

Teach Us

A S H O R T S H O R T S T O R Y

by Robert Garner McBrearty



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SHOW US SOME THINGS, we ask our new teacher. We sit on the floor in a circle, looking at him as he stands, surrounded by us.

We are young, though not children. He is older, but not old, though a look crosses his face as if he is tired, as if he has seen things he wishes he had not seen.

He doesn't really want to teach us. His eyes slide to the metal door as if he's measuring the steps, calculating how quickly he can escape.

I don't know that I really have anything to show you, he says.

But we heard that you were good. You won tournaments.

To tell the truth, he says, that was mostly a myth. I had a good day now and then. Once or twice I was lucky. But that was a long time ago.

Why have you come here, then?

For the money, he says, though it's not much. But I suppose I can't expect better at this point.

Still, we say, you're here. Show us something. Show us the one-finger push.

The one-finger push, he says, yes, well, it would probably work on most of you. You don't look so tough, but what about him? The big fellow?

The big fellow grins and rises to his feet. His biceps bulge from his T-shirt. Below his gray shorts, his huge calf muscles twitch. He played linebacker in college. He has the shifty eyes of one accustomed to being attacked from several directions at once. He grins. Sure, push me.

The teacher sighs. He is not large. There's a bit too much pot to his belly. You are very strong, he says. I don't know if this will work on you.

Come on, the big fellow, the linebacker, says.

The teacher touches his index finger to the center of the linebacker's chest. The linebacker grins, but the lines around his eyes tighten.

The teacher gives a small, almost imperceptible push with his finger. The linebacker goes nowhere. If anything, his feet seem to sink deeper into the floor. Hah! he snorts. He swells up with blood and muscle. He looks like he could charge and drive the teacher into the wall, shatter his spine and the back of his head. It looks hopeless for the teacher. We feel bad for him, but we are angry, too. Why did he come here when we are already in such despair? What does he know of our troubles? He may feel trapped like us, but at the end of the day he will be free to leave.

The teacher frowns. You're even bigger than I thought, he says.

Come on, the linebacker says, take another shot.

The teacher frowns. He shrugs. He pushes again, and the linebacker steps back.

The teacher's shoulders sink pleurably as if he's just been massaged. Step in here again, he says to the linebacker.

The linebacker steps back in, and again the teacher springs him back with a little push of his finger. The big fellow stops grinning; he grimaces, his face turns red. Time and again the teacher lightly pushes and makes him step back.

Sweat pours down the linebacker's face. The veins beat in his temples. The cords stand out on his thick neck. He sinks into a ballplayer's stance, one fist apelike on the ground, the other arm across his massive thigh. His calf muscles throb. He crouches on his toes, ready to burst through the line and sack the quarterback. The teacher makes a small sound in his throat, it might be a chuckle, and he touches the side of the linebacker's shoulder and thrusts him to the floor.

The linebacker bounces up grinning. He tries to pull grass from his teeth, though there is no grass in this windowless room. The linebacker's eyes travel into the past, into packed, cheering stadiums. He travels into bright chilly afternoons, his jersey stained with blood, his breath in puffs of fog between the bars of his face guard. Travels into bright, chilly afternoons, the scent of smoke and dying autumn in the air.

Hah! he snaps, this guy's great!

But already the teacher's shoulders are drawing in, and the light fades from his eyes. He shrugs.

Can you teach us that?

No.

Why not?

I don't know how to teach it. I could line you up and demonstrate it again and again, and we would get nowhere. I could have you practice it repeatedly, and it would not work. You all seem a little slow to me. I'm not complaining. If I were you, I would go to another teacher, if possible. There are young people who know how to explain it. It seems mostly a matter of luck to me. Sometimes I'm lucky. I could be humiliated a minute from now. You could push me right over.

Could we try? we ask.

He sighs. All right, then, if you must.

One by one we charge him. Sometimes he stands there like an oak, letting us push on him until we fall exhausted to the floor. Other times he turns his waist like a matador, and we go stumbling past him. Finally we all wade in on him at once, and he spins about, his arms moving like great windmills, and he whirls us into the corners and walls.

Teach us, teach us please, we cry eagerly. How do you do it?

Luck, he whispers almost with hatred. I don't know. He stares fiercely at us. Let me be.

We sink back down on the floor in our circle, lost in our despair. The linebacker's eyes glaze over. He is running off the field while the cheerleaders jump on the sidelines. He glimpses the red of their panties as their skirts flip up on their magnificent legs. They cheer: Big fellow! Big fellow! Big fellow! as they wave their pom-poms. The linebacker sits with us now, both knees all zippered with stitches.

I'll be here once a week, the teacher says. That's all I can do.

We look up at him. Our eyes widen. You'll teach us?

I'll be here.

You'll show us the one-finger push?

I'll be here, he says.

We look at each other. Something loosens in our chests. The linebacker slaps his palms on his great thighs. Whoo-hoo! he chortles. Here we go!

The teacher turns. Next week, he calls over his shoulder. He leaves us there as the guard lets him out. We sit, shoulders bumping together, a clock ticking in the silence. **N**