

## August in Their Hearts

In the late afternoon fry, the inescapable dry grass smell saturated the air. Heat waves played on the road ahead creating a mesmerizing ripple as if the road was actually melting. People began to complain about the heat again. We all know August: the burnt-end of summer.

The old, maroon S-10 didn't have AC, so Dirk Lakewood had the windows rolled down and his thick left arm hanging out of the cab. Dust flew off the tires and out of the wheel-wells as he drove onto the blacktop, away from the quarry. Heading home on the mainline back to town the dust from his pants and shirt swirled about him, leaping through the window and up into the air as if eager to stay at work. His wraparound sunglasses shielded his eyes from the aggravating particles.

The other guys from work were headed to some tavern towards the other end of the town limits. A bottle of beer was the only thing that was going to quench a summer thirst on a day like this; no doubt sweating as soon as it left the bar fridge, perspiration trickling down your hand.

However, Dirk took the long way home –a lazy detour that traced the perimeter of a few subdivisions to the high school. The truck lumbered its way into the jagged parking lot full of potholes and broken asphalt. He gingerly guided the quarter ton truck through the torn-up lot with the subtle crunch and pop of loose rocks trying to decide how to yield to its rubber tires.

He pulled up to the fence that surrounded Red Hawk Field. The sun was right in his face as it hung above the far end of the football field and the row of houses of the adjacent neighbourhood. He flipped down the visor, squinting (even through the old Oakley lenses), trying to see what the latest version of the high school team looked like through the dirty smudges of the S-10's windshield.

The familiar red-and-black helmets darted here and there, smaller groups scattered about the field, and a few of the old Wilson balls being tossed about.

Stepping out of the truck and towards the chain link fence he removed his sunglasses and let them fall over his chest, secured by the rubber band hung around his neck. He held a rough hand at his brow blocking the sun from his eyes, but the heat was persistent and sweat began to bead on his forehead.

The position coaches gravitated the small clouds of their own players that formed tiny clusters in different corners of the field. Dirk's scanning eyes once again became fascinated by the symbiosis of a football team.

Like different species of animals, the football field was an ecological system all its own. In one corner the big-bodied offensive lineman stood in a small circle watching two of their burly mates involved in, what looked like, hand-to-hand combat. Meanwhile, on the long end of the field, locked in a one-on-one battle, a receiver and cornerback sprinted along the sideline in chunks of twenty, thirty, forty yards hell-bent on beating each other to an arcing football. Bodies large and small, slow and fast all working together.

He spotted Coach Gresham stalking the field like a prison warden with his mirror-lensed Aviators; looking not unlike The Man With No Eyes who oversaw Luke, Dragline and the boys on that Floridian chain gang. Yet very much the stereotypical football coach: whistle dangling around his neck, too-tall ball-cap on his head, and white, knee-high socks. His hands folded behind his back made him look astute, but Dirk knew he cupped them thusly to hold a clandestine cigarette. As he strolled from drill-to-drill he observed his players, his mind no doubt busy making a list of who could do what to serve

his team best. Training camp couldn't have been a week old, so Dirk knew his old coach had a lot of work to do.

A drop of perspiration fell into his strained eye and stung for a moment. It rekindled the ferocity of football practice back in his day. Dirty sweat from his head, stuffed inside the old red-and-black Schutt helmet, ran from his brow into his eye. The sting and burn helped him hit and tackle. Like spurs in the side of a mustang, it lit a fire inside him. This was an ironclad memory from those days playing linebacker for Coach Gresham.

Dirk would sit in his room staring at that iconic picture of Chuck Bednarek, which he had plastered on his ceiling. All of his idols had that virulent toughness: Kevin Greene, Ray Nitschke, Dick Butkus, Jack Lambert. Tough guys. Hateable heroes. Dirk had wanted that legacy.

Without realizing it, his fingers had curled tightly around the mesh of the fence. He released his grip and was about to head back to the truck when he realized Coach Gresham was walking in his direction.

"Lakewood. How ya keepin'?" he hollered as he made his way around to Dirk.

"Coach. I'm good." They shook hands. Tobacco smoke stuck to Gresham's skin. "How's the team lookin'?"

"Ahh we're young. Graduated seven starters on defense alone last year." A gruff nonchalance.

"That right? Shoot."

Gresham nodded, looked back over the field.

"Some young talent though. Some able bodies. Keen to play. And they're gonna need to." Gresham pointed towards the group of o-linemen "This Winston kid, he's a big boy, and he got good feet. He'll start this year. Bit of a softie, but hell, even you were a little soft your first day here."

Gresham didn't turn towards Dirk but a little sneer crept over his mouth revealing that blackened, dead bicuspid he still hadn't fixed since the late-nineties. Dirk laughed along with his former coach.

It had been that same smile years ago on this same field when Dirk said he'd finish the game despite a fractured elbow.

Dirk had been locked on Lincoln's 250 pound tailback that day back in '98. He was a bruiser, who, according to the week of film study, never shied away from contact. On that memorable play, Dirk found it strange that the offense had called a sweep, swinging the big boy outside in space. The defense's speed was enough to get to the outside and seal the edge to turn the tailback, back inside.

But suddenly he felt the rouse.

The outside receivers came inside on vicious crack-blocks, including the slotback who hit Lakewood sidelong like a car into an unsuspecting pedestrian. The devastating block came helmet-first on his right elbow like a cannonball strike.

As he sat on the sideline, his elbow decimated, he swore to Gresham he'd be fine to return to the field, to finish the game for him. "Just need a little tape, Coach," is what he'd said that made Gresham smirk.

The perennial high school football coach laid a hand on Dirk's shoulder pad promising him a future at the collegiate level, considering his present skill-set, but *not* with a bum elbow however.

Dirk had opted for surgery, which ended his junior year. The Red Hawks lost the remaining games and missed the playoffs. With every odd click the elbow made, Dirk imagined and pondered the 'what ifs' of that lost season.

He had made Dirk a promise that he couldn't keep, or really couldn't have made in the first place.

"You know we could use some help with our 'backers. That'd free me up to look at the rest of the team. Give you some real coachin' experience. *Teach* these boys somethin'."

Standing there, absorbed in Gresham's hidden glare —those mirrored lenses obscuring any emotion—Dirk felt like a sheepish teenager. Yet, Gresham was offering him an opportunity he would cherish, and Dirk was almost drunk on the notion as he stood where he once played. The smell of sweat, that low-lying sun, a little bit of fight in the air.

"I know you wouldn't come down here if you weren't at least half-interested."

"Yeah, Coach...I dunno."

"Lakewood, you've got some college ball experience. The boys in this town'd really benefit from having that shared with 'em. Think about what you can offer."

Dirk dropped his head and smiled. He shook his former coach's hand: "Good luck this year Coach." He headed back to his truck. He started it quickly, but he hesitated and let it run, as if in winter, as he lingered another minute watching the team.

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A bottle of off-yellow HighLife sat next to him fizzing excitedly; opened to sate the thirst from mowing his lawn. Saturday morning sun shone through the myriad bubbles racing to the meniscus of the bottle, the surface of the shimmering liquid. Every ounce of that beer ached to be drunk.

But it seemed as if his desire to drink had been stolen. The sweat on his skin and shirt had dried firmly into a stiff film as he sat listlessly on the couch, the television screen alight.

The college football season kicked-off today and with that carried the excited hope of millions of fellow Americans and all their beloved *alma maters*.

His right hand was occupied with the remote controller navigating a path through the many channels. He sat back on the couch, his sunburnt left arm bent over his paunchy stomach. Once a fit, 5'10", 211 pounds and barrel-chested, that muscle had seemingly melted and dripped into his middle region forming a round, flabby center. A fleeting thought had him considering whether it was finally time to go from Large to XL.

His eyes were glazing over as the ticker ran with scores, statistics. A wealth of football information ran before his eyes though he felt it disconnected the sport from its core. Once upon a time, Dirk Lakewood, number fifty-four in the red-and-black, administered pain, but now the entirety of the sport was administered to him. Sweat and blood and mud and grunts and taunts pared-down into two dimensions.

The analysts gestured fanatically with their hands. Lee Corso, for one, was excited. But hell, he was *always* excited.

Dirk was silent, listless even, but was it quiet anticipation or was it the nostalgic delude of August once again? Footballers at every level were dusting off their helmets, and returning to the

gridiron and still Coach Gresham's offer lingered in his mind. He was antsy now, and memories filled his head having stepped back on his old field again.

He recalled his old red-and-black Schutt helmet again. By season's end it had been littered with scrapes and streaks of paint like an old demolition derby car. The blue divot near the ear-hole was the side-long block from the pulling guard at Lincoln High. The green streak on the crest had been from one of his season-high twenty-tackle total during the St. Pat's game. And the orange smear along the brow was from that blind-side shot on West's QB.

Lee Corso rambled and sputtered on the tv screen. Now dressed in a duck mask, Corso predicted that the University of Oregon would upset USC later in the evening. Lakewood chuckled to himself on the couch. However it was the fond recollection of his tarnished helmet, not the slapstick commentator, responsible for his boyish smirk.

Voices on the television wavered and waned as his gaze drifted beyond the television. His eyes caught on the off-white patch of wall that was strikingly dissimilar from the remainder of the uniformly white paint job he and Margaret had undertaken when they'd first moved-in.

He'd spent one Saturday afternoon a few years ago watching Notre Dame get pummeled by USC. With that result, Dirk had lost the equivalent of one mortgage payment on some boastful wager with a work buddy.

His immediate reaction to the blow-out left a fist-sized hole in the wall –it was the only time Margaret had ever sworn at him. And while Dirk didn't own a stitch of Fighting Irish apparel, there was much more behind the violent reactionary measure than just monetary loss.

He missed the unspoken admiration adorned on him from the other team. From the first play, eleven sets of eyes studied him as receivers ran in motion and the offensive line made their blocking calls.

The QB knew Lakewood ought to be right in front of him, and sometimes he was: standing idle in his typical linebacker stance; playing possum, hiding the possibility that he'd shoot the A-gap and make a bee-line for the QB at the snap. Or perhaps he'd be standing right over the ball, growling with such virulence that his spit and snot got the QB a little damp, only to drop back to cover his designated hook-zone.

Sometimes he didn't have to do a thing. For all of his reputed skill he'd have gained the offence's attention and it was another teammate that would blind-side the QB or beat a single blocker and tackle the runner for a loss.

And that fraternity was something he could see in the eyes of those with whom he shared the huddle. That circle of red-and-black helmets breathing out small, synchronous clouds of fog in the early November chill. He'd learned the game alongside Fulton, Baillie, Willigar, and Hill from the time they were first fitted for helmets and shoulder pads. And ten sets of eyes on him as he'd bark-out something like: "Viking Over Smash Cloud 3" and ten voices responded in unison with a stern "break!" as they broke the huddle.

The memory gave him a chill.

He stood from the couch and walked to the picture window. His newly-mown lawn, perfectly striped like pyjamas, was, in effect, his big achievement of the day. Taking a long pull from the bottle he kept his eyes on his front yard. However, the patio stones lining the front walk were cracked, the old aluminum storm door needed to be replaced and rust had been growing along the rear bumper

of the S-10. He probably couldn't truly afford the quarter ton truck, but he felt as if showing up at the quarry five days a week with a compact car was something he couldn't afford to do either.

The bungalow was enough room for him and Margaret but he knew he was struggling with the upkeep. Rubbing his elbow he wondered what his old pals from the team were doing now. Were they starting families of their own? Were they gainfully employed?

He knew for one they weren't playing ball anymore. You tend to hear about the small-town guy who makes it big in your sport—bronze statues are erected for guys like that.

But that life, as a player, and even high school football, was a lifetime ago.

Absently, he tapped his wedding band on the neck of the bottle as he retreated to the couch landing loudly with resignation.

He was 29. No, wait: 30. Sometimes he'd forget momentarily. And especially within the context of talking pro ball at the quarry: "Oh, Freeney? That guy is getting *old*." He'd say that about a pass-rusher for Indianapolis who was barely 33. That was only three years away for Dirk.

How many years had it been since his last game? How long had it been since his last time in gear? Not since those blue jerseys during his freshman year at Orono. And that was a short season, shortest of his life. He now rested his beer on his stomach, slouching so that the full effect of his belly threw itself forward, stretching the cotton t-shirt.

What had he done with his time since that last season?

The screen door slammed as it swung open against the vinyl siding. Then, in succession, the front door flew open and banged against the wall. Margaret stood there, over six feet tall, broad shoulders and in each hand three bags of groceries.

"Hey." Dirk greeted her, without turning from the tv. But she didn't respond. She simply stood in the spot just inside the door so her long shadow cast itself over the living room floor towards the kitchen. A few rays of sun managed to sneak in the door. The ringing of far-off locusts, as if called upon by Margaret, created the tone of Mexican stand-off.

"What?" he asked.

"Sittin' on the couch. I coulda predicted that. What'd you even get done today?"

He was silent, pretending to be transfixed by the analysts' babble. The "to-do" list she'd left for him on the kitchen counter (the largely incomplete "to-do" list) now entered his mind. He stared deep into the screen hoping to find some striking novel analysis to ease the tension his forgetfulness had created. However, the analysts simply muttered things about "pistol formation", naming "shut-down corners" and speaking of team's "exotic blitz packages." Things he'd heard *ad nauseum* his whole life.

"How're yer folks?" he asked plainly, as if by rote. Hoping to calm the judgemental seas – which rocked and rolled between his couch and the seething Mrs. Lakewood—with a bit of conversation.

"They're good." She replied equally as plainly. "I got milk, Cheetos, a few other things. You didn't text me, so I didn't get anything you wanted."

"Yeah."

"I really wish Mom and Dad would move closer. God, that drive..." She sighed. "They asked why you didn't come."

“Yeah, I bet they did.” He took a long drink from the beer bottle, still facing the television.  
“What did you tell ‘em?”

She dropped the grocery bags with a loud thud.

“I told them you had a full plate. Home repairs and chores.”

Dirk laughed towards the television: “Oh yeah.”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

She stood there, eyeballing him.

He sat in the same position, staring at the TV. He could feel her eyes and the implication of her statuesque body language. But he didn’t flinch.

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Margaret watched Dirk as they sat together on the step of her building. The weather was changing. Dirk wore his old high school varsity hoodie, now five years removed from the red-and-black days. They sat like bus passengers: silently, side-by-side, but secretly using each other’s body heat against the April breeze that still carried remnants of winter.

Dirk’s hands were jammed into the pouch of his hoodie. It had become too small, stretched taut over his back and shoulders. The sweater showed signs of wear and a few stray threads at the cuffs flitted on the wind. Propped up on the concrete steps he sat staring at his sneakers and a large crack, which seemed to bisect him.

They’d both survived four years in Orono. Margaret having just received a Bachelor degree was ready to head back home to Presque Isle. Dirk, however, spent the bulk of his time at college painfully within earshot of Alford Stadium. The ambience of the crowd seemed to ring constantly while he struggled to pick up courses here and there. Now that Margaret was leaving school, he doubted he’d return either.

It was a far different university experience than he thought he’d have when, after graduating high school, he got the call to try out with the Black Bears. Division 1-AA was not nationally televised, and some forgot that UMaine even had a football team, but he had been happy to continue doing the thing he loved most.

Margaret noticed Dirk look up at a couple guys walking past in their Black Bears garb –the blue logo on their sweaters and track pants. She knew, as he did, they were footballers. She only looked at his wheat-blond hair grown-long in the torrid end-of-year studies where precise hygiene seemed to wane in favour of cram sessions and all-nighters. The wind pushed it to and fro giving it rare personality –as Dirk’s hair was often short, close-cropped.

She imagined a wheat field on his head and she decided to run her left hand through the thick mane of her man’s hair. It was soft and yielding, but thick and membranous even. Her hands enclosed large locks of hair within her fingers, and she scratched his scalp lovingly, hoping to pry-loose a thought or sentiment. Her red-brown hair blew about her face in the breeze while she turned and tried to look up the street. Margaret knew what football meant to Dirk.

Seeing those guys in their Black Bears garb, stirred something in Dirk, and he remembered his brief stint as a collegiate footballer.

For all of his hail and health (his elbow having recovered nicely) he had not more than to look around during his position drills with the other linebackers to see his disadvantage.

The returning starters were almost a foot taller than Lakewood. Some of his fellow recruits were just as tall. He made up for that with his speed and ferocity, but when it got down to it that just wasn't enough.

He'd overheard his position coach talking to the HC between drills. "Lakewood's a tweener."

Death sentence. Expendable.

He was marooned on an island between two places.

The motor and the ferocity to play d-line, but outweighed by nearly a hundred pounds.

The smarts and experience to play linebacker, but half-a-foot meant the difference between looking *over* his teammates and looking *around* them.

Football was a business now. Collegiate ball was a feeder for the pros, and there just wasn't room for "Rudy" Ruettigers anymore.

His passion seemed to be out-growing his body, so Dirk choked-down his pride, and took his leave of the sport he loved, saving himself the embarrassment of eventually being cut.

He was not so prudish that he did not sit in the stands for every Black Bears home game. And most of the time he was caught-up in the suspense of the game with the rest of the crowd. But in those idle moments between quarters, and slipping away from the stadium as games became one-sided, he dwelled on his time lost.

Wearing that ragged red-and-black sweater had been Dirk's protest.

He leaned back against a few plastic totes and boxes that he and Margaret had just lugged down the three flights from her apartment. Margaret's hand fell from his head as he shifted.

She was happy being with Dirk, though she was afraid he was letting her go home and letting her go from his life. Because so much of Dirk's life was looking backward, she was petrified to talk about the future, their future –if it even existed.

Dirk thought that this could be the end of them. He doubted it would be a real break-up, but perhaps something as slow moving and subtly defined as Pangaea splitting apart on a time-lapsed graphic. Perhaps he'd just head back home and get a job at the quarry like many guys did. Forget about everything in a swirl of rock dust: football, Margaret, Orono. He was no academic. It had never been the reason for attending university.

On a few occasions he wondered if he was in Love with Margaret. The question only filled his head with more riddles. It wasn't so clear-cut. He enjoyed her company, did he Love her? What did Love look like?

A loud engine pulled around the corner and a wood-paneled, Buick station-wagon pulled alongside the curb before them. Simultaneously, the driver and passenger doors opened and two giant men emerged. Her father, Alvin, and her Uncle Mort were absolute chieftain in stature: six-and-a-half feet tall, Margaret's same broad shoulders, with salt-and-pepper mullets cascading over the collars of their denim coats.

They awkwardly stepped from the low vehicle with their large, hearty moustachioed smiles and took turns giving Margaret an expectedly warm greeting.

Her father and uncle turned to Dirk and smiled warm goliath smiles and with mannerly death-grip they each shook his hand, enveloping his tiny mitt in their monstrous paws. They weren't athletes, but they were big brutes. Throw some pads on them and a little eye-black, Dirk thought, and they'd look like Marc Gastineau or Bob Lilly. He couldn't help but smile, his face taut with emotion.

After the grunt work had been completed, the four sat down on the stoop again; a tinge of body odour in the air, hands a little sore. There was a silence.

"Well," her father began, "we'd better hit the road. Mom's making a roast for supper. We don't wanna keep her waiting." He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Yep." Her uncle agreed.

The two men rose. Margaret knew this was it. The two would shake Dirk's hand and get in the car, and give her a moment of privacy to say goodbye. And that would be it for her and Dirk. She bit her lip, trying to trade sadness for physical pain. She hoped her heart wouldn't betray her body.

And once they left Dirk would be there in front of Margaret's building. A vacant apartment he used to visit in the middle of the night after a few too many beers... He'd be out in the cold street by himself. Wind-swept and solitary. Not quite warm enough in the old hoodie.

Suddenly, Dirk stood and said: "Well, if it's all the same maybe Margaret could ride with me, I could follow you. No need for you all to crowd into the one car."

Dirk held her hand all the way to Houlton, and Margaret had to try even harder to hide the new, joyful tears.

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Dirk heard the intermittent *clunk* of cans being placed on the pantry shelves. It was the only thing he could hear louder than the rush and roar from the Ohio State and Nebraska game through the television.

He'd considered downing the rest of the beer and rising from the couch to help Margaret put away the groceries. He didn't need to even make conversation. It'd be such a simple gesture, something kind, something that'd help repair some damage he'd done previously. Something of Love.

However, the noises from the kitchen ceased. Dirk had missed his chance for simple amends. He accepted that outcome, tilting the bottle skyward, finishing the remains of the beer. As he did it he had to turn his head slightly so one eye could maintain connection with the action. The house was quiet again except for the ambience of the crowd from the Horseshoe. So when the fridge slammed with that dead *thud*, Dirk jumped. But he was able to compose himself as Margaret's foot falls came towards the living room.

She plunked herself beside Dirk on the couch and handed him a full High Life.

"Thanks," he said idly opening it.

She pressed herself against him. Now without her jacket it was easy to see she was carrying a little extra weight. She was pregnant. Dirk's right hand moved for her swollen stomach, his eyes still very much anticipating Nebraska's attempt to convert a 3<sup>rd</sup> down conversion attempt with inches to go.

"Dirk," she began.

"Ha! Goddamn boys, if you can't get a single yard on third down you ain't worth a *damn*."

"Dirk."

Eyes still on the screen. Nebraska was to have another try on 4<sup>th</sup> down and inches. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands cupping his mouth nose and chin. So when he asked, "Yeah, what's up?" it was muffled and sounded about as sincere as a conversation through a plate glass window.

"You didn't ask me about my trip to the doctor's yesterday."

"You went yesterday? I didn't..."

"Yes. Before I went to Mom and Dad's."

"Oh. Well, how was it?"

"Went well."

"Good. Great." That inaugural sip of HighLife was cool, carbonated, but his heart was pumping as he watched Shazier, Ohio State's middle linebacker, yelling and signalling to his mates in the deafening roar of the home crowd. It was absolute mania at the Horseshoe with the impending 4<sup>th</sup> down conversion and only inches to spare.

Who was it used to roam the field for Ohio State? Before Laurinaitis, and Hawk... It was Katzenmoyer. Andy Katzenmoyer. Not much of a pro career, but hell of a junior year for the Buckeyes.

"Dirk."

"Jesus Margaret, what is it?" He still faced the screen.

"They did an ultrasound. Look at this." She produced the blurry, black-and-white picture of a tiny human being.

Dirk looked from the screen his eyes struggled to absorb the photo: A black field and fanned-frame of a ghostly-white image.

Brow furrowed and bent, Dirk tried to further interpret the image. Before he could even ask, Margaret laughed as she said: "It's a little boy, Dirk. We're gonna have a boy."

His head spun to face her. His mind raced with the idea that this tiny image could grow to be Bednarek, Urlacher, Spielman or Romanowski. Another great linebacker, like his father. Now open-mouthed, Dirk Lakewood had been transformed.

"We are? That's incredible!" he jumped from his seat. Seeing Margaret beaming from her seat he leaned in and kissed her on her mouth. Then again. He smiled as he kissed her. She touched his cheek and felt his smile with her own lips.

The television buzzed with applause from the crowd. The Buckeyes had stopped the Cornhuskers' offense on 4<sup>th</sup> down. Shazier and the defense ran off the field celebrating, as the crowd erupted. One Nebraska player still lay writhing on the field, forgotten amongst the revelry.

**END**

For RLB