

# Eagles

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A Memoir of My Father,  
Football, and Philly



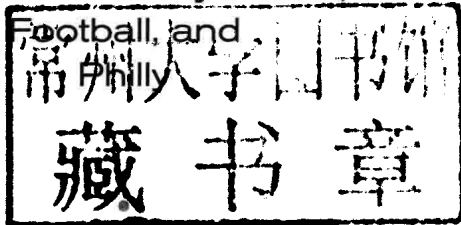
# BURY ME IN MY JERSEY



Tom McAllister

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A Memoir of My Father,



Tom McAllister



Villard Books  
New York

While all of the incidents in *Bury Me in My Jersey* are real, certain dialogue has been reconstructed, and some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals have been changed. Any resulting resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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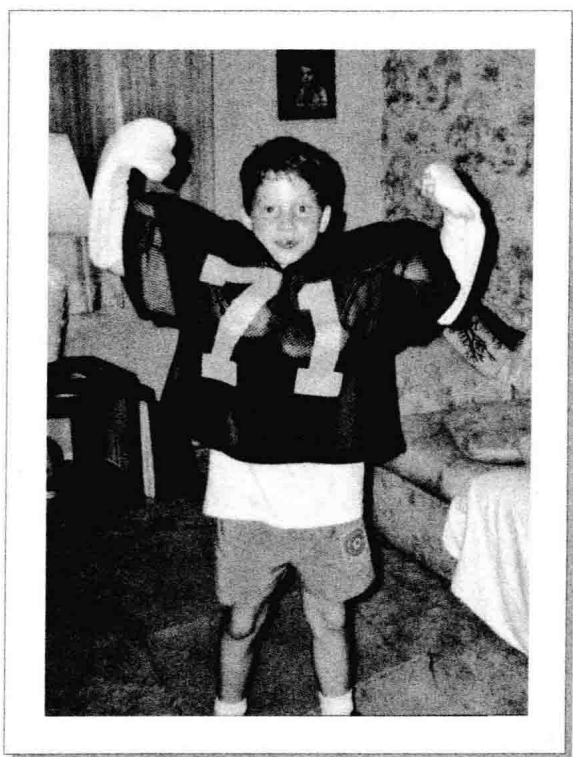
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BURY ME  
IN MY  
**JERSEY**



**For LauraBeth**

Many people need desperately to receive this message:

“I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people don’t care about them. You are not alone.”

—KURT VONNEGUT

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BURY ME  
IN MY  
**JERSEY**



# CHAPTER ONE

## SUPER BOWL XXXIX

**THIS BOOK**, like so many other stories in this city, begins and ends in the same place.

It's early February 2005 and eight of us are huddled in the basement, all dressed in green, desperately leaning toward the TV like plants toward the sun. Stacks of chicken bones and pizza crusts clutter the two end tables, and empty bottles and cans line the perimeter of the room. We're all engaged in varying degrees of prayer. The Eagles are on TV, and they're going to win the Super Bowl.

If you're from Philly, you know the story already. By the time you're old enough to throw a football, you can recite the history of futility, the failed trades, the untapped potential, the many pitiful losses. But let's not dwell on that right now. The fans in Boston and Chicago may have embraced their history of failure and sold it to the highest bidder, but Philly fans would give anything to forget it, to overcome it and never look back.

Swanson, my best friend since first grade, sits between his father and his uncle on the big couch. Next to them, in a recliner that hasn't actually reclined in years, is Swanson's brother-in-law. Three more close friends—Quinn, Big Kev, and Anthony—sit rigidly on the floor or on folding chairs.

There I am. In the corner, wearing my father's sweater (over a Brian Dawkins jersey, number 20, faded and tattered), drinking Molson Golden, tonight's celebration beer, because I'm convinced the team does something good every time I open a bottle.

I'm the only one drinking. In my defense, I may also be the only one helping the Eagles.

I open a new bottle, my seventh, and gulp a mouthful. I'm too full on wings and pizza to drink much more, but I don't have a choice. Donovan McNabb completes a thirty-six-yard pass to Terrell Owens, who wasn't even supposed to be able to jog on his broken leg, let alone play in the Super Bowl. I take another swig and pound my fist on my thigh. We've moved well beyond the high-fiving and group cheering that marked the first half; now we're into aggressive, personal celebrations, like punching the floor or clapping so hard it stings. I drink again.

The Eagles are mounting a comeback; they're behind by ten, but marching easily down the field. They'll score here, get the ball back, and score again. They'll hold on to the lead, maybe even add an insurance field goal. And we'll count down the seconds until the final gun before we charge into the street in an orgy of whooping, shouting, hugging, drinking, and champagne dousing that might never end, and I'll break free from the pack and sprint two blocks to my aunt's house, where my family is watching the game, and my brother and I will scream incoherent things that make perfect sense to us as we're mobbed by neighbors and strangers, and normally I'm not one to be comfortable with strangers, but tonight it's okay, because the Eagles won, the Eagles won, the Eagles won the Super Bowl and everything is okay. I might never stop, sprinting all the way back to my apartment in Iowa City just to let everyone know what they're missing, then turning back home and running through the cheesesteak shop where I worked for so many years, and maybe charging straight into heaven, where I'll finally relax with my Dad and his dad and always relive the moment, that second when the game was clinched and the city erupted in civic pride and true, legitimate brotherly love maybe for the first time ever.

**EXCEPT NONE** of this happens. There is no celebration. The next pass is poorly thrown, intercepted by Tedy Bruschi, a player I despise. The Patriots go on to win their third Super Bowl in four

years, and we're left empty-handed. The celebration rages in Boston. Only rage remains in Philadelphia.

**JANUARY 2004:** The Eagles have just lost their third consecutive NFC Championship Game. They weren't even competitive this time. I'm slumped on the couch in the house I rent in Philly with Big Kev and Anthony, trying to figure out why I even bother with this team. I feel abandoned and forgotten; I want to give up on everything. I want to lock myself in my bedroom until I starve. I boycott the Super Bowl and vow never to watch football again.

**JUNE 2003:** I'm alone in the bathroom in a Toronto bar, punching the paper towel holder until it's dented and dangling from its mount; kicking the trash can across the room; and ripping the toilet paper dispenser off the wall, doing my best rock-star-at-the-Ritz. I'm Ted Nugent after a bitchin' show. I'm Jim Morrison after a gallon of whiskey and a bottle of pills. I'm nobody. My friends and I have just engaged in a heated argument with a group of Buffalo Bills fans about whose team is a bigger disappointment, and we've decided to go drink up the courage to find them later and start a real fight. I'm too drunk to remember that, though; all I'm thinking about is how I miss my Dad. I leave the bathroom with hands buried in my pockets so no one will see the blood on my knuckles. When LauraBeth, my girlfriend, asks what's wrong, I ignore her.

**JANUARY 2003:** The Eagles have just lost their second consecutive NFC Championship Game, this time to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a loss so shocking and heartbreaking that years later replays of the game's signature play—an interception returned for a touchdown by Tampa's Ronde Barber—will make me ill. I'm in the driveway by myself, cursing every Eagle and smashing empty beer bottles against the wall. Nobody stops me. When I'm out of bottles, I slink back into the house and wish we owned a broom.

**DECEMBER 2002:** Four days after Christmas, I'm huddled around a trash can fire with six other guys, waiting overnight for

Eagles playoff tickets. We've just caught someone cutting in line, and I'm throwing an empty beer bottle at him from twenty feet away. Just a few minutes ago, I spat at a family of four trying to sneak past us, and led the *Asshole* chants that rained down on them. It feels good to be a part of the crowd.

**JANUARY 2002:** The Eagles have just lost the NFC Championship Game to the St. Louis Rams. We're in my apartment in North Philly, and even though we're disappointed, we're also hopeful. This is a team on the rise, a team bound for a championship. We're already excited about next season, even if it is eight months away. Outside, a skinny white kid calls for help while an enormous black man squats on his chest, shouting something about money, presumably a bet on the game. He punctuates his demands with fierce open-hands to the face. Two of his friends kick the white kid in the ribs. We close the blinds and watch the post-game show, while one of the girls at our party insists that *it's not fair* that the Rams won't give the ball back and let the Eagles have one more chance to score.

**EVERY YEAR,** it's the same story, although in the seasons since Super Bowl XXXIX, the Eagles have been kind enough not to get my hopes up too much. They did sneak into the playoffs in the '08 season and played well enough to lose another conference championship game, but I never really believed they could win then, not after another mediocre regular season. Maybe I didn't allow myself to believe in them because I couldn't handle another let-down like the ones we had from '02 to '05. Or maybe this game is more complex than I ever realized when I was a kid. Now we're in the midst of another off-season, the buildup to another Super Bowl campaign, and I'm wishing I could stop caring. But I know that's never going to happen. The desperation in the city's air is contagious; it's a collective civic longing to be part of something great, even if we had nothing to do with it. I want that moment, that city-wide catharsis that will follow a Super Bowl. I need it.

# CHAPTER TWO

## **CONFESSIONS OF AN OBSESSED FOOTBALL FAN**

**CONFESSION NUMBER ONE:** I've been known to occasionally stalk pro athletes. When driving on the Schuylkill Expressway last summer, I saw Eagles cornerback Sheldon Brown cruising just ahead of me in his Escalade. I gassed my little Honda Civic and pushed as hard as I could to catch up with him. I didn't really have a plan from there, but I knew I wanted to watch him as he drove, to see where he positioned his hands on the wheel, to see if he sang along to the radio, if he talked on his cell phone, if anyone was with him. I caught up to him about two miles from the exit for Packer Avenue, the last exit before you cross the Walt Whitman Bridge into New Jersey, and also the exit that leads to the NovaCare Complex, where the Eagles practice. In two miles, he would be gone and I would probably never see him again, at least not in real, everyday life.

I stayed even with him and was glad to note that he was a careful driver—focused on the road, moderate speeds, no distractions. I was not careful, leering through my passenger window at my favorite football player, my car drifting off course like a shopping cart with a broken wheel.

I hoped he would look at me, but then I didn't know what I would do if we made eye contact. Would I wave dumbly? Would I ask him to pull over so I could explain that he's my favorite player, and I wear his jersey every Sunday? Should I call him Sheldon or Mr. Brown? And how would he react to all of this? Surely, he'd be as frightened as he was flattered.

I turned the radio down and opened the window to hear the music he was playing, but all I heard was the faint bass line of a rap song. There weren't many other cars on the road, and it felt like Sheldon and I had the stretch of highway to ourselves.

Two miles passed quickly. I fumbled with my cell phone to try to snap a picture of him, but soon we were at Packer Avenue. I veered across two lanes to follow him all the way to the NovaCare Complex. If he knew I was following him, he didn't show it. As we sat at a red light, I lightly tapped my horn, hoping he would look over, and I could point to the Eagles jersey I was wearing. But he looked straight ahead, leaning on his left hand and looking cooler than I've ever looked. At the next light, he was gone, turning into the NovaCare and leaving me behind. I turned around and headed back toward the bridge. When I got home, I would log on to the Eagles' Internet message board and tell everyone the story about my close encounter with greatness.

LauraBeth—then my fiancée, now my wife—was in the car with me, and she was extraordinarily tolerant, especially considering that I didn't talk to her the whole time Sheldon was there. She laughed at me, but she didn't complain when I pulled off the highway to follow him. She knows how much I care about the Eagles, how much I like Sheldon Brown, and she probably also knew I would follow him whether she approved or not.

One of these days, she's going to demand that I grant the same devotion to her as I do to the Eagles, and she'll be right to do so. I'm lucky to be married to her, but I suspect the Eagles will always be my mistress.

**CONFESSION NUMBER TWO:** The last real conversation I had with my Dad before he died was about the Eagles. We didn't talk about love, father-son bonds, or regrets—the regrets we saved for later, after I delivered the eulogy, after we put him in the ground and turned away and had to go back to living our lives as if nothing had happened, as if we weren't scarred and miserable.

He had cancer. A big, evil lump in his esophagus that spread all the way down to his stomach, rooted itself in his liver, and sucked



the life out of him. Who knows how long he actually had cancer, but we knew about it for almost two years. When he was diagnosed, I turned it into a joke. When a friend asked if my apartment floor had a tumor—water damage had buckled the floor and caused an unusually large lump to form next to my couch—I said, “No, but my Dad does.” Everyone laughed. It was funny at the time, but mostly they laughed because I had implicitly given them permission to laugh, and they needed it as much as I did. When we joked about it, it was less real. It was easier to face, to forget.

When people asked how Dad was doing, I didn’t know, because I was too focused on life at college to call him and get real updates. I said he was doing fine, and, in fact, might be even healthier than before because he’d lost some weight and now he wasn’t bothered by the diabetes or high blood pressure anymore. I’m not sure whether I was oblivious, stupid, or if I really did know he was dying and just tried to rationalize the whole thing away. Whatever I was thinking at the time, it forced me to distance myself from him. Even in his final five weeks, when he checked into the hospital and got progressively worse, his face becoming an unrecognizable putty mask, each organ shutting down one at a time, I only visited a handful of times. I acted like I wasn’t concerned, but I was. I acted like I had more pressing things to do, but I didn’t. I talked about what we would do after they discharged him from the hospital. And LauraBeth, knowing intuitively that he wasn’t ever going to come home, urged me to visit. She made me go at least twice a week, which is five less weekly trips than I should have made, but still better than nothing.

He called me one day, left a message on my voice mail—a delirious, morphine-addled plea for me to come visit. His voice a near-whisper, he told me he missed me and was wondering where I was. He said he was scared and that he loved me.

I’ve never felt worse about myself.

And still, I didn’t call back. What would I say? *Please don’t die, Dad, and, by the way, sorry I’m too busy to see you before the cancer kills you.*

I did visit the next day. I was the only one there, and I told him