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## Chalk Lines on the Field [Short Story]

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## Chalk Lines on the Field

Kathy Fowler

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A while ago this guy who was on Davis High School football team with me said I wouldn't talk so much about how great Coach was if he threw me around like he'd done to a lot of guys. I figured the guy was exaggerating. I thought the kid just wanted to make Coach look bad because he'd given me the MVP two years in a row. There were a lot of reasons I didn't want to believe the story, but the biggest reason was that as long as Coach and I were on the football field, I could do no wrong, and that felt good. I wanted Coach to be great. I didn't get the point until the day he substituted for my English class.

I ran into English late that day, and I was happy to see Coach instead of Ms. Lewis standing up there at her podium. I was so happy I didn't even care that the only seat that was left was one of the shitty ones left over from the 60's. Even some of the girls had trouble getting comfortable in those reject desks, so I was going to have to wedge all six feet of myself into that puny piece of shit. I had just pushed my butt into the seat and was trying to arrange my legs so that they weren't bumping the top of my desk when Coach did the kind of thing that makes me like him.

"Hey, Daley," he said. "Sit up here," and he pointed to this long table at the front of the class by the lectern where our English teacher usually put the worksheet buffet. No one was ever allowed to sit there.

One of the linebackers, who had gotten the seat in the back that we all thought was the best, groaned when I spread my notebooks out across the whole table and still had room to cross my arms and prop my head up on my hands.

Everything was looking great. I had the whole class's envy, and like any other last minute substitute, Coach was going to pop a DVD in the player or pass out a worksheet we could blow off.

Wanting him to give us something easy to do didn't mean I was a slack-ass. But after a month of depressing Holocaust stories, I hoped we'd do something else for a change. "I know you probably didn't expect me to be in here," Coach said. "But Ms. Lewis needed the hour off and football isn't the only thing I do."

Up until he said that, I'd forgotten Ms. Lewis was known for badmouthing the coaches in the PE department. She told



everyone who'd listen that coaches and Health teachers didn't work hard and that they probably could never do the job that the English teachers had to do. I had noticed Coach and Ms. Lewis walking together in the hall. It looked like he was into Ms. Lewis, and putting two and two together, I guessed he had something to prove to her.

Then Coach dropped the bomb. "Okay, everyone, get out your copies of *Night*," he said.

He was going to make us read the Elie Wiesel memoir we'd started earlier that week. I pulled the paperback from my pants pocket. I thought maybe Ms. Lewis had a point about Phy Ed teachers and wasn't sure I wanted to hear what Coach had to say. He couldn't know as much about *Night* as our teacher did—all I'd ever heard Coach teach was Health, common sense stuff—and well, I didn't want to listen to him bullshit about something that was hard for me to take in the first place. I thought the story was creepy and hard to believe, and that Coach better know all there was to know if he was going to try to explain it. "Page twenty-seven," he said. "I want you to follow along as I read."

Coach didn't even have to open his mouth and things didn't seem right. Everything about him was larger and louder than Ms. Lewis, too big for our quiet, serious English class. He didn't seem so out of place on the football field, but in here he was taking up a lot of space. His bushy black hair stuck up from his head, almost touching the ceiling. As always, he had on his bright white and blue team jacket with the brown bear mascot on the back and Davis High School in blue block letters on the front. He must have had Phy Ed earlier that day because he even had on those red polyester shorts all the PE teachers wear. He looked like some proud American in red, white, and blue.

"Follow along while I read," he said.

Usually Ms. Lewis made us read to ourselves, but if he was going to make it easy on us, I hoped I could block him out. I settled back in my seat and leaned my head against a bulletin board, half-closing my eyes and pretending like I was reading along.

Coach faced the class, his back to me because my table was up by the wall. He began reading and as he paced the bear on his jacket was like a cartoon head floating back and forth. Watching that bear and the Coach's all-American colors, I started spacing out.

At first the reading wasn't bad—he didn't stumble over words or speak too quietly or anything—and I was in the zone, following the bouncing bear. But Coach was just warming up.

As he read about a woman losing her mind on the train to Auschwitz, he got so much volume going that his voice was ping-pong off the walls. He stomped on the floor tiles, his sneakers making a sound like a basketball slapping the court.

He glanced back at me and his big, black eyebrows shot up, the same way he did when I completed a pass or ran in for a touchdown. The whole class was sitting up straight in their seats, and I wasn't the only one with my mouth hanging open. But Coach thought he was doing great and didn't notice us.

He read as if he were trying to rally us at halftime, not like Ms. Lewis, who read *Night* in a voice that showed she had some respect. Coach seemed to want to get us excited. *Night* wasn't that kind of story and I started to get mad that he didn't know that.

He read on and the woman was screaming and the officers were hitting her and the sound of Coach's voice and the thud of his shoes whumped against my eardrum like the room was going to start shaking.

"God," I mumbled.

All at once, Coach's reading, his marching up and down, and the slap of his feet stopped. And there was silence. I swallowed hard.

He turned, looking stunned, and walked over to my table.

I was sitting down, so I was like Jack and the Beanstalk with the giant standing over me. I hadn't meant to say anything. The word had just slipped out. "Sorry," I said.

He scratched his head and shifted his weight from foot to foot. He was so caught up in his show for us that I might as well have hit him over the head. He didn't know what to do.

"Okay," he said, but he didn't face the class when he started reading again. He stood by the podium and put his elbow up where our teacher put her papers. That way, he was at an angle and could see me and the rest of the class at the same time.

I tried to keep my mouth shut while Coach kept going.

His reading wasn't as crazy at first. But after he'd finished a page or so, the ranting started all over again.

He was speeding up now, zigging and zagging around the rows, his voice booming, and everyone was crumpling up like paper when he got close to them. Staring at the book in his hands, he was pacing back and forth. Without pausing, he read how babies burned, how an SS Officer knocked down Wiesel's father on all fours, how Wiesel couldn't help his father get up. Coach was yelling, "Work is liberty" like he was shouting plays to us on the field.



The shouting and the story together made me feel like I was being punched in the stomach over and over again. His voice was rising up and up, louder and louder, filling my head with sharp pains and the babies were crying and the officers were shouting and the people were dying and dying and the blood and the burns and the gunshots and boom! Coach slammed his hand down by my notebook.

"Fuck, man," I said and jumped out of my seat so fast a ghost might as well have touched my shoulder.

Coach's face lit up about fifty shades of red. He opened and closed his mouth like he couldn't get any words out and then stepped towards me. With his hand shaking, he grabbed my jacket sleeve, and dragged me out the door, across the hall, and into the men's bathroom.

The room stank, urinals full, toilet paper everywhere, and on the wall by the door, someone had written "Fuck!" in black capital letters. Coach faced me, his blue and red-veined eyes a few inches from me, his breath raspy and wheezy.

Finally, he whispered loud, "What the hell are you doing," spattering me with warm spit. "How dare you say fuck to me." The fuck so sharp and quick that I leaned away from him, my head hitting the tile.

He looked me up and down like he didn't know who I was. "You need to learn some respect. I'll hang you by your balls from a tree if I ever hear anything like that from you again." His growled, the sound even worse than the reading had been. "I'll follow you home, break into your house, and choke you until you bleed."

Plenty of guys have tried to talk shit to me. I wasn't scared of the words. I wasn't scared of how Coach's huge hands had ahold of my shirt either. I'm a big guy and could have yanked myself loose easy, but there was something dead wrong about the whole situation. I shivered, cold creeping through me.

"And if you think I want a smart ass motherfucker like you on my team . . ." The veins in his eyes were too red.

As I shivered there against the dirty wall, it seemed that the kind of shit that happened in the Holocaust books started small. Like Coach hauling me into a bathroom to kick my ass where no one could see or hear what he was doing.

With his thick fingers, he cinched my collar so that it cut into my neck and shoved me aside. "Get out of here," he said.

I stumbled into the hall just as the bell was ringing for class to get out. No one who came out of the English classroom would look at me.

For the rest of the day, all through my other classes, I

imagined Coach's eyes and the rumble of his voice in his throat—Coach in a Nazi uniform, screaming and kicking me over on all fours. I had Night in the deep front pocket of my jeans, and I kept thumbing the edge of the pages, flicking the corners, thinking about Coach in the bathroom.

In my last class, the clock hands inched toward two o'clock. By that time, my whole picture of Coach as a Nazi was confusing the hell out of me. Every time I saw him kicking me, I also saw him at the front of the cafeteria, telling the whole school that I was "most valuable." When you put an SS cap on the person who's handing you the award, the trophy doesn't look so good.

When the bell rang, I went to the locker room with the other guys and put on practice gear, planning to show Coach he hadn't fazed me. No matter what he'd said, I was still at practice. Everyone left me alone like they knew I wasn't supposed to be there. Like they felt sorry for me but couldn't come up with anything to say. I waited a while until they cleared the locker room, staring at the water dripping from the showerheads.

I wasn't the kind of player who didn't face a challenge head on. I psyched myself up like I did before every game, taking deep breaths, focusing on the plays. I walked out of the locker room, crossed the parking lot, and headed for the football field.

The grass was Chem-Lawn green, with fresh white chalk marking the yard lines. Coach stood in front and blew the whistle to signal the team's push-ups.

I walked right up to where he was leading the exercises, walked close beside him so that I brushed his arm as I went by. I turned and I looked him right in the eye. I glared at him the same way I glared at every quarterback when I hunched over the back of our team center, waiting for the ball to snap.

He looked away from me and kept blowing the signal for push-ups. He was always serious and focused at practice, so if I hadn't known better, I would have thought nothing had changed.

See, I could forgive him for what he'd done with Night. Maybe he didn't know that kind of stuff deserved peace and quiet and being about as serious as you can be. To me, he was, and had always been, the guy who spent every minute with us to make us the best team in the league. In all the time I'd known him, I'd never seen him get so mad. I wanted to forgive him.

At the time, I didn't know why I'd come to practice. I thought that I was there just to show the coach he didn't scare me. Later, when I thought about it, I guess I went thinking I'd give Coach a chance to back down. The coach had gone overboard, and I'd have apologized if he'd have listened.



But, while I was at practice, I wasn't so sure what I was doing there, and I was still pissed I'd been thrown around. So, I kept my game face as I took my place with the others. And as I did my push-ups, I watched Coach and didn't flinch. I waited for him to look at me. And when he did, I stared.

After practice was over, going on without a hitch, I got my shower, dressed and walked out. I was kind of proud of myself--somehow I'd thought I settled things. As I turned down the hallway that led to the outside door, there Coach was, waiting for me by his office. "Get over here," he said, leading me in. I followed him and sunk down on the fake leather couch.

I was low down on the old couch and Coach rose up behind his desk, like a judge on a bench. The desk was covered from edge to edge with scraps of paper and pencils. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at a poster of the circulatory system that hung on the wall above his desk. He kept looking at all the turning and twisting blood and guts on the poster when he finally spoke. "No one will believe you if you tell them what happened today."

I didn't answer. I didn't care. I didn't plan on telling anybody anyway. The principal wouldn't believe my story over his. And both of them would be mad at me for cussing in class before they'd be mad at Coach. None of the other guys wanted to lose Coach and risk not going to the finals. I didn't want to rat on him--I just wanted him to know he'd done something wrong. Not just know. I wanted him to say it, say something to me.

"And you know that I didn't have to let you stay at practice," he continued. He was as calm as he always was at practice, focused like the talk was part a routine. "If you want to keep coming to practice, it's simple. Lose the attitude."

"So, you can do whatever you want and I have to take it?" I said.

"That's the way it works."

Coach's face didn't just look calm when he said that. He was sure of himself. Sure he was right. So sure that I didn't want to be on his football team.

When I spoke, I knew that everything I thought I cared about--the team, the coach, the MVP--didn't matter. "I think you should lose your attitude," I said.

Coach sat up fast, his chair squeaking with his weight. He looked stunned, and I imagined he didn't expect this. No one risked being thrown off his winning team if they could help it. I'd done it twice in one day.

I shrugged and got up.

Coach shoved back his chair so hard that it banged into the back wall. He slammed his hands down on the table--all the papers slipped and slid, rustling in the quiet as he stared at me. Every pleased expression I'd ever seen of his disappeared in that moment. I imagined him leaping across the table and knocking me down.

"Are you going to kick me and throw me like the guy in the book?" I said.

Coach stayed where he was, his forehead wrinkled. "What book?"

I took Night out of my pocket and held it up for him to see. "This book," I said, showing him the cover, "This one," and tossed it on his desk.

He stared at the paperback like he'd never seen it before, still looking confused as hell.

"You don't have to beat me up anymore," I said. "I quit." Coach's mouth dropped open a little when I said that, but he stopped looking confused and the growl from the bathroom returned to his voice. "Then get out of here," he said.

He was sitting in the chair staring at Night as I walked out the door.

I don't know if he ever realized what I was talking about. I don't know how to explain why everything made me so mad. If I think about it, I know there's a big difference between what happened in Night and a coach beating up kids. I guess.

In my gut, it felt the same.

Kathy Fowler has lived all over the US and travelled the globe. Still, her fiction is often set in the high school and middle school classrooms where she taught for years. She is currently a lecturer in the English Department at Old Dominion University.