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Franklin

August in the south is a trial run in hell. It was hot as a firecracker in the classroom and sweat rolled down Franklin's back. He squirmed on the hard wooden seat. Mrs. McClellan was reviewing absence policies, PTA meetings, and such. Boring.

There was some new stuff now that he was in eighth grade and at a different school. All the eighth graders had been merged into a single school – something about a space crunch. Changing classes, having more than one teacher, having your own locker – this was all new. And scary.

Franklin looked around the room to see how many kids he knew. Maybe half of them. There were a bunch from his old school, but also a lot he had never met. It was like starting over.

He checked out the girls. Some of them had bosoms pushing at the front of their blouses. A few of them had been fooling around with make-up. Franklin's friends were fascinated with bosoms. He didn't get it. Maybe that was just him.

"Psst, listen up!" The whisper was loud and urgent. Franklin half-turned in his desk, and Kenneth caught his eye. "You need to hear this." Kenneth whispered and nodded in the direction of Mrs. McClellan.

Franklin quickly realized why Kenneth was so persistent. The teacher was talking about sign-ups for the football team. He scrambled to pick up the thread of her announcement.

... the informational meeting will be this afternoon at four o'clock at the baseball field below Hillside Cemetery. The coaches will hand out release forms for parents to sign and a physical form for your doctor. Both forms must be completed before you can practice.

First practice – in shorts, t-shirts, and cleats – is next Monday. Coach McNinnis invites anyone, experienced or not, to come out and join the team.

Mrs. McClellan shuffled her papers and went on to an announcement about cheerleading.

Kenneth had introduced Franklin to football. The second week of third grade Kenneth asked Franklin if he wanted to play. They rode their bikes to practice at the scrubby field in front of the Presbyterian Church. It was the beginning of Franklin's football life. He was hooked from day one.

This was little league football, and there were only four teams. Franklin was a Blue Devil; Kenneth was a Golden Bear. Neither of them knew a damn thing about football, but Franklin owed

Kenneth a debt for bringing him to the game. Kenneth quit football after fourth grade. He didn't have whatever madness drove Franklin through the agony of practice. But Franklin was captivated.

He wasn't even sure he *chose* football – it was more like football chose him. It was the only sport he had half a chance to be good at. He was too square and slow for basketball and lacked the hand-eye coordination for baseball. But football, at least on the offensive line, didn't require much. You had to be able to count to three for the snap count. You had to be willing to knock the snot out of someone. And you had to be willing to get the snot knocked out of you. That was it.

Franklin met all three requirements, but his greatest asset was his brain. He flashed back to the first time he realized he could *out-think* an opponent – could use his brain as a weapon. It was five years ago.

He had never done this before, and he was scared. Sun baked the practice field, and sweat soaked his uniform. He felt the unfamiliar weight of shoulder pads drooping across his body and the heaviness of the helmet on his head. That all paled in comparison to his fear. Fear of being hit. Fear of being hurt. Fear of being embarrassed.

A line of six or so elementary-school-age boys snaked back from the site of what the coach called a "skills drill". The objective was to learn how offensive linemen block. As a fat, slow, clumsy kid, Franklin had been consigned to the offensive line from day one. It was the least desirable of all positions.

Because he was fifth in line, he had time to get a handle on what was going on before his turn came up. At the head of the line, facing the first player, was the coach. Coach Cooper they called him, though his first name was Clyde, and he ran a barbecue restaurant not far from the bank where Franklin's father worked.

Franklin studied what happened as the guys in front of him went forward. Each player would squat in his stance, then burst out of the stance when Coach blew the whistle. Each player tried to block Coach Cooper by slamming into the dummy positioned in front of them. And each was easily thwarted by the coach's counter-moves. Franklin was next.

He considered his options. It was not going to work to hit the dummy head on – he had four examples to prove it. What could he do differently? He chewed on the problem, then trembled as he squatted in the unfamiliar stance. His stomach was pressing on his lungs, and it was hard to breathe. Coach blew the whistle.

Franklin's squat legs exploded with all the power he could muster and he launched himself low and hard at Coach Cooper. It was an unexpected move and caught the coach completely off-guard. Franklin hit the coach just below the knees – flush on the shins – and the man grunted and toppled over. Franklin bulled on top of him in a damp pile, panting.

Waves of guilt swept over him. Had he hurt the coach? Franklin's breath got tight. He began to panic.

"Way to go!" Coach roared and leapt out from under Franklin. "You see that, guys? Sometimes you have to out-think your opponent. Franklin did that. You see that? Way to go!" Coach slapped Franklin on the butt, and Franklin felt the adrenaline rush of redemption and approval.

There was nothing in his entire life that had ever felt like this. Franklin wanted to feel this way forever. He jogged back to the end of the line, grinning broadly, and determined to knock the next guy on his butt, too.

Five years later, Franklin remembered this moment clearly, as if it had just happened.

Since that time, Franklin had played in dozens of football games. He had hit others, and he had been hit. He had won and lost and once busted his nose so bad it looked like the thing was going to come loose from his face. There was nothing in life like knocking the snot out of someone on the football field. To *annihilate* someone and have other people applaud. That didn't happen much in everyday life. At least not in Franklin's life.

He glanced around the room and wondered who else would be on the team this year. Harvey was sitting behind him; he would play. Franklin had played with him for several years in little league, though never on the same team. He was a decent quarterback.

Danny, across the room at the head of the first row, was a defensive end and running back. He'd surely play. Franklin envied Danny's athleticism. He was broad-shouldered and slim-waisted, with agility and speed and a feline quickness. Danny didn't say much – just flew to the ball and flattened the ball carrier or knocked down a pass intended for a stunned receiver.

Franklin scanned the rest of the students. It looked like there were only three football players in the room. He couldn't see the people directly behind him.

He swung his body slightly to the left and glanced over his shoulder. A girl with braces was sitting right behind him. He didn't know her. At the back of the row, behind her, was a guy who looked like he might be a football player. Franklin had seen him somewhere.

Franklin turned to face the teacher. Who *was* that dude? He looked older than everyone else, more like a high school student. Thick shoulders. A face shed of baby fat. Franklin noticed his jaw line first thing. The guy had scowled, lowering his brow and tightening his lips. Franklin hoped the guy had not seen him stare. He'd have to sort it out later; it sounded like Mrs. McClellan was saying something important.

“All right, class, I know I have thrown a lot at you in the last half-hour. It is always boring trying to cover all the details at the beginning of the year; sometimes it bores *me*. Let's take a break and get to know each other, since we're going to be together for the whole year. Why don't we start with this row?” Mrs. McClellan smiled and pointed at Franklin's row.

She picked up a piece of chalk and wrote as she talked. “I'd like each of you to introduce yourself and tell us three things. First, tell us your name and what you'd like us to call you. So, if your name is *Susan*, but your friends call you *Susie*, let us know.”

“Second, I'd like you to tell us your favorite thing you did this summer.” This went up on the board as the class groaned. “Finally, please tell us what you most want to get out of being in

eighth grade.” Mrs. McClellan wrote as the chalk squeaked, then she nodded at the girl sitting at the head of Franklin’s row.

Bingo, Franklin thought. I will get to figure out who that guy at the back of my row is, and if I am supposed to know him.

The girl at the head of the row went first. She was followed by some guy Franklin didn’t know, wearing a damp and wrinkled blue shirt. When Franklin introduced himself, he gave his name and said something about scout camp in answer to the second question. He said he hoped to make lots of new friends in answer to Mrs. McClellan’s final question.

Franklin’s answers were sincere when he said them, but as they came out of his mouth he thought they sounded ridiculous. As he finished question three, he heard a half-stifled snort from the back of his row. It came from the guy whose name he couldn’t remember.

The girl with braces went next, and Franklin couldn’t wait for her to finish. Then a gravelly voice – it sounded like a man – came from the back of the row. Everyone turned to look, so Franklin felt free to turn around and look as well.

“My name is Bart Wagram and my friends, at least those who have any sense, call me ‘Mister.’ My favorite summer activity was lifting weights so I can kick some serious butt in football. I sure didn’t go to any summer scout camp. What I hope to get out of eighth grade this time around is to pass and go on to high school.” Bart smirked, and the class giggled.

“Thank you, Bart,” Mrs. McClellan said, ignoring the smirk. Then she added, “Class, please do not use words like ‘butt’ in my classroom. I’m sure you can find a word that serves you just as well, but is less offensive. I’d also ask you not to make fun of other people’s answers; just give your answer.”

She smiled at the class and continued, “Let’s move to this row.” She nodded toward the row where Danny was sitting, and Franklin turned to look at Danny. As he did, he again heard the half-stifled snort. It came from Bart Wagram.

That’s it. Franklin had heard about Bart Wagram – they went to the same elementary school for a while. Bart was in third grade when Franklin was in first, so their paths rarely crossed. But Franklin knew about Bart.

Bart was a terror in sports. And life, too. He played all three major sports: baseball, basketball, and football; it was clear football was his favorite. Now that Bart had flunked eighth grade, he and Franklin would be on the same team. Franklin thought about Bart – maybe football is this guy’s best subject in school. He chuckled to himself, careful not to laugh aloud.

The big clock on the wall ticked slowly toward three o’clock. Day one would soon be over. Only 179 days and Franklin would be in high school. The bell rang and there was a crush of folks trying to get out the door.

Franklin made a mental note to call his mother and let her know he'd be late because of football sign-ups. She would worry if he didn't call.

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Bart

“Coming through!” Bart shoved his way through the crowd blocking the classroom door and wedged himself into the hall. The other students looked lost, and Bart remembered that feeling. This year he wasn’t lost; he was lonely. Repeating eighth grade meant Bart had been left behind by the friends he’d had since fourth grade. He was starting over.

His closest friends and football buddies had gone on to high school, where they were doing well. Murdock and Fairley were even going to play on the varsity team. They were skipping junior varsity altogether.

Bart knew he could play on the varsity if he ever got to high school. His father had been a badass football player. Bart was determined to be better.

His new classmates made Bart sick, especially that suck-up Franklin Gibson. *I went to scout camp and I hope to make some new friends this year.* In his mind’s ear Bart mimicked Franklin in a high-pitched, sing-song voice.

What was it about that kid? Bart put his mind up against the question. He didn’t even know Franklin, though everyone knew *about* everyone else in a town as small as Laurinburg. In Bart’s mind, everything came easy for Franklin. He didn’t have a witch for a step-mother. His family had tons of money. Teachers loved him. Franklin was the opposite of Bart in every way. Bart was fit; Franklin was fat. Franklin had a regular family; Bart had a wreck of a family.

Bart stiffened his back, pulled himself up to his full height, and stood ramrod-straight like a Marine. He knew the ads: *The few. The proud. The Marines.* Sometimes life put you in a tough place and you had to man up. Kids like Franklin hadn’t learned that. Hadn’t had to learn it.

They would know something about tough places if they had to live with Doris Wagram. And Franklin Gibson was gonna find out about tough places if he came out for football.

Bart made his way down the hall and out into the mid-afternoon glare. The heat of the day hit him like he had run into a wall. He was glad practice didn’t begin today. The football field would be flat and hard and scorched. He remembered early practice from last year, with heat shimmering off the field.

The field belonged to the Laurinburg recreation department, and it was close to school. Bart could be there in fifteen minutes, ten if he hustled. He felt for the money in his jeans pocket, found it, and headed to the Corner Pocket.

The Corner Pocket was the only pool hall in town. It was a quarter-mile from school. Bart could see the crooked Budweiser sign the minute he got to the road. The sign was old and faded, like the place itself. It hung cock-eyed from a rusty pole that had once been painted silver. The

parking lot was a rutted gravel and mud puddle affair, littered with empty cigarette packages and thousands of cigarette butts.

The pool hall served beer, so no one under twenty-one was supposed to go inside, but old Rufus didn't care. Bart, Fairley, and Murdock hung out in there last year, and no one said a thing. By the end of the school year, they could shoot a fair game of eight-ball. Bart was the ace by far.

There weren't many people who played pool in the middle of the afternoon. Bart figured he would know them all. He slipped around back so no one could see him and stepped into the cool, damp blackness.

It was so dark Bart was disoriented. He had forgotten how long it took for his eyes to adjust and had to wait for his pupils to dilate. He remembered a discussion in health class about rods and cones in the human eye, and he wondered which of those helped him see in this dump.

There wasn't a window in the whole place. Except for lights above each pool table, and a few above the bar, there wasn't any artificial light either. Bart could make out the faint shape of the pool tables and the blue glow of a television perched above the bar. Someone stood under the television.

"Hey Bart, what's shaking?" Rufus spotted him.

"Rufus, is that you? I can't see a damn thing in here. It's bright outside."

"Hot, too, ain't it? Come on in. I'm over here at the bar." Bart's eyes began to adjust. "What you been up to this summer?"

"Not much. Working out for football, mostly. Making a little dough mowing grass. And trying to stay out of trouble with my step-mother. I'm on the way to football sign-ups and had a few minutes to kill. Want to play a quick game of eight-ball?"

"How come you ain't playing at the high school? Murdock was in here the other day talking about you and what fun y'all had playing ball last year."

Bart hated this. Who wants to be known as the guy who flunked *two* grades before he got to high school?

"I got a do-over on eighth grade." Making a joke out of it sometimes worked. "They didn't think I got it right the first time. Now what about that game of eight-ball?"

"Sure. Rack 'em up and break. How's the team going to be this year?"

"Don't know. All of 'em just moved up from the elementary school. Last year's team is all at the high school now. All except me."

“Tough break. How did you manage to flunk eighth grade? You’re plenty smart enough. I know that from your hanging around here. What’s the deal?”

“Lots of stuff going on at home, man. Now, are we gonna play pool or what?”

“I’m gonna whup you bad, is what I’m gonna do. Sorry it’s tough at home. You deserve better. Want something to drink?”

“Yeah. You got a cold Sun-Drop in the cooler?”

“Sure thing.”

Bart racked the balls and broke them with a crisp shot. The balls spun wildly across the green felt, but none went in a pocket. He took the cold, wet bottle from Rufus and sucked down a long draw. The citrus sweet taste was a perfect antidote to the late-summer day.

“Man, that’s good,” Bart said. “How much do I owe you?”

“The game’s on me. The soft drink is a quarter.” Rufus took his shot and the ball rolled slowly into a pocket. His next shot yielded nothing. Bart’s turn also yielded nothing.

Bart caught Rufus’s eye and flipped him a quarter for the Sun-Drop. The quarter spun brightly though the air before Rufus reached out a big right hand and snatched it in mid-flight. He slapped it down on the top of his left hand and called out to Bart, “Call it. Double or nothing. You could be playing for free *and* drinking for free.”

“Sure. Heads.”

Rufus uncovered the coin. “Heads it is. Lucky dog.” He flipped the quarter back to Bart and lined up his shot. The balls clicked together. One rolled into a pocket and Rufus moved for his second shot.

“Hey Rufus, you know a kid named Franklin Gibson?”

“Nope. What about him?”

“He’s in my class. I remember him from elementary school. Sort of a chunky, goody-two-shoes kind of kid.”

Rufus laughed. “Why do you think I’d know him? We don’t get many kids like that in this place.”

“Hell, Rufus, you know everybody. You’ve lived here almost forty years. Think, man. Do you know anyone named Gibson?”

Rufus stared into space. “Well, yeah, there was a kid in my class in elementary school named Gibson. Fact is, I think his first name was Frank. He didn’t go to high school here – went to some fancy-smancy prep school up in Virginia.”

“What happened to him?”

“How would I know? I ain’t his mama. I think his old man worked at the bank. Maybe that’s where he works, too. Why are you so interested in this guy?”

“Nothing. It’s something about this kid. You look at him, and you just want to knock the shit out of him. You ever felt like that?”

“Nah, man. I’m a lover, not a fighter.” Rufus lined up his second shot. He missed, then took a long look at Bart. “This Gibson kid do something to you?”

“No. Just sat there at his desk looking like some sort of candyass. You telling me you never wanted to kick a guy’s tail just for how he looks, just to see if you could?”

“Well, maybe once in a while when I was younger. But not in a long time. I was running out of teeth.” Rufus laughed and smiled an enormous gap-toothed grin. Bart never noticed how many teeth Rufus was missing. Almost all the front ones were gone, top and bottom.

“You really get all those knocked out fighting?” Bart was fascinated. Rufus had never talked about this.

“Yeah. You should have seen the other guy; he went to the hospital in a meat wagon. Now, you gonna play pool or you just gonna stand there and shoot the shit?”

Bart lined up his shot – he had to get the bridge to reach across the table – then tapped the cue ball gently. The target ball rolled slowly across the felt, paused at the pocket, then dropped in with a clunk.

“Lucky dog,” Rufus said.

“Lucky and good ain’t the same thing. Now watch this.”

The balls had split in a way that Bart thought he could run the table. He lined up his next shot, took it, and heard another soft clunk. Again. Clunk.

“Some gratitude,” Rufus said. “I give you a game *and* a soft drink, then you kick my ass. I’m glad there ain’t nobody else in here to see it.”

Bart ran the table, then glanced up at the yellowed clock above the bar. It was three-forty eight. He had twelve minutes to get to the team meeting, and he was going to have to hustle.

“Thanks, man. I hate to run, but I got to get to sign-ups. You’ll get me next time!”

“Fat chance,” Rufus said. “You’re on the way to being a world-class hustler. Good luck with football. Sorry to hear about the school thing.”

“Thanks,” Bart said. Then, more softly, “Me too.”

“Oh – and Bart . . . ?”

“Yeah?”

“Take it easy on the candyass, will ya?” Rufus winked at Bart, who shot him the bird.

Bart set out for the practice field at a slow jog, picking up the pace as he got closer to the field. It hadn’t gotten any cooler, and sweat was pouring off of him by the time he reached the hill above the field. His stomach gurgled and he burped loudly. He wished he hadn’t drunk the Sun-Drop. It wasn’t good the second time around.

He trotted down the hill to the field and scanned the group – there was Coach McInnis with some short, thick grown-up Bart didn’t know. Maybe he was a coach, too. A bunch of kids milled around the coaches, talking nervously. Some of them looked like they might be able to play a little bit. He recognized Harvey and Danny from class with Mrs. McClellan. Bart remembered hearing about them when they played little league ball last year. Folks said that Harvey had an arm like a rocket; he could really air it out.

Bart wondered if the team was going to be any good. Maybe. Maybe not. Hard to tell at this point. Either way, he figured he was gonna have a heck of a good year. He had worked out all summer so he could jack some jaws big time.

“All right, men, listen up.” It was Coach McInnis, and the group immediately stopped talking. “Head over to the bleachers so we can see and hear each other. I want to make some announcements and pass around a sign-up sheet. We’ll use the first three rows over there, about ten guys to a row. Hustle up now, we’ve got a lot to cover.”

Bart turned toward the bleachers and there was Franklin Gibson, sitting right in the middle of the bleachers like a teacher’s pet. “Man,” Bart thought, “there’s something about that mama’s boy I don’t like at all.”

Bart jogged toward the bleachers and took a seat on the fourth row up, right in the middle, overlooking the team and above the coach. He wanted to eyeball everyone.

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Franklin

Franklin saw a knot of students at the front of the class, all trying to get out the door at once. Then Bart Wagram came busting through the group, pushing and shoving like it was fourth and goal. What was the hurry? There was an hour before sign-ups, and the field wasn't fifteen minutes from school. Bart seemed mad at the world. Franklin would bet anything that Bart didn't have to call home to report in.

But Franklin had to call *his* mother. She made him promise to do it, just like when he was a kid. Franklin read about mothers who practiced *smotherhood*, not *motherhood*. They hovered over their kids so much that the kids never got to make an independent decision, a mistake, or a choice of their own.

That's my mom, Franklin thought. And if Bart had a mother like mine he wouldn't be cussing and bullying people and flunking grades in school.

Franklin wondered what his mama would think about him playing football with eighth-graders, especially Bart Wagram. Franklin knew his mom didn't get football. In fact, she didn't get *guys*. Maybe it was because she didn't have any brothers.

He had drawn the line when she wanted him to take an umbrella on a scout camping trip. Even though it had rained like crazy, and an umbrella would have been handy, he was not going to be the only guy with an umbrella on the camping trip. Next it would be fuzzy bunny slippers.

The knot of classmates was still hung up in the doorway. Franklin had plenty of time, so he walked over to chat with Mrs. McClellan. He reintroduced himself and asked her where she had taught the previous year. He told her how much he was looking forward to the year and how he had enjoyed the way she conducted class, especially the introductions. She seemed pleased and that made Franklin happy.

The room emptied. Franklin headed down the hall to the school office. There was no one else in line to use the phone – he couldn't believe it – and the secretary said he was welcome to use it as long as he was quick about it.

He called home and told his mother he was going to football sign-ups and would be home by six. Franklin figured it would actually be five-thirty, but he had to give himself a cushion. If he was late, she'd be all spun-up and worried.

“Be careful, honey,” she said to him. And then, “Don't get hurt.”

“Okay, Mom. See you in a little while.” What did she think he was going to do, fall off the bleachers? Stick himself with a pencil? It was hard to get hurt at football *sign-ups*.

He thanked the school secretary for letting him use the phone, and she asked his name. “I’m Franklin Gibson,” he said. Then he remembered his manners and added, “I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself when I first walked in.”

“Don’t worry about it. I thought I recognized you. We go to the same church as your family, and my husband Bob works with your father down at the bank. I’m Mrs. Robertson.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Robertson.” Franklin stuck out his hand. He couldn’t remember the rule about shaking hands with ladies.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Franklin.” Mrs. Robertson took his hand. “You have excellent manners. I look forward to seeing you in school this year.”

“Yes ma’am. Me, too.”

Franklin left the office and stepped into the afternoon. The glare bouncing off the concrete driveway was so bright it hurt his eyes. He raised his hand to shield them. It was blazing hot.

Franklin had resolved not to be late for sign-ups, and so he headed to the field. It was only half a mile, and he wanted to get there early.

“Hey! Wait-up!” Someone shouted, and Franklin turned to see Harvey and Danny behind him. They jogged to catch up, then slowed to a walk. The three boys hugged the side of the road under the oak trees, walking from one puddle of shade to another.

“You guys excited about football?” Franklin asked.

“Yeah,” Harvey answered. “I’ve been waiting for this day since the end of football season last year. What kind of team do you guys think we’re gonna have?”

“Sounds like Bart Wagram is ready.” Danny added. “I wonder if we’re ready for him.”

Franklin remembered Bart’s snorts during introductions. And his sarcasm, *I sure didn’t go to any summer scout camp*. Bart made Franklin nervous. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Bart; he didn’t even really *know* the guy. It was just something in the wind. Like Bart wanted to bust Franklin’s mouth, or worse.

“You guys ever played with Bart before?” Franklin didn’t want to appear scared.

“I’ve never played with him, but I’ve heard *about* him.” It was Danny. “They say he’s a headhunter. Just as soon crack your head as look at you. He runs wide-open all the time, and he don’t take nothing from nobody. I heard he even attacked a custodian in elementary school.”

“My brother was there when it happened,” Harvey spoke up. “He was in Bart’s class when they were both in fifth grade. The janitor – I think it was Old Man Thomas – told Bart to do

something. Bart kicked him square in the shin. It was a big deal. They suspended Bart for a week, but Bart said he didn't care; said he stayed home all day, watching TV and eating popcorn."

"What about that time when he was in seventh grade?" It was Danny again. "I thought they were going to toss him out for good after that fight."

The stories about Bart were legion, but this was the most famous of them all. In seventh grade Bart had gotten into an epic fight on the playground. Bart was the strongest guy in the school, and his opponent was the biggest. As the fight unfolded, one teacher said, "I'm not going to risk my life to break it up; they're both bigger than I am. Just let them work it out like two young stallions. Then we'll patch 'em up once they're finished."

They worked it out, all right. Bart and the other guy rolled across the playground, flailing each other while grunting and swearing and sweating. They wound up knocking over two huge trash cans and a bunch of benches, spilling garbage over most of the schoolyard.

No one ever knew what the fight was about, but the end result was clear. Bart pounded the other guy, leaving a bloody nose and both eyes black and blue. Other than getting dirty, Bart didn't seem any worse for the wear.

The maintenance man finally broke it up. He grabbed each of them by the collar and half-dragged them to the principal's office. Bart gloated even as he was horse-collared – turning to some wide-eyed younger kids watching the fight. "I really packed his lunch, didn't I?" The maintenance guy shut him up, and then hustled off both of them.

"I guess we should just be glad he's on our side," Harvey added. "Imagine having to play against the sumbitch."

"Let's hope he *is* on our side," Franklin added. "That guy seems mad at everybody. Did you see how he pushed through everyone to get out of the classroom?" Franklin waited for a reply, but the incident hadn't made much of an impression on Danny or Harvey.

"Someone told me Bart would have made the varsity team at the high school if he had passed eighth grade," Danny said. "I know Murdock and Fairley made it, and they played with him last year. He's better than either one of them. Think about that – we're gonna be playing with a guy who could be playing varsity football. That guy's a man, is what he is."

"He ought to be a man. He's flunked two grades. I bet he's sixteen years old if he's a day. Heck, maybe they'll let him drive the team bus." Harvey laughed at his joke and the others joined in.

They walked in silence for a bit, still trying to stay in the shade of the oak trees. The lone highway they had to cross was shimmering black asphalt with transfer trucks whizzing by. They waited a bit, then dashed across, cleared a small rise, and saw the field come into view.

Franklin had never set foot on this field. It was way across town from where he lived. But he knew where it was, just down the hill from the cemetery where they buried his Grandmama in September of last year.

He pushed that memory down and checked his watch. Three fifty-two. He was not going to be late. He didn't have much control over how slow he was – bad genes and all. But he could be on time.

“Hey look, there's Coach McInnis. Hey, Coach!” Danny spoke up and waved. Coach turned and threw up a hand, but Franklin wasn't sure he knew who he was waving at.

Coach McInnis was standing in the middle of a crowd of twenty-five to thirty boys – all sweating and milling about. Franklin didn't know half these guys. They must have come from the other elementary schools – the newer one on the west side of town, or some of the ones out in the county.

A whistle broke the nervous buzz of conversation, and the whole group stopped its chatter. “All right men, listen up. Let's head over to the bleachers so we can all see and hear. I want to make some announcements and then pass around a sign-up sheet. We'll use the first three rows over there, about ten guys to a row. Hustle up. We've got a lot to cover.” Coach McInnis turned and headed towards the bleachers.

The boys followed him, jogging, and Franklin took a seat in the middle of the second row. Danny and Harvey sat in front of him on the front row, scuffing their feet in the dirt and waiting. Some guys wore cleats; they made a tremendous racket when they clattered over the metal bleachers.

Coach McInnis thanked them for coming and introduced a short, muscular man as the assistant coach. He explained that Coach Wittenburg had been a small-college All American lineman at Lenoir Rhyne College.

Then he told them about the season: the number of games, some of their opponents, and so forth. They would play a few games at home, in the same stadium the high school team used. The balance of the games would be on the road. Franklin glanced around as the coach talked. He saw some familiar faces from his years playing little league football.

Coach began talking details and Franklin focused. “I need each of you to bring your release form and your proof-of-insurance on Monday. Show up at four o'clock sharp, in shorts, t-shirts, and football shoes. For those of you who don't have a jock strap, get one and wear it to our first practice. Don't forget to put it on right; the pouch goes in the front.” Coach's eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed.

“We'll do a light conditioning work-out on Monday, and then fit you for your equipment. We've got a lot to cover, so we're going to practice every week-day for the next three weeks. We'll be hitting by the end of the first week.”

“When you’re ready, we’ll have our first game-type scrimmage with referees and the whole business. Then we head into the games and the season. That’s all I’ve got. Does anyone have questions?”

No one spoke.

“See you Monday, then. Four o’clock sharp.” Coach McInnis’s whistle shrilled loudly to dismiss them.

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