

## LONE STAR, A MONOLOGUE

*“Courage is a form of constancy. It is himself the coward abandons first. After that all other betrayals come easily.”*

*All the Pretty Horses*  
Cormac McCarthy

### I

The black and white photograph was more tattered and bruised than the day Jim Gannon claimed it and tucked it safely in his wallet more than a decade ago. By chance and design, he had visited the picture many times during the years that followed; the handsome features and earnest look inherent in the young man’s face almost always produced a memory of time well spent, but often they unearthed a more complicated and conflicting set of emotions. All were particular reminders of the impact a father can have upon a son.

Jim Gannon headed the pickup north; towards the small ranch he had bought several years back. The January day produced a clear sky and a cool, crisp morning. Three dogs, a chocolate-colored lab named Ben and two lemon-spotted pointers called Josh and Jake, sat patiently in the back of the truck, their bodies eager and their eyes trained on the passing countryside. The drive from his home in town to the main gate of the ranch took about thirty minutes, with the small headquarters, barn and corral located another two miles off the road. There, two stray cats and several horses awaited him. Today he planned to saddle the Buckskin gelding he called Zip, and check the condition of the fence lines and water gaps following last night’s storm. He rode almost every day now

and liked being a passenger on Zip best of all; the horse had worked on ranches his whole life and together, they had begun to form a fine partnership.

He pulled the truck up to the barn area and stopped. Ben and the two pointers were standing now, their tails upright and wagging feverishly with anticipation. The horses stuck their heads over the top rail of the corral, greeting him with their gentle whinnies. It was easy to see they felt good today.

“Alright boys, let’s go,” he said.

With that command, the dogs leaped out of the truck and began to run and sniff and do all the things they were born and bred to do. He let them range into the distance and whistled them back before they got too far away; as always, he admired their stamina and desire. The voices of quail came from the vicinity of the water tank and windmill nearby, the sound of *bob-White*, as clear as a bell.

It required most of the morning and part of the afternoon to complete his rounds and the few minor repairs caused by the heavy rain and wind that struck suddenly last night. Afterward, he stopped to eat a packed lunch on the top of a hill that overlooked a large pasture; there were plenty of pecans, oaks, and mesquites scattered about the land, and the grass was hearty and tall although it took on a whitish-brown color this time of the year. The dogs and horse settled down to rest as he leaned his back against one of the large oaks. Dad would have liked this place, he thought, closing his eyes. Sleep and its companions approached along with some unconscious memories; those where stardust, bats and demons fly unsupervised out of our inner boxes:

*Sunset and evening star  
And one clear call for me!  
O Captain my Captain!*

*Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers  
I'm nobody!  
Who are you?*

For the first ten years of his life, Jim Gannon's father was the athletic director and head football coach of the Waco Panthers, a traditional power from the central part of Texas. It was during these years that young Jim began to learn about sports, and the larger lessons that could be drawn from them.

Until the day he died, most colleagues called William Gannon coach; so too did the boys – all men now, and most with families of their own - that played for him and wore the black and gold jerseys of the Panthers. To them he played the role of father figure, counselor, and teacher all rolled into one. But to young Jim, he was simply dad.

William Gannon loved the game of football. He believed it possessed the drama and truth of a great novel and was, like life, a place where virtue was rewarded. After all, the game helped pull him from the clutches of a tiny sawmill town in the piney woods of East Texas, where he was the oldest of seven children and his father worked as a pulpwood foreman. In doing so, it provided the opportunity for a college education, and a chance in life.

“We each had our different parts of the chicken,” he said, describing how the family pull together to make ends meet some months, especially during the Depression years.

“Mine was the wing.”

As a player and later as a teacher, William Gannon welcomed the challenges demanded by competition, and brought leadership, industry, and knowledge to his

performances. His joy and passion for the sport were evident and never waned; besides, he was good at it.

He (The Coach) taught his players the score of the game was important, but trained them to believe how they played it mattered more; he believed that if they performed as well as they could, the outcome would take care of itself, and win or lose, they would always leave the field ahead.

He (The Man) taught them that certain values like respect, balance, honesty and integrity were paramount, and endured for a lifetime, regardless of the fashion of the day. He believed the truth worked and was easier to remember. It may have been a relatively small circle, but William Gannon helped to shape young lives, including his son's.

Were these idealistic approaches to competitive sport practical? Or was his unwillingness to cut corners, to win at any costs a higher ideal? Either way, it did not take away from the fact where teaching high school football was concerned this was a tough-minded and spirited man; one that worked as hard as possible at his craft, and who sought any edge imaginable, within the rules of the game.

William Gannon's adult journey began in 1936 at a small junior college in Beaumont, Texas, where he quickly found his stride as a student-athlete, being elected captain and most valuable player of the team in his final year. A year later, with an athletic scholarship in hand, he landed quietly on the campus of Georgia Tech University in Atlanta.

When he first arrived at Tech for fall practice, William Gannon found his name listed seventh on the team's depth chart, but when the season opener against the Tulane Green Wave rolled around in mid-September - he had become the starting center and linebacker.

By the time he graduated, he had helped lead the Rambling Wreck to consecutive Southeast Conference titles.

Some individual honors accompanied those championship seasons, but William Gannon strongly believed in the concept of team glory, and of making the personal sacrifices necessary to achieve that goal. He understood team victory honored everyone, and that loyalty and unity were essential ingredients to any successful organization. Still, he was twice named to the all-conference team and in his senior season, served as the Yellow Jacket captain.

Jim's mother, Katherine, told her son his father always had a skinned nose during the fall of those years.

"I did not see him much during the season," she said, later. "He was so intent on doing well, and I believe part of what drove him so hard was the fear of ever retuning to the life he had known near that sawmill; of being so poor and of having that type of uncertainty knock on his door again.

"Of course," she said, "no one had much money in those days, and hardly anyone had a car, but your father did not even have a pot to put it in. Heck, he had never even celebrated his birthday before I met him, and always hitchhiked back to Texas for Christmas and his summer job in the oil field."

She told her son that although his father came from a different set of circumstances, he never complained or made excuses for that fact. She told him that his father had perhaps the best disposition of anyone she had ever known, yet he was not a sentimental man, not outwardly anyway.

“He never held my hand walking down the street, or even in the picture show,” she said.

On the surface, William Gannon’s skinned nose may have resulted from playing in leather helmets that had no face mask attached to them, but part of the truth may also rest with the inside of the man rather than the outside; that when push came to shove, he was willing to risk it all. That was how he played, and it was the manner in which he conducted himself.

The relationship between a father and son travels many highways; at a minimum it can be described as a one-sided, complicated and enduring one. It begs, among many others, the question: Do we really know anyone as completely as we think?

Jim stirred beneath the oak. He opened his eyes; everyone and everything remained quiet. He closed them, dreaming again.

## II

Jim Gannon had seen a film recently and in it, an intriguing conversation takes place between a young woman and three male friends from New York. All the characters had chosen to spend their two-week vacation working cattle on a ranch in New Mexico. During lunch one day, the subject turned to baseball.

“Do you hate baseball?” one of the men asked.

“No, I like baseball,” the woman said, “I just never understood how you guys spend so much time discussing it. I’ve been to games, but I don’t memorize who played third base for Pittsburgh in 1960.”

“Don Hoak,” the men said, in unison.

“What do you and your friends talk about?” another man asked.

“Real life,” the woman said. “Relationships – are they working or not working.”

“You’re right I suppose,” said one of the men, “I guess it is childish, but when I was about eighteen and my dad and I could not communicate about anything at all, we could still talk about baseball. Now that was real.”

So too it was with his own father; a man that introduced his son to athletics early in life. Not only did Jim Gannon learn to throw, catch, hit, and shoot balls of various shapes and sizes, he loved doing it. For almost any son or daughter, the experience of playing catch or shooting baskets with their dad remains a memorable and magical one, regardless of age. There is a tangible goodness attached to it.

The summer before Jim’s freshman year in high school he worked at the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Waco, and delivered cases of the soft drink to businesses around the area. Besides making the small fortune of forty-five dollars each week, it helped him become stronger for the upcoming football season. He remembered saving his money for a movie and cheeseburger afterward, other odds and ends, and in particular – for buying his father a pocketknife for Christmas that year. He had seen him secretly admiring one at the hardware store on several occasions.

On Christmas day, his father opened the gift and to his surprise, found something he would have never bought for himself. He thanked his son. Later that afternoon, the family made the short drive to his Uncle Matt’s for a traditional holiday dinner.

Following the meal and coffee, and before leaving for home that evening, William and Matt Gannon were having a last-minute conversation by the front door. Jim was there too, and he watched as his father reach into and pull the new knife to the edge of his trouser pocket. The boy was so proud to think his father would show someone else the

gift. But without explanation and just as suddenly, his dad slowly lowered the pocketknife back into the darkness. Jim could not suppress the sadness.

That summer William Gannon took his son to the high-school gym almost every night to throw footballs in preparation for the upcoming season – balls were tossed through tire swings, against brick walls, and to friends and teammates; his father always made time for his son through teaching. Jim Gannon remembered that also.

He (The Coach) thought football pure; the playing field nearly level for everyone, and its lessons charged with enough wisdom and understanding to help see one through life's inevitable challenges. Of course no sport or human being quite meets those high standards, but William Gannon never considered teaching and coaching youngsters a job. He was tough and demanding, but he recognized the difference between discipline and punishment. Discipline, he thought, teaches us to try - to put forth our best effort despite the circumstances.

“Can we ask anymore of ourselves?” he said.

He (The Man) never pressured his son to play organized athletics, and if the joy for them had been confined to the backyard, that would have suited William Gannon just fine. Oddly enough, the pressure to perform came from the son.

By the age of eight, Jim Gannon's interest and imagination with sport began to bloom. During those years in Waco, he tossed a countless number of balls into the air and as the switch-hitting Yankee slugger Mickey Mantle, slammed one beyond the neighbor's fence for a homerun, or inside the outdoor clothesline pole for a game-winning hit.

Looking back now, he wondered how many shots were played with the hand-me-down

Ben Hogan irons, complete with leather grips, at the nine-hole country club course – the dusk and difficulty of the game being his principle opponents?

What his father did grant him was access to his professional life. At a tender age, Jim Gannon watched and listened to games unfold from a rare perspective. He rode team buses, felt the tension and excitement of a dressing room before kickoff, paced sidelines, and even helped change the sprinklers at the playing field on hot, muggy summer evenings. He retrieved punted balls, visited other stadiums, and learned about the game at his father's knee. The experiences were rich and fun, and they shaped his view of athletics. He knew that learning anything in this manner was unique – as different as the tourist and the traveler; the tourist always thinking of returning home while the traveler yielded entirely to the present.

While other kids his age were also going to the games on Friday night, most were playing in one of their own just beyond the fence of the south end zone; using sand-filled paper cups as their ball. Jim Gannon was in another place, not necessarily better – just different.

### III

In the 1950s, the radio played a large role in American life; the Gannon home was no exception, especially when it came to news programs and ballgames. In the fall and armed with their imagination, father and son listened to Saturday night broadcasts from around the state. When the time came, Jim took his small transistor to bed with him and set it beneath his pillow. During other times of the year he listened as the strong stations out of Houston, St. Louis or New Orleans delivered baseball and basketball games to his

bedside. He missed only a handful of his father's contests during those years and when he did, there was the radio.

But there were road trips too, and William Gannon often took his son along. He watched Texas and Oklahoma tangle in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas; and saw lads named Swink, Crow, Meredith and Alworth lead their teams on an autumn afternoon. He was introduced to well-known coaches, Abe Martin at TCU and Jess Neely of Rice Institute, something that made an impression upon a young boy from a small town. The spirited play, large crowds, colors, and pageantry swept Jim Gannon away; no wonder he raced for the editions of the weekend newspapers when they arrived; the stories and photographs were simply a chance to know more.

William Gannon spent many hours preparing his team for a game. However, he understood that hard work alone did not necessarily translate into victory and in his wisdom, tried to teach that fact at every turn. He believed if he respected his opponent and prepared himself to do his absolute best; he could accept whatever outcome and move forward without regret.

His toughest and most challenging defeat as a coach arrived on a rainy December afternoon at Baylor Stadium in Waco, Texas. It was the Class AAA semi-final game between the Waco Panthers and Breckenridge Buckaroos.

The Panthers were a big and powerful team, undefeated and ranked at the top of the polls. Breckenridge, winners of the state title the past two years and rich in football tradition, came into the game with one tie and were ranked second. Earlier that year, the Buckaroos had beaten eventual big school champion Abilene, 35-13; a significant victory

because following that defeat Abilene went on to win a record forty-nine straight games, and three consecutive state crowns.

In a drenching rain, the two teams fought evenly. The game ended with the Panthers scrimmaging from the Breckenridge four-yard line, and a final pass falling to the wet grass incomplete. The West Texans won the game 12-7, and captured the state title the following week. A brilliant season was suddenly over.

“Played in a stadium usually reserved for collegiate competition, this game took a backseat to none in quality, thrill, and suspense,” a sportswriter said in his account. “It was the kind of contest in which both winner and loser could walk away with head high, and chin up.”

Jim Gannon visited the town of Breckenridge for the first time many years later. He found his way to the same football stadium that had been the site of so many schoolboy classics. From one end zone he studied the structure’s rock façade, its arched entrances, and small white press box. An oil well pumped nearby, and a North wind and cold sleet slammed against his face.

William Gannon stepped away from coaching football several years later and became the superintendent of schools in Waco. He held a masters degree in philosophy and believed education a key element in any person’s life. He made the trip to New Haven to attend his son’s graduation from Yale.

“Well done, son,” he said, offering his firm, proud handshake.

Fortunately for Jim Gannon, his father was always his hero. Only two others have approached that particular station in his life – Robert F. Kennedy and Jack Roosevelt Robinson – but at best they were a full stride behind. William Gannon’s became a

football coach, but he might have been a newspaper editor, lawyer, mason, politician, or writer; a man of any profession really. He was not without imperfections and his life ran like most lives do – attached to it in some form or another were those elements of respect, pleasure, failure, disappointment, pain, questions unanswered and those not asked.

There are no amounts of money that can buy the time William Gannon spent teaching his son the skills, subtle understanding, and virtues of the games he loved and knew so well. But he also recognized the power of an idea, the courage of conviction, and that one must not be afraid to fail or seek excellence. He believed a person ought to take certain risks in life as long as they are prepared to endure the consequences of those choices.

William Gannon died several years ago, losing a battle to cancer. Jim Gannon was there at his bedside and told him he loved him for the first time.

“I love you, son,” William Gannon said.

Shortly after his death, Jim Gannon helped sort through his father’s personal affects, including his private papers. He kept a few things – the two Stetson hats, a pair of monogrammed cuff links, his typed notes on building a championship football team, two photographs, and a poem written to a son. It reads in part:

*But teach him also that for every scoundrel there is a hero – for  
Every selfish politician, there is a dedicated leader – Teach him that  
For every enemy, there is a friend.  
Teach him to judge others  
Not on the basis of one flamboyant hour,  
But by the ledger of their daily life.*

Jim Gannon became a journalist and later, a teacher. With the help of his father and others he made his way in the world and now tends to his own family, the ranch and its animals. The Stetson hats have a more western shape to them now; however, the values his father taught him through sport and the conduct of his life have not changed their shape at all.

He is still thrilled by the first hint of autumn, and when he sees kids passionately struggling to improve their skills at anything. His wife does not understand why they eventually drive by the football field of any new town they visit, although she has come to accept it. On his night table there is a book and a small radio.

William Gannon is buried on a hillside in his hometown near a cypress tree and a stone bench. The marker simply reads,

*William Polk Gannon – Capt., U.S. Army*

It says a lot about a man that served his country as an officer, but not near enough for those that knew him. A fresh arrangement of flowers is always present.

Jim Gannon woke suddenly. Not much time had passed. He checked the photograph in his wallet, looking at it briefly before returning it to its place. He stirred and rose; then he walked over to Zip and swung up onto the Buckskin's back. They say there is almost nothing better than seeing the sun rise or set between a horse's ears. Much obliged dad, he thought

“Let's go boys,” he said, heading home.

