

Eagles playoff tickets. We've just caught someone cutting in line, and I'm throwing an empty beer bottle at him from twenty feet away. Just a few minutes ago, I spat at a family of four trying to sneak past us, and led the *Asshole* chants that rained down on them. It feels good to be a part of the crowd.

JANUARY 2002: The Eagles have just lost the NFC Championship Game to the St. Louis Rams. We're in my apartment in North Philly, and even though we're disappointed, we're also hopeful. This is a team on the rise, a team bound for a championship. We're already excited about next season, even if it is eight months away. Outside, a skinny white kid calls for help while an enormous black man squats on his chest, shouting something about money, presumably a bet on the game. He punctuates his demands with fierce open-hands to the face. Two of his friends kick the white kid in the ribs. We close the blinds and watch the post-game show, while one of the girls at our party insists that *it's not fair* that the Rams won't give the ball back and let the Eagles have one more chance to score.

EVERY YEAR, it's the same story, although in the seasons since Super Bowl XXXIX, the Eagles have been kind enough not to get my hopes up too much. They did sneak into the playoffs in the '08 season and played well enough to lose another conference championship game, but I never really believed they could win then, not after another mediocre regular season. Maybe I didn't allow myself to believe in them because I couldn't handle another let-down like the ones we had from '02 to '05. Or maybe this game is more complex than I ever realized when I was a kid. Now we're in the midst of another off-season, the buildup to another Super Bowl campaign, and I'm wishing I could stop caring. But I know that's never going to happen. The desperation in the city's air is contagious; it's a collective civic longing to be part of something great, even if we had nothing to do with it. I want that moment, that city-wide catharsis that will follow a Super Bowl. I need it.

CHAPTER TWO

CONFESSIONS OF AN OBSESSED FOOTBALL FAN

CONFESSION NUMBER ONE: I've been known to occasionally stalk pro athletes. When driving on the Schuylkill Expressway last summer, I saw Eagles cornerback Sheldon Brown cruising just ahead of me in his Escalade. I gassed my little Honda Civic and pushed as hard as I could to catch up with him. I didn't really have a plan from there, but I knew I wanted to watch him as he drove, to see where he positioned his hands on the wheel, to see if he sang along to the radio, if he talked on his cell phone, if anyone was with him. I caught up to him about two miles from the exit for Packer Avenue, the last exit before you cross the Walt Whitman Bridge into New Jersey, and also the exit that leads to the NovaCare Complex, where the Eagles practice. In two miles, he would be gone and I would probably never see him again, at least not in real, everyday life.

I stayed even with him and was glad to note that he was a careful driver—focused on the road, moderate speeds, no distractions. I was not careful, leering through my passenger window at my favorite football player, my car drifting off course like a shopping cart with a broken wheel.

I hoped he would look at me, but then I didn't know what I would do if we made eye contact. Would I wave dumbly? Would I ask him to pull over so I could explain that he's my favorite player, and I wear his jersey every Sunday? Should I call him Sheldon or Mr. Brown? And how would he react to all of this? Surely, he'd be as frightened as he was flattered.

I turned the radio down and opened the window to hear the music he was playing, but all I heard was the faint bass line of a rap song. There weren't many other cars on the road, and it felt like Sheldon and I had the stretch of highway to ourselves.

Two miles passed quickly. I fumbled with my cell phone to try to snap a picture of him, but soon we were at Packer Avenue. I veered across two lanes to follow him all the way to the NovaCare Complex. If he knew I was following him, he didn't show it. As we sat at a red light, I lightly tapped my horn, hoping he would look over, and I could point to the Eagles jersey I was wearing. But he looked straight ahead, leaning on his left hand and looking cooler than I've ever looked. At the next light, he was gone, turning into the NovaCare and leaving me behind. I turned around and headed back toward the bridge. When I got home, I would log on to the Eagles' Internet message board and tell everyone the story about my close encounter with greatness.

LauraBeth—then my fiancée, now my wife—was in the car with me, and she was extraordinarily tolerant, especially considering that I didn't talk to her the whole time Sheldon was there. She laughed at me, but she didn't complain when I pulled off the highway to follow him. She knows how much I care about the Eagles, how much I like Sheldon Brown, and she probably also knew I would follow him whether she approved or not.

One of these days, she's going to demand that I grant the same devotion to her as I do to the Eagles, and she'll be right to do so. I'm lucky to be married to her, but I suspect the Eagles will always be my mistress.

CONFESSION NUMBER TWO: The last real conversation I had with my Dad before he died was about the Eagles. We didn't talk about love, father-son bonds, or regrets—the regrets we saved for later, after I delivered the eulogy, after we put him in the ground and turned away and had to go back to living our lives as if nothing had happened, as if we weren't scarred and miserable.

He had cancer. A big, evil lump in his esophagus that spread all the way down to his stomach, rooted itself in his liver, and sucked

the life out of him. Who knows how long he actually had cancer, but we knew about it for almost two years. When he was diagnosed, I turned it into a joke. When a friend asked if my apartment floor had a tumor—water damage had buckled the floor and caused an unusually large lump to form next to my couch—I said, "No, but my Dad does." Everyone laughed. It was funny at the time, but mostly they laughed because I had implicitly given them permission to laugh, and they needed it as much as I did. When we joked about it, it was less real. It was easier to face, to forget.

When people asked how Dad was doing, I didn't know, because I was too focused on life at college to call him and get real updates. I said he was doing fine, and, in fact, might be even healthier than before because he'd lost some weight and now he wasn't bothered by the diabetes or high blood pressure anymore. I'm not sure whether I was oblivious, stupid, or if I really did know he was dying and just tried to rationalize the whole thing away. Whatever I was thinking at the time, it forced me to distance myself from him. Even in his final five weeks, when he checked into the hospital and got progressively worse, his face becoming an unrecognizable putty mask, each organ shutting down one at a time, I only visited a handful of times. I acted like I wasn't concerned, but I was. I acted like I had more pressing things to do, but I didn't. I talked about what we would do after they discharged him from the hospital. And LauraBeth, knowing intuitively that he wasn't ever going to come home, urged me to visit. She made me go at least twice a week, which is five less weekly trips than I should have made, but still better than nothing.

He called me one day, left a message on my voice mail—a delirious, morphine-addled plea for me to come visit. His voice a near-whisper, he told me he missed me and was wondering where I was. He said he was scared and that he loved me.

I've never felt worse about myself.

And still, I didn't call back. What would I say? *Please don't die, Dad, and, by the way, sorry I'm too busy to see you before the cancer kills you.*

I did visit the next day. I was the only one there, and I told him

I'd gotten his message. "Oh, that was nothing," he said, "don't worry about it." Sitting next to him, I didn't know what to say, so I turned on the TV instead. The NFL draft was on, and I realized that he hadn't even heard the big news—the Eagles had replaced Hugh Douglas, one of the league's best pass rushers, with Jerome McDougle, a hotshot rookie from Miami. I told him the good news, and he smiled. He was broken down and nearly unrecognizable, but his smile was still the same, even if he was beardless and his teeth were stowed in a bedside container.

"Think he can play?" he asked.

"Definitely," I'd said. "All those guys from Miami are awesome. Like Jerome,* Warren Sapp, Ray Lewis, Dan Morgan—"

"I don't know how you kids keep up with all those names," he said, fighting to keep his eyes open. The drugs made it hard for him to stay awake for long stretches. "You're a smart kid."

"It's easy," I said, shrugging. "All you have to do is watch the highlights and check out the message boards online." I stood and stepped away from the bed. "Best thing is, a lineman can help out right away. If he's any good,[†] we'll be a lot better this year." He smiled again and closed his eyes. I left the room and would never see him lucid again.

CONFESSION NUMBER THREE: I've probably spent more time in my life thinking about the Eagles than all other subjects combined. Since registering on the Eagles message board in February 2003, I've posted over fifteen thousand messages, an average of seven per day. On the EMB, as board regulars call it, I'm known for my long, detailed messages, which average about 250 words each. While this may not seem like a lot, it's important to remember that reading 250 words on an Internet message board is like reading the Book of Genesis. I've written countless 1,000-word

* To Eagles fans, "Jerome" will always refer to Jerome Brown, an Eagles legend who died in a car crash in 1992, in the prime of his career.

† He wasn't good. He was terrible. The most noteworthy thing he did in five years as an Eagle was to get shot by a carjacker.

posts, even though I know everyone stops reading after the first paragraph, and even though writing them usually requires a half hour of research, plus an hour of typing and editing.* I feel guilty as I write them, because I know I should be spending that time on actual, useful writing, or on my family, or reading, or anything else besides analyzing the special teams coach's tone of voice in his mid-April press conference. But I can't. I'm driven there compulsively, every day.

My name on the message board is swamistubbs—which is Rerun's name when he becomes a used-car salesman on *What's Happening!* I have no particular connection to Fred "Rerun" Berry, and no particular love for the show. I only picked the name because I thought it was funny, and at the time of registration, I'd had no intention of becoming an EMB regular. If I'd realized my identity would become tied to a sitcom character best known for his red beret and goofy dancing, maybe I would have spent more time considering my name, come up with something a bit more representative of who I am, but it's too late for that.

Since registering, I've established a reputation on the message board, and each of the hundred-thousand-plus members knows who I am and how I think. I say with a real mixture of pride and shame that I'm well respected on the EMB. I'm considered one of the voices of reason, one of the more intelligent posters who will really analyze a situation and then break it down clearly. Others have given me a five-star rating as a poster, and I've received several votes in the "Who's the best poster on the EMB?" poll.[†] Board administrators have asked me to be a moderator, an offer that was simultaneously flattering and depressing. When big Ea-

* I'm confident that I put more research and effort into my EMB posts than most professional analysts put into their own work. This probably reflects poorly on both me and the analysts.

† Of course, not everyone likes me, and I've actually received death threats from three different people. One particularly frightening threat came from a Vietnam vet whom I'd antagonized in a political debate—he had tracked my IP address and made it clear that he could find me. The other threats came from people who—misled by my name and the picture of Rerun that

gles news breaks, I feel obligated to go to the EMB and add my two cents. LauraBeth hates all of this, and I kind of hate it too.

The person they respect, though, isn't Tom McAllister, but swamistubbs. Tom McAllister is a neurotic guy who teaches college composition and admires the hell out of Kurt Vonnegut and loves donuts and can't ride a bike and has two obese Welsh corgis and a very tolerant wife. Swamistubbs is some dude who hides behind the face of Fred Berry and talks about football. On the EMB, I'm rational and well spoken and always calm. In real life, I throw things and break toes kicking tables. I give people the finger when I'm driving, and once, when my Dad was dying, I had to be restrained from attacking a priest in a hospital. I stammer and I talk too much and I'm socially awkward. I never went to the Internet with the intention of creating a new self, but it's what happened. It's what happens to all of us.

The deeper we dive into our online personalities and try to hide ourselves behind clever pseudonyms, the more we expose ourselves. We haven't created a new character; rather, we've indulged another aspect of our being. With each word I type, I realize just how obsessed I am, just how skewed my priorities are. When I wrote, after an ugly loss to the Jacksonville Jaguars, that "this team makes me feel like a battered wife—no matter how bad they treat me I always come back for more," it was supposed to be a joke. But this is exactly our relationship. I'm neglected and mistreated, yet I continue to follow them, always wishing I could be a part of what makes them so special, hoping that they would just look me in the eye once and tell me I mean something to them. I would never say these things, but swamistubbs says them every day.

Last year, I wrote that "I have a serious man-love for Sheldon Brown." Physically, I have more in common with him than most non-punters—we're the same height, he's got about fifteen pounds

accompanies my posts—thought I was black and didn't appreciate that I was getting so uppity. One sent a private message saying, "Listen up, black-ass, why don't you shut youre [sic] nigger mouth if you know what's good for you." I told the guy I was white, and he responded by saying, "my bad."

on me, and he's black, but it's not easy for a guy like me to find a good body double on a football team. He's soft-spoken, but when he does speak, people listen—the conviction and intelligence in his comments have won him the ear of both teammates and fans. Still, he's underappreciated, because he's not half as flashy as the other highlight-reel players on the Eagles. He just does his job every day with a quiet dignity and an impressive determination.

I wear an authentic Sheldon Brown jersey, a Christmas gift from LauraBeth, every week.* For three hours a week, I live inside the shell of Sheldon Brown; after a particularly good game, I'll wear the jersey until I go to bed. I never bring Sheldon into bed with me, but that may be because I don't want to share him with my wife.

I don't know exactly how much she paid for the jersey, but I do know authentic cost about \$150 more than replicas, because we fans want our football costumes to be as realistic as possible. The only ones that cost more are actual game-worn jerseys, some of which go for over \$1,000, just so someone can wear the sweat of another man.

The fantasy goes beyond just playing dress-up, though; it's a constant mind-set that drives us as fans, and that finds itself articulated on the message board. How many nights have I closed my eyes and dreamed about being on the field between Brian Dawkins and Sheldon Brown, laying down a monster hit on some fool halfback, and then celebrating with high fives and chest bumps? I've envisioned the Super Bowl in a thousand different ways—sometimes I'm in the locker room, and sometimes I'm in my best friend's basement, where we shower each other in beer. I spend hundreds of dollars every year on fantasy football, in a desperate attempt to edge my way onto the sidelines somehow, to win games alongside my heroes.

But why do we get so lost in the fantasy? What's so appealing about being with these athletes? Much of it seems to be rooted in

* Not completely true—sometimes I wear Brian Dawkins' number 20, depending on who needs the most support that day.

our obsession with the players' bodies, their impressive physical stature and what it represents: strength, invincibility, sexual prowess. Consider the EMB thread devoted to discussing the "sexual prowess [sic]" of 49ers tight end Vernon Davis.

Davis is an extraordinarily large, dreadlocked black man. He's stronger and faster than most NFL players, and could easily pass as a professional wrestler. The thread features about three dozen pictures of him, half of which are close-ups of his face, and the other half of which are wide-angle shots of him shirtless and/or flexing. To be fair, the thread started as a lighthearted attempt to make some cheap black guy/big dick jokes, but now, at 272 posts, it stands as a testament to something altogether different. One poster writes, "According to scouting reports, Vernon weighs 260 pounds and thirty percent of that weight is his genitals." Another says, "Rumor has it that Vernon wields his enormous member like a sword during games, using it to fight off opposing defenses." Sure, the guys are joking. But at the same time, it's a massive thread devoted to a bunch of guys discussing the size, shape, and effectiveness of a football player's penis.

Although overtly sexual threads like this are the exception on the EMB, there are still plenty of similarly revealing posts:

- Someone posted a picture of then-rookie Brodrick Bunkley in nothing but black boxer briefs. Dozens of posts followed with people using only an animated emoticon to indicate that they were drooling over his cartoonishly muscular upper body. Imagine a man calling a sports radio station and saying, *I get so excited at the thought of Bunkley topless that I'm drooling on my phone right now.* Imagine if it were said in a bar, or a locker room.
- In a thread titled "Who has the best Eagles wife?" one guy brags that "I get a bj at halftime of every game." Three others quickly follow suit* and it is generally agreed that after

* And, of course, they're all completely full of shit.

watching the Eagles for an hour, not only should we all have raging hard-ons, but women should be there to service us at halftime and then get the hell out of the way.

- Professional alcoholic Tara Reid appears at an Eagles game wearing a tight Eagles jersey, and is pretty obviously not wearing a bra. People drool over her like they did over Bunkley. They go on to proudly post pictures of their own wives and girlfriends in form-fitting Eagles jerseys. Eagles fans are more sexually attracted to women when they dress up like the players themselves. A wife is okay, but a wife in a Jeremiah Trotter costume is perfect. Fuck sexy nurses; we want sexy linebackers.
- When the Eagles sign free-agent linebacker Takeo Spikes, one poster writes, "I have to admit I am starting to get a little bit of a chubby thinking about [Spikes]." When the Eagles are rumored to be on the verge of trading for defensive tackle Kris Jenkins, he says: "I'm going to sleep but when I wake up we should have Jenkins or I just had a wet dream." Another poster responds: "I know man, if they get Jenkins I'm gonna totally cream my pants."

These are the kinds of things someone would only feel free to say online. In fact, most people wouldn't even allow themselves to *think* like this if they weren't on the EMB. Let's be clear: posts like these don't make their authors gay; in fact, if they *were* gay, their comments wouldn't be interesting at all. The fact that otherwise completely heterosexual men are saying these things reveals another layer of complexity to this whole ordeal, to our own responses to the game. They're sharing thoughts they would never share with other guys in real life. Freed by their anonymity, the posters' inhibitions fall by the wayside. And here, they may finally be finding out how they truly feel about the game, about the players.

CONFESSION NUMBER FOUR: A week ago, I walk into the Whole Foods supermarket with LauraBeth. It's not exactly my

kind of place, but we go there because we have to, thanks to her celiac disease,* which necessitates the purchase of all kinds of specialty products you can't find at your standard grocery store. I see a massive black man in a blue sweat suit pull a cart out of the line. He wheels around and I get a quick glimpse of his face; he doesn't look at me, because he's so tall he probably doesn't even see me, and because he seems conditioned to ignoring crowds. Immediately, I recognize him as Eagles offensive tackle William "Tra" Thomas.

When I whisper to her that Tra is here, she laughs and then asks how I know. How would I *not* know, I ask. She asks if I want to follow him. I say no, but she knows I mean yes, so she asks again and I nod, a little ashamed that my idolatry is so transparent.

So we follow him as he picks up an orange. In his hands, it looks like a Ping-Pong ball. I pretend not to watch him squeezing it. At the time I think I'm smooth in my stalking, but probably I'm like a drunk teenager trying to do the sober walk past his parents on the way back into the house—a parody of self-awareness.

Tra loads his cart with fruits and vegetables, and I'm glad to see he's taking care of his body. I'm the only one stalking him, but others are watching. I resent their watching him; they're not fans like I'm a fan. They don't care like I care. They probably don't even know who he is—or that he's had back problems, and blood clots in his legs—and they're only staring because he's the first black guy they've ever seen in Marlton, New Jersey, or because he's a giant and we can't help staring at giants.

When it comes time to pay, I get in line behind Tra to see the money in his hands. I follow him through the parking lot to see him get in his car—an SUV, somewhat disappointing in its lack of ostentation except for the spinning rims. He drives off and I'm left in the parking lot with my fiancée and our bags of gluten-free

* Celiac disease is an intolerance to gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. As we've learned over the past few years, gluten is in pretty much everything that tastes good, except for Cap'n Crunch and M&M's.

cereal. I don't remember anything else about the trip to the store, and I don't remember if I even talked to her while I was stalking. She's surprisingly comfortable with this, and I get into the car knowing full well that I ought to be ashamed of myself. As we drive, she sees how badly I want to call my friends and subject them to the *guess who I just saw* routine. Seconds later, I'm on the phone, like a fifteen-year-old girl with a crush, relaying every detail to friends who are equally interested in the quality of fruits Tra Thomas eats.

CONFESSION NUMBER FIVE: I'm a depressingly ordinary white guy in his mid-twenties. I'm so embarrassed by my own body that I actively avoid swimming pools and beaches, so I won't have to take my shirt off in front of other people. I was fat in high school, and my greatest athletic triumph was losing sixty pounds just to become a backup on the soccer team. I was seventeen when I peaked as an athlete, and now I'm just another doughy guy with limp arms and the upper-body strength of a corpse. My body is a constant source of disappointment and shame, and I naturally envy the appearance of men like Jevon Kearse, Brodrick Bunkley, and Terrell Owens, who are built like comic book characters. Their bodies are so perfectly sculpted, it's hard to believe they're even human. They look like they're indestructible, like bullets would bounce off of their chests and fall steaming to the ground. When you see people like Kearse, Owens, Dawkins, and Sheldon Brown, it's hard to imagine them ever being injured, sick, dying. How could a body like *that* ever harbor a tumor? How could they ever fall apart? What could possibly knock Goliath down? Sure, they get injured and sick, but it's always a shock, because you can't help being amazed by their appearance, the way they've perfected the human form. Hell yes, I envy their bodies, and I know I'm not the only one.

CONFESSION NUMBER SIX: I once told a friend, while drinking, that although I didn't cry when my Dad died, I would cry if the Eagles won the Super Bowl. I was partially lying when I said

this: of course I cried when my Dad died. But the second part is true—not only would I cry if the Eagles won the Super Bowl, but I'm pretty sure I would cry more about the win than the death.

This half-truth seems particularly relevant for two reasons. First, it's fucking weird, and I know this. It's bizarre and inhuman and disrespectful. This all seems so straightforward that it barely warrants discussion.

But here's the second point: my macho chest-pounding in the bar (real men don't cry!) and my intense, thinly veiled vulnerability (this football team means more to me than my own family) are both eerily reminiscent of the tenor of the rhetoric on the EMB.

The EMB is marked by an aggressively masculine ethos, an exaggerated version of locker room bravado. Every post featuring the picture of a woman is guaranteed, within ten minutes, to elicit one specific response: "I'd hit it." Of course, the poster wouldn't just have sex with "it"; he would hit it, because even when he's being intimate, it's violent and painful, and he's totally in charge, like a real man would be. Like the Eagles would be.

Posters on the EMB spend so much time exposing their weaknesses—the emotional venting over losses, the desperation for a winner, the fetishizing of male physiques, etc.—that the remaining posts are a parody of hyper-masculinity. Literally every day, someone starts a new thread about the team's cheerleaders, so people can post the same old pictures, scrutinize their bodies, declare them hittable, and then say something like, "I see twenty hotter girls than that every day." And, as with the guys who claim to get blow jobs during every game, these people are liars, unless they live inside a rap video. Still, every man on the EMB will insist that not only is he surrounded by more beautiful women, but they've done the old in-out with those women and left them behind in tears, because that's what real men do.

It's a locker room atmosphere without the requisite checks and balances. In the locker room, we're limited by our appearance, and by our peers' personal knowledge of us. A guy like Tom McAllister could never get away with the claims swamistubbs can make. Swamistubbs could be a *G2* model who works at NASA on

weekends. No one has ever met DaveTheStud*—maybe he is a stud, and maybe he has bagged all of the Eagles cheerleaders in the past month. Even if one wants to call people on their BS, they can't make the accusation stick. So no one bothers, and then we're all up to our eyes in testosterone. Suddenly, every woman is an open receptacle waiting to be filled by Eagles fans. If any angry boyfriends or husbands get in the way, they'll take their beating and move meekly aside. Everyone on the EMB could kick everyone's ass. Everyone is a ninja.

It's a teenage boy's playground. Unlike with talk radio, you can always get the last word in and make yourself sound reasonably intelligent. You can hide behind false identities and you can pretend to be a legendary lothario, an ass-kicking machine who's built like Brodrick Bunkley. No one tries to stop others from lying, because they don't want to be stopped themselves. If you ruin one person's fantasy, then you ruin everyone's.

Here's what the Internet does: it promises to bring us together, but then it drives us apart from one another and ourselves. It promises anonymity, and yet it reveals parts of ourselves that we've hidden our whole lives.

These players embody so many of our fantasies, and they represent for us some unattainable ideal. Pro sports, ultimately, are about the worship of the human body, and the NFL is about the worship of the male body specifically. It's not about homosexual eroticism so much as it is about wish-fulfillment. We go online to pretend to be someone else, and yet we unwittingly betray the reality that none of us is close to the man we claim to be. This is a dichotomy that can only exist on the Internet, the only place in the world where you can be two people at once and yet still not even be one complete person.

CONFESSION NUMBER SEVEN: I've chosen to list seven confessions here not because of any biblical significance, and not because we rest on the seventh, but because former Eagles

* An actual name used on the EMB.

quarterback Ron Jaworski, The Polish Rifle, wore jersey number 7. I wish I were joking.

Jaworski was pretty good, not great, and he has had no direct influence on my life. But he was the predecessor to Randall Cunningham, who was the first really exciting athlete I ever watched, and he was the quarterback on the teams my Dad loved, which makes him part of the extended family. Before I ever watched football, I watched my Dad watching football. I learned how to think and talk about football. Although I hung on to every word he and my older brother, Kevin, shared during the games, I never heard the unspoken words that hovered in the conversational gaps. We watched the games because they did things we could never do, and because the Eagles showed us that it is possible to overcome the limitations of the human body.

One particular game stands out vividly. It's 1996, late September. The Eagles are 3-1 and hosting the hated Dallas Cowboys, who are 1-3 and on the verge of collapsing, so the excitement in the city is palpable. A win buries them for the season and finally puts an end to their loathsome dynasty—they've won three Super Bowls in the past four years—plus it catapults us toward our own championship.

When the Eagles jump out to an early ten-point lead, Kevin and I run around the living room like our shirts are on fire, high-fiving, jumping into walls, screaming. Dad is not a runner or a jumper but he yells along with us and high-fives us and he looks as giddy as I've ever seen him. When the Cowboys score consecutive touchdowns to take the lead, I sulk and complain that the Eagles always blow it, that they're screwed now. And Dad tells me, like he does every week, not to give up, to quit whining in the middle of a game when there's still a chance. Dallas hits a field goal, I sulk more, and Dad glares at me because I should know better.

The Eagles mount a drive, looking like they're about to tie the game before halftime. Quarterback Rodney Peete drops back to pass and he collapses, untouched. The ball trickles out of his grasp and sits less than two feet away from him, taunting him, taunting us. Instead of grabbing the ball, he grips his knee. Cowboys

swarm to the ball, dive on it, dive on him, and we know now that the game is over. They will take the ball and score again before halftime. They will go on to turn their season around, finish tied with the Eagles, and win the division by virtue of a tiebreaker. They will host a playoff game and win it. The Eagles will lose a playoff game on the road.

The people on TV tell us Peete collapsed because his cleat got caught in a seam in the turf and his patellar tendon was torn. "Well, that explains the fumble," I say, amazed that something as simple as a rift in a carpet can so easily crumple a great athlete. My brother calls me an idiot and says that's no excuse, he blew it, the season's ruined. I look to Dad, expecting him to rebuke my brother, but he's nodding. "So what he hurt his knee?" Dad says. "That's no excuse for dropping the ball!" I say that when you're in severe pain, you're not thinking about the ball or the team. You're just grabbing your knee and hoping you'll walk again someday. We would all do the same thing, we would all focus on the pain instead of worrying about everyone else. My brother insists that he would have held the ball, and, again, Dad agrees. "They're going to fall on him anyway," he says. "Why not take the pain for another two seconds?" He's sitting on the edge of his seat now, fiddling with nail clippers like he does when he's nervous, and scowls at the screen. If his kids weren't with him, he would unleash a mighty stream of profanity, but he maintains his composure, mostly.

Peete gets carted off and Dad, usually the rational one, tells him to never come back. Then he flops back in his chair. When I begin a new defense of Peete, he glares at me silently and I know the subject's not up for debate.