

# The Wishbone

## HARRISON SCOTT KEY

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**MY FATHER DID MANY** things, but he did not cheat. Cheating required skills that Pop did not have, like the ability to whisper and make at least one good friend. Pop didn't have friends, which he believed were things meant for women and children, as were holidays and happiness—and cheating. A real man didn't need all that. All a man needed was a gun and a woodstove and maybe, if things got bad, some Vicks VapoRub. The man put it on everything: heads, chests, sore muscles, flank steak. But he did not cheat.

He followed all laws, rules, commandments, and codes, and when that didn't work, he did the gentlemanly thing and started abusing people. In fishing tournaments, where fraud was almost too easy and the purse was big, Pop did not stockpile big fish from earlier that week or shove lead weights down the large mouths of the largemouths, as others did. Instead, when he trolled up to a rich stretch of backwater and found another fisherman had beaten him there, he simply threatened to shoot the man.

"You're crazy," I heard more than one fisherman say.

"I might be," Pop would say. But he was no cheater.

Except for this one time.

It happened one cool November evening, with the hiss of fried pork chops and the pedantry of *Jeopardy's* Alex Trebek wafting down the hall to my room, where I was staring into the mirror at my changing body. It was a glorious thing, this body, and I admired it, its pubescent blubber melting away and hair arriving in secret places with disturbing speed.

"You're a man now," I said to the thing in the mirror. I flexed. What power!

There was a knock at the door. I jumped onto the bed, covered myself in a pillow, turned my book over, feigned reading. "Come in."

It was Pop.

There had been a great rift between us for months, ever since I'd stabbed the dagger of treason into his back. I'd quit the football team, and now I was no longer a son to him, but a turncoat. **Pop had been a football hero, then a coach, then my coach. My quitting the team was a tragedy, a royal abdication.** I might as well have tried to marry a Jew. I was dead to him.

Then came this knock at the door.

"What you doing under that pillow, boy?"

"Reading."

"What about?"

It was a slightly lusty Dean Koontz novel about a hermaphrodite whose sons possess the ability to telekinetically transport themselves through space and time, and so I said, "It's about science."

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“Neato Cheeto,” he said.

Something was wrong. Pop never acted positive about science.

“I need you to do something,” he said. He was also not a big asker of things. Still, I was honored to be the subject of his petition, whatever it was. “Fetch them old cleats you got and get dressed. We going to Pearl.”

There was only one thing in Pearl worth going to on a Thursday night: a complex of dirt football fields as flat and red as a Mars plateau.

“Why?” I said.

“I need you to suit up.” He walked out.

That was odd. Not because I preferred hermaphroditic literature to football, but because I was in high school. Pop coached a peewee team. Let me say that again: He coached a team full of ten- and eleven-year-old fatlings, whose soft little necks had trouble holding up a helmet. My neck, along with the rest of me, was fully formed. I was fourteen.

Was this a joke? Ah, yes, perhaps it was. Perhaps the old man was being funny. And then I remembered: Pop did not tell jokes. The horn on the Dodge bellowed. I grabbed my cleats, ran toward the sound.

Pop, they said, was a beast on the grass, a true wonder in athletic contest, despite being as round and thick as a mastodon. They could say this because it was back when they had mastodons. The man had a head like a medicine ball, legs like Doric columns, shoulders like two HoneyBaked hams on either side of a very wide room. It was generally agreed that he would eventually play ball for Coach Vaught at Ole Miss or, at the very least, wrestle bears for a living. Then, during a fateful high school game versus Hernando, he broke one of the more necessary bones in his leg, and—just like that—the dream died. And so, since he would not be making any game-saving sacks or game-winning scores, he set himself to making something even better: a little man, just like him, who

might fill those cleats and carry the mantle, live the unlive dream. No son of his would have a choice in the matter. The gravity and density of his DNA were too much to ignore.

It took him three marriages, but finally, he got him a boy.

“Hot damn!” Pop said in a hospital just up the road from Graceland. “I do believe that’s a pecker.” He devoted the next eighteen years of

his life to making a man of the little thing attached to the pecker. Of course, the little thing was me.

“It’ll make a man out of you,” he was always saying. Take the time he told me to saw a deer in half. He handed me a rusty bone saw old enough to have been used by Grant’s siege engineers at Vicksburg and told me to run it through the dead thing’s pelvis.

“It’ll make a man out of you, boy!” he said, handing me the saw. “And don’t be sawing through his nuts, neither.”

This is advice I’ve taken everywhere with me: don’t be sawing through an animal’s nuts. Speaking of nuts, that’s what Pop was about football. It had everything required to make a boy into a man: brutality, blood, a nearby concession stand.

On the way to Pearl, we spoke little. I had so many questions, like “Do you really expect me to hit all those children?” and “Have you lost your mind?” We powered up Highway 18 in the Dodge, not even a radio station to break the tension. He stared ahead, as he always did, with the frozen gaze one typically associates with Arctic muskoxen.

It took him three marriages,  
but finally, he got him a boy.

I was worried. I was not a big rulebreaker. I did not like the idea of flouting what was clearly league policy about age limits. Some of the boys who played up in Pearl, they were big. I might not stand out too much. But still. What if I was caught?

“So—” I said.

“I got you at fullback,” he said, looking straight ahead into the black.

“Oh.”

“We running the Wishbone.”

“Good.”

I had no idea what the Wishbone was. Some kind of formation. Also, a salad dressing. I suppose he could sense my wondering, because he soon explained that he was expecting only ten players to show and needed one more or else he'd have to forfeit. I suggested there'd be dozens of teams at the park and that he shouldn't have a problem finding an eleventh from another squad, some boy of some eager father who wanted his boy to get more reps in.

“It's you what knows the plays,” he said.

“True, true.”

I remembered none of the plays. Pop was always doing this, assuming I knew more than I knew about whatever game it was he'd ordered me to play. Overestimating my talent. Believing his DNA had won the battle with my mother's and that I was like him in every athletic way, even though history had shown us both otherwise.

When I turned ten, Pop announced that I would play football.

When I was five, he put me on a soccer team, believing the angularity and velocity of the sport would at least teach me to run, even though he considered soccer a game for boys with vaginas. I found it disorienting, a marriage of kickball and prison riot. My only physical virtue was this enormous head, bequeathed to me through the miracle of genetics, and so I resorted to hitting people with it. The other parents became worried, but not Pop.

“My boy's got a powerful head, don't he?” Pop would say.

Next, he put me on a baseball team with boys three years older than me, hoping I'd rise to the challenge. Mercifully, they put me in right field, a clear signal to all that I was mentally disabled. On the rare occasion when a ball limped my way, I'd hurl it toward the infield and would be as shocked as everyone else to see it flying in the wrong direction, toward the heads of children on other fields. The parents shrieked, sought medical help, but not Pop.

“The boy's got a powerful arm!” he would say, sirens in the distance.

As I got older, I filled out a little, foreshadowing my future girth and power, but still lacked hand-eye coordination, as well as eye-foot, foot-foot, and head-wall coordination. In games of Smear the Queer or Two Hand Touch, I struck people and objects with great frequency. Once, after scoring a touchdown, I broadsided my grandfather's barn and knocked two planks loose. Cousins ran inside for something to soak up the blood, but not Pop.

“I swunny if he don't have him some powerful legs, too,” he said, while relatives pried me from the me-shaped hole.

When I turned ten, Pop announced that I would play football. The time had come. Glory. It was an August afternoon when he took me outside, pulled from his trunk enough football equipment to make a house payment, and told me to put it on so he could hit me: shoulder pads, Puma cleats, a jockstrap large enough for a Viking warlord. I put it on. He got down opposite me.

“Say, Hut, hut,” he said.

“Why?”

“Just say it.”

Nothing’s quite as horrifying as watching your extra-large father—for all practical purposes the Incredible Hulk with a heart condition and comb-over—squat down, look you in the eyes, and ask you to ask him to hit you.

“Hut, hut,” I said, and I soon found myself blessed with the gift of backward flight.

“What are you doing to my baby?” Mom said, as I lay there, my nose bleeding, my life-force pooling into the dry, sandy ground.

“That’s how a man hits,” he said.

Pop had never been my coach before. He was safer in the bleachers, telling himself harmless lies about his boy. But coaching. Someone could get hurt. Me, for example.

Pop poured everything into my teams, building squads which might array themselves around me and help carry me to some future exaltation. He did this by trolling the playgrounds and trailer parks of our community, filling the roster with previously unknown athletes, boys whose time in juvenile detention had precluded their involvement in youth sports. He made the acquaintance of other large men, who might have large offspring, and many did. He reached across racial lines and signed up poor black children, whose parents could not afford the registration fee, or the equipment, or the gas money to get to games, and he paid from his own pocket. Which is to say, we had a roster full of lawless, large, fast, and very grateful athletes. Also, we had no savings.

“You spend too much on football,” Mom said.

“It’s his future we talking about,” Pop said. “He’ll play college ball one day.”

“I sure would like to take a vacation one day.”

“I sure would like you to shut up.”

That was their marriage.

And it worked. She shut up, and we won bowl trophies and whipped many teams across the county. Pop soon became a vaunted member of the fraternity of coaches, a real bootstraps kind of hero. And I am grateful for what he did. It was fun, all the healthy camaraderie, the sleepovers after games, the time spent with family in the hospital while suffering from concussions.

I toughed it out, fought through phalanxes of giant cornfed children, tried my hardest to do something right. I could barely understand the cryptic metaphors Pop used in his coaching.

“Eat his lunch!” Pop would shout from the sidelines.

“Eat his what?”

“His lunch.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Let me hear some leather pop!”

“Leather?” I would say. It sounded like something he’d pried out of a dictionary of nineteenth century hobo slang.

“You know,” he’d say, clapping.

None of us were wearing leather, as far as I could tell. Should we be? Did he want me to carry some kind of a whip?

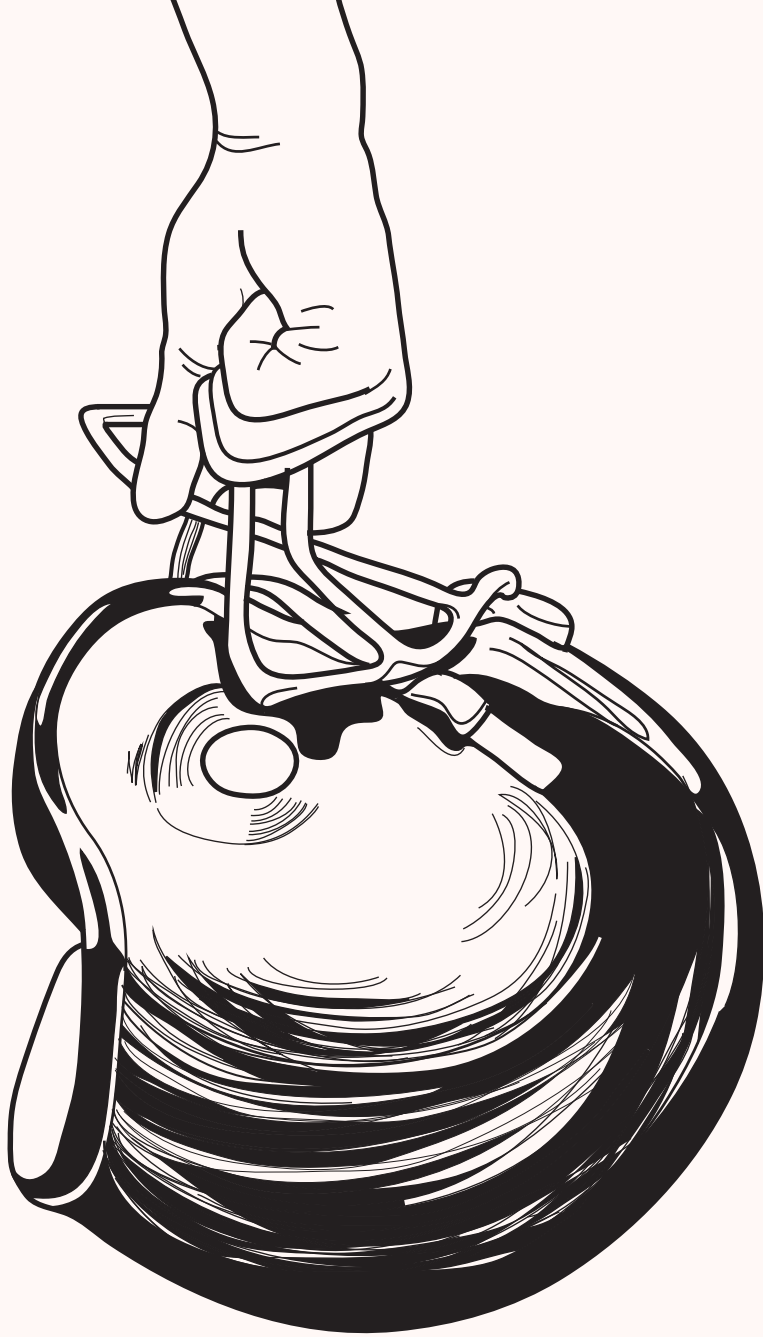
“Take a two-by-four to him, Junior!”

“To who?” I’d say. “There’s eleven of them.”

“Yo deddy crazy,” my teammates would say. “He ack thataway atcho house?”

“Sometimes,” I’d say.

If pictures are worth a thousand words, the look on my face in team photos of this era says something like, “I am uncomfortable and hot.” My face is strained and stiff, the



countenance of a fatalist who is suffering from a high-fiber diet. I seem to be making private signals to the camera, suggesting my location and how a well-trained team of SEALS might extract me.

Over the next four years, I tried to quit football approximately 842 times. There was one rough game where a fullback, who seemed way too old for junior high, had abused me. His age, of course, was an assumption of mine, based entirely on his lush and rather full mustache.

“I think he collapsed one of my lungs,” I said.

Pop, as ever, pretended not to hear. “You shoulda eat his lunch.”

“I don’t even like lunch. I don’t like football, either.”

“I sho am hungry,” he said. “I could eat me a turkey leg.”

I dreamt of being in a terrible car accident and losing my legs. Having no feet, I believed, would make it easier to quit. During a physical in Jackson, I got the brilliant idea to have a physician sanction my unfitness to play.

"I have a heart murmur," I said. "I could die."

"You won't die."

"But I might die."

"Not from that."

"But one day."

"One day, yes," he said. Then he put his credentialed hand around my vitals and made me cough.

Back at home, I kept trying. "It's just . . . there are so many extracurricular activities I could do," I said.

"We got to get you a multivitamin, firm you up."

"Like maybe the quiz bowl team."

"Make a muscle," he said, groping my bicep.

With my other arm, I extended an envelope. "Did you see this invitation I got to join Mensa?" I asked.

"Men's who?"

"It's for geniuses," Mom said from the kitchen. "My baby is a genius."

Pop looked toward the sound of dishwasher, confused. "Your momma's gone crazy," he said.

"It just seems like maybe I should focus on things besides football," I said.

"You mean, like baseball?"

"Like maybe the chess team."

*Their peewee teams were notoriously nasty, unmannered, and good.*

Something inside him died. You could see it. He stared into the middle distance, as though reaching back through memory for some tenuous relationship between chess and balls.

I soon spiraled into a whorl of decadence with the chess and science clubs, learning very different kinds of offensive moves and establishing control groups and reveling in the empirically verifiable company of other disappointing children. Pop and I didn't speak for weeks.

Until that night when he came knocking and told me to find my cleats.

We arrived at the Center City Complex of Pearl, Mississippi, and I remembered that I did not like Pearl very much—a community best known for its excellent marching bands, violent dogs, and high rates of venereal disease. *Their peewee teams were notoriously nasty, unmannered, and good.* We didn't know why they had always been so much better and stronger and faster than us, but we suspected it had something to do with having stepfathers who abused them. The only consolation, for those of us from outlying rural communities, was that they would all soon be in prison.

Pop opened his door, got out. It was night. The halogen glow formed a dome around the park, over which moved low gunmetal clouds. A gust of wind blew off Pop's baseball cap, and his hairflap came unmoored, rose to attention.

"I got your pads in back," he said and walked toward the lights.

I found all my old gear, including a jockstrap that smelled of spring meadows. I undressed right there in the grassy glen, preparing to don equipment that I had first worn four years earlier, when I was not yet the size of a Viking warlord as I was now, owing to a strict regimen of Little Debbie Fudge Rounds and Cool Ranch Doritos. I had grown as big as Pop, but not in the right way. Not with the muscles.

A quart of sweat later, I made a jarring lurch onto the field, like Dr. Frankenstein's hopeful monster duct-taped inside a protective barrier of sofa cushions. My knees

refused to flex, and my shoulders had grown too large for the shoulder pads, which now perched atop my clavicles rather than astride them, giving the effect of small and functionless wings sprouting from my neck.

**I joined my team, a squad of cushioned munchkins.**

“Who are you?” a small uniformed boy asked, looking up.

“I’m Coach Key’s son,” I said.

“You’re big,” he said, poking a finger deep into the fatty tissues around my exposed gut. More of the younglings gathered around me, as children are wont to do with Jesus and clowns.

“How old are you?” they said.

“He’s tall as my uncle.”

“What grade is he in? Hey, what grade are you in?”

“He ain’t got no grade,” Pop said, strutting over. “He’s homeschooled.”

It was strange to hear my father lie so imaginatively.

“I’m in high school, and I have a driver’s permit,” I wanted to say. But it would blow Pop’s cover, so I didn’t.

Then, during warm-ups, the taunts began.

“Ain’t he a big one?” I heard, off to my right, from the Pearl side.

“The big ones is always stupid,” another said.

“Hey, boy!” they said. “I bet you too big even to fit in the short bus!” They howled.

The Pearl parents appeared to believe I was slow of speech and had something of a gland problem.

“Good luck tonight, hon!” a tattooed mother said. “You about to bust outta that uniform, ain’t you!”

**I said nothing, just stared dumbly, which only strengthened their belief in my retardation.** I ignored them, tried to be the bigger man. I was the bigger man. Bigger than some of the parents, even.

“Grab a knee,” Pop said.

It was almost time. My teammates looked up to me, and I looked up to Pop, and Pop looked at a point approximately thirty degrees above the horizon, as though he’d sighted a large formation of ducks he wished to shoot. It started to rain.

“Lead us in a prayer,” Pop said to me, and I did as I was told.

I was disoriented, at first, by the giant-headed children raging around below me in the rain. Then, four plays into the game, I got steamrolled by a child I hadn’t seen coming and landed sideways in orange mud that was the consistency and color of an unfinished carrot cake. My teammates gathered around me, their dripping helmets wreathing the dark sky. One of them kicked me.

“I think Coach Key’s son is dead.”

I elbowed myself to a sitting position. My small attacker was the size of a ferret but appeared to be feeding on amino acids and gunpowder.

“I tole you he was dumb, Rusty!” his teammates said to him, high-fiving. It was embarrassing, getting whipped by a fifth-grader named Rusty.

**What happened next would become the stuff of peewee football lore.**

And what happened was, I sort of became an enraged gorilla. At fullback, I folded up children like bad origami, including Rusty, who soon took to running in the opposite direction, screaming. I chased down the largest players, knocked them into a new day of the week. I started calling the plays, took the handoff, ran over as many athletes as possible, which required several awkward turns and parabolic vectors, before entering the endzone. On my second—or was it my third?—touchdown, I dragged at least four

defenders across the plane, along with one of my own pocket-sized teammates, who had become excited and was riding me like a homecoming float.

“It feels so good!” he said.

“It does,” I said.

I ran around children, over them, under them, and, at one point, fulfilled a childhood fantasy by throwing and then catching the very same pass. I made their running backs drop balls merely by barking at them.

“He’s got the rabies,” they said. “He’s a animal.”

And I was. I played with abandon, both because I knew it would be my last football game ever and also because, owing to puberty and the shrinking properties of cotton, my jockstrap finally fit. My cup, literally, runneth over, and onward, for many touchdowns.

“Thatta way, boy!” Pop said. “Stack ’em like cordwood!”

Ah, yes! The metaphors—they all made sense now. I started inventing my own.

“I just ate a tree!” I said to a fallen Pearl athlete. Or, “I’m about to grow a new head!”

“That don’t even make sense,” Rusty said, from across the line.

People were starting to talk. I saw them pointing, whispering. I knew there might be inquiries made about the depth of my voice and the hair on my arms and the date on my birth certificate. From what I could tell and hear, it was believed that I was either in high school or the greatest athlete in the history of youth football.

By the time the game was over, the field was littered with bodies. Children cried in pain or wept in joy, depending, rolling around celebrating or lamenting in the soupy carnage. Parents and coaches were on the field to tend the wounded. Referees shook their heads. The score was 63-0, and every point was mine.

It was lovely, really.

To him, it wasn't cheating.  
It was fathering.

Pop put his hand on my shoulder, and we beheld the spectacle of the battlefield together, where an alternate history played itself out, unraveling backward like reversed game-tape, a glorious past where I had not quit, where I had inherited the best qualities of this beast on the grass that was my father.

“We whipped ’em good,” he said.

I couldn’t help thinking that he’d wanted me to play, to feel what it was like to be him, at least for one game. To him, it wasn’t cheating. It was fathering.

Pop was smart, and we got out of there quick, while children tried to get my autograph or a lock of my hair, and league officials loitered to get a look at the young Sasquatch. On the way home, we spoke little. My ears rang like they always did after games, but now it was from all the cheering. To my knowledge, nobody ever pressed the matter. Pop was allowed to continue coaching and did so for many years.

There in the truck, in the dark, plowing through fat gems of rain, Pop spoke first. “I would like you to play again,” he said. “In high school at least.”

“Pop,” I said, “I hate football.”

“A man likes to see his boy play.”

“I played tonight.”

I had terrorized many young children on that field, had eaten many lunches, had perhaps ruptured important organs and caused internal hemorrhaging. It felt great. Somehow, even then, I knew that this sort of triumphant feeling could never be achieved at our nation’s many science fairs.

“It’s fun to whip a little ass, ain’t it?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “It kind of is.”

And for once, it was no lie. ■