

JACK MARDIN, 12 YEARS OLD

by Robert Peirce

"New York, 14, 12—hike!"

Jack Mardin took two steps toward his opponent, cut sharply to the right, and was running upfield in the clear. His long legs, well developed for his age, easily outdistanced the opposition.

"Here, Benny, here!" he shouted frantically over his right shoulder.

The worn, leather football arced uncertainly from Benny Butler's fingertips, wobbled in midflight, and fell harmlessly short.

"Gol-l-l-y, Benny," Jack scolded after he had joined his four teammates in the huddle. "I was wide open. Can't ya ever throw a ball right?"

Benny Butler spit at the ground and wiped his face with his torn, sweaty T-shirt. "Man, they were all over me."

"Ya gotta run outta the pocket," Jack insisted. "Let me run the next play."

The players agreed. They knew he was the best quarterback Livingston's seventh grade class had produced since Reed Mardin.

"Terry, Jimmy--ya guys take six steps an' crisscross. Benny, ya lay back an' block."

"New York, 12, 18, 14. . ." Jack Mardin eyed the defender expertly. Larry Pierce, the pudgy redhead covering Terry, was slow. Terry could beat him easily.

"Hike—!" The ball flip-flopped back into Jack's hands. He gripped the smooth leather tightly with his right hand, and stepped back quickly, as he has seen his brother do many times. Ronnie Duncan was rushing in. Jack waited to the last possible moment, and then, copying his brother's well-known style, cut to the left suddenly, leaving Ronnie Duncan sprawled on the sunburned-yellow grass. Terry had left Larry Pierce safely behind him and was streaking for Mr. Lipkins' backyard.

Jack set his right foot and let the ball roll smoothly from his fingertips. The projectile cut through the air perfectly and settled neatly in Terry's outstretched arms.

"Nice pass, Jack," Terry bubbled as he ran back with the ball.

Jack Mardin grinned with satisfaction, and wiped his sweaty right hand on the back pocket of his faded bluejeans. Reed would have been proud.

"Jackie," a high-pitched, hoarse voice belonging to a stout, middle-aged woman two doors down interrupted the game. "Jackie, comere and wash up. Your brother will be home in an hour."

"OK, Mom," Jack answered, with a trace of excitement in his voice. "I gotta go, guys. Reed's comin' home today."

"Hey, you 'spose he'd throw us some passes this afternoon?" Benny asked.

Jack flushed with pride. "Maybe," he allowed. "We'll see what we got planned."

"When'd he get back from Vietnam?" Larry Pierce inquired, still puffing from his futile chase after Terry.

"Bout a month ago. He was wounded over there," Jack had become very good at telling this story. It still gave him a twinge of pride. "He caught a shrap-in-el," he repeated the word as he had heard it from his parents, "in the arm."

"Wow!" the boys breathed their admiration together.

"Did he get hurt bad?" Benny asked seriously.

"Naw, Dad said he'd be all right. He was in the hospital for awhile. Listen, I'll ask him if he'll throw us some this afternoon."

"Yeah," Larry agreed. "Maybe we can get Billy Jackson to play to even out the sides."

"I ain't seen him in a week," Benny observed.

Jack frowned. "He's nothing but a bookworm. He can't play football worth a shit."

"Seems like all he ever does is read," Terry offered.

"Who cares? We'll just play one short," Jack decided. "That's better than havin' Billy screw things up."

The other boys followed Jack's lead the way they always did. "Yeah," Benny added, "Billy'd probably just get in the way."

Nearly cooked roast pork smells greeted Jack Mardin at the sliding screen door that led into the Mardin gameroom. As he entered he heard his Mom rummaging through the silverware drawer in the adjoining diningroom. Tonight Jack knew there would be the "good" silverware, china plates with pictures of purple flowers on them, and dainty glasses you had to refill many times during the meal. Tonight was special. Reed was coming home.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hurry up, Jackie," Mrs. Mardin turned to greet her youngest son as he walked into the diningroom. She must have been very pretty once. Now two childbirths had rounded out her figure and her

once very dark hair was greying. 'I don't ever want my children to get grey hair,' she had once joked. True to her word, both sons had very blond hair and deep blue eyes. "Reed and Daddy will be home anytime now."

"OK," Jack turned to go. Then, as an afterthought, "What time are we goin' to eat tonight?"

"Oh, about six."

"Good. Reed can throw the guys some passes before dinner."

The cheerful, calm smile that made Jack feel warm inside left his Mother's face, and the expression that replaced it made him uncomfortably chilly.

"Whatsa matter?"

She turned quickly to the silverware drawer, and scooped out some utensils. "Nothing . . . except we'll all have a lot to talk about." But her voice sounded strange and it left Jack troubled.

By the time a cold, brisk shower had washed off a morning's football, and Jack had dried himself, the feeling of dread had left him. He dressed quickly, feeling much like he did at kickoff time against Gainsburgh Junior High last fall, or when they had announced the first string all-state quarterback two years ago—Reed Mardin. Jack put his dirty undershorts in the clothes hamper by Reed's stereo. He settled back on his carelessly made bed across the room from Reed's neatly-made bed with its tightly drawn bedspread. He tried leafing through an autobiography of Y. A. Tittle, which he had borrowed from the school library, but he couldn't concentrate. Restlessly, he wandered over to his mahogany desk, and picked up the heavy, brown scrapbook that was lying on top.

In it were newspaper accounts of Reed Mardin's high school football career. Jack knew almost every article by heart, but he still liked to gaze at the black, bold headlines, which proclaimed such miracles as, "Reed Sets Brimington School Record; Sophomore Whiz Throws, Runs In 5 TD's,;" "Reed Connects For 3 TD's; Aces Still Undefeated," and so on right to the last article telling readers that Brimington's star had decided to enlist in the Marines rather than go to college.

That was two years ago, and now Reed was coming home. Discharged because of a 'shrap-in-el' wound. Then, like a lurking panther, Jack's mother's face sprung out at him again, and the way she looked a half hour ago turned his blood icy. Jack had seen that expression only once before, when his grandfather had died.

(“Nothing, except we’ll all have a lot to talk about.”)

There had been a phone call the night before, and his parents had whispered in the kitchen following it. Somewhere in the back of Jack’s mind, a voice was telling him something. But he turned on Reed’s stereo to drown it out.

“Do you want somebody to love. . .” the stereo pounded.

A car pulled up in the driveway. The backdoor opened. Voices. “Oh, Reed, oh God, it’s good to have you back.”

Jack sprang from his bed, slid around the corner and ran into the livingroom.

“Reed- . . .” Jack stopped cold, frozen in disbelief, his jaws working but no words coming out.

There stood Reed Mardin, all-state quarterback, the pride of Brimington High. Six-feet-two, blond hair, blue eyes, 195 pounds, a little less since the Marines.

The room swayed, and Jack could do nothing to keep it still. Inside, his heart was bursting, his stomach retching. He struggled to close his mouth, to act cheerful, and not to look at the empty right sleeve of Reed’s dress uniform, which was folded in the middle and pinned neatly at the shoulder.

“Hi, Jackie!” Reed said, and he smiled uncertainly, leaving his only arm wrapped around his Mother. “How have you been?”

Jack’s mother, like the face of doom, stared at her youngest son. His father studied the picture on the livingroom wall.

Then Jack knew he couldn’t stand there. He wanted to, but he couldn’t.

Tears blinded his vision, and more came as fast as he could wipe the others away. He didn’t remember turning and running to his room. Or pounding his fist on the mahogany desk until his knuckles bled and blood ran on his bedspread. There was only anger, and dismay, and finally sorrow. And he couldn’t stop crying.

Far away, the creaking of bedsprings across the room filtered through Jack’s aching emotions.

“They should have told you,” Reed Mardin began, and he got uneasily to his feet and walked over to the scrap book still lying open on the mahogany desk. He fingered a page absentmindedly, and then turned to his brother.

“They should have told you, but I only called them last night.”

Jack tried to speak, but he couldn’t yet. His throat felt swollen, and it burned so that no words would come out.

"I didn't want to worry them. When the doctors told me I would lose this," he tugged on his empty right sleeve, "I told them to let me tell the folks. I didn't want to worry them."

There was an uneasy silence. The tears had drained from Jack's eyes, and he regarded his brother selfconsciously, keeping his eyes off the empty sleeve. Someone he didn't remember had once told him it wasn't polite to stare at crippled people. So Jack couldn't bring his eyes to face his brother directly.

"I got this at Hue," Reed said, and the words came too quickly. He bent down to examine the autobiography of Y. A. Tittle, which had been tossed on the floor.

"Wha . . . what's a shrap-in-el?" Jack sputtered, trying to keep his voice steady.

"It's a piece of exploding shell. They come whistling at you and you hit the dirt and then if you're lucky you can get up again. One hit the officers headquarters. I was lucky."

Then Jack had an idea. "Reed, can't you learn to throw a football left handed?"

The answer came with such agitation, forced by such anger, that Jack actually felt frightened.

"You don't understand, Jackie. And I don't know if I can tell you so that you will." Reed sat down on the bed next to his brother. Jack saw him relax again.

"Jackie, you remember the offers I got from those colleges?"

His brother nodded.

"Why do you think I never accepted any of them? Why do you think I went to the Marines instead?"

Why? Jack realized suddenly that he had never considered why. He had accepted the fact that his brother was going to the Marines, much as he had accepted the 90-yard pass his brother had thrown to Toby Jackson his senior year. It was just something that happened. Why? Jack felt uneasy and he didn't know why.

"When I graduated I felt. . . You remember Dad telling us how to drive the boat at Lake Tammany? You remember, he said always pick a point on the shoreline where you're heading. He said that way you would never go off course. Remember?"

Vaguely Jack did. He had been very young at the time.

"When I graduated I felt like I didn't have a point on the shoreline. I felt like my life had no direction. I panicked, and joined the Marines."

Jack tried very hard to understand what his brother was saying. It sounded important, though he couldn't tell himself why.

Reed laughed a very dry laugh and lit a cigarette. Jack didn't remember that his brother smoked. "Well, I can't say that I know now where I'm going. But I know there is more to be gained than the fans' applause. There is more to be lost than fifteen yards for offensive clipping."

Jack was feeling very uneasy now, and that little voice in the back of his brain was again trying to tell him something. His brother's intense stare was making the voice louder.

"You remember Toby Jackson? He joined the Marines three months after I did. You probably know his brother, Billy."

Jack knew Billy, the bookworm, and he remembered Toby. Toby Jackson played end on the Brimington state championship team. Reed and Toby hung around a lot together in high school.

"Toby died over there last week. His outfit was ambushed. Only four made it out alive. I'm sorry they didn't tell you about me, Jackie. It was cruel. But you've got to try to understand."

Reed got up and headed toward the door. "I'm going over to see the Jacksons. Probably see you for dinner?" And he was gone.

The voice in the back of Jack's brain was throbbing now, demanding to be heard. Jack walked over to the stereo, flipped the record, and waited for the drumbeat to silence the voice. Toby Jackson, Jack remembered him. And Billy—

"I gotta girl she loves me tru-u . . dah, dah, du, dah, dah. . ." the stereo pounded.

And then the voice broke through. Jack whirled, slid around the corner, and pumped full speed to the front door, where Reed and his folks were standing.

"Reed! Reed!"

Jack Mardin felt something he could not understand. But he knew somehow it was important, and he needed to understand. "Reed," he looked his brother in the eye, "I'm going with you."