

## “Jock Semantics”

James Beach

THE eldest 12-year-old leapt off the stoop and onto the bristly lawn. He pitched his tattered Athletics baseball cap forward to block the afternoon light. “But *girl* Spartans?” he shouted, shirtless, proud of new muscles. “The Spartans did *every* damned thing *without* girls. We’re so gonna lose this season.”

On the right side of the stoop, Richie crossed blonde-fuzzed arms over his big abdomen and spit on the hedge. “Not *everything*, dumbass, or none of us would be here,” said Richie, as if he knew the history of the world.

Douglas, seated on the left, smirked freckled cheeks into milky eyes, as if he knew what drove Richie. Meanwhile Ian scratched his jock beneath the poly-blend fabric of authentic Heat basketball shorts, checking that Douglas was watching. “Go out for a long one.”

“The real Spartans used females for *something*,” Douglas maintained, trudging out over the wide suburban lawn, obedient, to catch. “And our girls *will* look hot,” smirking less but blinking more, “in uniforms. We’ll know the best ass right off.”

Ian hurled the football in a near-perfect spiral. The trajectory put it way over head; with a fake-sounding bonk, it went bouncing in the street. “Plastic ball!” he said with a scowl.

“Snug-tight,” agreed Richie as the ball wobbled to the gutter and out of sight. “But hey, I’m not into *butt*.”

Ian located his muscle shirt, abandoned near where Richie kept spitting, and thrust smooth hands through its bottom.

“Follow those thighs up on into,” continued Douglas with a whistle. “I’m telling you, they will look hot in football pants.”

“They will look dumb,” insisted Ian, frustrated. He set his wrists so the shirt could be un-bunched and fitted over his head. He readjusted his cap, Athletics insignia straight, then flipped it backward. “Or, no; *we’re* the ones who’ll look dumb: The Spartans, with girls, what a *joke*—!, females in shoulder-pads and mouth-guards and nut-cups!—or, slot-cups!—; and no end to the dishonor of the jock.”

“Slot-plates,” corrected Richie, a hint in his thick voice of maybe coming round to Ian’s view.

“Girl... jocks!” fumed Ian. He wiped at sweat escaping his shaggy hair. “Do you *hear* what you’re saying?”

As a pair, Richie and Douglas gave the impression of being loaded up with too many ideas.

“They’ll decorate our jockstraps—*made for males!*—with puny pink hearts and yellow daisy chains,” Ian mock-minced. “Then we’ll need new rules, ’cause the girls keep getting hurt. Our red and

gold jerseys will become totally gay, like lavender, and *beige*. Our trusty helmets? throw 'em away; we'll be pulling at *flags*!, not tackling. It's unofficially over, the *game* we signed up for to play."

"Got a pop' to suck on, hey?" suggested Richie, lippy.

With a provoking nudge, Ian got Douglas out of the doorway and pulled open the screen door. "They join up, you know, because they see us standing tall together, free of them for once, and they want to *wreck* it. Trust me. I have a sister. She *does it* all the time."

Ian flipped the lights on in the mud room. It was hot enough outside to share the popsicles his mom hid below those frost-cakey vegetables; she horded them, then showed them off like she was a magician, pulling them out of thin air every weekend if it was sunny. As he bent into the freezer, Ian felt a thing tickling his ankle. He stood up fast, cracked his crown on the lip.

"Mom says no 'sicles," said the girl.

Ian let out an exasperated wheeze. His little sister was in an old tee-shirt of his, "Arrowhead" in faded kid-lettering, the one from boys' day camp several summers ago; like folds of a robe, it hung in clumps on her. It was the hem that was tickling. "Did Mom say you could wear that shirt?" he demanded, gripping tight the paper-coated popsicles in his fist.

"Yes."

"Well, sister, she gave me *these*," the boy lied, slamming shut the freezer door. "Would you get outside? I can't watch you in *here*."

Timidly, the girl followed her older brother out the door. With disgust, Ian saw her put on a pair of his azure swim goggles. She tottered off the stoop and into the grass. In a daze of wonder, she sniffed at and trailed after pollen, dandelion seeds, butterflies, monarchs and invisible stuff in her head or on the goggles.

“That’s some weird sister you got,” said Douglas, peeling the paper from his treat.

“You can keep watching her, too,” Ian said. “I’m no babysitter.” He passed a popsicle to Richie, who shoved the thing in his mouth, to the wood.

As if to divert the vibe of a fight, Douglas asked Ian, “How much you been lifting?”

“A little,” the eldest boy admitted, “Got a set of ’bells for me birthday. Throw ’em every little while.”

“Sand, synth, or what?”

“No, no, iron!”

“The real body-builder,” said Douglas.

A moving truck moving in Ian’s periphery caught his eye and he turned to see head-on the swerve of the vehicle as its driver avoided running over his sister. With his palms he gripped at his cap, watching his oblivious four-year-old sister lift the plastic football out of the gutter. “*We’re* the Spartans!” cried Ian. “Get your *own* team, call it the Placenta Slots, or somesuch, aw, can’t you see it?”

Douglas snortled, cheeks again obscuring cloudy eyes, and barely licked at the vanilla popsicle dribbling down and onto his knuckles. “We’re not *really* Spartans. You think Chicago Cubs are *really* cubs?”

“Yeah, the Florida Marlins, they’re actual fish?”  
chimed in Richie.

Ian said, coolly, “Tell you what. You can get your pops’ some other place.” He yanked the screen door hard enough to gouge Douglas in the back. “And, since words mean nothing to you *girls*, why are we still yapping?”

To shrug off the scrape, Douglas fussed with the long, wayward laces in his cleats; having finished his treat, Richie eyed the other’s hungrily. Neither made a move from the stoop. For various reasons, the little footballer gave them a pointed, toothy smile.