

ACCEPTANCE AT THE HAMPTONS

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Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction

FIRST AND THIRTY-FIVE; “hut, hut, hut.” The quarterback took the snap, faded, dodged, and threw the bomb towards the pyracantha bushes lining the walkway to PS 23. In an effort to slip his coverage, the receiver slanted up the shallow hill before the goal. The pass flew just beyond his fingertips.

“Jesus Christ, Eddie!” I told you the last pyracantha bush. Whatya running around the bottom of the hill for?” Schultz, the quarterback, being almost in high school could say “Jesus Christ.” Truth be told he probably practiced saying “fuck” while riding his Schwinn home following the previous loss of seven to five touchdowns.

Though still early in October it was the eleventh game of the season between the “Park Lawn Projects” gang and the “Hampton Street” gang. It was Schultz of Hampton Street and his loyal followers against Pickard (pronounced Pic’-erd) and his “Park Lawners” from the housing projects. Each team consisted of a collection of scrub players from their territories with some regulars. Schultz could depend on Eddie for pass receiving and Chester Junior Fryjoff as a general utility and defensive player. Hoddinger, a former little kid, grew over the summer and threatened to become the Hampton Streeter’s main receiver. The Park Lawners under Pickard had always held off the Hamptoners with a collection of “toughs” and Keckritz’s running and receiving supported by Kern for short yardage and defense. Dicky functioned as team mascot and general nuisance.

Longing to play and belong, I watched from behind the goal line of bushes. Two things blocked an invitation. First, as a little kid transitioning from “darn it” to “damn it,” I couldn’t block and tackle with the effect of someone whose voice was changing. Second, I flunked “bicycle.” I rode a bike no one ever heard of, a Colson. Made by a baby-buggy company, it was painted in a rust brown and beige; it begged for dubious comparisons.

The rebuke on first encounter was immediate—“A Colson! Where do they make it? In Czechoslovakia?” “No man, in Russia.” “Hey no, in the Congo. They painted it with elephant turds. Neat bike, kid.” No amount of handle bar streamers or rear view mirrors helped. I parked behind the school so as not to taint the cluster of spokes, fenders and handlebars by the goal line.

The game progressed as I watched from the sidelines. Fourth down resulted in a punt, a normal event for Hampton street. But losing by one touchdown, not the usual three or four, gave a sense of hope. Pickard considered the new passing combination of Schultz to Hoddinger a threat to his undefeated season.

As Park Lawn took over the ball, Dicky, who had flunked twice and was floundering in fourth grade, took notice of my presence. As the only kid lower in the pecking order than Dicky, I deserved his special attention. “Hey you guys,” he blurted, scratching his crotch, “Isn’t that the kid with the funny bike? What’s it painted with?” Looking to his teammates for support, he found none, everyone seeming too interested in the game.

Finally Pickard said, “Yah, that’s the kid with the bike painted in elephant turds...Dicky, get over here and block.”

The game had progressed to what might be called the last quarter. One of two events could end it. First, Eddie's mother could call him for supper and since he owned the ball all would be over, or second, the street lights would come on signaling everyone's need to run home for supper.

Intent on belonging and somehow being part of the game I summoned my courage; I moved past the pyracanthas marking the goal line. Now on the playing field, I technically still wasn't on a team. All knew me to be a potential Hamptoner by reason of residence. I lived three houses from their namesake and a comfortable two blocks from Park Lawn's territory. I wanted to play and prayed for a miracle that was about to happen.

Keckritz streaked out for the bomb. Oil residuals from working at Schmitt's Standard Station made him glisten as he ran. You could almost see the effervescence of gasoline in his slip stream. Arching through the air, the perfectly thrown spiral slipped out of Keckritz's oily hands, slamming into Hoddinger's nose. As Hoddinger fell back, Keckritz caught the rebound and bolted up the slope to the goal. Rising to the top, his oil soaked shoes slid. Attempting to right himself, he released the ball in a fumble. It rolled to my feet!

On impulse I picked it up and headed for the cyclone fence, the Hampton goal. I easily outran my only pursuer, Dicky, whose bare belly protruding from under his sweatshirt became the foremost aspect of his anatomy on a dead run. "Touchdown!" I announced.

"That ain't no TD." Dicky insisted trying to grab the ball as I ran to give it to Schultz.

My TD was a side event for the moment. Everyone stood above Hoddinger who was bleeding profusely. A chorus of "Jeez's" and "holy smoke's" acknowledged his injury. Hoddinger seemed unperturbed. He let the blood flow on his jacket and wiped his nose with his sleeve before adjourning to the elm tree to wait out the bleeding.

A dilemma was created. If Hoddinger left and they didn't adopt me as a substitute the imbalance would end the game without resolution. And in a way, an eleven game winning streak would be snapped. If they accepted me the TD counted, tying the game. Pickard offered to let the TD count and have me substitute for Hoddinger. Schultz accepted, providing when Hoddinger came back, they could keep me. I was hardly a substitute for Hoddinger but this was the first tie this year and maybe...who knows. Pickard accepted probably thinking the street lights would go on before we'd get the ball.

Dicky taunted "You'll never even get the ball, we'll cream your asses."

"Shad up and get back for the kickoff," Pickard groused, "You should'a tackled him."

Schultz's kick arched high from the top of the hill bouncing through Keckritz's slippery pants and downing itself on the cyclone fence. Possession started the prerequisite ten giant steps from the fence.

There were never any earned first downs. Each team played four downs either punting or going for it on the fourth down. There were only three fundamental plays: the long bomb, the end run, and a flea flicker with double passing. The Park Lawner's had a fourth option. For short yardage they gave the ball to Kern. His widowed mother doted on him and he outweighed the biggest of us two to one. Kern favored Twinkies

but Clark Bars and Butterfingers could always be found stuffed in his pockets. He always wore cowboy boots and a cowboy shirt with "Gene Autry" embroidered above the pocket. A pair of undersize chaps that stopped just below the knees completed the outfit.

With supper approaching, Kern was becoming a non-entity in the game. Finding some crushed Twinkies he tried to suck cream off the cellophane while blocking for Pickard. The tactic proved effective, no one wanting Twinkie gunk all over them. I covered Dicky who was more intent on knocking me over than catching a pass. When Pickard passed, it hit him in the back of the head. "Jesus Christ, Dicky, turn around, you shithead," he muttered. To which Dicky replied he was held. A chorus of bullshits issued from all players with the exception of Kern who, retrieving a dropped piece of Twinkie, picked out the grass prior to inhalation.

The second down was a brilliant quadruple reverse by Keckritz without forward gain. Winded, he finally plunged forward dragging myself and Chester Junior Fryjoff. Schultz tackled him several yards later with us still clinging to his legs.

A disaster occurred on the next down, Dicky, who I covered, stepped into the pyracantha in order to relieve himself and see if he could knock berries or insects off the branches. With the hike of the ball he streaked from the bushes. Still dripping, he caught a pass just short of the goal. The tackle by Chester Junior Fryjoff left Park Lawn three yards from a touchdown.

The choice of a fourth down play brought smirks from everyone as Park Lawn came to the line. Kern, still dripping twinkies, tucked his half-eaten Clark Bar into the pocket on his chaps as he took the fullback position. Dicky would block; no longer dripping he nevertheless displayed streaks of wetness. The duo of Twinkie cream and urine stains presented a formidable offense.

My older cousin, wise in sports, told me. "If a big kid is coming at you and you can't tackle him, throw yourself between his legs and trip him." This became my strategy. Kern, gripping the ball, lurched toward the goal line, supported by blocking from oil-soaked Kechritz and Dicky. Dicky aimed for my head and I slipped under his arm. The fringed Gene Autry chaps flapping about Kern's knees became my target. I slipped off Kechritz's oiled jeans and wedged myself between Kern's legs. A moment of intense pain, a slow grinding feeling as the chap's metal studs slipped by my ribs and then a loss of wind. Kern's, not mine. I felt the momentum begin to shift. All bodies on the playing field were interlocked. All fell together. Like a frame house collapsing under hurricane winds, its mass lurched sideways in a twisting motion. All took credit for the tackle. Hoddinger had stopped bleeding. Schultz smiled. Pickard worried. We all smelled like Kern.

Hampton Street took possession of the ball. Careful plans required a long huddle. The first pass would be to me. Schultz quizzed my ability. I assured him my cousin who actually played for Pulaski High School raised me on bullet passes. He felt dubious but my testimony reassured him. Everyone would think Hoddinger's the target.

We lined up. Dicky once again threatened to knock my head off. Chester Junior Fryjoff blocked and Kern, holding a Butterfinger, rushed. Keckritz covered Eddie and Pickard covered Hoddinger. I raced off the line slipping past Dicky. Turning after six steps

I waited for the ball, a sharp bullet hitting me square in the chest...I dropped it. Schultz looked stunned. I hung my head nearly crying. All knew I had blown my only chance.

Dicky turned his butt toward me saying, "Kiss this."

Schultz said, "Don't even come back to the huddle kid. I thought you could play football." I stood on the scrimmage line not running on the next play, a pass to Hoddinger. He completed it for a run that went half the length of the field. Dicky, frustrated by the lack of action, knocked me down as Schultz looked on without concern.

Next down was another Hoddinger attempt which nearly got intercepted as Pickard and Dicky double covered him. I just sat at scrimmage where Dicky had blocked me.

As the fourth down began, I stood up. Turning towards Schultz who looked me in the eye, I said, "I'm going...the hell with you." As the ball was snapped, I ran towards the gate in the cyclone fence. Reaching it, I turned. The high spiral from Schultz zeroed in on the gate. The ball floated into my arms as my butt bounced off the fence. A touchdown!

Park Lawners stood with their mouths' open. Dicky yelled in a whisper, "It ain't fair, off sides." Pickard stood in silence realizing he had been taken in by a variation of his own trick. Kern started eating his last Clark Bar. The street lights went on...

For the rest of the season they called me "The Colson Kid." By Christmas, they just called me by my last name.

