Grade 12 Unit 1 EA 2

We Strangers

I didn’t set out to be a football player. I didn’t set out to lose my best friend, either, but somewhere between freshman and senior year, somewhere between the 1-yard line and the end-zone of our high school experience, we lost sight of each other down the lights and shadows of the field.

The summer before 8th grade year, I met Joel down at Tres Palmas beach. It was kind of a revolving group, eight, 10, sometimes as many as 14 of us, but we’d all known each other since junior lifeguards and YMCA surf camp, except for Joel. Joel moved from Kentucky in 7th grade. We marveled at his tie-dyed shirts and round vowels. I think the other kids saw him as kind of a mascot, trying to break into our group of friends, but I resented Joel trying to break in. So it came as a surprise that one day we were hanging around and Joel sheepishly asked me if I’d help him pick out a surfboard.

By the time 9th grade year rolled around, our roles had completely reversed. This was no more apparent than the day in August when, after returning from a 10-day trip to Hawaii, everyone wasn’t down at Tres Palmas. I called Joel that night and he said, somewhat sheepishly, that he was too tired to surf now that football Hell Week had started. That’s where everybody else was too. And he didn’t think we should be friends any more.

Football? Hell Week? What was that about? There were three weeks left in summer! How selfish could he be?

Joel was no longer James Baldwin, the “stranger in the village.” I was. I could imagine what Baldwin would have had to say to the psychiatrist, Carl Jung, about his ideas of the other or the shadow, as they sat down at a little café in that Swiss village: how we can see a quality in others that we recognize in ourselves, but mostly how we deny ourselves by projecting it into others.

I held out a month, stoically surfing by myself. But a week after school started up I approached a P.E. teacher who I knew was a coach asked if it was too late to sign up for freshman football. Not because I felt any urge to play football, but because I didn’t want to miss out. Had I been left out by design? Or worse, by indifference?

I’d missed the first three weeks of practice and wouldn’t be eligible to play until mid-October. The first I time tried to put on pads, it was like a twelve-year old girl struggling with a training bra. There was the sense I’d been a victim of a conspiracy, which was confirmed when one kid, a buff, red-headed, flush-faced halfback named Mike quipped, “You not really part of this team until you go through Hell Week. You’re not one of our brothers until you prove you belong here.” This guy, Mike, drew his whole identity from being a football player: either you were his “brother” or one of “them”, which struck me as cultish and weird, yet I couldn’t deny the disrespect was warranted. So was the challenge.

My difficulties: My lack of aggressiveness; my total ignorance of the rules and procedures of football. The game’s lexicon was like learning a foreign language while going through boot camp on an alien planet. The complexities of a Wing-T offense were lost on me; I couldn’t tell the difference between a 3-4 defense and 3-in-1 Oil. My slow acquisition of strange terms like “sink,” “swim,” “blitz” was often interpreted as lack of motivation, but words like “burpees” and “gassers” and “green bays” punish the slow of mind and foot alike. I quickly acquired the sobriquet “Millie” because I tended to mill around a lot in practice, gasping for breath, lost. I was a gangly, 160-pound surfer dude with knock-kneed stance and, in the words of one coach, “a chest like a wet-blanket”. I spent most of that year on the scout team, a tackling dummy for the first stringers and getting the snot beaten out of me for my “friends”.

I was advised to hit the weight room in the offseason. Weight rooms had always struck me as a place where antisocial people go to socialize. Close your eyes and feel the oppressive heat and smell the swamp and hear the techno and groaning and you’d think we were in a nightclub. There was the unfamiliar vocabulary of “sets,” “squats” and “leg press,” the motivational sayings stenciled on the walls like “Pain is weakness leaving the body”. Why did I choose this over a clear, blue Pacific and 4’-6’ sets rolling into Black’s Beach and girls on the beach. Was this worth doing it to hang on to my friends?

Despite all the pain, I could see the physical changes starting to happen, and my mentality shift, as a stranger started staring back at me in the mirror. As I went from 160, to 175, to 205, I began to believe, not just think about doing, but believing, that success is a summative effort of small things done habitually. I began to wonder about kinesiology as a major. Not because I liked jocks or loved athletics. Football was always going to be a struggle for me. I had no natural talent, and I lacked the killer instinct—I could not bring myself, like some guys, to purposely go low and destroy an opposing player’s ACL—but I had something to contribute. Football is a game of mental as well as physical discipline. How could I be a sports therapy physician, a healer, if I’d never played a single team sport?

Looking back, I was upset at Joel because I felt like he’d been the selfish one, and football a rejection of me. Like him, I imagined others could not be trusted, and surfing is a sport where you can trust only yourself. But now I recognize that when I’m more concerned with what I do rather than what other people think, I feel better. Before, I was about joining a group, seeing what I could get out of it. But now, doing what’s in the best interest of others actually turned out to be what was in the best interest of me. Me, who had never joined a team in his life.

Now a senior, I stand on a football field. It’s Friday night. The lights are on. I’m in a huddle with Joel and my other teammates. As a defensive end, my job is to crowd the line and free up the linebacker, Joel, to make the tackles. Unlike Joel, I have no chance of playing college ball. In four months, one way or another, my time as a football player will be over. The lights, my teammates, we strangers: do they illuminate different sides of my nature, or do I illuminate something in them? In the end, I think that huddle speaks to embracing the stranger in myself: true, selfless love is often doing what’s in the stranger’ best interest. And while we are not friends anymore, Joel is, for now, my teammate.

First and ten.