

Jeanne Marie Laskas

Unquestionably, the most surprising sentence in this book is: "I CANNOT FIND MY MULTIPLICITY ESCALATE VOLUME WHIP!" It also seems safe to say the writer who quotes the cheerleader in that dire situation once would have been this book's most surprising contributor. Jeanne Marie Laskas (b. 1958), director of the Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh, has spent a goodly portion of her time away from academe doling out advice in *The Washington Post Magazine*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. She made her way into more serious realms on the strength of her wit, compassion, and novelist's eye for detail. The author of six books, most recently *Hidden America* (2012), Laskas has graced *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, and *The New York Times Magazine* with stories about coal miners, migrant workers, hit men, and, much to her surprise, sports. Although she confesses she "knows nothing about any sport in America," she says "sports stories, to me, are just character studies. It's almost better if you're naive, sometimes." Laskas has written memorably about concussions in the NFL, and, as you will discover in this January 2008 *GQ* feature, she took off and flew when her subject was the Cincinnati Bengals' cheerleaders, in whom she found engaging young women alive with hopes and humor and vulnerability. Readers, male and female alike, will wish they'd been there to help find the missing hair gel.

G-L-O-R-Y!

RIGHT NOW ADRIENNE MIGHT BE SICK. It isn't funny. It isn't her stomach so much as her nerves, her heart, her history. Rhonéé, one of her closest cheerleader friends, has her eyes bugged out, standing outside the stall door, "*Adrienne? Adrienne, are you okay?*"

"I'm good," Adrienne is saying. "No, I'm good. I'm good."

She vomits. This is not good. Something is seriously wrong with Adrienne. At pregame practice in the gym an hour ago, she ran off crying—twice. Ran to the bathroom and slammed her fist into the stall door to get ahold of herself, to reclaim herself, to remember who she is: a Ben-Gal. Both times she returned to the gym with a smile, got in formation, front row, left center. "C-I-N!" she roared, "C-I-N! N-A-T-II LET'S GO!"

She seemed *fine*. She seemed *Adrienne* again, five feet nine, a thoroughbred of a woman, broad shoulders, booming voice, the biceps and forearms of a sailor. She is not the drama queen of the squad, not

even close, not one of the girly-girls, with the super-yummy cleavages and the wee, wee waists and the sugary smiles. She is the iron-willed, no-nonsense, no-curls straight shooter of the squad—six-pack abs, forlorn eyes, too busy with her own too busy life to deal with a lot of crap.

"Is Adrienne okay?" shouts Shannon from the other end of the locker room. Shannon is perhaps best known for her extreme volume of sandy blond hair.

"What happened?" asks Shannon's very best friend and protégée, the demure Sarah.

"Is something wrong?" asks another, as news of Adrienne's nausea filters through the din of cheerleader chatter.

Cheerleaders are all over the place, half-naked, shrieking, sitting, squatting, kneeling in front of mirrors in the panic of an NFL Thursday night. National television! The game starts in just over an hour. This is crunch time, hair-spray time, false-eyelash time, Revlon-Orange-Flip-lipstick time. "WOULD SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP ME? I CANNOT FIND MY MULTIPPLICITY ESCALATE VOLUME WHIPP!" Some cheerleaders are in curlers the size of Budweiser cans. The locker room, reserved just for them, is hardly equipped for the machinery of glamour, and so most have brought their own full-length mirrors, power strips, extension cords, suitcases of makeup, curling irons, hose. "Try my Bouncy Spray Curl Activator. You can totally glow it on." The cheerleaders are all scream and shout, jazzed with beauty adrenaline, in thongs and hose and push-up bras, stretching, bopping, bouncing, assisting one another with hair extensions, pasting over tattoos, spraying tans, announcing newly discovered cleavage-engineering solutions—"Duct tape, girls!"—hooting and hollering in a primpest worthy of Miss Universe.

"We look so awesome."

"Oh, my God, we do!"

Perhaps fittingly, there is a big storm coming, right now a cold front dumping rain and snow on Chicago, moving swiftly east, headed exactly for Cincinnati, promising to turn a balmy sixty-eight-degree evening into instant winter in a way that no one anywhere near Paul Brown Stadium is prepared to believe. *Maybe the storm will be late? Maybe it will get... delayed?* Charlotte, the mother superior of the Bengals, is responsible for all the rules—all the line formations, all

the dances, all the praise, all the punishments, all the outfits—has to make a difficult decision: teeny-weeny skirts with white go-go boots and halter tops, or catsuits that hardly provide any better winter cover. The gals vote: catsuits. "Please! Please! Please!" They love the catsuits. There is nothing sexier than the catsuits.

"Is Adrienne okay?"

"Did you hear she is throwing up?"

"Oh, my God!"

Now, the men. The men are just super. Oh, the men think this whole thing is about them. That is so cute. That is enough to make any Bengal roll her head to one side and get teary with admiration. *That is so sweet!*

Hello, men. Meet the cheerleaders. There are a lot of them. At first they are hard to tell apart in the same way kittens playing with a ball of yarn in a basket are hard to tell apart. Every single one of them you want to pick up and stroke and pinch and poke and take home. How can you choose? And what if you did take one home? Think it through. Where would you put the cheerleader? What would you feed it? Would you have time to play with it? Play with it in the way it longs to be played with? Yeah, that is one luscious volume of girl flesh.

The cheerleader is a fantasy. Let it go.

It. The cheerleader is an it. Are you aware that you have been thinking of this person as an *it*? Does that make you a pig? Nah. Or no more so than the next person, but that's not even the point. This is about the cheerleader. She is not trying to get your attention so much as she knows she has it. God, you're easy. You are not the real reason she has been up since five working on her hair, spraying on her tan, squishing her breasts together and forcing them upward into a double-mushroom formation with the assistance of all manner of wired undergarments. Of course, you play a role in it. Of course. When you catch a glimpse. For barely a second on the TV. There on the sideline. Right after some blitz resulting in a crushing sack. She's there for you. Sharing your moment of glee. Bouncing up and down for you with her pom-poms, beckoning you to, yeah, pump-fake your way into her itty-bitty shorts.

Right. She knows you think this way, but there is more to the story: You are sorta beside the point. Oh, your weakness is pre-

This is good old-fashioned sex appeal. This is straight-up Marilyn Monroe pinup-girl shtick. Sexy-happy, happy-sexy. It's family-values sex appeal. Other than that, it has nothing to do with you.

People assume a lot. People assume cheering in the NFL is mostly about a girl trying to snag herself a big, beefy, stinkin' rich football player. That is not the case. The Ben-Gals are not even permitted to socialize with players, except at officially sanctioned appearances. This rule is strictly enforced. Zero tolerance. As for football itself, the game, the players, the stats, the formations—that stuff rarely rises to the level of actual conversation. For most of them, this whole thing has nothing to do with football.

Money? No, no, no. This is really, really, really not about money, either. People assume NFL cheerleaders are within some vague sniffing distance of the good life, but a Ben-Gal is paid seventy-five bucks per game. That is correct: seventy-five bucks for each of ten home games. The grand cash total per season does not keep most of them flush in hair spray, let alone gas money to and from practice. "We have a rule book that's like *this thick*," Charlotte will explain to any woman interested in becoming a Ben-Gal, holding her hands four inches apart. "If you can demonstrate commitment and dedication and following-the-rules, you're good to go." It is not as easy as it sounds. Practices are Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7 P.M.—sharp—at which time a Ben-Gal must be in full uniform, full hair, full makeup, a state of readiness that can take two hours to achieve. She must then step on the scale. If she is more than three pounds over the target poundage assigned to her by Charlotte, she will have to attend the after-practice "fat camp," doing crunches and running laps for a half hour after everyone else is gone, and she may not be able to cheer in that week's game. There are many other reasons a cheerleader can get benched: If she misses a single mandatory practice, she will not cheer at that week's game. If she misses four practices, she's off the squad. She is permitted just two tardies per season. Within fifteen minutes, it's a tardy, but sixteen is a miss. Two tardies equal a miss. No excuse is greater than another. Death won't get you a free pass, unless it's your own.

Given all the rules and the lack of distinct perks, it is difficult to understand why so many beautiful young women would eagerly and longingly choose any of this.

Charlotte sees it as a gift. Charlotte sees herself as a fairy godmother with a magic wand under which only a few select gals earn the privilege of the wave. "My most precious thing I can do is take a person and give them the tools that the program offers and watch them grasp it and watch them mature," she says. "Now, not everyone does that. But you take a girl like Adrienne. I mean, she was... *when!* She was kind of... alternate for a while. You know what I mean? And now to watch her mature and develop into the program—she's a real special girl. She's had a hard life. She's the only single mom we have on the squad. Oh, I don't know why I'm talking about Adrienne. I mean she's not *Pro Bowl* yet. But still."

Contrary to popular mythology, not all NFL cheerleaders are bimbos or strippers or bored pretty girls looking to get rich. The Ben-Gals offer proof. Neither a bimbo nor a stripper nor a bored pretty girl would survive the rigorous life of a Ben-Gal. The Ben-Gals all have jobs or school or both. Kat and Sarah are sales reps. Sunshine is a database administrator. Shannon works at a law firm. Tara is a cancer researcher working toward her Ph.D. Adrienne works construction, pouring cement.

They have full and complicated lives. They don't need all this nonsense. They completely crave it.

MEET THE CHEERLEADER: RHONÉE

This is my second year as a Ben-Gal. The first year, I commuted three hours from Liberty, Kentucky. That's how bad I wanted to cheer. I had never even heard of a witch leap before—where you do a leap and do splits and then switch legs? The first time I tried that, I felt like Peter Pan.

I have a bachelor's in chemistry and a bachelor's in biology. I just finished my master's in public health with an emphasis in environmental-health science. For two years, I worked on a project dealing with air quality within chemical-fume hoods. We came up with something called the smoke-particle-challenge method. I did monoclonal-antibody research for BD Transduction Laboratories. I worked for the U.S. government at the Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine. We did soil sampling, water sampling, at military bases throughout Europe. That was the very best job I ever had. When I first took my new job at PPD's global central labs, I didn't tell anybody I was a Ben-Gal.

I met my boyfriend when I was 14. He was 16 and I was 14. We took our time. We got engaged in 1998. He asked me to marry him in Paris, at the Eiffel Tower. I was like, "I'm melting!" That's been a long time ago. He's going to have to, you know, renew that. His job takes him to Chicago a lot, so I don't see him a whole lot.

I don't feel 32. I keep telling everybody you're only as old as you feel, and I don't feel 32 at all.

For me the Ben-Gals is about fulfilling a dream. Not many people out there can say they're an NFL cheerleader. I have never been so proud to wear such an ugly color of lipstick.

In Kentucky, cheerleading is big. But when a small-town girl tries out for NFL cheerleading and makes it, that's huge. I made the front page of our local newspaper. Last year I was Miss November in the Ben-Gals calendar. Everyone kept telling me they wanted a calendar. I didn't tell a lot of people I had them. Word of mouth, people asked. I ended up bringing over 350 calendars back to my hometown. This year I'm not a month, but I'm still in the calendar. You feel like a superstar. I had trouble doing the sexy look. They teach you how to do that, to look like you're mad at somebody. This year I don't look mad. Just like I'm halfway smiling. I'm wearing a Rudi Johnson youth size small jersey that they cut up and made into a bathing suit. A youth size small.

The Reindog Parade is this Saturday. There will be 500 dogs dressed like reindeer. I have to be there at one. Judging begins no later than one thirty. The parade starts at two. I'll be walking in the parade with a reindog.

Adrienne comes flying out of the stall. She is not done throwing up but refuses to continue. She will not give in to a day of senseless, stupid puking. She is: Cheerleader of the Week! Okay, that news came days ago. So it's not news news, but tonight is the night, and so you could say reality is settling in. This is almost certainly at the center of the nausea Adrienne must conquer.

There are so many things that may or may not happen tonight. The storm may or may not come. The Bengals could score very many touchdowns. The Ravens could be called for holding or do an onsidewhatever kick. All kinds of... football things could or could not happen on this electrifying NFL Thursday night. But one thing is certain: Adrienne is going to be Cheerleader of the Week. She'll get her face on the Jumbotron during the second quarter. Just her, dancing live,

beside a sign listing her name and her hometown and her hobbies—in front of 60,000 people in Paul Brown Stadium—for perhaps five or six or seven seconds.

Okay, listen. Adrienne poured the cement in Paul Brown Stadium. Way before she became a Ben-Gal. When she was just a regular person working under a hard hat in the freezing-cold wind blowing off the Ohio River. She poured the forms.

She does not feel worthy to be Cheerleader of the Week, and yet, at the same time, she does. (When in this life does she get a turn?) She is looking into the mirror, trying to get color into her cheeks. She is trying to get ahold of herself. She is a Ben-Gal! A good Ben-Gal. An obedient Ben-Gal. She stays in her target-weight zone, 144–147, higher than most because of her muscle, her height. She does not smoke. She does not chew gum. She has no visible tattoos or naughty piercings. She curls her hair when Charlotte or Mary tells her to curl it, sprays it when they say it needs to stand taller or wider, slaps on more makeup when they demand bigger glamour. She works as hard as any other Ben-Gal at becoming what the coaches call “the total-package.”

But Cheerleader of the Week? It is overwhelming.

“Come here,” Rhoné tells her. “Look in this mirror. Isn't this a great mirror? It makes you look so skinny. It's an awesome esteem booster!”

“All right,” says Adrienne.

“Oh, you look awesome,” Shannon tells Adrienne.

“You always look awesome,” Sarah tells her. “I wish I had your abs.”

“I wish I had your boobs,” Adrienne tells her.

“I wish I had your hair,” Rhoné tells Shannon.

“Everyone wishes they had Shannon's hair,” Sarah says.

“I wish I had your brains!” Shannon tells Rhoné.

“Oh, you girls are so awesome,” Adrienne says.

Cheerleader of the Week. It is not something most people in the world ever get even close to being. For that matter, most people don't get close to being a regular Ben-Gal—just thirty per year, out of a field of a couple of hundred who try out. Chief among the characteristics required to make the squad—beyond raw dance talent, a degree of physical beauty, a soldierlike level of self-discipline—is a specific consciousness. It is so obvious to those who have it and yet so elusive, if at all attainable, to others. Ask a person who does not have it why she

wants to be a Ben-Gal and she will say things like, "Because I love to cheer" or "I have cheered my whole life" or "For the camaraderie" or blah blah blah.

Now try this same question on a person who has within her the consciousness, the essence of what it is to become a Ben-Gal.

"So why do you want to be a Ben-Gal?"

She will look at you. She will look at you blankly, keeping her smile in place while her eyes tell the story: *What, are you from Transylvania or something?*

"Because it's a Ben-Gal," she will say, wondering politely and in her own generous way if you have perhaps suffered some brain injury at some point in your tragic life and if there is anything she can do to help make your world just a tiny bit brighter. Everyone, she thinks, wants to be a Ben-Gal. Pity the president of the United States, the queen of England, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, for not having the attributes necessary to become a Ben-Gal. It is difficult to accept that not everyone in this world has what it takes to become a Ben-Gal, and for those people, all she can do is pray.

That's what it takes to become a Ben-Gal. If a woman has any lesser sense of the glory, she will not make it.

Charlotte and her assistants, Mary and Traci, and the captain, Deanna, maintain and constantly feed the glorification. Each Tuesday at practice, they decide who will cheer that week and who will not. Six people per corner, four corners, twenty-four cheerleaders. Six get cut. It depends on weight, glamour-readiness, dance-preparedness, all the factors of the total-package. Each Tuesday, as nonchalantly as possible, Charlotte reveals her choices for those who will cheer and those who will not, for those who have earned a coveted spot in the front of the formation and those who must go to the rear. "Sarah, you are in the back," Deanna will say, or "Shannon, I want you up front." *Nonchalantly.* Because it's stressful enough. It's devastating enough to be left out or put in the back, even though most girls sort of know, can sense, can see the signs in Charlotte's eyes or see the way Mary's whispering to Charlotte and nodding and pointing and wondering, *Who told Sunshine she could dye her hair that dark?!*

The choosing goes on all season. Everything is about the choosing. Whose picture will make the Ben-Gals calendar? Who will be Miss January? Who will make the front cover and who will make the back?

These choices are revealed Academy Award-style at a special ceremony in September, with slide shows, at a restaurant, with families invited, and lots of hugs and lots of tears, celebration, consolation, grieving.

There is more choosing. There is the biggest honor of all: the Pro Bowl. One cheerleader per season per NFL squad is chosen to attend the Pro Bowl in Hawaii. All season long, the cheerleaders speculate about who will be chosen. Charlotte will tell no one until it is time—she is the decider. No one understands the total-package better than she, herself a Ben-Gal from 1978 to 1989, a Pro Bowler, and a coach for thirteen years.

The choosing is the bait that keeps any Ben worth her Gal reaching toward her total-package goal. And each week there comes this choice: Cheerleader of the Week.

Who among the living would not vomit?

Now, the men. The men are super-adorable. The game has not yet started, and some of the cheerleaders are glamour-ready, so they have left the locker room to sign calendars by the stadium gift shops. "Who-dey!" some of the men chant, soldiers coming to battle, stomping up stadium steps toward nachos, hot dogs, beer. "Who-dey!" The idiosyncratic growl is a Bengal original and all the more popular now that the team is actually semicompetitive. Marvin Lewis came in 2003, turned the team around, gave football back to a woefully depressed Cincinnati. From a cheerleader point of view, it's been super.

Who-dey!

The men are dressed in orange and black, some with striped faces, crazy wigs, naked bellies pouring over Bengals pajamas, furry tails hanging from their asses. Soon this platoon rounds a corner, comes upon a table behind which four cheerleaders sit: Daphne, Sunshine, Kat, Tiffany. Glimmer and shimmer kitty-cat babes signing calendars, \$10 a pop. The men say OH, MY GOD with their eyes, stop dead in their tracks.

"Who-dey!" the cheerleaders say, all sex and sweetness and growl. The men suck in air, seem to have trouble releasing it. These gals are, well, *whoa*. These gals are—fuckin' A.

The cheerleaders give a thumbs-up. "Awesome outfits, guys!"

The men look at each other, at face paint, tails, fur. *Oh, Jesus... we look like fucking idiots.*

"Who-dey!" the cheerleaders say.

The men dart away like roosters.

Outside in the parking lot, the men are more serious. Businessmen, banker types, tailgating, bonding. Somebody knew somebody and arranged for two cheerleaders, yeah, two real cheerleaders to come to the tailgate party for 200 bucks. Heh heh. *Where they at? Are they coming? Where they at?*

Holly (blond ringlets) and Stephanie (brunet innocence) arrive.

"Hi!" They have doe eyes and dewy smiles. They wear little string backpacks in which they carry pom-poms. They slip off their backpacks. They slip off their white satin Ben-Gals jackets. "Ooh, it's chilly!" Holly says, revealing her naked arms and abundant bosom. "Ooh, that storm is coming!"

"I've been looking at you girls on the Internet," one of the businessmen says.

"Dude," says his colleague. "Dude."

"I'm Holly," says Holly. "Nice to meet you. Thanks for having us."

"You want some beef-barley soup?" one says to her. "Some kielbasa?"

"We have Chips Ahoy," says another.

"I'm good," says Holly.

"We're good," says Stephanie.

The conversation is not flowing. Just what is the purpose of this meeting?

The men give up trying to talk to the cheerleaders, turn to one another, laugh, grunt. Holly and Stephanie stand there smiling. Stephanie is shy, is a first-year, is taking lessons from Holly, who is also a first-year but who has so much more experience feeling gorgeous. "Would you guys like to learn a cheer?" Holly asks them.

"Uh, yeah."

"Come on, do it with us."

"Uh, no."

"Well, will you say it if we do it?"

"All right."

Of course, it starts to rain. The men dart under a tarp. Holly and Stephanie stay out in the rain, just a sprinkle, a trickle, a tickle, drops for the cheeks.

"Let's go Bengals—ooh, aah!" the cheerleaders chant. "Let's go Bengals—ooh, aah!" They spin, throw their heads, offer ass. The men

learn the words quickly. "Let's go Bengals—ooh, aah!" The men hold up their beer cans, toast one another. Heh heh. The cheerleaders finish and wave, faking their jackets and pom-poms with them.

"Well, that was worth it," says one of the men.

MEET THE CHEERLEADERS:

SARAH AND SHANNON

Sarah: I work for Pepsi. I'm pretty much on call twenty-four-seven, so it's stressful. If somebody runs out of Mountain Dew and they're having a sale on it, they're calling me to get out there. I'm like, I know, I know.

Shannon: This apartment is two bedrooms, two baths. We met pretty much through Bath & Body Works in Lexington. We both went to the University of Kentucky.

Sarah: I called Shannon "Miss Hair." I was like, "Do you know Miss Hair?" That was my first meeting of Shannon. We've been best friends ever since then. We're so laid-back. Nothing gets us really fired up too much.

Shannon: I thought it would be awesome to be a Ben-Gal. You just put it way up here. You never really think you can get there.

Sarah: We dared each other to try out. To be an NFL cheerleader, I think every girl dreams.

Shannon: We use a great bra by Victoria's Secret. Body by Victoria Push-up Bra. We all had to get a bra that has a fixture that's real low. It's spandex and it's definitely tight, so it squishes and pulls. And then we have bronzing stuff to make it look more... You do it, like, right here in the V. It makes it look like there's a shadow, so it makes your chest look bigger.

Sarah: Being a female, you gain water weight. You can go in there and think you're so thin, and it'll weigh you five pounds over. It gets frustrating. I eat lots of asparagus.

Shannon: There's, like, seven or eight things on our grocery list. For breakfast it's egg whites and oats—dried oats.

Sarah: People think we're so weird. You have to be very disciplined. And you have to get in that mind-set, because it is hard to follow. Very, very hard to follow. Like, a guy will ask you out on a date on a Wednesday night, and you can't say, "I can't eat, because I have to weigh in tomorrow." But you can't go and not eat, either. So it is hard.

Shannon: I've been in situations with people who think, like, "Oh, you're not having fun. Or, Why won't you go out? Because I don't want to eat."

Sarah: I usually say to a guy, "Let's wait until Friday night, because I have four days to get my weight back down after that."

Shannon: You saw us in practice in the short booty shorts and, like, a sports bra or bikini top? That's so they can see your fitness level. The stomach, the legs, the butt.

Sarah: They stand right in front of you with a clipboard. I don't like it, but it's a good idea. It has to be done.

Shannon: It's about glamour, fitness, and always being ready: full hair, full makeup, giving 110 percent.

Sarah: Of course, guys look at it as some type of sex symbol. But I don't think it's a thing that guys want their girlfriend to look like, you know what I mean? It's like a costume. It's not something I think a guy would like to look at every day.

Shannon: Egg yolk is actually what carries most of the fat. I'll usually put one yolk and about six egg whites just to have some fat and not just the protein.

Sarah: This month has been good. I mean, we gained a few pounds, but that helps you start again.

Shannon: I'm not usually this color. I tanned yesterday.

Sarah: If Shannon has her hair up in a ponytail, I swear, ninety-nine out of a hundred people would bet it's fake. It looks so perfect, and it's so big and thick. I bet ninety-nine out of a hundred would think it's fake. It's that good.

Shannon: You want some water?

There's more. For Adrienne, so much more. You have to understand at least one more important beat of the backstory: This is not the first time Adrienne has been named Cheerleader of the Week. The first time, she blew it. She may be the only Ben-Gal in history to screw up so royally. It happened three weeks earlier. Charlotte had told Adrienne, "This is it! You're going to be Cheerleader of the Week!" The night before the game, Adrienne was so excited she could barely sleep. Well, she did sleep. And sleep, and sleep, and sleep.

She awakened to the sound of her phone ringing. It was Missy, calling from the parking lot, where all the other cheerleaders had already gathered. "Where are you?" Adrienne hoped this was a bad dream. But, no, it was true. She had overslept. She threw on her clothes and rushed into the stadium, arriving not exactly Ben-Gal ready and more than six minutes late.

"Tardy!"

The Cheerleader of the Week was... *tardy*? She was immediately dethroned. She would not be allowed to cheer, let alone be Cheerleader of the Week, and she would be penalized two games. Hey, late is late. Rules are rules. All the gals, including Charlotte, embraced her, grieved with her, over the tragedy that seemed for her so typical, so many almosts, so much dumb luck, so much stupid, rotten, dumb luck.

"It's my own fault," Adrienne told her teammates on that dismal day. "It's nobody's fault but my own."

For all her mother-superior-style discipline, Charlotte is a kind soul. Now here it is, just three weeks after Adrienne's disaster, and Charlotte is giving her a second chance at being Cheerleader of the Week. Here you go, Adrienne. Your sins are forgiven.

So maybe it's the generosity that is making Adrienne sick. The out-pouring of love. The second chance that in so many ways feels like the last. The thought of going out there, in front of all those screaming fans, appearing on the JumboTron in the stadium whose concrete you yourself once poured.

After serious consultation with Mary and Traci, Charlotte has an announcement. "Catsuits!" she bellows out into the locker room that by now is held in tight under a hanging cloud of aerosol. "Okay, girls, catsuits!"

"Catsuits!" the women shriek. There is nothing sexier than the catsuits.

Adrienne throws her head in the sink, runs the water at full blast, plunges. "Catsuits!" several tell her. "Catsuits!" They throw their arms around her, leap tiny leaps. "Catsuits!"

"Adrienne, honey, are you okay?"

MEET THE CHEERLEADER: ADRIENNE

My mom was killed. She was murdered by my stepdad. I had just turned 1 year old. I break down sometimes. You can't think: Why me? Things happen for a reason. You just can't think about the unknown.

This right here is a mud mat. It's just so we have a flat area to set our forms on. We poured all this today. We started back in the corner. Last pour, we did over 300 yards.

The finishers finish the concrete and make it look pretty. And the laborers, which would be us, take it and pull it close to grade. The rollers are the

ones that put all the rebar in. They are just totally rebar. Oh God, I would never want to be a rod buster.

Cement is not the same as concrete. Cement's an ingredient in concrete. Cement is the glue in concrete.

Working with all men, you realize that they really act like girls. They whine and cry. I'm not trying to be stereotypical, but they act different. I don't think of myself as a female at work. I think of myself as an employee. As a guy. Well, I don't want to be a guy. But I let them know: You're not allowed to call me names or treat me like dog crap.

With the Ben-Gals, with thirty girls in one group, you'd think it'd be a bunch of backstabbers, cliques, but it's not like that. They say I'm this role model because I have a little girl I'm raising on my own and I work construction. They say I'm an inspiration. They say that they're amazed I do all this. I went to college, a full ride in track. I chose criminal justice. Afterward, I took a test in Lexington to become a cop. I got all the way to what they call the "rule of five," when they compare you to four other applicants. I had four speeding tickets, because I commute a lot. That ruined my chances. That kinda bummed me out. I was like, Screw this.

Then I took the county exam and failed by two points. I did bad because the whole time I'm thinking how I'm gonna kill my boyfriend because he made me late. He had my car, didn't get it back to me in time. The whole time I was thinking about him.

I had a change of heart. I decided I didn't want to be a cop. I didn't want someone to have to tell my kids someday that I'd been shot.

In the beginning, when I started working construction, the guys were horrible. The first day, my boss said I was a lawsuit waiting to happen. He made me bust up a twelve-by-twelve slab of concrete alone, with a sledgehammer. Then I had to carry four-by-fours, one after another. But I stuck it out. I've been doing this eight years. My body goes through a lot.

After my mom was killed, my aunt Pam wanted me. She really wanted me. After two years, she hitched a ride to Florida in the back of a truck to get me. People were upset with my grandma for letting me go. Pam was 16 at the time. I call her my mom now. She ended up being a single mom with six kids. I think that's why I am the way I am today, because I was raised on love.

I told Pam I wanted to go on Ricki Lake and find my dad. I said I want to know who made me. She didn't want me to do that, but she talked to my aunts. I met him at a benefit. It was weird. I cried. Like, Wow. We went out together the next night, to FSN Steak House, in Dayton. I ate chicken,

and he was so mad. "I bring you to a steak house, and you order chicken?" I didn't want him to think I was money-hungry. He told me how beautiful my mom was, how much he loved her. He said he remembered the last time they made love was 1975, World Series Game 7. He followed newspaper stuff about me through high school but didn't know for sure that I was his. I don't regret anything that's ever happened. I did get the shit end of the deal with Mom dying, but that was out of my control.

I never get hit on. A lot of my friends say I'm intimidating. Women who are successful or independent, guys are too scared to talk to. Which I hate. Because I'm a person.

My one fear is failing at being a mother. I don't want her to go through the things I went through. I'm afraid she'll be a priss. Her dad spoils her, which I hate because it makes me look bad.

Being a Ben-Gal in general is just awesome.

Being Cheerleader of the Week is awesome.

Taking photos for the calendar was awesome. It's a day that's all about you. Last year I ended up being Miss October. This year I was Miss December. It's heartbreaking when you don't make a month. People say, "Why didn't you get a month?" We don't know. But when you are a month, you feel great. Awesome. Sexy. Amazing. You feel like you're somebody.

Underneath this, I have jeans and long johns. And then I have two long-sleeves on, a sweatshirt, a sweater, and one of the poly sweatshirts that, like, covers you, and my Carhartts. You get cold. Your hands and feet and face and your nose. I'll thaw out later on tonight, like, a couple hours after I'm home I'll start thawing out.

I've always wanted to be a nurse. Ever since I graduated from high school. So I'm just gonna go back and give it a shot. I'm a people person. That's my calling. I get home, and normally I pick up my daughter, and we usually do homework. I have to study. I'm taking chemistry. In a couple years, I should be a nurse. I should graduate in three years. August 3, 2010.

You're not supposed to put a lot of stickers on your hard hat, because sometimes OSHA will think that you're covering up a hole. If these get a hole, you can't use them, because something might land on your head and kill you. But I have this sticker that says HOTTIE. And DEWALT tools. The twin towers—one of the guys from the company, he was killed, so I have a sticker from him. And I have one that says BITCH GODDESS.

I spit, too, like boys. Oh yeah. Just 'cause, I don't know. Your mouth gets dry or whatever. The guys are like, "Quit spittin'. That's n... aylike." And

I'm like, I'm not a lady at work. Charlotte doesn't know I spit. Charlotte would kill me.

"Who-dey! Who-dey! Who-dey think gonna beat dem Bengals?"
"Nobody!"

It is time. The gals have pranced like a pride of lions out of the locker room and are standing in the tunnel, peering out. There are enormous Bengals walking around back here, but the gals notice only one another. They are cold. Sarah is holding on to Shannon for warmth, she always seems to disappear next to Shannon, mostly due to Shannon's hair, currently a celebration, a testament to extremes, curls streaming like Niagara Falls down her back, crashing into the bend of her bottom. "I'm so freezing!" Sarah is saying.

"Get a grip, girl!" Shannon says. "It's showtime!"

The catsuits are sleek, sleeveless, with necklines plunging deep and tight, allowing for blasts of perfectly spherical honeydew breasts. Each gal wears a thin glitter belt around her hips and a pair of white satin wrist cuffs crisscrossed with orange laces. Hair is high, broad, glued in place. Makeup is paint, pasted on thick. Tans are air-sprayed, darker in the V to accentuate the total-package. Perfect. Exactly perfect.

Of course, it might not *really* rain and ruin all their hard work. It might not. The storm is probably still over Indiana or something. It could hold off. The balmy sixty-eight degrees has gone kerplunk to fifty-two. Outside, in the stands, ponchos are starting to come out.

"I don't know about the '80s look, with all this hair," Lauren says.
 "Do you think we look like poodles?"

"I can't brush my hair after," Tiffany says. "I have to wash it."

"I have to soak it," Brooke says.

"You guys!" team captain Deanna interrupts. "Think how lucky we are to be here, and savor every moment!"

"Sexy, ladies!" Rhoné shouts. "SEXY!"

"SEXY!"

"Wooo!"

With that, they fire out of the tunnel like bullets out of the barrel of a gun. One arm up, pom-pom shaking, "Let's Get It Started" blaring, "Who-dey!" "Who-dey!" Fireworks shooting into the night sky. Any one of them could burst into tears of excitement. Some of them will. Adrienne will absolutely not. Adrienne is all game face, determination

from a twisted gut. She's on the five-yard line, next to Maja and Tiffany, all the cheerleaders lined up forming a chute, a welcome path for the football players, who come chugging out like beefy boxcars. "Who-dey! Who-dey!" The gals stand like ponies, one knee up, one arm down. Pom-poms shimmering.

They take to their corners, and the kicker kicks off, and the stadium erupts into "Welcome to the Jungle." Axl Rose crooning his timeless anthem, gals dancing stripper moves with hips, ass, roll head, whip hair. Then they just as quickly retreat into sweet pom-pom action. Sloopy. Reelgood. Hicktown. Worm. Tweety. All the dances have code names.

"We're on Pump, right?"

"We're on Worm!"

"Oh, my God!"

Four sets of cheerleaders, one set in each stadium corner, Charlotte and Mary and Traci with walkie-talkies, demanding coordination, demanding precision: "Lines, ladies, *LINES!*"

Six minutes into a scoreless first quarter, most of the hair is... flat. That was quick. That is a shame. But that's okay. At halftime they'll charge back to the locker room and drop to their knees in front of mirrors waiting like lonesome cousins. Hot rollers. Curling irons. Makeup. Spray tan. Primp! There is not much time to re-create perfection, but they'll do their best.

Six-yard line. The football players are trying to pound the ball in. *Come on, football players!* The cheerleaders hold their arms up, smile, keep their arms high, and jiggle their pom-poms, shimmer shimmer shimmer. They have turned themselves into candles burning flames of hope.

A field goal. Okay, we'll take it. Who-dey! "Jungle Boogie." Celebrate with the cheerleaders; watch them bounce like balls.

It isn't until three minutes twenty-six seconds into the third quarter that Carson Palmer completes a forty-yard flea-flicker touchdown pass to T. J. Houshmandzadeh, but that is not even the point. The sky has done it, finally opened up—sheets of rain. The gals valiantly bump and grind to "Bang the Drum All Day," the touchdown song, in the glimmering downpour. Forget hair spray, forget makeup. It is all washing off now, washing down, soaking them. Wet cheerleaders! The JumboTron appears itself to experience the orgasm. Exploding wet

cheerleaders! The cameras are all over the cheerleaders. The gals are screaming, laughing, howling, forgetting everything. Forgetting the fucking construction site, the man who murdered your mother, the store calling for more Mountain Dew, the chemical-fume hoods and the smoke-particle-challenge method, the men who don't call, and all those egg whites and protein shakes that have made this moment possible. Forget it all! This is it. This is a rain dance, a joy dance, a jet-propulsion explosion of cheerleader love, love to the crowd, love from the crowd, men in striped pajamas, wigs, tails, painted bellies washing clean, oh, those men are super, super-duper adorable. Who-dey drunk.

In the stands cheering for Adrienne is Pam, the woman who hitchhiked decades ago to Florida to scoop her up. Also, Adrienne's cousin Leslie, her aunt Nancy, her little aunt Sandy, and her regular aunt Sandy—the one who takes the picture. It is the first time they get a picture of Adrienne on the JumboIron. In the picture, Adrienne is smiling and looking up. It's just her face next to her name and her hometown and her hobbies. In that moment, she doesn't even know she is on the JumboIron. She is damp, out-of-her-mind joyful. Free.

Weeks go by, months, a year. Adrienne is looking at the picture. She keeps it in a storage box in her spare bedroom. She doesn't know what else to do with it. She thinks she looks awesome. She thinks she looks like a real girl. She thinks she looks happy. Probably she should display the picture, downstairs with her collection of tiny ceramic angels. She can't believe this is happening.

Nate Jackson

NFL teams always say they want smart players, but when one of those players writes a book that addresses the uncomfortable truths of the pro game, everybody acts like the maiden surprised. We know by now there are no maidens involved. Our education began when Dave Meggery, a former St. Louis Cardinals linebacker, spilled his amped-up memories of football's dehumanizing qualities in *Out of Their League* (1970). Peter Gent, battered and cynical but still funny, followed with *North Dallas Forty* (1973), a relentlessly tough novel based on his experiences as a Cowboys wide receiver. In the years since, Pat Toomay, another rebellious ex-Cowboy, and Tim Green, late of the Atlanta Falcons, have maintained the tradition of the player who asks why and then writes about it. The latest to emerge from the NFL with stories to share is Nate Jackson (b. 1979), whose *Slow Getting Up* was greeted by this hosanna from the *New York Times* in 2013: "it's everything you want football memoirs to be but never are: hilarious, dirty, warm, human, honest, weird." Jackson came by his experiences the hard way. Undrafted out of tiny Menlo College, he spent most of his six seasons as a tight end with the Denver Broncos, bouncing between the practice squad and the active roster, making it into only forty-one games, and catching but two touchdown passes. Football beat him up but he loved it. As the following excerpt shows, set in 2009, it was a love that ultimately led him to desperate measures, otherwise known as human growth hormone.

from

Slow Getting Up

A WEEK AFTER BEING CUT, I fly back to Denver to clean out my locker and say goodbye to my friends who work for the team. All of my teammates are gone for the off-season. I'll never see them again. Flip and the guys in the equipment room, Greek and Corey and Trae, and Rich and Crime, and everyone else. They have become my extended family. When I came to Denver, I came alone. All players do in one way or another. The Bronco organization was my lifeline. They were very good to me. I love them. I want to tell them how I feel about my time there. But I don't have the words.

All I can think about is Josh McDaniels not calling me back. I want to run into him in the parking lot. I won't need any words for that. I have a bone to break with him. But Flip tells me that I can't even here. He's in Indianapolis for the combine. Lucky Josh. Not that I