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Desire. Without it, you might as well pack up and go home. Fran Welch, Coach Welch, had said this when the season began, then repeated it at frequent but irregular intervals as the season moved along. By now, I had decided I no longer wanted to play college football. So I turned in my gear and went home, but not before Coach Welch gave me an ass-chewing I'll not live long enough to forget. Before the chewing began, though, he wanted to know why in the name of Christ I was quitting.

No desire, I said. I have lost my desire to play football.

Coach, sitting behind a wooden desk in his small office at the stadium, grimaced, as if someone had struck him in the solar plexus with a closed fist. The grimace revealed two rows of yellowing teeth. I remember thinking that those teeth appeared to be aching to bite something.

No desire, he said.

Yes, sir, I said. I have lost my desire to play football.

Coach removed his ball cap and wiped his forehead with the palm of his right hand. I was certain that the practice I had skipped that Monday afternoon had been a tough one; two days earlier the Emporia State Hornets had beaten a stubborn band of Gorillas on their home field, but the win had been sloppy. And Coach Welch did not approve of sloppiness. I could envision the entire nest of Hornets doing more wind sprints than I cared to imagine. But because my resolve to leave the team was firm, it now pleased me that I had not been one of the sprinters.

No desire, Coach said again. No goddamn desire.

Yes, sir, I said. No desire.

It was the truth. To this day I do not know what prompted my loss

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of desire, but I know absolutely that it vanished almost entirely—not overnight, but over a series of nights during which I had discussed my dilemma with one of my roommates, Gene Carpenter, who like me had believed at the outset that playing college football would be pretty much the same as playing the game in high school, and who, as it turned out, was also experiencing a loss of desire.

Then let's stop talking about it and turn in our gear, Gene said. I'm ready if you are.

Gene was a year older than I. I had known him for as long as I could remember. We played on the same football team, the Attica High School Bulldogs. He was the third son of a railroad foreman, and probably because he was several years younger than his brothers, and because his parents could afford it, he had been pampered. After graduating from Attica High, he enrolled at the University of Kansas, where Acacia—a fraternity maybe as disreputable as the one I would join at Emporia State—took its toll. He finished his freshman year, then in a moment of clear-eyed sobriety decided not to return to Lawrence—elected instead to join me and our mutual friend, Toar Grant, at Emporia.

Gene was blond and congenial, with a round, dimpled face and teeth that, free of tobacco stains, would have made the most fastidious dentist justifiably proud. He was confident and competitive and good-natured and always certain that his next change of mind would be the one to take him wherever he was destined to go. He then would commit himself to the newest change until another one came along, whereupon he would commit himself anew.

I'm ready, I said.

Gene grinned and lit a cigarette. He was sitting at his desk in our modest, second-story sunroom, his bare feet, crossed at the ankles, resting on the top of the desk. I was sitting on the edge of my narrow bed. The room itself was wide but not very deep. Windows lined the north, south, and west walls. We paid twelve dollars each to rent the room, and what it lacked in privacy it made up for in coziness. I occupied the north one-third of the room, Toar the center portion, and Gene the south. Each of us had a desk with a chair, and each had a free-standing closet

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near the head of the bed. It was a very difficult room to rearrange, maybe even impossible, but it was a rather easy place to despoil—not horizontally, because of the limited area, but vertically, because the room had a high ceiling. So in lieu of spreading, we piled—and piled and piled—until one of us, most likely Toar, who had been raised on a farm and knew both the pleasure and the necessity of ridding a barn or a henhouse of manure, would begin sweeping and shoveling and sorting and discarding until finally Gene and I would feel guilty enough to help; and in what seemed an interminable time, we would return the room more or less to its pre-catastrophic condition.

We can skip practice tomorrow, Gene said, then when practice is over and everyone is gone, we can show up and tell Coach Welch we're quitting. What do you think the old turd will say?

He'll want to know why. He'll tell us to reconsider.

Gene giggled. He'll do a lot more than that. He'll rip us a new one. I'm betting he'll call us some names we've never been called before.

I tried to imagine what some of these names might be, but because I had never heard them I could not call them up. Yet I knew that Carpenter was right. The old turd's off-the-field vocabulary was probably unlimited.

Carpenter finished his cigarette and suggested that, to celebrate, we go see a movie.

Maybe the late one, I said. I'll be at the cafeteria until eight.

I had taken a job at the cafeteria when I realized that my bank account probably would not see me through an entire term. Emporia State—Kansas State Teachers College—was not an expensive institution in the fall of 1950 (seventy-eight dollars for fifteen credit hours), but I did not have a scholarship, athletic or otherwise, and after I had purchased my books and paid the rent and bought a desk lamp and a sweatshirt with Corky the Hornet on the front, and some additional necessities, it occurred to me that perhaps I should find a job. I found one soon enough—feeding dirty dishes into the maw of a steamy washer under the omnipresent eye of the cafeteria manager, Miss Helen "The Nose" Bishop. For my services I was paid a modest hourly wage augmented by free meals.

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The second showing at the Orpheum began shortly after nine, a Technicolor rerun thriller whose title I cannot remember. Fred MacMurray was in it, and Barbara Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson. What I do remember is the absolute joy—with its first cousin, fear—that I experienced as I anticipated an existence unencumbered with the smash-mouth trappings of football. Not football *per se*, but football as coached by Fran Welch. And perhaps, after all, it was Coach Welch who was responsible for my lack of desire. He was indeed an old turd, his grimace so often a part of him that without it he appeared deformed. And he walked with a slouchiness that seemed to me at odds with the coaching of football, a casualness that suggested retirement more than involvement. And almost always he kept his hands in the back pockets of his trousers—not trousers, actually, but the tan pants of a football uniform he bloused at the knees. He always wore a white T-shirt with a hornet on it, and a tan baseball cap on a head that was losing its hair. In this outfit he roamed the field while his assistants, Gus Fish and Shorty Long and Keith Caywood, did almost all the coaching. Or so it seemed. Is it possible that this man was the reason I no longer had the desire to play football?

The seats at the Orpheum were inordinately comfortable, plush and sensuous to the touch. I had bought a large sack of popcorn soaked in butter. I was pleasantly tired, having fed perhaps a million plates and saucers and glasses and pieces of silverware into the hissing, relentless mouth of the washer. My friend Bill Johnson removed and stacked the dishes as they emerged; he was an upperclassman, a young black student with impeccable diction and a fondness for yodeling, a skill that he would teach me, or attempt to, before the end of the semester. From time to time Helen "The Nose" Bishop materialized to oversee our work. She was tall and thin, with black eyes the size of marbles and a nose long enough to stick into everyone's business. I liked her, though, because she had hired me without asking more than half a dozen questions. She always appeared without warning or fanfare, perhaps because she moved pretty much at the speed of light. One moment only Johnson and I at the washer. The next moment, behold! Helen "The Nose" Bishop there between us, her black marble eyes making certain nothing was amiss.

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At eight o'clock I had removed my white soggy apron, hung it on a far wall to dry, then helped myself to whatever the customers, mostly students and faculty, had chosen not to order—ham loaf or tuna salad, most likely, and the less desirable pieces of chicken. But there were choice leavings, too, such as apple pie or chocolate cake. And always there was cold milk, whole and plentiful, milk I swear as fulfilling as the milk I had coaxed from the udders of a long line of Jersey cows in south-central Kansas.

Carpenter had his own sack of buttered popcorn, and he was digging into it with an energy worthy of the position he was about to retire from, that of middle linebacker. He was resting one shoe atop the unoccupied seat in front of him. There was a pretty good crowd at the movie, but no one was sitting in the seats next to us, so we had plenty of room to relax and extend our arms; to give ourselves even more freedom, we had left one seat empty between us.

When it comes to flat-out, unadulterated comfort, there are few places to equal a movie theater. Something akin to the spiritual takes place when the lights dim and the curtains part and the fuzziness that was the picture behind the curtains becomes the images of scenes so sharply focused and so beautifully colored that you wonder whether the cameraman has performed some trick to make reality more real than in fact it is. You spend the first few minutes settling in, rearranging yourself in the plush seat, and adjusting your elbows to the armrests so that you can handle the popcorn with a minimum of inconvenience. If you are not soon far removed from whatever had bothered you before you entered the theater's inner sanctum, the cartoon completes the removal for you—and, following that, the previews of coming attractions and a newsreel that depicts a world of characters and events almost as surreal as Tom and Jerry or Elmer Fudd. Once in a while, in spite of your involvement in the action before you, or maybe at times because of it, you think of something you'd rather not think of—Coach Welch, say, standing on the sideline with his hands in his hip pockets, shouting something to Coach Fish or Coach Long who in turn will shout something at you, shout it into the hole of your helmet until your ear rings like a

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church bell—and the thought causes your blood to freeze and your head to spin, until you remind yourself that in less than twenty-four hours such bullshit will be always and forever behind you, at which moment you lapse into a calmness even more serene than the one you enjoyed before Welch and his henchmen popped like little demons into your consciousness. Meanwhile, Fred MacMurray or his equivalent moves at a steady pace to reassure Barbara Stanwyck or her equivalent that as long as she stays with him she'll be perfectly safe, and you nurse the buttered popcorn now one fluffy kernel at a time, hoping to make it last until injustice has run its course and is punished, and innocence is rewarded with a kiss.

Carpenter coughed all night and was still coughing when I left for my eight o'clock class. When I returned he was sitting at his desk, wearing a red plaid robe and smoking a cigarette. His cherubic face was flushed, his eyes rheumy. He exhaled, sending a shaft of smoke almost to the edge of Toar Grant's bed, which was empty, Toar having left for work at Reeble's grocery. Carpenter grinned.

I'm too sick to quit football today, he said. You can do it for me.

The truth is this: I had decided to drop football, come hell or high water—or, now, my buddy's illness. So I did not waver when Gene delivered his prognosis. I instead told him that I would be more than willing to do his quitting for him. And here, while I'm at it, is another truth: I did not altogether dislike Coach Welch, certainly not enough to blame him entirely for my loss of desire. His temperament was a factor, but not the only one. And if another truth must be told, let it be told now: There were times when I admired the old turd, times when his pugnacious approach to the coaching of football revealed a wryness and a sense of theater worthy, almost, of Edward G. Robinson or Fred MacMurray.

Case in point: Billy Freeman and the significance of desire.

Billy Freeman was a sophomore who at first glance did not appear to be much of a football player. Too short, too baby-faced. And much too good-natured. To be a legitimate football player, one must not resemble too closely an altar boy which, from any angle you looked at him, Billy

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certainly did. At the same time, he had been impressively assembled; neither slight nor chunky, he was beautifully proportioned, an Adonis, really, someone to admire but not fear.

At our first squad meeting I took special note of Billy Freeman; I was wanting to find someone that I might feel equal or even superior to, a feeling that in turn would give me confidence. I was a small-town greenhorn who needed any type of assurance he could muster, and Freeman gave me an opening. Many of the other players, on the other hand, deflated my ambitions; some were behemoths, while others resembled the specimen on the back of so many of the comic books I read, the one who, as he strolled the beach, made a practice of kicking sand in the faces of his scrawny victims. But Billy Freeman—well, he was neither a behemoth nor a Charles Atlas. He appeared to be a well-formed boy among an assortment of ruggedly chiseled men.

We had checked out our gear and placed it into our assigned lockers, whereupon we assembled in the squad room for introductions and what Coach Fish, in his gravelly voice, called "an overview of the system." A major segment of the overview was the showing of a game film. The sixteen millimeter projector sat on a metal stand near the back of the room, its operator a good-looking young man who could tape ankles and knees as well as run a projector. The following week I'd see him out on the playing field, kicking a football, and watching it sail sometimes more than sixty yards. I'd ask one of the upperclassmen why he wasn't a member of the team.

Too valuable as a track man, he'll say. That's Freddie Wilson, the best fucking high hurdler on the planet. Can't take any chances with those incredible legs.

The introductions that preceded the showing of the film had been alternately long and short. Coach Fish, we learned, was to handle the offensive line, and for almost half an hour he told us what he expected it to accomplish and how he expected the line to carry out its job. Coach Fish's gravelly voice was complemented by a weathered face redder, as one of the seniors later would phrase it, than a baboon's ass, and his large eyes seemed on the brink of popping out of his head. To clarify

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each of his major points, he drew Xs and Os on a chalkboard. It was difficult for me to follow his scribblings because, for one thing, they were so plentiful and, for another, I was at once charmed and distracted by his gravelly voice. It was a deep voice, and Coach Fish with every word seemed to be trying to clear it, but without success. I found myself wanting to help him by clearing my own throat, which I did a couple of times, as quietly as I could, but my sympathetic attempts did nothing to help him out. Eventually, though, once I realized that the sounds erupting from his throat were beyond modifying, I began to pay less attention to them and more attention to the Xs and Os on the chalkboard.

Next on the docket was Coach Shorty Long, who, having stood as high as he could on the toes of his white tennis shoes to clear the chalkboard, spent no more than five minutes emphasizing the importance of special teams. As he did this he held the eraser in his left hand and a small piece of white chalk in his right. To underscore a word or a sentence he would point either the eraser or the stub of chalk at one of the players and, pretending it was a weapon, would shoot the player squarely between his eyes, *Pow!* being the exclamation mark to punctuate his point. From the moment I saw Coach Long I admired and trusted him, and I believe my response was that of every other player in the room. Genuinely free of pretension, he had a face you needed to see to believe. It wasn't homely, exactly, or ugly. It was instead slightly off-balance, the nose crooked, eyebrows thickly joined, both ears large and leafy, and not level, the left one a good inch lower than the right; and he seemed to have difficulty keeping both eyes, which were small and blue, focused. His speeches probably were brief because his lexicon was not very extensive, and he did not mince those few words he had at his disposal. He was an intense, frisky man wholly incapable of being disliked. Even when he chided you, you loved him. Popcorn, he'd say to me when I bungled a pulling movement from my position at left guard to lead the ball carrier over right tackle, you couldn't hit a hole even if it had hair around it. His remarks might be crude, if not downright vulgar, at times, but they were always on the mark.

I would come to respect him even more the following semester when

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I'd have him as my boxing coach. Everyone who graduated from Emporia State was required to have a minimum of four credit hours in physical education, so to fulfill one-fourth of this requirement I enrolled in Fundamentals of Boxing. Why not? I had never boxed before, and I might find the new experience exhilarating. And, too, the course would be taught by Coach Shorty Long.

Here is the scene: a midsized room on the second floor of a red brick building whose gymnasium served as the location for each semester's madhouse enrollment proceedings. Most of the wood floor is covered with a mat used for the class, Fundamentals of Wrestling. Two large punching bags, the "heavies," hang from the ceiling, while three smaller bags, the so-called speed bags, used for conditioning and timing, are affixed to wooden overhangs on apparatuses with metal platforms. Two windows are at the back of the room, but they are always firmly shut, which means that the air smells thickly of sweat socks, stagnation, and human exertion. There are no chairs.

Here are the players: fourteen male students, each wearing black shorts and a gold Corky the Hornet T-shirt, white socks, and tennis shoes of several different colors, and one instructor, Coach Shorty Long, who will meet his three o'clock class consistently five minutes late each Monday and Wednesday afternoon. On the first day of class Coach Long appears with a clipboard in his right hand. He is wearing black tennis shoes, a gold Corky the Hornet T-shirt, and gray sweatpants gathered at the ankles. His hair is a mid-1940's flattop. I am surprised to see that he is wearing glasses. He never had them on during the previous semester on the gridiron.

Shorty is all business. He takes the class roll, asking each student where he went to high school and why he is taking Fundamentals of Boxing. Then very matter-of-factly he tells us to sit down on the floor and listen up. He has a lecture to deliver, he says, and he wants anyone who doesn't care to give him his full attention to get the hell out right now and not bother to shut the door behind him.

No one leaves.

Good, Coach Long says. Now listen up.

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