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THE BLIND SIDE

BY THE AUTHOR OF MONEYBALL AND LIAR'S POKER

MICHAEL
LEWIS

MICHAEL LEWIS,
THE BLIND SIDE:
EVOLUTION OF A GAME
(NY: W.W. NORTON, 2007).



"It's not a jock book. It's not a sociology book. It's a storybook about modern society, ancient virtues, and the power of love, money and talent to do a little good."

—JAY HANCOCK, *BALTIMORE SUN*

WHEN WE PURSUE GREATNESS Michael Oher is one of thirteen children by a mother addicted to crack; he does not know his real name, his father, his birthday, or how to read or write. He takes up football, and school, after a rich, white, Evangelical family plucks him from the streets. Then two great forces alter Oher: the family's love and the evolution of professional football itself into a game where the quarterback must be protected at any cost. Our protagonist becomes the priceless package of size, speed, and agility necessary to guard the quarterback's greatest vulnerability—his blind side.

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—JANET MASLIN, *NEW YORK TIMES*

The author of bestsellers *Liar's Poker*, *The New New Thing*, and *Moneyball*, **MICHAEL LEWIS** writes regularly for the *New York Times Magazine* and *Bloomberg News*. He lives in Berkeley, California.

COVER DESIGN BY HENRY SENEYEE
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CHAPTER THREE

CROSSING THE LINE

WHEN BIG TONY put the two boys in his car on the west side of Memphis and drove them out, he was taking the longest journey he could imagine, and yet he only had to travel about fifteen miles. Driving east, he left the third poorest zip code in the United States and headed toward some of the richest people on earth. He left a neighborhood in which he could drive all day without laying eyes on a white person for one where a black person was a bit of a curiosity. Memphis could make you wonder why anyone ever bothered to create laws segregating the races. More than a million people making many millions of individual choices generated an outcome not so different from a law forbidding black people and white people from mingling.

As Big Tony pattered along in his ancient Ford Taurus, he passed what was left of Hurt Village, a barracks-style housing project built for white working-class families in the mid-1950s, reoccupied by blacks, and, in the end, controlled by gangs: Hurt Village was where Big Tony had grown up. He passed schools that had

once been all white and were now all black. He passed people, like himself, in old clothes driving old cars. He passed Second Presbyterian Church, from which Martin Luther King Jr. staged his last march before he was shot and killed—now abandoned and boarded shut. Further east, he passed the relatively prosperous black church, Mississippi Boulevard, housed in a building abandoned by the white Baptists when they fled further east to a new church so huge and sprawling that it had been dubbed Six Flags Over Jesus. Even God, in the west end of Memphis, felt like a hand-me-down. As Big Tony drove east he left what was, in effect, a secondhand city occupied by black people and entered the place for which it had been exchanged: a brand-new city, created by Born Again white people. And now here came Big Tony, chugging along in his beat-to-hell Taurus, chasing after them.

Everyone called him Big Tony—his actual name was Tony Henderson—because he stood six three and weighed nearly 400 pounds. It was in Big Tony's nature to cross lines, if for no other reason than when he looked down he couldn't see them. But today he had a motive: his mother had died. And her dying wish had been for him to go east. Big Tony's mother's name was Betty, but she went by "Betty Boo." Right up until Big Tony reached the sixth grade, Betty Boo had been the party girl of Hurt Village. She smoked, she drank, she ran around; then suddenly, in 1973, she gave up alcohol, then her three-pack-a-day cigarette habit, then sin itself. She announced she had been saved, and accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior—and spent most of the next twenty-five years mailing pamphlets and pressing Christian literature and videos into people's hands. She wasn't tedious about it, though, and all the kids in Hurt Village called her "Grandma." Her first real grandson was Tony's son, Steven. As Betty Boo lay dying, in the early summer of 2002, she asked Tony for one thing: that he take Steven out of public school and get him a Christian education. She wanted her grandson to become a preacher.

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Big Tony would have preferred Steven to become an NBA point guard. Still, he didn't consider Betty Boo's request unreasonable. Steven was one of the best students in his class, and always had been. There wasn't any difficulty in Memphis finding a school that offered a Christian education: the nation's largest private school system had sprung up in the mid-1970s, in East Memphis, to do just that. The problem was that Steven wasn't the only child living in Tony's small house. Occasionally, one of the boys from Hurt Village would crash on his floor; but a few months before, a boy came to stay the night and never left. His name was Michael Oher, but everyone just called him "Big Mike." Tony liked Big Mike, but he also could see that Big Mike was heading at warp speed toward a bad end. He'd just finished the ninth grade at a public school, but Tony very much doubted he'd be returning for the tenth. He seldom attended classes, and showed no talent or interest in school. "Big Mike was going to drop out," said Big Tony. "And if he dropped out, he'd be like all his friends who dropped out: dead, in jail, or on the street selling drugs, just waiting to be dead or in jail."

Tony decided that as long as he was taking Steven out on this search for a Christian education, he should take Big Mike, too. Just a few days after he buried his mother, he put Steven and Big Mike in his car, and drove east. White Memphis had use for a great variety of Christian schools: Harding Christian Academy, which had been around forever; Christian Brothers, which was Catholic and all male; and the Evangelical Christian School, known as ECS. ECS was as close to a church as a school could get. ECS wouldn't accept kids unless both parents gave testimony of their experience of being Born Again—and the stories better be good. Finally, and furthest east, was the Briarcrest Christian School. Briarcrest, also evangelical, was as far east as you could get and still be in Memphis. Briarcrest, more than the others, had been created to get away from Big Tony.

From the point of view of its creators, Briarcrest was a miracle. Its founder, Wayne Allen, had long been distressed by the absence of the Bible from public schools; the white outrage over busing was a chance to do something about it. In the year after the court decision—on January 24, 1973—that forced the city to deploy 1,000 buses to integrate the public schools, the parents of white children yanked more than 7,000 children out of those schools. From the ashes arose an entire, spanking new private school system. The Briarcrest Christian School—originally named the Briarcrest Baptist School—was by far the biggest. It was a system unto itself: fifteen different campuses, inside fifteen different Baptist churches. Its initial enrollment was just shy of 3,000 children, and every last one of them was white. By the summer of 2002 Briarcrest had a handful of black students, but these tended to be, like the black families in the fancy white neighborhoods, imports from elsewhere. The school had existed in East Memphis for nearly thirty years and yet no one who worked there could recall a poor black person from the west side of Memphis marching through its front door to enroll his child. Big Tony was the first.

All Tony knew about Briarcrest was that John Harrington was the basketball coach who had coached in the public schools, where Tony had met him. But any doubt that the Briarcrest Christian School served up the sort of education Betty Boo had in mind was allayed by the sight of the passage from the Book of Matthew inscribed on the outside of the main building: *With men this is impossible; with God all things are possible*. Two very lost-looking boys at his heels, Big Tony marched beneath it and inside the building and went hunting for the basketball coach.

JOHN HARRINGTON HAD SPENT two decades coaching in the public schools and was about to begin his first year at Briarcrest. When Big Tony walked into his office, unannounced, Harrington

knew he couldn't do anything for him. The problem presented by Big Tony was too large for the new guy. They chatted for a few minutes and then Harrington sent him over to see the senior coach at Briarcrest, Hugh Freeze. Freeze was only thirty-three, and with his white-blond hair and unlined face might have passed for even younger than he was—if he weren't so shrewd. His shrewdness was right on the surface, so it had an innocent quality to it, but it was there just the same. Slow to speak and quick to notice, Hugh Freeze had the gifts of a machine politician. He was a man of God—if he hadn't been a football coach, he said, he'd have liked to have been a preacher—but he was also, very obviously, adept at getting his way on earth without any help from the Almighty. He'd coached at Briarcrest for eight years, taken the boys' football team to the Tennessee State Championship game five years in a row, and the girls' basketball team to the last seven state championship games, where they had won four of them. This year his girls were ranked ninth in the nation. Freeze was at his desk preparing for the first day of the new school year when his secretary alerted him to the presence of someone who insisted on calling himself "Big Tony."

In walks this 400-pound black man in a mechanic's shirt with a little white name tag that says: *Big Tony*. This huge man introduces himself as Big Tony—again, no last name—and proceeds to tell Hugh about Steven. "He told me about his son, and how he wanted more for him than the school he was at," said Freeze. "I told him how admirable that was but he had to understand that it cost a lot of money to go to Briarcrest, and not everyone got in. You had to have good grades. Big Tony said he knew about the cost and the grades; but Steven was an honor student and he was able to pay whatever the financial aid didn't cover." Freeze gave him the financial aid forms and thought: *Good luck*. That's when Tony said, "And Coach, I've also got one of Steven's friends." He told him about Big Mike, a basketball player who, in Big Tony's modest opinion, might also be of use to the Briarcrest football team.

"Where are his parents?" asked Freeze. He felt a twinge of interest. If a man who weighed 400 pounds was referring to someone else as "Big Mike," he'd like to see the size of that someone else.

"It's a bad deal, Coach," said Tony. "No Dad, Mom's in rehab. I'm pretty much all he has."

"Who is the guardian?" asked Freeze. "Who has legal authority over him?"

"The mom."

Big Tony said he could get Big Mike's mom to fill in the forms, then just sat there, a bit uneasily. Finally, he asked, "You want to meet them?"

"The boys are *here*?"

"Right outside."

"Sure," said Freeze, "bring 'em on in." Tony went out and came back with Steven. Hugh sized him up: almost six feet, and maybe as much as 180 pounds. Plenty big enough for the Briarcrest Christian School Saints football team. "But where's the other one?" he asked.

"Big Mike! Come on in here!"

Hugh Freeze will never forget the next few seconds. "He just peeks around the corner, with his head down." Hugh didn't get a good first look—it was just a sliver of him but it suggested an improbably large whole. Then Michael Oher stepped around the corner and into his office.

Good God! He's a monster!

The phrase shrieked inside Hugh's brain. He'd never seen anything remotely like this kid—and he'd coached against players who had gone to the NFL. When football coaches describe their bigger players, they can sound like ranchers discussing a steer. They use words like "girth" and "mass" and "trunk size." Hugh wasn't exactly sure of the exact dimensions of Big Mike—six five, 330 pounds? Maybe. Whatever the dimensions, they couldn't do justice to the effect they created. That mass! That . . . girth! The kid's shoulders and

ass were as wide as his doorway. And he'd only just turned *sixteen*.

"How can I get their transcripts?" asked Hugh.

Big Tony said he'd go get them and bring them in person.

Then Hugh tried to make conversation with this man-child. "I couldn't get him to talk to me," he said. "Not a word. He was in a shell."

A few days later, Big Tony delivered the transcripts to Hugh Freeze. Steven, as advertised, was a model student and Briarcrest could see no reason not to supply him with a Christian education. Big Mike was another story. Hugh was a football coach and so he tended to take an indulgent view of bad grades, but he had no pleasant category in his mind for Big Mike's. "I knew it was too good to be true," he said. He sat on the transcript for two days, but he knew that eventually he'd have to hand it over to Mr. Simpson, the principal, to pass judgment. But his wheels already were spinning.

Steve Simpson, like John Harrington, was new to Briarcrest. He'd spent thirty of his fifty-six years working in the Memphis Public School system. When you first met him, you thought that whatever happened next it wasn't likely to be pleasant. His social manner was, like his salt-and-pepper hair, clipped short. He had the habit of frowning when another would have smiled, and of taking a joke seriously. But after about twenty minutes you realized that though the hard surface was both thin and brittle, beneath was a pudding of sentiment and emotion. He teared up easily, and was quick to empathize. When you mentioned his name to people who knew him well, they often said things like, "Steve Simpson has a heart that barely fits in this building." When teachers came to Briarcrest from the public schools, they often felt liberated, and took great pleasure in advertising their Christian faith. When Simpson arrived in this new place, he placed front and center on his desk a framed passage from the Bible that he never would have placed on his public school desk. But it was special to him:

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in His good works.

—II CORINTHIANS 9:8

Still, when the file on Michael Oher from the Memphis City School system hit his desk, Simpson was frankly incredulous. The boy had a measured IQ of 80, which put him in mankind's 9th percentile. An aptitude test he had taken in the eighth grade had measured his "ability to learn" and ranked him in the 6th percentile. The numbers looked like misprints: in a rich white private school, under the column marked "percentile," you never saw single-digit numbers. Of course, logically, you knew such people must exist; for someone to be in the 99th percentile, someone else had to be in the 1st. But you didn't expect to meet them at the Briarcrest Christian School. Academically, Briarcrest might not be the most ambitious school. It spent more time and energy directing its students to Jesus Christ than to Harvard. But the students all went on to college. And they all had at least an average IQ.

In his first nine years of school Michael Oher had been enrolled in eleven different institutions, and that included a hole of eighteen months, around the age of ten, when he apparently did not attend school at all. Either that or the public schools were so indifferent to his presence that they had neglected to register it formally. But it was worse than that. There were schools Big Tony mentioned that did not even appear on the transcripts. Their absence might be explained by another shocking fact: the boy seldom showed up at the schools where he was enrolled. Even when he received credit for attending, he was sensationally absent: forty-six days of a single term of his first-grade year, for instance. His *first* first-grade year, that is—Michael Oher had repeated first grade. He'd repeated second grade, too. And yet Memphis City Schools described these early years as the most accomplished of his academic career. They

claimed that right through the fourth grade he was performing at “grade level.” How could they *know* when, according to these transcripts, he hadn’t even attended the third grade?

Simpson knew what everyone who had even a brief brush with the Memphis public schools knew: they passed kids up to the next grade because they found it too much trouble to flunk them. They functioned as an assembly line churning out products never meant to be market-tested. At several schools Michael Oher had been given F’s in reading his first term, and C’s the second term, which allowed him to finish the school year with what was clearly an ignoramus’s D. They were giving him grades just to get rid of him, to keep the assembly line moving. And get rid of him they did: seldom had the boy returned to the school that had passed him the year before. His previous year, in the ninth grade, he’d spent at a high school called Westwood. According to his transcripts, he’d missed fifty days of school. Fifty days! Briarcrest had a rule that if a student missed fifteen days of any class he had to repeat the class no matter what his grade. And yet Westwood had given Michael Oher just enough D’s to move him along. Even when you threw in the B in world geography, clearly a gift from the Westwood basketball coach who taught the class, the *grade point average* the boy would bring with him to Briarcrest began with a zero: 0.6.

If there was a less promising academic record, Mr. Simpson hadn’t seen it—not in three decades of working with public school students. Mr. Simpson guessed, rightly, that the Briarcrest Christian School hadn’t seen anything like Michael Oher, either. And yet here he was, courtesy of the football coach, seated across the desk staring hard at the floor. The boy seemed as lost as a Martian stumbling out of a crash landing. Simpson had tried to shake his hand. “He didn’t know how to do it,” he said. “I had to show him how to shake hands.” Every question Simpson asked elicited a barely audible mumble. “I don’t know if ‘docile’ is the right word,” Simpson said later. “He seemed completely intimidated by authority. Almost

nonverbal.” That, in itself, Simpson found curious. Even though Michael Oher had no business applying to Briarcrest, he showed courage just being here. “It was really unusual to see a kid with those kinds of deficits that wanted an education,” he said. “To *want* to be in this environment. A lot of kids with his background wouldn’t come within two hundred miles of this place.”

The disposition of Michael Oher’s application to Briarcrest was Steve Simpson’s decision, and normally he would have had no trouble making it: an emphatic, gusty rejection. Beneath the crest of the Briarcrest Christian School was the motto: *Decidedly Academic, Distinctly Christian*. Michael Oher was, it seemed to Simpson, neither. But Mr. Simpson was new to the school, and this great football coach, Hugh Freeze, had phoned Simpson’s boss, the school president, a football fan, and made his pitch: *This wasn’t a thing you did for the Briarcrest football team, Freeze had said, this was a thing you did because it was right!* Briarcrest was this kid’s last chance! The president in turn had phoned Simpson and told him that if he felt right with it, he could admit the boy.

Simpson thought it over and said: sorry. There was just no chance Michael Oher could cut it in the tenth grade; the fourth grade might be a stretch for him. But the pressure from the football coach, coupled with a little twinge inside his own heart, led Simpson to reject the applicant gently. “There was just something about the boy’s desire to be here,” he said. “I couldn’t justify sending him away without any hope.” He granted a single concession: if Michael Oher enrolled in a home study program based in Memphis called the Gateway Christian School, and performed at a high level for a semester, Briarcrest would admit him the following semester. Simpson knew there wasn’t much chance Gateway would pass him, and suspected he’d never hear from the football coach, or Michael Oher, again.

He was wrong. Two months later—six weeks into the school year—his phone rang. It was Big Tony. It was a sad sight, said Big

Tony, watching Big Mike stare at these books sent to him by the Gateway Christian School, without any ability to make heads or tails of them. Big Tony didn't have the time or the energy to work with him. Big Mike was trying so hard but getting nowhere, and it was too late for him to enroll in a public school. What should they do now?

That's when Mr. Simpson realized he'd made a mistake. In effect, he had removed a boy from the public school system. He'd tried to handle this problem the easy way, for him, and it had backfired. "It was one of those things," Simpson said. "I should have said, 'You don't qualify and there's no chance you will ever qualify.' When Big Tony called back, I thought, 'Man, look what I've done to these people. I sent them out of here with false hope.'" He went to the Briarcrest president, Tim Hilen, and told him that he had made a big mess for these people. Then he called Michael Oher—who appeared still to be living with Big Tony—and said, "We're gonna take a chance on you but you're not going to play ball." The message was delivered simultaneously to Hugh Freeze: no football, no basketball—the kid couldn't even sing in the choir until he proved to the school that he could handle the schoolwork. Michael didn't say much at all in response, but that didn't matter to Mr. Simpson. "My conscience would be clear if we gave him a chance," he said. His thoughts turned to the teachers: how would he explain this mess to them?

JENNIFER GRAVES HAD RUN Briarcrest's program for students with special needs for nine years. "I decided early on in my life," she said, "that Christ was calling me to work with the kids who did not have it so easy." But her mission took on a different and less hopeful tone when, six weeks into the school year, this huge black kid was dumped in her lap. She, too, had seen the file on Big Mike that had come over from the Memphis City School system. After the transcript came the boy himself, accompanied by Mr. Simpson.

“He said this is Michael Oher and you’ll be working with him,” recalled Graves. “And Michael didn’t say a thing. His head was always down. He kept his head down and his mouth shut.” And she thought: *Oh Lord what have we gotten ourselves into?* She knew the coaches thought that he might help their sports teams, but even that surprised her. “He was *fat*,” she said. “I didn’t see how he could move it around. We weren’t real sure what we’re going to do with him, and I’ll bet they weren’t either.” After Michael left her office, she went right back to Mr. Simpson to ask what good he imagined would come from letting this child into the Briarcrest Christian School. “He said, ‘Jennifer, let’s give him until Christmas.’”

She took him around and placed him in the middle of every classroom. “By sixth period of the first day everyone knew who he was,” she said. “And he hadn’t said a word.” It was a matter of days before the reports poured in from the teachers, every last one of them asking the same question of her that she asked of Mr. Simpson: why had they let this kid in? “Big Mike had no conception of what real school was about,” she said. “He’d never have his books with him, didn’t speak in class, nothing. He had no academic background, no foundation at all. His transcript said he’d had algebra but he’d obviously never laid eyes on it.” Another shocking discovery: “I don’t know that he’d ever even held a Bible.”

At length, in response to an especially loud complaint from the English teacher, Graves brought Big Mike into her office. She pulled out a remedial English test, and gave it to him. “The first thing he was supposed to do,” she recalled, “was to identify parts of speech. He says, ‘What do I do?’ And I say, ‘You mark all the parts of speech.’ He says, ‘I don’t know ’em.’ So I say, ‘Let’s start out with nouns.’ He says, ‘I don’t know ’em.’ I tell him that ‘a noun names a person, place, or thing.’ He says, ‘It does?’ For him English was almost like a second language.”

She noticed things about him. She noticed, for instance, that he wore the same pair of cutoff jeans every day, and that he hadn’t the

first idea how to interact with other people. Everyone in the school knew who he was—he was the biggest human being anyone had ever seen—and they tried to engage him, but he refused to comply. One day while she was sitting with Michael, sorting out some mess or other, her own little girls, aged six and nine, came into her office. “And they just stood there with their mouths open. They’d never seen anyone who looked like that. But then Big Mike left and my six-year-old asked, ‘Mama, who was *that*?’ And I told her it was Big Mike.” The next few days the little girl went out of her way to find Big Mike in the school halls, just to say, “Hi, Big Mike!” And Big Mike just stared at her. The little girl came back to her mother, obviously frightened, and said, “Mama, he doesn’t speak to me!” Graves called Big Mike into her office and explained that if he wanted to stare at the ground mutely in her presence, that was fine. “But when a little child tells you hello and you don’t respond, you scare that little child.” A few days later Graves caught sight of Big Mike in the hallways, smiling and shaking hands with a crowd of small, awed children.

Still, Michael Oher was only a few weeks into his tenure at the Briarcrest Christian School before several teachers suggested he should be on his way out. He wasn’t merely failing tests, he wasn’t even starting them. The only honest grade to give him in his academic subjects was zero. And it wasn’t just the academic subjects. Briarcrest offered a class in weightlifting, and Jennifer Graves had gotten him into it on the assumption it might offer him some relief from relentless failure. If there was one class Big Mike should have been able to ace, this was it. But the weightlifting teacher, Coach Mark Boggess, said that the boy was neglecting even to change into gym clothes. He just sat around, lifting not even his eyes. Boggess doubled as the Briarcrest track coach, and already had made vague plans for Big Mike to put the shot for his team, once he became academically eligible. The third time he watched Michael sit through class in street clothes—not even bothering to change into

his sweats—he doubted that would ever happen, and he jumped on him. “Michael, there are a lot of people in this school waiting to see you fail,” he said. “Every little step that you make, people are watching. This is the one class in this whole school that can help you with your grades. All you have to do is show up. And right now, you’re flunking *weightlifting*.”

The situation appeared hopeless, and humiliating for all concerned. Word of the new boy’s various failures inevitably reached Mr. Simpson, who also began to sense the dimensions of the void in the boy’s life experiences. Michael Oher didn’t know what an ocean was, or a bird’s nest, or the tooth fairy. He couldn’t very well be taught tenth-grade biology if he had no clue what was meant by the word “cell,” and he couldn’t very well get through tenth-grade English if he’d never heard of a verb or a noun. It was as if he had materialized on the planet as an overgrown sixteen-year-old. Jennifer Graves had the same misgivings: the boy reminded her of a story she had read in a psychology journal, about a child who had been locked away inside a closet for years. “That child didn’t even have tactile sense,” she said, “but it felt like the same sort of thing. Big Mike was a blank slate.” The obvious problem, that he suffered from some learning disability, had been ruled out. Graves had called the Memphis school system and been told that Michael Oher had been tested for learning disabilities, and he had none. In short, they said, he was just stupid. “By their standards,” she said, “he was achieving what was expected.”

It was then that the Briarcrest biology teacher, Marilyn Beasley, came to Graves in despair. She said that giving Michael yet another weekly biology test was pointless: nothing came back. “We’ve got to find out what he does and doesn’t know,” she said. She proposed that Graves replace her in the biology class, and proctor the exam while she, Beasley, took Michael into a separate room and gave him the test verbally. The next day, Ms. Beasley took him into a room and sat down beside him, test in hand. By now she, like the other

teachers, knew about his academic record. She had taught at Briarcrest for twenty-one years—and had entire classrooms of children with learning disabilities—and had never experienced a student so seemingly hopeless. “I had never encountered anybody at Michael’s reading and comprehension level,” she said. His brain did not appear to contain any sort of intellect.

As they sat down together she noticed, once again, how enormous his hands seemed when set beside hers. She had a son who was six one, but compared to Big Mike, his hands were the hands of a child. She picked up the test and read aloud the first question from the multiple choice exam:

Protozoans are classified based on:

- a. How they get their food
- b. How they reproduce
- c. How they move
- d. Both *a* and *c*

She waited for his answer and received nothing but a blank look. She knew the problem: many of the words, words every tenth-grader should know, were foreign to him. “Classified” overwhelmed him. “Science has its own vocabulary,” she said. “He didn’t know it. He didn’t know what a cell was, or an atom. He didn’t have the foundation to figure out meanings through prefixes and suffixes. He didn’t know what the prefixes and suffixes were—they might as well have been Greek.” The vast quantity of things he didn’t know paralyzed his mind. A word at a time, she talked him through the problem.

“Michael, do you remember what a protozoan is?”

Just down the hall Jennifer Graves waited for what she assumed would be bad news. She was already wondering about the best way to ease Big Mike out of the school. An hour later Marilyn Beasley emerged with wonder on her face and a simple observation:

"He knows it."

"What?"

"Jennifer, he knows the material!"

Or, at any rate, he knew something. As he had given no sign of picking up anything, Beasley was shocked at how much he had absorbed. His brain wasn't dead; he simply had no idea how to learn in a classroom. Even so, he knew enough biology to get himself a C on the test, and a high D for the semester instead of an F. He wasn't yet eligible to play any sports, but Graves could see that he longed to. He'd missed the football season, but it was basketball he was most eager to play. She hinted that if the biology test was any indication of the contents of his mind, he might well be eligible to play ball after Christmas, and catch the last part of the season. "The first thing he did," she said, "was start hanging around the basketball court."

WHEN SEAN TUOHY first spotted Michael Oher sitting in the stands in the Briarcrest gym, staring at basketball practice, he saw a boy with nowhere to go but up. The question was how to take him there.

Sean was an American success story: he had come from nothing and made himself rich. He was forty-three years old. His hairline had receded but not quite to the point where you could call him bald and his stomach had expanded but not quite to the point where you could call him fat. He was keenly interested in social status—his own, and other people's—but not in the Old Southern kind. Not long after he'd become a figure in Memphis—a rich businessman who had his own jet and was the radio voice of the Memphis Grizzlies—he'd had feelers from the Memphis Country Club. He didn't encourage them because, as he put it, "I don't hang with the blues. I'd rather go to a high school football game on Friday night than go to a country club and drink four scotches and com-

plain about my wife.” Sean Tuohy loved success. He delighted in the sight of people moving up in the world. Country clubs were all about staying in one place.

When he introduced himself to Big Mike, Sean was already knee-deep in the various problems and crises of the few black students at Briarcrest. Sean’s daughter, Collins, a junior at Briarcrest and Tennessee State champion in the pole vault, had guaranteed him almost constant exposure to them. She ran track, they ran track. The first time Sean decided to play a role in their social education had been a couple of years earlier, when the track team traveled to Chattanooga for a meet. Coincidentally, also in Chattanooga, a Briarcrest tennis player was playing a tournament at the fancy local country club. Sean thought the black kids at Briarcrest might benefit from some exposure to tennis and golf and other white country club sports; and he thought the Briarcrest tennis player would enjoy a cheering section. Gathering up all two of the black kids on the track team—which amounted to two thirds of the blacks at Briarcrest—he drove them to the Chattanooga Country Club. Sure enough, it was, for them, an entirely new experience. Neither had ever seen a tennis match in person. And while they had no idea how to keep score, they quickly worked out that the Briarcrest kid was making mincemeat of his opponent. After each point they’d stand and holler and raise their fists:

Woo!

Woo!

Woo!

Rather than explain tennis club etiquette, of which he vaguely disapproved anyway, Sean let them have their fun. Between sets they ran over to the concession stand where a little old lady sniffed at them, “I just think y’all are in bad taste.” To which one of the kids replied, “You must be rootin’ for that other little white guy.” The

lady went off in a huff and the kids returned to the match, where the Briarcrest player kept on winning. The breaking point came when one of the kids stood up and screamed: "Keep on! You beatin' him like a two dollar whore!" Sean tried to drag the boy by his oversized jersey back into his seat, but before he could get him down, the boy spotted the little old lady in the stands, glaring at him, and screamed: "It's got to be killing ya, ma'am! It's got to be killing ya!"

Afterward, Sean realized that it had been awhile since he had had so much fun. And by the time he met Big Mike, he had a new unofficial title: Life Guidance Counselor to whatever black athlete stumbled into the Briarcrest Christian School. The black kids reminded him, in a funny way, of himself.

Sean knew what it meant to be the poor kid in a private school, because he'd been one himself. First off, none of the rich kids realized that one big difference between public schools and private schools is that, in the public schools, lunch was free. Every day for several years in high school Sean arrived without lunch, or money to buy it, and bummed what he could from friends. "When food is finite," he said, "you'd be surprised how much time you spend thinking about it."

He also knew what it was like to think of sports as a meal ticket. His sense that his future depended on his athletic ability was driven home during his freshman year in high school, when his father, a legendary but ill-paid basketball coach, suffered a stroke and ceased to function. Sean had adored his father. From the age of three, when he had grabbed a basketball and followed him to work in the morning, he had spent the better part of his life on his father's heels, soaking in everything he could about basketball and life. Twenty-five years later he would say, "Everything I do is still all about my daddy." And yet when he lost his father, he, and everyone around him, went on about their lives as if the earth had not just

opened and swallowed the most important person in his life. The fancy New Orleans private school was still, for him, free; lunch was not.

He'd left New Orleans for the University of Mississippi on a basketball scholarship. When he set out for Ole Miss he was a six one, 147-pound exception; he wasn't even sure he could cut it as a college basketball player. When he walked off the court after his final game, he'd set the NCAA record for career assists; and, twenty-five years later, he still holds all meaningful SEC assist records. After he'd led Ole Miss to its first (and still only) SEC Championship, in 1981, a photograph of him, perched on top of the rim and bleeding from a cut on his chin as he cut down the nets, appeared in the *New York Times*. At a college still trying to figure out why their white boys were being whipped so routinely by the other team's black boys, he was an instant legend.

That was the joy; the misery was his essential powerlessness. He was at the mercy of a single man who specialized in tearing his players apart and leaving them in pieces. From the moment he had arrived at the Ole Miss gym, Sean realized that his coach had him trapped: he could only afford to stay in school so long as he played basketball, and he played at his coach's pleasure. His entire identity hung in the balance. "From the age of five I had been trained to do this one thing, play basketball. And if I couldn't do that, where did it leave me?" And this coach, who had him by the short hairs, loved nothing more than to give them a yank: threatening to bench him, pull his scholarship, humiliate him in front of his hometown crowd when the Ole Miss team played in New Orleans. Early in his freshman year, for instance, the team had traveled to Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, to play in a tournament. In the first game they beat Loyola Chicago; in the finals they got beaten badly by a nationally ranked Illinois State team. The game ended just before midnight, and they were supposed to drive the four hours

to the St. Louis airport, then catch an early morning commercial flight back to Memphis. Sean had played every minute of both games with a torn cartilage in his knee, and afterwards had to be treated by trainers. When he emerged from the locker room, he found a fleet of cars and only one spot left in them, right beside his coach. No one else on the team wanted to sit next to the coach. "For the next four and a half hours," he said, "not one word was spoken. Not one word. I got a cramp in my leg and I remember holding back a scream because I was afraid of getting in trouble."

They caught their plane, and returned to Memphis, where a bus picked them up and carried them the rest of the way to Oxford, Mississippi. "We drove onto campus. There isn't anyone there. It's Christmas Day. It's now eleven in the morning and we still haven't slept. Coach gets up in the front of the bus and says, 'Dressed, stretched, and taped. Thirty minutes.' And I just remember going: 'I don't know about y'all but I haven't slept.'"

Still, the players all trudged to the locker room, donned practice uniforms, and set out for the film room. That's how practice always started: by watching films of their most recent performance and being humiliated by Coach. The players found their seats, the lights went down, and Coach entered the room. He always took a wide circle on his way to his lounge chair[†] in the back: the players felt watched. "I had played forty minutes of both games," Sean said. "My knee was swelled up as big as Dallas. We hadn't slept. It's my first Christmas away from home. Coach walked around so he was right behind me and stopped. Never once in four years did he call me 'Sean.' It was either 'Buddy' or 'Twelve.' Now he comes right up behind me and says,

"Hey Twelve. Merry Fucking Christmas."

"The lights went out and I cried for the next forty-five minutes. The assistant coach literally sat there rubbing my back and patting me."

For four years he'd played what he called "survival ball." He had

to play, or he couldn't afford school. The New Jersey Nets drafted him in a late round to play in the NBA, but the desire had gone out of him. He left Ole Miss with a fiancée and a new religion. But he left without a penny.

Now, by the fall of 2002, he'd become, by just about every way they measured it in Memphis, a success. He'd been Born Again, and helped to create one of the fastest growing evangelical churches in Memphis, the Grace Evangelical Church. He'd married the Ole Miss cheerleader who, twenty-five years later, could still pass for an Ole Miss cheerleader. He owned a chain of eighty-five Taco Bells, KFCs, and Long John Silver restaurants, along with a mountain of debt. His financial life remained risky. If everything broke right, he might soon be worth as much as \$50 million. If everything did not break right, he could always call games for the Memphis Grizzlies. What Atlanta was to the American South, Sean Tuohy was to the white southern male. Prosperous. Forever upgrading the trappings of his existence. Happy to exchange his past at a deep discount for a piece of the future.

It wasn't enough. The restaurants ran themselves, the Grizzlies gig was a night job, church was on Sundays. He needed overt drama in his life. He was a person for whom the clock was always running out, the game was always tied, and the ball was always in his hands. He'd played the role for so long that he'd become the role. And he now had all the time in the world for what he still loved more than anything: hanging around school gyms and acting as a kind of consultant to the coaches at Briarcrest in their dealings with their players. Sean was interested in poor jocks in the same way that a former diva might be interested in opera singers or a Jesuit scholar in debaters. What he liked about them was that he knew how to help them. "What I learned playing basketball at Ole Miss," he said, "was what not to do: beat up a kid. It's easy to beat up a kid. The hard thing is to build him up."

Collins had mentioned Big Mike to him. When she tried to pass

him on the stairwell, she said, she had to back up to the top, because she couldn't fit past him. Without uttering a peep, the kid had become the talk of the school. Everyone was frightened of him, she said, until they realized that he was far more terrified of them. Sean had seen Big Mike around the halls three or four times. He'd noticed that he wore the same clothes every day: cutoff blue jeans and an oversized T-shirt. Now he saw him in the stands and thought: *I'll bet he's hungry*. Sean walked over and said, "You don't know me, but we have more in common than you might think."

Michael Oher stared intently at his feet.

"What did you have to eat for lunch today?" Sean asked.

"In the cafeteria," said the kid.

"I didn't ask where you ate," said Sean. "I asked what you ate."

"Had a few things," said the kid.

Sure you did, thought Sean. He asked if he needed money for lunch, and Mike said, "I don't need any money."

The next day, Sean went to the Briarcrest accounting department and arranged for Michael Oher to have a standing charge card at the lunch checkout counter. He'd done the same for several of the poorer black kids who had come to Briarcrest. In a couple of cases he had, in effect, paid their tuition, by giving money to a school fund earmarked for scholarships for those who couldn't afford tuition. "That was my only connection with Michael," he said later. "Lunch."

Sean left it at lunch, and at lunch it might have ended. But a few weeks later, the Briarcrest Christian School took its Thanksgiving Break. One cold and blustery morning Sean and his wife, Leigh Anne, were driving down one of the main boulevards of East Memphis when, off a bus just ahead of them, steps this huge black kid. He was dressed in the same pair of cutoff jeans and T-shirt he always wore. Sean pointed him out to his wife and said, "That kid I was telling you about—that's him. Big Mike."

"But he's wearing shorts," she said.

“Uh-huh. He always wears those.”

“Sean, it’s snowing!”

And so it was. At Leigh Anne’s insistence, they pulled over. Sean reintroduced himself to Michael, and then introduced Michael to Leigh Anne.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To basketball practice,” says Big Mike.

“Michael, you don’t have basketball practice,” says Sean.

“I know,” says the boy. “But they got heat there.”

Sean didn’t understand that one.

“It’s nice and warm in that gym,” said the boy.

As they drove off, Sean looked over and saw tears streaming down Leigh Anne’s face. And he thought: *Uh-oh, my wife’s about to take over.*

The next day afternoon, Leigh Anne left her business—she had her own interior decorating outfit—turned up at Briarcrest, picked up the kid, and took off with him. A few hours later, Sean’s cell phone rang. He picked up and heard his wife’s voice on the other end of the line:

“Do you know how big a fifty-eight long jacket is?” she asked.

“How big?”

“Not big enough.”

Leigh Anne Tuohy had grown up with a firm set of beliefs about black people but had shed them for another—and could not tell you exactly how it happened, other than to say that “I married a man who doesn’t know his own color.” Her father, a United States Marshal based in Memphis, raised her to fear and loathe blacks as much as he did. (Friends who saw Tommy Lee Jones in the movie *U.S. Marshal* would say to her, “Oh my God, that’s your father!”) The moment the courts ordered the Memphis Public School system integrated, in 1973, he pulled her out of public school and put her into the newly founded Briarcrest Christian School, where she’d become a member of the first graduating class. “I was raised

in a very racist household," she said. As her father walked her up the aisle so that she might wed Sean, he looked around the church, filled with Sean's black ex-teammates, and asked, "Why are all these niggers here?" Even as an adult, when she mentioned in passing that she was on her way into a black neighborhood on the west side of Memphis for some piece of business, he insisted on escorting her. "And when he comes to get me, he shows up with this magnum strapped to his chest."

Yet by the time Michael Oher arrived at Briarcest, Leigh Anne Tuohy didn't see anything odd or even awkward in taking him in hand. This boy was new; he had no clothes; he had no warm place to stay over Thanksgiving Break. For Lord's sake, he was walking to school in the snow *in shorts*, when school was *out of session*, on the off chance he could get into the gym and keep warm. Of course she took him out and bought him some clothes. It struck others as perhaps a bit aggressively philanthropic; for Leigh Anne, clothing a child was just what you did if you had the resources. She had done this sort of thing before, and would do it again. "God gives people money to see how you're going to handle it," she said. And she intended to prove she knew how to handle it.

For Leigh Anne, the mystery began once Michael climbed into her gray minivan. "He got in the car and didn't say anything," she said. "Not one word."

"Tell me everything I need to know about you," she said.

She noticed his sneakers—all beat-up and raggedy.

"Who takes care of you?"

He didn't answer.

"I've noticed in the African American community the grandmother often helps to raise the kids. Do you have a grandmother?"

He didn't, but he didn't explain.

This wouldn't do. Leigh Anne Tuohy was an extreme, and seemingly combustible, mixture of tenderness and willfulness. She cried when a goldfish died. On her daily walks, when she spotted an

earthworm sizzling on the sidewalk, she picked it up and put it back on the grass. On the other hand, when a large drunk man pushed and cut his way in front of her in a line outside a football game, she grabbed him by the arm and screamed, "You just get your fat ass right back where it belongs. *Now!*" When she did things like this, her husband would shrug and say, "You have to understand that my wife has a heart the size of a *pea*. If you cross her, she will step on your throat and take you out and she won't *feel a thing*." Sean had decided, no matter what the potential gains, it was never worth provoking his wife.

And this child's reluctance to answer her questions had provoked her. "We're gonna keep talking about this," she said. "We can do this the easy way. Or we can do it the hard way. Take your pick."

That worked, sort of. She learned that he'd not laid eyes on his father in many years. He never had much to do with his grandmother, who was now gone. He had a sister but didn't know where she was. His mother was, Leigh Anne surmised, an alcoholic. "But he never actually used the word 'alcoholic.' He let me say it and never corrected me. I didn't know then, but Michael will let you believe what you want to believe." After torturing him for a bit, she decided to leave him be. She'd had too much success getting what she wanted to pay much attention to temporary setbacks: it was only a matter of time before he'd tell her everything. "I knew that 103.5 FM was kind of a black station so I had that playing," she said. "I didn't want him thinking this was some charity thing and 'oh poor, pitiful me.' So I said that the Briarcrest basketball team needed its players looking spiffy and we were just going out to make sure that happened."

If it were up to her, she would have driven him straight to Brooks Brothers or Ralph Lauren, but she realized it might make him feel uncomfortable.

"No offense, but where do you go to buy clothes?" she asked.

He mentioned a place—it was in a less affluent section of

Memphis. Not the safest neighborhood. She set off in that direction, heading west.

"You okay going there?" he asked.

"I'm okay going there with you. You're going to take care of me, right?"

"Right," he said. She sensed a little shift in him. Sooner or later she'd break him. "I can talk to a wall," she liked to say.

For the next couple of hours that's just what she did. She was facing a new problem: trying to guess, from his body language, what a sixteen-year-old black child of the ghetto might wear to his new white Christian school. They arrived at the first of many Big and Tall shops and ran smack into another problem: nothing fit him! He wasn't big *or* tall. He was big *and* tall. The selection of clothing into which he could painlessly squeeze himself was limited, and he reduced it by refusing to wear anything that wasn't loose-fitting. For twenty minutes or so she pulled the biggest articles of clothing she could find off shelves and racks, without a comment from the boy.

"Michael!" she finally said. "You got to tell me if you like it or not. I cannot read your mind. Or we'll be here till Christmas, with me trying to guess what you like."

She pulled down the absolute biggest shirt she could find.

"I think that's okay," he said, at length. For him it counted as a soliloquy.

"No! Not okay! You need to love it! If you don't love it in the store, you'll never wear it once you get it home. The store is where you like it best."

She pulled down a gargantuan brown and yellow Rugby shirt.

"I like that one," he said.

She was five one, 115 pounds of blond hair, straight white teeth, and the most perfect pink dress. He was black, poor, and three times her size. Everyone—*everyone*—stared at them. And as they moved from shop to shop, the surroundings, and the attention,

became more discomfoting. At the final Big and Tall Shop on the border of what had just been pronounced, by the 2000 United States Census, the third poorest zip code in the country, Leigh Anne said, "I've lived here my whole life and I've never been to this neighborhood." And Big Mike finally spoke up. "Don't worry," he said. "I got your back."

Along the way she asked him more questions. "But of course they were the wrong questions," she said later. She noticed little things about him, however, and in these were tiny clues. "I could tell he wasn't used to being touched," she said. "The first time I tried to touch him—he just freezes up."

When they were finished shopping, he was heaped with packages and yet he insisted he wanted to take the bus home. ("I am *not* letting him ride the bus with all these bags!") She drove him back—into what she assumed must be the worst neighborhood in Memphis. They stopped in at McDonald's. He ordered for himself two quarter pounders with cheese. On a hunch she bought six extra burgers for him to take home with him. At length, they reached what he said was his mother's house. It was an ominous dark redbrick building behind a tall metal gate. Across the street was an abandoned house. The scrub grass, the dead plants in pots, the flaking paint on the houses: everything, including the small children in the streets, looked uncared for. She parked and stepped out of the car, to help him with all the bags. That's when he sprang into action:

"Don't get out!" he said.

"I'll just help you with the bags."

"You don't need to get out of the car," he said.

He was so insistent that she stepped back inside the car and promised to stay put, with the doors locked, while he went in and found someone to help him with his packages. A few minutes later a line of small children streamed out of the front gates of the depressing apartment building and, antlike, lifted the sacks and

carried them inside. When the last child had moved the last package, the gate closed behind him.

He hadn't given her the first clue of what he thought of her, or of their strange afternoon together. "Probably," she figured, "that I'm some nice lady who wanted something from him." So when he thanked her, she made a point of saying, "Michael, it was my pleasure. You don't owe me anything." And that, she thought, was that.

It wasn't, of course. He was different from the other children that she and Sean had helped out. For a start, he was obviously more destitute. And she couldn't explain why just then, but she was drawn to him and felt the urge to do things for him. He was just this big ol' kid who could have been mean and scary and thuggy, but everything about him was soft and gentle and sweet-natured. With him she felt completely safe; even if he wasn't saying anything, she sensed he was watching out for her.

She went home and thought about the problem still at hand: how to clothe the biggest sixteen-year-old boy she had ever laid eyes on. She flipped through her Rolodex. Several of her interior decorating clients were professional athletes. All but one were basketball players, and all of them were tall and *thin*. The other was Patrick Ramsey, the Washington Redskins' new starting quarterback. "I know how these athletes are about their clothes," she said. "They're very particular and they're tossing them out and getting new ones all the time." What more fertile source of extra-large hand-me-downs than the NFL? She called Ramsey, who said he was more than happy to dun his teammates for their old clothing. She gave him Michael's measurements, and Patrick Ramsey took them down.

A few days later, he called back. "You've got these measurements wrong," he said, matter-of-factly. She explained that she had taken the measurements herself, and written them down on a piece of paper. It must be Patrick who had them wrong. He read them back

to her—20-inch neck, 40-inch sleeve, 50-inch waist, 58-inch chest, etc.—nope, he had them right.

“There’s no one on our team as big as he is,” Ramsey said.

She thought he was kidding.

“Leigh Anne,” said the Redskins quarterback, “we only have one player on this team who is even close, and he wears Wrangler blue jeans and flannel shirts and no black kid is going to be caught dead wearing that stuff.” That would be Jon Jansen, the Redskins’ starting right tackle.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line.

“Who *is* this kid?”

CHAPTER TEN

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THE EGG BOWL

IN 1958, WHEN A BLACK TEACHER from Gulfport, Mississippi, named Clennon King tried to enroll in Ole Miss, and was instead carted away by Mississippi state troopers to an insane asylum, the football coach couldn't have imagined it had anything to do with him. When, in 1962, James Meredith came and stayed, the campus was engulfed in riots, and the football coach watched as his practice field became a staging area for army helicopters—but his team still went 10–0 and ended the season as national champions. But not long after that Ole Miss coaches set out to recruit the black athlete and found that history interfered. “There just aren't that many white guys in Mississippi who can play,” said one of the Ole Miss football coaches. “The game is so much about speed now. The defense is so much about speed now. We need the best black kids if we're going to have a chance.” But they seldom attracted the best black players; and since the early 1970s the Ole Miss football team has had about it a delicious fatalism. The civil rights movement achieved many things, and one of them was to create a plausible analogy between Ole Miss football and the Confederate army.

In part because of the needs of their local football team, there wasn't a town in America more concerned than Oxford, Mississippi, with seeming to have dispensed with race as an issue. The effort the locals put into avoiding obvious racism rendered the near-total lack of interaction between black people and white people in Oxford, Mississippi, almost as invisible as it was in the rest of the country. The history of the place was inescapable, however, if for no other reason than all these extremely annoying outsiders kept dragging it into otherwise pleasant conversations. As late as the fall of 2004 coaches from other SEC schools—including the University of Alabama—were phoning up Michael Oher and telling him that he shouldn't go to Ole Miss because black people weren't welcome there. And if Michael Oher hadn't put down the phone and found himself staring at his very own white Ole Miss family, he might have taken an interest in the subject. Mississippi's past had created the climate for Mississippi's present, and it would continue to do so until the present was otherwise notified. Bobby Nix, a white Ole Miss graduate from the early 1980s who now tutored football players, made this point routinely. To help the black kids feel as if they belonged at Ole Miss, Nix often took them into the places frequented by the old white affluent Ole Miss crowd. The Grove, say, or the Square. Usually he would end up feeling awkward and self-conscious. "When you show up with them," he said, "you'll get this look. It's like you have the crying baby on the airplane."

That look could have meant any number of things. The color of their skin was just the beginning of what set the Ole Miss football players apart. They had gold caps on their teeth and blue tattoos on their skins. They wore different clothes: oversized ersatz sports apparel so loose fitting that every stiff breeze threatened to leave them naked in the streets. They drove different cars—these jalopies outfitted with hubcaps worth twice the market value of the entire vehicle. You'd see them driving around in these bizarre-

looking rigs with the front seats tilted so far back that the driver appeared to be an astrologist hard at work in a fully reclined Barcalounger. Many of them didn't speak or write standard English; to all but the most attentive white Ole Miss football fan, the black football players were barely comprehensible. Many of them, according to their tutors, were *less* well prepared for college than Michael Oher. The typical incoming player in Michael's class had third-grade level reading skills. Several had never taken math. *Ever*.

But if they wanted to play college football—if they wanted a shot at “the league”—they had to go through the tedious charade of pretending to be ordinary college students. Of the seventy players who survived Coach O's first grueling spring practice, more than forty were classified as “academically at risk,” which meant, among other things, that they spent a great deal of their time inside a redbrick building with dark windows on the fringes of the Ole Miss campus, being spoon-fed books by an army of tutors. “We tell them that they are employees of a corporation,” said Nix, one of the more experienced of those tutors. “And that they might be dropped at any time for lack of performance.” A big part of the tutor's job was to steer the players away from the professors and courses most likely to lead to lack of performance. The majority of the football team wound up majoring in “Criminal Justice.” What Criminal Justice had going for it was that it didn't require any math or language skills. Criminal Justice classes were also almost always filled with other football players. Of course, football players weren't the only Ole Miss students majoring in Criminal Justice. But when the Criminal Justice program took the field trip to Parchman Farm—aka the Mississippi State Penitentiary—the football players were the only students with friends on the *inside*.

When people on the streets looked at the black football players, and made Bobby Nix feel as if he was holding the crying baby on the airplane, they might have had other things in mind but the color of their skin. And in other places, Nix might have discounted

those looks. Here in Oxford he couldn't. Here every look was filtered by the past.

The perception that Ole Miss's treatment of black people might not be up to the high standards of, say, the University of Alabama was just one of the many problems Coach O faced when he set out to convince the region's top high school football players to come play for him—but he couldn't ignore it. Coach O had been hired by Ole Miss in large part because he had proven himself to be a gifted recruiter of black football players. He'd never been a head coach, or run a football offense. And while he had an obvious knack for firing up a football defense, his single most important career achievement was to have recruited a pair of national championship football teams for the University of Southern California. When Coach O had arrived in the late 1990s the USC football team was faring poorly, and losing the best Los Angeles inner-city athletes to other schools. Coach O decided that what he needed was an example. Talk just one great inner-city high school player into committing to USC, prove that he can have a great experience, and others would follow. His opinion leader had been a defensive lineman named Shuan Cody—a *USA Today* High School All-American who, after three years at USC, went on to become a second-round draft pick of the Detroit Lions. When Coach O looked at Michael Oher, he saw Shuan Cody. But he was more than that. Not only was Michael Oher black, famous, and the best offensive lineman anywhere near Oxford, Mississippi. Michael Oher had a white sister who was an Ole Miss cheerleader and belonged to one of the snootiest white sororities on campus. The possibilities were endless.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for word to arrive back at Ole Miss that the new head coach was out there saying he planned to build his football team on the back of Michael Oher. Ole Miss's two starting

tackles, Bobby Harris and Tre Stallings, dug out Michael Oher's high school recruiting tape just to have a look at this new guy everyone was talking about. Stallings and Harris both were entering their senior seasons with at least a shot at playing in the NFL—Stallings would be taken in the sixth round by the Kansas City Chiefs, and Harris would sign a free agent contract with the San Francisco 49ers. Stallings, especially, expected to be the center of attention when people paid attention to Ole Miss offensive linemen. Then he rolled the tape of Michael Oher playing left tackle for the Briarcrest Christian School. "We both just laughed," said Harris. "I'd have to say he was the best lineman I'd ever seen with my own eyes—Terrence Metcalf [of the Chicago Bears] would be second. He was just maulin' people. Tre and me just looked at each other and said, 'He a beast!'"

Coach O handed the same tape to George DeLeone. DeLeone, in his thirty-sixth year of coaching offensive linemen, in college and the pros, had just arrived at Ole Miss from Syracuse University. He popped in Michael's tape, and as he watched he thought, *Oh my God*. "The flexibility in those hips! The arch in that back! That mass! Those feet!" he exclaimed, as he rewatched. DeLeone had seen plenty of future star NFL linemen back as college prospects. "Orlando Pace," he said, "or Andre Gurode with the Cowboys. In my judgment Michael Oher looks just like those guys did at this stage. It's a kinesthetic sense. You can't teach it."

In modern times Ole Miss's football team had enjoyed only the briefest and most fleeting moments of glory but had always been good at sending offensive linemen to the NFL. In the most recent NFL draft—the draft of 2005—their center Chris Spencer was picked in the first round by the Seattle Seahawks, and one of their guards, Marcus Johnson, was taken in the second round by the Minnesota Vikings. Before that, Terrence Metcalf had gone to the Bears, Todd Wade to the Texans, Stacey Andrews to the Bengals, Ben Claxton to the Falcons, Tutan Reyes to the Panthers, and Key-

drick Vincent to the Steelers. None of those players had been in the starting lineup his freshman year. George DeLeone assumed Michael Oher would be treated like any other great offensive line prospect. He'd be red-shirted, sit out a year, and learn the system. In his thirty-six years of college coaching DeLeone had inserted a freshman into his starting lineup just once. And that had been back in 1986, on a losing Syracuse team, in a far weaker college conference than the one Ole Miss played in. Even then, Blake Bednarz—that was the kid's name—had started several years in high school, weight trained seriously, and arrived at Syracuse with a good understanding of his position. And he'd stunk! "Blake ended up being a great player for us," said DeLeone, "but he wasn't one that year."

Now Coach O was insisting that Michael Oher start for Ole Miss . . . immediately! The kid had played a grand total of fifteen high school games on the offensive line. "He's a kid who has never really been in a weight program," said DeLeone. "And he'll be going up against grown men who have been in the weight room for five years. And he's doing it in the best league in the country for defensive linemen." To make matters worse, the college game had grown a lot more complicated in the past twenty years. The Ole Miss offense would be a combination of the Atlanta Falcons' running game and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' passing game. DeLeone assumed that no matter how quickly the kid took to the game he'd need a full season to learn whom to block, and how to block him—and now he was being told by Coach O that Michael had some kind of learning disability, and that he'd have to teach him the plays using ketchup and mustard bottles. "A visual learner," Coach O had called him. Whatever that meant.

With the first game of the season less than two months away, DeLeone hopped in his car and drove the hour and a half from Oxford, Mississippi, to the Tuohy home in Memphis. Ditching the

Ole Miss playbook with its X's and O's, he gamely set out to teach Michael Oher what was essentially an NFL offense. The kitchen chairs stood in for linebackers. The fancy dining room chairs—the Tuohy lady had just enough of them, luckily—served as the defensive and offensive lines. Coach O had told him to get the kid out on the field as quickly as possible, so DeLeone turned him into a right guard. It wasn't the kid's natural position. His natural position was left tackle. But the right guard had physical help on either side of him, and verbal instructions, from both the center and the tackle. It was the easiest position to learn, but, even so, DeLeone did not believe any true freshman could learn it. "Michael Oher is without question one of the greatest athletes I have ever seen for a guy his size," said DeLeone. "But what we're asking him to do is impossible to do."

In the safety of the Tuohys' kitchen they made progress—the kid was driving the fancy dining room chairs off the line nicely—when Leigh Anne came through the door. When she saw Michael firing off the line and getting fit with her furniture she took control of the defense. "The linebackers can stay," she said, tensely. "But you put my two thousand dollar dining room chairs back! Right now!" She then proceeded to tell him that she had examined his playbook with its X's and its O's and that it was "never going to work."

Coach DeLeone had a better idea than changing the playbook: keep Michael on the bench. How could an offensive line coach in good conscience stick any freshman into an SEC football game, much less a lineman who didn't know the plays? The first few games he actually tried this ploy. Coach O had made him start Michael Oher; but in the middle of the second quarter, when Coach O's attention was diverted, he'd have an upperclassman tap Michael on the shoulder and quietly inform him he was being replaced. Michael would go sit on the bench until Coach O noticed he was there, and flip out.

Leigh Anne he assumed he could ignore; Coach O he assumed he could not. "Everyone who coaches college football is intense," said DeLeone. "But O's intensity is at another level."

ALRIGHTEERIGHTEERIGHTEE *righteeerighteeeee!! Hooo! . . . Hooo! . . . Hooo! . . . Hooo! LessgoooooLessgoooooLessgooooo!*"

It was seven o'clock in the morning, and already Coach O was out roaming the halls of the practice facility, hollering at the top of his lungs.

The players filed past him, wearily. The linemen came as a group, a study in ectomorphism. Fourteen 300-pound men lumbering down a narrow hallway was a sight worth seeing. Their movements were regular, synchronized, and slow. Each step was a discrete event, requiring conscious effort. They transferred all their weight onto one leg, paused in preparation for the next three-foot-long journey, and then shoved off. They looked like a herd of circus elephants. All but one, the biggest of them all, who skipped along lightly on the balls of his feet.

Michael Oher now had a swagger about him. A lot of people he didn't know were talking about him. Before the season *Sports Illustrated* had named him one of the five freshman football players in the country to watch. At one of his first practices, newly installed at right guard, Michael could only shake his head as a defensive end bull rushed the left tackle and sacked the quarterback. But after the play he walked over to the defensive end and said, "If I was left tackle you wouldn't know what our backfield *looked like*. You'd need a road map." But he wasn't the left tackle; Bobby Harris was.

"*Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Bobbah Harris YouWAKEyet????!!!! C'mon Bobbah Bobbahbobbahbobbah! . . . WhatyouthinkBobbyHarris??*"

"Aw-rye coach," said Bobby Harris.

"*Mikka Oh! Mikka Oh! Howdoosaaaaaa!*"

(Michael Oher! Michael Oher! How you doin' son?)

“*ReddostahCOMpeet’n?*”

(Ready to start competing?)

“*Lessturnbackdaclock. Two a days all over again! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!*” His voice broke and became a piercing, dog-whistle-like shriek, and then he vanished around a corner.

A human geyser of adrenaline and testosterone, he had maintained this pitch from the first day of spring practice until this morning, the day before the team was scheduled to play its final game of the season. He’d done it in spite of presiding over what had to be one of America’s most dysfunctional football teams. He’d been handed a weak and dispirited group of players and instantly set about trying to determine who among them met his standards. After three grueling weeks of spring practice, seventeen of Ole Miss’s eighty-five football players quit. Some decamped for other colleges; some just went home. Coach O immediately went looking for their replacements. Now, as the season entered its final week, his nose for available football carrion would be the envy of any vulture. He knew by heart the rosters of many junior college teams. He knew where to post ads on the Internet to solicit college football players. When Hurricane Katrina drove the Tulane University football team out of New Orleans, there, at the city limits, stood Coach O, hoping to lure away Tulane’s finest—prompting the Tulane head coach to call him, publicly, “lower than dirt.”

Coach O wasn’t lower than dirt. He was a desperate man in a dire situation. Here he was in his first, and possibly only, shot at making it as a head coach in big-time college football. And he had no players! His defense was actually very good—and Coach O, who ran the defense, ran it well. But Coach O had no real experience with a football offense, and his offensive coaches weren’t giving him a lot of help. Each week they trotted out plays that might be run with success only by physically superior football players. And each week the Ole Miss offense ran onto the field without the faintest hope of success. Going into the final game of the season the

Rebels were 3–7, but their record did not capture the flavor of their despair. In seven SEC games they were 1–6 and their lone win came against Kentucky, which was seldom a thing to be proud of. Their offense had scored the grand total of 77 points. Of the 117 Division I-A football teams Ole Miss ranked 115th in points scored. “We must have the worst offense in college football,” said Michael, and he wasn’t far wrong.

The coaching staff had passed through all the stages of grief—denial, shock, anger, sadness, resignation—and entered a stage overlooked by the psychology textbooks: the terror of total humiliation. They were about to travel to Starkville, Mississippi, to face the Mississippi State Bulldogs. The Ole Miss–Mississippi State game was called the Egg Bowl, in honor of the egg-shaped trophy passed back and forth for the previous twelve or thirteen centuries between the two schools. It had been several years since Ole Miss had lost the egg; no senior on the Ole Miss football team had suffered the indignity of surrendering the egg. It had been several years, for that matter, since Mississippi State had beaten any other team in the SEC. As Hugh Freeze, who was now Coach O’s closest confidante and chief aide de camp, put it, “This is a game we don’t need to be losing. You don’t lose to Mississippi State.”

A football game between Ole Miss and Mississippi State was more than just a football game—but then that was thought to be true of many Ole Miss football games. Before the previous game, against LSU, the second-to-last game of the season, Ole Miss’s dean of students, Sparky Reardon, tried to explain the extreme emotions associated with the event. “It’s kind of like the situation in the Middle East,” he told the Ole Miss student newspaper. “Fans of one grow up hating the other and really don’t know why.” The twist to the Mississippi State rivalry was that the fans knew exactly why they hated each other. The game served as a proxy for the hoary Mississippi class struggle, between the white folks who wore shirts with collars on them and the white folks who did not. Mississippi

State was a land grant college, originally called Mississippi A&M. The desperate contempt Ole Miss football fans felt for Mississippi State was echoed in the feelings of fans of the University of Texas for Texas A&M and fans of the University of Oklahoma for Oklahoma State—formerly known as Oklahoma A&M. These schools were not rivals; they were subordinates. Theirs was not a football team to be beaten but an insurrection to be put down. This notion was most vivid in the Ole Miss imagination: that the state of Mississippi, with the sole exception of the town of Oxford, was once a Great Lake of Rednecks. In recent decades the earth had warmed, and the shores of Great Lake Redneck had receded, so that, strictly speaking, perhaps it should not be described as a lake. But still, the residue was a very large puddle. And the one place in the puddle deep enough to ruin a shiny new pair of tassel loafers was Starkville, Mississippi.

And now the only thing between the players and the game was this final morning of preparation. The players stumbled in and parsed themselves into small groups according to their positions. The running backs went off into a room with their fellow running backs, the linebackers disappeared with linebackers. The fourteen offensive linemen herded themselves into what instantly appeared to be an inadequate room, and settled behind desks that seemed designed for midgets. Michael took his usual seat, in the back of the room.

If Michael Oher felt any social anxiety leaving Memphis for Oxford he hadn't shown it. Once or twice he'd asked questions of Miss Sue about Ole Miss that suggested a certain vague apprehension. "Is it true they got fraternities that won't let in black guys?" (It was true.) "Will I be the only person at Ole Miss who doesn't drink?" (The small club of teetotalers was accepting all applicants.) But his wasn't the ordinary story of the boy going away to college. He'd left home, but home had come along for the ride. Miss Sue was still his private tutor. Hugh Freeze was still his football coach.

Sean and Leigh Anne were, on many nights, in the house they'd built a couple of hundred yards off the Ole Miss campus. Before the first home game of the season Sean Junior had walked just ahead of him through the Grove, hand in hand with Coach O. And when they'd gotten to the stadium Collins was right there on the sidelines, leading cheers.

He felt right at home, in his own way. He didn't run with a crowd but he had many friends. He floated back and forth between white Ole Miss and black Ole Miss. He enjoyed his own company and kept much of himself to himself. When the other linemen chattered he just sat and watched them.

"There was a *transvestite* in Chevron this morning," said one of the other linemen. "It was scary."

Several of them started, at the horror of it. The circus elephants had stumbled upon their mouse.

"And it wasn't buying anything either," said the 300-pound lineman. "It was just standing there. *Staring.*"

"Aw, man!" said another gargantuan fellow.

"Jesus," said a third.

Michael just shook his head and said nothing. When the digital clock turned from 7:29 to 7:30 Coach DeLeone came into the room, hunched and limping and deeply weary. T-shirt, sweat pants, reading glasses, gray hair cut in the style of a marine sergeant: if you had to guess what he did for a living you would guess George DeLeone was a retired military man, with a string of Purple Hearts. In fact he was a former undersized college lineman whose knee injuries still plagued him. He didn't look happy, but then he had no reason to be happy. The offense had been abysmal, and the Internet pundits and the newspaper columnists were pointing to his offensive line as the problem. His situation was grim: he was on the verge of losing his job. Now he hoped to persuade his linemen to join him in grimness and to see the gravity of their predicament.

"All right, men," he said, as he fiddled with the overhead projector. "I want to thank you for everything you've done for me this year."

No one said a word. Then one of them realized: "Coach, was that a joke?"

They all laughed, even Michael.

"We all set, ready to go, or we gonna laugh?" barked DeLeone, wrong-footing them utterly. "Guys! Can we just have one game where we come in on Sunday, look at the tape, and say, 'This is how we can play as an offensive line'? Let's play this game with some frickin' pride on the offensive line. That means something to me, and I hope it means something to you. We can laugh next week. Laugh Sunday night. Now . . ."

He calmed down, without any help from his players, and pulled out his plastic sheets—the sheets with the X's and O's on them. Then he switched on the overhead projector and assumed his usual position beside it.

Bobby Harris gave a huge yawn.

"Sit up please, Bobby," said Coach DeLeone.

Bobby sat up.

"Thank you."

The final lesson of their miserable season took the form of a pop quiz: Coach DeLeone called the name of a lineman and a play. The lineman was meant to respond with his assignment on that play. The air was soon thick with jargon and code. "Rip" and "Liz" and "Willie" and "Philly" and "Rum" and "Pookie" and "Trios" and "A-Gaps" and "3-Techniques." A gifted student of language would require a month to grasp it all. Throughout DeLeone kept one eye on his most troubling pupil, Michael Oher. Michael was now Ole Miss's starting right guard. A third of the time he had no idea where he was meant to go, or whom he was meant to block. The other two thirds, when he knew what he was supposed to do, and was sure of himself, he'd beaten up on

much older opposing players. He'd pancaked a linebacker at Tennessee, and another at Alabama, both future NFL draft picks. After he'd crushed the Tennessee kid, and as he sat on top of him, he'd gotten into his face and said, "You lucky, if I'd come here to school, you'd be getting this every day." You had to like the kid's confidence—taking it that way to a senior all-conference linebacker. And, as confused as he was at times, he'd had games after which the film revealed him as the best performing lineman on the team. "He's getting by on his raw athletic ability," said Matt Luke, a former college lineman himself turned Ole Miss assistant coach. "It's the best I've ever seen. And my entire college line except me is in the NFL."

The games in which Michael had excelled also happened to be the games before which Sean Tuohy had sat down with him for six hours or so and reviewed the plays. Now he sat rubbing his knees, pushing down so hard on them with his hands he seemed to be trying to rip off a layer of his own skin. ("That's a nervous reaction he has," said Leigh Anne.)

He'd put fifty hours into this course for every hour he had put into math or English. But of all the courses he had taken, the course in playing offensive line had proved the most difficult. It *was* the most difficult. The plays were all new to him, and in a code foreign to him, and on each play there were a mind-numbing number of variations. On a football team, only the quarterback experienced the same level of complexity as the offensive line. As Michael struggled to organize inside his mind the blizzard of new material, this sixty-something-year-old coach with his funny East Coast accent kept hollering in his ear. Coach DeLeone prided himself on his rigor and the high expectations he had for his players. "One of my players misses a class I'm here at six in the morning running him," he said. "I know this: I don't see a lot of history professors out there running people around the building."

Today—the last day of preparation for the Mississippi State

Bulldogs—is in theory a review. In fact, the coaches, grasping at straws, have put in new plays, with new terminology. Michael Oher isn't the only lineman who has no clue what's going on.

“Michael Oher!”

Michael stirred, uneasily.

“Twenty-eight Gem,” barked his coach. “Gem tells the right guard to do what?”

“Go get the Mac,” Michael said. The Mac is the middle linebacker. Unless he's the Mike. The main thing is he's not the Willie or the Sam—the nicknames for the other linebackers.

“Go get the Mac,” said DeLeone, approvingly.

Michael knew that much. But—he was thinking, as he sat there—the Mac moved around. So did every other player on a college defense. What if the Mac wasn't where he was supposed to be? “The problem is,” he said later, “I got eight guys running in front of me two seconds before the ball's snapped.” Back at Briarcrest they had three basic running plays, and Michael had been assigned to block the same man no matter what the defense. Ole Miss had dozens of running plays, with half a dozen different blocking assignments on each of them. Whom he blocked, and how he blocked them, depended on where the defenders stood at the snap of the ball. There was a good reason for the new complexity. In high school if some defender came free and went unblocked—well, the team would take that risk for the sake of keeping things simple. In college the coaches couldn't risk a defender going completely unblocked, because the defenders were so routinely dangerous. A defender who went completely unblocked in the SEC could end the quarterback's season.

“This is the last time to talk about these assignments,” DeLeone shouted. “We got to nail this, men!”

It was as if Coach DeLeone had read his thoughts. Even though he'd given him the right answer, the coach seemed upset. He was getting himself all worked up again.

"You must step up!" shouted Coach DeLeone.

He'd changed gears. He meant this literally—that when the ball was snapped the linemen needed to step forward, not backward. "Both guards last week stepped on the quarterback," the line coach continued. "This *cannot* happen this week." Last week they'd played LSU and lost 40–7. Against LSU the Ole Miss quarterback had gone down several times, in the most embarrassing way possible, with his foot pinned to the ground by one of his own linemen. At least one of those feet had been Michael's.

"You must step up!!" He was screaming again. "You must step up!! We got that, Michael Oher??"

Coach DeLeone's face was red, but his toenail was still black and blue from having been stepped on during practice, two months before, by Michael Oher.

"Yes, sir," said Michael. He thought: *If this old guy doesn't calm down, he's gonna have a heart attack right here and die.* But, once again, the coach calmed himself. "What's the deal with Mississippi State?" he asked, innocently.

The linemen searched in each other's blank faces for the right answer, but failed to locate it. It was Bobby Harris who finally ventured a guess.

"That we hate them?" he said.

"Someone is saying that the Mississippi State coach is guaranteeing a win," said DeLeone, incredulously. "They think that much of us that they're *guaranteeing* a win?"

Ah—that was it. A faint stab at a motivational speech. But that wasn't Coach DeLeone's job. Which was just as well, as it was time to go listen to Coach O.

TEN MINUTES LATER Coach O had his football team arranged before him. One final pre-game speech to deliver before he could put this dreadful season behind him. He waited for them to quit

horsing around, which they always seemed to need to do for at least ninety seconds, and then strolled with authority to the podium.

"Let me say this about Mississippi State," he began.

He paused for dramatic effect.

"They hate you, we hate them."

He paused again. No one could disagree.

"I purposefully have not had much for the other team. 'Cause I don't respect them much. I say I respect them in the paper. I don't respect 'em. I don't have *nuthin'* for them. The other guy has been putting up the scores of last year."

He hardly needed to explain himself because everyone in the room already understood. They might not have read the papers but they had at least heard the rumor that Sylvester Croom, Mississippi State's head coach, has been riling up his players by posting the scores from past defeats at the hands of Ole Miss. Croom also stood accused of trash-talking. He'd gone in front of a group of Mississippi State boosters, spoken about Ole Miss, and gotten himself quoted in the papers. All he'd actually said was "I don't ever think about Ole Miss. If our kids play as well as they can, we're going to beat their butt." But every right-thinking Ole Miss football fan and player must agree that Croom has violated football decorum—which is of course only what you'd expect from a Mississippi State football coach. "This is totally wrong," Coach O now says. "Let's put these guys *way* below our program. Think about class and Ole Miss. Think about how we are, think about how they are."

A Great Lake of Rednecks!

"Understand that their team is going to come out fired up," he continues. "He [Coach Croom] didn't even let 'em go home for Thanksgiving. Wanted 'em all living in a hotel in Starkville. *Dumpy ass* hotel in Starkville. I can just about imagine it."

Coach O actually didn't share the social pretensions of his employer. He was just a good ol' boy who didn't present himself as anything but a good ol' boy—he said his boyhood idea of going out

to a fancy restaurant was driving thirty miles to Kentucky Fried Chicken. He'd have been perfectly content in a dumpy ass hotel in Starkville. He was just speaking from the Ole Miss script—and doing it well, in view of the circumstances.

The circumstances were that the Ole Miss football team, like the Mississippi State football team, consisted mostly of poor black kids from Mississippi. When the Ole Miss defense gathered in a single room, the only white people were coaches. On the football field the players became honorary white people, but off it they were still black, and unnatural combatants in Mississippi's white internecine war. Even as Coach O worked to fire them up for the game, many of the seniors had their bags packed and their cars running. After the game they'd vanish, en masse, from the Ole Miss campus. They'd just walk right out of the locker room and get in their cars and drive away. Several who might have stayed and picked up their degrees will decide it wasn't worth hanging around five months to do it. They'll have spent four years shuttling between their off-campus apartments, their Criminal Justice classes, and football practice on the off chance of making it to the NFL.

Coach O was finished imagining the dumpy ass hotel in Starkville. It clearly pained him to dwell on the negative qualities of their opponents; he was by nature a positive man. He wanted to end on a positive note. "You come to school here," he said, seriously. "You graduate. You go to the NFL. That's what I want our program to be." And then he began to ramble, sounding like a man talking in his sleep.

"Just gonna win tomorrow," he said. "Focus. Details. Let's focus."

THE NEXT MORNING the Ole Miss Rebels' buses rolled into Starkville. At Ole Miss there was money in the air; here there was just hostility, and the sights and sounds of resentment. Every State

fan carried a cowbell, and rang it incessantly, as they hurled insults at the Ole Miss players. The players changed into their uniforms on cold concrete floors, and hung their street clothes in old wooden cubbyholes. Once dressed, they crowded into the foyer outside the locker room, like soldiers on a troop carrier about to storm a beach. That's when one spotted, beneath a pile of cardboard boxes, empty Gatorade bottles, and surgical tape, an oddly shaped trophy badly in need of polishing.

"*Dat da egg?*" he asked, incredulously.

Another player looked over, then another. The Ole Miss staff had brought the old trophy along with them, in case they lost and had to hand it over.

"*Dat is da egg,*" said someone else.

With that, they raced out onto the field, to the clanging of cowbells and hoots of derision. Never mind the barnlike quality of the locker room; never mind the rickety old stadium itself: the football field was a work of art. There was no substance on earth more lush or thick or green or beautiful. Turfology, as it happened, was Mississippi State's great academic strength. At the mention of State's turf-tending skills, the Ole Miss snob would become serious and acknowledge that, whatever you might want to say about State, they knew how to grow golf courses. "Don't forget to look down and check out the grass!" had been one of two pieces of advice Sean had given Michael before he left for the game. The other was, "Never take your helmet off in Starkville."

And Michael didn't, but more out of shame than fear of being brained by a beer bottle. The game took the Ole Miss team through a speeded-up version of the emotions of their season. First came hope: five plays into the game the Ole Miss quarterback, Ethan Flatt, hit his fastest receiver, Taye Biddle, for a 41-yard touchdown pass. But Biddle, one of the seniors who would quit school immediately after the game, might as well have kept on running out the back of the end zone and into his car. Ole Miss never called

that play again. Instead, their offensive brain trust decided to use their unbelievably slow, fifth-string running back to test the strong interior of the Mississippi State defense. In the press box before the game, the Ole Miss offensive coordinator, Noel Mazzone, happened to walk past a TV on which was playing a North Carolina State football game. Six months earlier, Mazzone had left his job running the North Carolina State offense to take the job of running the Ole Miss offense. Seeing his former team on TV he snorted and said, loudly enough for journalists to overhear, "Should have stayed there, at least they had some players."

Bill Walsh had shown how much an imaginative coach might achieve even with mediocre talent; Noel Mazzone was demonstrating how little could be achieved by a coach who did not admit any role for the imagination. The next five times Ole Miss had the ball Mazzone used the opportunity to prove that his slow, fifth-string running back couldn't run through a giant pile of bodies in the middle of the field. Once the Ole Miss offense faced third and long, as it invariably did, everyone in the stadium knew a pass was coming. There was nothing for the Ole Miss quarterback to do but drop back and wait to be buried under the Mississippi State blitz. Most of the time, just before he was crushed, he managed to throw an incomplete pass or an interception.

Three punts and two interceptions later Mississippi State led 21-7. Rather than try a different strategy—say, the surprising pass play that had worked the first time they had the ball—the Ole Miss coaches tried different players. First they switched their fifth-string running back out for their sixth-string running back. (Between them they ran the ball twenty-five times for 31 yards.) Then they switched their first-string quarterback out for their second-string quarterback—the fellow who had started the season as the first-string quarterback. (Between them they threw four interceptions.) The frantic search for the right combination of

players reflected their more general football worldview: they believed in talent rather than strategy. They placed less emphasis on how players were used than who they were. Whoever had the best players won: it was as simple as that.

It was a bleak and deterministic worldview, implying, as it did, that there was little a strategist could do to raise the value of his players. More to the point, it was a false view, at least for running a football offense. The beauty of the football offense was that it allowed for a smart strategist to compensate for his players' limitations. He might find better ways to use players, to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. He might even change the players' sense of themselves. But Ole Miss not only lacked a smart strategist: it lacked a coach who understood the importance of strategy. The genius of Bill Walsh was missing; so, for that matter, was the genius of Leigh Anne Tuohy. There wasn't a soul on the Ole Miss sidelines thinking seriously how to make the most of what another person could do. They were all stuck dwelling on what other people couldn't do.

After each failed series the linemen trotted to the bench and plunked themselves down for a chalk talk delivered by assistant line coach Matt Luke. This served mainly to highlight their near-total confusion. After one series the right tackle, Tre Stallings, confessed he had gone the wrong way because he thought the center, Daryl Harris, had shouted "Philly," when he had in fact shouted "Willie." After another series there ensued a long argument—for them—about the difference between "G" and "Gem." After a third series three of the linemen got screamed at for firing out and blocking linebackers instead of blocking the linemen right in front of them. After a fourth series a coach thrust a headset at Michael Oher so that Michael could listen to Coach DeLeone, up in the press box, holler at him to try harder. After a fifth series the left guard, Andrew Wicker, hurled his helmet on the ground and shouted,

"We're getting our ass kicked by *State*." And they were—largely because none of them had any clear idea what he was meant to do on any given play.

By halftime hope was rapidly giving way to denial. At the start of the third quarter denial gave way to depression, with hardly a pause for the intermediate stages of bargaining and anger. The change came on a single play. With Ole Miss down 21–14, the team had the ball and began, slowly, to move it. It was, as always, third and long, and the Ole Miss quarterback, Michael Spurlock, called for a pass. That in itself posed a problem, as he was only about five nine, and unable to see over the linemen. To compensate for his stature, Spurlock had the habit of just taking off toward the sideline the minute he received the ball. The price he paid for his new view of the field was to render himself nearly useless as a passer—he was running too fast to throw the ball with accuracy—and to confuse the linemen assigned to protect him, as they had no idea where he was.

On this play it hardly mattered. Ole Miss had lined up with two tight ends: both ran the wrong way and missed their blocks. Ole Miss had a tailback: he, too, ran the wrong way and failed to block the defender he was meant to block. Three of the five Ole Miss linemen—Michael plus the center plus the left guard—all blocked a single Mississippi State defensive tackle. With most of Ole Miss's blockers ungainfully employed, a Bulldog linebacker shot through a gap and sacked the Rebel quarterback for a 20-yard loss, almost killing him in the bargain. After that Coach DeLeone, watching from the press box, yanked Michael Oher from the game. Michael ended his season on the bench, a simmering symbol of his coach's frustration.

From his seat beside his wife, high in the stands, Sean Tuohy watched the loss take shape with the calm of an asset manager who long ago banked his annual returns. In the grand scheme of Michael's career this one game—this entire season—didn't matter.

Just by taking the field as a freshman, Michael's stock remained high. Sean's main goal had been to make sure that Michael didn't have the same experience of college sports that he had had, and that Michael didn't wind up depending on the mercy or the intelligence of his coaches. Now Sean understood that the Ole Miss coaches needed Michael far more than he needed them. Their careers were at stake; Michael could always transfer—a fact Leigh Anne had brought to the attention of the Ole Miss coaches more than once. Leigh Anne had already told Coach O that if Noel Mazzone and George DeLeone returned to run the Ole Miss offense for one more year, Michael would not—and the two coaches were almost sure to be gone after this game. Michael didn't need to worry about the bigger picture; the bigger picture was arranging itself to maximize his value. "See how his face looks right now," said Sean, his binoculars trained on Michael. Michael's upper lip was tucked under his lower, and his eyes stared straight ahead at nothing. "That's how he looks when he's planning on not talking to anyone for a while." He could afford to pout.

THE DAY AFTER his team's embarrassing 35–14 loss to Mississippi State, Coach O fired his offensive coordinator and began to look for a new offensive line coach. Then he sat down and wrote out his depth chart for the 2006 football season. The first name he moved around was Michael Oher's. Michael became Ole Miss's starting left tackle. "If I could do it over," said the head coach, "I'd have just put him there to begin with and let him figure it out."

The plan started with Michael Oher but didn't end there. Coach O might not have Bill Walsh's gift for taking average talent and tricking it into being better, but he knew how to find and attract great talent. Over the next few months he set out to pluck the finest football talent from the junior colleges and high schools of America—and, to judge from the high marks he received from the

recruiting services, he appeared to have succeeded. At the center of this effort, oddly enough, was Michael Oher. "In every conversation Michael's name came up," he said. "He was my tool. And when we had the top guys on campus, I had him show them around."

Michael walked away from his freshman season wondering what that had all been about. And then, strangely, the honors began to roll in. He was named a First Team Freshman All-American, and First Team Freshman All-SEC. He was named pre-season All-SEC by magazines and also by the SEC's coaches. *College Football Weekly* listed him the best player on the Ole Miss offense. His value, once perceived, was indestructible. He could play on one of the worst football offenses in the nation and nobody would hold it against him. The experience had been a blur. But all anyone seemed to care about was that (a) he was still the biggest guy on the field and a freakishly gifted athlete, (b) he'd picked up the college game faster than anyone had the right to expect, and (c) when he knew what he was supposed to do, he'd knocked some folks around. And while that wasn't as often as anyone would have liked, it had been often enough that players and coaches now knew he'd eventually figure it out.

So often given the benefit of doubts, Michael Oher now set out to confirm the wisdom of the people who showed such faith in him. After the season, for the first time in his life, he hit the weight room. Six months later he emerged a different shape; he went in a square and came out an inverted triangle. He went in being able to bench-press 225 pounds and came out bench-pressing nearly 400 pounds. He went in weighing 345 pounds and came out weighing 320—without, it seemed, an ounce of fat on him.

But there still lingered this ominous feeling about him. He might be injured at any time, of course, but that wasn't the source of the feeling. There was another, more disturbing risk, because it was harder to pin down. He could never shake entirely the place he had come from, and he could never change entirely who he was

born. Every now and then, for instance, he'd go back to his old neighborhood and when he did bad things often happened. At Leigh Anne's urging he had gone to see his mother—and the next thing Leigh Anne knew she was getting a call from a clearly flustered Big Tony, and the only words she could understand were “truck” and “dead” and that Michael was in the custody of the Memphis police. When Michael had arrived at his mother's house he'd found the police there, arresting her. For some reason she'd been driving around in a truck that belonged to a man the police had just found, murdered. The police had asked Michael why he was there, he'd told them, and they'd put him in handcuffs and taken him to central lockup. Sean had sprung him, then given Michael a little speech about black people and the police and the unlikelihood of the former being treated graciously or even fairly by the latter. When a police officer told Michael to do something, no matter how rudely he put it, Michael was to say “yes, sir” and do it. And his first telephone call should be to Sean Tuohy.

In theory, when Michael went away to Ole Miss, he put some distance between himself and the hand reaching out from his past. But Michael had left behind inner-city social risks only to find that inner-city social risks had followed him to Oxford, Mississippi. One friend and teammate, having failed his Ole Miss classes, left school and went right back to his old neighborhood to peddle drugs—because it was the only way he knew how to make money. His three closest friends on the Ole Miss team all had children. One, Jamarca Stanford, had become a father at fifteen. Another friend was a tough defensive end named Peria (he pronounced it *Pur-Ray*) Jerry. Peria had so little knowledge of math or English he might as well never have been to school. Miss Sue not only tutored him, and got him reading and adding fractions, she mothered him incessantly. Michael didn't fully approve—he thought Miss Sue was *his*. One day he blurted out to Miss Sue, “You love Peria more than you love me.” “I'll never love any of them more than I love

you," said Miss Sue. "But he's catching up!" said Michael, outraged.

And he was: one day Peria looked at Miss Sue with tears in his eyes and said, "Nobody ever loved me till you," and it was all Miss Sue could do not to break down right there. Peria was so big that you forgot he was still, in most ways, just another needy child.

There were at least a dozen black football players from impoverished backgrounds auditioning for the role of Eliza Doolittle. ("I wish I could get me an adopted family," said Peria.) No one asked Leigh Anne for a shirt with a little alligator on it. But they all longed for some connection and the sense of being taken care of. Michael brought them home to Memphis, and so Leigh Anne got some idea of the risks to keeping Michael on the straight and narrow. To Thanksgiving dinner, for instance, Michael had invited a freshman linebacker named Quentin Taylor, who had no place else to go. At the start of the meal Michael leaned over and whispered, sternly, "Quentin, you're supposed to put your napkin in your lap." Right after that, Quentin let it drop that he had fathered three children by two different mothers. Leigh Anne pulled the carving knife from the turkey and said, "Quentin, you can do what you want and it's your own business. But if Michael Oher does that I'm cutting his penis off." From the look on Quentin's face Michael could see he didn't think she was joking. "She would, too," said Michael, without breaking a smile.

All these surprisingly good things were happening to Michael Oher. Still there was a sense that something surprisingly bad could happen at any time. And it did.

ONE AFTERNOON, long after their miserable season was over, Michael sat on the front steps of his dormitory with a couple of teammates. Up walked another teammate, a freshman linebacker named Antonio Turner. Antonio had visited the Tuohy home in

Memphis, and apparently he didn't like what he had seen. Now he made a number of unflattering remarks about white people generally and about Michael's "cracker family" specifically. When he called Michael a "cracker," Michael gave him a shove, and Antonio punched him in the face—then ran. Michael gave chase, and the two of them raced in circles around a parked car like a couple of cartoon characters. Finally, Antonio said something about Collins and Leigh Anne Tuohy. What exactly he said no one ever exactly learned—and Michael refused to repeat it. But it had something to do with Antonio's intention to have sex with Michael's white sister, but only after he'd had sex with Michael's white mother. Whereupon Michael said he was going to his dorm room to change his clothes, because he didn't want to get Antonio's blood on his nice shirt.

When Michael walked back into the dorm to find a shirt he didn't mind spoiling with Antonio's blood, Antonio took off at a sprint. He ran to the redbrick study hall with the darkened windows used by the football players and monitored by tutors. Surrounded by teammates and white tutors, he figured he'd be safe. He figured wrong.

Michael knew he didn't need to run. He knew where Antonio had gone—there was no place else to go where Antonio would think he was safe. Michael walked across campus, calmly stalking his prey. Finally, he came to the study hall. There, in a small room filled with half a dozen players and tutors, he found Antonio, and charged.

Force equals mass times acceleration, as Hugh Freeze said, and when Michael's mass comes at you at Michael's speed, it's just an incredible force. With that incredible force he drove Antonio into the ground. Then he picked him up with one hand by the throat and lifted him straight off the ground. Antonio weighed 230 pounds but in Michael's big hand he looked, as one player later put

it, "like a rag doll." Michael beat Antonio around the face and threw him across the room as, around the room, huge football players took cover beneath small desks.

That's when a lot of people at once began to scream hysterically and Michael noticed the little white boy on the floor, in a pool of blood. He hadn't seen the little white boy—the three-year-old son of one of the tutors. Who had put the little white boy there? When he'd charged Antonio, the boy somehow had been hit and thrown up against the wall. His head was now bleeding badly. Seeing the body lying in his own blood, Michael ran.

Antonio, a sobbing wreck, was taken to the home of running back coach Frank Wilson, for his own protection. He was still alive, and the Ole Miss coaches planned to keep him that way. Back in the study hall Miss Sue sat listening to another football player, a line-backer named Robert Russell. She told him she didn't understand why these disputes must be resolved with violence. "Miss Sue," he said, "Michael and I weren't raised that way. No matter how much you try to wash us up behind the ears, we're going to go back to what we know."

Hugh Freeze called Leigh Anne, who was up in Memphis. Like a zoo director discussing a crazed rhinoceros with its trainer, he said, "You got to get down here and find him. You're the only one who can control him." Leigh Anne jumped in her car, took off for Oxford—and then stopped. Michael was gone, no one knew where he was, and she didn't actually believe she could find him. She pulled over to the side of the road and called Sean, who was somewhere on the West Coast with the Memphis Grizzlies. It was Sean who said, "He's running because that's all he knows how to do." He wasn't out looking for someone to kill. He was just trying to escape his predicament. Just a few months earlier Sean would have been shocked. But now he knew that when Michael got into trouble, he ran. He knew it because not long after Michael had left for Ole Miss

he'd had an argument with Miss Sue and vanished for two days. He wouldn't return phone calls—nothing. Late one night, Sean and Leigh Anne had turned to each other in bed and considered the possibility that Michael Oher might never come back. That he'd just used them to get what he'd wanted and that he actually had no real feelings for them. "You think this is it?" Leigh Anne had asked. And the truth was, Sean didn't know. "Your mind does funny things when it's idle," said Sean. "But that's when I decided that the downside was that we'd helped some kid—so even if he'd been playing us all along there really was no downside."

But he knew something else, too. He knew that Michael had spent his life running. Not long before, he'd been in his Memphis office when a woman named Bobby Spivey, who worked for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, finally returned his call. Spivey was the officer who had handled Michael's case. Sean had phoned her three times to see what he could learn about the missing years in Michael's life, and each time he found himself in conversation with Spivey's voice mail box.* Now, finally, Spivey herself was on his speaker phone, and embarrassed to say that most of the details of Michael's case were unavailable. The Department of Children's Services had lost his file. She remembered very clearly some things about Michael Oher, however. She recalled, for instance, the night that Children's Services had sent the police to remove seven-year-old Michael Oher from his mother's care.

"It was raining that night," said Bobby Spivey. "She was homeless. She was on drugs. Someone called the police and said she was walking around in the rain with her kids."

She recalled that Michael Oher had been taken away and put into a foster home—but that he hadn't stayed. "He was a runaway

* He called only after I'd found Bobby Spivey's name and pestered him to use his status as legal guardian to learn what he could about Michael's early childhood.

a majority of the time,” she said, laconically. “He was real quiet. He wasn’t disrespectful. He just ran.” Eventually, the Memphis branch of the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services had given up looking for Michael Oher. “He ran so much that we stopped trying to stop him,” said this woman who had handled his case. The government had officially taken charge of Michael at the age of seven, she said, but lost track of him around his tenth birthday. She was curious to know what had become of him.