

The play was whistled dead before the ball could be snapped, the shrill echo in the empty stadium halting the practice game sooner than usual, and varsity and second-stringers alike uncoiled from their stances reluctantly.

Animal Angelides spat toward the sideline. "Here it comes. Why doesn't he go drown kittens to keep himself busy?"

The other interior linemen groaned along with him and Ben at right end held in his own with effort. He watched with the others as their coach and chief tormenter came striding onto the field as if he personally owned Treasure State stadium. In his camelhair topcoat and snapbrim hat Lionel Bruno could strut standing still, so when he added some relish to it as he did now, he was practically parting the grass like the Red Sea. It was times like this when Ben wished to high heaven that he hadn't been elected team captain.

Hastily he checked over his shoulder to see how the backfield was taking it. Moxie Stamper smirked unmercifully behind his quarterback privileges, about as expected. At the left halfback position, Vic shook his head at Ben as if he couldn't believe what was happening to this season either. At right half, Dex was gazing at the sky with a bitter expression. "Oh Lord of the Pigskin, please let our grasp

hell can
he just
play pocket
pouch w
a n to
keep himself
busy?

stay over the
keep on...
You
give us
~~attract~~
alone
how is he?
lay off us?

skyward

exceed our reach,” he intoned in sardonic prayer. Bulking between the pair of them, Jake had yanked his helmet off and stood tapping it impatiently against his thigh pads. “I must have missed the page in biology,” he thought out loud, “where it says football coaches eat their young.”

“Knock it off, guys,” Ben said in a low voice. “Don’t make it any worse than it is.”

As if scripted, Bruno marched straight to the football. He plucked it off the ground and walked back and forth through the players holding the ball in front of their faces as if all twenty-two of them were nearsighted morons. Ben tried to guess which speech it was going to be this time.

“If the bunch of you would pull your heads out of your butts,” the coach began as if they had brought up the question, “and put aside the lesser things of life to concentrate on the basic game of football”--

Ouch, that one.

--“then you just possibly might have the makings of a genuine team.” At the word *might*, Bruno squeezed the ball so hard it threatened to pop. “Forget nights on the town. Forget dessert and the cigarette after. Forget about trying to get into your girlfriend’s pants,” he said with rising intensity. “This”--he

brandished the football higher--“this is the one and only object of your desire from this moment forward, people. You have to want this ball. You have to lust for it. You have to *love* getting this ball and handling it as if you are the only ones on the face of God’s green sod it is entrusted to.” Pausing for emphasis or maybe it was breath, Bruno nursed his disgust in front of them for all it was worth.

There was more than one audience for this. Ben risked a glance toward the near sideline where Ted Loudon, Bruno’s favorite sportswriter and nobody else’s, was taking in the coach’s every word hungrily. *Why? He’ll keep making up whatever he wants to about “the team that can’t find itself” anyway.*

Suddenly into the silence, from out there on the scruffy practice field halfway to Hill 57, wafted feminine voices in full-throated chant. The cheerleader squad was lustily rehearsing its taunts to other teams.

“TSU is our alma mammy!

We’ll give you the double whammy!”

Ordinarily Bruno was death on such distraction. When he put the team through drills on the practice field he confined the cheerleaders out of sight in the stadium, and whenever he ran through plays in the stadium he banished the yelling nymphs to the practice field. But this time he cocked a significant ear.

“Listen up, people. That dumbfuck cheer has it right. That *is* what you want to give the other side. Run *and* pass. Block *and* tackle. Handle the ball *and* hold the ball. Double whammy the bastards across from you until they can’t see straight.”

He paused again as if waiting for more angelic inspiration from the cheerleaders, but none seemed forthcoming.

“There is not,” the coach resumed like a thunderclap, “I repeat, *not* an opponent on the schedule that the Treasure State University Golden Eagles of nineteen hundred and forty-one can’t beat the living piss out of, if you will merely play this game my way. *If!* Do you hear that word? *I-F!* And now that I have your attention, may I point out to you something there is no goddamn if about. It is one week from today to the season opener. *One week!* That gives you seven days to pull together into a team that devotes itself heart, soul, and fart hole to this ball.”

Now--Hollywood could not have cued him better, Ben had to admit--the coach put the football down gently as an egg. By then varsity and second-stringers alike knew Animal indeed was prophetic, here it came. “People?” the coach addressed them as if dubious about that. “To help you concentrate on the loving care of this miraculous object, you are now playing under the Golden Rule.”

stick

stick on
wall

Pin call ?

Despair followed those words like jackal tracks behind a caravan. The only thing biblical about Bruno's Golden Rule was that it was blunt-edged and carried the whiff of Hell. The dreaded maxim was actually a catchall of his wrathful coaching canons--no fumbling the football, no missing a tackle, no messing up a play, no timeouts to fix shoulder pads, no anything else that could conceivably offend the exacting eye on the sideline--but what sane person in a football uniform was going to stand out there arguing singular and plural with the gridiron lord and master?

Not Ben, not quite yet. *Not in front of everybody. He'd run the legs off all of us up to those big white sons of bitches just to show me.*

His involuntary glance toward the butte looming out there beyond the end zone stands was not the only one. The entire football squad, with one exception, had grown to hate the Letter Hill. Of all of Bruno's raging innovations this year, trickier drills, tougher calisthenics, full-length slambang practice games that pitted the varsity against the scrub team twice a week, the punishment runs up to those pale letters halfway into the sky were the hardest to take. Early on when they were working into shape it was somewhat different, all the players together plunging up the long steep slope at the end of the day like lemmings in reverse, gasping their

lungs out as they touched rock at the base of the TSU and jolting their way back down which was damn near as hard as the climb up. But since then came the practice games and the Golden Rule, and a dead-tired footrace with yourself up the Letter Hill any time Bruno happened not to like how you performed. By now Ben read all kinds of trouble in those three eternally waiting letters; penalty laps around the field were a custom as old as football cleats, but nobody had signed on to clamber up a junior mountainside any time a volcanic coach blew off steam. Dex would be his bet, for the first to shove the Golden Rule in Bruno's face and walk off the team, followed immediately by Animal and Jake. Today could be the day. Even the Butte hardcase at right guard, Larry O'Fallon, looked mutinous. *God damn it, this isn't football, it's Russian roulette.*

Still looking supremely disgusted at what he had to work with, the coach gathered himself to go. "All right, Stamper"--another mark of Bruno was that he did not acknowledge the existence of first names--"show us something that resembles football."

Instantly Moxie yapped at the varsity, "You heard the man, huddle up, everybody get your ass in gear." That was one thing about Moxie Stamper, he was ornery but reliably so. His style as quarterback was quick and slick, and he had in

his favor a sneaky sidearm slinging way of passing that made it hard for the defense to see the ball coming. On the first play now, he hit the left end, Larry Danzer, with a screen pass for ten yards. Right away he caught the scrubs by surprise with the same play again, good for a dozen yards this time. The second-stringers, no slouches, did not like being patsies on such calls and Danzer didn't help the matter any. Physically flawless as a swan, the lithe left end preened past them with an exceedingly leisurely trot back to the huddle; Narcissus was an amateur compared to Danzer. Ben by contrast, with no action on his side of the field but to block his man, was starting to feel like a paying spectator; his hands itched for the ball but he couldn't argue with first downs.

Rubbing his passing arm fondly, Moxie looked very full of himself in the huddle. It did seem to cross his mind briefly that there were others in the backfield besides him, as he handed off to Jake for four yards up the middle. Then, though, like a roulette player repeating his bet on one lucky number, Moxie called yet another screen pass to Danzer.

"Christ, Mox, again?" Animal panted. "What the hell you trying to prove?" The tackle, guard, and center had to check-block on the play, then muscle their way downfield to form a blocking wedge in front of the pass receiver; this meant

Animal, Sig Prokosch, and Chris Pennington were pulling double-duty on every one of these left-side trick plays. “Is Danzer the only guy who gets to handle the precious little old ball besides you?”

“I’ll do the play calling, Angelides, you just do the blocking,” Moxie snapped. Ben could feel the tightening circle of tension in the huddle. Stamper and Danzer were the only ones on the team who weren’t fed up with the Stamper-to-Danzer aerial circus in these practice games. But he couldn’t say anything without looking like he wanted more catches for himself. Which was true enough.

Animal muttered something to Sig and Chris as they left the huddle. When Moxie took the snap, all three blocked no harder than feather pillows and scrambled on through, leaving the line of scrimmage wide open. Barely did Moxie have the football in his hands before he was smothered under a gleeful avalanche of scrub-team players. Interestingly, the whistle on the sideline stayed silent over this, and Animal sent Ben a wink of triumph. Moxie got up slowly, wiping at a trickle of blood out the corner of his mouth and glowering at the left-side linemen as everyone shambled into the huddle. But this time the play he called was “Reinking, right-side slant pattern long.”

Precise as the moment the center snapped the ball to Moxie, Ben fainted and broke free as though catapulted. The exhilaration of swiftness took him over, the field flying under him so instinctively sure that he knew to the instant when to veer past the scrambling pass defender, and at top speed aim himself to the unknowable but sure spot where he and the airborne ball would intersect. He looked back only then, the looping pass coming to him as if in a recurrent dream, from backyard lobs by a bespectacled father when he was ten to the Gros Ventre high school field's skyfull of leather pluckings to this supreme stadium's ordination of sure-handed catches, another one now. How miraculous it always seemed, then and when the war trained him into the start of a pilot, the grace of nature that kept a propelled object aloft; the substantiality of air which some first human eye surely mused on with wonder at a leaf floating by. It all gathered, half-known half-sensed, into him with the feel of the ball meeting the skin of his hands. The pass secured, he raced final yards and was in the end zone.

Still whooping after that and the extra point, the eleven of them lined up across the green field to kick off to the scrub team. It was to become something like a permanent moment, time previous gone to shadow and all else now lit from that single image, in Ben's memory. Moxie held, Vic boomed the kick high and

far, and the Treasure State University varsity raced down the field toward what would prove to be fame.

By chance the kickoff sailed to Purcell, the scrub team speed demon, and everyone bayed a warning and went into high gear to head him off. Vic himself managed to nail him at about the thirty-yard line, and they all breathed in relief.

Lining up opposite Purcell as the scrubs broke their huddle and came up to the line of scrimmage, Ben as ever felt like he was looking across at wasted evolution. Reedy, long-limbed, big-eyed, Merle Purcell resembled some creature Nature shaped for speed but forgot to give fang or claw. Bred to flee, but not to block and tackle in the flatten-'em-into-the-ground manner preached by Bruno. No coach could resist that tantalizing speed entirely, so he stuck Purcell in at left end on the scrub team. Until the varsity wised up in a hurry, the wispy speedster caught a few passes in the open and gained so much yardage it began to look like mileage. But from the very first pass that the kid juggled and dropped, Ben divined what was going to be Purcell's problem: he heard footsteps. When a defender closed in on him, Purcell would flinch, maybe infinitesimally but that was enough. It was a matter of guts: the one necessary requirement for an end was to hang in there and catch the ball first, however much of a hit was coming at you. Anybody, Ben

included, could look at Purcell's leggy insubstantial build and sympathize, but sympathy couldn't make up for a leak in fortitude.

True to form, Purcell flitted all over the field on the next series of downs, but the scrub quarterback played it safe and let his backs pack the ball. "See that, Moxie?" Dex was heard to say darkly. "That's an innovation called running the football." As if to prove his point, when the time came for the scrubs to punt, Dex made a thirty-yard runback. Moxie was impatiently ragging the varsity into the huddle when the whistle blast from the sideline cut in.

Now what? As startled as everyone else on the field, Ben swung a look toward where the coach was standing. Bruno kept to game conditions when the Golden Rule was in force, and that meant no substitution except for injury. But as they watched, Merle Purcell was imperiously waved in to the sideline by the coach. Bruno jawed hard at him for a minute, Loudon hovering right there lapping it up. Then Purcell, head down, jogged back onto the field and crossed the scrimmage line to the varsity huddle.

Puzzled, Moxie watched him approach. "Look who's here from Cow Pie High. You trying to set a record for being farthest offside, Purcell?"

"Coach sent me in for Danzer," Purcell reported bashfully.

“The hell you say.” The quarterback’s face clouded. As Ben read them, though, most other faces in the huddle except for Danzer’s showed no dismay. Quickly Moxie clapped his favorite receiver on the shoulder pad in consolation. “Guess this is your chance to go play stinkfinger with a cheerleader, Danz.”

“I could use a rest,” Danzer said languidly and sloped off to the sideline.

“Let’s get to business,” Moxie snapped out. “Our fancy sub on a fly pattern.” Purcell’s Adam’s apple bobbed for everyone to see, but he looked determined as he took his stance at left end.

On this pass play to the other side of the field Ben was to knock the defensive end opposite him off balance, which he thriftily did, then Carl Friessen rotated onto the man, springing Ben loose into the secondary to block as needed when the catch was made. From the corner of his eye he saw Purcell already was twenty yards downfield. The kid did travel like a flash.

Moxie’s pass was one of his patented flings, not that much on it but it sailed and sailed to give the receiver time to get under it. Almost. Purcell not only got there but had to pull up a bit and, off balance from broken momentum, he juggled the catch, the ball bouncing on and off his fingertips, those phantom footsteps distracting him just enough. Racing toward him from the opposite direction

Moran, an ambitious scrub, snatched the ball before it could settle into Purcell's hands and lit out up the sideline for the end zone seventy yards distant, the entire TSU varsity strung out behind him like barnyard puppies trying to catch up with a coyote.

If Bruno whistled the play dead, no one heard it. But before everyone had even stopped running, the coach had stormed the middle of the field, shaking his head as if trying to clear away what he had just witnessed.

Unexpectedly, when he spoke there was clemency for some. "Second string, head for the showers, you at least have earned it." Then, though, he turned savagely to the varsity.

"Moran showed you a clean ass on that interception, did he not? I hope you all had a good look at what a busted play looks like, because I do not want to see anything like that again on this field." Bruno was enunciating now like a coroner giving a tutorial. "The passing game, people, only works if the receiver hangs on to the ball. Can you grasp that, Purcell? Along with the football, perhaps? Purcell, I did not hear your answer."

"Yup, coach, I--I'll do better."

“You will also do the Hill,” Bruno decreed, “you heard me invoke the Golden Rule. In the meantime, get your dropsy butt over there to the bench and wait for me. The rest of you,” the coach swept a hand as if to get them out of his sight, “head for the locker room and while you’re there, try to talk each other into playing some real football next week. *Seven days, people,*” he flung over his shoulder as he stalked toward the sideline.

The team stood rooted in surprise that Purcell was the only victim among them, Ben more caught by it than any. Then and there, he gave up on waiting for the right moment, there did not seem to be such a thing around Bruno. Of course Loudon had been absolutely sopping all this up on the sideline. *Just what we need,* a week of columns ahead the length and breadth of Montana about the sputtering TSU football machine and its noble mechanic of a coach trying desperately to fix it. Sportswriter be damned, Bruno and his Letter Hill had to be dealt with somehow, the faces of the team were saying as much to Ben.

Four-fifths of them, rather. Already jogging to the locker room, Moxie Stamper looked piously murderous, while Merle Purcell, the object of that, went slinking off the field in the opposite direction. The other eight teammates hung on

plastered
in

around Ben. "Purcell got the shaft on that, Benny," Carl stated the case from the linemen. "Could have been any of us on any old thing."

"Moxie underthrew that ball," Vic said quietly.

"Maybe not by accident," Dex fitted on to that.

Jake and Animal weren't saying anything, worse than if they had.

"I'll try my goddamnedest to make Bruno hear us on this," Ben promised.

"But I want to do it out of range of Loudmouth. I'll be a while, guys." Everyone else filed off the field, and he trudged over to speak with the gesticulating coach in one-sided conversation with Loudon.

"Off the record for now, Ted, but what does it take? You heard me lay into the entire bunch of them to shape up or else and look what--" Bruno broke off his grousing to the sportswriter when he became aware of Ben approaching. Up close, the coach was thickset and biscuit-faced, but there was always that slick hat and concealing coat. Now he brushed a dark speck, probably a gift of the smelter stack, off a camelhair sleeve and looked up, farther than he seemed to want to, at the taller younger man. "Reinking, I was just discussing the mob you are unlucky enough to be the captain of. Can't you do anything to jack them up?"

LR who is
honoring
us w/
his
presence

“I need to talk to you about some of that, coach.” Ben glanced at Loudon and stepped away a few paces. “All the way off the record.”

“Excuse us, Ted,” Bruno adjusted to that in the bat of an eye. “Catch me in my office later.” He jerked his head at Ben and strode to the middle of the field, out of earshot of the sideline just in case the sportswriter was slow to withdraw. At the fifty-yard line, the stocky coach halted and gazed around the stadium as if he couldn’t get enough of it. *Too bad he didn’t when he was our age, maybe we wouldn’t be in this fix.* In the old newspaper stacks at the back of the *Gleaner* office, Ben had quietly looked up Bruno’s playing years at Gotham Tech. At the big-name school back east, the team just before his had boasted the famed set of linemen known as the Seven Blocks of Granite; he had played guard on the subsequent Seven Grains of Sand as Gotham Tech’s football fortunes and stadium crowds dried up.

As if the roars of glory he had come west to seek abruptly weren’t there, the coach asked in a narrow tone: “So what’s on your mind? It better have to do with how to win football games.”

It did and it didn’t. That always seemed to be the case where Purcell was involved. For the life of him, Ben was unable to understand why Bruno went so

rough on the sophomore. That speed of his alone qualified as real talent. Why wasn't he being brought along with encouragement this year, as Ben and Danzer had been before Bruno ever entered the scene, to groom him for one of their positions after the only thing left for them to catch was their diplomas?

Resolutely Ben indicated to the troublesome figure slumped on the bench waiting for his Letter Hill fate. "It's him. That was his first play on the starting team, remember, and he didn't have any time to settle down. Besides, Moxie didn't get quite enough zip on that pass." He watched the coachly eyes that should have seen that but they gave away nothing. "The guys pretty much think you ought to go easy on Purcell this once."

Bruno's scowl gave off cold. "Is that what they think." He looked at Ben oddly. "I'm surprised at you, sticking up for Purcell. You're a grab-ass buddy of his, are you?"

"Not so as you would notice. The Hill is on everybody's nerves, coach, we all think you should lay off it now. You've made your point." *And made it and made it.*

rare

Ital.

“That again.” Bruno managed to sound put upon. “Your touching concern for Purcell is misplaced. The dumb damn kid comes out and runs the Hill himself, even Saturdays and Sundays, you know that.”

Ben stuck to the obvious. “That’s different from doing it when he’s pooped out after sixty minutes of a practice game, and with full pads on.”

Another chant came lilting from the unseeable cheerleaders.

“Oro y plata,

Gold and silver!

Treasure State

Is first-rate!”

There still was something strange in Bruno’s expression as he left off listening to that and faced around to Ben. “You’re an interesting case, Reinking.” The impression was he could have said vastly more on that score, but that was not what came out. “It’s getting late, and I have to deal with a three-letter man. You can tell your friends in the locker room they needn’t worry about themselves so goddamn much.” The coach spun away in a manner that warned off any impulse to follow him. Ben watched his receding back as he stalked toward the gangly figure

on the bench, but not needing to see more than that, did his own angry pivot toward the locker room and the task there.

“No go, Purcell’s still going to get it,” he reported tightly as all the faces in there turned to him. “Maybe not the rest of us from here on out--I think I got through to our esteemed coach that we’ve had enough of that Hill crap.”

In the lateness of the day, everyone showering and clearing out in a hurry, it was not noticed that Purcell never showed up in the locker room.

He was found the next morning almost all the way up the Letter Hill, at the stem of the T. Word raced through the dorms, and instead of breakfast the team went to the locker-room meeting hastily called by Bruno. White-faced, he reported that he had watched Purcell make his run to the base of the letters and head back down, before he himself quit for the day and went to his office. Never dreaming, of course, that Purcell would take further punishment on himself and keep running the Hill, evidently time after time, until his heart gave out. The funeral would be on Wednesday, just three days before the opening game and most of the way across the state, but as if it was the most natural thing in the world, the coach announced the whole team had been named honorary pallbearers and would be there.

And out there in a dried-up homesteader cemetery with tumbleweeds banked against a wire fence, they climbed off the team bus and gathered at the grave, outnumbering Purcell's relatives and townspeople. Ben sensed something as soon as he spotted the metal call-sign initials on the radio microphone at graveside:

KOPR, statewide coverage. What amazed him more was the sight of Ted Loudon instead of a radio newsman stepping to the mike before the funeral service got underway. In a rapid-fire patter he obviously been practicing, Loudon reeled off phrases of pathos: "Not since the sad demise of Notre Dame's George Gipp in the

prime of his playing life has football seen a tragedy such as this....Now on some field of cloud, The Gipper is joined by The Ripper, for that is what Merle Purcell's teammates called him for his uncanny ability to rip off yardage on the gridiron....Every lad of the TSU team is here today to do him honor...

unmuffled

change

at some point in his game
ghost runner
h/t - football business as to ~~some~~

Having grown up around journalistic boilerplate, Ben knew beyond the shadow of a doubt Loudon's same words would show up in tomorrow morning's sports column in virtually every daily paper across Montana. The copper company owned those as well as the statewide radio network. For whatever reason, Purcell was getting a sendoff from on high.

At last Loudon yielded to the minister, there was firm prayer and a wavering hymn and after a moment of silence another set of each. As the gaunt parents clung there in probably the only good clothes they owned and wept, a shovel clod of dirt resounded on their son's casket. Then instead of things closing down, Loudon was at the microphone introducing Bruno.

Stepping up to the mike, Bruno dramatically cleared his throat and the ears of countless listeners. "We at Treasure State University, and indeed this great state for which is named," he boomed his words out as if to make sure they reached from border to border, "have suffered a loss before the football season of record has even begun."

Dex and Jake and several others of the team stirred uneasily with Ben at equating a death on the Letter Hill with losing a game played with a ball. Vic, who knew all about treacherous slopes from his daily ascension of Hill 57, simply listened cold-eyed. Moxie Stamper still was trying to adjust his face to the posthumous promotion of Purcell to The Ripper.

The coach of them all swept right on. "But valor can rise from a field of loss. That is the lesson we must take from this tragedy. Merle Purcell was among

change
ghost
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us for too brief a time on the patch of earth he loved above all other, the football field. What better site, then, to remember him on.”

Now Bruno sprang it.

“I have gone to the president of Treasure State University. Mr. and Mrs. Purcell”--he inclined his head solemnly their direction; it proved to be first of pauses emphatic as bullets--“are to be our honored guests at every game, home and away. As shall Merle, present in spirit. In our commemoration of the undying valor of giving his life for the sport he sought to excel at. There will be eleven men on the field each Saturday, but by the presence of his memory among us, he will be there too. I ask every member of the Treasure State team in their endeavors on the field, and all TSU alumni and supporters in your cheers in the stands and beside your radios, to dedicate this season to Merle Purcell, our twelfth man!”

Notepad pages flipping, Ted Loudon was writing it all down like a mad monk.

Afterward, Ben could look back and see the team had been trapped. By the trappings draped all over TSU home games from then on, if nothing else. The stadium-shaking stomping roars of “*Merrle!*” led by the student section as Twelfth Man pennants flew in their hands. Purcell’s awkwardly dressed-up parents

unmissable in the guest seats of honor. The cheerleaders ripping opponents to imaginary bits. While up there in the KOPR booth, inflated to sportscaster by the heady vapors given off by his prose back there at graveside and the days of headlines after, Loudon rattled on about the uncanny inspiration driving the team to destiny.

Did the eleven of them buy into it? Not fundamentally. But there is always a *but*. Among themselves they acknowledged the so-called season of the Twelfth Man as utterly more canny than un-, seized upon by Bruno and Loudon and their helper bosses to transform a yokel kid who blew a gasket on his heart doing something he shouldn't have into a football saint. There were times in the huddle when Moxie, having had to motion the crowd to settle down so his signals could be heard, would crack something like "*Never know Purcell had so much lip to zip*" and draw cynical laughs. But as the victories piled up, something unaccountable had to be credited. Even Ben, their elected skeptic, could feel it. They all, every one of them, were playing every minute as if their lives depended on it. This season was like no other; it was that simple and that complicated. They could try to ignore each weeklong buildup of expectation or joke past the game-day din all they wanted, but Purcell's fate up there on the hill over them sobered their talent to a

gaily
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opponents!
confusion.

change
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certain purity. Death was death, no matter how you cut it. Ben did not quite have the words for it yet, but somewhere deep he came to understand that for these inexplicably singled-out young men he was among, one short of a dozen, what had happened to that remindful twelfth man was like an alarm clock going off murderously early in someone's room next to yours.

Long thoughts left him as Cass