



(from Chapter 11)

(Rick narrates)

The sun's been down for a couple of hours, now. We got out a camp tarp that we set on the ground around the side of the fire circle where the smoke tends to blow the least. After dinner, we burned our paper plates in the fire, and Alex offered to clean the pots Bob cooked in. She also washed the plastic forks. Bob put everything away, except the three buckets, which we filled with water over at the creek so we can put out the fire later. Had a joint after dinner, too, as we digested.

Now we're just sitting around, drinking water from our five-gallon collapsible plastic jug in our plastic cups. Helps to cut all the salt in our dinner. I get up off of the tarp and take my penlight over to the car. "One more joint before we call it a night?"

"Yeah, that sounds good, Rick," Harv agrees.

As I head over to the car, Alex inquires, "So who exactly are you guys? I mean, what's your story? You're out here, just kinduh drivin' around, livin' outdoors. I mean, I can tell you're friends an' all, but how?"

"Well, Alexandra, my dear. Excuse me, Alexis." Harv continues in grand fashion, gesticulating exaggeratedly as he goes, "The gentleman heading over to the car to retrieve more medicinal herbs for us, is none other than rammin' Rick Shifflet, tight end extraordinaire for the John Letcher High Rebels, class of seventy-nine. He could run over anybody an' open up a mean hole for a running back to scoot through. Gave it all up, though, to be a C P A. Coulduh played at the next level, just not competitive D one."

"I'm sorry. Did you say the John Letcher Rebels?"

"Yes, a most unfortunate name. Particularly for an institution with a principal bearing a striking resemblance to Aqualung. Don't think many haven't had a field day with that name over the years. The problem, you see, is that in Virginia we're just taking a temporary respite from the Civil War. We decided, in eighteen sixty-five, that strategically it made sense to lull the North into a false sense of security that they had won the war. See, we keep the symbols alive, so that the cause survives. Then one day, we'll turn the tide in the War of Northern Aggression."

"That's not quite what they teach in history in Wyomin'."

"God damn Greater New England Puritan bastards! Out filling your minds with drivel, like the Civil War settled something. Everyone knows the South will rise again. Well, at least everyone in the South with no sense whatsoever. Anyway, the aforementioned Letch, uh, Mr. Letcher, was the governor of Virginia during the Civil War. What better name to give a high school right outside Washington, DC, than the name of a traitorous politician, and then give 'em a Rebel for a mascot, just to drive home the point of eternal struggle. But I digress."

"Yeah, Harv. You kinduh do. Have a hit," I say, as I hand him the lit joint. He obliges, then passes the joint along. It makes its rounds as we continue. "So, Alex, the gentleman who just regaled you with an impromptu history lesson is none other than Mortimer, don't call me Mort, David Harv Weinberg, always the smartest kid in the class, but never the smartest kid at his dinner table."

"Oh, so now you're askin' for it," Harv says to me playfully. We're having a good time.

"Mort came to be a Letch as a freshman. Through a spectacular fall from grace, he had to withdraw from the rather exclusive Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC, and go slumming with

the likes of Bob an' me in the Fairfax County public schools, a victim of that all-too-common social phenomenon known as divorce."

"Easy, buddy."

"I'm done there for now. Anyway, before school begins, we're all going out for the freshman football team, an' a kid named Randy Stipes gets ahold a Mortimer here's name, an' starts bustin' on him for it. He got about two or three cracks in before blood exploded out of his nose at the instigation of a fist, belonging not to Mortimer apparently, but to Harv, as he announced he was thence forward to be known, because, he would, in fact, eventually be attending college at Harvard. There was then general agreement among the players that, in fact, Harv was his name, not Mortimer.

"And so a legend was born. A star ascending to ever higher heights. Harv excelled in every way. Four point oh, sixteen hundred S A T, President of the National Honor Society, science fair winner, all district wide receiver, and, of course, admitted to Harvard at the end of it all, where he was an all Ivy wide receiver and academic All-American. Am I leaving anything out?"

Just before a snort issues from Bob trying to hold in a hit off the joint, he chimes in, "Just that he's damn pretty, too." But he can't pull it off, as we all laugh at Harv's expense, and the smoke from Bob's hit comes exploding out of his nose and mouth.

"Ha, ha, very funny. Well, the last member of our troupe is master Robert Kenneth, Bob, Johnson. A very industrious fellow. Always enjoyed tinkering and building things. His dad was an engineer. And now Bob's an engineer. Apparently a damn good one, because he got a bunch a crap in Standing Bear's barn to run. Anyway, Bob also played ball with us in high school. He was a safety. He could lay wood on you with the best of 'em. Just needed another thirty pounds of muscle to be really dangerous at his position."

"Jeez, Harv, don't hold back."

"Really, Bob? You want me to go on?"

"No. That's OK."

"What more is there?" Alex asks.

"Well, you might notice that both Rick an' I have football nicknames."

"Harv." I can see Bob getting a little antsy, because he knows what's coming.

"I mean, I essentially gave myself my football nickname."

"Harv." Bob says it a little louder this time.

"And you can certainly see where rammin' Rick comes from on the football field. I mean, just look at what a fine physical specimen he is."

"HARV."

"But Bob, it took a couple of years to finally get his nickname down."

"Dammit, Harv. Enough!"

"Stump!"

"Shit!" Bob gets up and starts poking the fire.

Alex looks perplexed, "What's so bad about that? I get Stump. You can't move him. He's a good tackler, right?"

Harv and I both snicker. Bob looks away and pokes at the fire. Harv picks back up, "Well, that might work if in fact he played that way. But most of his hits, strong though they were, were based on great angles and capitalizing on his brains, not his brawn."

"Then I don't get it."

"Fuck you, Harv. You guys put out the god damn fire. I'll see you in the morning."

"Oh, Bob, come on, man. Lighten up. Don't take everything so god damn serious."

"I'll say this one time, Harv, an' then I'm goin' to bed. It's easy to joke when you aren't the butt of it. But I've never liked that nickname. An' you know why. You can be a real mean bastard, sometimes, y'know?" And with that, Bob lays down the poker and goes over to the trees to pee.

"Bob. Hey, Bob. Come on, man. Look, I'm sorry. Come on back over an' have a seat."

But Bob doesn't come back. Eventually we hear the zipper on his tent go up. Alex seems to have the good sense not to push things any further. We sit in silence for a bit and watch the fire burn down. Eventually Alex excuses herself to go pee. As she walks over into the woods, Harv and I unzip and pee on the fire. Waste not, you know. We finish the fire off with the buckets of water, so that it's drowned real good.

"Night, Harv."

"Night, Rick. I'll see you tomorrow."