

COACH

I could never make up my mind if Mr. Miles Manning looked old or young. Up close you could see the wrinkles and spots on his hands and arms. And his neck had a lot of loose skin. But from a distance, he was a thin guy with red hair who moved quickly. And he acted young because he was really kind of simple. He was probably the simplest adult I had ever met. Not retarded, just simple. Whatever happened, he would smile and shrug.

People called him “Coach” even though he had worked only one year as an assistant sophomore football coach and that was ten years ago. My brother was on that team and said Manning didn’t know the difference between a field goal and a fair catch. Most of the time he would walk around with that dopey smile on his face saying things like, “Go get em guys. Go get em.” Then in one game he actually cheered when the other team scored a touchdown. When that happened, even the cheerleaders went after him. Instead of apologizing or making up an excuse. He just shrugged. That was the last day he ever coached at Forest High.

But everyone still called him “Coach,” even though he was nothing more than a PE flunky. That meant he did the dirty work. Before class, he took roll. When we had swimming, he passed out towels. When we played touch football, he was in charge of the yard-line markers. If the teacher in charge forgot something, Coach would go back to get it. “Manning, I forgot the bases. Run back and get them, OK?”

“Go, Coach,” we’d all shout and off he’d sprint. He loved to run. Most of the time he would take the long way around. A few minutes later, we’d see him tearing towards us with his arms full of bases, and we’d give a big cheer.

But even though he seemed really dumb when he sprinted across the field, he was supposed to be a smart guy. He came to Forest as a history teacher. My brother said he knew a lot about Lincoln and the people you study in American Literature. One time he brought in a World War II hand grenade. Another time he brought in a letter written by Teddy Roosevelt. But he couldn’t make the kids shut up so they reassigned

him to the PE department. One evening, about a week after he was demoted, a janitor found him alone in his old classroom. He was sitting at the desk with all of his teaching stuff in front of him, and he was crying.

Earlier that year, after a PE class, I found out that he really didn't think like a teacher. He caught up with me as we were walking back to the locker room across the football field. "Archie, I've got to ask you something." He had noticed I was wearing a shirt with a picture of Leadbelly, the old folk singer. That really excited him. He told me that two summers ago he had dropped off his wife with her family in Indiana and driven all by himself through the Mississippi Delta where a lot of those singers had lived. He knew what to look for because he had read a book about the old singers. He even played blues music while he made the drive. He wanted to know what I knew about the blues. When I said the shirt belonged to my brother, he looked disappointed. But then he gave me a big nod and a smile and I smiled back. From that time on, he would make a point of calling me "Leadbelly."

Naturally, we all made fun of him. Part of being at Forest High was that you made fun of Coach Manning when you got to be an upperclassman. You couldn't do it as a freshman, but by the time you were a junior, it was cool. And the funny thing was that he wasn't that strange. It was just that he seemed like a total loser and didn't care if we knew it. We imitated the way he stood with his hands on his hips and with his head rotating looking at nothing. We copied his high, scratchy voice. We copied the way he stood too close to people and the way he threw a ball like a girl did. We made fun of the real coaches too, but never so openly because they would have smacked us. Rick Babson was this big, blond kid on his way to Yale, and even though he didn't look like Coach, he could still do a perfect imitation. Babson would drop his shoulders and walk with his feet out. He would gesture in a big, silly kind of way. Manning's gestures never quite fit his words. And Babson would make his voice go into a sing song.

Manning must have known. Some guys would actually speak in his voice when he was nearby. And during games, people would break off into Manning runs. Even the coaches would do this. That would really crack us up. If Manning knew we were ripping him, he would give off that stupid smile and then walk off somewhere whistling and try

to act busy. And he would shrug.

I could copy him too, but I wasn't very good at making fun of people. And, to tell you the truth, it was hard to make fun of him because I knew he liked me. This was obvious ever since the Leadbelly conversation. He didn't say much, but I would catch him looking at me. Once in a touch football game, he listened in on the other teams' huddle and he nodded at the guy who was going to catch the pass. When I made the interception on the next play, Coach clapped and everyone hooted. It gave me a really creepy feeling inside. Another time he stopped me in the hall to tell me that when he retired in two years, he and his wife were going to travel around the world. I had a hard time imagining that.

"I think he's queer for you, Archie." my friend Weldon shouted one day driving home. He had to shout because the muffler of his van was shot. "He looks at you all the time. You'd better be careful in the shower." We were driving in Weldon's van near the projects. Weldon went this way when he wanted to buy pot. He didn't tell me that's why he stopped at the old apartment and went inside, but I knew.

That was the way it was. If someone brought out a joint at a party, I might take a hit, but that was it. I wasn't into the whole business of buying and selling. And it wasn't that big a deal anyway. We were all suburban kids going off to college and having a little fun our senior year.

Actually I wasn't going off to college because I would be staying home to run the family restaurant, a family place called Dominicks. My dad, whose name was Dominick, had died a few years ago. My brother lived in California with his family. And I was the one to keep the place going. We all thought it would be great if I worked during the day and went to community college at night. That was fine with me. I wouldn't have been going to a good college anyway. I was ready to move into the adult world of stores. My hair was starting to recede little bit, and I had started to call adults by their first names. Rudy the barber had even asked me to join a bowling league.

One time Mr. Manning and his wife came into the restaurant. I looked up from my Sporting News and saw Mrs. Manning heading for a table in the back with Coach following along. It was an informal place where people just walked in and sat down at

one of the tables or at a counter. The table where they sat had no window, but there was a large poster of the Italian Alps. Coach read the menu and she sat there with her head slightly bowed. She was small like the coach, but she looked firm. Whenever I saw her around town, she was always wearing plain colors and pulled her hair back like a pioneer woman. My mom said that Mrs. Manning worked in a hospital in the city and that she had grown up in a religious community in Indiana.

My sister took their orders. The coach had a cheeseburger and Mrs. Manning ordered a salad. During the meal he took out a map and leaned it against the napkin holder so that they both could see it. Once she leaned over and wiped something off Coach's chin with her napkin. After they finished eating, they were standing by the counter. She had just paid the bill, and he had been standing off to the side looking at a picture of the restaurant that had been taken twenty years ago. "Frieda," he suddenly spoke up, "this young man is Archie Ori. He's a senior at the high school."

Mrs. Manning stopped fussing with her change purse and looked right at me. "Hello, Archie." she spoke clearly. "And whom are you named after?" She tipped her head and stared into my face. From that angle, I could see that she wasn't wearing earrings.

It was an odd question, but I tried to answer it. "My grandfather was named Archibald, so I guess that's why. He came here from Italy."

"And whom was he named after? Archie is an unusual name for Italians." For a second I thought she was going to take notes. When I told her I didn't know, she frowned. Then she smiled and reached over the counter to shake my hand. "Nice to meet you anyway, Archie Ori. Whoever you are. Come on, Miles. We have to do more weeding before it gets dark." Out the door she marched with Coach hustling to keep up. But he did look back at me with one of his simple smiles and naturally he shrugged. They lived in a small house about two blocks away. It backed up on a huge field where people grew vegetables. Mrs. Manning could walk everywhere from there. And she would catch the train to get to the hospital. As I watched them leave, I wondered if she had any idea how often the kids made fun of her husband. I wasn't really sure if she'd care.

The Hartmut Incident happened a few days before the start of summer vacation. We had this exchange student named Hartmut Wuhlrob. He was from Dusseldorf, and he was a complete dork. In fact, we made fun of him as much as we made fun of Manning, and I would join in too. He would say things like, "waycation," when he meant "vacation," and he wore his pants too high. And he could never quite figure out what we were talking about.

But he did figure out that we liked to make fun of Coach, and this one day at the very end of the school year, Hartmut went nuts. We were lying down between halves (??) of a soccer game when all of a sudden, this goofy German leaped up and crouched over and started chattering in what he must have thought was a Manning voice. And he did all of this right in front of him. And when Manning tried to get away, Hartmut actually chased him while he did this embarrassing impersonation. It was sickening.

Well, Babson went berserk when he saw what was happening. That wasn't the way we did things. He walked up to Hartmut and shoved him down right beside a soccer goal. "If you do that any more, you fucking kraut, I'll punch those pig eyes out." Hartmut lay on the ground his eyebrows raised stammering in German. We were in a semi-circle hoping that they would fight. And off to the side with his mouth opening and closing stood Coach. His bottom lip was trembling and his eyes were bugging out, and for just a second I thought he was going to say something, but instead he stared at his hands and kept moving his lips.

Then he turned and tore across the fields right through the middle of a freshman soccer game, into the parking lot and headed towards his house. Some students standing next to a car smoking leaped out of the way when they saw him coming. They said his teeth were bared and he was panting like an animal.

The school year ended shortly after that. Coach didn't come to class any more. I didn't see him in the hall. He probably called in sick. What had been a big deal in the spring, soon faded as we graduated. We had a small party in the restaurant the day after graduation. My mom let the kids drink if they promised to walk home. She also stayed in the front of the restaurant so she didn't have to catch anyone smoking pot in the back alley. Suddenly we were doing adult things like shaking hands and hugging.

Several of my friends wished me well because I was not going on to college. I'm sure they didn't believe me when I said I was glad that I was staying home. Towards the end of the evening Babson staggered in with an older girl. He had lipstick on his face. The girl's blouse was buttoned wrong. He was loaded but still sharp enough to do one of his best Coach impersonations I have (had?) ever seen. Then someone suggested we call Coach, but I vetoed that idea. Someone else said they had seen him in town and that he looked like an old man. "He didn't even have that dumb-looking smile. He just walked right by me like a zombie." And he was always alone; in the summer his wife visited her family in Indiana.

If I hadn't been staying home to run the restaurant, I would have had other things to worry about. But I wasn't going off to college, so I thought a lot about Coach Manning. He hadn't been the same since that day with Hartmut and Babson. I could understand why he must have felt so embarrassed, but why for so long? Was this going to be it? Would he be dragging himself through town forever? When his wife came back from Indiana, would he still look so pitiful?

When he did come into the restaurant, he barely said hello. The customers who didn't know him must have thought he was some kind of street person because his shirt wasn't tucked in and he needed a shave. He would shuffle in and head for a table in the back. He'd have a book, but instead of reading it, he would just stare at his hands. Once I walked over to his table and started a conversation about black singers but he didn't offer much. "When does Mrs. Manning get back from Indiana?" I asked before I walked back to my place behind the counter.

"It's hard to say." he didn't look up from his hands. "Her sisters need her down there to help with the farm." He wasn't going to say anything more. Man, he looked sad. I thought that she had to be pretty mean to leave him like this.....

I played catcher on a softball team that summer. In the second game I hit a home run. When I crossed home plate, I saw Coach in the crowd but he was sitting there. I also signed up for my community college courses. At the time I thought for a second about asking Coach for advice in picking out classes. But then I could see how lame that would look.

I also spent more time with my mom. Now that I was an adult, it was OK to do things like that. We would sit in the living room of our apartment with the TV playing or at the restaurant, where we were both more comfortable. She always sat in the same chair where she could see the picture of my brother with the other members of the National Honor Society. There was also a picture of my father accepting the Class B golf championship trophy at the local course. Like lots of golfers, he was a short and stocky guy. When that picture was taken, he hadn't told any of us that he had cancer. Mom still wore the wedding ring, but she had to get it fixed to fit her skinny fingers because she had lost a lot of weight since he died. All she really wanted to talk about was the restaurant. Should we hire a new cook? What about expanding? Would it be a good idea for me to take some restaurant management courses in college? These were probably the same things she said to my dad when he was alive. She didn't ask about my friends. I didn't ask about her bowling or her soap operas. She was frail but determined to keep the restaurant going. I didn't worry about my mom.

Towards the end of July, I saw Mr. Manning gardening. He was on his knees planting pumpkin seeds in this place he had cleared out. He and Mrs. Manning were supposed to have a spectacular garden but it looked a little sickly to me, especially with that big bare spot.

"How are you doing, Coach?" I called out and walked over to him. He stood up and shook my hand.

"Nice to see you, Archie." He actually smiled a little. "How's business at your restaurant?" He was wearing a baggy orange jogging suit that was big enough for Babson.

"Business is great. We had to hire a new dishwasher. Next year the Rotary Club will have the meeting there." I was really glad to see him.

"That's got to make you and your mom happy." He started to smile a little bit more.

"You know it does. I've also started doing some of the cooking." I felt like talking, and he seemed kind of interested so I told him that my brother was coming to town in a month.

“I knew him. Isn’t his name Dominick, just like your Dad’s? He’s the one who gave you the Leadbelly shirt.” This was the first time I had seen that stupid grin for quite a while. And it made me feel good. I had forgotten what it was like to be around the Coach. “When he was on the sophomore football team, I was one of the assistants. You must have heard that I cheered for the other team one time.” He chuckled to himself and looked off in the distance towards the school. From where we were standing you could see the smokestack and part of the field. I could even see the area by the soccer goal where Babson had thrown Hartmut Wuhlrob and threatened to punch his German eyes out.

“When he gets to town, I’ll let you know. I know he’d like to see you. When you come to the restaurant, we can all talk.” I felt myself slipping into an adult voice. This was the kind of things adults did -- making plans to get together.

But he wasn’t really listening anymore. He had gone back to his knees and was pulling out weeds. “Maybe so, Archie.” His voice was faint and hard to understand. “Maybe so. But I might be gone. I have two more weeks to decide if I’m coming back.”

“Coach, you can;t retire!”

“I can still take early retirement. It might be time for me to do some more traveling.” He had found a way to turn his back on me. He had stopped pulling at the ground. I didn’t really want to see the expression on his face.

“You’d better go now, Archie. I have lots of work here.” And then, just before I started walking back to town, he said something really odd and he turned around to say it. “And Archie, be careful working in the kitchen.” I stood there and then walked off.

My brother came and went. We drove to a Cubs game in the city. I bicycled with his kids over to the high school so they could see where their father had been an athlete and an honors student. My brother’s wife helped in the kitchen. She even prepared one of the specials: “Anne’s Mighty Meatloaf.” On their last day, she took my mother to the mall and bought her three new outfits. Up until this trip, I had called her, “my brother’s wife.” Now I called her my “sister-in-law.” And then they flew back to San Diego. I hadn’t even mentioned Coach.

Why did I go to his house that day? It’s really hard to say. He didn’t come after I

rang the door bell, but I could hear him shuffling inside so I didn't go anywhere. Finally he opened the door about a foot and peered out blinking. His skin was white and his eyes were pink. He was an old man. He was wearing the same jogging suit that he wore gardening, but it looked even bigger. His hair hadn't been cut. I could see some gray in the corners. It had never occurred to me that he dyed it red. "Archie? What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?" I had never been inside his house. We all imagined it to be plain and clean, just like his wife. It wouldn't have trophies or family pictures. Before today, I hadn't wanted to see it because it might show me what a depressing guy Coach really was.

"Not today, Archie." His voice was flat and serious. "The house is a mess. I'm packing up." I got this feeling if I tried to barge in, he would block the way.

"It's time to go then?" My voice sounded low and far away.

"Oh, yes. It's time to go." He opened the door a little wider, but not much. "I told the principal I wanted early retirement. Schools love that, you know. Now they can hire some new teacher for much less money." His feet were fidgeting. He smelled of cigarettes and maybe booze. I had never seen such an unhappy looking human being.

"That day Babson got so mad at the German. That did it didn't it? That was the day you decided not to come back?"

"That was a bad day. The worst day ever. But I've had some bad days. You have no idea." I could still picture him with that stunned expression looking over at Babson and the German -- the moment before he sprinted home.

"How does Mrs. Manning feel about your retiring? Did you get in touch with her in Indiana?"

"She didn't go to Indiana, Archie. She didn't go anywhere." his voice had a really scratchy whisper. If I hadn't been so near him, I couldn't have heard the words. Any kids pedaling by on their bikes or people walking with their dogs would have no idea what was happening in the front porch of this little man's house.

We stared at each other. My hands were tingling. Sweat was starting to sneak down my arm. I could have shook his hand, said goodbye and walked back to the

restaurant. But I didn't move. "That cleared out area," I heard myself ask, "where you were planting pumpkin seeds. Is that.....?"

"You'd better leave now Archie. We both have other things to do."