

*anyone could have
predicted hugo
would be a
middling middle
linebacker for the
rest of his career—
but anyone who
did so would have
been dead wrong*

WHISPERS IN BEDLAM

fiction **By IRWIN SHAW** HE WAS A TYPICAL 235-pound married American boy, rosy-cheeked, broken-nosed, with an excellent five-tooth bridge across the front of his mouth and a 63-stitch scar on his right knee, where the doctors had done some remarkable things with floating cartilage. His father-in-law had a thriving insurance agency and there was a place open in it for him, the sooner, his father-in-law said, the better. He was growing progressively deafer in the left ear, due to something that had happened to him during the course of his work the year before on a cold Sunday afternoon out in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He was a professional football player. He played middle linebacker on defense and a certain amount of physical wear and tear was to be expected, especially in Green Bay.

His name was Hugo Pleiss. He was not famous. He had played on three teams, the sort of teams that are always around the bottom of their division. When coaches said that they were going to rebuild their clubs for next year, the first thing they did was to trade Hugo or declare him a free agent. But with all the new teams coming into the leagues, and the consequent demand for experienced players, Hugo always managed to be on somebody's roster when a new season started. He was large and eager to learn and he liked to play football and he had what coaches called "desire" when talking to sportswriters. While intelligent enough in real life (he had been a B student in college), on the field he was all too easily fooled. Perhaps, fundamentally, he was too honest and trusting of his fellow man. Fake hand-offs sent him crashing to the left when the play went to the right. He covered decoys with religious devotion while receivers whistled past him into the clear. He had an unenviable record of tackling blockers while allowing ball carriers to run over him. He hadn't intercepted a single pass in his entire career. He was doing well enough, though, until the incident of his ear at Green Bay. The man who played left corner back with him, Johnny Smathers, had a quick instinct for reading plays and, as the offense shaped up, would shout to Hugo and warn him where the play was going. Smathers was small, distrustful and crafty, with a strong instinct for self-preservation and more often than not turned out to be right. So Hugo was having a pretty fair season until he began to go deaf in the ear on Smathers' side and no longer could hear the corner back's instructions.

After two games in which Smathers had correctly diagnosed and called dozens of plays, only to see Hugo go hurtling off in the opposite direction, Smathers had stopped talking to Hugo at all, on or off the field. This hurt Hugo, who was a friendly soul. He liked Smathers and was grateful for his help and he wished he could explain about his left ear; but once the word got around that he was deaf, he was sure he'd be dropped from the squad. He wasn't yet ready to sell insurance for his father-in-law.

Luckily, the injury to Hugo's ear came near the end of the season and his ordinary level of play was not so high that the drop in his efficiency had any spectacular effect on the coaches or the public. But Hugo, locked in his auditory half-world, fearful of silent enemies on his left and oblivious to the cheers and jeers of half the stadium, brooded.

Off the field, despite occasional little mishaps, he could do well enough. He learned to sit on the left of the





coach at all meetings and convinced his wife that he slept better on the opposite side of the bed than on the one he had always occupied in the three years of their marriage. His wife, Sibyl, was a girl who liked to talk, anyway, mostly in protracted monologs, and an occasional nod of the head satisfied most of her demands for conversational responses. And a slight and almost unnoticeable twist of the head at most gatherings put Hugo's right ear into receiving position and enabled him to get a serviceable fix on the speaker.

With the approach of summer and the imminence of the pre-season training sessions, Hugo brooded more than ever. He was not given to introspection or fanciful similes about himself, but he began to think about the left side of his head as a tightly corked carbonated cider bottle. He poked at his eardrum with pencil points, toothpicks and a nail clipper, to let the fizz out; but aside from starting a slight infection that suppurated for a week, there was no result.

Finally, he made hesitant inquiries, like a man trying to find the address of an abortionist, and found the name of an ear specialist on the other side of town. He waited for Sibyl to go on her annual two-week visit to her parents in Oregon and made an appointment for the next day.



Dr. G. W. Sebastian was a small oval Hungarian who was enthusiastic about his work. He had clean, plump little busy hands and keen, merry eyes. Affliction, especially in his chosen field, pleased him and the prospect of long, complicated and possibly dangerous operations filled him with joy. "Lovely," he kept saying, as he stood on a leather stool to examine Hugo's ear, "Oh, absolutely lovely." He didn't seem to have many patients. "Nobody takes ears seriously enough," he explained, as he poked with lights and curiously shaped instruments into Hugo's ear. "People always think they hear well enough or that other people have suddenly all begun to mumble. Or, if they do realize they're not getting everything, that there's nothing to be done about it. You're a wise young man, very wise, to have come to me in time. What is it you told Miss Cattavi your profession was?"

Miss Cattavi was the nurse. She was a six-foot, 165-pounder who looked as though she shaved twice a day. She had immigrated from northern Italy and was convinced that Hugo played soccer for a living. "That Pele," she had said. "The money he makes!"

Dr. Sebastian had never seen a football game in his life, either, and an impatient look came over his face as Hugo tried to explain what he did on Sundays and about Johnny Smathers and not being able to hear cleats

pounding perilously on his left side when he went in to stop a draw over center. Dr. Sebastian also looked a little puzzled when Hugo tried to explain just exactly what had happened at Green Bay. "People do things like that?" he had said incredulously. "Just for money? In America?"

He probed away industriously, clucking to himself and smelling of peppermint and newly invented antiseptics, orating in little bursts that Hugo couldn't quite hear. "We are far behind the animals," was one thing Hugo *did* hear. "A dog responds to a whistle on a wave length that is silence for a human being. He hears a footfall on grass fifty yards away and growls in the darkness of the night. A fish hears the splash of a sardine in the water a mile away from him, and we have not yet begun to understand the aural genius of owls and bats."

Hugo had no desire to hear whistles on dogs' wave lengths or footfalls on grass. He was uninterested in the splash of distant sardines and he was not an admirer of the genius of owls and bats. All he wanted to be able to hear was Johnny Smathers ten yards to his left in a football stadium. But he listened patiently. After what doctors had done for his knee, he had a childlike faith in them; and if Dr. Sebastian, in the course of restoring his hearing, wanted to praise the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, Hugo was prepared to be polite and nod agreement from time to time, just as he did when Sibyl spoke about politics or miniskirts or why she was sure Johnny Smathers' wife was no better than she should be when the team was on the road.

"We have allowed our senses to atrophy," Hugo winced as Dr. Sebastian rose on his toes for leverage and went rather deep with a blunt instrument. "We have lost our animal magic. We are only one third in communication, even the best of us. Whole new fields of understanding are waiting to be explored. When Beethoven's last quartets are played in a concert hall, a thousand people should fall out of their seats and writhe in unbearable ecstasy on the floor. Instead, what do they do? They look at their programs and wonder if there will be time for a beer before catching the last train home."

Hugo nodded. He had never heard any of Beethoven's last quartets and the floor of a concert hall didn't seem like the place a nice, well-brought-up married American boy should choose to writhe in ecstasy; but now that he had taken the step of going to a doctor, he was going to see it through. Still, with talk like that, about dogs and owls and sardines, he could see why there were no patients waiting in Dr. Sebastian's outer office.

"A crusade," Dr. Sebastian was saying, his eye glued to a lighted chromium funnel whose narrow end seemed to be embedded deep in Hugo's brain. Dr. Sebastian's breath pepperminted warmly on Hugo's bare neck. "A crusade is called for. You have a most unusually arranged collection of bones, Mr. Pleiss. A crusade to lift the curtain of sound, to unmuffle, to recapture our animal heritage, to distinguish whispers in bedlam, to hear the rustle of roses opening in the morning sun, to catch threats before they are really spoken, to recognize promises that are hardly formulated. I never did see a bone structure like this, Mr. Pleiss."

"Well, that feller in Green Bay weighed nearly three hundred pounds and his elbow——"

"Never mind, never mind." Dr. Sebastian finally pulled various bits of machinery out of his ear. "We will operate tomorrow morning, Miss Cattavi."

"OK," Miss Cattavi said. She had been sitting on a bench, looking as though she were ready to go in as soon as her team got the ball. "I'll make the arrangements."

"But——" Hugo began.

"I'll have everything ready," Dr. Sebastian said. "You've got nothing to worry about. Merely present yourself at the Lubenhorn Eye, Ear and Nose Clinic at three P.M. this afternoon."

"But there're one or two things I'd like to——"

"I'm afraid I'm terribly busy, Mr. Pleiss," Dr. Sebastian said. He whisked out of the office, peppermint receding on the aseptic air.

"He'll fix you," Miss Cattavi said, as she showed him to the door.

"I'm sure he will," said Hugo, "but——"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Miss Cattavi said, "if you came back to have the other ear done."

When Hugo woke up after the operation, Dr. Sebastian was standing next to his bed, smiling merrily. "Naturally," Dr. Sebastian said, "there is a certain slight discomfort."

The left side of Hugo's head felt as though it were inside the turret of a tank that was firing 60 rounds a minute. It also still felt like a corked cider bottle.

"You have an extraordinary bone structure, Mr. Pleiss." The doctor raised himself on tiptoe, so as to be able to smile approvingly down into Hugo's face. He spent a lot of time on his toes, Dr. Sebastian. In one way, it would have been more sensible if he had specialized in things like knees and ankles, instead of ears. "So extraordinary that I hated to finish the operation. It was like discovering a new continent. What a morning you have given me, Mr. Pleiss! I am even tempted not to charge you a penny."

It turned out later that Dr. Sebastian resisted this temptation. He sent a bill for \$500. By the time Hugo received the bill, on the same day that Sibyl came back from Oregon, he was happy to pay it. The hearing in his left ear was restored. Now, if only Johnny Smathers wasn't traded away and if their relationship could be patched up, Hugo was sure he'd be in there at middle linebacker for the whole season.

There was a red scar behind his ear, but Sibyl didn't notice it for four days. She wasn't a very observant girl, Sibyl, except when she was looking at other girls' clothes and hair. When Sibyl finally did notice the scar, Hugo told her he'd cut himself shaving. He'd have had to use a saw-toothed bread knife to shave with to give himself a scar like that, but Sibyl accepted his explanation. He was rock-bottom honest, (continued overleaf)

Hugo, and this was the first time he'd ever lied to his wife. The first lie is easy to get away with.

. . .

When he reported in to training camp, Hugo immediately patched up his friendship with Johnny Smathers. Johnny was a little cool at first, remembering how many times at the end of last season he had been made to look bad, all alone out there with two and three blockers trampling over him as Hugo was dashing away to the other side of the field, where nothing was happening. But when Hugo went as far as to confide in him that he'd had a little ringing in his left ear after the Green Bay game, a condition that had subsided since, Smathers had been understanding, and they even wound up as roommates.

Pre-season practice was satisfactory. The coach understood about the special relationship between Hugo and Smathers and always played them together and Hugo's performance was respectable, even though nobody was confusing him with Sam Huff or Dick Butkus or people like that.

The exhibition games didn't go badly and while Hugo didn't distinguish himself particularly, he made his fair share of tackles and batted down a few passes, listening carefully to Johnny Smathers' instructions and not being caught out of position too many times. It was a more-or-less normal September for Hugo, like so many Septembers of his life—sweaty, full of aches and bruises and abuse from coaches, not making love on Friday and Saturday, so as not to lose his edge for Sunday, feeling frightened for his life on Sunday morning and delighted to be able to walk out of the stadium on his own two feet in the dusk on Sunday afternoon. For want of a better word, what Hugo felt was happiness.

Then, just a minute before the end of the first regular league game of the season, something peculiar happened. Hugo's team was ahead, 21 to 18, and the other team had the ball on his team's eighty-yard line. It was third down and four to go and the crowd was yelling so much, the opposing quarterback, Brabbledoff, kept holding up his arms to get them to quiet down enough so that he could be heard in the huddle. The crowd hushed a bit; but, even so, Hugo was afraid he wouldn't be able to hear Smathers when the play started. He shook his head to clear the sweat from the inside of his helmet and, for a moment, his left ear was parallel to the opposing huddle. Then the peculiar thing happened. He heard what Brabbledoff was saying, just as if he were right there next to him in the huddle. And the huddle was a good 15 yards away from Hugo, at least, and the crowd was roaring. "I'm going to bootleg it to the weak side," Brabbledoff was saying. "And, for Christ's sake, make it look real!"

The opposing team lined up and just before the snap, Hugo heard Smathers yell, "Around end to the strong side, around end to the strong side, Hugo!"

The two lines leaped into action; the guards pulled out to lead the run to the strong side. Hugo could have sworn he saw Brabbledoff hand off to Frenzich, the halfback, who churned after the screen of interference, while Brabbledoff sauntered back, as though out of the play. Everybody on Hugo's team scrambled to stop the strong-side thrust. Everybody but Hugo. It was as though a button had been pushed somewhere in his back, making his moves mechanical. Struggling against the tide of traffic, he trailed Brabbledoff, who suddenly, in the clear, with no one near him, began to run like a frightened deer toward the weak-side corner, the ball now pulled out from behind the hip that had been hiding it. Hugo was there on the line of scrimmage, all alone, and he hurled himself at Brabbledoff. Brabbledoff said something unsportsmanlike as he went down with Hugo on top of him, then fumbled the ball. Hugo kneeled on Brabbledoff's face and recovered the ball.

Hugo's teammates pummeled him in congratulation and they ran out the clock with two line bucks and the game was over, with the score 21 to 18.

The team voted Hugo the game ball in the locker room and the coach said, "It's about time you read a play correctly, Pleiss," which was high praise, indeed, from that particular coach.

In the shower, Johnny Smathers came over to him. "Man," Johnny said, "I could have killed you when I saw you drifting over to the weak side after I yelled at you. What tipped you off?"

"Nothing," Hugo said, after a moment's hesitation.

"It was a hell of a play," said Smathers.

"It was just a hunch," Hugo said modestly.

He was quieter than usual that Sunday night, especially after a win. He kept thinking about Dr. Sebastian and the sound of roses opening.

. . .

The next Sunday, Hugo went out onto the field just like every Sunday. He hadn't heard anything all week that a man wouldn't ordinarily hear and he was sure that it had been an acoustical freak that had carried Brabbledoff's voice to him from the huddle. Nothing unusual happened in the first half of the game. Smathers guessed right about half of the time and while there was no danger that Hugo was going to be elected defensive player of the week by the newspapers, he served creditably for the first 30 minutes.

It was a rough game and in the third quarter, he was shaken breaking into a screen and got up a little groggy. Moving around to clear his head while the

other team was in the huddle, he happened to turn his left side toward the line of scrimmage. Then it happened again. Just as though he were right there, in the middle of the opposing huddle, he heard the quarterback say, in a hoarse whisper, "Red right! Flood left! Wing square in! R down and out . . . on five!"

Hugo looked around to see if any of his teammates had heard, too. But they looked just the way they always looked—muddy, desperate, edgy, overweight, underpaid and uninformed. As the opposing team came out of the huddle, up to the line of scrimmage, Hugo moved automatically into the defensive formation that had been called by Krkanus, who played in the front four and ran the defense positions. "Red right! Flood left! Wing square in! R down and out . . . on five!" he repeated silently to himself. Since he didn't know the other team's signals, that didn't help him much, except that "on five" almost certainly meant that the ball was going to be snapped on the fifth count.

Smathers yelled, "Pass. On the flank!" and, again, Hugo felt as though a button had been pushed in his back. He was moving on the four count and was across the line of scrimmage, untouched, a fraction of a second after the ball was snapped, and laid the quarterback low before he could take a half step back into the pocket.

"Have you got a brother on this team, you son of a bitch?" the quarterback asked Hugo as Hugo lay on the quarterback's chest.

After that, for most of the rest of the afternoon, by turning to his right, Hugo heard everything that was said in the opposing huddle. Aside from an occasional commonplace remark, like "Where were you on that play, fat ass, waving to your girl?" or "If that Hunsworth puts his fingers into my eye once more, I'm going to kick him in the balls," the only operational intelligence that came across to Hugo was in the quarterback's coded signals, so there wasn't much advantage to be gained from Hugo's keenness of hearing. He knew *when* the ball was going to be snapped and could move a step sooner than otherwise, but he didn't know where it was going and still had to depend upon Smathers in that department.

Going into the last two minutes of the game, they were ahead, 14 to 10. The Studs were one of the strongest teams in the league and Hugo's team was a 20-point underdog on the Las Vegas line and a win would be a major upset. But the Studs were on his team's 38-yard line, first down and ten to go, and moving. Hugo's teammates were getting up more and more slowly from the pile-ups, like losers, and they all avoided looking over toward the bench, where the coach was

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giving an imitation of General George S. Patton on a bad day along the Rhine.

The Studs went briskly into their huddle, keyed up and confident. Hugo had been blocked out of the last three plays ("wiped out like my three-year-old daughter" had been the phrase the coach had used) and he was preparing his excuses if he was pulled out of the game. The Studs were talking it up in the huddle, a confused babel of sound, when suddenly Hugo heard one voice, very clearly. It was Dusering, the leading pass catcher in the league. Hugo knew his voice well. Dusering had expressed himself to Hugo with some eloquence after Hugo had pushed him out of bounds in what Dusering considered an ungentlemanly manner after a 30-yard gain on a pass to the side line.

"Listen," Dusering was saying in the huddle 15 yards away. "I got Smathers all set up. I can beat him on a buttonhook on the inside."

"OK," Hugo heard the quarterback say, and then the signal.

The Studs trotted up to the line of scrimmage. Hugo glanced around at Smathers. Smathers was pulling back deep, worried about Dusering's getting behind him, too busy protecting his area to bother about calling anything to Hugo. Hugo looked at Dusering. He was wide, on the left, looking innocent, giving nothing away.

The ball was snapped and Dusering went straight down the side line, as though for the bomb. A halfback came charging out in front of Hugo, yelling, his arms up, but Hugo ignored him. He cut back to his left, waited for a step, saw Dusering stop, then buttonhook back inside, leaving Smathers hopelessly fooled. The ball came floating out. Just as Dusering set himself to get it at waist height, Hugo flung himself across the trajectory of the pass and gathered it in. He didn't get far with it, as Dusering had him on the first step, but it didn't matter. The game was, to all intents and purposes, over, a stunning victory. It was the first pass Hugo had ever intercepted.

He was voted the game ball that Sunday, too.

In the locker room, the coach came over to Hugo while he was taking off his jockstrap. The coach looked at him curiously. "I really ought to fine you," the coach said. "You left the middle as open as a whore's legs on Saturday night."

"Yes, Coach," Hugo said, modestly wrapping a towel around him. He didn't like rough language.

"What made you cover the buttonhook?" the coach asked.

"I . . ." Hugo looked guiltily down at his bare toes. They were bleeding profusely and one nail looked as though he was going to lose it. "Dusering tipped it

off. He does something funny with his head before the buttonhook."

The coach nodded, a new light of respect in his eyes.

It was Hugo's second lie. He didn't like to lie, but if he told the coach he could hear what people were whispering in a huddle 15 yards away, with 60,000 people screaming in the stands like wild Indians, the coach would send him right over to the doctor to be treated for concussion of the brain.

. . .

During the week, for the first time, he was interviewed by a sportswriter. The article came out on Friday and there was a picture of him crouching with his hands spread out, looking ferocious. The headline over the article said, "MR. BIG PLAY MAN."

Sibyl cut the article out and sent it to her father, who always kept saying that Hugo would never amount to anything as a football player and ought to quit and start selling insurance before he got his brains knocked out, after which it would be too late to sell anything, even insurance.

Practice that week was no different from any other week, except that Hugo was limping because of his crushed toes. He tested himself, to see if he could hear what people were saying outside of normal range, but even in the comparative silence of the practice field, he didn't hear any better or any worse than he had before his ear was hurt. He didn't sleep as well as he usually did, as he kept thinking about the next Sunday, and Sibyl complained, saying he was making an insomniac out of her, thrashing around like a beached whale. On Thursday and Friday nights, he slept on the couch in the living room. The clock in the living room sounded like Big Ben to him, but he attributed it to his nerves. On Saturday, the whole team went to a hotel for the night, so Sibyl had nothing to complain about. Hugo shared a room with Smathers. Smathers smoked, drank and chased girls. At two in the morning, still awake, Hugo looked over at Johnny, sleeping beatifically, and wondered if perhaps he was making a mistake somewhere in the way he led his life.

. . .

Even limping from his crushed toes, Sunday was a remarkable day for Hugo. In the middle of the first quarter, after the opposing tackle had given him the knee to the head on a block, Hugo discovered that he not only could hear the signals in the other team's huddle but *knew what they meant*, just as though he had been studying their play-book for months. "Brown right! Draw fifty-five . . . on two!" came through in the quarterback's voice to his left ear, as

though on a clear telephone connection, and was somehow instantly translated in Hugo's brain to "Flanker to the right, fake to the fullback over right guard, hand-off to right halfback and cutback inside left end."

Hugo still lined up obediently in the defensive formations called by Krkanus; but once the plays got under way, he disregarded his regular assignments and went where he knew the plays were going. He intercepted two passes, knocked down three more and made more tackles than the rest of the team put together. It was with somber satisfaction mixed with a curious sense of guilt that he heard Gates, the opposing quarterback, snarl in the huddle, "Who let that fish face Pleiss in there again?" It was the first time that he had heard any quarterback in the league mention him by name.

It was only as he was leaving the field that Hugo realized that Smathers hadn't called a play to him once during the whole game. He tried to catch Smathers' eye in the locker room, but Smathers always seemed to be looking the other way.

On Monday morning, when they ran the game films, the coach kept stopping the film on plays in which Hugo figured and rerunning those bits in slow motion over and over again. Hugo began to feel even more uncomfortable than he usually felt at these Monday-morning entertainments. The coach didn't say anything, except, "Let's look at that once more"; but seeing himself over and over again, in the center of plays so many times, embarrassed Hugo, as though he were showboating in front of his teammates. It was also embarrassing to see how often, even though he was right there, he allowed himself to be knocked down by blockers who were primarily going for another man, and how many tackles he had made that should have been clean but that developed into dogged, drag-me-along-with-you-Nellie yard-eating affairs. It was a stern rule with the coach that no comments were allowed by the players at the showings, so Hugo had no notion of what his teammates' estimate of his performance might be.

When the film was finally over, Hugo tried to be the first man out the door, but the coach signaled to him and pointed with his thumb to the office. Leaning heavily on his cane, Hugo hobbled into the office, prepared for the worst. The cane was not merely window dressing. The toes on Hugo's right foot looked like a plate of hamburger and, while he waited for the coach, Hugo thought of ways to introduce his infirmity as an excuse for some of the less glorious moments of his performance as revealed by the movies of the game.

The coach came in, opening the collar

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of his size-19 shirt so that he could express himself freely. He shut the door firmly, sat down and grunted. The grunt meant that Hugo could sit down, too. Hugo seated himself on a straight wooden chair, placing his cane prominently in front of him.

Behind the coach, on the wall, there was a blown-up photograph of a player in a 1940ish uniform. The player's name was Jojo Baines and he had once been voted the dirtiest lineman ever to play in the National Football League. The only time Hugo had ever heard a note of tenderness creep into the coach's voice was when he mentioned Jojo Baines.

"Ever since you joined this club, Pleiss," said the coach. "I have been appalled when I looked down at the starting line-up and seen your name on it—in my own handwriting."

Hugo smiled weakly, hoping to recognize a pleasantry.

"I won't keep it a secret from you, Pleiss," the coach went on. "For two years, I've been trying to get rid of you. I have made the circuit of every city in this league with my hat in hand, eating the bread of humiliation, trying to beg, borrow or steal another middle linebacker. To no avail." The coach had an ear for rhetoric, when he was so inclined. "No avail," he repeated. "They all knew that as long as I had to start you every Sunday, we were never a threat to anybody. I am going to give you an impersonal estimate of your abilities. Pleiss. You're slow, you have a miserable pair of hands, you don't hit hard enough to drive my grandmother out of a rocking chair, you close your eyes on contact, you run like a duck with gout, you wouldn't get angry if a man hit you over the head with an automobile jack and raped your wife in front of your eyes, and you get fooled on plays that would have made a high school cheerleader roar with laughter in 1910. Have I left out anything?"

"Not that I can think of, sir," Hugo said.

"With all that," the coach went on, "you have saved three games in a row for us. You make a mockery out of the holy sport of football, but you have saved three games in a row for us and I am hereby increasing your salary by one thousand dollars for the season. If you tell this to anyone else on the team, I will personally nail you by the hands to the locker-room wall."

"Yes, sir," said Hugo.

"Now, get out of here," the coach said.

"Yes, sir," Hugo said. He stood up.

"Give me that cane," the coach said.

Hugo gave him the cane. The coach broke it in two, without rising from his



"First we have to convince the people that good health isn't everything."

chair. "I can't stand the sight of cripples," he said.

"Yes, sir," Hugo said. He tried not to limp as he walked out of the office.

The next Sunday was unsettling.

It started on an audible.

When the opposing team lined up after the huddle, Hugo knew that the play that had been called in the huddle was a short pass to the right flank. But when the quarterback took his position behind the center, Hugo saw him scanning the defensive setup and frowning. The quarterback's lips didn't move, but Hugo heard, just as though the man were talking directly to him, the word "No." There was a little pause and then, "It won't work, they're overshifting on us."

Hugo didn't have time to wonder at this new extension of his powers, as the quarterback began to call a set of signals aloud, changing the play he'd picked in the huddle. Everybody could hear the signals, of course, but Hugo was the only one on his team who knew that the quarterback was calling for an end around, from left to right. Just before the snap, when it was too late for the quarterback to call any changes, Hugo broke for the left side. He knew, without thinking about why he knew it, that the end would take two steps to his left, hesitate for one beat, then whirl around and streak for the quarterback and the ball on the way around the opposite end. As the ball was snapped, Hugo was knifing in between the end and the tackle, and when the end, after his two steps, came around, Hugo flattened him with a block. The quarterback was left all alone, holding the ball, like a postman delivering a package to the wrong door, and was downed for a five-yard loss.

But it was an expensive exploit for Hugo. The end's knee caught him in the head as they went down together and he was stretched out unconscious when the whistle blew.

When he woke up some minutes later, he was lying behind the bench, with the doctor kneeling over him, prodding the back of his neck for broken vertebrae, and the trainer jamming spirits of ammonia under his nostrils. The jolt had been so severe that when the coach asked him at half time how he had been able to nip the end-around play in the bud, Hugo had to confess that he didn't remember anything about the play. In fact, he didn't remember leaving the hotel that morning, and it took him a good ten minutes after the coach had spoken to him to remember the coach's name.

The doctor wouldn't let him go back into the game and his value to the team was neatly demonstrated to the coach by the fact that they lost by three touchdowns and a field goal.

The plane was quiet on the flight



"Château Lafite '08, say, what kind of antibourgeoisie are you?"

home. The coach did not appreciate a show of youthful high spirits or resilience in adversity by teams of his when they had lost by three touchdowns and a field goal. And, as usual on such occasions, he had forbidden any drinks to be served, since he didn't believe the fine, full flavor of defeat should be adulterated by alcohol. So the plane sped through the night sky in a long funereal hush.

Hugo himself was feeling better, although he still didn't remember anything about the game that afternoon. He had a nagging sensation that something peculiar and fundamentally unwholesome had occurred *before* his injury, but he couldn't bring it up to the level of consciousness. There was a small poker game going on up front in low whispers and Hugo decided to sit in, to stop himself from profitless probing into the afternoon's events. He usually lost in these games, since one glance at his open face by any normally acquisitive poker player showed whether Hugo had a pair, two pairs or was buying to a straight.

Either because it was too dark in the plane for the other players to get a clear look at Hugo's face or because the head injury had hurt some nerve and rendered him expressionless, Hugo kept winning a fair proportion of the pots. He was a careless player and didn't keep track of his winnings and merely felt that it was about time that luck was turning his way.

After about an hour of play, he had a sizable stack of chips in front of him. He was sitting with three aces in his

hand, having gotten two of them on a four-card draw, and he was about to raise the man on his left, Krkanius, who had drawn three cards, when somehow, just as though Krkanius had nudged him and whispered the news into his ear, he knew that Krkanius had a full house, jacks and fours. He didn't raise Krkanius but threw his cards in. Someone else saw Krkanius and Krkanius put his cards down. Full house. Jacks and fours.

"I'm not feeling so well," Hugo said. "I'm cashing in." He stood up and went back to his seat.

It was a miserable night and the plane was bucking through thick cloud and Hugo sat at the window, looking out and feeling horrible. He was a cheat. He could make all sorts of excuses to himself, he could say he had acted out of surprise, without thinking, that it was the first time anything like that had ever happened to him, but he knew that if that weird message hadn't come through to him from Krkanius, on his left, he'd have raised Krkanius \$10 and Krkanius would have raised him and Krkanius would be at least \$20 or \$30 richer right now. No matter how he tried to wriggle out of it, his conscience told him he was just as guilty as if he had taken \$30 out of Krkanius' wallet.

Then, in a flash, he remembered the afternoon—the moment on the field when he was sure that he knew what the quarterback was thinking on the end-around play and his automatic reaction to it and his blotting out the end. It was another form of cheating, but he didn't

know what to do about it. He could keep from playing poker, but he made his living out of playing football.

He groaned. He came from a deeply religious family, with a stern sense of morality. He didn't smoke or drink and he believed in hell.

After the plane landed, Hugo didn't go right home. Sibyl was away in Chicago, attending the wedding of one of her sisters, and he didn't feel like rattling around in an empty house. Krkanius, who had emerged from the poker game the big winner, invited him and a couple of the other boys to join him for a drink and, while Hugo didn't drink, he went along for the company.

The bar Krkanius took them to was crowded and noisy. There was a group of men with some girls at the bar, and as Hugo followed Krkanius to the back room, he heard a woman's voice say, "Uh-huh. That's for me. That big innocent-looking one."

Hugo looked around. A round blonde at the bar was staring directly at him, a sweet small smile on her full lips. If you didn't know what went on in her head, she looked like somebody's pure young daughter. "I'm going to teach you a few things tonight, baby," Hugo heard, staring, frozen, at the girl. The girl's mouth had never shown the slightest tremor of movement.

Hugo wheeled and hurried into the back room. When the waiter asked him what he wanted to drink, he ordered bourbon.

"Man," Krkanius said, surprised, "you really must've got shaken up today." Nobody had ever seen Hugo drink anything stronger than ginger ale before.

Hugo drank his bourbon quickly. He didn't like the taste, but it seemed to help his nerves. The blonde girl came into the back room and leaned over a table nearby to talk to somebody she knew. Remembering what she had been thinking as he passed her on the way in, Hugo ordered another bourbon. She glanced, as though by accident, at the table of football players. The way her sweater fit around her bosom made a peculiar ache come up in Hugo's throat.

"What're you waiting for, sweets?" he heard her think as her glance swept over him. "The night's not getting any younger."

He drank the second bourbon even more quickly than the first. "Oh, God," he thought, "I'm becoming a drunkard." The bourbon didn't seem to do anything for his nerves this time.

"It's time to go home," he said, standing up. His voice didn't sound like his. "I'm not feeling so well."

"Get a good night's sleep," Krkanius said.

"Yeah." If Krkanius knew that he'd had \$30 stolen from him that evening, he wouldn't have been so solicitous.

Hugo walked quickly past the bar,

making sure not to look at the girl. It was raining outside now and all the taxis were taken. He was just about to start walking when he heard the door open behind him. He couldn't help but turn. The girl was standing there, alone, with her coat on. She was scanning the street for a taxi, too. Then she looked at him. "Your move, baby," he heard, in a voice that was surprisingly harsh for a girl so young.

Hugo felt himself blush. Just then, a taxi drove up. Both he and the girl started for it.

"Can I give you a lift?" Hugo heard himself saying.

"How kind of you," the girl said, demurely.

. . .

On the way home, in the dawn, many hours later, Hugo wished for the first time in his life that he had been born a Catholic. Then he could have gone directly to a priest, confessed, accepted penance and been absolved of sin.

. . .

Sibyl called in the morning to tell him that her parents, who had come East for the wedding, were taking a trip to New York and wanted her to go along with them. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have been able to keep the disappointment at news like that out of his voice. He loved Sibyl dearly and usually felt lost without her. But now a wave of relief swept over him. The moment of confrontation, the moment when he would have to tell his innocent and trusting young wife about his appalling lapse from grace or, even worse, lie to her, was postponed.

"That's all right, honey," he said, "you just go along with your mother and dad and have a good time. You deserve a holiday. Stay as long as you like."

"Hugo," Sibyl said, "I just could break down and cry, you're so good to me."

There was the sound of a kiss over the telephone and Hugo kissed back. When he hung up, he leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes in pain. One thing he was sure of, he wasn't going to see that girl, that Sylvia, again. Sylvia. Almost the same name as Sibyl. How rotten could a man be?

. . .

Passion spent for the moment, he lay in the largest double bed he had ever seen, next to the dazzling body that had opened undreamed-of utopias of pleasure for him. Ashamed of himself even for thinking about it, he was sure that if Sibyl lived to the age of 90, she wouldn't know one tenth as much as Sylvia must have known the day she was born.

In the soft glow of a distant lamp, he looked at the bedside clock. It was past four o'clock. He had to report for practice, dressed, at ten o'clock. After a

losing game, the coach gave them wind sprints for 45 minutes every day for a week. He groaned inwardly as he thought of what he was going to feel like at 10:45 that morning. Still, for some reason, he was loath to go.

An hour later, he was finally dressed. He leaned over Sylvia to kiss her good-bye. She lay there, fresh as the morning, smiling, breathing placidly. He wished he were in as good condition as she was. "G'night, sweets," she said, an arm around his neck. "Don't let those rough boys hurt you today. And bring Baby a little giftie tonight. Try Myer's, on Sanford Street. They're full of goodies."

Walking home along the dark streets, Hugo thought, "Of course. Girls like little tokens of affection. Flowers, candy. Sentimental creatures." He didn't remember any store called Myer's on Sanford Street, but he supposed it was a confectionery shop that had some specialties that Sylvia had a taste for. He resolved to get her the best five-pound box of candy money could buy.

That afternoon, feeling a little light-headed from lack of sleep and the wind sprints, he walked along Sanford Street, searching for a shop called Myer's. He stopped short. MYER, the thin lettering read on the window. But instead of boxes of candy displayed behind the glass, there was a blaze of gold and diamonds. Myer's sold jewelry. Expensive jewelry.

Hugo did not go in. Thrift was another of the virtues his excellent family had instilled in him as a boy. He walked along Sanford Street until he found a candysshop and bought a five-pound box of chocolates. It cost \$15 and Hugo felt a twinge at his extravagance as the clerk wrapped the box in festive paper.

That night, he didn't stay more than ten minutes in Sylvia's apartment. She had a headache, she said. She didn't bother to unwrap the candy.

The next night, he stayed longer. He had visited Myer's during the afternoon and bought a gold bracelet for \$300. "I do like a generous man," Sylvia said.

The pain Hugo had felt in handing over the \$300 to the clerk in Myer's was considerably mitigated by the fact that the night before, when he had left Sylvia with her headache, he had remembered that every Tuesday there was a poker game at Krkanius' apartment. Hugo had sat in for three hours and had won \$416, the record for a single night's winnings since the inception of the game. During the course of the evening, by twisting his head a little now and then to get a fix with his left ear, he had been warned of lurking straights, one flush and several full houses. He had discarded a nine-high full house himself because Croker, of the taxi squad, was sitting in the hole with a jack-high full house; and Hugo had won with a pair of sevens after Krkanius had bluffed wildly

through a hand with a pair of fives. Somehow, he told himself piously, as he stuffed bills and checks into his wallet when the game broke up, he would make it up to his teammates. But not just now. Just now, he couldn't bear the thought of Sylvia having any more headaches.

Luckily, Sibyl didn't return until Friday. On Friday nights during the season, Hugo slept on the living-room couch, so as not to be tempted to impair his energies for Sundays' games, so that problem was postponed. He was afraid that Sibyl's woman's intuition would lead her to discover a fateful change in her husband, but Sibyl was so grateful for her holiday that her intuition lay dormant. She merely tucked him in and kissed him chastely on the forehead and said, "Get a good night's sleep, honey."

When she appeared with his breakfast on a tray the next morning, his conscience stirred uneasily; and after the light Saturday-morning practice, he went into Myer's and bought Sibyl a string of cultured pearls for \$85.

Sunday was triumphal. Before the game, suiting up, Hugo decided that the best way he could make up to his teammates for taking \$416 away from them was by doing everything he could to win the game for them. His conscience clear, obeying the voices within his head, he was in on half the tackles. When he intercepted a pass in the last quarter and ran for a touchdown, the first of his life, to put the game on ice, the entire stadium stood and cheered him. The coach even shook his hand when he came off the field. He felt dainty footed and powerful and as though he could play forever without fatigue. The blood coursing through his veins felt like a new and exhilarating liquid, full of dancing bubbles.

After the game, he was dragged off to a television interview in a little makeshift studio under the stands. He had never been on television before, but he got through it all right and later that night, somebody told him he was photogenic.

His life entered a new phase. It was as definite as opening and going through a door and closing it behind him, like leaving a small, shabby corridor and with one step emerging into a brilliantly lit ballroom.

His photograph was in the papers every week, with laudatory articles. Newspapermen sought him out and quoted him faithfully when he said, "The trick is to study your opponents. The National Football League is no place for guesswork."

He posed for advertising stills, his hair combed with greaseless products. He modeled sweaters and flowered bathing trunks and was amazed at how simple it was to earn large sums of money in America merely by smiling.

His picture was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and small boys waited for him at the players' entrance after practice. He autographed footballs, and taxi drivers recognized him and sometimes refused to take payment for their fares. He took to eating out in restaurants with Sibyl, because the managers more often than not tore up the check when he asked for it. He learned to eat caviar and developed a taste for champagne.

He was invited to parties at the home of Bruce Fallon, the quarterback, who had been paid \$200,000 to sign and who was called a superstar by the sportswriters. Until then, Fallon, who only went around with the famous old-timers and the upper-bracket players on the club, had never even said hello to him when they passed on the street. "Do you play bridge, Hugo?" Fallon asked.

They played bridge, Fallon and Fallon's wife, Nora, and Hugo and Sibyl, in the huge living room of the Fallons' apartment, which had been decorated by an imported Norwegian. "Isn't this cozy?" Nora Fallon said, as the four of

them sat around the pale wood table before the fire, playing for ten cents a point. Hugo's left ear worked for bridge as well as poker and Hugo wound up the first evening with an \$800 profit, and Fallon said, "I've heard about your poker from the boys, Hugo. I've never met anybody with a card sense like yours."

Fallon discussed the coach with him. "If Bert would really let me call my own game," Fallon said, pouring whiskeys for himself and Hugo, "we'd be twenty points better a Sunday."

"He's a little primitive, Bert, that's true," Hugo said, "but he's not a bad guy at heart." He had never heard anybody criticize the coach before and had never even thought of him by his first name. Even now, with the coach a good seven miles away across town and safely in bed, Hugo felt a curious little tickling in the small of his back as he realized that he had actually said, "Bert."

When they left that night, with Fallon's check for \$800 in his pocket, Nora Fallon put up her cheek to be kissed. She had gone to school in Lausanne. She



"Lieutenant—this is a war room!"

said, "We have to make this a weekly affair," as Hugo kissed her, and he knew she was thinking, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could have a little quiet tête-à-tête, you and I, sometime soon?"

That night, when Hugo got home, he wrote the Fallon telephone number in his little pocket address book. He wondered what it could be like, making love to a woman who thought in French.

. . .

The trainer took a fussy interest in him now and, when he came up with a small bruise on his knee, insisted on giving him whirlpool baths for six days. The coach let him off a half hour early one day to make a speech at a local high school. Brenatskis, the publicity man, rewrote his biography for the programs and said that he had made Phi Beta Kappa in college. When Hugo protested, mildly, Brenatskis said, "Who'll know?" and, "It's good for your image." He also arranged for a national magazine to have Hugo photographed at home for a feature article. Sibyl insisted on buying a pair of gold-lamé pajamas if she was going to be photographed for a national magazine, and on having new curtains in the living room and new slipcovers made. When the article came out, there was only one picture accompanying it—Hugo in an apron, cooking in the kitchen. He was supposed to be making a complicated French dish. He never actually even made coffee for himself.

He bought three loud checked sports jackets for himself and a \$400 brooch for Sylvia, who was still subject to headaches. He couldn't tear himself away from Sylvia, although he was beginning to find her rather common, especially compared with Nora Fallon. He bought a \$100 pair of earrings for Sibyl.

On Sundays, he raged over all the fields in the league, and at the end of home games, he had to get to the locker room fast to keep from being mobbed by fans. He began to receive love letters from girls, who sometimes included photographs taken in surprising positions. He knew that these letters disturbed Sibyl, but the mails were free, after all. By now, everybody agreed that he was photogenic.

Sibyl one day announced that she was pregnant. Until then, although Hugo had wanted children from the beginning of their marriage, she had insisted that she was too young. Now, for some reason, she had decided that she was no longer too young. Hugo was very happy, but he was so occupied with other things that he didn't have quite the time to show it completely. Still, he bought her a turquoise necklace.

Fallon, who was a born gambler, said that it was a shame to waste Hugo's card sense on penny-ante poker games and ten-cent-a-point family bridge. There was a big poker game in town that Fallon played in once a week. In the

game, there were a stockbroker, a newspaper publisher, the president of an agricultural-machinery firm, an automobile distributor and a man who owned, among other things, a string of race horses. When Fallon brought Hugo into the hotel suite where the game was held, there was a haze of money in the room as palpable as the cigar smoke that eddied over the green table and against the drawn curtains. Hugo and Fallon had made a private deal that they would split their winnings and their losses. Hugo wasn't sure about the morality of this, since they weren't letting the others know that they were up against a partnership, but Fallon said, "What the hell, Hugu, they're only civilians." Anybody who wasn't in some way involved in professional football was a civilian in Fallon's eyes. "Hugu" was Fallon's friendly corruption of Hugo's name and it had caught on with the other men on the team and with the newspapermen who followed the club. When the offensive team trotted off the field, passing the defensive team coming in, Fallon had taken to calling out, "Get the ball back for me, Hugu." A sportswriter had picked it up and had written a piece on Hugo using that as the title; and now, whenever the defensive team went in, the home crowd chanted, "Get the ball back for me, Hugu." Sometimes, listening to all that love and faith come roaring through the autumn air at him, Hugo felt like crying for joy out there.

. . .

The men around the green table all stood up when Fallon and Hugo came into the room. The game hadn't started yet and they were still making up the piles of chips. They were all big men, with hearty, authoritative faces. They shook hands with the two football players as Fallon introduced Hugo. One of them said, "It's an honor," and another man said, "Get the ball back for me, Hugu," as he shook Hugo's hand and they all roared with kindly laughter. Hugo smiled boyishly. Because of the five-tooth bridge in the front of his mouth, Hugo for years had smiled as little as possible; but in the past few weeks, since he had become photogenic, he smiled readily. He practiced grinning boyishly from time to time in front of the mirror at home. People, he knew, were pleased to be able to say about him, "Hugu? He looks rough, but when he smiles, he's just a nice big kid." Civilians.

They played until two o'clock in the morning. Hugo had won \$6020 and Fallon had won \$1175. "You two fellers are just as tough off the field as on," said the automobile distributor admiringly as he signed a check, and the other men laughed jovially. Losing money seemed to please them.

"Beginner's luck," Hugo said. Later

on, the automobile distributor would tell his wife that Hugu didn't look it, but he was witty.

They hailed a taxi outside the hotel. Fallon hadn't brought his Lincoln Continental, because there was no sense in taking a chance that somebody would spot it parked outside the hotel and tell the coach his quarterback stayed out till two o'clock in the morning. In the taxi, Fallon asked, "You got a safe-deposit box, Hugu?"

"No," Hugo said.

"Get one tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Income tax," Fallon said. In the light of a street lamp, he saw that Hugo looked puzzled. "What Uncle Sam doesn't know," Fallon said lightly, "won't hurt him. We'll cash these checks tomorrow, divvy up and stash the loot away in nice dark little boxes. Don't use your regular bank, either."

"I see," Hugo said. There was no doubt about it; Fallon was a brainy man. For a moment, he felt a pang of regret that he had taken Nora Fallon to a motel the week before. He hadn't regretted it at the time, though. Quite the contrary. He had just thought that if the child Sibyl was carrying turned out to be a girl, he wouldn't send her to school in Lausanne.

Sibyl awoke when he came into the bedroom. "You win, honey?" she asked sleepily.

"A couple of bucks," Hugo said.

"That's nice," she said.

. . .

By now, Hugo was free of doubt. If God gave you a special gift, He obviously meant you to use it. A man who could run the hundred in nine flat would be a fool to allow himself to be beaten by a man who could do only nine, five. If it was God's will that Hugo should have the good things of life—fame, success, wealth, beautiful women—well, that was God's will. Hugo was a devout man, even though, in the season, he was busy on Sunday and couldn't go to church.

During next week's poker game, Hugo saw to it that he didn't win too much. He let himself get caught bluffing several times and deliberately bet into hands that he knew were stronger than his. There was no sense in being greedy and killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. Even so, he came out almost \$2000 ahead. Fallon lost nearly \$500, so nobody had reason for complaint.

When the game broke up, Connors, the automobile distributor, told Hugo he'd like to talk to him for a minute. They went downstairs and sat in a deserted corner of the lobby. Connors was opening a sports-car agency and he wanted Hugo to lend his name to it. "There's nothing to it," Connors said. "Hang around the showroom a couple

of afternoons a week and have your picture taken sitting in a Porsche once in a while. I'll give you ten thousand a year for it."

Hugo scratched his head boyishly, turning his left ear slightly toward Connors. The figure \$25,000 came through loud and clear. "I'll take twenty-five thousand dollars and ten percent of the profits," Hugo said.

Connors laughed, delighted with his new employee's astuteness. "You must have read my mind," he said. They shook on the deal. Hugo was to go on the payroll the next day.

"He's got a head on his shoulders, old Hugo," Connors told his wife. "He'll sell cars."

Another of the poker players, Hartwright, the race-horse owner, called Hugo and, after swearing him to secrecy, told him that he and what he called "a few of the boys" were buying up land for a supermarket in a suburb of the city. There was inside information that a superhighway was being built out that way by the city. "It'll be a gold mine," Hartwright said. "I've talked it over with the boys and they think it'd be a nice idea to let you in on it. If you don't have the cash, we can swing a loan. . . ."

Hugo got a loan for \$50,000. He was learning that nothing pleases people more than helping a success. Even his father-in-law, who had until then never been guilty of wild feats of generosity, was moved enough by the combination of Hugo's new-found fame and the announcement that he was soon to be a grandfather to buy Hugo and Sibyl an eight-room house with a swimming pool in a good suburb of the city.

So the season went on, weeks during which Hugo heard nothing, spoken or unspoken, that was not for his pleasure or profit, the golden autumn coming to a rhythmic climax once every seven days in two hours of Sunday violence and huzzas.

The newspapers were even beginning to talk about the possibility of "The Cinderella Boys," as Fallon and Hugo and their teammates were called, going all the way to the showdown with Green Bay for the championship. But on the same day, both Fallon and Hugo were hurt—Fallon with a cleverly dislocated elbow and Hugo with a head injury that gave him a severe attack of vertigo that made it seem to him that the whole world was built on a slant. They lost that game and they were out of the running for the championship of their division and the dream was over.

Before being injured, Hugo had had a good day; and in the plane flying home, even though it seemed to Hugo that it was flying standing on its right wing, he did not feel too bad. All that money in the bank had made him philosophic about communal misfortunes. The team

doctor, a hearty fellow who would have been full of cheer at the fall of the Alamo, had assured him that he would be fine in a couple of days and had regaled him with stories of men who had been in a coma for days and had gained more than 100 yards on the ground the following Sunday.

An arctic hush of defeat filled the plane, broken only by the soft complaints of the wounded, of which there were many. Amidships sat the coach, with the owner, forming glaciers of pessimism that flowed inexorably down the aisle. The weather was bad and the plane bumped uncomfortably through soupy black cloud and Hugo, seated next to Johnny Smathers, who was groaning like a dying stag from what the doctor had diagnosed as a superficial contusion of the ribs, was impatient for the trip to end, so that he could be freed from this atmosphere of Waterloo and return to his abundant private world. He remembered that next Sunday was an open date and he was grateful for it. The season had been rewarding, but the tensions had been building up. He could stand a week off.

Then something happened that made him forget about football.

There was a crackling in his left ear, like static. Then he heard a man's voice saying, "VHF one is out." Immediately afterward he heard another man's voice saying, "VHF two is out, too. We've lost radio contact." Hugo looked around, sure that everybody else must have heard it, too, that it had come over the public-address system. But everybody was doing just what he had been doing before, talking in low voices, reading, napping.

"That's a hell of a note," Hugo recognized the captain's voice. "There's forty thousand feet of soup from here to Newfoundland."

Hugo looked out the window. It was black and thick out there. The red light on the tip of the wing was a minute blood-colored blur that seemed to wink out for seconds at a time in the darkness. Hugo closed the curtain and put on his seat belt.

"Well, kiddies," the captain's voice said in Hugo's ear, "happy news. We're lost. If anybody sees the United States down below, tap me on the shoulder."

Nothing unusual happened in the passenger section.

The door to the cockpit opened and the stewardess came out. She had a funny smile on her face that looked as though it had been painted on sideways. She walked down the aisle, not changing her expression, and went to the tail of the plane and sat down there. When she was sure nobody was looking, she hooked the seat belt around her.

The plane bucked a bit and people began to look at their watches. They were due to land in about ten minutes

and they weren't losing any altitude. There was a warning squawk from the public-address system and the captain said, "This is your captain speaking. I'm afraid we're going to be a little late. We're running into head winds. I suggest you attach your seat belts."

There was the click of metal all over the plane. It was the last sound Hugo heard for a long time, because he fainted.

He was awakened by a sharp pain in one ear. The right one. The plane was coming down for a landing, Hugo pulled the curtain back and looked out. They were under the cloud now, perhaps 400 feet off the ground and there were lights below. He looked at his watch. They were nearly three hours late.

"You better make it a good one," he heard a man's voice say, and he knew the voice came from the cockpit. "We don't have enough gas for another thousand yards."

Hugo tried to clear his throat. Something dry and furry seemed to be lodged there. Everybody else had already gathered up his belongings, placidly waiting to disembark. They don't know how lucky they are, Hugo thought bitterly as he peered out the window, hungry for the ground.

The plane came in nicely and as it taxied to a halt, the captain said cheerily, "I hope you enjoyed your trip, folks. Sorry about the little delay. See you soon."

The ground hit his feet at a peculiar angle when he debarked from the plane, but he had told Sylvia he would look in at her place when he got back to town. Sibyl was away in Florida with her parents for the week, visiting relatives.

Going over in the taxi, fleeing the harsh world of bruised and defeated men and the memory of his brush with death in the fogbound plane, he thought yearningly of the warm bed awaiting him and the expert, expensive girl.

Sylvia took a long time answering the bell and when she appeared, she was in a bathrobe and had her headache face on. She didn't let Hugo in, but opened the door only enough to speak to him. "I'm in bed, I took two pills," she said, "I have a splitting—"

"Aw, honey," Hugo pleaded. There was a delicious odor coming from her nightgown and robe. He leaned gently against the door.

"It's late," she said sharply. "You look awful. Go home and get some sleep." She clicked the door shut decisively. He heard her putting the chain in place.

On the way back down the dimly lit staircase from Sylvia's apartment, Hugo resolved always to have a small emergency piece of jewelry in his pocket for moments like this. Outside in the street, he looked up longingly at Sylvia's window. It was on the fourth floor and a crack of light, cozy and tantalizing, came

through the curtains. Then, on the cold night air, he heard a laugh. It was warm and sensual in his left ear and he remembered, with a pang that took his breath away, the other occasions when he had heard that laugh. He staggered down the street under the pale lamp-posts, carrying his valise, feeling like Willy Loman coming toward the end of his career in *Death of a Salesman*. He had the impression that he was being followed slowly by a black car, but he was too distracted to pay it much attention.

When he got home, he took out a pencil and paper and noted down every piece of jewelry he had bought Sylvia that fall, with its price. The total came to \$3468.30, tax included. He tore up the piece of paper and went to bed. He slept badly, hearing in his sleep the sound of faltering airplane engines mingled with a woman's laughter four stories above his head.

It rained during practice the next day and as he slid miserably around in the icy, tilted mud, Hugo wondered why he had ever chosen football as a profession. In the showers later, wearily scraping mud off his beard, Hugo became conscious that he was being stared at. Croker, the taxi-squad fullback, was in the next shower, soaping his hair and looking at Hugo with a peculiar small smile on his face. Then, coming from Croker's direction, Hugo heard the long, low, disturbing laugh he had heard the night before. It was as though Croker had it on tape inside his head and was playing it over and over again, like a favorite piece of music. Croker, Hugo thought murderously, Croker! A taxi-squadder! Didn't even get to make the trips with the team. Off every Sunday, treacherously making every minute count while his teammates were fighting for their lives.

Hugo heard the laugh again over the sound of splashing water. The next time there was an intrasquad scrimmage, he was going to maim the son of a bitch.

He wanted to get away from the locker room fast, but when he was dressed and almost out the door, the trainer called to him.

"The coach wants to see you, Pleiss," the trainer said. "Pronto."

Hugo didn't like the "pronto." The trainer had a disagreeable habit of editorializing.

The coach was sitting with his back to the door, looking longingly up at the photograph of Jojo Baines. "Close the door, Pleiss," the coach said, without turning round.

Hugo closed the door.

"Sit down," the coach said, still with his back to Hugo, still staring at the photograph of what the coach had once said was the only 100 percent football player he had ever seen.

Hugo sat down.



"I mean, what with the generation gap, how did you know this was just what I wanted?"

The coach said, "I'm fining you two hundred and fifty dollars, Pleiss."

"Yes, sir," Hugo said.

The coach finally swung around. He loosened his collar. "Pleiss," he said, "what in the name of Knute Rockne are you up to?"

"I don't know, sir," Hugo said.

"What the hell are you doing staying up until dawn night after night?"

Staying up was not quite an accurate description of what Hugo had been doing, but he didn't challenge the coach's choice of words.

"Don't you know you've been followed, you dummy?" the coach bellowed.

The black car on the empty street. Hugo hung his head. He was disappointed in Sibyl. How could she be so suspicious? And where did she get the money to pay for detectives?

The coach's large hands twitched on the desk. "What are you, a sex maniac?"

"No, sir," Hugo said.

"Shut up!" the coach said.

"Yes, sir," said Hugo.

"And don't think it was me that put a tail on you," the coach said. "It's a lot worse than that. The tail came from the commissioner's office."

Hugo let out his breath, relieved. It wasn't Sibyl. How could he have misjudged her?

"I'll lay my cards on the table, Pleiss," the coach said. "The commissioner's office has been interested in you for a long time now. It's their job to keep this game clean, Pleiss, and I'm with them all the way on that, and make no mistake about it. If there's one thing I won't stand for on my club, it's a crooked ballplayer."

Hugo knew that there were at least 100 things that the coach had from time to time declared he wouldn't stand for on his club, but he didn't think it was the moment to refresh the coach's memory.

"Coach," Hugo began.

"Shut up! When a ballplayer as stupid as you suddenly begins to act as though he has a ouija board under his helmet and is in the middle of one goddamn play after another, naturally they begin to suspect something." The coach opened a drawer in his desk and took out a dark-blue folder from which he extracted several closely typewritten sheets of paper. He put on his glasses to read. "This is the report from the commissioner's office." He ran his eyes over some of the items and shook his head in wonder. "Modesty forbids me from reading to you the account of your sexual exploits, Pleiss," the coach said, "but I must remark that your ability even to trot out onto the field on Sunday after



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some of the weeks you've spent leaves me openmouthed in awe."

There was nothing Hugo could say to this, so he said nothing.

"So far, you've been lucky," the coach said. "The papers haven't latched onto it yet. But if one word of this comes out, I'll throw you to the wolves so fast you'll pull out of your cleats as you go through the door. Have you heard me?"

"I've heard you, Coach," Hugo said.

The coach fingered the papers on his desk and squinted through his bifocals. "In your sudden career as a lady's man, you also seem to have developed a sense of largess in the bestowal of jewelry. In one shop in this town alone, you have spent well over three thousand dollars in less than two months. At the same time, you buy an eight-room house with a swimming pool, you send your wife on expensive vacations all over the country, you invest fifty thousand dollars in a real-estate deal that is barely legal, you are known to be playing cards for high stakes with the biggest gamblers in the city and you rent a safe-deposit box and are observed stuffing unknown sums of cash into it every week. I know what your salary is, Pleiss. Is it unmannerly of me to inquire whether or not you have fallen upon some large outside source of income recently?"

The coach closed the folder and took off his glasses and sat back. Hugo would have liked to explain, but the words strangled in his throat. All the things that had seemed to him like the smiling gifts of fate now, in that cold blue folder, were arranged against him as the criminal profits of corruption. Hugo liked everyone to like him and he had become used to everyone wishing him well. Now the realization that there were men, the coach among them, who were ready to believe the worst of him and ruin him forever because of it, left him speechless. He waved his hands helplessly.

"Pleiss," the coach said, "I want you to answer one question, and if I ever find out you're lying. . . ." He stopped, significantly. He didn't add the usual coda, "I'll personally nail you by the hands to the locker-room wall." This omission terrified Hugo as he waited numbly for the question.

"Pleiss," the coach said, "are you getting information from gamblers?"

A wave of shame engulfed Hugo. He couldn't remember ever having felt so awful. He began to sob, all 235 pounds of him.

The coach looked at him, appalled. "Use your handkerchief, man," he said.

Hugo used his handkerchief. Damply he said, "Coach, I swear on the head of my mother, I never talked to a gambler in my life."

"I don't want the head of your mother," the coach snarled. But he seemed reassured. He waited for Hugo's sobs to

subside. "All right. Get out of here. And be careful. Remember, you're being watched at all times."

Drying his eyes, Hugo dragged himself out of the office. The public-relations man, Brenatskis, was having a beer in the locker room with a small, gray-haired man with cigarette ash on his vest. Hugo recognized the man. It was Vincent Haley, the sports columnist. Hugo tried to get out without being seen. This was no day to be interviewed by a writer. But Brenatskis spotted him and called, "Hey, Hugo, come over here for a minute."

Flight would be damning. Hugo was sure that the whole world knew by now that he was a man under suspicion. So he tried to compose his face as he went over to the two men. He even managed an innocent, deceitful, country boy's smile.

"Hello, Mr. Haley," he said.

"Glad to see you, Pleiss," said Haley. "How's your head?"

"Fine, fine," Hugo said hurriedly.

"You're having quite a season, Pleiss," Haley said. His voice was hoarse and whiskeyish and full of contempt for athletes, and his pale eyes were like laser beams. "Yeah, quite a season. I don't think I've ever seen a linebacker improve so much from one game to another."

Hugo began to sweat. "Some years you're lucky," he said. "Things fall into place." He waited, cowering inwardly, for the next doomful inquiry. But Haley merely asked him some routine questions, like who was the toughest man in the league going down the middle and what he thought about the comparative abilities of various passers he had played against. "Thanks, Pleiss," Haley said, "that's about all. Good luck with your head." He held out his hand and Hugo shook it gratefully, glad that in another moment he was going to be out of range of those bone-dissolving eyes. With his hand still in the writer's hand, Hugo heard the whiskeyish voice, but different, as though in some distant echo chamber, saying, in his left ear, "Look at him—two hundred and thirty-five pounds of bone and muscle, twenty-five years old, and he's back here raking in the dough, while my kid, nineteen years old, a hundred and thirty pounds dripping wet, is lying out in the mud and jungle in Vietnam, getting his head shot off. Who did he pay off?"

Haley gave Hugo's hand another shake. He even smiled, showing jagged, cynical, tar-stained teeth. "Nice talking to you, Pleiss," he said. "Keep up the good work."

"Thanks, Mr. Haley," Hugo said earnestly. "I'll try."

He went out of the stadium, not watching or caring where he was going, surrounded by enemies.

He kept hearing that rasping, disdainful "Who did he pay off?" over and over again as he walked blindly through

the streets. At one moment, he stopped, on the verge of going back to the stadium and explaining to the writer about the 63 stitches in his knee and what the Army doctor had said about them. But Haley hadn't said anything aloud and it would be a plunge into the abyss if Hugo had to acknowledge that there were certain moments when he could read minds.

So he continued to walk toward the center of the city, trying to forget the coach and the gamblers, trying to forget Vincent Haley and Haley's 19-year-old son, weight 130 pounds, getting his head shot off in the jungle. Hugo didn't bother much about politics. He had enough to think about trying to keep from being killed every Sunday without worrying about disturbances 10,000 miles away in small Oriental countries. If the United States Army had felt that he wasn't fit for service, that was their business.

But he couldn't help thinking about that kid out there, with the mortars bursting around him or stepping on poisoned bamboo stakes or being surrounded by grinning little yellow men with machine guns in their hands.

Hugo groaned in complicated agony. He had walked a long way and he was in the middle of the city, with the bustle of the business section all around him, but he couldn't walk away from that picture of Haley's kid lying torn apart under the burned trees whose names he would never know.

Slowly, he became aware that the activity around him was not just the ordinary traffic of the weekday city. He seemed to be in a parade of some kind and he realized, coming out of his private torment, that people were yelling loudly all around him. They also seemed to be carrying signs. He listened attentively now. "Hell, no, we won't go," they were yelling, and, "U.S. go home," and other short phrases of the same general import. And, reading the signs, he saw, BURN YOUR DRAFT CARDS and DOWN WITH AMERICAN FASCISM. Interested, he looked carefully at the hundreds of people who were carrying him along with them. There were quite a few young men with long hair and beards, barefooted in sandals, and rather soiled young girls in blue jeans, carrying large flowers, all intermingled with determined-looking suburban matrons and middle-aged, grim-looking men with glasses, who might have been college professors. My, he thought, this is worse than a football crowd.

Then he was suddenly on the steps of the city hall and there were a lot of police, and one boy burned his draft card and a loud cheer went up from the crowd, and Hugo was sorry he didn't have his draft card on him, because he would have liked to burn it, too, as a sort of blind gesture of friendship to Haley's soldier son. He was too shy to

shout anything, but he didn't try to get away from the city-hall steps; and when the police started to use their clubs, naturally, he was one of the first to get hit, because he stood head and shoulders above everybody else and was a target that no self-respecting cop would dream of missing.

Standing in front of the magistrate's bench a good many hours later, with a bloody bandage around his head, Hugo was grateful for Brenatskis' presence beside him, although he didn't know how Brenatskis had heard about the little run-in with the police so soon. But if Brenatskis hadn't come, Hugo would have had to spend the night in jail, where there was no bed large enough to accommodate him.

When his name was called, Hugo looked up at the magistrate. The American flag seemed to be waving vigorously on the wall behind the magistrate's head, although it was tacked to the plaster. Everything had a bad habit of waving after the policeman's club.

The magistrate had a small, scooping kind of face that made him look as though he would be useful in going into small holes to search for vermin. The magistrate looked at him with distaste. In his left ear, Hugo heard the magistrate's voice—"What are you, a fag or a Jew or something?" This seemed to Hugo like a clear invasion of his rights, and he raised his hand as if to say something, but Brenatskis knocked it down, just in time.

"Case dismissed," the magistrate said,

sounding like a ferret who could talk. "Next."

A lady who looked like somebody's grandmother stepped up belligerently.

Five minutes later, Hugo was going down the night-court steps with Brenatskis. "Holy man," Brenatskis said, "what came over you? It's a lucky thing they got hold of me or you'd be all over the front page tomorrow. And it cost plenty, I don't mind telling you."

Bribery, too, Hugo recorded in his book of sorrows. Corruption of the press and the judiciary.

"And the coach—" Brenatskis waved his arm hopelessly, as though describing the state of the coach's psyche at this juncture were beyond the powers of literature. "He wants to see you. Right now."

"Can't he wait till morning?" Hugo wanted to go home and lie down. It had been an exhausting day.

"He can't wait until morning. He was very definite. The minute you got out, he said, and he didn't care what time it was."

"Doesn't he ever sleep?" Hugo asked forlornly.

"Not tonight, he's not sleeping," said Brenatskis. "He's waiting in his office."

A stalactite formed in the region of Hugo's liver as he thought of facing the coach, the two of them alone at midnight in naked confrontation in a stadium that could accommodate 60,000 people. "Don't you want to come along with me?" he asked Brenatskis.

"No," said Brenatskis. He got into



"But wouldn't the local zoning laws have prevented him from building a house of straw in the first place?"

his car and drove off. Hugo thought of moving immediately to Canada. But he hailed a cab and said "The stadium" to the driver. Perhaps there would be a fatal accident on the way.

There was one 40-watt bulb burning over the players' entrance and the shadows thrown by its feeble glare made it look as though a good part of the stadium had disappeared centuries before, like the ruins of a Roman amphitheater. Hugo wished it *were* the ruins of a Roman amphitheater as he pushed the door open. The night watchman, awakened from his doze on a chair tilted back against the wall, looked up at him. "They don't give a man no rest, none of them," Hugo heard the watchman think as he passed him. "Goddamned prima donnas. I hope they all break their fat necks."

"Evenin', Mr. Pleiss. Nice evenin'," the watchman said.

"Yeah," said Hugo. He walked through the shadows under the stands toward the locker room. The ghosts of hundreds of poor, aching, wounded, lame, contract-haunted football players seemed to accompany him, and the wind sighing through the gangways carried on it the echoes of a billion boos. Hugo wondered how he had ever thought a stadium was a place in which you enjoyed yourself.

His hand on the locker-room door, Hugo hesitated. He had never discussed politics with the coach, but he knew that the coach cried on the field every time the band played *The Star-Spangled Banner* and had refused to vote for Barry Goldwater because he thought Goldwater was a Communist.

Resolutely, Hugo pushed the door open and went into the deserted locker room. He passed his locker. His name was still on it. He didn't know whether it was a good or a bad sign.

The door to the coach's office was closed. After one last look around him at the locker room, Hugo rapped on it. "Come in," the coach said.

Hugo opened the door and went in. The coach was dressed in a dark suit and his collar was closed and he had a black tie on, as though he were en route to a funeral. His face was ravaged by his vigil, his cheeks sunk, his eyes peered out of purplish caverns. He looked worse than Hugo had ever seen him, even worse than the time they lost 45 to 0 to a first-year expansion club.

"My boy," the coach said in a small, racked voice, "I am glad you came late. It has given me time to think, to take a proper perspective. An hour ago, I was ready to destroy you in righteous anger with my bare hands. But I am happy to say that the light of understanding has been vouchsafed me in the watches of this painful night." The coach was in one of his Biblical periods. "Luckily," he said, "after Brenatskis called me to

tell me that he had managed to persuade the judge to dismiss the case against you for a hundred dollars—naturally, your pay will be docked—and that the story would be kept out of the papers for another hundred and fifty—that will make two hundred and fifty, in all—I had time to consider. After all, the millions of small boys throughout America who look up to you and your fellows as the noblest expression of clean, aggressive American spirit, who model themselves with innocent hero worship after you and your teammates, are now going to be spared the shock and disillusionment of learning that a player of mine so far forgot himself as to be publicly associated with the enemies of his country—Are you following me, Pleiss?"

"Perfectly, Coach," said Hugo. He felt himself inching back toward the door. This new, gentle-voiced, understanding aspect of the coach was infinitely disturbing, like seeing water suddenly start running uphill, or watching the lights of a great city go out all at once.

"As I was saying, as long as no harm has been done to this multitude of undeveloped souls who are, in a manner of speaking, our responsibility, I can search within me for Christian forbearance." The coach came around the desk and put his hand on Hugo's shoulder. "Pleiss, you're not a bad boy—you're a stupid boy, but not a bad boy. It was my fault that you got involved in that sordid exhibition. Yes, my fault. You received a terrible blow on the head on Sunday—I should have spotted the symptoms. Instead of brutally making you do wind sprints and hit the dummy for two hours, I should have said, 'Hugo, my boy, go home and lie down and stay in bed for a week, until your poor head has recovered.' Yes, that's what I should have done. I ask your forgiveness, Hugo, for my shortness of vision."

"Sure, Coach," Hugo said.

"And now," said the coach, "before you go home to your loving wife and a good long rest, I want you to do one thing for me."

"Anything you say, Coach."

"I want you to join me in singing one verse—just one small verse—of *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, sir," Hugo said, sure that he was going to forget what came after "the rockets' red glare."

The coach gripped his shoulder hard, then said, "One, two, three. . . ."

They sang *The Star-Spangled Banner* together. The coach was weeping after the first line.

When they had finished and the echoes had died down under the grandstand, the coach said, "Good. Now go home. I'd drive you home myself, but I'm working on some new plays I want to give the boys tomorrow. Don't you

worry. You won't miss them. I'll send them along to you by messenger and you can glance at them when you feel like it. And don't worry about missing practice. When you feel ready, just drop around. God bless you, my boy." The coach patted Hugo a last time on the shoulder and turned to gaze at Jojo Baines, his eyes still wet from the anthem.

Hugo went out softly.

He stayed close to home all the rest of the week, living off canned goods and watching television. Nothing much could happen to him, he figured, in the privacy of his own apartment. But even there, he had his moments of distress.

He was sitting watching a quiz show for housewives at nine o'clock in the morning when he heard the key in the door and the cleaning woman, Mrs. Fitzgerald, came in. Mrs. Fitzgerald was a gray-haired lady who smelled of other people's dust. "I hope you're not feeling poorly, Mr. Pleiss," she said solicitously. "It's a beautiful day. It's a shame to spend it indoors."

"I'm going out later," Hugo lied.

Behind his back, he heard Mrs. Fitzgerald think, "Lazy, hulking slob. Never did an honest day's work in his life. Comes the revolution, they'll take care of the likes of him. He'll find himself with a pick in his hands, on the roads. I hope I live to see the day."

Hugo wondered if he shouldn't report Mrs. Fitzgerald to the FBI, but then decided against it. He certainly didn't want to get involved with *them*.

He listened to a speech by the President and was favorably impressed by the President's command of the situation, both at home and abroad. The President explained that although things at the moment did not seem 100 percent perfect, vigorous steps were being taken, at home and abroad, to eliminate poverty, ill health, misguided criticism by irresponsible demagogues, disturbances in the streets and the unfavorable balance of payments. Hugo was also pleased, as he touched the bump on his head caused by the policeman's club, when he heard the President explain how well the war was going and why we could expect the imminent collapse of the enemy. The President peered out of the television set, masterly, persuasive, confident, including all the citizens of the country in his friendly, fatherly smile. Then, while the President was silent for a moment before going on to other matters, Hugo heard the President's voice, though in quite a different tone, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, if you really knew what was going on here, you'd piss."

Hugo turned the television set off.

Then, the next day, the television set broke down, and as he watched the repairman fiddle with it, humming mournfully down in his chest somewhere, Hugo heard the television repairman think,

"Stupid jerk. All he had to do was take a look and he'd see the only thing wrong is this loose wire. Slap it into the jack and turn a screw and the job's done." But when the television man turned around, he was shaking his head sadly. "I'm afraid you got trouble, mister," the television repairman said. "There's danger of implosion. I'll have to take the set with me. And there's the expense of a new tube."

"What's it going to cost?" Hugo asked.

"Thirty, thirty-five dollars, if we're lucky," said the television repairman.

Hugo let him take the set. Now he knew he was a moral coward, along with everything else.

He was cheered up, though, when his mother and father telephoned, collect, from Maine, to see how he was. They had a nice chat. "And how's my darling Sibyl?" Hugo's mother said. "Can I say hello to her?"

"She's not here," Hugo said. He explained about the trip to Florida with her parents.

"Fine people, fine people," Hugo's mother said. She had met Sibyl's parents once, at the wedding. "I do hope they're all enjoying themselves down South. Well, take care of yourself, Hooey. . . ." Hooey was a family pet name for him. "Don't let them hit you in the face with the ball." His mother's grasp of the game was fairly primitive. "And give my love to Sibyl when she gets home."

Hugo hung up. Then, very clearly, he heard his mother say to his father, 1000 miles away in northern Maine, "With her parents. I bet."

Hugo didn't answer the phone the rest of the week.

Sibyl arrived from Florida late Saturday afternoon. She looked beautiful as she got off the plane and she had a new fur coat that her father had bought her. Hugo had bought a hat to keep Sibyl from noticing the scalp wound inflicted by the policeman's club, at least at the airport, with people around. He had never owned a hat and he hoped Sibyl wouldn't notice this abrupt change in his style of dressing. She didn't notice it. And back in their apartment, she didn't notice the wound, although it was nearly four inches long and could be seen quite clearly through his hair, if you looked at all closely. She chattered gaily on about Florida, the beaches, the color of the water, the flamingos at the race track. Hugo told her how glad he was that she had had such a good time and admired her new coat.

Sibyl said she was tired from the trip and wanted to have a simple dinner at home and get to bed early. Hugo said he thought that was a good idea. He didn't want to see anybody he knew, or anybody he didn't know.

By nine o'clock, Sibyl was yawning and went in to get undressed. Hugo had had three bourbons to keep Sibyl from

worrying about his seeming a bit distracted. He started to make up a bed on the living-room couch. From time to time during the week, he had remembered the sound of the low laugh from Sylvia's window and it had made the thought of sex distasteful to him. He had even noticed a certain deadness in his lower regions and he doubted whether he ever could make love to a woman again. "I bet," he thought, "I'm the first man in the history of the world to be castrated by a laugh."

Sibyl came out of the bedroom just as he was fluffing up a pillow. She was wearing a black nightgown that concealed nothing. "Sweetie," Sibyl said reproachfully.

"It's Saturday night," Hugo said, giving a final extra jab at the pillow.

"So?" You'd never guess that she was pregnant as she stood there at the doorway in her nightgown.

"Well, Saturday night, during the season," Hugo said. "I guess I've gotten into the rhythm, you might say, of sleeping alone."

"But there's no game tomorrow, Hugo." There was a tone of impatience in Sibyl's voice.

The logic was unassailable. "That's true," Hugo said. He followed Sibyl into the bedroom. If he was impotent, Sibyl might just as well find it out now as later.

It turned out that his fears were groundless. The three bourbons, perhaps.

As they approached the climax of their lovemaking, Hugo was afraid Sibyl was going to have a heart attack, she was breathing so fast. Then, through the turbulence, he heard what she was thinking. "I should have bought that green dress at Bonwit's," Sibyl's thoughtful, calm voice echoed just below his eardrum. "I could do without the belt, though. And then I just might try cutting up that old mink hat of mine and using it for cuffs on that dingy old brown rag I got last Christmas. Maybe my wrists wouldn't look so skinny with fur around them."

Hugo finished his task and Sibyl said "Ah" happily and kissed him and went to sleep, snoring a little. Hugo stayed awake for a long time, occasionally glancing over at his wife's wrists and then staring at the ceiling and thinking about married life.

Sibyl was still asleep when he woke up. He didn't waken her. A church bell was ringing in the distance, inviting, uncomplicated and pure, promising peace to tormented souls. Hugo got out of bed and dressed swiftly but carefully and hurried to the comforts of religion. He sat in the rear, on the aisle, soothed by the organ and the prayers and the upright Sunday-morning atmosphere of belief and remittance from sin.

The sermon was on sex and violence in the modern world and Hugo appreciated it. After what he had gone through, a holy examination of those aspects of today's society was just what he needed.

The minister was a big red-faced man, forthright and vigorous. Violence actually got only a fleeting and rather cursory condemnation. The Supreme Court was admonished to mend its ways and to refrain from turning loose on a Christian society a horde of pornographers, rioters, dope addicts and other sinners because of the present atheistic conception of what the minister scornfully called civil rights, and that was about it.

But when it came to sex, the minister hit his stride. The church resounded to his denunciation of naked and leering girls on magazine stands, of sex education for children, of an unhealthy interest in birth control, of dating and premarital lasciviousness, of Swedish and French moving pictures, of mixed bathing in revealing swimsuits, of petting in parked cars, of all novels that had been written since 1910, of coeducational schools, of the new math, which, the minister explained, was a subtle means of undermining the moral code. Unchaperoned picnics were mentioned, miniskirts got a full two minutes, and even the wearing of wigs, designed to lure the all-too-susceptible American male into lewd and unsocial behavior, came in for its share of condemnation. The way the minister was going on, it would not have surprised some members of the congregation if he finished up with an edict against cross-pollination.

Hugo sat at the rear of the church, feeling chastened. It was a good feeling. That was what he had come to church for, and he almost said "Amen" aloud after one or two of the more spiritedly presented items on the minister's list.

Then, gradually, he became aware of a curious cooing voice in his left ear. "Ah, you, fourth seat to the left in the third row," he heard, "you with that little pink cleft just peeping out, why don't you come around late one weekday afternoon for a little spiritual consolation, ha-ha." Aghast, Hugo realized it was the minister's voice he was hearing.

Aloud, the minister was moving on to a rather unconvincing endorsement of the advantages of celibacy. "And you, the plump one in the fifth row, with the tight brassiere, Mrs. What's-your-name, looking down at your hymnbook as though you were planning to go into a nunnery," Hugo heard, mixed with loud advice on holy thoughts and vigorous, innocent exercise, "I can guess what you're up to when your husband goes out of town. I wouldn't mind if you had my private telephone number in your little black book, ha-ha."

Hugo sat rigid in his pew. This was going just a little bit too far.

The minister had swung into chastity.

He wanted to end on a note of uplift. His head was tilted back, heavenward, but through slitted eyes, he scanned his Sunday-best parishioners. The minister had a vested interest in chastity and his voice took on a special solemn intonation as he described how particularly pleasing this virtue was in the eyes of God and His angels. "And little Miss Crewes, with your white gloves and white socks," Hugo heard, "ripening away like a tasty little Georgia persimmon, trembling on the luscious brink of womanhood, nobody has to tell me what you do behind the stands on the way home from school. The rectory is only two blocks from school, baby, and it's on your way home. Just one timid knock on the door will suffice, ha-ha. There's always tea and little cakes for little girls like you at the rectory, ha-ha."

If Hugo hadn't been afraid of making a scene, he would have got up and run out of the church. Instead, he rapped himself sharply across the left ear. The consequent ringing kept him from hearing anything else. Several people turned around at the sound of the blow and stared disapprovingly at Hugo, but he didn't care. By the time the ringing stopped, the sermon was over and the minister was announcing the number of the hymn.

It was *Rock of Ages*. Hugo wasn't sure of the words, but he hummed, so as not to draw any more attention to himself.

The organ swelled, the sopranos, altos, tenors and bassos joined in, musical and faithful.

*"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy side, a healing flood,
Be of sin the double cure . . ."*

Hugo was swept along on the tide of sound. He didn't have much of an ear for music and the only things he played on the phonograph at home were some old 78-rpm Wayne King records that his mother had collected when she was a girl and had given him as a wedding present. But now the diapason of the organ, the pure flutelike tones of the women and young girls addressing God, the deep cello support of the men, combined to give him a feeling of lightness, of floating on spring airs, of being lost in endless fragrant gardens. Virgins caressed his forehead with petaled fingers, waters sang in mountain streams, strong men embraced him in everlasting brotherhood. By the time the congregation reached "Thou must save, and Thou alone," Hugo was out of his pew and writhing in ecstasy on the floor.

It was lucky he was in the last row, and on the aisle.

The hymn was never finished. It started to falter at "While I draw this fleeting breath," as people turned around to see what was happening and came to a

final stop on "When I rise to worlds unknown." By that time, everybody in the church was standing up and looking at Hugo, trembling, sprawled on his back, in the middle of the aisle.

The last notes of the organ came to a halt discordantly, at a signal from the minister. Hugo lay still for an instant, conscious of 300 pairs of eyes on him. Then he leaped up and fled.

He rang the bell a long time, but it was only when he roared, "I know you're in there. Open up or I'll break it down," and began to buck at the door with his shoulder that it opened.

"What's going on here?" Miss Cattavi asked, blocking his way. "There are no visiting hours on Sunday."

"There will be this Sunday," Hugo said hoarsely. He pushed roughly past Miss Cattavi. She was all muscle. It was the first time he had ever been rude to a lady.

"He's in Romania," Miss Cattavi said, trying to hold on to him.



"I'll show him Romania," Hugo cried, throwing open doors and dragging Miss Cattavi after him like a junior high school guard.

Dr. Sebastian was behind the fourth door, in a room like a library, practicing dry-ily casting. He was wearing hip-length rubber boots.

"Oh, Mr. Pleiss," Dr. Sebastian said merrily, "you came back."

"I sure did come back," Hugo said. He had difficulty talking.

"You want your other ear done, I wager," said Dr. Sebastian, reeling in delicately.

Hugo grabbed Dr. Sebastian by the lapels and lifted him off the floor so that they were eye to eye. Dr. Sebastian weighed only 140 pounds, although he was quite fat. "I don't want the other ear done," Hugo said loudly.

"Should I call the police?" Miss Cattavi had her hand on the phone.

Hugo dropped Dr. Sebastian, who went down on one knee but made a

credible recovery. Hugo ripped the phone out of the wall. He had always been very careful of other people's property. It was something his father had taught him as a boy.

"Don't tell me," Dr. Sebastian said solicitously, "that the ear has filled up again. It's unusual, but not unheard of. Don't worry about it. The treatment is simple. A little twirl of an instrument and—"

Hugo grabbed the doctor's throat with one hand and kept Miss Cattavi off with the other. "Now, listen to this," Hugo said, "listen to what you did to me."

"Cawlsnhnd on my goddamn windpipe," the doctor said.

Hugo let him go.

"Now, my dear young man," Dr. Sebastian said, "if you'll only tell me what little thing is bothering you. . . ."

"Get her out of the room," Hugo gestured toward Miss Cattavi. The things he had to tell Dr. Sebastian could not be said in front of a woman.

"Miss Cattavi, please. . . ." Dr. Sebastian said.

"Animal," Miss Cattavi said, but she went out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Moving out of range, Dr. Sebastian went behind a desk. He remained standing. "I could have sworn that your ear was in superb condition," he said.

"Superb!" Hugo was sorry he had taken his hand off the doctor's throat.

"Well, you can hear your team's signals now, can't you?" Dr. Sebastian said.

"If that's all I could hear," Hugo moaned.

"Ah." Dr. Sebastian brightened. "Your hearing is better than normal. I told you you had an extraordinary aural arrange-

ment. It only took a little cutting, a bold clearing away of certain extraneous matter. . . . You must be having a very good season."

"I am having a season in hell," Hugo said, unconscious that he was now paying tribute to a French poet.

"I'm terribly confused," the doctor said petulantly. "I do better for you than you ever hoped for and what is my reward—you come in here and try to strangle me. I do think you owe me an explanation, Mr. Pleiss."

"I owe you a lot more than that," Hugo said. "Where did you learn your medicine—in the Congo?"

Dr. Sebastian drew himself to his full height. "Cornell Medical School," he said with quiet pride. "Now, if you'll only tell me—"

"I'll tell you, all right," Hugo said. He paced up and down the room. It was an old house and the timbers creaked. The sound was like a thousand sea gulls in Hugo's ear.

"First," said Dr. Sebastian, "just what is it that you want me to do for you?"

"I want you to put my ear back the way it was when I came to you," Hugo said.

"You want to be deaf again?" the doctor asked incredulously.

"Exactly."

Dr. Sebastian shook his head. "My dear fellow," he said, "I can't do that. It's against all medical ethics. If it ever got out, I'd be barred forever from practicing medicine anyplace in the United States. A graduate of Cornell—"

"I don't care where you graduated from. You're going to do it."

"You're overwrought, Mr. Pleiss," the doctor said. He sat down at his desk and drew a piece of paper to him and took

out a pen. "Now, if you'll only attempt, in a calm and orderly way, to describe the symptoms. . . ."

Hugo paced up and down some more, trying to be calm and orderly. Deep down, he still had a great respect for doctors. "It started," he began, "with hearing the other team's signals."

Dr. Sebastian nodded approvingly and jotted something down.

"In the huddle," Hugo said.

"What's a huddle?"

Hugo explained, as best he could, what a huddle was. "And it's fifteen yards away and they whisper and sixty thousand people are yelling at the top of their lungs all around you."

"I knew it was a successful operation," Dr. Sebastian said, beaming in self-appreciation, "but I had no idea it was *that* successful. It must be very helpful in your profession. Congratulations. It will make a most interesting paper for the next congress of—"

"Shut up," Hugo said. He then went on to describe how he began understanding what the signals meant. Dr. Sebastian's face got a little graver as he asked Hugo to kindly repeat what he had just said and to explain exactly what was the significance of "Brown right! Draw fifty-five . . . on two!" When he finally got it straight and noted that it was a secret code, different for each team, and that the codes were as jealously guarded from opposing teams as the crown jewels, he stopped jotting anything down. And when Hugo went on to the moment when he knew that the opposing quarterback was thinking, "No. . . . It won't work, they're over-shifting on us," in just those words, Dr. Sebastian put his pen down altogether and a look of concern came into his eyes.

The description of the poker game only made the doctor shrug. "These days," he said, "we are just beginning to catch a glimmer of the powers of extra-sensory perception, my dear fellow. Why, down at Duke University—"

"Keep quiet," Hugo said, and described, with a reminiscent thrill of terror, the radio breakdown in the cockpit of the airplane and hearing the conversation between the pilots.

"I'm sure that could be explained," the doctor said. "A freak electronic phenomenon that—"

Hugo cut in. "I want you to hear what happened to me with a girl," Hugo said. "There was nothing electronic about that."

Dr. Sebastian listened with interest as Hugo relived the experience with Sylvia. Dr. Sebastian licked his lips from time to time but said nothing. He clucked sympathetically, though, when Hugo described the laughter four stories up and Croker's replay in the shower.

Hugo didn't say anything about his conversations with the coach. There



"And now a word from her alternate sponsor."

were certain things too painful to recall.

In a rush, Hugo let all the rest of it out—Vietnam, the clubbing by the policeman, the interior sneer of the magistrate, Mrs. Fitzgerald's dangerous radical leanings, the President's speech, the television repairman's chicanery, his mother's judgment of his wife.

Dr. Sebastian sat there without saying a word, shaking his head pityingly from time to time.

Hugo went on, without mercy for himself, about the green dress and the mink cuffs at a time when you'd bet for sure a woman would be thinking about other things. "Well," he demanded, "what've you got to say about that?"

"Unfortunately," Dr. Sebastian said, "I've never been married. A man my size." He shrugged regretfully. "But there are well-documented cases on record of loving couples who have spent long years together, who are very close together, who have a telepathic sympathy with each other's thoughts. . . ."

"Let me tell you what happened in church this morning," Hugo said desperately. The doctor's scientific ammunition was beginning to take its toll. The fearful thought occurred to him that he wasn't going to shake the doctor and that he was going to walk out of the door no different from the way he had entered.

"It is nice to hear that a big, famous, attractive young man like you still goes to church on Sunday morning," the doctor murmured.

"I've gone to my last church," Hugo said and gave him the gist of what he had heard the minister think while he was delivering his sermon on sex and violence.

The doctor smiled tolerantly. "The men of the cloth are just like us other poor mortals," he said. "It's very probable that it was merely the transference of your own desires and—"

"Then the last thing," Hugo said, knowing he had to convince the doctor somehow. He told him about writhing on the floor of the church, the spring breezes, the smell of flowers, the unutterable ecstasy during *Rock of Ages*.

The doctor made an amused little moue. "A common experience," he said, "for simple and susceptible religious natures. It does no harm."

"Three hundred people watching a two-hundred-and-thirty-five-pound man jerking around on the floor like a hooked tuna!" Hugo shouted. "That does no harm? And you yourself told me that if people could really hear, they'd writhe on the floor in ecstasy when they listened to Beethoven."

"Beethoven, yes," the doctor said. "But *Rock of Ages*?" He was a musical snob, Dr. Sebastian. "Tum-tum-tah-dee, tum-tum-dah," he sang contemptuously. Then

he became professional. He leaned across the desk and patted Hugo's hand and spoke quietly. "My dear young man, I believe every word you say. You undoubtedly think you have gone through these experiences. The incidents on the playing field can easily be explained. You are highly trained in the intricacies of a certain game, you are coming into your full powers, your understanding of your profession leads you into certain instantaneous practical insights. Be grateful for them. I've already explained the cards, the minister, your wife. The passage with the lady you call Sylvia is a concretization of your sense of guilt, combined with a certain natural young man's sexual appetite. Everything else, I'm afraid, is hallucination. I suggest you see a psychiatrist. I have the name of a good man and I'll give him a call and—"

Hugo growled.

"What did you say?" the doctor asked.

Hugo growled again and went over to the window. The doctor followed him, worried now, and looked out the window. Fifty yards away, on the soft, leaf-covered lawn, a five-year-old boy in sneakers was crossing over toward the garageway of the next house.

The two men stood in silence for a moment.

The doctor sighed. "If you'll come into my operating room," he said.

When he left the doctor's house an hour later, Hugo had a small bandage behind his left ear, but he was happy. The left side of his head felt like a corked-up cider bottle.

Hugo didn't intercept another pass all the rest of the season. He was fooled by the simplest hand-offs and dashed to the left when the play went to the right, and he couldn't hear Johnny Smathers' shouts of warning as the other teams lined up. Johnny Smathers stopped talking to him after two games and moved in with another roommate on road trips. At the end of the season, Hugo's contract was not renewed. The official reason the coach gave to the newspapers was that Hugo's head injury had turned out to be so severe that he would be risking permanent disablement if he ever got hit again.

Dr. Sebastian charged him \$500 for the operation and, what with the fine and making up the bribes to the magistrate and the newspapers, that took care of the \$1000 raise the coach had promised him. But Hugo was glad to pay for it.

By January tenth, he was contentedly and monogamously selling insurance for his father-in-law, although he had to make sure to sit on the left side of prospects to be able to hear what they were saying.

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