





**She had no idea, back then, that he was sick. She had no idea he was losing his mind. Something neurological, the doctors are now saying, some kind of sludge blocking pathways in his brain. Would it have made a difference if she knew? Of course it would have. But you can't think like that. And you can't give a shit about people whispering behind your back. You hear about Fred McNeill? Star linebacker for the Minnesota Vikings back in the '70s and '80s. Ended up going crazy and his wife, Tia, couldn't handle it so she walked out. It's not like that, not even close, but whatever. People can think what they think.**

She's double-parked outside his apartment in the mid-Wilshire section of L.A., idiots honking as they veer. *Oh, for godsakes. I'm in this world, too, people.*

"Fred?" she says, calling him on her cell. "Are you coming down?" She has a sleepy, husky voice that announces her stance on just about everything these days: *I'm done.* Her face is round, still alive with curiosity, sturdy and pretty and framed by tight dark curls.

"Am I what?" Fred says. "Are you coming down? I'm outside waiting."

"You're waiting?"  
 "Fred, I'm out here waiting!"  
 "Oh, okay, I'll come down."  
 "Don't forget the suitcase," she says.  
 "Suitcase?"  
 "Remember I need my suitcase back?" she says.

He does not remember anything about a suitcase.

"Fred, I just told you ten minutes ago that I am outside waiting for you and to bring me the suitcase," she says.

"It's too early for karaoke," he says.  
 "Coffee," she says. "I am taking you out for coffee. Now, come on."

"Coffee. That sounds good."  
 "Please hurry, Fred."

"So what I'm going to do is, I'm going to put my shoes on, and I'm going to get my briefcase, and I am going to get you the suitcase, and I am going to come downstairs,

and we are going to get coffee."  
 "Why are you bringing your briefcase?"  
 "I need to go to the office."  
 "No, you don't, Fred."  
 "Can we stop by the office?"  
 "Just come downstairs."

Five minutes go by. More honking. More idiots. No Fred. Her next call goes to voice mail: "*You've reached the law offices of Frederick Arnold McNeill. Please leave a brief message.*" She hangs up the phone. She reaches into a bag of trail mix, pops a handful, and chews. She stares forward and shakes her head slowly in that way that speaks of tragedy, of comedy, and the insidious fine line.

There was a time when Fred was brilliant. He started law school during his last year with the Vikings, studying on the plane to and from games while the other guys slept. He graduated from William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, top of his class. After he retired from the Vikings in 1985, at age 33, he got recruited by a huge firm and then another one, where he quickly made partner. Then one day in 1996 a certified letter came while Fred and Tia were on vacation with the kids. He had been voted out, it said. Fred was 44. It was devastating. How Tia hated those people. Fred was calm, though. He went into private practice, started doing workers'-comp cases for athletes, including some injured Vikings—work that would later prove to be tragically ironic. But after two years, no money was coming in. "What is going on?" Tia asked. It's not like he wasn't trying. He worked all the time, gave it his all; you couldn't find a more honest, diligent man. Weird things started happening. Fred jumping out of bed in the middle of the night, panicked and ready to fight. "*They're here!*" he would shout, face hot with terror. "Fred, it's just me!" Tia would say. She would shake him until he snapped out of it. At the time you think he's just having a nightmare. You get used to things. You don't put it all together.

They have two sons, Gavin, now 23, and "Little Freddie," 26. Gavin shares the two-bedroom apartment with Fred, looks after him, cooks him pancakes in the morning. Freddie lives with Tia, about fifteen minutes away, both of them piled into her mother's house, a blessing, since it's paid for. The boys are good boys, trying to run a creative agency together, and they go to counseling to help deal with their dad, to help untangle all the craziness that was never understood.

Here now is Fred. Thank God. He knocks on the passenger window, flashes a wide, beautiful smile, does a little ta-dah! dance move. He's 58 years old, and he has a long, gentle face, a blocky brow, wire-rimmed glasses, and sprouts of gray hair shooting this way and that. He's wearing a windbreaker, baggy jeans, sneakers. She thinks he looks terrible. He's carrying a white notepad, stained and smudged, and covered top to bottom with phone numbers. He forgot



Fred McNeill spent eleven seasons with the Vikings, retiring to become a lawyer in 1985. His memory started failing in 1994.

the suitcase.

"You need a haircut, Fred," Tia says. "You look like Bozo the Clown!"

"I don't want a haircut."

"All right, let's just go." She pulls out and still, even now, listens as if there is going to be substance.

"I have to make some calls," Fred says, looking at the notepad. "One of the things you have to do is, people call you, you have to respond to them." He speaks softly, almost a purr. "You would do the same thing, Tia. Somebody called you, what would you do? Call them back. I take this, I put the number on a big sheet of paper, and I'm cool. I have to start now calling back, not just writing it down. That's next. And then when I call the person back, I have to respond to whatever it is they say. That's how it goes. You would do the same thing."

"Yup," she says.

"I need to go to the office," he says.

"Please, Fred."

There really is an office. He's not making it up. He's not delusional. One of the things that happens to people when they begin losing their minds is they fall prey to vultures. One such vulture swooped in on Fred about three years ago. An old-man paralegal offered Fred the dusty back room of his little green house over on Arlington. The man had use for a befuddled lawyer with a valid license whom he could manipulate, get him to sign legal documents, do his bidding. Fred would show up each day, suit and tie, meticulous, a look befitting a partner in a firm, and he would do what he was told to do.

Tia knew nothing about any of this. She'd left Fred in 2007. "I'm moving out with the boys, and you're not coming," she had said. She couldn't take it anymore. She thought he was severely depressed and refusing to get help. She kept up his car and phone payments but otherwise stepped out of his life. Gavin stayed in better touch, heard about the paralegal, which didn't sound quite right. He learned about a "girlfriend" who lived in a rented room Fred would sometimes share. He slept on people's couches or sometimes in his car. It was Gavin who first

rallied the troops. He called Freddie home from college. "There is something seriously wrong with Dad," he said to Tia.

This was about a year ago, when all the lights went on. Tia met Fred outside his "office" and confronted him in the driveway of the little green house. She hadn't seen him in nearly a year.

"Fred!" she said. "What is *going on*?"

"Going on?" he asked. He was standing by his car, a silver Altima with fresh dents. It was filled with clothes and also dozens and dozens of Starbucks napkins and paper cups, which Tia instinctively began gathering.

"What are you *doing!*" he said.

"Throwing shit out," she said.

"I need my cups!" he said angrily.

She let it go. "Gavin's taking you to a doctor, and I don't want you giving him any trouble," she told Fred. She felt like a one-woman ambulance with a big siren on top of her head. "Now, would you mind telling me what you are doing with this asshole paralegal?" she asked. "He's using your license and pimping you for rent!"

Fred stood in the driveway, taking in the sun and thinking about *asshole* and *pimping rent* for some time. There was still a vast intelligence beneath the fog. "That would be a *hustler*, not an asshole," he said to Tia.

"Oh, my God. Where did you meet this guy?" she asked. "He's crazy. Stay away from crazy people!"

"Okay," he said, and agreed to move out of the office.

He hasn't yet. He will. He has to pack it up first. There are materials in file folders. He has to open the file folders and read the materials and decide which box the file folder with those materials should go in. For example, he will open one file folder and read the materials and make a decision to put that file folder with those materials in this box, or that box, or some other box. That's how it works. That's how you would do it,

too. He's been packing up the office for about six months now.

Another former football player gone mad. This has been the story of the NFL, an \$8 billion industry, over the past few years: players going crazy from concussions and head trauma sustained during their playing days. Crazy enough to kill themselves. One swallowed antifreeze, another shot himself, still another fled in a paranoid frenzy from police and crashed his car into an oncoming tanker. The tales have been tragic and dramatic, and the science, finally, has become undeniable.

Forensic pathologist Bennet Omalu was the first to figure it all out, to find microscopic changes in brain tissues of deceased players. The bodies were all found to have the same unusual formations of proteins, called tau, in the same regions of their brains, believed to be the result of repeated head trauma. Omalu first found the tau "threads" in the brain of former Steeler Mike Webster in 2002 and published his findings in 2005, in the journal *Neurosurgery*. The new disease was named chronic traumatic encephalopathy, and the NFL fervently and repeatedly denied that CTE had anything to do with the league or its players.

But then, in September 2009, researchers at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research—in a telephone survey of retired players—found that Alzheimer's disease, or something very similar, was being diagnosed in former NFL players *nineteen times more often* than in the national population among men ages 30 through 49. Even worse for the NFL, the league had commissioned that survey, which was designed simply to gather data about retired players. It was like Big Tobacco ordering a study that ended up showing that smokers got cancer.

Last summer, before preseason games even started, the league began placing posters in locker rooms. "CONCUSSION. A Must Read for NFL Players. Report it. Get Checked Out. Take Care of Your Brain." The poster quoted the CDC: "Traumatic brain injury can cause a wide range of short- or long-term changes affecting thinking, sensation, language, or emotions." It spoke explicitly of personality changes, depression, and dementia. "Concussions and conditions resulting from repeated brain injury can change your life and your family's life forever."

The poster was heralded as a seismic shift in the NFL's handling of head trauma, and yet, at the same time, it was a...poster.

On October 17 of this season, after a weekend in which four players were knocked out with concussions, the league announced it would start handing out fines and suspending any player judged to be guilty of "devastating hits" and/or "head shots."

Discussion boards lit up:

**ON THE FIELD**  
*Seven of the NFL's most opinionated veterans on concussions and the new rules of play*

Larry Fitzgerald cut inside, snatched the football out of the air, and braced himself for the punishment he knew was coming: a hit by Seattle Seahawks safety Lawyer Milloy, an enforcer who'd made his name on bone-jarring brutality. As Milloy closed in for the kill shot, Fitzgerald hit the Qwest Field turf and assumed the position. To his utter amazement, the next thing Fitzgerald saw was Milloy standing over him with a twisted smile on his face.

"Fitz, you're lucky I can't hit you the way I want to hit you," Milloy said. "You *know* if they weren't handing out these fines, I'd have clocked you."

Fitzgerald had been spared by the league's hastily revised guidelines prohibiting helmet-to-helmet hits. These guidelines threaten even first-time offenders with fines of up to \$50,000 and possible suspensions, and they warn players that they may be held responsible for the consequences of their collisions, regardless of intent. In locker rooms and film sessions, on practice fields and during league-mandated screenings, players are debating the merits of the sea change, balancing concepts like brotherhood and player safety with fears that the game they love is being neutered. —MIKE SILVER



**MATT BIRK**  
**BALTIMORE RAVENS CENTER**  
 When you're 21 years old, single, and full of piss and vinegar, you think, "Nothing's going to happen to me." My

view at the time was, if playing for ten years in the league meant I had to walk around with a limp, that'd be a good trade-off. Now I'm 34 and I have five kids, and my perspective's changed. A limp is one thing, but if you're talking about brain trauma, that's a whole lot scarier.



**SCOTT FUJITA**  
**CLEVELAND BROWNS**  
**LINEBACKER**  
 When an episode of *Real Sports* shows one of our predecessors lying in bed,

speaking to his incredible wife through his eyelids and a computer, it rips our hearts out.



**LAWYER MILLOY**  
**SEATTLE SEAHAWKS SAFETY**  
 I was part of the head-trauma group that went down to Florida the week before the Super Bowl last year [for a gathering

that brought together NFL players and researchers]. It was definitely alarming. But in a sense football is kind of like the military—you know what you signed up for. Our sport was built around big hits. Now you can get fined \$50,000 for a play you've been taught to make your whole career? Come on!

This is not good. Freaking women organs running this league.

The NFL is turning into a touch football “Nancy Boy” League. Steer your kids that have talent into baseball, basketball or any other sport that will still have dignity left in 2 years....

The pussyfication of the NFL continues. Every single goddam year the rules get more and more VAGINIZED.

What Fred would do was sit in the apartment alone, and he would hold the blade to his wrist and look at it. That’s when he would start thinking. The thinking ruined everything. It wasn’t “Oh, everyone will be upset if I do this” or “I hate my life.” Nothing like that. Instead, he would feel the cool blade on his skin, and he would consider how thin and baby soft that skin was, and he would think, *This is going to hurt like hell.* It might actually have been quite simple if not for the pain part.

The pills the doctor gave him must be doing some good, because it’s been two weeks since he sat there like that with the scissors or the knife. He plans to tell the doctor thank you for those pills. He wants to be positive, wants the doctors and nurses to feel positive about all their hard work.

Tia and Fred are sitting in the waiting room, and Fred is focused on positive thinking and how it’s going to affect the memory test. He has a new line of attack. The last time he took the test, he thought he’d nailed it. He had it all worked out even before the test started. He had heard somewhere that a woman’s memory is superior to a man’s. Now, why would that be? Emotion, he reasoned. Women are more *emotional* than men, so they must attach *emotion* to their memories. Therefore, all he had to do was attach emotion to every answer on the memory test and he would significantly boost his performance.

He tried. Oh, how he *tried*. The nurse would say a string of numbers and ask Fred to repeat them back. Fred tried caring, deep in his gut, *caring* about 4 and 16, 12 and 22. He *opened his heart* to the numbers and afterward he felt great.

“You did terrible,” the doctor said. “Terrible.” That put Fred into a whole new kind of funk.

Let it flow, that’s his new memory strategy. It brings him a sense of calm. This is what he’s explaining to the nurse who calls up the new memory test on the computer. “The way to improve memory is to not question but just go ahead and have the confidence to remember,” he tells her. “I just have to allow myself to flow with it, knowing that if I just let go, that it’s going to work.”

“That’s good, Fred,” the nurse says, “That’s good.” She tells him she’s going to read him a list of words and she wants him to repeat

them, one by one, after her.

“Jazz,” she says.

“Jazz,” he says, enunciating.

“Bus,” she says.

“Bus,” he repeats, with a loud *b* and a loud *ssss*. It goes on like this: *lid, critic, dark, owner, guest, weather, peace, bass*, ten words in all. She then asks Fred to recall as many words as he can.

“Bass, peace, bus,” he says. He sits there, biting his lip. In the long silence you can hear the lights buzz. “Bass, peace, bus, weather,” he says. He sits a while longer, thumping his thumbs. “Interesting,” he says. “Very, very interesting.” The nurse repeats the test several times, and Fred never gets past remembering four of the ten words.

*Let it flow* is about as effective as emotional attachment was; the difference is that now he’s beginning to grasp the hopelessness.

“Oh, you did fine, Fred,” the nurse says, and she ushers him to another office, where a beautiful, tall blonde doctor in a miniskirt puts a tight white bonnet on Fred’s head, an elastic cap dotted with sensors. She squirts gel in the little holes and hooks wires into it and connects the wires to a computer, and then she tells Fred to stare at either the orchid or the bear, his choice. Fred chooses the bear, and for about ten minutes the computer reads his brain waves to determine, according to the doctor, the degree to which his “daydreaming” waves have hijacked his brain. Fred leans back in the chair and smiles slightly, fighting sleep.

“Fan-*tas*-tic, Fred!” the doctor says. She brings him to the office, where Dr. Daniel Amen, a short, athletic, happy fellow, sits waiting. She summons Tia into the room. Amen shuts the door.

“How’s your mood?” Amen asks.

“My mood?” Fred asks. It takes him minutes of explanation to get out the point that he isn’t suicidal, while Tia checks her phone, the time, her phone again, trying to keep herself calm.

Gavin was the one who first heard of Amen and the former football players who went to him for help with depression and strange symptoms. When he brought Fred here the first time, in 2009, Amen ran a standard battery of tests on him and afterward told Gavin that Fred had flunked spectacularly. Fred scored in just the first percentile on mental proficiency and less than 1 on information-processing speed.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it,” Amen told Gavin. “It’s bad.” That’s when Amen told him about football and brain injury and early-onset dementia and how Fred was not the only one.

Amen prescribed Wellbutrin for the depression and Numenda to help slow the dementia, and he gave Fred many bottles of his own special brain supplements to help him maybe get some of his brain back, and then Gavin went home to his mom and told her what he had learned. Fred was upset.

## FUJITA

One thing that was classic—and ridiculous—was when the NFL sent out that video of proper and improper hits. We watched it, and as soon as we left the room, players and coaches were blurting out, “Now I’m *really* confused!” It’s so easy for someone sitting in New York to look at a hit in superslow motion and rewind it one hundred times and say, “He should have ducked in here.” It’s not that simple.

## HINES WARD

### PITTSBURGH STEELERS RECEIVER

Man, nobody paid attention to that video. We don’t know what they want. They’re so hypocritical



sometimes. They came out with these new helmets that are supposed to stop concussions. If they care so much about our safety, why don’t they mandate that we

wear the new ones? If they’re so worried about what concussions will do to us after our careers, then guarantee our insurance for life. And if you’re going to fine me for a hit, let the money go to veteran guys to help with their medical issues. To say the league really cares? They don’t give a fuck about concussions.

## FUJITA

Everybody doubts the league’s sincerity. Quit pretending to be the flag-bearers for our health care and safety when you’re telling us in the next sentence that we need to start playing eighteen games. Obviously you don’t give a shit about our health and safety. Remember that photo of [Steelers linebacker James] Harrison making a hit on [Browns receiver Mohamed] Massaquoi? They fined him \$75,000 for that—and at the same time they were selling the photo on nfl.com for \$24.99.



## TERENCE NEWMAN

### DALLAS COWBOYS CORNERBACK

You hear about dementia, but you also hear about guys like

Earl Campbell. His head is fine, but he can’t walk. That’s no good, either. And I think the way they’re calling it now and asking players to lower their targets, you’re going to see more brutal leg injuries.

## WARD

I’d rather have a concussion than have my knee blown out and not be that fast guy I used to be.



## LOFA TATUPU

### SEAHAWKS LINEBACKER

You can only hope the helmet technology will get better. But in the end, isn’t the big hitting what fans love? The

gladiatorial nature, the huge hits. You wonder, if that goes away, will we lose viewers?

He demanded that Tia and Gavin hand over the test results, saying he didn’t want them getting into the wrong hands. Someone, he believed, was *after* him, and this might be the data they needed. Tia handed over the papers to Fred, called Amen for copies, said, “What the hell?” and made a follow-up appointment. Then she opened her laptop and searched “football” and “brain injury,” and in the space of one hour, twenty-five years’ worth of history came crashing into place.

Right about the time the NFL started fining and suspending players for violent hits, it also quietly removed from its Web site the popular DVD *Moment of Impact*, which it sold for \$14.95. The copy on the box puts you on the scrimmage line:

First you hear the breathing, then you feel the wind coming through your helmet’s ear hole. Suddenly you’re down, and you’re looking through your helmet’s ear hole. Pain? That’s for tomorrow morning.... *Moment of Impact* takes you through the rugged world of the NFL like never before. You’ll go into the huddle, up to the line, and under the pile with some of the game’s roughest customers.

You don’t have to be a brain surgeon to recognize the massive contradiction at the center of the NFL’s existence right now. Even sportscasters struggle to reconcile what football *is* versus what it’s doing to its players.

The postgame commentary following *Monday Night Football* in mid-October got at the heart of the dilemma:

**STEVE YOUNG:** If you do something that’s devastating—a big hit—you’re going to probably be exposed to being suspended.

**STUART SCOTT:** But isn’t that *football*? I mean, seriously. A devastating hit—isn’t that, hasn’t that been *football*?

**MATT MILLEN:** Listen, this bothers me, what we’re talking about right here. It’s wrong. You can’t take the competition and the toughness and all the stuff that goes into making the game great—you can’t take it out of the game.

**YOUNG:** What they’re worried about is that Daryl Stingley hit. They’re going to legislate it out.

**MILLEN:** That is stupid.

**TRENT DILFER:** This game was built—and people love it—because of the gladiatorial nature of it. Those are guys out there, and they’re sacrificing their bodies and laying it all on the line, and that’s what people enjoy. And the league is going to rob us all of that.... It’s an absolute joke. First of all, every week we’re talking about thousands of hits. Eventually the head is going to get hit. This is part of football.

**MILLEN:** It’s the game. It’s the way the game is played.

**DILFER:** It’s just gonna happen! These guys are gonna get blown up. It’s a physical game and

you can’t take it out of it.

**YOUNG:** A defenseless player, you’re gonna have to take it easy on him.

**MILLEN:** You can’t!

**YOUNG:** You’re going to have to! Or you’re going to sit out for a couple weeks.

**SCOTT:** *That’s not football!*

Fred remembers the old days a lot better than anything you can throw at him in the new ones. Growing up, he figured he’d probably become a doctor someday, because that’s what everybody said smart kids ended up being. Football was not even on his radar and might never have been, had some kids on his block in Durham, North Carolina, not invited him to the park to play when he was maybe 9 years old. It was fun. Tackling was easy—wrap your arms around a kid and ride him down. No one could get past Fred.

He kept getting better at it, played in high school where the coaches pulled him aside. “Gifted!” they said.

UCLA recruited him, gave him a football scholarship, and when he got there, he signed up for pre-med. Then he went down to the field house to get his football stuff. The coaches said, “Pre-med? No, no, no. That’s not the way it works. You’re here to *play football*.”

So he postponed the doctor idea, switched to economics, figuring this was just a delay. He was, after all, getting college for free. He got his first concussion during freshman year. “I got hit. I felt it—*zhz zhz zhz zhz*.” He holds his hands up to his head, rocks back and forth. “I felt dizziness and just... I couldn’t stand up, and I was like that for a week.”

He’s sitting alone in the apartment, a stripped-down bachelor pad if ever there was one, couch, chair, TV, giant shoes strewn this way and that in the small foyer. The lights are out, and he’s got *Monday Night Football* playing quietly on the TV, flickering the room bright and dim. Fred says he doesn’t remember the play that resulted in that first big concussion, just the feeling, the *zhz zhz zhz*, a sharp, stinging static that would soon become as familiar as the smell of coffee announcing morning. Some things just go together. The brain static went with pounding your body into other bodies that came at you like stampeding elephants.

In 1974 the Minnesota Vikings recruited him in the first round, seventeenth pick, with a \$100,000 signing bonus. He helped take his team to two Super Bowls, including XI, when, scoreless and ten minutes into the game, he broke in clean on Oakland’s Ray Guy and blocked a punt, recovered it at the Oakland three. That felt damn good. There were plenty of good. And plenty of brain static.

“My thing was tackle. Bring him down. Stop him right here. Then a couple of smaller



Fred’s wife, Tia, knows she’ll be taking care of her husband for the rest of her life.

guys, defensive backs, they come up like a bullet...head down...just boom! *Zhz zhz zhz*. More and more it was like that, trying to be so aggressive with the intent to hurt. I didn’t want to hurt anybody. But then I realized if they got a great running back and you hurt him, you might win the game, you know? So actually I started seeing that as a thing to do. To hurt them so they have to leave the game.”

He pauses, stares for a moment at the TV, says nothing about the game, has no interest in the score or who anyone is.

“One time there was this guy, like a 280-pound guy, coming to block me, coming out, and I just turned and hit him with my head. I came up under his chin, knocked him up into the sky.” He uses his fist to simulate his head, punches the air. “The guy flipped, *and he was hurt!* He wasn’t totally out, but he was laying on the ground. And after I did that to him, I made the tackle. If I ever saw that on TV, I would go, *Man...* I would be very proud that I did that.”

Fred had been with the Vikings nine years when he married Tia and started talking about returning to school—not for medicine but for law. Tia encouraged him. She wasn’t so big on the football thing, wasn’t part of that world. The day Fred graduated law school in 1987 was the happiest day of his life. He was an emerging star attorney. He worked on huge cases, Dow breast implants, tobacco litigation. They built a five-bedroom house in Minnetonka, contemporary, slick, beautiful. Fred was popular. A former Viking right there in the neighborhood! Fred coached youth football, taking Gavin’s team through a season (*continued on page 000*)

# RUNOVER/OVERSET??

with zero—zero!—scores against it, which Gavin still thinks ought to be in the record books somewhere.

His memory started failing as early as the mid-'90s. He never told Tia; he didn't understand it himself. Even when he got voted out of Zimmerman Reed, and then the next firing, and the next. Everything was just taking so long. Something that should take an hour was taking him four. Reading a brief. The simplest tasks. He blamed his deteriorating eyesight. He went to an eye doctor—the only medical help he ever sought. He got glasses, then stronger ones, and stronger ones still. He kept forgetting things. He was supposed to pick up Freddie at school. Forgot. So many thoughts just—poof! He learned to compensate. He learned to say “Nice to see you” instead of “Nice to meet you.” The latter was simply too risky. Apparently some of those people he had been saying that to were *friends*. But he had no memory of them. Blank. So it was “Nice to see you,” always, just in case.

The boys were so young they thought their dad was just acting dumb when he would forget things. They thought he was being funny, and when he did that, they would punch him in the gut.

That was important information, the gut punch. That meant: *You just messed up, Fred. You messed up bad. Come on, get it together. Act like you know what the hell is going on.*

As for Tia, she would scream. She didn't have a lot of settings, just on or off.

“You think I'm stupid!” he would say to her.

“I don't think you're stupid!” she would say. She didn't. She thought he was depressed. She thought she understood. All that excitement being in the NFL, all that glory—the transition was hard for those guys. She urged him to get medicine for his depression. She would make the appointment herself, but the day would come and he would bail. “I have to work on my cases.”

They left Minnesota on Tia's urging and headed home to her family in L.A. Fred managed to pass the California bar—remarkably he still had his intellect—and got a job with a general-practice firm but was fired after a year. He got a job with another firm and was fired again. He was hired to do legal work for Farmers Insurance, but they fired him, too. Within a year after moving to California, the family filed for bankruptcy.

It was all those years of urging Fred to go to a doctor, literally years of him promising and then not going, before she said, “I'm done,” and walked out of the marriage. She didn't know that Fred's refusal to get help wasn't really a refusal. It was more about living in a fog and all the energy of trying not to show it. It was clutching for dignity and losing it, constantly losing it, feeling it dissolve.

In spring of 2010, Tia, Fred,

Freddie, and Gavin traveled to the Independent Retired Players Summit & Conference at the South Point hotel just off the Vegas strip.

It was a full-on immersion into the world of football and dementia—a vast, confusing, seemingly infinite parallel universe. All this time Fred had been suffering, there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of other guys suffering, and scientists and lawyers and doctors and opportunists and all kinds of people getting into the brain-trauma act for all kinds of reasons.

Bennet Omalu stood up to explain the science behind his discovery, and showed slides of tau threads, and told of dazzling advances, including the ability—soon, he believed—to diagnose CTE in a living person. Therein lay the key to finding a cure, he said, and he spoke of his devotion to finding it.

Chris Nowinski spoke, representing a team of researchers from Boston. He was a former WWE wrestler who'd gotten into the work because of his own bruised brain. He passed out paperwork. *Sign up to donate your brain to our group when you die. Sign up now!*

Fred sat next to Tia, listening to the speakers. Well, Fred always looks like he's listening and following, but the truth is, he's able to zoom in to only a few key points, and Tia hoped that brain donation wasn't one of them. Wasn't that sort of jumping the gun? She thought the brain-donation guy sounded like a late-night-infomercial barker and wanted no part of him.

Eleanor Peretto got up to speak. She is the wife of retired Steelers and Chargers lineman Ralph Wenzel. Wenzel's dementia was the reason he had been institutionalized in 2007, no longer able to coordinate his body, to feed himself. Peretto explained the NFL's “88 Plan,” a bright spot of humanity. The 88 Plan was the result of a letter written to the league by Sylvia Mackey, wife of Hall of Famer John Mackey, who wore number 88 for the Colts. His existence, she wrote, had become a “deteriorating, ugly, caregiver-killing, degenerative, brain-destroying, tragic horror,” and his monthly \$2,450 pension didn't come close to covering the cost of the care he needed. The 88 Plan was created to help foot the bill for caregiving.

Since the plan's inception in 2007, 149 retired players suffering from dementia have been approved to receive benefits. One hundred forty-nine players sick enough in the head, by the NFL's own count. And those are the players who have come forward. There are about 16,000 retired players living here and living there, some—like Hall of Famer Rayfield Wright, a Cowboys tackle—too proud to admit dementia. There are players' wives waiting to apply for the plan, unwilling to do so while their husbands are still coherent enough to understand.

A representative from Congresswoman Linda Sanchez's office got up to speak about congressional oversight. A couple of class-

action attorneys spoke, and a worker's-comp attorney, and an NFL historian.

Tia drank up the information with the thirst of an exhausted mule. Could not get enough. So much to understand. Law. Dementia. Brain injury. Class action. Forms to fill out. Brain scans and vitamin cocktails and don't forget fish oil. Who's who in neurosurgery, who's fake, whom to trust.

At one point, Tia went over to Omalu and thanked him for his work. She introduced him to Fred, to Gavin and Freddie, and Omalu smiled politely and called over Garrett Webster, the son of the great Mike Webster, whose brain was the first.

“Talk to Garret,” Omalu told Gavin and Freddie. “You have much in common.” The three sons sat for a long time, straddling folding chairs. Garret talked about what it was like trying to care for his dad when things got bad. His dad pissing in the oven, his dad supergluing his teeth, his dad shooting himself with a Taser gun, his dad living out of his truck, and Gavin and Freddie nodded and nodded some more.

Other than obeying Tia and avoiding the dude who wanted to take his brain, Fred had fun at the conference. He likes people. He likes learning. Sometimes, seemingly out of nowhere, he would have moments of sparkling clarity and offer sharply defined opinions about workers'-comp cases. Then he would get distracted wondering if the South Point hotel had karaoke. Surely a place like that had karaoke. He checked his BlackBerry a lot, worried about getting back to the office; he was thinking maybe he had to be in court or file a continuance or something, and it disturbed him that he could not remember. He understood he was unable to keep up with the rigors of a law practice. He understood he was sick and needed a hiatus. “I'll take a period of time,” he said to Tia. “Ninety days, and then I can start all over as an attorney. That's if my brain is healed. I take a ninety-day break, and then I can choose to start being a lawyer again.”

So far, the youngest player to be diagnosed with CTE has been 21-year-old University of Pennsylvania defensive end Owen Thomas, who, in April 2010, hanged himself in his apartment.

His mother told reporters that her son had started playing football at age 10, had never been diagnosed with a concussion, had never shown any side effects normally associated with brain trauma.

Thomas's diagnosis shed light on a crucial fact that keeps getting lost in all the hoopla. *He never had a recorded concussion.* CTE is not about the big hit, or not only. It's the thousands of little hits, the sort that linemen constantly take and give; science shows that it's the subconcussive collisions, the small repetitive blows, that cause permanent, cumulative brain damage.

It could, for all anyone knows, begin in

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youth leagues.

Gavin can hardly watch anymore, and Freddie, who played tight end through college, is even worse. “To me it's almost like modern-day slavery,” he says. “They say it's America's sport, but like 95 percent of the players are African-American, and they're all out there beating themselves up.” He's home in the kitchen, making a tuna sandwich. He moves deliberately, like Fred, and has his father's smooth voice and gentle demeanor. “I mean, they're getting paid, but for a man who sacrifices his life, there's no number to put to that. I try to be there for my dad, get lunch with him. I do try. Having a conversation with him is probably the most difficult thing to do. You can tell he's still a brilliant dude. He'll break the information down for you, and then break it down again, and then break it down ten more times, and then start over.”

As for Fred, he doesn't blame the NFL for making him sick.

“I mean, did anybody know?” he says, slouched on the couch. “Did the owners know? Did the players know? I don't think you can get angry if no one could have anticipated that this was going to happen. The only thing is, okay, there is a problem now.” He sits forward, brings his hands up parallel, like a trial lawyer moving blocks of logic into sequence. “And you got NFL football, and you've got quarterbacks, talented people, making millions of dollars. You've got a tough economy, and in a tough economy, sports are still popular. And still generating money. And so the owners are still making... You can imagine! You're paying your employees millions and millions of dollars. What kind of money are *you* making? And so how do you then look at something that wasn't anticipated? Your employees and your former employees are having difficulty living a normal life because of your business. So it's not looking at the owners and saying you're bad people. It's saying: ‘Here's the situation—now take care of it. You can't say you can't afford it.’”

The boys know that the dad who can come out with coherent, reasoned thoughts like that may not be around much longer. They know his condition is deteriorating. Tia knows she will be taking care of Fred for the rest of her life. He has told her that the people chasing him in the middle of the night have largely been replaced by armies of insects. Thousands of fat bugs crawling all over him, and the sheets, and the walls, and Tia doesn't know if that qualifies as an improvement or deterioration.

One day, in the car on the way to a doctor's appointment, Fred asks Tia for a divorce.

“Why the hell do you want a divorce?”

“It's causing some tension,” he says.

He means with his girlfriend, an elderly woman who goes to karaoke with him on Wednesdays, when it's not crowded, but also

on Thursdays, when it is. She takes a bus to his apartment, and then he drives, which he most certainly shouldn't (Amen has suggested that Tia alert the DMV), while she tells him where to turn, and they get lost, deeply lost, in the hills of L.A., even though they go to the same place each week. Eventually they get there, and they clap for the other singers, because that is polite karaoke behavior, but really the whole point is waiting for Fred's turn, waiting for him to get up there and belt out some James Brown with his smooth, electric voice while the girlfriend dances, prances like a bopping reindeer around him. He tells her singing relieves some of the stress that comes with being an attorney; it really helps.

Tia has met the girlfriend and knows she is not a vulture; she's a companion. For Tia, it's someone else looking out for Fred.

“Well, do you want to marry her?” Tia asks Fred.

He looks at her, squints. “Why would I want to marry her?”

She laughs. “Good Lord, Fred.”

“She doesn't want me to be married to someone else, so it's causing problems.”

“You can say I'm the bitch that won't divorce you,” she says. “Blame it on me.”

“I see. And then I don't marry her because I am already married to you,” Fred says.

“Correct,” she says.

“Cool,” he says, and he repeats the strategy until he thinks he has it memorized.

“I need to go to the office,” he says. “I am not making progress on the files.”

“Do you have your keys with you?”

“Keys to what?”

“The office.”

“For what?”

“You said you want to go to the office. Do you have your keys?”

“No. You say we're going to the office?”

“You just said you wanted to.”

“To do what now?”

“Fred! Stop! You're making me nuts!”

“I'm making you nuts. I'm sorry.”

He sits quietly awhile, watches the cars whiz along the 405.

“Tia, now, about my brain,” he says, finally. “I don't want to give it away.”

“Your brain? Is that what you're sitting here thinking about?”

“Well, I don't want to give it away to anybody.” “That's for after you die, Fred,” she says.

“Like I'm an organ donor on my driver's license. It's to *help* other people.”

“The truth may be different from what people think,” he says. “You don't know. A person still exists when the body stops working.”

“Their spirit—”

“How long does that spirit sit there feeling the body, thinking ‘What's going on around here?’” he says.

“Spirits don't have feelings, Fred.”

“I don't want to be surprised. Like, ‘Oh, God, I wasn't supposed to feel this! Oooh, owwww!’”

“You watch too many movies. You think your ghost is going to be, ‘What the hell, they took my brain?’”

“No one gets to tell what happens. You don't get to say to the guy that buries you, ‘Do you know what really happens down here?’ You've lost all communication at that point, Tia.”

“Okay, Fred. Okay.” She understands. She understands that for most people there's living and then there's dying, but for Fred the whole gig has become more like being slowly buried alive.

“You can try, but there's no one who can *hear* you down there,” he says.

She has nothing left on this one, jabs at the radio.

“Hello, it's me down here, ow, ow, ouch—”

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