

*Meat Squad, 1982*

I was relaxing in my brother's kitchen over in Palmer Woods, waiting for him to return from the hospital, when Jack came in from a night class down at Wayne State. Last weekend he'd shaved his head again to make the hair grow back thicker. He sighed heavily and took a place at the table under a large round Faygo clock that glowed purple on the wall.

"Peter, I need a change, and not the minor things. New job, new pussy, the whole thing across the board."

My sister-in-law walked in with a pile of laundry. "Hi, Jack. How was teaching tonight?"

"Betsy, I walk in there and they haven't put the chairs around in a big circle. Why do I always have to *ask* them to put the chairs in a circle? I mean, I'm a consistent person."

Betsy chuckled and went to the closet to get some chips. I rolled a couple joints and placed them in the middle of the table. "This is what they would have preferred down at the soup kitchen today."

"How's that *Metro Detroit* article coming, Peter?"

"Sister Mary Watson is a remarkable lady. Her soup kitchen has a real touch of home. Maybe the article will attract a little more money her way."

At that moment Pat arrived back from the hospital. Still thin as a rail since Vietnam, he grabbed a Lowenbrau and joined us at the table. His face was red from exertion.

"Patrick..." Jack said, reaching for a joint. "How's it going?"

"A little busy in the ER," he said, without elaboration, that mysterious benign blankness on his face. "There was some basketball practice afterwards. Henry Ford has a team, mostly blacks from the ER. For an inept and completely useless team member, I have quite a following."

"I've heard this story too many times," Betsy said, withdrawing with a magazine into the living room.

We passed the joint around, and talk meandered from the Boy Scouts to past summer jobs to what we might do with a videotape of Ronald Reagan butt-fucking a chimp, if we uncovered one. The

three of us had been meeting regularly for mid-week head adventures for a couple years now. This night Pat led us back to sports and some memories of his career as a half-miler in high school.

“I remember the Flint meet,” he began. “I ran the first 440 in sixty, coasted the next 220, then waited to see what I had left. Dad had the movie-camera rolling. With about a hundred yards to go I started my kick. You could tell it was time because these guys with long strides all around me were now stretching it out, pulling away. But I had nothing left. Zilch. You feel the legs go rubbery, the vision blur, and your body stiffens into a hysterical hunchback gasping for air. Your teammates are no help, standing along the track waving sweat pants at you, yelling at you to pump your arms, as more runners are passing you, pouring over the finish line now, the camera recording all. . . . On the ride home everybody’s horsing around, while I’m in the back of the bus, a wet towel over my head, puking my cookies into a pail. . . . Christ, I remember after the Clio meet I went blind, just lost my vision for half an hour.”

Maybe it was just dope profundity, but it struck me sitting there that over time jock humiliations like Pat’s turn into silver trophies, far more precious than memories of victory. It is the losing that unites us. “Buzz,” as I turned to my brother, “I remember you had some problems at the Huron Relays too.”

“Yeah, that was my first race on an indoor track, a medley relay, in Ypsilanti. I remember Jim Cooley ran the first 220 and handed me the baton with a thirty-yard lead. I jumped out and ran, entirely alone, just the tic-tic-tic of my shoes on the track. I lost a little ground by the second lap, but was still way ahead. I was really flying. But on the third lap, I went into a curve under the balcony in first place, and came out of the turn in fifth! Everybody on the infield was screaming and waving at me. I had run the whole race in my outside lane. . . . It never occurred to me to merge. . . .”

“We were always taught as kids to color inside the lines. What do you expect?”

Jack popped a third of a joint into his mouth, and then leaned back, rubbing his shaved head.

“Pat, we had a defensive football coach in high school who believed that the way you proved you had guts was by spear-tackling, with your head. But at 130 pounds I didn’t want any of that defense. I remember once I went down to cover a kickoff and cut

through traffic to the middle of the field, doing a good job of avoiding people. Suddenly there was a parting of bodies and a back was galloping straight toward me. Both of us ran full speed into each other in a straight-up position. I went back and down as a knee went squarely into my nuts. Then I rolled over and passed out . . .”

“Jack . . .” Betsy groaned, back at the sink.

“After that I made it clear to the coach: *no defense*. I don’t need that. But it seemed to follow me. In lacrosse, I think it was a Rutgers-Princeton game, I got into an even worse collision. That was enough. I got up and just walked off the field, with some guy clubbing me with his stick all the way to the sidelines . . .”

Pat put a helmet of hands over his head in sympathy.

“Jack,” he said, “that’s what freshman football at Rumson High in New Jersey was like with my brother at quarterback. We were the meat squad, a band of orphans, with one gentle, black 270-pound lineman, John Berry, with an off-colored helmet and, obviously, glandular problems. The first play of any game or varsity scrimmage Peter would always call my number, 23-halfback-dive, you know, just to feel out the defensive line. And every fucking time I would get creamed, swallowed up in a grunting pile of bodies and choking dust. To this day I remember no pain, just stars, like in the cartoons.”

“I don’t know what he’s complaining about, Jack. The end-run option was worse. This was the days of the standard T-formation, remember that? I’d get in trouble after a few ineffectual fakes on the defensive end, then lateral to Patrick as the secondary came charging in, full speed. Right as the poor bastard grabbed the ball about eye level, they’d *run his ass over*.”

“And to add insult to injury, they’d grab my jersey and shoulder pads and whirl me into the yardsticks.”

“You guys,” Betsy said in mock despair. “These experiences are so *violent*.”

“Self-inflicted wounds,” Jack said with fatuous sagacity. “Self-inflicted wounds.”

“In preparation for war,” I said. “Look here, Bets.” I unbuttoned my shirt, flung it open, and pointed to a smooth disc of skin the size of a dime in the middle of my breastbone. “See this? Our locker room at Rumson was about as ventilated as a dungeon. Everything stank. Shoulder pads were always caked with mud or soaked with

sweat, rank and stiffening. I was fourteen with acne all over my shoulders, back and chest, and pulling on that equipment was like feeding a fire. So one day I'm sitting on the bench in front of my locker and pop this huge inflamed pimple. I keep pressing the skin around it until there's a stream of yellow pus running down to my stomach, pooling at my hip, and then, no lie, running down the inside of my thigh until it reached my *knee*! At last when I wiped away the pus there was a wound in my chest that looked like a bullet hole."

"Our job, Jack," my brother quickly redirected the conversation, "was to scrimmage the varsity all week leading up to the games on Saturday afternoon. We always represented the next opponent, except we were fourteen and fifteen, totally outsized, in worn-out equipment, yellow tank-top pullovers, unnumbered jerseys, battered cleats. . . . We were pitiful."

"Give us some dignity," I said. "We were sacrificial. . . our heads poked up from those oversized shoulder pads like wary turtles. And when the scrimmage started, we were nothing but road kill."

"I wised up about meat squads long before my brother," Pat said. "He's still on the meat squad. Me, after that freshman year I turned to golf."

Elizabeth and the boys were asleep when I returned home later that night, and one remark from the bull session kept surfacing in my mind. *He's still on the meat squad*. It was therapeutic to linger a while on the sofa, our cat Carter beside me, and think back twenty years to Rumson, how my gut used to fill up with anxiety as last period ticked down in study hall. Whether there was rain or fall sunlight at the tall windows, I felt the lassitude of someone who would soon be ordered to walk in formation across open terrain toward a woods alive with the crack of rifle fire. Every afternoon, I watched two rows below me our starting senior guard, a muscular pockmarked gnome named Earl Scholl, hold a cigarette lighter to the seat in front of him and char the wood with fierce concentration. He was just getting ready for practice. Up front the faculty proctor was too preoccupied trying to spot who was arcing pennies high into the air to notice Earl's work. When the pennies came down with a metallic clank across the auditorium, like toy grenades, a ripple of laughter would go up. Anything seemed possible, indeed permissible.

When the final bell rang, and students flooded out noisy corridors into airy freedom, I would file down to the locker room.

This was the late fifties, and high school locker rooms were cramped, filled with a gray din, like a holding cell in some county jail. Despite the chorus of curses and jokes, slamming metal doors, the mood was somber among the meat squad. At last we would file out into the slant light of afternoon and with cleats clicking, walk across a parking lot to the football field, where we lay down on a grassy knoll to await the arrival of Coach Rosotti. I recall how the woods beyond the field stood silent and remote, autumn leaves a lovely quilt of red and yellow, almost mystical, having nothing to do with us.

More memories of the meat squad kept drifting into mind, carrying along a quick, unexpected anxiety. I brought a glass of bourbon back to the sofa, just to take a little bit of the edge off.

When practice started, we operated as a unit, stretching, doing jumping jacks, running laps, occupied with various formational drills. It was like a wholesome boot camp. But soon the drills became violent. Face guards were still a couple of years away, and I dreaded in particular the tackling drill. Two dummies were set up about four yards apart, and we formed two lines, facing each other on either side of the opening. At the sound of the whistle, a player at the head of one line ran with the football between the dummies. The player at the head of the other line did a somersault and met the charging runner in the opening. One afternoon I came out of my somersault late and rose up to catch a knee square in the face. After the hit I got up and went to the back of the other line, where Mr. Early, our high school principal, who had stopped by to watch practice, started talking to me long enough to recognize I was out cold on my feet. He led me away with a cracked cheekbone and concussion, and the next two days became a permanent hole in my memory. But meat was not expected to think.

The second half of practice we scrimmaged the varsity. On offense I was cast as quarterback of our next opponent, Matawan or Point Pleasant, and whether handing off to a back, running the option, or dropping back to pass, I was leveled. Every play was the same play: the signal count, then soft crunch of shoulder pads, confused yells and grunts, then contact like the rush of a train, a distant whistle, and the quiet weight of bodies piled on top of me. It wasn't much

different on defense, where I played cornerback. Billy Lewis with a gang of blockers was always bursting through a giant hole in the line and stampeding straight toward me. Maybe 5-8 and 120 pounds back then, I just toppled over backwards and reached up to grab feet and legs as they ran over my chest. Scrimmage offered the meat squad the pure experience of enduring blows.

When it grew dark, the team would huddle around the coaches for strategy sessions, the meat squad at the margins, a ghostly irrelevance now. But sometimes we were summoned to take more. Once, when the varsity was ordered back on the field to return kickoffs, I jogged down in coverage and was blind-sided by John Kunce, our best lineman and 230 pounds. I lay on my back in the torn grass, never wanting to move, feeling the relief of the dead. When I opened my eyes, there was the towering figure of Coach Rosotti staring down at me. On his mafia face was a look of the most exquisite compassion. John was staring down too, innocent and uncomprehending. It was the closest I have ever come to being welcomed into heaven.

Once practice was over, back in the locker room, all the pain was replaced by the deepest sense of solidarity I've known. For the meat squad, the challenge had been met and we were alive. Even the varsity players seemed to treat us like comrades in arms. The shower room, with its broken nozzles, chipped tiles, billows of steam, was abuzz with jokes and horseplay. Earl stood now under a shower talking with our team captain Paul Dobrowski, a James Dean look-a-like, whose attentions kept Earl from noticing that someone was pissing on his leg. For the meat squad, this was a restoration of justice. When he looked down, Earl jumped back, went berserk, and everyone broke up. We were inside the magic circle.

At the varsity game on Saturday afternoons I had the job of recording all the plays on a clipboard from the sidelines. I also volunteered to tend to the injured. When Bobby Clark went down with a torn-up knee against Red Bank Catholic, I became a crutch, helping him to the bench, where he wept in pain amidst a litter of plastic cups, chewed orange rinds, and as the game went on, neglect. In a brutal, losing game against Sayerville, played on an away field turned into a prairie of mud and standing water, I watched our back-up defensive end, Rob Hamilton, enter the game in the second half wearing a starkly clean uniform, sudden technicolor in a world of

indistinguishable brown shapes. No sign of transcendence here, just an irresistible target for the Sayerville linemen, who jeered as he bent into position. Rob came off the field a play later with his two upper front teeth knocked out. On the bus ride home, I sat next to him as he clamped his bite into a blood-soaked towel.

I never played varsity football at Rumson High. My family moved to Michigan my junior year, where I quarterbacked another varsity high school team, and pretty well, until late in that senior season my career ended the way John Kunce started it: a blind-side hit after the whistle, blowing out my knee. But that seemed fated, too, because my brother was right. I was still on the meat squad. Nothing quite matched the existential edge of being aligned with an underdog cause, the voluntary martyrdom of joining it, the complex terms of surviving it. The experience was formative, and left me with an irrepressible, if distorted way of viewing events outside the chalk lines.

“I was an awful fool when I went off to the Great War,” Ernest Hemingway wrote. “I just thought we were the visiting team and they were the home team.” This classic analogy between sports and war, a tragic confusion of realms, was drowned in carnage. A British captain, W.P. Nevill, led his men at the Somme attack in 1916 by dribbling a soccer ball up to the German lines, and was killed instantly, as was the spirit he embodied, by an engagement that cost the British sixty thousand killed and wounded that day, for an advance of a hundred yards, the length of a football field. General Haig declared the battle a success.

Even before my time on the meat squad, I had a fascination with World War I. When I was twelve, I devoured an old hardcover edition of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Sprawled on a plush living-room carpet, I poured over books of photographs of the trenches, not the glossy Time/Life books, but old black-and-white photographs, yellowing, the smell coming off those pages as keen to me as the smell of dinner in my mother’s kitchen. The visual record was stunning. Young men dead, their fragments decomposing in mud, ten million of them. Here I imagined was the first and ultimate meat squad, largely volunteer until 1917, their survival a matter of luck, with a subterranean loyalty only to each other, as their “coaches” dreamed up murderous nine-

teenth-century military strategies miles from the front, thereby earning what infantrymen called “the red badge of funk.”

The same sentiment resurfaced in my twenties, during the civil rights struggle in the South. Meridian. Selma. Orangeburg. I was drawn down there less by ideology than by the example of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodwin, an early meat squad from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, murdered by the Klan. The moral rightness of this matter was self-evident, with a clear underdog, an engagement no more complicated really than wanting to beat Sayerville. Only one injunction here: *put your body on the line*. Passive but resistant meat, something I understood. On the back steps of Brown’s chapel, keeping watch for marauding whites, an unloaded rifle on my lap. On the streets of Montgomery, arrested after being thrown through the glass windows of a department store. On the sidewalks of Orangeburg, blocked by a giant barber with a razor, eyes glinting from two cups of flab. None of this rivaled the terror of that Mississippi summer of 1964, and I suspect Bob Moses put an end to the strategy once it became clear that a dead member of the meat squad, especially a white one, became far too temptingly useful a media symbol. But for a while, what a holy sense of community.

Over those years I watched the commanders of the meat squads in Vietnam prove less merciful. Dump teenage grunts into the mine-filled, guerrilla-controlled jungles, and once they are ambushed, call in the napalm. An anti-war activist after my stint in the South, it was my shame to recognize only later the grunts of Vietnam as the tragic meat squad of my generation: brothers sacrificed for nothing. 58,000 of them, including Earl Scholl, one way or another *wasted, greased, iced*, their poetic language for death a bitter reminder of their physical mortality, an antidote to the Orwellian lies that justified the war. As I saw it, the war came to an end only when the nation woke up in protest as white middle-class KIAs came back in body bags, and the meat squads in-country mutinied through drugs and fragging. But not for returning vets. Twice as many committed suicide after the war as were killed in Vietnam, *as if* in loyalty to their fallen comrades, *as if* survival guilt could be purged by death alone.



Afterwards a member of any meat squad carries off a dangerous respect for loss, for what could success possibly mean now? A lethargy settles in that bordered in my own case on immobilization. An absence that is really loyalty to what has passed. Maybe that was why I was known behind my back as “the shadow” when I taught down at Wayne State. On a high shelf of my bookcase was a framed picture of my mother. Last year I had leaned over her casket in Florida and kissed her cheek, firm and cold as marble. I had been away a year and a half, failed to reach her bedside in time. The same mother who, rightly fearful of meat squads, failed to see how her own open heart for people had inspired her children to volunteer. The same mother who, after dinner was over, and my homework done, would apply sulfur compresses to the acne on my back and shoulders. The same mother who, every morning for those three months of the football season, was always there to help me out of bed, I was so sore.