Contest

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Abstract

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English 3

Tilden sprinted the length of the field. At the end of it stood Rock holding a stopwatch, which he clicked as Tilden passed. Rock looked at it as Tilden walked back to him.

“Ten flat. And you ain’t even breathing hard.” He shook his head.

Tilden shrugged.

Rock looked at him. “How can you be so casual?”

“What do you mean?”

“How about your time, man. I mean, you could be starting on the football team tomorrow if you went out today. Til, you could be first string you are so good, man.”

Tilden frowned. He looked out past the stands of the football field, across the cornfields and wheatfields bordering his high school. The wheat looked like a soft brush, while the corn stood bristly and straight. It was kind of a nice contrast, he thought.

Tilden turned back to Rock. He really didn’t know Rock very well. Rock was called Rock partly because he was solid, brick wall solid, and partly because his last name was Quarry. His first name was really Marvin, but Rock had adopted his nickname long ago of his own accord, and no one called him that anymore. At least not to his face. Rock was also on the football team, and right now its unofficial recruiter.

Okay. Maybe I could. But you know the coach wouldn’t let me just walk on and start right away, not after the other guys have been working for weeks now.”

“Nope, the coach would.” Rock said. “Til, the coach has seen you around. He knows how good you are. All you have to do is show up.”

“But what about the other guys, Rock? Even if it was that easy, they wouldn’t think it was fair.”

“Who said anything about fair? Fair is for history books. Look, would you show up if I asked you to?” Rock knew Tilden
would, but that'd be the only reason he would—because Rock had asked him to.

Tilden was an easy-going type. He didn't stand out in a crowd and never would. He stayed in the background, watching a lot. He was quiet most of the time, and Rock never would have noticed him except Tilden could run, throw, jump, even square dance better than any kid in their gym class.

"Okay, Rock. I'll come if you want." Tilden looked out on the fields again, where the sun was beginning to set lazily on the top of the red horizon. It was warm for early fall, but the grass still shivered as a light breeze rippled over it. Scents and sounds of the farms around rode in on the wind. Tilden listened. It might be nice to be out here every afternoon for practice. "Sure, Rock."

*****

The next night at practice Tilden heard the sounds of mass hitting mass, and the grunts of effort. The smells were of sweat, the tastes of salt. There wasn't time for sightseeing.

Ted Beard watched his team go through their warm-up drills. He was a stumpy man—a trunk for a trunk, two trunks for legs. Like Rock, he was saddled with a surname that lent itself to his nickname: Blue. Unlike Rock, his alias was unknown to him. He never raised his voice, and he never repeated himself. He was hard. He was a football coach.

Beard watched Tilden go through quickness drills with a precision of movement. His cuts were clean and sharp, his timing so exact he never wasted a second or a gesture. He had to be the nearest thing to a natural athlete Beard had ever seen. His talent and moves were things a coach came along once in a lifetime, if he prayed hard. And Tilden didn't even seem winded. He was keeping up with kids who'd been practicing for three weeks.


Tilden jogged over. "Yes, sir?"

"You're doing fine, son. I just was going to ask you, do you lift weights, work out or anything, usually?"

"No, sir."
“Live on a farm?”
“No, I live in town here.”
“Oh. Do you do anything to keep in shape?” Beard wondered why he suddenly felt embarrassed asking this kid questions.

Tilden thought a moment. “I like to walk sometimes. Down to the river. And sometimes I run.”
“You jog?”
“No, sometimes I just start to run. Because I feel like it.”
“Well, fine, Nichols, fine.” Beard glanced away from the boy. “Move, let’s go,” he almost shouted.

Tilden guessed he was dismissed and walked back over to join the group. Beard brushed at a twig with his toe. He began to wonder if he should feel fortunate not having a kid like Tilden around.

*****

Rock peeled off a pasty jersey and sat down. “Hey, Til.”

Tilden looked up from where he was unlacing his shoes. Half the guys were in the showers and Tilden was still messing with his shoes. Rock wondered how he got away with being so quick on the field. “Sore, buddy?”

Tilden straightened. “Yeah, I guess a little.”


“And you don’t mind?” Tilden wondered what he was in for.

“Sure. But that’s just football.” He grabbed a towel as a stack went by. “So what are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing.”

“Great. There’s a party down by the river. Want to check it out?”

Tilden wondered if Rock ever said anything that wasn’t a cliche. “I suppose,” he said.

The party was like any other kegger in the fall. The kids stood around the small fire, talking and holding their Dixie cups of beer. A few would wade in the stream later on for kicks, and their laughter would come back to the group. Between the trees came down the moonlight, casting the mood for them. It was getting chilly out.
Tilden and Rock were fashionably late, by Rock's standards. The group around the fire greeted them as the two went over to the keg and drew a beer.

"Hey, Til." Rock had to say something to somebody. "Did you see who's here? Janis Wright. Looking good." Rock the Jock was talking.

Tilden tipped his cup under the tapper. "Which one?" he asked.

"You know. The Cheerleader." She had to be. "She lives just up the street from you."

"Oh, yeah. I think I know." Tilden tried to pick her out. "So go talk to her," he suggested.

"Are you kidding, man? You don't just walk up there." Tilden wondered where Rock got his rules. "Come on."

They drifted from group to group, finally graduating to the large circle around the fire. Each boy held his beer with one hand and shoved the other into his pants' pocket. Rock was posed. Tilden was thinking.

The fire snapped at the darkness, lighting the young faces around it. The eyes in them stared at the fire's center, even as the kids talked.

"Hi, Rocky." Janis came across. Tilden was closest to her.

"Hi, there, Janis." Rock's voice was oh so casual. "Do you know Tilden here?"

She knew him. A guy like Tilden wasn't going to go unnoticed by Janis. "Yeah, but I don't think I've ever talked to you much."

"I'm sorry," Tilden said. Then he wondered what he was apologizing for.

"I hear you're out for football now, Tilden."

"Yeah, I started what? Monday? This is Thursday, right?"

"Are you suiting for the game Saturday night?"

"Tilden's tailback." Rock was being Buddy, but not so Buddy he was going to tell Janis, Tilden was the tailback. Starting tailback in one easy week.

"I can't wait. We got new sweaters, and this year we got the big letters, not those little ones, with the megaphones across them with our names."

"What for?" Tilden asked.
“For cheerleading.” Janis thought he was good-looking all right, but she didn’t know if he was really that out of it or just putting her on. She had time to find out. With her, getting any guy was just a matter of time.

“Janis, did you go to American Lit today?” Rock knew she had. He knew every move she made.

“Yeah.”

Rock snickered. “I ditched it. I couldn’t hack sitting there listening to Bissel go on about whoever it was today.”

“Emerson.”

“So she started on someone new.”

“We’ve been on Emerson for a week,” said Tilden.

Rock looked at Tilden, and then shrugged. “How would I know? Emerson.” He rolled his eyes and looked at Janis.

“I kind of like Emerson.” Tilden wrinkled his forehead and looked at Rock.

“Yeah? What do you mean?”

Tilden’s eyes widened against the fire. He seemed a little reluctant to talk. “Well, I like what he has to say about being individual. And about using your intuition to think.”

“So?” Janis suddenly wanted to know what Tilden Nichols was all about.

Tilden shrugged uncomfortably. “So if you think things out for yourself, on your own, you’ll come to certain basic conclusions. Ones that are universally true or right for everybody.”

“Hold it,” Janis said. “Just how do you know you’ve come to the ‘right’ conclusions?”

“ ‘Trust thyself.'” Tilden smiled slightly, sheepishly. “That’s what Emerson says. What bothers me is that most people don’t even get as far as coming to the wrong conclusions. They just kind of go along and never know that there’s something deeper.”

“And you do,” said Janis, something vicious about her now. “You do, and you’re going to go out tomorrow and do right, even when everyone else is supposedly doing wrong.”

Tilden looked up, a little shocked.

Rock belched. “Oh. ‘scuse me.” He glanced around the circle. “Anybody want another brew?”

****
Tilden looked up as his mother stopped by his door. She was putting away towels. “Studying?” she asked.
“Really just reading.”
She came in. “Oh? What?”
“An essay. I guess it is for my literature class.” He closed the book and met his mother’s eyes. “Sorry I was late for dinner again tonight.”
She sat down on the bed. “I know your practice keeps you late.” She smiled an understanding smile. At least Tilden knew that’s what she wanted him to think.
“Mom, what’s wrong?” Both Tilden’s mother and father were quite a bit older and Tilden had a feeling for the way they loved him. He was very careful about that—he always wanted them to think the best of him.
She laughed. “I guess I was going to ask you the same thing.”
Tilden didn’t look at her. “Does it seem like something’s wrong with me?”
“No, not really wrong. I just wonder what you’re thinking.” She paused and added, “If you’re thinking.”
He was silent.

****
Tilden came off the field after running for his second touchdown in the game. He watched the scoreboard record six more points, and he wondered what was wrong with himself. He wasn’t winded, but he felt tired.
“Fine run, kid. Good job.” Beard said with his eyes on the field, his arms crossed, his stance wide.
Rock ran over, did a little dance, and jumped on Tilden. “I don’t believe it, man.” He thudded Tilden’s shoulder pads. “All right.”
“Hey whaddya say, hey whaddya say. Say go, get together go, go,” yelled Janis, her pert bottom bouncing, her movements mechanically precise.
Tilden studied the crowd. The night made their white faces stand out like separate moons. Every mouth was open, chanting in unison, every heart set on a victory.
Tilden knew his parents were out there somewhere in the green and gold stands watching him. The Pep Club was selling
buttons and Tilden had bought one for his mother. But after seeing her face when he was leaving for the game, he couldn't really give it to her wholeheartedly.

It was third down. The defense was doing a great job. They came off the line quick and clean, hitting hard. Fourth down. Tilden saw Rock get up slowly, shaking his head. He started off in one direction, turned, and came off the field. Tilden took his arm. "Are you okay?"

Rock gazed at him.

"I'm getting the coach," Tilden turned.

"No." Rock's eyes cleared. "I'm all right."

"No you're not. I'll go get Coach."

"No, man." Rock gripped Tilden's arm now. "Just cool it." Rock's eyes met Tilden's. "I don't want to get sidelined now. I can't."

Tilden shook off Rock's grip, but he didn't move to get Beard. The specialty team came off the field and he turned back in to play. Luckily—it almost seemed to Tilden—the gun sounded and the game was over.

Tilden took off his helmet and walked slowly back to the locker room. People passed him, patting him on the back. He ignored them. He hadn't put much into this game. He didn't want their admiration, their small tokens of appreciation for a chore well done.

"Tilden."

Tilden turned as his father caught up to him. "Fine game, son." He put an arm around Tilden's shoulder.

"Where's Mom?"

"She didn't come, Tilden." He looked at his son's quiet profile. "She was going to but—I think you better talk to her about it."

"Why?"

"Well, she has a feeling, I guess you'd say, that you don't really enjoy what you're doing. She said she couldn't come."

He paused. "She couldn't watch you play when she didn't think you wanted to."

"I don't—dislike playing, Dad."

"No, I know that. I guess she feels you're doing what is expected of you, rather than doing it because you believe in what you're doing."
“Do any of them, Dad?” Tilden asked suddenly. “Do any of them really believe in football?” He brushed a tear of perspiration from where it was rolling down his cheek.

“What about you, Dad? Do you think like Mom?” He looked into his father’s face.

His eyes committed nothing. “I’m proud of you whatever you do, Tilden.”

Tilden nodded.

*****

The locker room was hot and humid as a summer’s day. The guys joked and horsed around, snapping their towels as they strutted to the showers. Rock, apparently making a fast recovery, was in the middle of it all. He caught sight of Tilden.

“Hey, Til. Where are you going for pizza?” Janis had turned him down, and he wondered if she had a date with Tilden. Somehow he didn’t think so, though.

“What? Oh, I think I’ll go on home,” Tilden said. “I think I better. Where’s the coach? Hey, Murph, have you seen Coach?” He asked one guy as he passed.

“Nope. Could be outside yet.”

Tilden went out and looked around. Janis was there. She ran and hugged Tilden. “We won, we won,” she repeated in the same sing-song way that she cheered. “Great game, Tilden.”

“Thanks.”

“You were great. That time you just completely faked out that one guy. He was right there.” She was enjoying her recap of the game. “You just faked him and you were gone. Touchdown!”

Tilden looked down at her. “Which one?”

Janis stared back. Was he being smug, or had he actually forgotten which touchdown? Tilden’s face was absent. Janis thought that it seemed to have that expression a lot, like he was never really in the concrete world. Or at least thinking that way. Janis was not dumb. She understood how Tilden was, even if she couldn’t understand why.

“Janis, have you seen Coach Beard?”

“Yeah, I think he’s over there.” She pointed. “We’ll see ya, okay, Tilden?”
“Sure.” He walked away as she watched. He had the walk of an athlete. But not of a jock.

Beard was going over the stats as Tilden came up behind him. “Coach, can I talk to you?”

He turned and saw who it was. “Sure, Tilden.”

They started off in the direction of the football field. It was deserted now, and as they walked towards it the huge floodlights went off one by one—actually six by six, on one switch—until all that shone was a lone light on the sidelines that was always left on.

“Sir, I don’t think I’ll be at practice next week. I don’t think I want to play.”

Beard wasn’t surprised, and he didn’t argue. But he was still a coach. “Well, son, you know you could get a good scholarship in a couple of years, go to a good school, get a fine education, if you played ball.”

“I couldn’t do that, sir.”

“Sure, I know.” Beard stopped and the glow from the light fell on his face. Not many kids Tilden’s age could make the choice Tilden was making. He doubted if many even knew there was actually a choice. Beard hesitated, wanting to say something. “You’re a fine athlete, Tilden,” he finally said.

“Thank you. I’m glad you think so. And I’m sorry, I guess, to let you down like this.”

Tilden kept walking towards the field, towards the light, and Beard wondered if Tilden really was glad, or sorry, or if he cared at all what his effect was on the world.

He turned his face to the darkness again, back towards the school.