

*When closeted teen Max Sparks inherits his grandpa's NFL franchise, he is thrust upon the national stage, suddenly forced to run a team, navigate classmates, social media, skeptical players, hard core fans, and discover himself, and love.*

## **Ready...Set...Pride!**

By Truscott Jones

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A photograph of a hallway with a large window and an exit sign. The text 'READY SET PRIDE' is overlaid on the image. 'READY' is in white, 'SET' is in blue, and 'PRIDE' is in a rainbow gradient. The hallway has a carpeted floor with a circular pattern and a metal grate on the wall.

READY  
SET  
PRIDE

Truscott Jones

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# One

Class presentations sometimes felt like Russian roulette: what was the teacher's mood; how well did the student right before you do; did you really understand the project in the first place? This particular one was less terrifying than usual. It wasn't a group assignment, requiring reliance on the under-qualified or unprepared. And it wasn't a fact-checkable spewing of the essentials about, say, the War of 1812, or the bonding properties of Carbon.

Nope. This was a Mrs. Heather Harline, feel-good, reveal your inner essence, Sixth Period Introduction to Sociology original:

*In an oral presentation of no less than three minutes, and no more than five minutes, please describe the individual (only one) from your life, past and/or present, who has contributed the most to your personal growth. Be sure to include examples, details and specifics sufficient to explain and validate your selection.*

Mrs. Harline was actually one of the more popular teachers at Shirley Chisholm Senior High, and her Sociology offering was considered an easy "A" for those who cared, and almost impossible to fail for those who didn't. Which was part of the problem – it attracted the whole gamut of the high school hierarchy: girls, guys, honor rollers to stoners, jocks to thespians, band geeks, homecoming queens, and everyone in between.

So, when Mrs. Harline called out "Max, you're up," he stood from his desk without abject terror, but, still .... There remained the whole peer judgment thing, and he was, however indirectly, about to reveal a tiny glimpse of his inner being. Definitely not the most important parts – God, he would *never* do that. To Megan, yes. Gideon, of course. They were his best friends, his only friends if you gave that word a

reasonably legitimate definition. But to tell a whole class, *The Public*, something real about who he was? For the circumspect Max, that was a leap. Yet this would draw back the curtain more than ever before.

He walked his index cards to the podium next to Mrs. Harline's desk, soaking in her pleasant, reassuring gaze as he covered the few steps from the front row (always the front row; better for ignoring your classmates' antics behind you, and what you didn't know didn't really happen, right?). He laid his notes on the creviced, spotted wood laminate top, etched with initials of long-gone alumni, random designs, and even a couple of asterisk-disguised curse words, and busied himself rearranging the cards. Stalling, really, as there were only four of them.

Max took in the room. His opening lines were memorized because he fully anticipated the distraction of what he now saw: 23 teen bodies spread amongst five rows of six mismatched desks each, most eyes tunneling into him, some eager to grab a morsel they could laugh about later, some curious to see how his weirdness compared to theirs, others challenging him to alleviate their boredom, and perhaps worst of all, the ones who confirmed his irrelevance with posture or expressions that screamed, "I couldn't care less what you have to say."

Finally, knowing the quickest way to beat water's chill was to dive into the deep end, Max took a breath, and began.

*There have been a lot of people I have looked up to in my life so far. Some of them are famous, some of them are super good at what they do, and a lot of them are just, well, really interesting. This project said we were supposed to pick the one...*

Here, playing to the Grader-in-Chief, he peered down at his top card and, quoting her, read,

*... “who has contributed the most to your personal growth.” When I thought about what that means, none of the big, famous names seemed right. Even though I knew it would sound kinda corny, I kept thinking about the same person. My Grandma Jocelyn.*

Not surprisingly, at least half of the girls smiled. Also not surprising were the eye rolls and snickers from most of the guys.

*We all love our grandparents. I know that’s not what we are supposed to be talking about. But when I think about “personal growth,” what makes me different than when I was in First Grade, or even a freshman here at Chisholm, a lot of it is, like ... failing. Messing stuff up and then figuring out how to do it better. I don’t mean how to do better at Algebra or Spanish. I mean how to be a better person.*

Up until this point, Max had managed to avoid looking directly at anyone, diffusing his vision so that the audience was a single, indistinguishable blob. Now, though, he settled on Gideon in the seat next to his empty one. Founding member, along with Megan, of their Treble Trouble private support group, Gi sat with his elbows on his desk, chin resting upon his interlaced hands, a trace of a smile igniting the prominently chiseled features of his proud Nigerian face. Not a mocking grin, but a subtle acknowledgement that he, alone in the room, knew where this was going. Gideon had met Jocelyn on a couple of occasions. He knew Max’s grandmother much better, however, through seven years of stories and innocuous mentions, all of which added up to a pretty admiring portrait.

Max plunged ahead, feeling bolstered by Gideon’s silent support.

*So how does Grandma Jocelyn get picked? How is she the one who contributed most to my growth? She's not a parent who raised me and I see every single day. In fact, I really only see her about once a month. Probably that's why Mom and Dad aren't my pick. They're too busy taking care of every little thing. My food, my clothes, where I live, my crappy car ...*

Even Mrs. Harline had to smile at that one. Max had considered using “shitty,” maybe the daring and edge of it gaining a few fans and boosting his reputation. Too risky, though. She wouldn't have shut him down, but would have docked points. Turns out he didn't need it. Some of the *too cool* guys laughed at his poor excuse for transportation anyway.

*They are definitely important and great and everything, and I wouldn't be who I am without them for sure. It's just, I don't know, maybe they are more a part of me than impacting me, if that makes any sense.*

*I also thought about our teachers. I mean, they literally instruct us for an hour a day, five times a week.*

He had thought really hard about this line. Even the slightest hint of sucking up could do great damage with everyone he cared to impress. Teachers as a general rule were not the enemy, especially one as well-liked as Mrs. Harline. Yet, they were still “them.” Brown-nosing put you a big step outside of your own tribe, and could get you ex-communicated altogether.

*To me, that's not what affecting you as a person means. Yeah, you have to learn a lot of stuff to be successful. And, some of our teachers*

*are really there for us if we need them. It's just ... I don't know ... for me, anyway, contributing to personal growth is more about challenging who you are than anything else.*

*I guess that's also why I didn't go with a famous singer or sports person or politician or anything. They might, you know, do something amazing or really impressive, or I might even learn something from them, like don't do drugs or anyone can achieve something if they really work hard. Does that really influence who I am?*

Max was feeling good. Most everyone was looking at him, and not with the usual disdain or, more common, disregard. He was telling a pretty decent story, and he was almost done – all the way to the easy part, the part where he just said why he loved Jocelyn. He hadn't used his index cards in a while, and didn't need to anymore.

*The thing is, the real reason is, Grandma Jocelyn has always been a safe place. She's a great listener, super smart, and very honest, someone who doesn't look to criticize everything or point out everyone else's mistakes. But she keeps it real, because she doesn't tell me what she thinks I want to hear. She also doesn't spell out what I'm supposed to do.*

*Like this one time when I was in Sixth grade, I mean it's not a big thing, but in P.E., Coach said we were going to do basketball for a couple of weeks. Every day at the beginning of class we all had to line up and shoot baskets. You got one shot, and then went to the back of the line and kept moving up until it was your turn again.*



*Standing in that line was one of the worst experiences ever for me, because when I got to the front, I knew what would happen. It was embarrassing. I was terrible. The ball felt like it was bigger than I was, and when I threw it, the stupid thing never once made it to the basket – not even close.*

In the third row, Dirk Duggan's face burst into glee, and he leaned over to Ronnie Green and snarled, "He's actually telling a story about what a pussy he is!" low enough to be a whisper, but with enough volume for everyone with young ears to hear – everyone, that is, but Mrs. Harline.

They convulsed with giggles, which spread in a concentric wave to most of the class, drawing a disapproving frown from the teacher. But it was all fine with Max. In fact, he had pretty much expected it, planned it. For the one person most noticeably not laughing was six-foot-six Danny Merchant. With the frame of a 25-year-old, and a crew cut which made him appear even older, Danny was a hardwood legend at Chisholm High, a five-star guard being recruited by the likes of Kansas and Georgetown. He never spoke unless called upon, not because he was stupid, but, oddly for a budding superstar, because he didn't like the attention. Danny was calm and expressionless, whether running down the court or gliding down the hallways like the tall mast of a majestic schooner.

No, Danny wasn't laughing. Max, using his peripheral vision so as not to be obvious, caught Danny ever so slightly straighten in his chair, wrinkles forming around a jaw which he set determinedly. His face, sun-kissed from hours on the crappy outdoor courts where he preferred to practice, alone, betrayed not even the slightest flush. He was intent because this story, the one Max was sharing with the class, was about him, too.

*Grandma J visited our house the night after our first day of basketball, and she knew I was upset. She always knew. I said I didn't want to talk about it – she's really into sports and all, and this was all kinda humiliating. I told her after a while – she always got me to talk – and like I was saying before, she didn't sugar-coat anything. She thought for a minute, and looking at me all serious, said, "Well, how can you fix it?"*

*At first, I thought, "What a dumb question. If I knew how to fix it, I would." Then I realized, my whole thing is how ashamed I am. I haven't even considered doing anything about it.*

*She asked me, "Who's the best free-throw shooter in your class?" Once I figured out what she meant by "free-throw," I told her.*

Danny sat up even straighter. His eyes narrowed. Max plowed ahead.

*"Hmmm," she said. "Is he a decent person?"*

*I told her I didn't know, and she asked me why not. And then I figured out where she was going. And to me, it was like, "No way! No way I'm going up to this guy to get laughed at. I'm not going to make things worse."*

*But after a while, even as a dumb 12-year-old, a light bulb went off. Grandma didn't push me. She didn't have to.*

*The next day it was, literally, like one of the hardest things I ever did, but I asked him if he could teach me. And it ended up he was a decent person. And a good coach. We went to a court off*

*campus where no one could make fun of how terrible I was, and he showed me the basic stuff.*

*I was never any good, and I still can't play basketball. But I wasn't as awful, and I survived P.E. And it was all because Grandma made me think through my problems, how to find which way to go and how to make choices.*

Max had cut it close. He stole another furtive glimpse of Danny. Fact was, they probably hadn't spoken more than 20 words in the six years since, and those were assignment related – reading his reaction would be pure speculation. Nonetheless, Danny appeared to have relaxed, the privacy of a good deed having been protected.

*So, I guess my point is, getting through life, getting through the bad things or the tough stuff, or even everything that seems bad or tough but looking back was no big deal, I think that's how you become who you really are. At least, that's how I grow as a person, and it's probably the same for a lot of us.*

*Grandma Jocelyn has taught me, since I was too little to even understand, how to figure things out. And no matter how many times I screw up, it's not like she keeps score or anything. She's just there to help me pick myself up. And she always does it with love, and always accepts me for me.*

*That's why, when I read this project, I knew she was the person from my life, past and present, who has contributed the most to my personal growth.*

The shield of talking gone, Max squeezed his cards, knowing he should quickly slink back to his chair. Still, as much as he didn't want

to, he couldn't help himself from scrutinizing the room for reactions. Behind the tepid applause, mandated by Mrs. Harline whenever a student finished a presentation, cued by her approving smile and, "Thank you, Max," he could see clearly that he had ... survived. A lot of the girls were smiling, and in a larger victory, none of the guys looked thoroughly disgusted. It didn't mean he was in the clear from gentle mocking in the hallways about being a *granny's boy* (in that case, the language would be way more cutting and sinister); however, he seemed to have skirted anything requiring more severe taunting, and honestly, the story was better than most of the other homages to "Mom" (seven times), "Dad" (four times), Tom Brady and Michelle Obama (twice each), or even Tucker Carlson (gross!). I'm probably fine, Max thought, making his way back to the relative safety of his desk, head down, and relieved to hear the teacher call the next presenter.

Gideon leaned over, his fixed grin even wider, and whispered, "Nice."

\* \* \*

They glided down the hallway, both light – Max having aced an assignment that caused him anxiety for almost a week; Gideon because, well, Gideon nearly always radiated a cheerful buoyancy. The two were not in a sufficiently high caste to warrant notice from the hoard of other kids scrambling to their lockers, to the exits, to after-school clubs or the gym or the pool or the bus circle. They were simply additional members of the hive.

Even their strange pairing, tall, dark, ostentatiously festooned, proudly out young man walking side-by-side with his subdued, inconspicuously dressed, palely Nordic five-foot-eight best buddy, didn't draw many looks in a community where teenage insecurity was the dominant thread.

It was in this relative anonymity that they could breathe.

“Absolutely brilliant, Maxie. That was such a Disney-plus original film! I didn’t know you had it in you to make everyone so weepy.” Gideon contorted his face into pretend anguish.

“Come on, no one cried,” Max insisted.

“Are you kidding me?” Gideon replied, excitedly jumping into a sideways stance, his large smile back. “Half the females were all teary, and I’m pretty sure even Arnold,” as in Arnold Rhinehart, the school’s humongous starting left tackle who had never been known to display any emotions other than contempt and anger, “even Arnold was getting a bit misty.”

Max couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, well, anyway, I’m just glad it’s done.”

“Uhhhhhhh, I wish she had called on me so I could be done too.”

“But you said you hadn’t even started on it.”

“Oh, I haven’t, dear boy, but I’d rather have winged it than suffer another night thinking about the stupid thing.”

“Guys!” the voice cracked like a whip, direct, serious, commanding, its owner instantly recognizable even if she wasn’t in their sightline.

“Thanks for waiting,” she offered sarcastically, emerging between them just as they entered the scrambled mass of bodies near the main lobby.

“Hey Megan,” Gideon muttered with exaggerated indifference. This was their thing. He pretended to be unimpressed by her well-deserved confidence. She pretended to ignore his show.

“Hi Megan,” Max said amiably.

“What’s going on?” she asked, slipping her fingers into the pronounced front pockets of too-large blue jean bib overalls, today’s costume. Megan’s wardrobe easily alternated between seductress and tomboy and future businesswoman of America, depending entirely on her mood at 6 a.m.

“Well, Maya Angelou here just delivered a heart-warming homage to his grandmother.” Gideon purred theatrically, his right hand floating above his head,

*In the flush of love’s light*

*we dare be brave*

*and suddenly we see*

*that love costs all we are*

*and will ever be.*

*Yet it is only love which sets us free.*

“Young man had Mrs. Harline’s whole class melting in the palm of his hand,” Gi sighed. Max rolled his eyes.

“Oh, really? Tell me more, Maximilian” she said, elbowing him. No one called him that, not even his parents when laying down the law. No one except these two.

“I honestly don’t know what the hell he’s talking about,” Max pleaded, somewhere between embarrassed and irritated.

“Oh Max, don’t be so humble,” Gideon said, grabbing his shoulders. “I’m just sorry Megan missed it. Oscar worthy,” he informed her.

A strange 2:30 p.m. gravity pulled the entire student body in a single, bobbing rush toward the school’s main entry, four pairs of double doors, half held in place by functioning kickstands allowing an unimpeded flow of adolescents to afternoon freedom, the other half swinging open and closed with the hard, rhythmic bashing of push bars, the drumbeat beckoning louder as one approached.

As the trio rounded the corner into this vortex, onto the large, gray-tiled foyer across which the massive exodus progressed, Max prepared to retort, to defend the simple normality of his presentation. He had even formed the nonchalant words with which to defuse

Gideon's otherwise unrelenting tease, hopefully moving the conversation on to something more interesting, or at least, something not about Max.

And then.

And then, at almost the same instant, they all three lost their forward momentum, slowed by the same vision.

Swimming upstream, like a mighty steelhead defying an oncoming rush of water, Silas Cannon confidently strode through one of the open doors, lesser mortals squeezing to the side, parting his way into the building. The man-child towered above his contemporaries, not just the muscled six-foot-two frame, but in his assured aura of superiority. Silas wore his jeans like a second skin, not to show off his physique, but because none of the designers at Levi's really had someone of his sculpture in mind.

What drew Max's notice, however, despite all there was to admire, was Silas's t-shirt. Not the torso that strained its fabric, though he certainly appreciated that feature; nor the fact that, being a chilly, cloudy, late October day in Portland, such a skimpy covering was an act of defiance against the gods, or stupid, or both.

No, what Max saw most in the first moment of Silas' ascension was the shirt's distinctive UN blue with "Golden" yellow sleeves, and the rampaging, snorting, dust-kicking elephant logo across the chest, official merch of the Portland Rogues of the National Football League. The club was part of the league's grand expansion four years ago, and the whole city was still enthralled, despite the Rogues' losing ways.

But it wasn't affinity for the home squad capturing Max's interest. All that mattered, as his brain whirled with calculation, was Silas' selection of the shirt, his obvious pride in wearing it ... and the fact that Max's grandpa owned the team.

This was a bragging right Max kept well-hidden – even Megan didn't know (she would inevitably talk); only Gideon did (he could

care less, found football extraneous to his existence, and promptly lost the knowledge of Max's famous pedigree). Why was this potential boon to Max's position on the high school pyramid so aggressively guarded? Why would he not even be seen in the franchise's gear, unopened bags of which stuffed the back of his closet? He didn't fully understand himself. He loved Grandpa Sparks, and not only because he had married Jocelyn and sired Max's mother. It's just that he loved him for him. Grandpa's money, and now the team? Well, his affection was in spite of those possessions. Maybe that was it. Maybe Max embraced this disinterest to validate the purity of his fondness.

Or ... maybe he didn't want the false friends or fake celebrity such secondhand fame would capture.

As likely, though, was a much deeper motivation. An inkling of who he was, of what his inner longings meant, of an honesty he was not ready to share. And the spotlight to shine upon the grandson of the owner of *the Portland Rogues*? How would *that* protect a secret he was incapable of defining? How would moving to the center of the Chisholm universe leave Max less subject to scrutiny, less vulnerable to exposure? Maybe ignoring the Rogues was his cloak.

Yet ... Silas was wearing the damned shirt, and every aspect of his wearing it, every movement of his body within it, was magnetic. "Oh, what webs I might weave," Max thought with each of Silas's smooth steps in his direction. If he knew who I was, who my grandfather was ... if he knew the trademarked swag I could score and he could wear, the players we could meet (*together*, of course), the swanky NikeDome suite we could use (again, *together*, side-by-side, elbows touching, maybe knees), watching games (but also watching each other), becoming chums, the celebratory hugs (my arms around his wide, sturdy back, my little chest touching the one I see inside that Rogues' tee), becoming inseparable, becoming ... *more!*



Max's fantasy, all three seconds of it, ended with an abrupt shove from behind, the day's exodus of bodies heaving forward, unyielding to the triad standing agog at the spectacle of Silas Cannon. The surge forced the three to stumble ahead, directly toward the object of their attention. And tentatively, out of sync, they moved closer, and he to them. Twenty feet, the currents guiding them together. Ten feet, and ... and Silas turned his head, focused ... right on them ... right at ... *Me*, Max determined, his heart suddenly thumping, his pulse racing, sweat dotting the edges of his pores.

Five feet, almost arms' length, a visage of yearning on Max's face, his brain drowning, gulping for a clever springboard of words to begin their friendship ... their ... *relationship*.

They were now close enough to see clearly the creases in Silas Cannon's heavenly face, which surprisingly formed a faint smile. Or was it a smirk?

Then the luscious lips parted, and the beautiful boy spoke. He actually acknowledged them, their existence, his ocean blue irises zeroed in on ... Gideon?

The words, just seven of them, tumbled out like angrily thrown bricks, and even though aimed at his closest pal, Max felt their jarring impact just as painfully.

\* \* \*

"So, let me be sure I have this right," Megan started, planting her right foot in front of Silas, her body between him and her two friends, her hands locked on her hips. Her voice was unhurried, but loud, sufficient to cause the flow of students to coagulate in a circle around the four of them. Max was pale, his stomach churning, the course of events nothing like what he imagined before the insult, before Gideon smiled contemptuously in response, before Megan decided to launch this counterattack.

“The captain of the wrestling team, this buff athlete who wears tight leotards every Wednesday night for a crowd of onlookers – mostly young men from his own school, by the way – and who then grabs all parts of another guy while they roll around on a mat and sweat up a storm together ...”

Megan’s face was expressionless as she prosecuted her assault. Gideon’s hand rubbed his neck as he stifled any reaction, sensing it best to stay out of her way. Max felt light-headed, confused as his fairy tale faded, wanting simultaneously to *be* Megan, to cleverly defend his mate, yet to do so in a way that somehow impressed Silas, changing his heart and diffusing this whole bomb of an interaction while putting their nonexistent relationship back on track.

“... *that* same person in a spandex onesie, or singlet I guess you call it, a revealing little uniform that barely hides your junk or anything else, who goes to the bench after his match and lowers the straps on it so everyone can see his glistening chest, *that* guy is actually throwing shade at *this* man,” she jerked her thumb at Gideon, her head pivoting to him. “What was it he called you again?”

Gideon adopted a bored effect, focusing on the ceiling. “I’d rather not repeat it.”

“By the way,” Megan returned her fire to Silas, “you know the ‘F’ word is considered by those in the LGBTQ community to be as hurtful as the ‘N’ word is to African Americans, right?”

Silas felt the crowd tightening, leaning in, waiting for his reply. Only he wasn’t sure what part of her fusillade to address, or how harshly to counter – as aggressive as Megan was, she was a girl, after all.

His hesitation proved fatal. Her bombardment resumed.

“Of course you wouldn’t know the hurtfulness of your insults. That would require you to actually have an awareness of people other than yourself.”

Silas finally, off balance as he was, responded. He angrily pointed a long finger at Gideon, and spat, “He *looked* at me! And I’m not into that gross shit.”

Max’s heart sank. The make-believe world where this beautiful dude was his constant companion, his intimate, his soulmate ... that imaginary existence crashed upon the rocky shoals of Silas’s hatred. Just maybe, though, Silas was struggling with the same admissions as Max. Maybe there was hope. Maybe Max could help his Adonis discover the truth. Possibly, together, they could fight through their denials, overcome their shame.

Could he really abandon Gideon, though, of all times in this moment? His longest relationship, other than family – in everything but blood, they *were* family, the sibling Max never had – didn’t Gideon deserve better? Guilt rushed over Max as he contemplated how thoroughly he was tempted, even willing, to sacrifice that special bond, all for the mirage of this made-up Prince Charming. A prince who, honestly or not, was making clear his revulsion at the very idea of Max’s glass slipper.

“Seriously?” Megan resumed. “*That’s* what triggered you? He *looked* at you?”

“He knows what I mean,” Silas sneered.

“Hmmm.” Megan contemplated. “I guess what I’m wondering is how *you* knew what he meant.”

“Screw all of you,” he replied, throwing his chin at the threesome. Silas stormed around them, pushing his way through the ringside audience as students jumped from his path.

“That’s a revealing comment,” Megan said as he moved away. She shouted after him as he stomped down the hall, “And to be clear, I’m not a fan. I only know about your sensual sporting behavior because Mr. Benning,” the school’s athletic director, “asked me to fill in as a scorekeeper last week.”

Gideon flashed his huge smile at her. “Girlfriend, I am breathless.”

Max, still spinning, finally sputtered out of his daydream. “Gideon, are you okay?” he asked sheepishly.

“Pffft! I’m fine. That’s not the first macho man I’ve somehow threatened,” he said, waving his hand dismissively toward the space Silas had occupied. “And for the record, I was most definitely looking at him. Staring, in fact.” His smile restored, he laughed, “Who wouldn’t?”

Relieved, Max put his arm around Megan. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Megan gave him the slightest trace of a smile. Was she pissed at him for not jumping in? No, he told himself, I’m being defensive. She loves to take charge. She’s still wound up from the battle, the adrenaline still coursing. That’s all it is.

“Shall we,” Gideon broke into Max’s thoughts.

They marched on, through the front doors and down the steps. As they proceeded across the circular front drive toward student parking, their conversation moved to more mundane matters, pointedly avoiding what each took from the flashpoint moments ago. That reflection would be later, at home, alone – and thus way more honest.

## Two

Most folks assumed Gunnar had played football, for they could see a commanding frame in the remnants of the burly 71-year-old: fit, trim, tall, with fluid movements, splendid posture, and the hard focus of an accomplished athlete. Compared to the other three lining the sides of the long table he headed, all much younger, it was clearly he who had once dominated the gridiron, probably on defense, one would guess, probably roaming the middle of the field – a linebacker, cracking heads after precision tracking. His wavy, neatly trimmed hair may be silver, and his face deeply wrinkled, but those attributes exuded the grace of a competitor.

As it turns out, despite his impeccable profile and gladiatorial aura, Reginald Gunnar Sparks played not a single down of football in his entire life, on any field, at any level. Instead, he brought the National Football League to his hometown of Portland, Oregon. He was not an alumnus of the actual battlefield of competition. He was in a much rarer category. He was an owner.

“These get-togethers are always a lot more fun after a win, aren’t they?” he broadly grinned, always the optimist, always the salesman.

“Even if it’s the Seahawks,” the dour young man to his right – his son, in fact – tepidly agreed.

“*Especially* if it’s Seattle!” Gunnar snapped, roaring with enthusiasm.

“I’m just saying,” Fen Sparks continued, “two and six is nothing to celebrate.”

Gunnar maintained his smile, though now it seemed more frozen in place, more determined than joyful. He switched his attention to the left side of the table, first to the only woman in the room, and the only one dressed formally, a light blue, neatly pressed Brooks Brothers

jacket. Then to the gruff, unshaven man in the tricked-out, high-tech wheelchair sitting conspicuously further down the flank.

“Well,” Gunnar told the odd couple, ignoring Fen and refusing to give up his hopefulness, “we’ve got 10 to go, and we’re on the right track.” Focusing on the weathered older man he added, “Isn’t that so, Coach?”

Fen couldn’t let it go. As a matter of habit, or possibly a feature of his character, he needed everyone to know what he was thinking, and that what he was thinking, whether or not comfortable or polite or even interesting, was *correct*. “I’m just saying, if we didn’t have Seattle on the schedule twice, we’d be winless.”

“Personally,” Rosalind Gerelick, the team’s chief operating officer, interjected, “if we got to pick our victories, at least we’re beating our arch rival. A lot of 12s in southern Washington are already starting to question their loyalties.” Not surprisingly, her attention was to the prospect of stealing Seahawks fans, even those of the “12<sup>th</sup> Man” vintage.

Gunnar nodded. *That* was more like it. Opportunities!

“Still ...” Fen revved up.

Coach Lem interrupted the coming round of pessimism. “I’m more interested in next Sunday,” he growled.

“Exactly,” Gunnar agreed. His chastened son frowned. It was like Fen was nine again, Gunnar thought. “And on that note,” he beamed, eager to launch, “let’s get started!”

These Monday mid-morning “after action” conferences, Tuesdays on the rare occasion Portland appeared on Monday Night Football, were Gunnar’s brainchild, a carryover from his multinational energy conglomerate. There, it was 7 a.m. every Monday to ensure goals, strategies and deliverables were reviewed and emphasized before the work week took off. Here, the concept was identical, though

the subject matter was a game played with a ball instead of the efficient transfer and storage of wind energy.

In both venues, the room was small, the attendees intentionally few, the coffee and pastries of marginal quality.

“Coach Lem,” Gunnar commenced, “take it away.”

At the moment the boss called his name, Lemuel George Curcio, the only head coach in Portland Rogues’ history, had just now taken a large bite of a small raspberry cream cheese Danish, the gooey confection gumming up his ability to reply. Nothing seemed to slow this man’s bustle, however, and certainly not the etiquettes of eating. “Yeah,” he gurgled, using his tongue to move around the mess in his mouth, smacking his lips twice before pushing forward.

“It helps,” the muffled words dribbled out, “we had four of our starting five back on the O-line.” He cleared his throat, in a loud reset that caused Rosalind, at his side, to flinch. “That let us run the ball, which I gotta say we did pretty damn well. Proud of Wheelwright. Kid’s gonna really pay off. Kept us outta third-and-long most of the day. We built this team to grind it out. Big boys gotta push folks around. We did that yesterday.”

Gunnar bobbed his head enthusiastically. He loved Curcio’s clipped cadence, his no-nonsense view of problems and events, of *life*, his unvarnished perceptions. Fen looked down at a legal pad, doodling, but listening, and impatient. Ros assessed Coach with full attention, politely, professionally, her erect posture perfect against the tall back of her chair.

“I know our record doesn’t show it, but we *are* gettin’ better.”

Coach Lem hated these meetings. A complete waste of time, in his view. He had so many other priorities, details actually in need of his attention. The owner has a right to know what’s going on with his

team, he conceded, wishing there was some less disruptive, and quicker, way to meet that need.

The real problem, Lem knew, was Fen. Guy played sufficient Pac-12 for Daddy to get him started in assistant coaching, bounces around the NCAA's lower echelons for a while, and all of a sudden, he's Vince Friggin' Lombardi. Thinks he knows at least twice what he does, and applies that inflated expertise like a hammer in a toy store: not much use and plenty of stuff to break. Lem understood the father-son thing, understood trying to help your kids to succeed. But to make the brat Executive Vice President of Football Operations, to give him day-to-day control over the roster, contracts, salary cap, scouting, draft choices, free agents? Yeah, Gunnar lets me run practice and games, Lem thought, but having to fight for every player we need is a pain in the ass. And the advice. God, the advice: on who to start, what plays might be "cool," what old friend of his might make a great linebackers' coach ... it's relentless. He knows I don't listen to him, think he's an overpaid, way underqualified idiot, Lem pondered. That should be the end of it, but no, the sage wisdom keeps flowing my way, like a blasted mosquito buzzing around my head.

At least Ros stays in her lane, he acknowledged: maximizing profit, marketing, fan relations, all the stuff I don't give a crap about. But not Fen. Any hole big enough for his nose will find him sticking it in.

The Coach had a point, having earned his stripes where it mattered. Nine seasons in the trenches for the Browns and the Bucs, All-Pro at defensive end twice. Another 17 years as an assistant coach for a number of teams, including two stints as defensive coordinator, plenty of play-off appearances, and a Super Bowl. That last accomplishment, a shutout resulting in his recognition as a defensive genius, earned Curcio his first head coaching stint, an eight-year run with Notre Dame that never saw more than three losses, and produced



six Top Ten finishes, three play-off appearances, a national title ... and both his wheelchair and storied, idolized comeback.

“The analytics don’t quite bear that out,” Fen sniped.

“What?” Coach Lem asked, having in his head moved on to another topic.

“That the team’s performance is improving,” Fen challenged. “You said, ‘I know our record doesn’t show it, but we are getting better,’” he repeated. “The analytics do not justify that conclusion. For one,” he began, holding out his left hand and grasping the tip of its index finger with his right, “we are two and six, with our only victories over another team that is also a miserable two and six.”

Fen unfurled his middle finger, said “Second,” holding the newly pinched pair of digits even higher for double the emphasis, and started his next diatribe. “If we look at almost any team performance category, be it yardage, third down efficiency ...”

Curcio rarely showed anger. He usually didn’t feel the need, preferring to concentrate his energies on the problem – in this case it was the pontificating E.V.P, who he now summarily cut off.

“I know all about the analytics, kid. But when it comes right down to it, I got 11 guys, they got 11 guys, and it’s all gonna depend on whether there’s an unexpected gust of wind, or whether an official decides to call a penalty, or not call a penalty, or a guy’s knee twists the wrong way. Because, you see, out of the 73,511 kids that play college football every season, or the 1,006,580 that play high school football, less than two thousand are good enough to make an NFL roster on any given weekend. And that means my 11, and their 11, are all pretty damn good. We coach ‘em as best as we can, we psychoanalyze the shit out of them, we try to make the best combinations of 11 that we can. In the end, though, it pretty much depends on old Hermes up there on Mt. Olympus, who decides when a ball bounces which direction, whose hamstring gives out, which cleat

slips on what slick of grass. And at the end of the game, when you look up at the scoreboard, most often the tally's not gonna be because my team was better or worse than your team, but because that's just the way it is."

Coach Lem, zero emotion on display, scanned the table. "How's that for some analytics?"

There is no precise dividing line between the game of football as, on the one hand, a mere spectator sport, a competitive battle for community pride, and on the other, the multi-billion dollar – no, *Tens* of billions of dollars – entertainment industry it also is. When Otto Graham dropped back from center for the Browns in the '50s, kicking up dust from the rock hard surface of Cleveland Municipal Stadium; when the Los Angeles Coliseum threaten to evict the Rams in 1946 unless they spurned the NFL's color barrier, and thus UCLA stars Kenny Washington and Woody Strode joined the team; when Texas A&M star and Heisman Trophy winner John David Crow was drafted by the Chicago Cardinals in 1958, and signed for an envy-inducing \$15,000 a year; in the time before there was AstroTurf, before there were domed stadiums, before Dandy Don Meredith and Howard Cosell made *Monday Night Football* an extravaganza, professional football was popular, though not yet "the" sport. Thousands of tickets were sold. Sports pages headlined the developing star power of Johnny Unitas and Jim Brown, of title games and coaching changes. Television's reach expanded as the league left the defunct DuMont Network for the wider affiliate holdings of ABC and NBC.

But despite all this evolution, despite all the growth in fans and loyalty, the association of clubs remained a quieter concern, the smaller, less noticed sibling of major league baseball, or even college football. When Clint Murchison bought the rights for a thirteenth franchise, for his native Dallas, a team he would call the Cowboys, he

paid all of \$600,000, less than the minimum annual salary for a player in today's game.

The NFL world in which Ros Gerelick now operated could not be more different. Her yearly compensation alone was a million dollars, something ole Mr. Murchison would scarcely understand. A not surprising sum, though, for a team executive in a league whose most recent television deal was a cool \$110 billion.

Perhaps most telling of all, Ros was a woman. The only women in the front offices of the old NFL were known not for their financial or marketing savvy, but for their typing skills.

"Fen," Coach Lem sighed, "we gotta stick! We don't move forward if we give up on folks after a few weeks, or for God's sake, after one bad game. You gotta stick with your guys, stick with your system, give 'em time to gel. Sometimes it's tough, but every time you turn over the apple cart, you're just going back to square one."

The petty skirmishes between these two were by this time routine, Ros realized, and probably natural for a losing squad. Fortunately, as C.O.O., her concerns were not trades, waivers, signings, drafts, game planning, practices, play calling or anything else that happened between the lines. Her territory was budgeting, social media, taxation, local television, radio and streaming opportunities, promotions, ticket sales. In other words, dollar signs versus X's and O's. While Fen and Lem's work certainly affected hers, she tried to float above their constant warfare, to be Gunnar's voice of reason, his respite from their chaos. Sometimes, though ...

"But Coach ..." Fen pushed.

"Now wait a minute ..." Lem pushed back.

"I just want to know ..."

"Wait just a damn minute, Fen."

"I just want to know ..."

"You don't bench a guy ..."

“Let me finish, Coach ...”

“Gentlemen!” Ros finally interjected, leveling her palms emphatically on the table. Whether DelRay Strand continued as the starting left guard, the apparent crisis, was not of consequence to her. What mattered was saving Gunnar from their childish spat, and in the process, establishing – reaffirming – her own status.

“I don’t think ‘this,’” she waved her hand back and forth between them, “helps anything get resolved.” She turned to her right and deferentially faced the man at the head of the table. “Gunnar, if I may?”

How many times had Ros used this or some similarly obsequious request? Brilliant, actually, as it simultaneously demonstrated her respect and, with his expected nod of consent, which he gave now as always, showed his confidence in the 37-year-old. She was the youngest in the room, and quite junior for a league exec.

Nor was her use of the familiar, “Gunnar,” an accident. He had been “Mr. Sparks” for most of the 16 years they had known one another, since the time an old friend of his, Ros’ economics professor at Reed College, first raised her potential, prompting Gunnar to sponsor the young prodigy with a full ride to Columbia for her Masters. Then it was on to a series of successively more important and challenging stops within his own business, and finally, a year before the franchise was granted, before it even had a name, to the football quest. It was at that last promotion he *insisted* she call him “Gunnar.” Ros made the perfunctory protests, and to this day called him “Mr. Sparks” in public settings. But behind the scenes, in gatherings like today’s, the comfortable, self-assured use of “Gunnar” was her face card, trumping Fen’s juvenile sounding “Dad” or Coach’s submissive “Boss.”

“Fen, you are skipping right over the fact that we just had a convincing win against our number one rival,” she admonished. “That

alone is worth celebrating, and I can tell you first hand our fans are doing just that! Merch transactions, ticket sales for the next home game, chatter on Reddit and Twitter ... I mean wherever you want to look, the evidence is there. People are excited, and I just wish we could all see that side too.”

Fen silently fumed, but as he weighed a rebuttal, as he plotted a recovery which avoided making him seem tone deaf, Ros seized the hesitation, pivoting to her left.

“And Coach Lem, no one has more respect for your instincts,” she smiled, more at having avoided the word “gut,” especially as he was polishing off his second – third? – pastry. “We are all proud of what you are trying to build, and yesterday’s amazing victory is a very positive sign.” Her affect turned pleading toward the grumpy 61-year-old. “I’m sure you can also agree, if I can reach back to one of my old philosophy classes, ‘There is no greater joy than that of feeling oneself a creator. The triumph of life is expressed by creation.’”

Coach stared at her, bewildered. “Corny, I know,” she backtracked. “I suppose what I’m trying to say is, and I think this is what Fen is trying to say too: even in triumph, we can still create.” Coach’s blank aspect became stone. Ros tried one more time. “We should keep looking for ways to improve.”

Gunnar roared with amusement from deep within his abdomen. “Quoting Henri Bergson to old Lemuel Curcio. Now *that’s* a first,” he wheezed, slapping his thigh and tilting his head back. “Oh Ros, god love a good Reed education,” he chuckled.

She smiled appreciatively. Gunnar’s approval really was all that mattered in this room, among these people. And yes, thank goodness for Reed College. It was, after all, where Gunnar first charted her incredible journey.

\* \* \*

*Henry who?* Fen wondered, derailed from his attack. He abruptly felt as if he were a spare tire, irrelevant unless the real thing blew up. If they were sleeping together, Ros and his father – no way, he knew without doubt – at least then he might understand why Dad tolerated her mindless interference. This was a *football* team, he thought, and I’ve played or coached my whole life. Isn’t that why Gunnar picked *me* to run things?

Yet here he was, once again, sidelined by this physically unremarkable, sports ignorant business grad. She definitely wasn’t the daughter Gunnar never had, for he had one, Fen’s sister Astrid, who his father worshipped. And yeah, Ros was smart about the dollars and cents stuff, but Gunnar was obviously a genius in that realm. None of it made any sense.

Clearly, though, Fen had been blunted, at least for now. Coach Lem’s ineptitude would go unchecked. All because Dad and Ros shared some favorite poet, or whatever “Henry” was, he stewed.

Joshua Fenris Sparks did not roll with punches, and he most certainly did not take slights with equanimity. His job was to build a winning football franchise, a championship team. And in his view, he was exactly the young gun to do it. Why else would his dad select him over all the crusty general managers who usually cycled through the top spots? Fen was a scholarship player at Oregon. True, he never cracked the Duck’s starting line-up, but was it his fault the coach who recruited him was fired after Fen’s freshman year? The new guy, with his fancy pedigree and his bizarre “Float & Sting” defensive scheme never gave Fen a chance. Maybe they did win the Rose Bowl, twice, but what a fraud the new coach was. “Sparks, you’ve got to move, you’ve got to move, see the play, dammit,” he’d scream, or “Come on Sparks, *EXPLODE!*”

Fen knew his dad wasn't laughing *at* him, just showing his delight for little Miss Perfect. "Oh Ros, god love a good Reed education," he replayed in his mind. Just to be clear, though ...

"Thanks Ros, but that's not really what I'm trying to explain to Lem. Whatever. Let's just move on for now," as if the room hadn't already.

*A good Reed education.* This wasn't a literary club, for Christ's sake. This is a *football* club. And I know what the hell I'm doing!

Did Fen let his screwing at Oregon define him? Of course not. He would have been a star, and would have made an NFL roster, probably drafted, probably second or third round, he considered, but so what? The grad assistant gig at Portland State? That wasn't Gunnar's handiwork. Gunnar wasn't a billionaire back then. Fen earned that spot, and if his boss, the linebackers' coach, hadn't been such an ignoramus, had given Fen the credit he deserved – he was the one, after all, who did the actual coaching, and that unit hit on all cylinders – Fen could have received a full staff position. But no, two years, a Master's in Education, and thanks for your service.

Fen could have given up. He would have been a great high school teacher, and what school wouldn't want him as its coach? Well, the several where he applied passed him over, but only because the losers they hired had actual classroom experience he lacked – those teams were so bad the athletic directors had to pretend academics were the priority. Joke was on them, as it turns out, because he found a *real* job at a *real* institution, not some ratty secondary school. Sure, the Salisbury Sea Gulls were Division III, but some of the greatest coaches ever came out of DIII.

"I think that's a good idea," Gunnar said to his son, leaving Fen to guess as to which idea he meant. "You and Coach can wait and talk through all the personnel specifics later." Oh, so "moving on" was his only good idea, he realized with a frown. Thanks, Dad.

“What I want to focus on,” his father continued, “is how we maximize the advantage. You know, ‘Big Win,’ ‘Future is Unlimited,’ gin up the fan base, the players, the media, the whole thing!”

Coach allowed the slightest smirk. He knew that if he escaped any directives from the big honcho at these Monday confabs, he was in the clear. The young punk could huff and puff all he wanted during the week, even storm over to the practice facilities, and Lem would just ignore him.

Fen reached the same conclusion. Sixteen years in the trenches, with stops at Salisbury, Framingham State, Bridgewater, where he made defensive coordinator his last year with the Eagles – if the head coach weren’t such a buffoon as to get the whole staff fired, who knows – and finally his longest stay, five years with Wartburg. That’s where he was when Dad got the Rogues and asked Fen to run the football side of it. Odd choice, some alleged. *Crazy*, most said. No one, Fen thought, none of the “experts,” understood what Gunnar knew: that *real* football was played on the dirt fields in the small stadiums in the bad weather with the tiny crowds. The true game was waged not by spoiled multi-millionaire professionals, but by the non-scholarship warriors who compete for honor ... challenge ... glory! If anyone could build a Super Bowl contender from scratch, smell talent from a mile away, look a player in the eyes and know whether he had “it” in his soul, that someone would rise from the heart of the gridiron, the places Fen had been forged. This is why Gunnar had put him in charge. Or so he was convinced.

“Ros, I think that’s fantastic,” his father intoned, all serious now, the conversation having somehow veered even further from what happens on the actual turf. “Walk us through ... Coach, see if this makes sense for you ... walk us through how it would actually work on Media Day, Ros.”



*My God, Fen thought. I left Wartburg for this. I'd be head coach there by now, for sure. Yet here I am. Here I am,* he lamented. If only they let him do his job.

\* \* \*

Unlike many of his fellow owners, Gunnar's title of president and chief executive officer was a bit misleading. The vast majority of the League's proprietors made their fortunes elsewhere, then purchased a club. It was a sure bet investment, a momentous symbol of status, and above all, an incredibly fun toy. Most of them lost interest in the mundane day-to-day affairs of, say, oil and gas, or insurance, or hedge funds, gravitating to the glamor and excitement of running a team.

For Gunnar Sparks, the Portland Rogues franchise was an achievement, for sure, but never a full-time engagement. It couldn't be, nor from the day he began the chase did he ever envision the team as a landing spot for his ego, and especially not for his time. He brought the NFL to the Rose City because it was his birthplace, because he and his fellow Portlanders deserved it, and especially because the informed "they" said it would never happen.

Gunnar made his money, and his fame, by founding Anemoi Kinetic Solutions to crack the elusive enigma of mass energy storage. When the air moves, massive amounts of clean electricity can be produced. The problem was, when the breezes were still, as they often were, the motionless generators made not a single bulb glow. After years of dogged effort, Gunnar, a mechanical engineer by training with an unparalleled visionary nature, led his hand-picked team of scientists, coders, chemists and mathematicians to the grail, fusing the solid-state and flow battery technologies in a way never even theorized. AKS merged "it isn't possible" and "that doesn't make sense" into wind energy that was for the first time reliably stockpiled, solving the most intractable problem of the renewables industry. And within a year, the same technology transformed solar radiation as well.

Suddenly, AKS's Dynamic Regenerative Battery Farms spurred an explosion in cheap, clean, renewable power, thrusting Gunnar onto the covers of Forbes and other leading business publications around the world. And it made him very, very rich.

Once the League finally submitted to his irresistible pursuit, his celebrity and bankroll pushing his hometown past the San Diegos, Orlandos and Austins in the race, it was assumed Gunnar would relish climbing behind the wheel of his new ride.

He was, of course, thrilled to have secured the team. And one does not pay 1.7 billion dollars to then ignore the prize. He would be the number one fan, no doubt, would never miss a game, would meet every player, know every statistic, and reserve final say on the critical decisions.

But more than lacking need for high-society adulation or the sports world's spotlight, AKS would always be Gunnar's priority, and the greatest demand on his time. No one else could have masterminded the energy revolution he created, and in his view, no one else could sustain it. Football managers were, on the other hand, a dime a dozen.

"That's why I think," Ros summed up, "we focus on the unsung heroes, the younger guys who played a role in yesterday's win, emphasize their grit, their determination ..."

"Their lack of *quit*," Coach interrupted.

"Exactly!" Gunnar agreed. "Exactly. Their perseverance. Show what we are building, or more to the point, the kind of quality people we are building with. A future to be excited about!"

"And I believe it models," Ros added, "maybe even on a subliminal level, but still, the type of behavior we want in our fans. 'Our guys don't quit on you, you don't quit on us.'"

"Who do you think, Coach?" Gunnar inquired. "Nevett? He was a monster on special teams. My gosh, that last punt he almost took the returner's head off."

“Sure, sure,” Coach agreed. “Kid’s tenacious as hell. I’d put Poage out there too. The real fans know what his blocking means. Plus, he looks like he’s been through war and back.”

“That’s great,” Ros chimed in. “Both are fun guys, very animated. The cameras will eat it up.”

This was why these Monday meetings were so important to Gunnar. They were his tether to the team, an opportunity to enjoy his acquisition, to learn, to tinker, to stay in the loop even on some of the small stuff without getting in the way. And if he were being brutally honest, there was another reason. It allowed him to maintain the guardrails around Fen, his son, who at this very moment sulked while the rest of them engaged in a positive plan for public outreach.

Honest to God, five years ago Gunnar believed he was solving multiple problems at once by rescuing his eldest child from the hinterlands of minor college football. The press crucified him for it, and even his wife, Jocelyn, the boy’s own mother for crying out loud, even *she* wasn’t so sure it was a great idea. But Gunnar had convinced himself otherwise.

Analytical as always, he compiled a catalog of validations: Fen was an *actual coach* for 15 years at the least pretentious level possible, and knew the game inside and out; Gunnar’s history of pulling people from ground floor to the lofts of management had been more than gratifying, because usually their baseline experience proved much more operational than the book-derived theorems of the more elite candidates; his kid would not be the first nepotistic promotion in the business world, or even in football, where many sons had followed many fathers into leadership roles; no one on Earth would be more motivated to succeed than Fen, to please his Dad, to prove himself – certainly not some recycled general manager who could always look ahead to the next job.

No, Gunnar thought, the reasoning had been solid. Besides, Fen would be surrounded by professionals with tons of experience, and surely would lean on them heavily. And as the final fail safe, Gunnar would always have the ultimate say. He ignored their lack of any real relationship and his own largely absentee parenting. He was sure that had nothing to do with the mammoth promotion. But hey, if Jocelyn were correct, even if Fen's installation near the top of the org chart was founded upon some motivation other than business-sense, so what? If the two of them now shared a platform upon which to bond, well, wasn't that simply another gratuitous benefit?

Yet, five years on, here they were, Fen six feet away but never more distant, seething. The Monday get-togethers were supposed to be for connecting, a source of pleasure for the boss. Instead, they seemed more like therapy. The team was in its fourth losing season, and Fen was not handling the pressure well. In fact, he was not handling it at all. He was resentful and moody, defensive about even the slightest signs of support or encouragement.

"Okay, let's talk about this Sunday," Gunnar transitioned. "New Orleans Saints." And then he hesitated. Did he ask Ros to lead off about themes and promotions? Or have Coach summarize his game plan? Or dare he risk a pouty rebuff by inviting Fen to jump in? Familiarity often leads to reality, and by that process, Gunnar had come to know his son. Not his aspirations for Fen, nor his prayers for him, but the true man himself.

He called on Coach Lem.

## Three

The Sparks-Picou home felt more like a cabin, nestled on a wooded three-quarters of an acre occupying a bluff that, in winter when the leaves had fallen, afforded a partial view of the Willamette River a couple of hundred yards away. Its weathered, reclaimed wood siding, large picture windows and spacious front porch suggested an older, quieter era. As much as the exterior exuded calm, though, only inside did a person experience the abode's full warmth: plush, patterned rugs in deep earth tones, darkly stained wood floors, and corpulent sofas, love seats and armchairs in autumnal reds, burnt oranges and greens calling more for a hug than to be sat upon.

Charles Picou and Astrid Sparks purchased the undeveloped land 16 years ago. With little two-year-old Max, they lived Bohemian-style in an RV off to one side of the property while their single-story dream house, a contractor or two at a time, sprouted from the ground. Over the years since, it had changed little, its minimalist landscaping matured to better mimic the natural surroundings, and inside, mostly by addition with very little subtraction, the space became more crowded, but comfortably so.

Reedy frame stretched across the living room's worn brown leather couch, bare feet poking out of baggy jeans, Max was under the snug setting's spell. He did not remember the apartment where his parents resided when he was born. And, as cool a story as it would have been, he held no mental snapshots of the RV either. *This* was the only home he had ever known, a sanctuary from all the monumental challenges of both the real world, and of being a teenager.

Propped up by two of the proliferation of pillows invading every quarter of the dwelling, Max's consciousness drifted from the iPad on his lap and from the words of the book he much preferred over the huge 4K display on the opposite wall. Sunday afternoons were like this

in the serene blanket that was 389 Clemens Place, in the township of Rochelle, Oregon.

“What’s the score?” Charles’ voice burst into the air, startling Max into a foggy revival. His dad carried a large grin and an even larger green bowl filled to the brim with freshly popped corn. He signaled with his head for Max to move his legs and make room.

“Uh ... Actually, I was reading.”

Charles smiled. “I forgot. You’re not a huge fan, are you.”

Max shrugged.

“To be honest, I prefer college ball,” Charles admitted. “But since it’s your grandpa’s team ... You know, kinda makes it exciting.”

Max reached over and scooped a handful of salty pleasure, cramming as much of it into his mouth as possible, which excused any further reply. This was Charles, though. Max was safe saying anything – well, almost anything – to his dad. “Football’s not really my thing,” he mumbled between chews.

Charles nodded knowingly. “Mind if I turn it up?” he asked. Max shook his head, no, he didn’t mind. The announcers’ voices drifted into the room at a respectfully low volume, excitedly describing whatever had just happened on the field.

“I mean, I don’t *hate* football,” Max added, reaching for more popcorn. “I’m just not, like, obsessed with it.”

Another understanding gesture from his father, who was now munching too.

*You can see Cruise trying to set, wants to begin his progressions, but here comes the Rams’ Mikaele Tuiloma around the edge ... my goodness, Ray Williams didn’t lay a hand on him ... and La’Marr Cruise has to take off, throwing the ball away.*

“They’re too hard on La’Marr,” Charles said. “My god, the poor kid spends every game running for his life. You’d think they’d ...” He glanced over at his son. The blank expression almost made him chuckle.

“So,” he asked, moving to more appealing terrain, “what are you reading?”

“Just something for fun. It’s stupid, really.”

“About what?”

“It’s this guy who is a really great swimmer, and his family’s really poor so it’s the only way he can get to college. But he and his friends are at this lake, and his girlfriend, she, like, goes out too far or gets a cramp or something – it doesn’t really say – anyway, she almost drowns and he tries to save her, and he does, except now she’s comatose. Not comatose, but brain damage or whatever, and it kills him because they weren’t just boyfriend, girlfriend, they were *best* friends, and had known each other and been really close since they were maybe eleven? And he’s super sad, and can’t swim anymore.”

Charles became graver with each detail. “You’re reading this for ... fun?”

“No, I mean, yeah. I mean, not fun, but for pleasure. Pleasure as in it’s not for school or required or anything.” Max closed his eyes and exhaled. He obviously wasn’t doing a great job of explaining.

“It sounds a tad bit depressing,” his dad opined.

“Well, kinda.” Max paused, focusing. “It’s a cool story, though, because he’s lost two things he loves: the person he’s closer to than anyone else, and the thing he was really good at. And he has to figure out how he can deal with it. I’m not done yet, but I think he’s going to help her recover and – I might be wrong about this – anyway, I think she’s going to wind up inspiring him to swim again.”

“Ah, a tragic love story then!” Charles brightened. He reached over and squeezed his son’s shoulder. “Not as gloomy as I thought. In fact, I can see that being a pretty compelling Hallmark movie.”

“Who’s in tragic love?” Astrid asked as she entered the room from behind them. She took a sip from her “Sunday Chardonnay,” and reached for the remote. “And who turned down the volume so low on my game?”

“Just a book I’m reading,” Max answered. “Not really tragic though. That’s Dad’s interpretation.”

“Girl in a coma. Boy blames himself. That’s pretty tragic.”

“She’s *not* in a coma,” Max laughed.

“Ugh, we’re losing,” Astrid moaned as she noticed the score bug along the bottom of the television. “Again.”

“Poor Grandpa,” Max murmured.

“Oh, good! You’re watching the game,” his mother exclaimed sarcastically. “He’d be so happy to see you taking an interest.”

“Actually, I was reading. When you said, ‘We’re losing,’ I just thought, ‘Poor Grandpa.’”

His mother squeezed onto one edge of the sofa, forcing his father to push him to the other end. And now here they were, Max observed, the whole family, watching Grandpa Sparks’ team on the big screen, getting another beating. By the Rams this time, he remembered, recognizing the curved horns on their helmets.

If you regarded the monitor from the correct angle, focusing more toward a corner than straight on, you could discern, only barely, the reflection of the three of them: the outline of the wispy layered bangs of Mom’s pixie, and an occasional glint from her wineglass as she moved it to her lips; the flawless oval of Dad’s head atop his narrow but sturdy shoulders; and slouched in the corner, Max, only his unruly tempest of curls visible, an uneven mound of shadow. He twisted his head ever so slightly left, then right, to be sure the echo on the screen



was his. Then he regarded the two figures next to him, the mom and dad silhouettes as warm and reassuring as the real ones seated with him.

While the footballers raced about behind his family's outline – to where, and for what, he didn't really notice – Max's mind imprinted another form onto the couch, next to him, so close the two practically merged. Its broad shoulders and majestic, squared head, all as if carved from granite, dominated Max's attention. He strained to fill in more: the lips, eyes, powerful cheekbones. Silas. On the cushions with the family, all from last week forgotten, or forgiven. An odd, irresistible warmth rose within Max and, startled, he quickly suppressed it, his face a guilty flush, his eyes desperately searching for the opaque likenesses of Charles and Astrid instead. Silas Cannon didn't belong here, and Max was embarrassed to have invited him, to have invaded the sanctity of his familial refuge.

"Is Gideon dropping by?" Charles asked. And there it was! Dad's reference to the out and proud best friend, his not-so-subtle message being, *Hey, Max, it's okay if you're gay too*. Had he seen Silas' reflection also? Was this dad's trademark welcoming nature at work, an inobtrusive way of bringing the conversation into the open?

*But I'm NOT!* Max silently protested. He knew he felt something. He was pretty sure *what* he was feeling, too, yet very, very far from giving it concrete form, let alone a name, or even close to admitting anything to himself – and most definitely not out loud.

Max juddered his head from side to side, like a dog casting off an irritant, expelling the internal conversation, bringing himself back to the living room's safe cocoon. I'm being defensive, he thought. No one knows. *I don't know*. Later. Later. I'll think about all that later.

"Um, no, I don't think so," Max finally answered.

"Did you finish that last application," Mom interjected, abruptly moving the conversation on to more benign territory.

“Not yet.” He should give her more. “Almost. I don’t have much homework left, so I might get it done tonight.”

“Well, I’m not nagging,” she said pleasantly, “but it *is* almost Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah,” Max agreed, tossing a piece of popcorn into the air and moving quickly to catch it, then chewing, then adding, “This is the last one. And I doubt I’d go to CalPoly even if they offered.”

“Great engineering school, son. If that’s really what you want to do ...” Dad said.

“Have you figured that out, Max?” Astrid interjected. “Not that you really need to. There’s a lot to be said for being a generalist for a year or two. Get a taste of all the options, *then* see what strikes your fancy.” Mom the professor. You’d think she would be rooting for him to go to Lewis & Clark. Free ride given her tenure in its history department. Instead, carefully, never to be accused of pushing one direction or another, she hinted Max might want to spread his wings, leave the nest, leave Portland, dive into and explore the world around him, find himself. Find himself. Were we back to self-discovery, back to that awkward matter? He pressed his eyelids, pushing the idea away. *Stop imagining stuff.*

“Not for sure.” He threw another piece into the air, this one far out of his reach, and it glided to the floor where he grabbed it, and ate it.

“Max, gross!” his mother said, face squinched.

“Engineering is definitely number one right now ...”

“Then CalPoly should be top of your list,” Charles interrupted.

“... but I for sure want to try some other things. Journalism sounds fun. And Megan is going to teach little kids, so I’m thinking about that too. Not little kids. I think they’re a pain. Maybe high school.”

Charles opened his mouth to comment on how smart Megan was, and she could achieve so much more than the poverty wages of elementary education. He thankfully stopped himself.

“I remember,” his father began instead, “when I started at OSU. This was before I met your mother, of course. Man, I tried a little of everything. Probably the best thing I ever did.”

Dad can talk about anything, Max knew. Just give him a topic, and off he goes.

“Did a little Spanish. That’s where we met, in fact. Spanish 111.”

“I think it was 112,” Astrid corrected him. “We didn’t have the first one together.”

“Yeah, right. That’s right,” he continued. “Anyway ...”

Max floated off to his own contemplations. On the one hand, going off to college was more exciting than scary. It would be a new beginning for him, for his life, for who he could be ... maybe for *what* he could be, if those two things were indeed different. And the farther away, the bolder his choice, the less certain his major, the cleaner the break with the Max of Rochelle, the Max of Chisholm High, the Max of the Treble Trouble, then the more the yawning doors of discovery would swing open, the more definitively he would move to become ... to become ... to *become*.

On the other hand, as he absorbed his present environment he wondered, *why would any sane person give this up?* The scene in this very room should tell him more than enough: the balminess of their affection, the three of them sitting in casual, trusting intimacy. And this was just one room. Every chamber in the house testified to their attachment, the intertwining of their very lives, from memories of hearty, aromatic collaborations in the kitchen, to the intense dramas and national events projected from the screen looming over them now, to the nightly, animated telling of tales in the dining room – yes, they were a clan that still shared most of their meals, noteworthy in and of

itself – tales about each of their daily existences, whether mundane or comical or sad.

And those were just the common areas. Even the private spaces spoke to their bond. Three bedrooms: the Master, Max's, and the guest quarters, as it had become. Originally, it was to be the room for Max's little brother or sister, an event which never happened, life and time having raced past the idea without the slightest regret from either Charles or Astrid – Max was a bountiful gift in their eyes.

All of which made Max's struggle all the more challenging for him. Was his inner turmoil trifling, possibly even petty, compared to the lot of so many others his age? He agonized over the thoughts battling inside his head, including a fate he often considered unspeakable. Was that a pathetic, entitled problem upon which to dwell? No, he told himself, not when it comes to my identity, to my truth, to my soul. And especially when I'm not sure *I* can accept me, or even *understand* me.

This debate was stymied by further considerations, more troubling than his personal Hamletian dilemma. For even if he could figure things out, Max was almost afraid to try. The outward perfection of his reality – the phenomenal home, the loving parents, the abundant opportunities – cautioned him to guard his good fortune. He was wary of any realizations that might change things, somehow let his parents down, create a separation, or cause them to look at him differently. After all, no matter how progressive Astrid and Charles may be to the rest of the world, no matter how cool they may seem to his own friends, there was no telling how they would react if he ever figured this out.

What Max sensed deep inside, this *entity*, made him feel distant, but as long as it remained deep within, he also felt imprisoned. He didn't want to mess everything up. An *Alien* movie scene played out slowly in Max's head, the one where a hideous Xenomorph infant bursts from Kane's chest, *right there on the table in the spaceship's*

*galley*. The grotesque creature's helmeted head pressed against Kane's abdomen, just as surrealistically as the discomfort of Max's internal brawl. Finally, in a spew of blood, the creature burst into the world, and Astrid shrieked!

His mother, in fact, leapt into the air with a loud yelp, and his father raised his arms above his head in the well know signal for a touchdown, the near-empty green bowl teetering on his lap as the uneaten brown kernels rattled inside. Max, partly in his nightmare, partly startled back to reality, looked at the action on the huge, flat display.

The Rogues had scored, several of them doing a poorly choreographed forward shimmy in the end zone, preening for the hand-held field camera. The people in the stands were largely unimpressed, so Max, still re-entering the atmosphere, gathered this was a road game. Of course it was. horned paraphernalia everywhere. Definitely not the NikeDome. Los Angeles. He was near certain that the Rams were the Los Angeles Rams, and noticing how scantily the fans were dressed, Southern California made sense.

"Oh, Charles, we should have gone!" Astrid said. "We might actually win this one." His dad just grinned, watching the unending replays, clearly pleased. "Max," she said, "this will put your grandpa in a great mood Thursday."

"Grandpa's always in a good mood," he replied. With another three days of school to go, he had forgotten about Thanksgiving. Last year they had enjoyed a sedate stuffing here, but every second or third holiday was spent at the Sparks Mansion – he couldn't believe anyone in his family tree had an actual mansion, although only his dad called it that, and never in front of Gunnar or Jocelyn.

"Let's not get too excited," Charles temporized, "it's only 26-24, and there's still half a quarter left,".

"O ye, of little faith," she answered.

Max decided to get a few factoids under his belt, not that conversation with Gunnar was ever hard, but just to show an interest.

“So, I heard they aren’t doing so great this year,” he asked.

“They beat Seattle twice,” Charles said, “which is awesome, but other than that, yeah, you’re right. Another tough year. Two-and-eight.”

“Lots of those games have been really close,” Astrid added, the eternal optimist. “And we’ve had more than our share of injuries.”

Max studied the broadcast, just back from commercials, the last one a trailer for the new Spiderman. Now *that* was something he couldn’t wait to see.

*Durkee lines up to kick-off. He’s been the unsung hero in this game so far, Ron. Four field goals and a couple of extra points.*

*Well, Cody, that’s actually the way it is on a lot of struggling teams, where the placekicker, like Derek Durkee here for the Rogues, leads his squad in scoring. Of course, it helps that he’s pretty darn accurate, one of the league leaders, in fact. If the Rogues were as stacked at other positions ...*

Noted. Max filed the nugget away. He wasn’t completely ignorant when it came to football. He knew the basics. A passion, however, it would never be. There were too many more important matters to spend time on than who was best at pushing an oblong, inflated pigskin across an arbitrarily magical line of chalk.

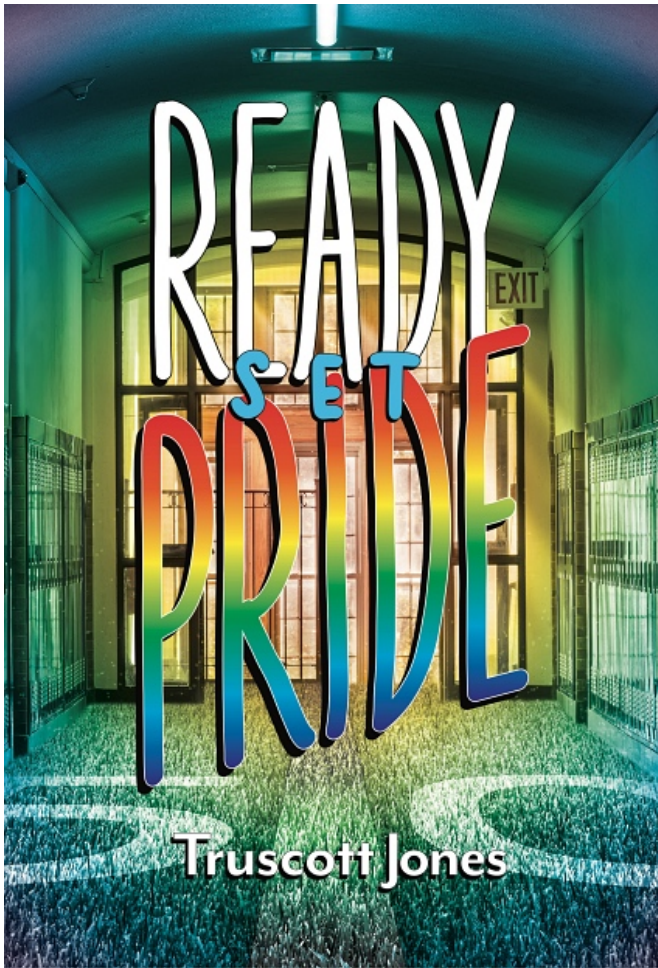
“Did you get the leaves yet, Hyphenate.” As a little kid, Max was so fixated with the unique nature of his last name, and especially that his *mother’s* surname took the lead, that Charles had granted him a nickname of his own.

“Ugh ... No.”

“Charles, let him watch the game. The yard will still be there.”

His dad shot him a mocked look of surprise, which Max returned. “You mean our son is watching football?”

“Why yes, Dad, I am,” Max said, his grin broadening. “And if our D can just stop this drive, we can run out the clock, and I’ll be out there raking away in no time.”



*When closeted teen Max Sparks inherits his grandpa's NFL franchise, he is thrust upon the national stage, suddenly forced to run a team, navigate classmates, social media, skeptical players, hard core fans, and discover himself, and love.*

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