

THE PANTHEON AT PLAY

companion to The Pantheon at Leisure

The Hungry Gods Universe

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A NOTE

These are the games the gods played together.

Alone, at the solitary games, the Turning had been their handicap: no one of them could take a single stroke without routing it first through the silent others. At the team games the same trait turned into its opposite. Minds that already thought as one made one body in many shirts — a side that could not be beaten, because it could not, in any sense the games meant, be played. A team is separate people, reaching and missing and reaching again. They had stopped being separate some time ago.

So they won everything and contested nothing, and each game gave up, in the losing of it, a different thing — the gap, the lie, the labour, the small graded matter of joy. What was left to watch, every time, was the humans; and the one among the gods who had never been quite like the rest.

She is in every one of these, somewhere at the edge, having a nice time.

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I • Total Football

We had seen everything the game could do, or believed we had, and we bought our tickets on that understanding. We knew the long ball and the low cross and the save that should not have been reached. We had given our Saturdays to it for the sake of the moment when it might go wrong, because that moment, when it comes, is the whole reason we go. We did not know, walking in, that we were about to watch a match with that moment taken out of it.

Eleven of them took the field. We will call them a team, because there were eleven and they wore one colour, though by the end not one of us would have used the word.

It began ordinarily and stopped being ordinary inside a minute.

None of them called for the ball. That was the first thing the older ones among us marked, because you spend a life at these grounds learning the sound of a match, and a match is loud with men shouting for one another — *man on, time, away* — and this was silent. They did not call because they did not need telling. They did not look up before they played, because there was nothing to look up and find. The ball went where no one stood, and then one of them was standing there, having set off before the pass that had not yet been struck.

We have a word for it, those of us who follow the history. Total football, they named it once, long ago — the dream of a side so fluid that any man could take any other's place, the whole team moving as one body. We had watched the great sides chase that dream. We understood, that afternoon, that we had only ever seen the chasing. This was the thing itself. The thing itself was not a dream we wanted back.

There was a fast one. His passes should not have been possible — struck at a pace that loses a teammate, threaded into gaps a half-second before the gap was there — and the trouble was that they were never wrong, never overhit, never a yard beyond the run, because the run and the pass were one thought in two bodies. A pass like that is meant to be a gamble. His arrived like a timetable.

There was one who never seemed to decide. A few of us knew the type — the player who holds the ball the extra beat, weighing it. He weighed nothing. He played at once, freely, without the pause, and it ought to have been a joy and was instead the part that troubled us most, because the pause is the place a man is most himself, and he had been relieved of it.

The keeper had already saved it. We do not know how else to put it. The shot was struck and the keeper was holding the ball, and the two did not seem to happen in an order.

And one of them — we pieced this together slowly, and not all of us agree even now — one of them was also the referee. And the linesman. And, some swore, the steward who had torn our tickets at the turnstile, and the voice on the tannoy, and a quiet man two rows down who had been in his seat when we arrived. When the half-time score came over the tannoy it was read in his voice, and it was wrong, and it was also *yes*.

They did not celebrate the goals.

This unsettled us more than the goals did. A goal is a surprise even to the side that scores it; that is why grown men fall into one another's arms. These had seen every goal before it was scored, and you cannot embrace what you already knew. So the ball went in, and they turned and walked back, and the number climbed, and somewhere in the second half we stopped cheering, all of us, without arranging it between us.

Because it was not a contest. It was a demonstration, and we had not come for a demonstration. We had come for the near-thing, the half-chance, the heart in the mouth — for the chance that it might go wrong — and on that pitch nothing could go wrong, nothing had ever

been able to go wrong, and a game with no wrong left in it is not a hard game or an easy one. It is not a game.

A team, we had always known without needing to say it, is a set of people who do not quite know one another, reaching and missing and reaching again. We sat and counted the eleven and could not make them eleven. We made one. We have argued since about much of that afternoon. No one has argued about that.

It was the other lot that brought us back.

They were a human side, the eleven being beaten, and at some point — behind by a score we had given up tracking — we found we were watching them instead. They called for the ball, loudly, the old noise. They got things wrong. They mistimed their runs and arrived late and blamed each other and forgave it a minute later. They were separate, every one of them, eleven minds that kept surprising each other; and watching them lose, we saw that they were the match. The gods were only the weather it was being played under.

And then, late on, the gods began to lose. Not the score — the score was past losing. They began to lose track of each other.

We did not follow it while it happened. We saw only that the passing changed: a ball rolled into space and arrived before anyone, and ran out untouched, because no one had been sure enough to be there. One of them, near the end, called out. Called for the ball. A god, asking aloud where another had got to. It was the strangest sound of that strange afternoon, and one of the few human sounds their side made all day; and we have had years to think about it, and we think they were trying. Trying to not-know. Trying to be surprised by one another. Trying to make, out of one mind, the eleven separate minds a team has to be.

They could not.

Except for the small one.

There was a small one among them. The small one did not move like the rest. It ran where the play was not, lost the ball, chased what could not be caught, got things plainly wrong — and the others, this is

the part we still cannot get past, the others had to watch it. They could not run its next move ahead of time. When the small one set off they did not know where, and so when they played the ball to it they played blind, into a space, on nothing but trust that the space would be filled.

We saw it happen. A ball played not from knowledge but from the want of it — the only blind pass of the entire afternoon, made by a side that saw everything, to the one among them it could not see.

The small one was the only footballer on that field in their colour. The rest worked the game. The small one played it.

At the very end they gathered round the small one, all of them, and the small one had the ball at its feet and a run to make that none of them had reckoned in advance; and for a moment we watched eleven who were one hold a single breath together, waiting — actually waiting — to learn what would happen next.

We had come to be surprised. We had been refused it for ninety minutes, and here it was at last, the wanting of it, on their side of the halfway line and not on ours.

The small one ran. We held our breath with them. Not one of us, afterward, could say who scored it, or the final tally, or whether the whistle had even gone. We talked the whole way home about the breath.

II · Misdirection

Beneath the collisions, football is a game of lies.

Every play is an argument for something untrue. The back dives into the line with no ball; the quarterback hides it on his hip and turns away; the safety shows blitz and drops, shows deep and creeps up. For one half-second — the half-second the whole sport is built around — the other side believes a thing that is not so, and acts on the belief, and is beaten by the distance between what they did and what was real. Take that half-second away and there is no football left. There is only large men running into one another over the ownership of grass.

The gods took the half-second away. They could not help it.

The All-Seeing stood at safety and read the play before the ball was snapped — the true play, beneath the fake, beneath the disguise, beneath the count meant to draw him across the line early. He said it aloud, every down: draw; the screen is the decoy; the tight end releases late. He was never wrong, and because he was never wrong, the lie at the centre of every play died unbelieved, and the offence ran its beautiful deceptions into a defence that had already heard the truth of them. He had killed misdirection as frost kills overnight — not violently, only completely. The art of the fake needs someone who can be made to look the wrong way. He could not be made to look anywhere but at what was so.

The Conscience-Keeper lined up across from a man whose task was to move him, his own task being to deliver, at the snap, a blow measured to stop that man — and he could not do it. Not the deception, this time; the collision. The play was a licence to run, at full speed and full weight, into another body for the purpose of arresting it, and he could not take the licence up. At the snap, when the line fired off into

its permitted violence, he came up out of his stance and stood, upright and useless and unwilling, the one man on the field who would not strike the man in front of him. They ran through the space where his block should have been. He let them. It was the third day he had stood like that.

The Chaos-Weaver hated the playbook on sight. A game in which every motion is scripted in advance, diagrammed, rehearsed, and called in from the sideline was the contrary of everything he was, so he did the one rebellious thing the sport allows: he audibled. At the line he killed the call, changed the play, improvised — and his linemen had already shifted, because they were him, and the receivers had already broken their routes to meet the thing he had not yet decided to do. You cannot audible to people who are inside the decision before you make it. The single sanctioned improvisation in the most scripted game on earth was dead in his hands, his own team never once surprised by him.

The Hand had run the entire playbook before the coordinator reached the second word of the call. It caused no trouble here; football has a clock, and a clock suited him for once, there being something he could be finished ahead of.

The Seeker coached by the chart. Go for it — the chart says go. Punt — the chart says punt. Every fourth down arrived with its percentage attached and he obeyed the percentage, until the down the chart did not cover: the situation with no precedent, the call that was a call and not a lookup. There he stood over the ball while the play clock fell — five, three, one — hunting a source that did not come, until the flag came instead. Delay of game. The penalty, in that league, for being unable to act without a citation.

The Allfather played all twenty-two positions and threw the flag on himself and called the game from the booth and waved a foam hand in the upper deck, all at once, every Sunday of the season. Asked the score, the Allfather said *yes*; and somewhere a referee signalled it, and the signal was also *yes*.

With the lie gone, the games stopped being games.

The gods beat the human teams as water beats a low field — without effort, without contest, without anything happening that could be called a play in the old sense. The humans came out with their schemes and disguises, their hard counts and their play-action and the long-rehearsed trickery of a century of the sport, and all of it broke against a defence that already knew, and slid off an offence that never troubled to disguise, having no one to disguise from. The score climbed. No one on the gods' side was fooled, and no one on the gods' side fooled anyone, and so no one on the gods' side was playing football. They were executing geometry on a field that happened to be marked for a game.

It was the humans, again, who were playing. The humans bit on the fakes. They guessed wrong, and guessed right, and lived in the half-second of belief that is the actual sport.

Only the Child could be fooled.

The Child bit on the play-action — every time, the whole body committing to the fake, chasing the back who did not have the ball, believing. The Child was the only one on that side who could be made to look the wrong way; which made the Child the only one for whom the lie still worked; which made the Child the only one playing. When the fake caught the Child, the gods watched a mind on their own side believe, for half a second, a thing that was not true, and could not look away from it.

At the end they took the field against no one.

They came out in formation, the ball spotted, the line set, and across the line of scrimmage there was no defence — because the only defence worth lining up against would be one that could run, at them, a play they had not already read: one mind, somewhere, able to point them the wrong way and make it hold for the half-second the game is made of. That mind was not on the field. It had not come yet. They felt it as a defence feels a snap count it cannot place — near, and not here.

So they held the formation. The ball sat on its spot. They stayed down in their stances, twenty-two that were one, waiting across the

II · Misdirection

empty line for the team that had not arrived — for the one opponent who might, at last, make them look the wrong way, and be believed.

III · The Rule of Three

Volleyball has a rule the other games do not. You may not score alone. The ball may not be returned by the hand that received it; it must pass through at least one other before it crosses the net. It is the only one of the games that legislates a team into being — that makes interdependence not a virtue but a requirement, written into the laws and enforced by the officials: thou shalt involve another.

The gods kept the rule perfectly.

The bump, the set, the spike — received, lifted, struck — moved among them in the prescribed three, never two, the letter of the law observed to the inch. And it was hollow, because the three who touched the ball were one mind in three bodies, and the rule that requires another had been met by a god passing to himself. The law said: you cannot do this alone. The gods could not do anything but alone, there being, among them, no one who was not also the others. They obeyed the rule and voided it in the same motion. Bump, set, spike — and no one had been involved who was not already inside the same thought.

The net helped the illusion. You never touch the opponent in this game; you act on them only through the ball, across a barrier, at a distance — which suited minds that had only ever touched anyone through a thing passed between. For one rotation it looked, from the stands, like the truest team on the floor: three touches, every time, flawless, democratic, each taking each position in turn.

It was the emptiest. They had met the requirement of others without, at any point, having any.

IV · Curling

There is a labour in curling the other games do not have. The stone, once thrown, cannot be touched by the hand that threw it. It runs down the ice on its own, slowing, curling, and its fate is mostly settled and not entirely — and into that not entirely the team pours its only sweat. Two of them run ahead of the stone with brooms and scrub the ice in its path, frantic, shouting, reading the throw as it travels, coaxing an extra metre from it or holding the line it wants to leave. The sweep is the one loud thing in a quiet game. It is the work of people who do not know where the stone will stop.

The gods knew where the stone would stop.

The All-Seeing threw, and watched the rock go, and could have told you the foot and the inch of its resting place before it had travelled its own length — and the line of every rock to come, his and the others', and the score of the end, and the end after that. He skipped from a position of total knowledge of the house. He called no shots, because the calling of a shot is the sharing of a guess, and he had no guesses. He had the result. He stood in the house and watched arithmetic arrive.

And so no one swept. The brooms were there, held, clean, and the stones ran down the sheet to the exact places they had been seen to go, and the two who should have been scrubbing ahead of each rock in a sweat walked beside it instead, with nothing to do, because there was no extra metre to coax and no errant line to hold. The loudest moment in the game did not occur. The sheet, which on any other night rings with *hurry* — *hard* — *whoa* — *clean*, stayed silent, and the silence was the sound of people who already knew.

The Chaos-Weaver discovered the takeout and wanted nothing else. Why place a stone when you can remove one? He peeled the guards,

smashed the rocks from the house, cleared the sheet end after end with the violence the game just barely permits — and the trouble was not that it failed but that it worked, flawlessly, into a blank: an end with no stones left standing scores nothing for anyone. He reduced the most patient game on ice to a clean swept emptiness, again and again, and could not see that he had vandalised it, a rink wiped bare being, to him, indistinguishable from a thing achieved.

The Conscience-Keeper met the one demand curling makes that he could not meet. The game has no referee; it polices itself; and chief among its courtesies is that a beaten team concedes — shakes hands, does not make the winner play out a settled end. He was beaten, often and visibly, the All-Seeing's reading having long since closed the game. But to concede is to judge that the game is lost, and he could not form the judgement with the precision it required, and so he did not extend the hand and did not play on, but stood at the hog line holding the imprecision while the others waited. It was the third day. The handshake had not come.

The Seeker played the percentage shot and cited the percentage, and curled, by the official tally, a flawless ratio — until the end that offered no standard play, the lie of stones the book had never charted, where the shot was a thing to be invented and not looked up. There he stood over the hack with the broom for a target and could not throw into the uncited, and ran the clock down, and gave the end away rather than guess.

The Allfather threw all eight stones and swept both sides and skipped both houses and cut the ice as the icemaker before the match and sat afterward drinking from every glass in the club. Asked the score, the Allfather said yes, and the scoreboard, somewhere, was changed to agree.

Only the Child swept.

The Child swept the wrong stone, and swept when told whoa, and stopped when the stone most needed help, and threw one clean through the house and hogged the next short of the line. And the Child swept hard — down on the broom, scrubbing, frantic, certain the scrubbing

mattered, because the Child did not know where the stone would stop and so believed, every time, that the work might still change it. The only honest sweat on the ice was the Child's. The gods walked beside their rocks in silence; and somewhere down the sheet a small one scrubbed for dear life over a stone whose ending no one had told it, in the dark, in hope, as if the work might still change where it stopped.

V · Showmanship

The Crystal Light National Aerobic Championship scored, among its categories, a thing the other sports had only ever assumed: joy. Not stamina, not synchrony, not the difficulty of the routine — those too — but showmanship, the visible projection of delight, marked out of ten by a panel of judges in tracksuits. To win, you had to do the grapevine and the high kick and the relentless eight-count, and you had to appear, for ninety unbroken seconds under the banners, to be having the finest time of your life. The smile was not incidental to the sport. The smile was the sport.

The gods could produce the smile.

The All-Seeing saw precisely what the judges wished to see — the exact width of the grin, the angle of the lifted chin, the half-second the eyes should find the camera — and produced it to specification, frame by frame, flawless and dead. He performed joy to the letter, completely, and not one watt of it reached him.

The Chaos-Weaver had the energy the routine demanded and despised the routine that demanded it — ninety seconds scripted to the count, no step his own, the grin mandatory and unbreakable even for him. He held the smile because the smile was scored, and behind it strained the one mind in creation least suited to standing inside a choreography beaming on command, forbidden the single thing he was for.

The Conscience-Keeper could not manufacture the face. To beam is to report a thing felt within, and he could not certify the report — could not establish, to the standard he required, that the joy the face would claim was in fact present — and so he stood in the back row with a plain and unbeaming expression, the only true face on the floor,

and the judges, scoring showmanship, marked him down for it. His honesty cost him points. He took the deduction rather than counterfeit the feeling.

The Hand had finished the routine, mounted the podium, and banked the sponsor's cheque before the music began; but the music had to play, and the ninety seconds had to be watched, and so even he stood and performed them, a thing already done made to happen in real time for the judges' sake.

The Allfather was all eight of the troupe and the panel scoring them and the host in the sequined blazer reading out the marks and the voice that said the drink's name between rounds, all at once. Asked his score, the Allfather said *yes*, out of ten, and the panel raised cards that agreed.

And then there was the Companion.

The Companion had not trained. She was not, in the way the others were, competing; she had come along, as she came along to all of it, and somewhere in the warm-up she had started doing the steps at the back because the song was bright and the room was happy and she liked it. She got the arms wrong. She was a half-beat behind the count the whole way through. And she was smiling — actually smiling, the real thing, the thing the entire championship had been built to find and reward, blooming on the one face in the building that meant it.

The judges could not see it.

Not because they were fools. Because the sport had no instrument for it. Showmanship measures the performance of joy — the projection, the sell, the grin thrown to the back row — and the Companion was not performing joy; she was only feeling it, quietly, a half-beat late, with her arms wrong, and a thing merely felt does not read from the judges' table. Beside her stood eight flawless counterfeits, beaming to specification, selling a delight they did not contain, and the panel raised perfect tens for the eight and marked the one real thing on the floor near the bottom of the card. It was too small to score. It did not face the right way. It had not been put there to be seen.

The gods swept the podium — eight perfect scores, the trophy lifted by a hand that had lifted it before the music started. The Companion finished last and did not look at the board, because she had not, at any point, been looking at the board. When the floor cleared she was still over by the exit, humming the bright stupid song and doing the grapevine by herself, one way and then the other, because she had liked it — having, as she had on the first tee and the mountain and beside the lake and everywhere the gods had ever gone to play, a nice time.

VI • The Box Score

There is a number in baseball the gods could not produce. A hitter who fails seven times in ten is not a journeyman; he is among the finest who ever lived. Failure is not the price of the game. It is the medium of it — the substance greatness is carved from, the thing a career is mostly made of. The gods did not fail. This turned out to be a disqualification.

They could play, in the sense of executing. The trouble was that executing is not the game.

The All-Seeing knew the pitch before it left the hand — the grip, the seam, the break, the location, the sequence the catcher had not yet called. He hit everything. He hit it clean and he hit it safe and it meant nothing, because the number that means something is the one with failure in it. A thousand is not a great average. It is the absence of a game. The seeing that could never become meaning could not, here either, become a hit that mattered. He stood at the plate with the answer to every pitch and nothing the answer was worth.

The Seeker found, at last, his element. Every situation in baseball arrives pre-sourced — the book on when to bunt, the matchup history, the platoon split, the count that dictates the pitch. He could cite without end, and the game thanked him for it. He kept the card. He was made official scorer and notated each event in the old shorthand, the 6-4-3, the backwards K, the silent geometry of the recorded game. He failed only once, and always at the same place: the ball that is neither plainly a hit nor plainly an error, where the rules hand the scorer not a precedent but a judgement — his alone, uncited, the one ruling the book cannot make for him. He held the pencil over the card. He did not mark it. It is, in the record of that season, the only at-bat left blank.

The Hand turned the double play before the ball was hit, and caught the fly that had not been struck. By his nature the game was already over — except that baseball does not end when one side is finished. It ends when the form is complete, when the twenty-seventh out is recorded; and the twenty-seventh out cannot be hurried, because it requires the other side to fail, in its own time, at the plate. There is no clock to run out. There is only the form, completing. The Hand, who had never in his existence waited for anything, sat through the bottom of the ninth and could do nothing but let the innings arrive. Baseball was the second thing that taught him to wait.

The Chaos-Weaver swung for the one honest thing the game offered him, which was distance. He hit it out — four hundred and fifty feet, the hardest-struck ball the park had on record — and then met the cruelty the game keeps for its most violent act: that having hit it, he had to trot. The home run is the only explosion in sport that ends in a slow ceremonial walk. The form takes the velocity and makes it processional. He rounded the bases at the pace the game required, the fastest mind in creation reduced to a dignified amble, and hated it, and did it, because the bases do not care how quickly you can move.

The Allfather pitched and caught and played all nine positions and sat in the bleachers with a paper bag of peanuts and called the game on the radio in the long flat voice of summer, in every park at once, all season. Asked the score, the Allfather said yes. The radio, somewhere, agreed.

And the Child failed all day.

The Child swung at the pitch in the dirt and the pitch at the eyes. The Child ran on the caught ball and held on the dropped one, slid where there was no play, got things wrong in every direction a thing can be got wrong. The Child struck out, and came back to the bench, and went out and struck out again, and was — this is the part the gods could not follow — glad to. The Child failed seven times in ten, and then eight, and then nine, and was, by the only measure the game honours, the only hitter among them. The gods batted a thousand and were category errors. The Child batted a hundred and was a ballplayer.

They watched the Child fail with the attention you give a thing you have lost the ability to do.

When the game ended — and it did end, the form completing in its own time, the twenty-seventh out arriving like weather — there was a thing baseball left behind that the other games had not. There was a record. The card the Seeker kept, the line score, the permanent account: the game, the moment it was over, became a thing that would be remembered. It is the most thoroughly kept of all the games; it turns at once into archive.

The gods knew something about being a record. They were the between-time. They knew that something came after them, and that what came after would hold them as the scorebook held the afternoon — a line, an account, a thing referred to once the players are off the field. They sat in the last of the light while the card was filled in, and did not hurry it.

In the book, when it was closed, the at-bats the years would keep were not the perfect ones. A thousand is not a story. The line they would tell, afterward, was the Child's: the one hit in ten, the failure all around it, the small impossible fact of someone who could lose, and stay, and come back up to the plate. The gods could not do it. They kept the record of the one who could.