**Chapter One**

**Pre-game and Kickoff**

Winter, spring, summer or fall, all I had to do was play ball.

And everyone seemed fine with this as the core of life‟s meaning. It was the wisdom of elders, settling my unease with how far info and impulse extended in every direction. Sport was all the light I needed to see by, the official sun my young planet could safely ellipt. It boiled down morality and how to get along to one manageable goal: the pursuit of the higher score!

I managed my little Cincinnati life well enough into high school, spurred to win the mind games of education by a nickel for every A, and to win admiration and a false sense of superiority from football, baseball, basketball, Monopoly, Risk, bedroom ball (pillow bat, sock ball), darts, chess, poker, and the mega-games: making Mom laugh with puns and defusing Dad with obedience, winning laughs from my peers and later on soft eyes from the budding girls. Through it all, the team sports of baseball, basketball and football were the mainstays of my life, the markers of my progress, the scoreboards of my value system.

Opponents (like charity and its opposites), began at home and ranged outward, starting with my own shortcomings needing the Confession box, through unsatisfactory teammates needing my holier-than-thou patience, to actual opponents, the other team, needing us to beat them silly. Their culture had differences we tended to mock but still had formed along the lines of our mutual sport. None of us had the slightest inkling of rivalry as a mode of evolution –we

just Olympiated for the thrilldance. We wrestled like Jacob with the angel, got wounded, and gimped off to meet limping Esau, the classic sibling rivalry ending with wrenching, empathic affection brightening our eyes.

Our rivalry with St. Ignatius High School began when my brother Tommy, star quarterback, transferred from its pricey house of blazers to our local haunt of stringties. A sensible move. He used to have to thumb home from practice, often not arriving until dark. Now he could enjoy dinner with his five arguing brothers and spluttering Dad whacking elbows off the table and glassy-eyed mom chanting no desert until you eat your greens which she herself would never touch. St. Ig‟s coach Babbelot called one night to guilt Dad about why their all-male Jesuit high school was better for Tommy‟s God-given soul and 60-yard throwing arm. But Dad (who was Cronus in an earlier life) stuck to his guns and wallet. Babbelot accused him of being lax in his fatherly task and Dad hung up with a sound like butting helmets and went back to laxly fathering again (Babbelot had that right anyway). So Tommy stayed on at St. Lawrence, where the teachers were not all Jesuits but nuns, parish priests and lay people – and, oh yeah: half the student bodies were so interestingly unmale. This was 1956 – Catholic co-ed was the wave of the future and St. Larry‟s was riding the tube.

After that call (as my mini-sixth-grade mind construed it), the shady ops of St. Ignatius began mustering to plan crusades against St. Lawrence. The next time our schools met, an air of ugly violence gave the beautiful autumn night an almost sickening excitement. The Bears had collected a maiming pool – three hundred to anyone who put Tommy in the E.R.

My big bad six-two brother broke from the first huddle, and sauntered to the line for the snap. He was so cool. Just a week earlier he‟d spent all his weed-pulling money on a pair of black pants with pink stripes down the sides. I couldn‟t believe how cool they were! My friends had to keep punching me to stop me from talking about their greatness.

Tommy gently put his hands on the center‟s tail and surveyed the defense with his noble squint. Then he crouched and barked the count, but the hike went through his legs to our second-team QB in the fullback slot. Tommy faked a sneak and laughed when the linebacker tackled him: “Where‟s your jock, Dog?” He then sprang up and tore downfield.

I was just a kid then, with the family privilege of watching the game on the sidelines. I could almost have reached and touched my hero as he chuffed into the end zone. There he jumped up in a clog of Bears for the long Hail Mary. Even in the roar of Friday-night highschool fans, I could hear their grunts and clash of equipment. Tommy‟s right shoulder shivered one defender and his forearm uppercut the thug at his throat. Then he was slanting forward in the air, his left hand floating out calmly to palm the spiraling ball, while his right hand jerked madly from the dog pack to stiff-arm a tackler mid-air. Then the guy beneath his legs heaved up and Tommy went ass over elbow, hitting the ground neck first. The fans‟ pubescent yowls changed at once to a more mature tone, rounded with awareness of our mortal coil: “Ohhhhhh!” It was a horrible pile-up – limbs akimbo and screams of pain you wouldn‟t wish on anyone – except, of course, them.

Someone was trying to unscrew his ankle, and a thumb sought his eye for the blatant evil of gouging. Then three more Bears ton-of-bricked on the parts of him still showing – in hopes of three hundred dollars, and better to hide the unnecessary roughness and indictable assault below

deck. Tommy felt someone spit in his face, and beefy hands clawing the ball from his hold. He tried to go foetal over the ball, but his legs were being torqued from their sockets and couldn‟t curl. And through it all: bone-chilling cries from some guy paralyzed by a collar-bone break – though no one knew that yet.

The refs were blowing their whistles repeatedly, peeling players off, yelling, “Play over! Stop moving! Back off! BACK OFF!!” – finally uncovering Tommy and Dog wrestling for the ball – Tommy holding the lion‟s share.

“Touchdown!” the ref yelled, flinging his hands to the sky – and all of us screamed in uninhibited abandon.

How often in life is expression that free? Not often enough!

The trainers ran onto the field. Five minutes later, an E.R. van bumped onto the stubble and ate the poor paralyzed goon.

Tommy had a twisted ankle and back spasms. Somber grown-ups hopped him to the school bus, where he waited out the rest of the game. He refused to go to the E.R.

After the game, Ignatius fans surrounded and pounded the bus. Tommy sat there chewing aspirin as they yelled things at him they‟d been taught were sins against the fifth and sixth commandments. (“Thou shalt not kill” barred believers from saying “killing” things like “We know where you live, Toad!” And “Thou shall not commit adultery” implied that healthy sexual circumspection required dropping words of sexual content from one‟s public speech, words such as “queer,” “dick” and “tittywomp.” And since (a) scatology evoked certain orifices; and whereas (b) some of aforesaid orifices were connected to reproductive (read “sexual”) places,

Commandment #6 (in the Catholic numbering system) also enjoined us to maintain our sanctity by not calling anyone a “shithead piss cunt asshole” or variants.)

Truth be told, we lost that game, 21-10. (We were, after all, a pussy co-ed school.) But the fires of archrivalry were stoked to the ominous skies.

Tommy went on to win a scholarship to a big football college, but the lure of intoxicants, I suspect, tempered the gung-ho he needed to stay on the team. (A dubious perk in playing “Where‟s Dad?” all your life is snooping long and hard in the self-med cabinet.) Don‟t know what became of the paralyzed pile-up boy, but as Christians we wish him the best of all outcomes, even if that just means a wheelchair with special levers. What I do know is that Coach Babbelot seethed and grew loud with vows of revenge on St. Lawrence and any son of my father.

Such as me.

So seven years later, 1963, last game of my last season on the high school gridiron, playing our archrival, the St. Ignatius Bears, for the GCL (Greater Catholic League) championship (this, like Hamlet, is based on a true story), we, the St. Lawrence Rockets, lost the toss and lined up to kick.

Reliable sources said the maiming pool for me was four hundred. The cost of living had gone up.

My dad was filming the game (official team cameraman) from the “press tower” (rickety scaffold on the sidelines). Babbelot (father-figure loads easier to loathe at this point in my life) paced before his bench like a robot with a screw loose, glaring at me as I fussed to tilt the ball just right on the tee, laces facing them. Their team wore black with yellow lettering, about the

coolest colors any scary team could wear. We had green with white (Give me an H! and an O! and a H-U-M!).

But at least we had female cheerleaders, and a pretty good bunch, too. Ignatius just had peppy guys with good posture and megaphones.

I stepped off seven strides from the tee. Turned round and stared at the spot one-fourth from the bottom of the ball where I‟d aim my kicking toes.

My pre-game nausea was worse than usual, and usually it was toxic. For some reason the threat of brutal, possibly crippling contact made me queasy. Call me weird. I didn‟t get this stomachy before a baseball or basketball game, but football‟s de rigueur bone-bruising primed my pump with the sump waters of dread. I knew from experience I‟d feel dimensions better after the first jarring shocks, when you learned you could take it and even enjoy it (the only common gender trait biologists have found in every living species is that adolescent males like rowdy physical contact). But today, in the thirty-degree cold under a milky Sunday sky, facing a ton of bully-big hit-men with me in their sights, I suffered the fear that I‟d throw up and fart diarrhea as soon as the whistle blew.

But the whistle blows and I don‟t! Something bigger takes over.

The game.

The crowd begins a crescendoing “Ahhhhh” as I lope toward the ball, faster and faster, eyes glued to kickspot. I try to land my left foot by the ball and keep my head down as I kick, but my left foot doesn‟t land forward enough. I kick the ball dead center but “run through it,” making a wobbly line-drive with fizz. The crowd explodes. Down-and-dirty excitement has struck, shimmering the air.

Their three biggest front guys converge on me. I veer right and they follow. Tom and Jerry – not the mice, the twins to my right at kickoff – slice into the gap those big guys leave. This is the play our coach set up when we heard of their plan to cripple me ASAP. I can hear one goomba straining behind me, yelling “You are dead, Blackie! Dead!!” The action of the play is now mayhemming way on the other side. Their speedy little score-queen Riser bobbled my knuckleball kick, but now is doing his can‟t-catch-me cha-cha, skittering five yards back to gain one yard forward; then back again, and so on. We studied his yo-yo ballet all week on films, and our guys now are narrowing his dance floor with practiced art.

Not me – I‟m too far from the play to get involved, still being chased by a Bear. Screw this! I turn on a dime, run right at him (fat surprised face), plane my arm and clothesline him. I “run through” his neck.

Totally flaggable, a crime as well on the field of life. He lifts off and whomps down flat on his back, choking and gasping. The refs are far off by the roiling green mass pulling Riser down. Distant whistles end the play.

But my evil has not gone unseen – it happened in front of Ignatius‟s bench! Babbelot is screaming for the refs to come over so he can tell on me. I scream back in reflected berserkery: “Jesus, coach – siccing your goons on me, calling for blood? Why don‟t you die soon in mental torment with no one caring!”

I‟m pretty pumped up by my attempted murder.

The trainer removes the wheezer‟s helmet, grabs the front of his pants and hefts his stomach mound up and down, helping him get his breath back. I slink away and a kind of prayer stirs up from my muddy depths: Dear God, please let him be hurt only as much as is fit for his

sinful intentions, and help me keep from yodeling at still being upright. And forgive my bile to the elder over there now telling the ref I should be spayed. Forgive also my use of disproportionate force which I know from Just War Theory is immoral, like my dad belting me five times a week for playing games with my brother past our 7:30 bedtime. And may this not foul my chances of becoming a priest like my brother Paul whose kindness I admire even more than Tommy‘s coolness.

One truly fucked-up Catholic jock.