

(Scene: Lacrosse practice. Narrator Jack Gaffney, a senior, and his freshman protégé Bobby Ward have just been punished by assistant coach Big Sir for dogging it in drills.)

When we finished our penalty laps and reached the drill lines, I joined the end of the right-hand line again, bending over at the waist, hands on knees, trying to catch my breath.

“Gentlemen,” said Big Sir to Bobby and me, “front of the line, if you please.”

Fuck.

Out scooted the ball. I took off after it with everything I had and was glad to see it angle a bit toward me, giving me the advantage.

Bobby blew past me and leaned down to scoop the ball. I cocked back my stick to check him as soon as he made contact with the ball, as Baggataway had with Vavolano, but instead of going for the scoop, Bobby turned in my direction and put a shoulder neatly into my left hip. It was a race between my right shoulder and my head to see which would reach the turf first. My head won by a nose, bouncing once and skidding along the grass.

Cradling the ball leisurely, Bobby jogged back to the line.

“Mr. Gaffney,” Big Sir said to me, pointing to the head of the line, “let’s try it again, shall we?”

Wheezing for breath, I looked over to see who my next opponent was: Scooter Zoril. Great.

Absolutely no one was taking bets on who would win. John Vavolano had All-American speed—but Scooter could fucking *run*. God had sculpted his legs from the tail of a comet and fired them with the blast of Creation. Me, He had given the lower limbs of a hairless chimpanzee. The bell rang, the mechanical rabbit went zooming out, and Scooter had it by the scruff of the neck about the time I was taking my fourth step.

Twweeeet! The whistle was not being kind to me today.

Big Sir stared at me, hands on hips. He was peaking. “Tell me something, Gaffney: Are you dogging it, or are you just slow?”

I kept my mouth shut.

“Well?”

I kept my mouth shut.

“Why aren’t you answering me, mister?”

“It sounded like a trick question.”

Big Sir did not like the snickering that followed. “Gentlemen, that will cost you one lap, compliments of Mr. Gaffney.”

Nine pairs of sullen eyes turned on me. As we started off, Big Sir said, “No, not you Gaffney. I want you to stand here and think about what you’ve done to your teammates.”

“Nice going, J.V.,” Vavolano muttered under his breath. As he trotted past me, he intentionally bumped shoulders.

Assistant coach Karl Yockstroppe—affectionately known as Big Sir—was tall and hard, with eyes the slate gray of a stormy sea. Somewhere along the line, all of the joy had gone out of his life. Maybe it was when his application to the CIA interrogator program was rejected.

He didn’t like me much.

Head coach Johann Yockstroppe was big on character building, and Karl Yockstroppe supported his brother one hundred and ten percent. Karl figured that before you could build anything, you first had to clear the ground; so he had been tearing me down for two years now. It was a terrible duty to have to destroy a player’s self-image. But like the Army said of that Vietnamese village, sometimes it was necessary to destroy one in order to save it.

In the navy, the ship’s captain is the good cop, the executive officer the bad. So it is in sports. The head coach leads and inspires. The assistant coach kicks ass. It could be a painful duty, but Karl Yockstroppe was not the kind of man to shirk his duty, no matter how painful others might find it.

Big Sir was a strict disciplinarian and preached with the passion of Savonarola against the Seven Deadly Sins: Sloth, gluttony, fear, charity, mercy, benevolence, and giving up the ball when you’ve got a perfectly good shot.

Sloth was self-explanatory. You hustled or you got nailed to the log. Gluttony’s effects were indistinguishable from sloth: blubber, nicotine, angel dust—they slowed you down. Karl believed that your body was your temple and insisted that his players adhere to a strict regimen: Eat right, or else lose the weight by the start of the season. Abstain from tobacco, in all its non-chewed forms. During the season, absolutely no alcohol before practice or games. And none of his players better ever get caught taking illegal drugs.

Fear was a sin because it led to mistakes. On-field, things happened in split seconds. You needed a clear head to make good decisions, and you couldn’t have a clear head if you feared your opponent or a ruptured spleen. So fear had to be banished. Not just hidden—that was fine if you

were a soldier, fighting for your life. Fear of mutilation and death was normal and could even serve as a good motivator on the battlefield. But the odds of mutilation or death on the lacrosse field were demonstrably lower than on the battlefield, and fear, even hidden fear, clouded the mind. It had to be banished completely.

Charity meant doom. From junior high school on, every lacrosse player in the land had it drummed into him that the team that got the most ground balls won the game. You must deny your opponent the ball. You must limit turnovers. It was inevitable that the ball would be on the ground part of the time, especially with a run-and-gun offense like ours. But if you dropped the ball, you'd damn well better go get it back. Failure to get it back was indistinguishable from sloth.

Mercy and benevolence occupied special places in Karl's pantheon. Mercy was at the root of all comebacks. If you had the lead, the time to strike was now, while your opponent had doubts. You could show him no mercy. You had to score and score and score again, until he couldn't wait for the clock to read 00:00. Big Sir was a Christian man who believed in Christian benevolence. He expected his boys to turn the other cheek and to do unto others as they would have others do unto them, from June to February. Then give it a rest.

But the ultimate sin had to be giving up the ball when you had a perfectly good shot, because the whole point of avoiding the other six sins was to make sure you got yourself in position to get one. What good was it to hustle, stay in shape, be courageous, dominate the ground balls, try to run up the score, and hate your opponent if you pissed it away in the moment of truth with an unnecessary pass?

Karl enforced these rules ruthlessly. They applied equally to everyone. There were no exceptions. Each player, from the loftiest All-American to the lowliest Gaffney, was expected to adhere to the code. Only the level of punishment for infractions differed from one player to another.

Leaning towards me and glaring, his fists pressing into his hips, Big Sir said, "Gaffney, there are two things in this world I don't understand: One, why you would want to be on this team in the first place; and two, why my brother didn't cut your ass last March. You'll never be any good. You should have got that through your skull when you got cut from the varsity last year. Why an upperclassman would want to play junior varsity ball is beyond me. Please enlighten me: Why are you here?"

I didn't know if he was looking for an answer this time or not, but as I watched my teammates circling the field, taking punishment on my behalf, I thought about the question.

“Because I used to be good.”

* * *

Four feet of steam-tempered hickory slashed across my left elbow, deadening my whole arm.

“Good defense, Johnny,” Coach Johann applauded. “Go get him.”

Try as I might, I couldn’t move my arm. Somewhere within, my motor neurons had turned tail and run. Unfortunately, my sensory neurons recovered quite well: after a second or two, a searing flash of fire surged from elbow to brain. I slowed down a little, wondering what I should do and how long it would take my arm to stop throbbing and start moving again.

That was a mistake. John Vavolano sensed that I was hurting. With dispassionate purposefulness, like a lion cutting a limping gazelle from the rest of the herd, he attacked....

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Even on a team with six returning All-Americans, team captain John Vavolano stood alone. As a sophomore, he was selected second-team Division III All-American, even though the team was young and taking its lumps. Last year he was first-team, and no one had any doubts that he would repeat this year, perhaps unanimously. In the second game of this season, he broke the school’s all-time record for goals by a midfielder, and in the next-to-last, the record for total goals, period.

Vavolano had a halo of dark brown curls that framed his face and cascaded halfway down his neck. His brown eyes were slightly lighter than the hair, and the tanned skin just a bit lighter still. His dimples came and went with complete confidence. An A student in Mathematics, he was president of his fraternity, which didn’t mean much, and president of the student body, which probably did. Somehow he found time to round out his dance card by helping lead the anti-war movement.

Those lucky enough to see Vavolano remove his shirt assumed that his hundred and eighty pounds of bronzed, burnished musculature were the product of countless hours in the weight room. But I spent a lot of time in the weight room pumping iron—ceaselessly and without effect, like Sisyphus rolling his stone—and I never saw Vavolano there. His family tree could be traced back to Michelangelo’s *David*, and I’m sure he exited the womb tanned and sinewed, leaving the baby

fat to lesser newborns. Girls threw themselves at him the way lemmings throw themselves into the sea: mindlessly, willfully, and in droves.

In short, he represented everything that women found irresistible about men, and men found admirable about each other.

I loathed him.

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John's first blow was a forearm shiver on my left shoulder to get me off balance. As I stumbled to catch my footing, the second blow fell, a long, swooping check arcing around my back and landing on my right elbow. The pain and the curse came as one: "Shit!" Trying to improve my passing, I had dispensed with arm pads. Now I was paying the price.

In the midst of the dust and sweat (and blood, now oozing from my left elbow), Vavolano started giggling. I don't know if that made me more mad or afraid, but I could move my left arm again, so I grabbed the bottom of my stick and made a feint to try to freeze him.

No go. He was bigger and stronger and faster than me, and unlike me, he wasn't afraid. He had kicked the shit out of little twerps like me for four years now and rather liked it. Rather than taking the fake, he instantly counter-punched by bashing his right shoulder into me, again knocking me off balance. With a savage gracefulness that I would have admired, had I been watching from a safe distance, he delivered the coup de grace. Letting go with his left hand, he lunged over my head with the tail end of his stick and caught the top of mine. With one arm, he wrenched me over sideways, till I had to let go with my left arm and catch my balance on the ground or else fall down altogether. His hip caught mine, and his hundred and eighty pounds sent my hundred and sixty sprawling face first on the grass.

The helpless rage of somebody who's totally outclassed welled up inside me. Struggling to my knees I made one last lunge with my stick, but he kicked it out of the way, casually slashed me on the head, and made the scoop. As I took off after him, I could hear Scooter Zoril shouting, "All right, Johnny. You kicked his ass!"