Winesburg, Indiana: "Manchild" Morrison, The Best That Almost Was

Porter Shreve
Winesburg, Indiana: "Manchild" Morrison, The Best That Almost Was

Abstract
Every ten years they trot me out for homecoming. Put me in the back of a red convertible and drive me around the stadium where half a century ago I took the Railsplitters to our first and only state championship. We ran the single wing back then, the old "Pop" Warner formation, with four guys in the backfield, any one of us ready for the snap. But in 1962, in Winesburg, Indiana, everyone knew the ball was going to number 21. I might as well have had a target on my jersey.

Keywords
age, growth, football, injury

Cover Page Footnote
Note: "This story is exclusively available in the anthology, Winesburg, Indiana, published by Breakaway Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press, in the spring of 2015. Available wherever fine books are sold, borrowed, or used as dowry."
Every ten years they trot me out for homecoming. Put me in the back of a red convertible and drive me around the stadium where half a century ago I took the Railsplitters to our first and only state championship. We ran the single wing back then, the old “Pop” Warner formation, with four guys in the backfield, any one of us ready for the snap. But in 1962, in Winesburg, Indiana, everyone knew the ball was going to number 21. I might as well have had a target on my jersey.

I don’t remember how I got the nickname, “Manchild.” It used to drive my mother crazy.

He’s Donald, for the love of Pete.

What are you feeding him, Mrs. Morrison?

Her Irish cheeks would glow as red as twisted apples.

I was always big for my age. A twelve pound baby, a head taller than my classmates in all the pictures. In seventh grade I played varsity basketball. In eighth the football coach suited me up, and the rest is history. To this day I hold every school record: rushing touchdowns, touchdown passes, all-purpose yards. I have all the kicking records, too.
Once, before practice, I knocked a fifty-eight yarder through the goal posts, but it wasn’t such a feat: the wind was at my back and the ball nicked the crossbar on its way through.

He’s just being modest, people would say when I’d tell them I wasn’t that good, but it turned out I was right. Never made the pros. Ask anyone outside the county if they’ve heard of “Manchild” Morrison and you’ll get a nod from a Purdue diehard or two who remembered the hype that followed my signing. *The Best That Almost Was*, ran the headline in the *Indianapolis Star* the week after I blew out my knee in a scrimmage freshman year.

People tell me I would have played alongside Bob Griese, another in-state hotshot who would go on to All American, then quarterback for the Miami Dolphins, winner of two Super Bowls and owner to this day of the last undefeated season in pro football.

Undefeated. Imagine.

I never did finish at Purdue. Got the surgery, but doctors were stabbing in the dark in 1963. They stapled the ends of the ligament together and one afternoon, on a rehab jog around the track, I felt a ping, then collapsed on the asphalt. I was no Gale Sayers. I wasn’t coming even halfway back from that. So I dropped out and headed home to Winesburg, sat around for a year or two feeling sorry for myself, gained forty pounds on sympathy casseroles. I hung a map of the U.S. on my bedroom wall, put pins in the states I’d visited – the Great Lakes eight, plus four in the south from a family trip to New Orleans. Twelve down, thirty-eight to go. Then the center on the old team, Tommy Flynn, who had just finished up at DePauw, proposed we go into business together. All I had to do was lend my name and look the part of local legend, and we’d have it made.

“Manchild” Motors: New and Used. Tommy was right, for a time. We did a good business. I worked the door, he did the selling, and his sunny wife, Cheryl, kept the books. They had twin boys and bought a five-bedroom house on a man-made lake in Whispering Woods. But one day, out for a test drive (he loved to see which was the fastest car on the lot), Tommy flipped a Camaro on the river road and went off to join James Dean. I was left with a car dealership, a grieving widow and little idea of what to do with either. Six months after the funeral, Cheryl and I were going over inventory in her office when she put her hand on my cheek. I still remember the photo on her desk of Tommy and the kids peering at us, as if through a window. We married, divorced, remarried, and now we’re separated again. I haven’t spoken with her since spring.

Which brings me more or less to this morning, when I found myself standing at the bathroom mirror of the Extended Stay in my fifty-year old high school uniform, the 21
as yellow as my teeth against the faded crimson. Coach Keller Jr. had asked me to wear the old jersey again. He’d done the same for the 40th Anniversary homecoming, as had his dad, Coach Keller Sr., for the 30th, 20th, and 10th. I’ll admit that I’ve tried on the uniform over the years, and not just before these games. But it never fit, so in the past I went in a windbreaker with the dealership’s logo on the back – a red Mustang flying through goalposts.

This time, though, the jersey slid right on. In fact, it drooped over my shoulders and arms; I looked like an old man playing dress-up. If I’d opened the door to such a sight on Halloween, I’d have felt a shiver. The whole town would be there. Cheryl. The twins, their wives and kids. No one missed a homecoming, and this was the golden anniversary of the once and forever golden age. I’ve seen more people in the dealership over the last few months than I have in years. But they haven’t been buying cars. They go online or drive to volume lots in Indy or Fort Wayne. I used to move 50 cars a month. Now I’d be lucky to sell five. I should have changed the name years ago. People who actually watched “Manchild” Morrison smash through a defensive line and drag cornerbacks downfield like strings of cans are dying every week. Parents. Uncles and Aunts. Teachers. Shopkeepers. Classmates. I used to go to their memorials but lately I’d rather not be seen.

It was Cheryl who first mentioned the weight loss. She made me stand on her bathroom scale. Two hundred forty, down twenty pounds from normal. I hadn’t been to the doctor in five years, and my refusal after the scale’s needle kept marching west – now under 200 for the first time since I was a kid – opened up old hurts in Cheryl that made her impossible to live with. Anything would set her off. A coffee mug I hadn’t rinsed out. Empty trash cans too long at the curb. The way I’d forget to switch stations when commercials came on. Earth to Donald, she said. And when I still wouldn’t go to the doctor after months of Cheryl’s nagging, she gave me one last chance. Called in the appointment herself, wrote it down in big letters on the kitchen calendar. 11:30 a.m. Dr. Reeves. You go, or I go, she said. I’m not going to be a widow two times over. I went to work, and I swear I had every intention of driving over to the internist’s. But I had a customer who was hot to buy a new Chrysler 300, and we were negotiating, me holding firm, stepping away to the back office to stall the guy. It was noon when we closed the deal, my first and last of that week. Cheryl asked me to move out the next day.
February 22, 2013

Winesburg, Indiana: “Manchild” Morrison, The Best That Almost Was

I haven’t stepped on a scale since, but I can feel myself shrinking. I drove forty-five miles to the outlet mall to buy clothes that would fit, and the expressions of people who come in to the dealership tell me all I need to know. They’re too polite to ask, *What happened to the rest of you?* Or to say, *You’re getting treatment, I assume?* I don’t trust doctors, but that’s not the real issue. If I made another appointment, if I stood up in the waiting room when the nurse called, *Mr. Morrison,* and went through that door to the steel table I’d be interrupting the natural course of events. I remember Cheryl once asking, *Do you ever wonder what would have happened if you hadn’t played in that scrimmage, or if the ball had gone to someone else on that particular down? You might not have come home. We might never have met. Tommy and I might have been watching you on TV, inviting people over on Sundays to brag on you and talk about the ’62 team.*

*I don’t think about that stuff,* I said. *What’s meant to be is meant to be.*

I remember another time, after I’d dropped out of college, my mother coming into my room one afternoon when I’d been sleeping most of the day:

*What are you going to do?* she asked.

*I guess we’ll see what happens,* I said.

*You sound just like your father.*
How would I know?

My father drove a ’51 Windsor convertible. My mother used to call it his mistress. The lady in red. I was too young to understand what she meant, but I can picture him now, out on the driveway polishing the hood, bent close enough to see his reflection. Just as my mother might have predicted, he did run off with that car. He used to talk about California, but he only got as far as Casper, Wyoming before he ran out of money or nerve. He did roustabout work in the oil fields, made journeyman then foreman at the Amoco refinery, died of a heart attack on the job nine months short of retirement.

I don’t know if Coach Keller has heard the details of that story – surely so, in a town like this – but of all the cars on the lot he always asks me to bring a red convertible for my little halftime parade around the track. And I say sure. But this year I must have forgotten to order a red convertible because the only soft top we have in stock is black, with tinted windows. I grab the keys, toss the old jersey in the passenger seat and fire up the engine. Though it’s a perfect fall evening, I keep the top up for now. It’s eight o’clock. Homecoming Friday. The streets are dim and empty. Closed signs glow in the restaurant windows. I could run the red lights, strip naked and race down Main Street crying Hallelujah, and no one would see or care because they’re all at the football stadium.

By the time I drive up near the entrance, it’s late in the second quarter and the place is packed to the gills. I cut the motor, crack the window to let in the cool breeze, the smell of popcorn, cotton candy, raked leaves and hormones. The crack of helmets and pads, waves of cheers, whistles, air horn blasts sweep in. The school band, forever out of tune, plays “We Will Rock You” and cheerleaders shoot into the air like fireworks. Coach Keller paces the sidelines, tugging at his headset. And I can see gathered behind him, lined up in the stands some of the old-timers – my teammates —wearing their faded jerseys. A few of them are shifting around, seeming anxious, as if on the lookout for someone.

The universal rule of homecoming games is that you schedule a team you can beat, but the Railsplitters are down 24-3. I’m checking the clock on the scoreboard and getting ready to pop the top of the convertible – I’ve already got my fingers on the release handle – when I see one of the old-timers point in my direction. He must have ESP because I’m a good fifty yards away in a hearse-black car with tinted windows double parked outside the chain link fence. Then someone else is looking over and others are pointing, too, and it’s like I’m watching a Western in slow motion about a posse of retired lawmen who have come together for one last ride. They’ve stepped off the bleachers and are walking toward me, coming around the track, past the end zone and the concession stand. I let go of the release handle and turn the ignition. Before I roll up
the window, I reach into the passenger seat and grab my old jersey. I toss the thing out onto the sidewalk, where it lands flat on its back, arms stretched out, as if steamrolled by tacklers.

I throw the car in drive and floor it. I peel out of there like a joyriding teenager. Squealing tires. Fishtailing. Leaving marks on the street. I don’t slow down for lights or anything. I fly through town out onto the river road, and up the ramp to the interstate, headlights stiff arming the darkness. Nothing in front of me but open lanes, an empty map. I step on the gas, like Tommy Flynn, like the “Manchild” Morrison of old: football star. Can’t stop me now. I’m going, going. Good as gone.

Porter Shreve is the author of three novels, all published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: *The Obituary Writer*, *Drives Like a Dream* and *When the White House Was Ours*. He directs the Creative Writing Program at Purdue University.