

“Well, Mr. White was seated at my desk and asked to write the answers to the questions my uncle wrote down as best he could” answered Gray.

“And did he?”

“Yes, he did and pretty quick too. Then he put them in the envelope, sealed it up and the notary stamped and signed it like you said before”

“Thank you, Sheriff. No more questions.”

“Mr. Gerity, do you have any more witnesses?” asked Somers.

“No, Your Honor” he replied.

“Then Mr. Hartly, may we have your closing arguments,” asked the judge.

Hartly rose and stood before the jury in his usual pose, jacket open, belly protruding, tie loosened and a glimmer of sweat reflecting from his receded hairline.

“Your Honor and ladies and gentlemen of the jury” he began.

“The State, through the testimony of these witnesses and evidence presented, has shown that Mr. Richard White went to Coach Carter’s home on Mischief Night to play a childish prank. In so doing, he has publicly claimed to have observed an illegal and immoral act on the part of the Coach and another individual.

As to whether his story about these observations is true or not, is immaterial to this case. During his visit to the house, he lost one of his prized possessions, his Cleveland Browns hat.

On the afternoon of December second, he decided to go to Coach Carter’s house to look for and hopefully retrieve that hat. In so doing he encountered the Coach.

An argument regarding the story Mr. White was spreading about Coach ensued. Mr. White strangled Coach Carter to death and left him in his car. Mr. Marvich subsequently picked him up as he was leaving the murder scene.

You must find him guilty as charged.”

Hartly then reseated himself.

“Mr. Gerity, your closing argument” the judge announced.

“Your Honor and members of the jury” began Gerity.

“I submit to you the fact that my client is known to be a rabid football fan, Cleveland Browns to be precise. He never misses a game whether on radio or TV. The day of Coach Carter’s death the Browns played, and the game was broadcast on radio. Mr. White would never have missed that game. He would never have been at the Coach’s house when that game was being aired.

In order to establish the fact that he was definitely listening to the game at that time and could not have been

at the Coach's house, we have shown that he indeed was instead seated before the radio in his own home as he has testified. How else could he know all the integrate details of the game?

Mr. Martin Gray, the sheriff's uncle prepared a list of questions pertaining to the radio account of the game. To many of the questions, even he did not know the answers. All he knew was that those facts and details of the game had been cited during the broadcast.

In a conversation with my client, Mr. White on the first day of his incarceration, when I ask about his presence on the day of the murder, he told me he was at home listening to the game. Then, he proceeded to tell every last detail in an hour-long ramble. It was almost as if I was listening to it on the radio myself.

I was amazed at his power of recall. I was sure that he must have been at the top of his class in school. But it was not so! It appears that Mr. White reserves his exceptional memory for Brown's football.

Once hearing this, I was sure that he could not have been at Coach Carter's house at that time, which was the time Dr. Fink has testified the murder took place.

I could think of only one way in which to establish that fact. It was to have someone who surely knew all the details of the game to verify my client's account of it. When I called the Brown's office they told me that no recording of the game had been made and only a few thirty-second film clips had been filmed for Movie Tone newsreels, containing hardly enough information to verify Mr. White's having listened to the game.

I then explained the circumstances of the case and that a boy's life was on the line. I asked if anyone was available to testify as to the details of the contest as described by my client.

Several hours after, I received a call from Mr. Brown indicating his concern and his willingness to help clear my client's name.

'I know that small country town justice is sometimes not that just, especially when comes to colored folks. I'll be there as soon as I can' he said.

Once hearing this I offered to pay his travel expenses to Highburg out of my own pocket. He declined and provided his own transportation to be here and ensure justice is done.

You've heard his testimony and the verification of Mr. White activities on the day of Coach's murder.

Everyone in Highburg loved and respected Coach Carter, that is certainly a fact but to convict an innocent Mr. White of his murder will do nothing to help honor the memory of Coach. Instead, it will serve to sully the town of Highburg as a place of unjustified vengeance against the guiltless.

Find my client innocent and retain Coach's honor and the good name of Highburg.

Thank you" and with that Gerity ended.

"Mr. Hartly, your final rebuttal please," asked Somers.

“Ladies and gentlemen” he began.

“Mr. White’s hat was found at the scene. How did it get there?

Mr. White left it there while lost in a frenzy after killing Coach Carter. How else could it have been there?

Did Mr. Marvich lie about picking him up just after the murder?

Why would he? What was he to gain by lying?

Nothing!

Mr. White went to Coach Carter’s house to retrieve the hat he so cherished and lost on Mischief Night. When he encountered the Coach, an argument ensued and Mr. White strangled Coach Carter. It’s that simple.

Again, I say, you must find him guilty as charged and thereby allow our beloved Coach to rest in eternal peace. Grant justice to him and our town of Highburg I implore you all.

Thank you” concluded Hartly, passionately.

That was it. The trial was over, except of course, for the verdict.

“It is late, and I am quite sure the jury will not reach a conclusion this evening so the court is adjourned until at which time a decision is reached. When that occurs the jury foreman will submit it to me in a sealed envelope and it will be read when court reconvenes a six o’clock of that day.

A posting as to whether a decision has been reached will be placed in the police headquarters window and will be available by phone if you call Chief Simpson’s office.

The court is now adjourned” and Somers slammed the gavel.

The jurors filed, grim-faced out of the room to begin their deliberation and the sound of crowd’s banter steadily rose. The crowd started to slowly stream out of the firehouse in an almost hesitant fashion. Many were disappointed that the show had ended that evening

without the final act being staged. For that, they would have to wait.

Outside, a mob of people awaited Jimmy Brown's exit from the firehouse door. Most all were clutching a pencil, a pen, a scrap of paper or a football that they had sent someone scurrying home to get before the trial session ended. When the door finally opened the throng rushed forward almost as if a gang-tackle was in progress. Brown courteously signed paper after paper and ball after ball. The sight cheered me. Maybe Ricky had a better chance than I thought.

On the other side of the firehouse, reporters from the local paper eagerly solicited opinions and prognostications.

"That boy's as guilty as Judas" one was heard to say.

"The only thing that surprised me is that Coach got choked. Those black kids are pretty good with a knife, the way I hear it!" shouted another.

"He can't be guilty. He hadda be listenin' to that football game when Coach was killed. That football player from

Cleveland kinda convinced me of that” answered an old lady.

“If Jimmy Brown says he ain’t guilty, he ain’t guilty,” responded a boy of about thirteen wearing a Browns jersey.

After the assembly in front of the firehouse dissipated I started the slow walk home, trying to forecast the jury’s verdict for myself.

Two days passed. I walked to the police station every day both before and after school to see if the notice had been posted. On the morning of the third day, there it was.

“Court will be in session at six o’clock this evening” is all it said.

During that day at school, rumors filled the halls. No one really knew but everyone seemed to have an opinion or prediction.

“I heard – guilty!”

“Twenty-five years at the least!”

“Not guilty is what I heard!”

“I heard they couldn’t decide whether he did it or didn’t!”

“I heard a bunch of guys are goin’ get him even if he ain’t found guilty!”

Everybody had a story. Six o’clock couldn’t come fast enough for me. No matter what happened at least the anxiety would be relieved.

Chapter Thirteen

The court session began, and the jury marched in just as grim-faced as when they had left three days ago. Not a smile, not a smirk was to be seen. They all stared straight ahead as if they had become robots. When seated, they descended to their chairs in unison as if purposely choreographed.

“Have you reached a verdict?” queried the judge.

“We have Your Honor,” announced the foreman.

It was passed to Somers by one of the state cops. He opened it and quickly perused its contents.

“Please read the verdict aloud” he commanded the bailiff who was again handed the paper slip.

A silence prevailed. Not a cough, not sniff, hardly even a breath could be heard.

“Not guilty!”

The throng erupted.

“Not guilty! No fuckin’ way. What is the matter with you people?” shouted a man as he stood and started to lunge towards the jury.

Two cops quickly pulled him to the floor and struggled to cuff his hands behind him. They then lifted him and dragged him from the room as he bellowed profanities and attempted to wrestle free from their grasp.

Several others who had stood in response to the jury’s announcement, upon seeing this, quietly reseated themselves.

Ricky’s mother and father rushed to their son, hugged him tightly and then euphorically shook Gerity’s hand.

The jury filed out of the room, Somers cracked down the gavel for the final time and the trial was over.

As the crowd subsided I stayed behind. I walked up to Ricky and eagerly congratulated him in the most heartfelt words that I could muster.

“Hey man, I knew all along that they couldn’t find you guilty,” I said as I grasped his hand and soundly patted him on the back.

I was lying of course. Had he been found guilty I knew it would have been unjust but certainly not surprising.

“Thanks for stickin’ with me, Man” he replied appreciatively.

“I’ll see you in school tomorrow then” I answered.

“Sure” came his soft, timid reply.

I left the firehouse overjoyed and naively anticipating a return to things the way they had always been.

During the following two days, I neither saw nor heard from Ricky. It was as if he had vanished. His disappearance worried me. What if some of the threats that I had overheard during the trial had actually been carried out?

When I entered the school on the morning of the third day, Mr. Robertson approached me as I stood by my locker.

“How are you this morning?” he inquired courteously and then proceeded to unlock the locker next to mine. It was Ricky’s. He took all the books from it along with some odds and ends and placed everything into a shopping bag. “Have a good day son” and he relocked Ricky’s locker, turned and walked towards the office carrying the shopping bag.

I stood staring as he left; I was confused.

As soon as school got out I hopped on my thumb and got a ride over to Ricky’s house. It looked like no one was home, but I went up and rang the bell anyway.

The side curtain adjacent to the window parted slightly with an eye peering through the break. It was Ricky’s sister. She unlocked the door and let me in.

“What’s goin’ on Whody?” she asked as I entered.

“I’m here to ask Ricky just that! He wasn’t in school today and I saw the principal cleaning out his locker” I replied.

“He ain’t here” she answered.

“Well, where is he?” I asked anxiously.

“He’s gone. He went and joined the Marines right after the trial.”

“The Marines!

Why in hell did he do that?” I asked dumbfoundedly.

She was silent for a moment.

“He had lots of people sayin’ that he really did it and they were gonna get him for it. He got some real nasty notes in the mailbox sayin’ they were gonna shoot him. Somebody even threw blood all over our front steps one night.

So, him and my dad decided the best thing for him would be to join the Marines and get outta here. The recruiter man told him he could finish school in the Marines, so he signed up and left yesterday.”

“Man!” I sighed. That was all I could say. It was the only response I could gather.

“Thanks!” and I left Ricky’s.

I thumbed my way back home not realizing that the day of the trial was the last day that I would ever see Ricky.

Two more school years passed. Graduation day came and went. When September approached, I left for college. My parents moved to Florida soon after I left, and I never again returned to Highburg.

Chapter Fourteen

“Hey Honey, here’s a letter from Janice Moore. Who’s Janice Moore?” my wife Sally asked.

I took the letter from her and looked at the return address. I opened it.

“I hope this note finds you well. Believe it or not it has been twenty years since our graduation from Highburg High School.

We will be holding our twentieth-class reunion on August 17th, at six o’clock, at the Highburg Hotel and hope that you will attend. Please return the enclosed form and check to assure your attendance.

Hope to see you there.

Janice Moore (Janice Stickle)”

“It’s from Janice Stickle. I graduated high school with her. It’s about our twentieth-class reunion” I replied to Sally.

“You never went before. Are you going this time?” she asked.

“I think so. I think I will this time” I answered thoughtfully.

August seventeenth came, and I set out for the hundred-and fifty-mile drive to Highburg. The last time I was there was twenty years ago, and I was eager to see what and who had changed. My mind raced as I drove, recalling all the times and friends that I had left. Of course, uppermost in my thoughts was the trial and Ricky. I again poured over every detail of that event as I made the three-hour trip back to my boyhood home.

I arrived at the reunion at six sharp and met all the old friends whom I hadn't seen in years. Bogie, Tojo, Lard, Cromag, Stinky, the whole bunch were standing over in the corner laughing and backslapping just like the old days. The main difference, of course, was large bellies and baldheads; however, their antics appeared to have remained unchanged.

“Whody!” came the united cry from the group as I approached them.

“Where the fuck have you been? We haven’t seen you in years, not since we graduated” yelled Bogie loudly.

“Been around” I replied vainly hoping to avoid relaying the story of my life.

“Around doing what?” chimed in Tojo, thereby obliging me to tell my tale which I did in the most succinct manner possible. My job, my wife, my kids, the whole nine yards I blurted it forth.

Eventually, the conversation came around to Coach’s trial and the events leading up to it. I knew full well that it would, and it did.

“Whatever happened to Ricky White?”

I knew he probably wouldn’t be here. He never did really graduate from Highburg High and I was sure that he had no fond memories of the place.

“He went right into the Marines after the trial.

You guys all knew about that, right?” I asked.

There was a silence and then Tojo spoke.

“He’s never going to be here. He got killed in sixty-two.”

“Got killed!

How? I replied in disbelief.

“Got killed in Vietnam. He was one of the first guys sent over there. They called them ‘advisers’ but being called an adviser didn’t stop the Viet Cong from killing him”

answered Tojo.

“What a shame. The guy sure got a raw deal, first being accused of something he didn’t do, then being forced out of town even though he wasn’t guilty and then that” I thought to myself.

“What a bitch!” concluded Tojo.

Everyone paused for a moment and then Bogie spoke changing the conversation away from the grim discussion of Ricky’s demise.

I stood listening but not really hearing the ongoing banter as it continued.

My mind was distant, pondering that which I had just heard.

“Ricky! Dead!

It was hard to believe!

But, I guess if you have a lot of bad luck going for you, that’s the way it works” I thought to myself over and over.

The news put me in kind of a stupor. I went to the men’s room and doused my face with some cold water. I felt a little better.

I rejoined the group and had a wonderful evening in spite of the frequently interrupting mental flashes of the bygone days that I’d had with Ricky.

When the reunion formalities ended everyone was pretty drunk including me. I decided to stay at the hotel for the night. In my condition, I really had no choice. I called Sally and told her that I would be home the next day and proceeded into the hotel bar for a few more with the rest of the boys.

We continued the stories of old adventures, boyhood pranks and all the nostalgia that went with them well into the night. As the evening wore on, the group ebbed away until only Tojo and I remained.

I looked down the bar through my intoxicated haze and spied a familiar looking face at the far end.

I squinted hard while trying not to be obvious, so as to get a better view.

“Hey To, who’s that down at the end?”

Looks really familiar but I can’t really place her” I asked.

Then Tojo squinted towards the figure at the other end of the bar but in a much more obvious fashion than I.

“That’s Marlene. I’m pretty sure” he replied.

“Marlene who?” I asked.

“Marlene - Moose’s sister. She’s in here a lot, almost every night. Really puts ‘em down too, the way I hear it.

I guess she’s kinda bent outta shape after her brother, Big Moose” he answered.

“Big Moose? What happened to him?” I asked eagerly.

“He killed himself. Hung himself in the garage of the house and she was the one who found him. Not too good! She always was a pretty good drinker but that put her right over the edge.”

“When did this all happen?”

“About, let me see, it was six or seven years after you left town, so it had to be at least, maybe thirteen years ago” replied Tojo.

“Why did he do it?” I exclaimed.

“Nobody really knows. He never left a note.

Some people say it was because he never made it in the Pros. He wound up driving a truck for Gensinger’s Lumberyard.

Everybody in town expected more from him and I guess he expected more from himself too.

I suppose he felt disgraced and he just couldn’t take it anymore, so he killed himself.”

He paused and then continued.

“Then again too, other people say it had something to do with Coach dying. Coach was like a father to him. After he died, Big Moose was never the same.

You know how he used to be one of the boys, always out drinking and having a good old time?

Well, his buddy Frank Shank, the guy he used to hang around with, he told me that after Coach died Big Moose just kind of curled up in a ball. He stopped going out. He just came home from work and sat and stared at the TV, drinking beer until two in the morning every night.

So, who knows?” concluded Tojo.

“Man, that’s a bitch. So, she comes here and drinks herself shit-faced every night?”

“Sometimes she goes to Harold’s Place but most of the time she’s here” he answered.

“She still works at the police station I suppose?” I asked.

“Yeah! I think they just keep her on out of respect for her brothers and all she’s been through. I really don’t think

they can get much work out of her at this point” he replied.

I continued to stare down the bar. I always kind of liked Minnie Moose as we used to call her. Under the gruff, mannish, outward appearance she was a nice person with a big heart.

Upon hearing Tojo’s story about George, that was Big Moose’s real name, I felt compelled to express my sympathy.

“She probably doesn’t even know who the hell I am after twenty years,” I thought to myself.

“I would probably just dig up old painful memories if I did.”

“Well, old buddy, it sure has been a trip seeing you after twenty years. I hope it’s not another twenty before I see you again.

I am going to see you again in five years, aren’t I? That’s our next reunion, twenty-five years,” said Tojo as he grasped me in a firm handshake and hug.

“I gotta go now. It’s been great” and with that, he left me alone at the bar with my thoughts whirling.

I sat sipping my beer and periodically glancing at Marlene.

“Oh shit! What the hell!” I mused and got up and walked, or should I say stumbled over to her.

She was just as big as I remembered, maybe even bigger.

Her large hips overflowed and swallowed up the seat of the stool upon which she was seated. She was hunched over the edge of the bar, braced by her elbows on its rail.

“Marlene, you don’t remember me, do you?” I began.

She leaned back off the bar onto the stool and eyed me head to toe.

“You look kinda familiar, but I can’t say as I do” she slurred out.

“Whody Crane!” I exclaimed expecting little or no response.

“Oh yeah, I remember you. You were the skinny little kid who lived over on Willow Street, right?”

“Right!” I replied with surprise.

“You sure grew up. I haven’t seen you around here in years. What brings you here now?” she inquired.

“Class reunion. Twenty years” I answered.

“Can I buy you a drink?” I continued in one breath.

“Why of course. I never chase away anybody that wants to buy” and with that, we began our conversation late into the night.

The more we talked, the more we drank and soon the talk was reduced to near incoherent babble.

“You were involved with Coach’s murder case, weren’t you? You were pals with that little colored boy that was accused but they found him not guilty” she asked.

The subject hadn’t come up during the entire conversation, but I was pretty sure it would and now it had.

“Whatever happened to him anyway? Never saw him again after that.”

I hesitated.

“He’s dead. He joined the Marines and died in Vietnam back in nineteen sixty-two” I replied.

“That’s too bad,” she said and cast her eyes down into the half-empty glass in front of her.

“You know, my brother George is dead too.”

“Wow, I’m really sorry to hear that” I replied feigning surprise.

“Yeah, he killed himself. Hung himself” she continued.

“Boy, that’s horrible. What do you think made him do that?”

There was a long, awfully long lull before she spoke.

“He killed himself because he had a guilty soul. He died of a guilty soul” she repeated in a stammering voice.

“What do you mean ‘guilty soul’?”

“He done somethin’ terrible and he just couldn’t live with it anymore. The only way he could get it outta his mind was to kill himself. He told me he was gonna do it long before he did but there wasn’t nothing I could do to stop

him. I sure wish there woulda been because I sure woulda done it” she blurted tearfully.

“What could he have done that was so bad that he wanted to commit suicide?” I ask consolingly.

Another long lull persisted.

“He killed Coach!” she muttered.

“He killed Coach!” she repeated.

I felt as if I had just drunk a pot of black coffee. Hearing those words sobered me almost instantly. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard.

“What do you mean, ‘He killed Coach’?”

“They’re all dead now so I guess it don’t make no difference” she replied with a soft sob.

“Who’s all dead?”

“George, Coach and the colored boy” she answered.

“How do you know he killed Coach Carter?”

“He told me. Told me all about it. He had to get it off his chest to somebody and I guess it was me, his sister.

George and me were always tight when we was kids. Even when he went away to college he used to write me a letter every week and tell me how he was doin'."

I said nothing in response. It was better to say nothing than to say the wrong thing. I waited.

"George heard about that story the colored kid told about how you and him saw Coach and another guy queerin' each other.

So, happens that I come to find out that Coach did a lot of that stuff with guys on the teams over the years and George was one of 'em too.

George wasn't no queer boy though. He said he only did it because Coach said he would help get him a football scholarship if he did. Coach got him into Alabama. He did pretty good there too, didn't he?"

"Sure did! All American!

Can't do much better than that" I replied.

“Well anyway, when George heard that story he wanted to go see Coach so to make sure Coach wasn’t gonna tell about him.

He borrowed Moose’s car, you know our brother Albert, and drove up to Coach’s house. I guess they got into it and George killed him so he wouldn’t say nothin’ and that was that.”

“How did Ricky’s Cleveland Browns hat get into Coach’s car?” I asked.

“George found it in the back seat of Moose’s car when he was riddin’ up there. He kinda liked it and just put it on. Then I suppose it fell off when he was fightin’ with Coach.”

“So, what about the story of Moose picking up Ricky the day of the murder and driving him back to town? Was that to cover up for George?” I asked.

“No. Nobody knew nothin’ about what George did until long after the trial, maybe a couple of years. That’s when it

really started to get him down and he told me. He said he ain't never told no one else but me," answered Marlene.

"Then why did Moose say he picked Ricky up that day?"

"That was Chief Simpson's idea. He had to solve that case and fast. The whole town was nuts about that murder.

You know that. You was here.

Who would be better to stick it on than the black kid especially when he had the kid's hat?

So, he called Albert in and told him that he wanted him to tell the story about pickin' the kid up that day. He told him if he didn't I might have to be lookin' for a new job.

So, Moose did what the Chief told him to save me.

I'm still there. He can't fire me now, not with what I know.

I got that job for life; well at least for the Chief's life anyway.

Chief takes pretty good care of himself. He's about fifty-five now so I think I got that job for another ten years at least now" she concluded with a slight smirk.

"Let's have another one," I suggested.

“Okay, one more” she agreed, “and then I gotta drive home.”

“Drive home!” I exclaimed, “Do you think you can drive?”

“Don’t make no difference. I ain’t never gonna get a ticket in Highburg either” she declared with drunken certainty.

We slugged down our last drinks and the night ended.

Chapter Fifteen

The alarm rang. I could barely raise my head from the pillow. I finally managed to open my crusty eyes and quell the alarm's jolting bursts. I stumbled into the bathroom and mopped my burning brow with a cold, wet washcloth.

My head throbbed. I looked into the mirror and to use an old country phrase, my eyes looked like 'two piss holes in the snow'.

My body was paying an awful price for the night before but what I had learned from Marlene - that was priceless. I couldn't stop thinking about all I had been told. Was it all true or just drunken blather? I guess I'll never know for sure, but Marlene's story seemed to be one that would be very difficult to concoct even for the best of fictional writers.

My head was filled with thoughts of the past at Highburg, stories of old friends and Marlene's tale as I drove home.

I pulled into the driveway and entered the house.

"Hi Honey" Sally greeted me.

"How did it go? Did you see all your old high school buddies?"

"Sure, saw most all of them" I replied.

"Any good stories?" she asked.

I hesitated.

"Not really."

THE END

Character List

Major Characters

Coach Myron Carter (Coach)

John Crane (Whody)

Richard White (Ricky)

Bart Craig (Tojo)

Howie Green (Football Team Captain)

Albert Marvich (Moose)

Don Wheeler (Flash)

Mr. Jeffrey Hartly (The Prosecutor)

Mr. Harrington Gerity (Ricky's lawyer)

Marlene Marvich (Minnie Moose)

Minor Characters

Principal Robertson (Highburg High School principal)

Officer Fred James (Highburg cop)

Chief Simpson (Highburg Police Chief)

Jake (Howie's pal)

Johnny Freed (Johnny Cromag)

Bogie (Whody's friend)

Stinky (Whody's friend)

Lard (Whody's friend)

Kathy MacIntyre (Whody's girlfriend)

Judge Jacob Somers (Judge at Ricky's trial)

Dr. Gordon Fink, ME (County Medical Examiner)

Peter Gray, (County Sheriff)

Sally (Whody's wife)

George Marvich (Big Moose)

Places in "Coach"

Snookie's Luncheonette

Jack's Bowling Alley

Crockton (site of weekly C.Y. O. dances)

Stanton (County Seat)

Henderson Town (Ricky's hometown)

Mallon Funeral Home

Coach's house

Highburg High School

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