Nine-Pound Hammer

I felt a little woozy in the truck. At first, I attributed it to my very first plane ride, but it seemed to only get worse as we drove out of El Paso and into the desert. The new depth of field—a far-off rain cloud dragging a gray smear, power lines disappearing into the horizon—created a kind of vertigo in me. The view in Southern Indiana was hemmed in by hills and creeks and tree lines and strip malls. I had never seen that far in front of my own face.

"There it is!" Coach Wells spat into a Whataburger coffee cup and tried to blow the clinging grains of snuff off his lip before wiping at them with the back of his hand.

"Nice." It looked like nothing more than a big, green hill—only significant at all because it was the first green I had seen since the plane touched down. The only thing signifying that it was a stadium at all were the lights.

"It's dug right into the ground. Wait till you see it on game day filled with thirty thousand Aggie fans!" Coach Wells had a strong West Texas accent, and I found myself affecting a slight West Kentucky accent, the accent of my dad's side of the family and the only Southern accent I had heard enough to pull off. We weren't each other's first choices. They called and offered an official visit two days before National Signing Day, meaning that at least one, possibly several, football players on their recruiting board had fallen through the cracks somehow, signed with another team or failed to make the requisite SAT/ACT score.

"What's the most people to ever watch one of your games at Central?"

"Maybe three thousand."

He sat in the driver's seat, taking me in through rimless glasses hatched with the shade of his straw golfing hat, evaluating my proportions, my density, and the sturdiness of my neck. He wore the same golf shirt, khaki pants, and white sneakers that they all wore.

"Indiana, huh? Farm boy?" Coach Wells asked.

"I de-tasseled a lot of corn." It was a lie I told football coaches all the time because coaches love what they call "farm boys." In truth, the farmers came into my middle school before every summer break recruiting boys for summer work, but I never signed on. I

tried to sign on the summer after the Sega Genesis came out, but my dad said it was too dangerous and bought me one for running the weed whacker and picking up the sticks and rocks in the path of the mower he was riding.

I was six foot five, two hundred and fifty pounds in the eighth grade. When football season started, Chris Stanley was presented to me over and over again. Chris was a hundred pounds lighter and a foot shorter than me and the loudest cackler in a swarm of boys that liked to punch me in the back and run away. They didn't punch hard. The goal was to induce frustration, an ochre-red face; tears were the inevitable money shot. I didn't catch them because then what? They were the only friends I had.

We faced each other with our fingers in the dirt, and he could not run in the other direction. We were playing a school-sanctioned sport under adult supervision. I was encouraged to unleash the full violence of my heart onto children from a body that dwarfed most of their fathers'. I snarled and spat on their hands before the snap, and the fear in their eyes was thrilling. I made a point of humiliating them. I threw them down, and I let them get up so that I could throw them down again. I was ejected from a game against Memorial for several legal but unnecessary abuses against a particularly helpless nose tackle. When I protested, the referee looked me in the eyes and said, "His father is in the stands watching this happen." When they started just diving at my ankles, I started coming down on their spines with both knees. All of this would excite the coaches into yelling "'Atta boy!" and smacking me on the helmet while they shook their heads at the others—or winced, or screamed, or laughed.

Aunts and uncles and cousins cheered in the stands with my number written on their brown sweatshirts in gold puff paint. Dad gushed pulsing, arterial pride when he talked about me. I was plucked into an exclusive social stratosphere and ditched my nerdy friend Terry in a brutal, middle school way that, when I dwell on it too much, makes me want to get on the medication again. They stopped hitting me. I spent recess loitering around the backstop among the tight-rolled Guess jeans crowd. I was there by some divine order, but I obviously did not belong. My hair fanned out on whichever side I slept on like a turkey's ass, and I grew so fast that the Guess jeans I eventually talked my mom into buying me were tight rolled at mid-ankle.

When we got to Las Cruces, Coach Wells drove through campus and pointed out a few of the short, smooth buildings. We didn't get out of the truck until we reached the cow pens at the far end of campus.

"That's a cannulated cow. See that plastic thing on its side? You can reach your hand right into its body and feel around on its organs." Coach Wells was evaluating something else then, something deeper than bones. I reminded myself that I was a farm boy, one of the four or five archetypes that coaches loved. I smothered my horror and probably said something like "cool."

When we met the head coach in the weight room he said, "Damn, boy, you're big enough to chase a bear with a switch." Coach Hess was easy like a slightly drunk cowboy, and his voice had the twang and celestial depth of Johnny Cash's voice ten minutes before he died.

"I believe a bear would run if he saw my mom coming at 'em with a switch." I was happy to make him laugh. In my experience, coaches preferred players who were hit as children. The more the better. My parents never laid a hand on me. My mother would sit me down and tell me how disappointed she was until I cried.

"Where you from again?"

"Southern Indiana, right on the Ohio River." I was laying the accent on too thick and decided to dial it back.

"We got a river. I wouldn't eat any fish out of it."

He told me it was the third-largest weight room in the country. There were seven squat racks and seven adjustable bench press racks. Between them were wooden platforms with rubber weights for the Olympic lifts and a strip of green turf for speed drills.

"We took all the bullshit out of here," Coach Hess said. "All the pussy squeezers and the butt masters. But we got everything here to turn you into an NFL offensive lineman. It's up to you to use it, of course."

We all stood a respectful distance from the lineman currently at the rack and watched. He watched himself in a mirror that covered the wall behind the dumbbell rack. At three hundred pounds, easy, he had veins down every inch of his arms. He grabbed two one-hundred-and-eighty-pound dumbbells from the rack and sat down on the bench, resting them on his thighs. His back spread into muscles twisting over and under each other like knotted bread. He lay down and pushed the dumbbells into the air, clacking them at their apex.

On the last rep he cried out with a voice so violent and sincere that Coach Hess made a joke of turning and running a few steps in the opposite direction.

The man flexed shamelessly in the mirror and took a deep drink from a gallon jug full of brown fluid.

"What the fuck are you drinkin', Stank? Motor oil? I knew it. You're one of them terminators."

"Coffee," he said.

"Jesus Christ!" Coach Hess said. "Stank here came to NMSU on a golf scholarship."

I laughed.

"I'm not pulling your leg, son. I bet you could drive a golf ball through a fucking steam engine now, Stank," Coach Hess said. Stank did not laugh. When he picked up the eighty-five-pound dumbbells for curls, we slinked away. I felt the fear of facing a monster like him and the excitement of becoming a monster like him in equal measure.

We walked up the sloping berm and looked down onto the field. It looked almost vaginal, with its concentric ovals of molded concrete seating. I imagined it full on game day, thirty thousand people cheering on the mad scramble for the egg.

"You won't have any problem with the academics here, I guess," Coach Hess said. "Coach Wells says your test scores are real high. What do you want to study?"

"I have no idea." I was embarrassed to ask about the art program, so I didn't.

"We've got people to help you figure that out. It'll be nice to have one I don't have to worry about. This can be a good school, or it can be an easy school. That's one thing we got going for us."

"I'm sure I'll find something."

"I'm going to level with you, Casey; we don't get the pick of the litter here. I don't mean that as an insult, son. I've always picked up after the big dogs, and I've always managed to find the treasure they toss away. You've got the frame. We've got the coaching and the facilities. If you've got the heart, you'll be a player."

I saw no ceiling to my potential. I would simply fill any talent gap with effort. I would outwork them all, and I would eventually destroy them.

"I want to show you something at the office."

Pictures of a few former NMSU players in NFL uniforms lined the hallway, but I didn't recognize any names. The woman behind the desk gave Coach Hess a motherly reprimand for letting his gym clothes air out in the office.

Coach Hess pointed to a photograph of a pretty woman with mid-sixties hair. "Sheri here used to model. Prettier than ever."

She scoffed. She had let go of it all a long time ago. The photographic proof was behind her on the wall in black and white, facing out to remind them all that she had enjoyed a few glory years too.

Coach Hess laid the magazine on the desk. "There we are on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*." It was the 1992 college football preview issue from three years prior. "The Best" was written in yellow letters next to a picture of a Miami running back in full lean. "The Worst" was written in red next to a picture of a New Mexico State lineman resting his elbows on his knees.

"It takes a special kind of heart to play here. We're going to get in some fights we're just not going to win. We need motherfuckers with the heart to fight the whole damn biker gang. Every truly hard son of a bitch on the planet has taken his share of ass-whuppings because truly hard sons of bitches aren't afraid of the fights they can't win."

It might have been a ladies sweatshirt. I've always been a bad dresser. It was cream-colored, with "Notre Dame" embroidered in dark blue and a suede football patch sewn

onto the front. I met Jared, the other offensive line recruit, in the hotel room we were sharing. He wore Wolverine boots that made him seem two inches taller than me, cowboy tight jeans, and one of those big and tall store T-shirts that made an affirming joke about his obesity. As far as guts go, his was marvelous. It hung low over his belt and pressed so tightly against his XXXL shirt that you could make out a belly button deep and wide enough to hide his dip can.

"I'm going to get me some head tonight," he said. "That's what they do on these things. They get some chick to blow the recruits."

"Like prostitutes?"

"No, just girls with a lot of school spirit."

"Did they do that on your trip to Kingsville?"

"No, but they got me shit-faced. My buddy got one on his trip to Colorado."

At dinner, I ordered the cheapest steak on the menu, like a good Midwesterner, and Jared ordered the filet mignon.

I met my official recruiter there. Coach Wells picked me up from the airport, but Roy Gerela was the man I spoke to on the phone and the one who found me, somehow, all the way up in Indiana. I don't remember if he wore any of his Super Bowl rings. He was a placekicker for the Steelers in the 70s and scored more points for that team than Lynn Swann, Franco Harris, or Terry Bradshaw. But made field goals are almost always forgotten.

"Do you remember when Cliff Harris slapped you on the helmet and Jack Lambert threw him to the ground in Super Bowl X?"

He grunted and ordered another drink.

I don't know why I felt like it would be a fond memory for him. Harris slapped him on the helmet after he missed the thirty-three-yard field goal. But I saw Lambert tossing Harris as a big brother protecting a little brother, as an assertion that he was a true part of that great team. The incident injected a crucial, violent energy into the hearts of his teammates that was more valuable than the three points, and remains a definitive moment in the lifespan of a great NFL team. The Steelers won the game, and so Roy Gerela still doesn't have to buy a drink in the state of Pennsylvania, but he is doomed to a life full of questions he does not enjoy answering.

"Not a lot of people know Roy cracked his ribs making a touchdown-saving tackle on the opening kickoff of that game," Coach Hess said. "Hollywood Henderson ran a reverse. Came around that corner like a black-tail jackrabbit. Took it forty-eight yards before Roy drove him out of bounds. The Steel Curtain forced a four and out. Imagine how a touchdown on the opening kickoff would have changed the momentum."

Coach Gerela shifted in his chair and fidgeted with his steak knife, even though the meat had not yet arrived.

When the food came, Jared's visible disappointment at the size of his filet mignon made the coaches laugh.

"I didn't know it would be so small," Jared said.

"You ever have filet mignon before?"

"No. I always seen it on the menu."

"They have the ounces written there," I said, cutting into the hamburger steak with my fork.

"I just look at the prices. I always imagined it was the biggest one they had." He ate the bacon first, stabbed it with his fork and lowered the whole piece into his mouth.

Coach Hess said, "Order this boy another steak. A ribeye. Tell 'em don't bother cooking it. Casey, do you want another steak?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"We gotta get you a New Mexico State sweatshirt. I can't stand looking at that Notre Dame."

"I'm an Irish Catholic kid from Indiana. What can I do?"

"Well, if you wanted to go to Notre Dame, you could have been better at football," Coach Hess said.

Unlike most coaches who traffic in clichés, Coach Hess was always frank and often hilarious. Once, after a reporter asked him if he could point to any positives in a 70-21 drubbing at Gainesville, he responded, "At least the fucking plane didn't crash." He made jokes about his erectile dysfunction at fundraising dinners, and his opening line at a symposium on drug awareness given to the incoming freshman players was, "Boys, I've done every drug there is." Then, in a shockingly honest and fairly short presentation, he listed the costs and the benefits of every drug he had ever tried: "Pot's not going to kill you or have you sticking up 7-Elevens. It feels nice, I guess. But I never did see the point of sitting around contemplating my belly button. We're required by the NCAA to test for it during the season, and it takes a month to get out of your system. I can almost promise you that the first time you do cocaine you will have a great time. Honestly, it will probably be fun for a while. And if you could just have that while, well, I might say go for it. But, trust me, there's a much longer while after that first short little great little while. LSD is nothing to try more than once. I had a cousin who did too much LSD. He was a crew-cut Texas football star when I knew him. His name is Tex Watson. Are you old enough to know who that is?"

Coach Hess was libertarian in his approach. The weight room was open all year round, and many players (including myself) used it, but it was not mandatory in the offseason. There were no required study hall hours. He turned the team loose in Vegas the night

before the UNLV game. My first year, we spent the nights before home games in Juárez, Mexico, where the drinking age was a joke, and seven dollars bought you all the flaming Dr. Pepper shots and beer chasers you could drink.

He recruited anyone that could play: fighters, drinkers, gangbangers. Rebel flags and area codes and AK-47s were inked into imposing physiques. They called each other "slob" and "crab," but street affiliations were trumped by the team affiliation. Criminal war stories were tossed around the locker room, most of them bullshit. The real gangsters didn't talk about it much. While I felt oppressed by the number of opportunities that were being shoved down my throat as a white, middle-class kid swathed in the suburbs, New Mexico State football was a rare, hard-fought opportunity for many of them. Most of these players took full advantage of their only chance at a college education. They put their pasts behind them. They didn't hurt anybody. They were serious about their educations, and they changed their trajectories. Some were genuinely dangerous people. Shortly before I got to campus, one of the team's best defensive players was charged with a series of violent rapes and an armed robbery.

We had just suffered a particularly humiliating loss in a litany of humiliating losses during that first season. It was one thing to get blown out by Texas or LSU, but we had been blown out 33-0 by Cal State Northridge, a Division II school whose program would dissolve shortly after. It was one of the very few we were supposed to win. When Tony Manning, a tough but undersized scout team walk-on, reacted with fists to a cheap shot by Matt Botone, the starting middle linebacker and one of Coach Hess' favorite players, Coach tackled Manning to the turf, put his hands around his neck, and told him, "The only reason I let you on this team is because I don't care if you get hurt."

After the coaching staff was fired mid-season, the practices got weirder. Players and coaches showed up drunk. One practice Coach Hess drove his golf cart up the berm, yelled something I could not make out from the top, and then barreled down the slope and tried to run us over while we were stretching. They did not hide their contempt. When Roach was beaten to the corner on a speed rush, Coach Wells called him "the worst offensive lineman, on the worst offensive line, on the worst team in college football," loud enough for the defense to hear it forty yards away. I was two spots below him on the depth chart.

The coaches were too hungover to yell, and the players were too hungover to bang their heads. The practices were so lethargic that I didn't even vomit. If you were to ask former teammates or coaches about me, the first thing they would probably mention would be the vomit. Tests were run, prescription strength antacids swallowed, but every serious practice, every game—vomit.

They hired a position coach from Nebraska named Toney Samuel to replace Coach Hess. He instituted carbon copies of Nebraska's offensive and defensive playbooks, and

most of the assistants he brought in had Nebraska ties and national championship rings. He was one of only two black head coaches that year in a field of 112. He was self-possessed and serious. In his mind, we were supposed to win every game, like Nebraska. We only had to prepare like Nebraska and believe like Nebraska, to swagger like Nebraska, and to eventually win like Nebraska. He had "Shock the World" printed on the T-shirts we wore under our pads.

We spent the nights before home games in hotels to keep us out of trouble. Study hall was instituted. They brought in Nebraska's weight training program, which lasted all year and was harsh enough to run some of the lazier players off.

I bought in and worked until I hit the ceiling. In high school, I could feel myself getting stronger every time I worked out. Once my body was fully developed, the gains came slower and harder. For eight months, my bench max was 315 lbs, and my squat max was 485 lbs. They had not moved and would not move. No amount of protein shakes or creatine supplements would budge them. It was taking a massive effort just to keep those numbers right where they were. In my heart, I knew there was a limit, but I had hoped mine would be higher.

My biggest problem was that, for the first time in my life, I couldn't put any weight on. I burned and purged so many calories training that I was down to 245 when the season started, at least sixty pounds lighter than the other O-linemen. I could do all the running it took, all the lifting it took, but I could not do all the eating it took. I watched Jared, on several occasions, eat two large pepperoni pizzas covered in ranch dressing in one sitting. Tommy Boy was not above asking the girl at the McDonald's counter when they were planning to throw those old fries away, and if—instead of throwing them in a trash can—they might mind just throwing them in a Happy Meal box for him to take home. Mick, who was always broke, could only go out to eat when we went to Little Nellie's, where he scarfed down the "If you can eat this entire obscene thing in under an hour, it's free" burger until they rescinded the policy.

The new coaches never mentioned steroids at all, but the players talked about it openly with each other. When several players gained thirty pounds of muscle in a summer, the coaches turned a blind eye and laid the credit at the feet of the almighty Nebraska weight program. The players were patted on the back and rewarded with playing time.

I abstained that year and was promptly left in the dust. Walk-ons I had handled the year before were overpowering me. I was underweight, a scout team player, and a waste of a scholarship.

That year all the extra sweat and vomit and performance-enhancing drugs produced exactly one more win—a 2-10 season. But the coaches focused our attention on the games we competed in. They tore apart the film and pointed their lasers to a few blocks that

could have been made or interceptions that could have been grabbed as the incremental differences. If we had just done these few things we were supposed to do, that we had an opportunity to do, been slightly closer to perfect… It wasn't that far away.

The summer before the next season, I took the Sostonol shots. There was Spanish writing and a silhouette of a horse on the back of the package. I managed to get back up to 285. This is not a confession. If there was a drug that would make me a better writer—not just a more successful writer but an honest-to-God better writer—I would take it in a second, even if it was unfair, even if it had serious, possibly life-shortening consequences.

After a rash of injuries forced me into a game against Nevada, I surprised everyone by playing well and started the remaining two games.

I did not take the shots the next year, though I did pay for them. One of the players was stopped coming from Juárez with vials and ready shots where his airbags should have been. He maxed out his credit card to pay off the Juárez police and still managed to get his full cycle, somehow. I could have raised a fuss, but I was relieved. I didn't play much the next year, and that was a relief too. I did the best I could with the two hundred and fifty pounds I had to work with, but I was easily handled. I played through minor injuries and concussions and secretly hoped for an injury bad enough to end it all, one that I could not play through, that nobody could be expected to play through. It did not come.

I spent almost all of my spare time that year writing and rewriting a short story for a fiction class. It was an overwrought but sincere story about a prostitute in love with a burn victim who doesn't love her back. The professor took me into his office and talked to me like I was something special that he had found. I don't know how much his reaction had to do with the fact that I was a neckless giant who wore only sweat suits. I couldn't have seemed to him like someone who would take it seriously. Liberal people, myself included, enjoy seeing their stereotypes shattered, and he seemed to take particular pleasure in the shattering of this one.

Delusion is easy with no objective score. There are no more stopwatches or max reps. They don't tell you that you're not good enough to write on at eighteen or twenty-two. You can find encouragement anywhere. After all, it's free, and it makes people feel good, and it makes people feel good to make people feel good. You can beat your head against it forever. You can rant against the proficient mediocrity that dominates the bookshelves. You're something different. That's your problem. No, that's their problem! Your integrity and originality are the very reasons. The world needs your work like green vegetables, and when they find themselves malnourished by the prepackaged and microwavable, they will seek it out. It's not that you're just a pretty good writer, a good enough writer to shine in a

graduate school workshop but not good enough to shine against literally every other writer in the world, holding their own lights up in the oppressive glare. That is definitely not it.

After over twenty years of serious writing, I have learned to feed mostly off of encouraging rejections and my agent's optimism. I have published a few stories and one novel, eight years of toil that fell on the world with all the impact of a popcorn kernel. The delusional optimism I learned playing for the worst team in college football is the only thing that has kept me going.

When I worry about the brain damage, it helps me to think of the crazing on a pot—about the fact that certain types of damage have the potential to make an ordinary thing beautiful. If the collisions have made me dumber, if they are the reason I haven't bothered to brush my teeth in three days, I accept that. If they have damaged the region in my brain that remembers to zip up my fly after a piss, I hope they have also damaged the regions that gravitate toward pretense and corruption.

All I can remember about the party our player-hosts took us to that night is a jungle theme and my dandruff in the black light. I did not drink. I was worried it might get back to the coaches. In retrospect, I would have left a better impression if I had drunk Jim Beam until I puked up forty dollars worth of steak, like Jared. Our host player insisted on driving. It was the first time I had ever conceded to a ride with a drunk driver, and we did not wind up dead, or in wheelchairs, or running over any children.

At the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, as I waited for my connecting flight home, an old man in a wheelchair told me I was "big enough to chase a bear with a switch." I always remembered that line and gave it to Coach Hess in this essay. I don't remember the exact words that were spoken so long ago, but it seems like the kind of thing he could have and would have said. I remember only fragments and tones and the general messages—that he was very frank about our chances, that the former golfer turned monster drank coffee like water, and that Coach Hess hated my sweatshirt and mentioned his cousin Tex Watson in his drug presentation. I remember what Jared ordered for dinner, but I do not remember what he wore. I know only that he wore that sort of thing. I remember what I ordered for dinner and my sweatshirt because they both seemed wrong. I know that I did bring up Super Bowl X to Roy Gerela at dinner and that he did not take it well. My imagination is covering for my memory, interjecting like an old spouse.

I know for sure that I did not receive what would have been my first blow job, but I remember carefully crafting the story for my friends on the plane ride. I had spent the weekend in New Mexico. I could claim anything. The only hint that I might have never been a football player at all, that I might have been a writer all along, was that I stayed away from the fantastic. There were no sorority blow job contests or cheerleaders involved.

I made it sad, so they would believe it. The girl had blood-red hair, freckles on the back of her neck, and a tattooed band on her wedding finger. I went first and the other guy went second.

Coach Samuel managed one good season by Aggie standards and was fired after a few losing ones. I never saw that stadium roar with people. Aggie fans are notorious for staying out in the parking lot with the grills and the beer, listening to the game on their radios. Campus police have to herd them into the gates at halftime. Even after halftime, it's not much more than a smattering. Who can blame them? There is nothing to do but drink, and sit, and eat seven-dollar nachos, and cringe at the futile effort.

There is nothing for the players to do except play, fight the biker gang, get their licks in—convince themselves that the next game and the next season are the first game and the first season, and winning is possible despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The only reward they have a right to expect is also the sacrifice: the ramming, puking, ligament-snapping effort itself. You get to run and you get to smash. You don't get to win because you tried hard enough, or because you wanted it badly enough, or even because you cheated. They're better at cheating, too.

As a writer, the only reward I have a right to expect is the sound of my fingers striking the keys, consciousness falling into place on the page. Solitude. The feeling of being in control and out of control at the same time. Rejection. Doubt. Revision. Searching for mistakes and imperfections (a few will always elude or seduce me). Solitude, again, darker this time.

The score is always corrupt. I believe in my work; I couldn't continue otherwise, but I am self-aware enough to understand that there are a lot of shitty writers in the world with high opinions of their talents. I accept that I could be one of them: a negligible but important part of the establishment. Every winner requires a pile of losers to stand on. I'm somewhere in that clamoring heap, and I'll never know where. Failure cannot dissuade me and success cannot convince me.

I tell myself not to think this way. Don Quixote is the master of the house. He has slain the surly giant. When it gets difficult, I read about "The Knight of the Sorrowful Face" and his adventures over and over again.

But what of the clear-eyed knight who knows that his steed is an ass and charges anyway?