

Bullyhood by Timothy Gager

When I was ten, my best friend in fifth grade weighed over 175 pounds. Johnny was my best friend, not by choice, but by geographical logistics. Our families lived in a very rural section of Long Island, nothing but horse and sod farms with a thirty minute drive to the nearest store. Johnny lived somewhere in between, but instead of going there I'd rather stay home watching *The Family Feud* or *Match Game*, because Johnny was a brute.

This wasn't his parent's fault. They gave him everything he possibly wanted. Johnny was more a product of society. For instance, in the annual school plays, he was always given a role of *scenery*. He was the only part of the set that could get away with being alive. I, on the other hand would disappear within the performance, always as some sort of extra, listed as "towns people" or "crowd on 52nd Street". I remember one time, Johnny was cast as a mountain for our production of *The Sound of Music*. He didn't appear to be upset by this, just huge, in his green rocky dirty looking outfit. "I'm a big bad mountain," he announced backstage while cracking me on the side of the head. He seemed to relish this, squashing one of the "party guests" of *The Captain* and his fiancée, Elsa Schraeder.

I'd always end up on the short end of moments such as this, either left without lunch money or if I happened to sneak by and get a lunch, having the tray knocked out of my hand by Johnny before I could enjoy the taste of Mrs. Gatewood's apple crisp.

One year, after Christmas, I was invited over Johnny's house. He had been given real boxing gloves as a present. They were heavy, red and shiny. We would role-play certain matches and undercards, with Johnny always prevailing at the end. When he tired of pummeling me, he covered up and let me throw a series of frustrated punches one after another and acted as if I were hurting him. After five or six futile roundhouses, Johnny snapped out of his act and rallied like Ali or maybe more like pro-wrestler Chief Jay Strongbow. Strongbow, a proud native-American would get hurt, regain his strength, by doing a war dance (sometimes while crying), energizing himself with kicks and punches, and finally pinning his opponent. The crowd loved it. In this play, Johnny was the role of the crowd, making a *hoooooooooooooooooooooh* after knocking me down on the basement floor.

In regards to my welts, my parents chose not to intervene, until finally, we moved to West Islip and due to my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder I was still socially disabled, never with the popular crew. I was outgoing enough to have friends, but my nervousness didn't allow me to overcome the role given to me by the high school hierarchy, ...that of dork. The cool kids were the jocks and the stoners. They excelled in athletics and drugs. My friends excelled at Chess, on the Math Team, in Junior Achievement and the French Club.

One year my friends and I attempted to better our social standing by attending the football team's open tryout. Coach lined us up to scrimmage against the first team. We got squashed! After we were beat, we could

hear him taunting us from across the field, "There's a need for members in the rally squad if you still want to support the team." We took it.

One of the jobs the rally squad had was to stand on the sideline and hold the downs indicator, that stick with the numbers 1 through 4 you flip after every play. The person responsible had to flip the number, based exactly on, without error, the precise down it was. The other field job we held was so unimportant that I do not know, even to this day, what it was called. Again we held a blunt stick into the ground. This time it marked the exact spot the team with possession of the ball started their drive. So if the team started on the twenty-yard line, you stood on the sideline at the twenty-yard line with your marker. You didn't move for awhile. Sometimes you stood in one place for fifteen minutes...until the other team took over on offense and then you stood there. This was to be my responsibility for the last game of the season against the town I moved from, seven years ago. The team had a squad small in number and in size but Johnny was there, wearing the number 99, lumbering in the middle of their defensive line. Even though we were ahead 20-0, and moving the ball with ease, I still wasn't feeling all that comfortable with Johnny this close in proximity. He was still going to get me, he was going to manage to humiliate me in front of everyone.

When the score became 27-0, we were moving the ball, again close to scoring. I was standing at around our thirty-five yard line, where we started the drive. The action was away from me, and I was checking the bald spots in the turf when something happened. Our third string quarterback fumbled and the ball was scooped up by Johnny, who began running down the sideline,

heading directly for me. His legs were churning, his arms pumping and he was running, really moving down the sideline, his 99 bouncing up and down as if it were driven by a jackhammer. I was sweating. I twisted and started to pull up the possession marker. He was getting closer. As he rumbled by, I raised the marker, over my head, holding it like a spear and I threw it into his legs the way he used to throw a stick into the spokes of my bicycle when I was riding past him.

Incredibly, Johnny went down. The crowd was stunned silent. I jumped around as if I'd made the best West Islip play that entire afternoon. I was overwhelmed with joy and vindication, pure ignorant bliss, until Johnny stood up with a strange look of bewilderment in his eyes. He ran toward me and began punching me so fast and hard that I didn't have time to cover up. Finally the mascot and some of the officials pulled him off. The referee indicated an automatic touchdown for Johnny's team, threw Johnny out of the game and me out of the stadium.

The play made all the local papers. Afterward, my parents forced me to go to a doctor. I had to talk about my hatred toward Johnny and all the things he had done to me years ago while he was still my best friend. I really don't think talking about it did any good, nor was it what I really needed. In fact, I'd already become popular in school immediately following "the play", which was talked about in the hallways and cited within my yearbook, as one of the moments defining my classmate's senior years.

