Eternal fair-haired boy| The many myths of Golden Richards

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The University of Montana
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The Eternal Fair-Haired Boy:
The Many Myths of Golden Richards

by

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and what will you do now my blue-eyed son
and what will you do now my darling young one
I'm a-goin' back out before the rain starts falling
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest dark forest

and I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinking

Bob Dylan, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"
Golden Richards had been my hero for 18 years. When I was a towheaded kid growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, the blond wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys was my idol. With his blazing speed, quick hands and blond hair that, in the words of one fawning article, “splayed from beneath his helmet like dried palm fronds,” John Golden Richards was proof to me that perfection existed. He was beautiful. He was the fair-haired boy on America’s Team.

There was a joke in Dallas in the mid-’70s: Why is there no top on Cowboys Stadium? The answer was: so God can watch his team play. If that was the case, Golden Richards surely was one of God’s favorite players. With his yellow hair splaying, number 83 made the acrobatic, one-handed catches; he made the cuts and fakes when he returned punts that left cornerbacks and safeties in the dust. He caught the 32-yard touchdown on the second play of the Cowboys’ first offensive possession in the ’77 championship against the Vikings. He caught the game-clinching touchdown against the Broncos in Super Bowl XII. Tossed not by Roger Staubach but by fullback Robert Newhouse, it was the first halfback-option pass completed for a touchdown in Super Bowl history. God smiled on Golden Richards. And I loved him. For years, I dreamed about meeting him.

And there I was, with my idol. Destiny had finally brought us together. I was going to be writing an article on him and his career and what had happened since retiring. I couldn’t sleep the night before I drove down to see him. He walked a little bowlegged, and his hazel eyes looked weary with slight lines around the edges. His skin was taut on his face, and his thin lips were drawn tight. But he was My Man, and I was with him.

It was a sunny early Spring afternoon in his hometown of Salt Lake City. I was 26—the same age he had been when he was traded from the celebrated Dallas Cowboys to the lowly, pre-Ditka Chicago Bears. We were going to drive around Salt Lake and he, the
second oldest in a line of six boys and one girl in a good Mormon family, was going to show me the fields where he triumphed as a youth. He was going to take me to the high school where he established the reputation, as BYU coach LaVell Edwards later told me, as one of the best athletes Utah has ever produced. He played for the Granite Farmers, playing football, basketball, and track. His unbelievable speed made him a natural at track, as he almost single-handedly won the state track meet for Granite in 1969. He also excelled at football, playing at wide receiver and returning punts, running toward the end zone decorated with the golden G for Granite. He scored five touchdowns his first game. It was high school where he met his eventual wife, the beautiful Barbara Johnson. Granite’s foes, such as the Jordan Beetdiggers and the Bingham Miners, were awed by this blond wonder.

But that was years ago. Golden had since been through rough times—he had become heavily addicted to painkillers. He had been arrested on Dec. 14, 1992, for forging his name to checks he had stolen from his father to buy prescription narcotics. He had stolen a total of 16 checks for a total of $664.88 and eventually spent a week in jail. He had been arraigned on his 42nd birthday. For a while he traded his pill addiction for alcohol and now attends AA. His world had been consumed by an unquenchable need for multicolored pills. Demerol. Percodan. Codeine. Words that didn’t mean much to me.

What mattered to me was that I was there. In his wife’s car—his third wife—with him driving, me asking questions. The way I’d imagined for years. This was the culmination of something for me—I didn’t know what, but it was some epiphany. That I knew.

“Goddamn my radiator light’s on,” he said. “We need to go get some water.”

We pulled into a gas station and he parked by the water hose, in front of the phone. We went in and he bought one of those monster Pepsis. I bought a small bottle of water.
We went out to the car and he opened the hood. He unscrewed the radiator cap and green antifreeze dribbled out onto the ground. "No problem there," he said. He slammed the hood shut and turned toward me.

"Say, listen, my teeth are killing me," he said, his sunglasses averting my eyes. "My dentist said it's from being knocked around so much on Sundays. I've had eight root canals. I can't go in to see him until tomorrow. I took some Tylenol this morning, but it's not working. Do you have any painkillers, Tylenol 3 or anything like that?"

Warning lights went off in my head. I didn't know much about addiction, but I knew this was not right. Today was Saturday—what kind of dentist saw patients on Sunday? Golden had been addicted to these pills, said he had been through hell, but he told me the night before he was clean and everything was okay. And now he was asking me for pills. I didn't know what to do.

"Um, no, I don't have anything like that," I stammered.

"Do you think your friend does?" he asked, referring to Sean, the guy I knew—not very well—whom I was staying with.

"I don't know. I don't know if he's around."

"Can you give him a call and see if he's home?" he said, pulling a quarter out of his pocket.

I knew I should say no, tell him this made me really uncomfortable. But I wanted to cooperate with him so he would cooperate with me. And he was Golden Richards.

"I can give him a call, yeah," I said. I took the quarter and dialed. I wanted Golden to walk away, to take a few steps away, so I could hang up, so I could dial the wrong number, so I could whisper, "say no, Sean. Say you don't have any pills. Say you don't have anything."

But Golden stayed there, leaning over my right shoulder. I could smell the leather of his bomber jacket.
“Hello, Sean? Listen, I’m with Golden and his teeth are really hurting. Do you, um, have any prescription stuff? Like Tylenol 3 or anything like that?”

“I don’t know. Let me go look,” Sean said. He put the phone down.

“What’s he doing? Is he checking?” Golden asked. I couldn’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Let me talk to him,” Golden said, taking the phone from my hand.

He waited a few moments. “What’s this guy’s name?” he asked, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece.

“Sean,” I said. I turned away from him and pushed the record button on my portable tape player.

“Hey Sean, Golden Richards here. How you doin’? Listen, my teeth are really bad and I need something for ‘em... Mepergan? What’s that?... Okay... well, listen buddy, I’d be glad to reimburse you for them... You sure?... Okay buddy, well, listen, what do you do?... Photography? Hell, buddy, I can set you up, get you all sorts of jobs taking pictures of sports teams stuff like that... I’d be glad to help you out.”

We left and drove to the apartment Sean shared with his girlfriend. No one was home, so I used the key they had given me to let us in. We went inside and Golden went to the dining room table, where Sean had left the pills. He looked at the label, and I could tell by the clicking sound of the pills that the bottle was fairly full. “You think they got anything else?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I felt numb.

“He said there might be more in the bathroom. Where’s their bathroom?” he asked.

“Down that hall and to the left.”

Golden went into their bathroom and I heard him rummaging through their medicine cabinet.
This couldn't be happening, I told myself. I had met with him the night before, and everything was perfect. It had been our get-acquainted night, his night to check out this guy who had driven nine hours from Missoula, Montana, to probe into his life. And he was exactly as I would have hoped. He looked a little haggard; his eyes were not as sharp as I'd thought they'd be, and he moved with a slowness. He was still trim and quick with a handshake, but his skin had the leathery look of someone who smokes too much and sleeps too little. He didn’t smile easily, but he’d been addicted to painkillers, off and on, for more than 20 years.

I had been speechless when he answered the door. I was suddenly cast back to the age of 11, when Golden caught the touchdown in the Super Bowl and I had run around my parents' living room, frenzied with delight. He opened the door with a smile and his hand extended. “Glad to meet you, Joel,” he had said with a slight drawl.

He invited me in to his apartment and we sat down and talked about his career. We sat across from each other in the living room looking out onto the Wasatch Mountains, the room glowing orange in the sunset, decorated with pictures of him and his new 25-year-old wife and a small plaster Christ figure. I brought out the cover story on him from the Chicago Tribune magazine when he first joined the Bears—a yellowed section I had kept with me for 16 years. We both got a little quiet when I realized I was as old as he had been when the article was written—the same age as he was in the picture on the cover, confidently looking at the camera, Bears helmet crooked in one arm, football tucked under the other, the number 83 emblazoned on his chest. His blond hair streamed down to his shoulders.

We went on to his porch and he smoked a cigarette—something he told me at first not to mention because he didn’t want to be a bad influence on kids. He told me about winning the high school state track meet, the records he set at BYU, the euphoria of being
rafted in the second round by the Cowboys, the challenge of coming back from a complete detachment of the medial collateral ligament. He told me he resolved to come back after seeing “The Stratton Story”—a Jimmy Stewart movie about a pitcher who battled back from serious injury—the night in the hospital after his knee operation. “It wasn’t that he got blown off the mound,” he said, “but he tried. It wasn’t that I had to win the race, but I had to get in.”

He said he assumed he was going to have to make it into the NFL as a free agent, which he was prepared to do. He was totally taken by surprise when the Cowboys traded up to pick him with the 46th pick of the 1973 draft, in the second round, ahead of eventual teammate and Super Bowl MVP Harvey Martin, as well as Dan Fouts, Tom Jackson, and Joe Ferguson. He was going to join the Cowboys to replace Bob Hayes, the player everyone knew as “the world’s fastest man.” Golden had admired Hayes while at BYU and had taken number 22 because it was his number.

He talked about his most greatest moments in the NFL. “Everyone assumes my most memorable moment was the Super Bowl, but it wasn’t,” he said. “It was every time it was 3rd and 6 and I caught an 8-yard out to keep the drive going. The camaraderie in the huddle. Those plays are the most memorable.”

He told me he had been traded to the Bears for a first- and second- round draft pick, and how the Cowboys had to shut down the switchboard after the trade because they were inundated with angry calls.

He talked about how he got hooked on drugs, that the Cowboys had started him on painkillers to keep him playing. He drank three Pepsis during the hour and a half we talked.

“I went to my doctor in Salt Lake after my first season because I felt so damn terrible,” he said. “I thought I had the world’s worst flu. I didn’t know what was wrong. The doctor looked me up and down and said, ‘I can’t find anything wrong with you. Are
you on any medication?' And I told him, ‘not any more.’ He asked what I had been taking, and I told him I didn’t know. He asked what it looked like. I told him it was yellow and said 135 and ‘endo.’ He sat back and said, ‘you’re going through withdrawal.’ I said, ‘what’s withdrawal?’"

That’s where it all began, he told me. But it was over now, he said. He was clean. And I had no reason not to believe him. He was so damn friendly; it was like we had been hanging out, watching football for years. He asked about my girlfriend in San Francisco.

“How’d you get involved with a woman that far away?” he asked. “Those long-distance relationships are a killer.”

“Don’t I know it,” I said, reveling in the bonding that was going on. He brought out his four-month-old son, Jay Golden, and talked lovingly to him.

“You’re going to do anything you want, little man, aren’t you,” he cooed. “You can do whatever you want. I’m not going to make you do anything. I’m not going to be one of those little league dads who lives through his son. Look at these hands,” he said, gently holding his son’s tiny palms. “Look at the size of these mitts,” he said. “He’s going to be slam-dunking soon.”

He became more friendly as the night passed, eventually deciding I was for real and worthy of trust. At one point I had referred to the “turk”—the man who tells players they’ve been cut—and Golden looked me in the eye and said, “you really know your football.” I mumbled some self-effacing denial. “No, I’m serious,” he said. “You do.”

By the time I left, Golden and I were good buddies. “We’ll see you tomorrow, young man,” he had said, clapping me on the back. He was all right. He was more than all right—he was still My Man. He had been through a tough time, had been to the bottom. One would be hard-pressed to think of something much lower than stealing checks from your father to buy pills. But he was back. He was on his feet, he told me he was going to
be starting a job on Tuesday with a California health-food company analyzing data. Everything was back on track.

As I drove back from his apartment to Sean's, the sky faded into dusk. I realized that Golden may not be worthy of all of the adulation I had heaped upon him for so many years, that he is just a man—a good, decent man who has faced his demons and conquered them. I turned the radio to the local college station and "Heroes" by David Bowie came on. "We can be heroes just for one day," the thin white duke sang. "We can be us just for one day."

But that had been the night before. Now, Golden came out of Sean's bathroom, still holding the bottle of pills. "They don't have anything else," he said. He went to the phone and called a pharmacy—a number he apparently had memorized—to find out what is in Mepergan. I stood there, staring at my feet. He hung up and we left Sean's to take a tour of Salt Lake. He drove. I put the incident behind me.

We drove around sunny Salt Lake and he showed me the large pink house where his parents still lived. He showed me the fields where he and his brothers played football, giving him the moves that made him a star in high school. "Running back punts was just like running away from my brothers," he said, his Pepsi held between his legs. We visited his younger brother Sterling, who was cleaning his garage, his young blond son running around the driveway. "I'm starting a job this Tuesday," Golden told him. "They're going to give me a four-wheel-drive company car." Sterling nodded. "That sounds real good, Golden." The sun shone down, the brothers standing apart across the hot concrete.

He asked me where I wanted to live as we sped along the interstate. I told him I liked Missoula, but was thinking of eventually going to Seattle, Denver, or San Francisco. "You realize how far you'd be from the mountains in Denver?" he asked. "Here, it's
right in your backyard. The elk and deer are all out now. Salt Lake is a clean city, a beautiful city.” He said I should see how this article turned out, then maybe see if I could write his memoirs. “Tarnished Thoughts on Golden Times,” he had told me he wanted to call it. “We’ll get you some real money, get some shoes to replace those Converse,” he said with a smile, referring to my ratty white canvas hi-tops. I laughed, slightly red-faced. I wanted to be swept up in the moment of being with My Man, but the morning’s events hung still in the air between us.

We drove up to a quiet, exclusive cul-de-sac and he pointed out an upscale brown house. He told me that was where he and Barbara lived back in the good days. I asked him about his second wife and what happened with her. He started telling me a winding, rambling tale about how she had attacked him one night then called the police on him. “It was the craziest damn thing,” he said. Then, slowly his voice got softer and softer, to the point where I could barely hear him. He wasn’t making much sense. He talked for about 10 minutes, then asked me, “what was the question again?”

“You were talking about your second wife,” I said.

“Oh, right. Yeah, that was a messy situation. Boy, I tell you...” then he was off again, starting to mumble. He appeared to be lost, turning into dead-end streets, stalling the car. We got back into the city and he stalled it as we crossed a busy intersection and I jumped out and pushed it, running alongside with my shoulder against the door frame. He got it started again and I jumped back in as he accelerated, ducking my head under the roof. “Boy, this is some adventure, huh?” I said, thinking that he had accelerated pretty quickly considering he had someone running alongside the car. He came close to running me over.

He pulled into a strip mall to go into a video store. I followed, but was sensing that something was going very wrong. He was off, but I didn’t know why. “Say how much money do you have?” he asked. “I don’t know, 60 bucks or something like that.” I said.
“Okay, I just wondered because, you know. . . ” he said, trailing off again. In the store he seemed to grab random boxes and stare at them, his eyes not processing the cover of “Weekend at Bernie’s.”

“So you see anything good?” he asked, his voice thick and slow. He kept licking his lips. I grabbed a couple of movies and said I liked these. He didn’t respond. He looked at the multi-colored wall of movie boxes, not comprehending the cardboard confusion in front of him. I pointed to “The Fabulous Baker Boys,” to “Raging Bull,” to “Born on the Fourth of July.” “These are pretty good,” I said. Again, he didn’t acknowledge me. He stood there, quiet, licking his lips and rocking on his feet. Finally, he said, “so nothing jumps out at you, huh?”

“Well, nothing except the ones I’ve already pointed out,” I said. I had no idea what was going on. Something had happened—he was different, slow. But how? I hadn’t seen him take any of the pills, and I was with him the whole time. I tried to remember if either of us had gone to the bathroom.

He grabbed a random box, “For the Boys” with Bette Midler, a Nintendo hockey game, and walked unsteadily up to the counter. “Do you want the instructions for that?” the teenager behind the counter asked. “What?” Golden asked. “The instructions. For the game,” the kid said, his gum clicking in his braces. “What?” Golden asked again. “This here. This is a Nintendo game, a cartridge,” the kid said patiently. “Oh,” Golden said, holding the cartridge up in front of his face. “No, I don’t want this,” he said. He paid and we walked out. I carried the movie.

I got out to the car and turned and he was standing there in the sun, on the curb before the parking lot. He looked pale in his Wrangler jeans and bomber jacket, mouth open, knees slightly bent, legs bowed like a retired cowboy. He tried to put his sunglasses in his shirt pocket and missing, swiping repeatedly, not hitting the pocket each time.
He wobbled out to the car and got behind the wheel.

"Why don't you let me drive," I said.

"No, I'll be fine," he said. He couldn't get the key in the ignition, again and again stabbing the steering column.

"I can drive stick no problem," I said. "How about I drive."

"No thanks," he said. "I'll be able to drive okay."

But he couldn't. He stalled it there in the parking lot, then finally got out onto to a road. He was weaving, crossing the middle line. Suddenly he pulled into the parking lot of a office complex. He pulled in behind a row of cars and we sat there, silent. Finally, I mustered the courage to ask, "are you feeling okay?"

He was leaning back in his seat, eyes closed, mouth agape. "I'm just kind of like, I don't know," he said. "The rest of my head."

We sat in silence. Finally, I asked, "Golden, how many of those pills—what are those pills called that Sean gave us? Morphedan, something like that. Do you remember what it's called? It begins with an 'M,' I think. Anyway, um, how many... " I was afraid to know what was happening.

"Say, do you want a cold drink?" he asked, motioning to a restaurant at the end of the lot.

"No, I'm not that thirsty," I said. That was a coherent sentence, I thought. Maybe he's okay.

The car started rolling, heading toward the restaurant. I looked over at him and his eyes were shut, his head lolling backward. He was blacking out. We headed toward the restaurant's window.

"Golden, better hit the brake here, you're about to hit that wall."

"Oh shit," he said, slamming on the brake pedal.
“Say, how many of those pills that Sean gave you, how many did you take, a bunch of ‘em?” I asked.

“I just, I don’t know,” he said. “I felt crazy, like jumping right through that window.” His head lolls back again.

“Why don’t I drive,” I said. “It looks like you’re getting sleepy there.”

“... blinding in my eye, can’t function,” he said. “Okay.”

I got out and walked around to the driver door and helped him out. He was no longer a man, he was like a drowsy, disoriented child. He held onto the car as he walked unsteadily around the back. He stopped and bent over the license plate. “Is this the kind you punch?” he asked. “Um, no,” I said. “Everything’s just fine. Let’s get home and relax. How’s that.” He was incoherent. I spent about five minutes cajoling him to shut the door. “Now grab the window there and pull it shut. Okay, that’s right. Good. Let’s go. You ready to go home? Let’s go.”

The engine sputtered as I drove, and I wondered what would happen if it stalled.

“How many of those pills did you take?” I asked. “The ones we got at the apartment?”

“When you’re an addict, you have to take all of them,” he said, suddenly semi-lucid.

“Do you think of yourself as an addict?”

“No, not really,” he said, head back against the headrest. His eyes drifted closed.

I drove in silence, looking over at him occasionally to see how he was doing. “... they could come in, 0 and 25, and beat the Cowboys,” he mumbled.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“The Rangers,” he said.

I got to his apartment complex and pulled into a spot. He was totally unresponsive, head straight back, skin ashen, mouth open and gurgling. I began talking into my tape recorder in a thin, trembling voice, trying to talk myself through this.
“Out cold. I need to get his wife. I don’t know how many he took. I’ve got to get him up to his apartment. Get him upstairs and put him to bed, I don’t know. Alright, Golden, let’s go upstairs. Let’s get inside. I’ve got everything, we can just go inside... he’s out.”

I helped him up the stairs and suddenly he turned and said, “do you want me to sing and play the guitar for you?”

“I didn’t know you played guitar,” I said. Maybe he was snapping out of it.

“I don’t do a very good job of it. My wife, she does...” he trailed off.

I finally got him upstairs and sat him down on his couch. His head immediately fell back. I ran into his bedroom and rifled through the address book on the dresser. I felt strangely clear-headed—there was no time to be self-indulgent and upset. I looked up his brother Doug, who is the assistant attorney general for the state of Utah.

“Doug, this is Joel Reese,” I said. “I’m the guy who’s doing the article on Golden. I’m at his place and he got hold of some pills. He’s passed out in the living room.”

“Oh no,” he said. “Sounds like he’s had a relapse. Is Amy around?”

“No, no one is here,” I said. “It’s just me and him. I have no idea what to do.”

“Maybe Amy’s at work,” he said. “I’ll call her there. She’ll know what to do.”

“I don’t know if I should call the paramedics or what,” I said. “What should I do?”

“God, I don’t know.”

“I’m going to call an emergency hotline and see what they say, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll call Amy at work.”

We hung up and I ran back into the living room to see what Golden was doing. He was crawling on the ground on all-fours in front of the couch. I went to his jacket and went through the pockets. The pill bottle was empty.

I ran back to the bedroom and found a psychiatrist’s business card. I called the number and got an answering service.
"I need to talk to the doctor," I said. "I'm with a man, Golden Richards, who's been addicted to painkillers off-and-on for 20 years and he took a lot of them and is passed out on the ground."

"One second, I'll try to reach him."

I sat there numbly. I don't remember anything about their bedroom.

"Sir, I can't reach the doctor."

"Well, what do I do? I mean, I have no experience with this stuff."

"By law, I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me?" I spat. "Look, this guy might have OD'd. He took a lot of pills. Should I call an emergency advice line? Should I call 911? Should I let him sleep it off?"

"Sir, by law I cannot tell you what to do, but if I were you I'd think pretty seriously about calling 911."

I didn't want to do that. What if the local TV stations got hold of it and came bursting through the door, lights beaming? What if he suddenly came to when the paramedics got here and said angrily, "what the hell did you call these guys for? I'm fine."

I called information, got an emergency hotline number, and called it. I told the guy at the other end what was happening.

"You say he took the whole bottle?" he asked.

"I think so. The whole bottle. I don't know how many were in it."

"Do you have any idea?"

"It sounded pretty full when he picked it up."

"Okay. Go see if he's still breathing."

My God. "Okay."
I ran into the living room and he was passed out, face down into the white carpet, arms at his sides, knees bent. I leaned over and heard his breath rasping out of his mouth. I ran back to the phone.

"Yes, he's still breathing."

"Okay. Call 911 immediately."

I hung up and ran back into the dining room and dialed 911. Golden lay prostrate on the floor as I talked to the operator. I didn't know the address so I waited for her to trace the call. Suddenly my breath started increasing and my eyes welled. "I can't fucking believe this," I said. "I nearly killed him. God I hope he doesn't die. Where are these guys?"

"They'll be there soon, stay on the phone."

"No, I'm going to tell them where I am. I'm going to go down and get them." I heard sirens. "Is that them?"

"Probably. I need you to stay on the phone."

"Why? Goddamn it, I need to tell them where he is."

"They'll find you. Don't worry."

Just then the paramedics came into the living room. I don't remember how many there were—four, maybe. Five. One went over to Golden and started taking his vitals. I leaned against the wall, unable to look at him. His blood pressure was 170 over 110. "His pupils are unreactive and constricted," one said. They put oxygen tubes up his nose. They asked him if he had taken any pills.

"No sir," he said, sitting on the floor, legs flat in front of him.

"What day is it—Monday, Tuesday—what day is it?" one asked him.

"Tuesday," he said. His eyes rolled back.

"Be straight with us here, Golden," one said. "What's going on?"

"In regards to what?" Golden asked.
"In regards to why we're here," one said. "They said you were unconscious on the floor."

"Probably a woman that said that," he said.

"You weren't unconscious on the floor?" the medic asked.

"That be 1231 15," Golden said.

"His eyes keep going back," the medic said. "Have them bring the stretcher up. He's going to go."

One of the medics in the background looked at the picture by the bathroom and said, "this Golden Richards?"

"Yeah," another responded.

"This is sad," the first one said.

"This is really sad." the other said.

I felt fat, hot tears roll down my cheeks. He lay there on the stretcher as they wheeled him out, eyes wild and uncomprehending, blue tubes up his nose. They took him to the hospital in the ambulance and I drove to Sean's to find out how many pills were in the bottle. I got to Sean's and his girlfriend was there. "Sean said at least 12," she told me. I drove to the hospital and joined his wife Amy, her son and her dad in the emergency room. We sat there against the wall, under the stifling fluorescent light, playing with Jay Golden's hands. "This is it," she said to her dad. "He's going to Arizona," referring to a rehab center there. I asked her a couple questions about Golden, how long he'd been straight, how many times this had happened before.

"I don't know," she said to each one. "I guess it's safe to say I don't know my husband very well," she said with a nervous laugh.

After an hour or so I got up to leave as she went into see him. I got a drink of water then looked into his room but couldn't see him behind the curtain. I heard Amy talking to him in a loving voice. "Golden? Are you okay, honey?" I unsteadily wandered out into
the hospital and found a payphone and called my parents. My mother answered the phone and I told her what had happened in a voice so detached I didn’t recognize it as my own. When I finished she asked if I was okay. “No,” I said. “No I’m not okay.”

I eventually drove back to Sean’s, my face slick and sticky and my hands shaking. I didn’t turn the radio on.

That night, Golden called me at Sean’s. “Say, sorry about today,” he said. “Thanks for your help.”

“That’s alright,” I said.

“Yeah, the doctors don’t know what the hell happened. They said it was either a grand mal seizure or an allergic reaction.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. Listen, how well do you know this guy you’re staying with?”

“Not too well. Why?”

“Do you think he takes drugs?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, the doctors think there might have been something other than Mepergan in that bottle.”

“Hold on a second,” I told him. I covered the mouthpiece and asked Sean if the bottle contained what the label said. He said yes.

“No, I think that’s what the pills were,” I said.

“Well, it wasn’t the pills that caused that today.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t the pills.”

“Golden, I found the empty bottle in your coat.”

He paused for a moment. “Well, I don’t know what the hell’s going on,” he said.

“But it wasn’t the pills.”
He told me later he thought they were a non-narcotic muscle relaxant and he took the whole bottle because they were old and he thought their potency might have expired.

In the life of Golden Richards, there are two realities: His, and everyone else's. His story must be told by others, since by the end of my interviews with him I found so little of what he had told me to be true.

It begins with BYU, where Golden went to college for three years before transferring to the University of Hawaii. On a sunny afternoon on BYU's beautiful campus at the foot of the Wasatch Range, it is easy to see how Golden was so revered here.

Young men with their hair in side parts stroll around with backpacks casually flung over their shoulders, looking like they just stepped from an Eddie Bauer catalog. Women in white shorts and BYU sweatshirts smile easily. This is the natural environment of a guy like Golden Richards.

And then there is the football program. With alumni like Steve Young, Jim McMahon, and 1991 Heisman winner Ty Detmer, BYU's program is one of the most respected in the country. Housed in its own building, the program serves as a showcase for Detmer's trophies and plaques, which sit behind glass partitions.

But it didn't always get so much esteem. When former defensive line coach LaVell Edwards took over the team in 1972, the Cougars were a pretty sad bunch. Their records hovered around the .500 mark, and in the Western Athletic Conference a game against BYU often meant it was time to dust off your second-stringers. But Golden shined.

He set records that stand today. He racked up 219 punt return yards against North Texas State in 1971, compiling a nation-leading 624 return yards that season. He caught 36 passes in 1970, but only 14 in 1971, leading the team in receptions in both years. But, Golden says, he got tired of the run-run-run orientation of the team and transferred to
the University of Hawaii in 1972, where he caught 23 passes for 414 yards and 5 touchdowns before injuring his knee. Every article I've ever read on him says he transferred because he wanted more passes.

But Edwards says it wasn't the offense that compelled Golden from Provo to Honolulu.

"It was grades," he said, his blue denim cap shading his eyes from the afternoon sunlight. "He had difficulty keeping his eligibility because he didn't attend classes conscientiously. He flunked out of school."

A 1972 BYU press guide backs Edwards' claim that Golden had to leave to keep playing: "It's the unexpected losses that are painful, and the Cougars experienced a major setback with the departure of Golden Richards, an academic casualty. A kick-return specialist who set NCAA records as a junior, Richards was capable of playing any number of positions, offense and defense. Golden produced his share of spark and excitement, and he was a source of genuine concern for opponents."

Golden denies this, saying it was the lack of passing that sent him packing.

"I've heard that, too. It's a bunch of bullshit," he said. "I had a B average and 23 more credits than I needed as a junior. That's a verifiable fact."

I try to tell him the BYU press guide does verify it, but not his way.

"Look, why would I be eligible at Hawaii and not BYU? They're in the NCAA. It doesn't make any sense," he said.

But there was a provision at the University of Hawaii stating that athletes didn't have to sit out a year before playing. And Edwards and Barbara, though neither can remember the details, recall Golden going to summer school somewhere to get his grades up to par. Golden denies this.

His words apparently convinced even his teammates. Fellow BYU return man Bennie Smith, who now runs a management firm in Salt Lake, said Golden left because
"he decided BYU was not the school for him to continue at. I don’t know all the particulars."

Smith, who said he may soon be hiring Richards to be a liaison between athletes and agents, talks admiringly about Golden’s abilities. “All you would need to do was give Golden that first step and he could create an avenue to score a touchdown.”

HAWAII

His speed captured the eyes of America’s Team, the Dallas Cowboys, who traded up in the second round to pick Richards. Bob Hayes was about to retire, and the Cowboys needed a burner.

“We were always looking for speed in receivers, and Golden had that speed,” said Tex Schramm, the GM and president of the Cowboys from 1960 to 1989. “And he could use it on the football field. That’s an important thing—that’s an important difference between a track man and a football player. Some can’t use their speed on the field, and he could.”

It was a natural match. The Golden boy packed his bags and went to Dallas to play a game in front of the world-famous shimmying Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders and 65,000 rabid fans. The Cowboys had lost the 1972 Super Bowl to the Baltimore Colts on a last-second field goal and the city was hungry for another chance. They love their football in Dallas, and they loved Golden Richards.

“He had the name and the long, flowing hair,” said Frank Luksa, a columnist for the Dallas Morning News who covered the Cowboys for 15 years. “He was very highly regarded and respected. People liked him and they liked his playing style—he was undersized but fast, and an underdog figure in a game where everyone was larger than he was.”

“He was very well-liked, and Dallas is a city that adores its football heroes,” said Barbara, now Barbara Dunn. “Especially wide receivers who are blond.”
The veterans on the team were skeptical of this new guy with the hair and the quick feet. And then, of course, there was the name. Sure he was fast, but Golden Richards? Come on.

"I always wondered, was that his real name or his stage name?" asked Thomas Henderson, who was known as "Hollywood" in the glory days and was famous for dunking the ball over the goalpost. I told him his full name was John Golden Richards. "They loved him in Dallas. You know, he was GOLDEN RICHARDS. He had a choice of women he could see. The Golden boy, from Paul Hornung to him, has always been a kind of wonderment for white athletes. With a name like Golden, being the golden wide receiver on America's Team—he fit that MO and description perfectly."

Just then, a colleague came into Henderson's office and he put the phone aside. "Hey man, guess who I'm talkin' about? I'm talkin' about the great white hope. Golden Richards. Remember him?"

He came back to the phone, laughing. "Golden was definitely the boy wonder. He had the great wonder."

Free safety Charlie Waters wasn't sure of this new guy with that name, either. "He was gifted, there was no question about that," said Waters, now the defensive coordinator for the Denver Broncos. "But who would believe there was a white guy who could run as fast as he could he could run? Who would have believed that a guy that looked like him would have that name? I remember thinking when we drafted him, 'oh no, here's a pretty boy.'"

Golden captured the city, and the rest of the nation wasn't far behind. Barbara says at one point he was receiving up to 1,000 pieces of fan mail a week from all over the country. He was doing commercials. He told me about trysts with cheerleaders, Olivia Newton-John, and Sade (never during his marriage, though). He mentioned hanging out with Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson. Charity work. Celebrity golf outings. Speaking
engagements. He and Roger Staubach were the most highly-requested Cowboys to speak to banquets.

"The good old boys of Dallas wanted a white guy," Sterling said. "And they wanted him. He was way good at public relations."

And he could play, too. Mike Ditka, who was the wide receiver coach for Dallas, said Golden was a real talent his first few years.

"He made some great catches," Ditka said. "He was a great player. He practiced very hard. And he hit people, too. One game he knocked... what was that guy's name, number 46 on the Bears?"

"Doug Plank."

"Yeah, Plank. He knocked Plank right on his ass. And Plank was a big guy."

Waters agrees, saying Golden was a legitimate football talent.

"We had our doubts, but he could play. He returned punts, made some great catches. And he showed some toughness."

One catch comes to mind. It's a Monday night game, and the Cowboys are playing the Kansas City Chiefs in Dallas. Staubach is rolling around in the pocket at about the 26-yard line, looking for a short pass, then looking long, then just trying to keep from being sacked. Suddenly he stops and tosses a bullet toward the end zone. Golden is running across the back line, and it looks like the ball is overthrown and the drive is about to end in a field goal. But Golden leaves his feet, extending fully, about five feet off the ground. He tips the ball, his left hand barely making contact, but it is enough to send it wobbling back toward his feet. Still in mid-air, he reaches back with his right hand and tips the ball back up toward his head. He and the football hang there momentarily, parallel and frozen, then he lunges with both hands and clasps the ball to his chest. He lands and slides along the turf. The ref, who is standing right above Golden, shoots both hands skyward. Touchdown. It is beautiful. The crowd roars. The
catch is chosen by the fans as the second-best in Monday night history in 1989—second to a fluky grab by a man who played in the NFL for one week.

“No one was more surprised than me when I caught that ball,” Golden said with a slight chuckle. “The place just went nuts. It was deafening. I looked up at the ref, who was right above me, and tossed him the ball. ‘You think you’re surprised I caught that?’ I asked him. ‘I’m the most surprised son of a bitch in the stadium.’ He laughed.”

“There was certainly greatness in Golden Richards,” said Danny White, the QB who succeeded Roger Staubach in Dallas. “He had great athletic ability, he was a great competitor. You don’t reach that level of performance in pro football without possessing some greatness.

“He was with the Cowboys when I first got there in ’76. I was like a little kid around his heroes. Superman, Batman. Staubach, [tight end] Lee Roy Jordan, [running back] Tony Dorsett. Golden Richards was one of those guys.”

But it was an act. There were two four-letter words that came along and made themselves a part of Golden’s life, two words that come into the life of every pro football player: Pain and Fear. Golden had messed his knee up good in college—said the doctors told him he would never walk without a limp, let alone play football again. He overcame that, but the knee never was the same.

And he may as well have gone onto the field with a bullseye painted on his chest—he was just the kind of guy defenses hated. Cliff Harris, the Cowboy’s free safety for ten years, says he was good friends with Golden, but he would have wanted to pound him if they were on opposing teams.

“Wide receivers love to think of themselves as having more refined skills, of being more proper,” said Harris, who works with an insurance company in Dallas. “They
hated it when you hit them because it would mess them up, mess up their socks, which were pulled up just-right. And Golden fit that profile.

"You've got a tough guy's sport, and you've got a guy with flowing blond hair who's fast and fragile, playing a tough guy's sport. And the fans loved it. But the players wanted to crunch a guy like that."

All that crunching took a toll. There were stinging blows to the ribs, back, legs—and the face. The Golden face. Bad teeth run in the Richards family, but Golden's were worse. He had major reconstructive surgery done, and then it had to be redone. There were the root canals and countless trips to the dentist. The pain, for a man who admittedly has a low threshold for it, became unbearable. So he began taking Percodan, a tremendously powerful, highly-addictive drug. And it wasn't long before Golden was hooked.

"It was the first season," Barbara said. "It got bad pretty quickly."

Initially, he knew how to control his intake. He would take a little in the morning, just to make it through the day.

"He never blacked out. Ever," Barbara said. "There were times when he got very, very drowsy, and it was apparent there was something strange. But he masked his drug habit very well."

Even his closest friends on the team—Waters, Harris, and roommate John Fitzgerald, who played center—never knew there was a problem.

"I knew he was taking them, but I never knew how bad it was," said Fitzgerald, now vice-president of an insurance company in Dallas. Fitzgerald said he found out about Golden's abuses from a mutual friend after he had been retired for a couple years.

But he remembers an incident at the 1978 Super Bowl in New Orleans, when he discovered a large bag Golden had filled with pills.
"I said, 'my god, Golden, where did you get all these and what are you doing with them?' But it was the end of a long season, and I didn't know what they were, except I knew they were some sort of painkillers."

But Fitzgerald is quick to add, as was every other player I talked to, that the drug usage in the NFL was much worse than anyone knows about. Golden popped painkillers, but everyone did.

"Let me tell you something," Thomas Henderson said. "When you play the game of football, it looks graceful, and these guys look like gazelles running around out there. But when you're running 24 miles an hour, and some guy hits you, and you strain, and you fall, and you hit the ground, it hurts. And sometimes it hurts forever. And first you start on aspirin, then Tylenol 3, then codeine, then Percodan, then you know some doctor and he gives you a hundred."

Golden says this is what happened with him: he was banged-up, his teeth hurt, and he was in some pain. Then he had to decide. "Here you are, you're in the Show. Somebody hands you something and says, 'you don't have to play, but if you want to, these pills will help you play better.' So I took them and took them and took them."

Once Golden knew he was hooked, there was nowhere to turn. How could he, the blond kid whom everyone loved, admit to a drug problem? If the team found out, they would cut him or trade him. He would end up in Green Bay or Philadelphia—then the NFL's equivalent to Siberia. Or, worse, maybe no one would pick him up and he would be banished from the game he loved, abandoned in an anonymous world where no one cheered when you come home at the end of the day. And then the fear set in.

Golden used the word fear many times in our conversations—fear of losing, fear of injuries, fear of being discovered, fear of death. But, he said, it didn't affect him on the field.
"There was a chalkmark on the ramp as you went out to the field, and I would leave my fear there every game," he said. "You’re afraid of losing, but what are you really afraid of? Getting hurt. That’s what you’re really afraid of."

Columnist Frank Luksa said Golden, like many athletes, sees himself as a sport figure and nothing more, and when that ends they are left with nothing.

"My long-held theory is that most athletes are motivated by fear—fear of failure, fear of losing their jobs, fear of letting the team down, and perhaps some outrageous fear that if they’re not good enough to play it makes them an unworthy person.

"There’s no question that pro football teams prey on that mentality."

Golden may have tried to leave his fear at the bottom of the ramp, but it didn’t work. It was there, gnawing at him, telling him he was one Jack Tatum tackle away from career-ending injury, one cleat caught in the turf away from obscurity. He said he never took pills when he was playing, but some of his teammates think otherwise. Charlie Waters recalls the one particular game where Golden dropped a routine, catchable pass.

"I looked at him as he ran back to the huddle and he was white and ashen. I knew right then he was on something," he said. "And I didn’t trust him. And I didn’t care if we used him in games anymore.

"I remember talking to Cliff about Golden and saying that he might be at a point where he won’t be able to perform. That he might be at a point where he wasn’t able to play within himself because of whatever he was on."

Ditka too remembers Golden’s demeanor changing after his first season.

"I confronted him somewhere along the way," he said. "I said ‘Golden, I don’t know what you’re doing, but you’re doing something wrong. I don’t know what it is, but you’re a bundle of nerves.’ Something had changed. He was walking on pins and needles. Before he had been a relaxed, happy-go-lucky guy. But something was different."

Fitzgerald noticed it, too.
"There was a certain habit change, trait change, attitude change that happened. The way he talked. The skittishness. The shortness every once in a while. The mood swings—he'd be happy happy happy, then 'I gotta get out of here, I gotta go do something.'"

But the games were scheduled and the seasons went on. By 1977, the Cowboys were knocking on the door of the Super Bowl. They played Minnesota in the NFC Championship in Dallas, with the winner going on to Super Bowl XII. In game films, Coach Tom Landry had noticed that Minnesota cornerback Bobby Bryant reacted quickly to screen passes, so he schemed to sucker him with a fake screen, then go long. On the Cowboy's second offensive play, at the Minnesota 32-yard line, Staubach faked a hand-off then set-up for a quick pump to wideout Drew Pearson. Bryant headed toward Pearson, leaving Golden wide open streaking down the left sideline. Staubach heaved a rainbow toward the end zone, and Golden pulled it in with a breadbasket catch. Touchdown. Dallas 6, Minnesota 0. The Cowboys won 23-6.

There was much rejoicing in Dallas, but not for Golden. He left the locker room to drive home, to face another night battling his addiction. But something happened as he drove away from the arena on I-35.

"I remember this so clearly—I pulled over and looked back in my rearview mirror and saw the light pouring up from the inside of the stadium," he said. "And I started to cry because I knew I had two more weeks there. Here I was supposed to be in one of the most exciting times of a football player's career, and I was all in despair because I had to propagate this addiction for another two weeks. I had to take the pills in order to play, and I was sick and tired of it. I just wanted the season to be over with so I could feel better and start taking care of myself."

But this was no time for emotional collapses. The Cowboys were in the Super Bowl against Denver's vaunted Orange Crush defense, and this time they'd better win. Dallas expected nothing less. But Golden was barely hanging on.
"I don't know how he played," Barbara said. "He was in such bad shape."

Super Sunday arrived, and the big game was held in the mammoth New Orleans Superdome. From the beginning, it didn't look like much of a game. The Broncos were pathetic. Former Cowboy QB Craig Morton tossed four interceptions by half-time, tying the Super Bowl record for the entire game. They fumbled another four times.

But the Cowboys couldn't seem to put them away. Efren Herrera missed three field goals and the Cowboy offense hadn't quite clicked. America's Team was up 20–10, but backup QB Morris Weese had come in to give the Broncos some life with his scrambling ability. The game wasn't over yet.

Then, in the fourth quarter, lineman Harvey Martin sacked Weese and forced a fumble, with Dallas recovering at the Denver 29. On the Cowboys' first play, Landry whispered, "brown right formation, X opposite shift, toss 38, halfback lead, fullback pass to Y." A trick play. Staubach pitched back to fullback Robert Newhouse, who shuffled left on a sweep. Suddenly, he stopped and heaved the ball toward the end zone. Golden had sprinted past the Broncos secondary, but safety Steve Foley recovered and was closing in. Too late. The ball arrived over Golden's left shoulder and he cradled it to his chest. Touchdown. Cowboys win, 27–10.

The catch is immortalized on the pages of Sports Illustrated, both in its Super Bowl issue and its year-end issue in a full-page blowup. There is Golden, bent backwards, the ball clasped just beneath his helmet, both legs off the ground, "Richards" emblazoned at the top of his white jersey. Foley is half a step behind, right arm vainly stretched upward. Too late.

"I told Newhouse, 'just get a spiral on it and I'll catch it,'" Golden said. "And he did. He threw a pretty good pass."

The season was over, the good guys had won, and Golden's catch had sealed the game. A storybook ending for the Cowboys, but not so for Golden. He and Barbara left
for Utah to get him away from the pressures of Dallas, to try to save him. But on April 2, 1978, that effort failed. Golden overdosed, and it nearly killed him.

He had a speaking engagement in Texas, one aspect of which warned against drug abuse. But going back to Dallas, the city that loved him so, brought back the pressure, and Golden went to his standby.

"It was the old 'gee I have a toothache is there a doctor who can get me a prescription' line," Barbara said. "And they did, and it was a pretty serious drug. I can't remember what it was, but it was something you wouldn't want to mess around with. And he took a lot. By nine he was pretty out of it, and by ten you could tell he wasn't all there.

"Then he started seizing and turning blue."

Barbara called the paramedics and Cowboy doctor Pat Evans, who met the ambulance at Baylor University Medical Center. Evans who didn't return my phone calls, has gone on the record as saying Golden's overdose wasn't such a big deal. But Barbara angrily disagrees.

"That's crap," she said. "I was there. It was a big deal. Later it was dismissed, classified as routine flu symptoms. Who knows how they covered it up."

Later that year, he was traded to the Chicago Bears for a third round draft choice—not the first and second round pick he had told me. Everyone I spoke with who knew of the overdose said that was the reason for the trade. But Schramm denies any knowledge of any overdose.

"I know nothing about that," he said. "In fact, this is the first time I've ever heard anything about it. I don't agree that he had a drug problem when he was playing. I think he had a clear head all the time he was playing for us.

"Is that what you want to know about? Because I don't have anything to say about that."
Gil Brandt, the man who engineered the trade, concurs.

"I traded him, and he was traded to the Bears in good faith. I wouldn't trade anybody who had a problem, so if he had a problem we didn't know about it.

"In fact, the first I knew about any visit to the hospital was when you said it just now."

Golden went to the mediocre Bears and produced—well, as much as anyone could produce with Bob Avellini throwing the ball. He caught a career-high 28 passes in 1978, but the once-small, nagging injuries got worse. He caught five passes in the '79 season then went on the injured reserve for a tear in his right knee. He later learned he had played that season with a broken arm. In April of 1980, the Bears released Golden.

He went to Denver to try to catch on with the Broncos, but hurt his hand and was cut. He retired in 1980 at the age of 28.

Since 1980, Golden has had a sporadic, shaky history. He hosted a cable hunting and fishing show called *ESPN Outdoors*, which ran from 1980 to 1981. The show's director, Lee Martin, said Golden was an ideal host and that he never knew of any drug problem.

"We never had any situations where he was late for a shoot or didn't show up—he was a great asset because he got involved with everything. He was such a charmer. People really took to him.

"It was a combination of that little boy charm—everyone just wanted to cuddle him, basically—and his reputation as an athlete. He could just charm the socks off anyone. I mean, anyone."

The show ended, and Golden returned to Salt Lake to work in public relations for an energy company. The addiction kept going though. It wouldn't end. But the marriage finally did.
"I couldn’t put up with it anymore," Barbara said. "And I became the bad person to the family, the cause of Golden’s troubles."

But Golden points the finger elsewhere. He says the Cowboys started it all, that Pat Evans pushed Percodan on him to get him to play.

Waters doesn’t buy that.

"Listen, I don’t know how much pain Golden was in when he played, but no one was in more pain than when I played," he said. "And never once did Evans say anything ridiculous to me like ‘this will help you play.’"

Ken Locker, the Cowboys trainer from 1973 to 1990, says Golden got the pills from many people in the community, such as local pharmacists, who were trying to get in good with the blond hero.

"Everybody tried to help him," Locker said. "Everybody tried to give him stuff to help him out. Everybody wanted to be his best buddy. Everyone wanted to touch the glory. It was like, ‘yeah, I’ll help you out, and if I do, can I get two tickets? my uncle’s coming to town next week.’"

Barbara says Golden was so charismatic and charming that he was able to finagle pills out of just about anybody. But he finally exhausted his options, which may be why Golden developed that mysterious toothache when I went to Salt Lake. Barbara said recently she was at a University of Utah function and a woman came up and introduced herself as Golden’s former Cub Scout master. She said that he had come to her house a while back to say hello. And to ask for some pills.

There are other questions about Golden’s life since retiring that may never be answered. Where did he stay when he was broke? Who supported him, and with how much? And does he still have his football memorabilia? The Super Bowl ring is perhaps
the most treasured of all football memorabilia, but he had been broke, and it could bring
a lot of money. Several ex-teammates asked if still had the ring.

My first visit with him, Golden said all his souvenirs were still at his parents house.
And the ring? He said had left it at the house of a former girlfriend who was now
demanding money for it. He said she was asking for $2,500-3,000 for it. When I visited
with him several weeks later, he told me a variation on the same story, apparently
forgetting I had heard it before. I asked how much she was extorting.

“I don’t even remember . . . something like $700,” he said.

I asked for this woman’s name, but he said he didn’t want to tell me so the lawsuit
he was about to file would surprise her.

The former manager of Salt Lake’s Baseball Cards Etc., Ken Sowby, said Golden’s
jerseys, shoes, helmets all came in for sale. He said they weren’t that popular until
Golden was arrested. Within minutes of that announcement, Sowby said everything was
sold. And he says Golden offered to sell him his Super Bowl ring.

“He was asking $1,100 for it, and I offered about half of that to see how serious he
was,” Sowby said. “I held it in my hand. He said he’d call me back, but he never did.

“He was such a super-nice guy—he made me feel like I was the greatest thing in the
world because he was letting me try his ring on. This was a while ago, and I was a young
guy—I thought he was like a God. I thought I should give him 50 bucks just for letting me
try it on.”

Sowby pauses for a moment.

“I have no thoughts at all that he still has it. I’d bet anything he doesn’t.”

Golden told me, in one of our first conversations, that Mike Ditka and Dick Butkus
were going to come to visit to go skiing. I asked Mike about skiing, and said simply that
he can’t do it because he has two artificial hips. I told him Golden said he and Butkus
were going to visit and ski.
“Well, see, he lies too much,” Ditka said.

Then there was the job that he was about to start with a health-food company in Salt Lake. He was going to be analyzing data, breaking down numbers, “using his business degree,” he told me. They were going to give him a Nissan Pathfinder as a company car.

When I visited him again, it had fallen through because the woman who was going to hire him “just wanted some wild weekend,” he said. “Even after I told her I was married. I told her, ‘you can just forget about this whole thing.’ I swear, some people.”

I asked for her name, for the company’s name.

“I don’t even remember,” he said.

There have been various jobs—the PR job, a construction job. “It’s not like I just rolled over and died,” he said.

He worked for a while as a machinist for his father-in-law’s plastic fabricating plant in 1993, but again the drugs came into the picture. He came to work one day and slowly lapsed into incoherence.

“He got almost non-functional,” Stan Mendenhall recalls. “He got very incoherent. My son took him home. He never did collapse. It wasn’t as though he was really drunk. And he said, at that point in time, he wasn’t aware that he had taken anything. He said he thought somebody in back had put something in his coke, as a joke, but I don’t believe that.”

But Golden has high hopes for the job with former BYU teammate Smith, and it’s mutual.

“I think Golden could be very good at being a scout or a guy who can work within our organization to help young people achieve a realization of what real life is all about,” Smith said. “Because he’s been the best, been at the top, and he knows the high points and the pitfalls.”
“This thing with Bennie is just so crucial,” Golden said. He pauses for a moment.

“Crucial in the sense that it would be fun for me to do something I really enjoy.”

There were several common occurrences in the interviews I had. Everyone had theories as to why Golden got hooked for so long, so heavily. Another common element was sadness for a man who cannot gain control of his life.

In a country that values autonomy and self-determination so highly, there is not a great deal of sympathy for people who suffer from addiction. Just recently, LA Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda said, “how anybody can be dumb enough or weak enough to take drugs is something I can’t comprehend,” referring to Darryl Strawberry, who recently checked into an alcohol and drug rehab center.

Ditka echoed this sentiment, saying that while Golden might have initially gotten pills from the team doctors, he needs to take responsibility for his own situation.

“I don’t think it’s so much a sickness as a weakness,” he said. “I never think you can blame the doctor. I think the option is always there for the player. We’ve all done it. But you don’t become hooked it. Because when you do get hooked on it, it’s a one-way road to nowhere.”

So the lesson is: play the game, perform on Sunday, don’t drop the ball. Do what you have to do. Take whatever you have to take. But don’t get hooked.

That may not be so easy when one starts taking codeine and Percodan. These are physically addictive drugs, and stopping them may be, as many find, impossible. There is also the addictive personality, a physiological condition in which some people get addicted to substances like caffeine, sugar, alcohol, cocaine, or, in Golden’s case, opiates. I cast my mind back to the time spent with Golden: the cigarettes, the Pepsis, the toothache, the enrollment in AA. In “The Hidden Addiction,” Dr. Janice Keller
Phelps discusses how some people become addicted while others don’t. One factor, she writes, is religion.

“If an addictive person belongs to a religious group that abhors the use of addictive substances such as caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and street drugs, he or she may readily avoid those addictions but succumb to sugary substances or eventually to a prescription drug,” Phelps writes. In the Mormon faith, the Word of Wisdom forbids the usage of caffeine, alcohol, and drugs.

When I spoke with Golden a couple months after my first visit, he said the doctors found traces of PCP in his blood. His wife nodded, yes, that was true. It might be convenient for Golden to blame my friend for that, but Sean, who has a degree from Amherst, he has assured me it was only what the doctor had prescribed in that bottle.

John Peterson, assistant professor of pharmacy at the University of Montana and staffer of the school’s drug information hotline, says PCP doesn’t show up in blood tests by accident, and it isn’t present in the pills Golden took with me.

“He wouldn’t have tested positive for it unless he’s taken it someway,” Peterson said. “He wouldn’t have gotten it from the Mepergan, that’s for sure.”

Another reason people may not have much sympathy for Golden is that he had it all—the blond hero had money, adulation, fame, talent, and loads of charisma. But it wasn’t enough for him. He had to have that—his whole identity had been defined by performing, and it had always been that way.

Barbara said there was always pressure from his family to perform.

“He was like the family entertainer, the star of the family. He was their social life,” she said. “All they did was go and watch Golden practice and play. When he finally went into rehab, the center had a family day and no one from his family came. It was a mile from their house. They couldn’t face that the Golden boy fell from grace.”
When I asked Golden about that episode, he said, “sounds like you’ve been talking to Barbara.” I said yes, I had, but what had happened?

“My family couldn’t make it because they were working,” he said. “It was during the day, it wasn’t at night. It wasn’t like they could just take off.”

Sterling, who followed Golden’s path from BYU to Hawaii, says that he was working 50 miles north of Salt Lake, but that perhaps the family was in denial at first. But he also thinks Barbara is carrying a grudge.

“Maybe there was a lot of support at first, but the meeting kind of came up real fast and it was quite a shock. We were all in doubt and fear. So we weren’t there and Barbara was and Golden was. She’s carried that thorn in her side for 15 years. Get over it.”

He also told me that he felt it would only take the right job for Golden to get back on track.

“Golden is so good when he’s not pill-oriented,” he said. “When he gets a job that is him, he’ll be excellent at it. Not just good. but better than anyone.”

Sterling expressed sadness about Golden’s state, as did Barbara. When I met her at an upscale restaurant in downtown Salt Lake, she was tall, immaculate and distant. Dressed in white linen, her blond hair pulled high and back, eyebrows slick, lips deep red, she spoke candidly about Golden in a calm, detached voice—until the end of the conversation.

As we were wrapping up, I asked her what she would say to Golden if she could say anything. She paused on this for a moment.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I really don’t know. I guess I feel bad for him. He continues to hurt himself and waste his talent. It’s easy for me to say he should quit and probably harder for him to break that habit. I’ve come to the realization in my life that I can’t worry about him. I can’t change it. I can’t make it any different.”
Her voice starts cracking, and her eyes dampen. “I feel badly that he is still hurting himself and especially if he is remarried and has a child. I know how difficult that must be for someone who is young and who has a child, who has a lot of expectations. And that’s horribly sad. I feel badly that someone has to go through that.”

Her eyes are filled and I am frozen, not knowing what to do. There is silence. My black plastic tape recorder sits on the table between us. “I don’t know what to say to him,” she finally said.

Cliff Harris expressed similar emotions. He called me collect one night at about 11 p.m. his time to talk about Golden. We spoke for more than an hour-and-a-half. I was elaborating on some point when suddenly he interrupted me.

“Where are you at in Montana?”

“Missoula.”

“What’s the weather like up there in Missoula?” he asked.

“Well, it’s about 40 now, but tomorrow it’s supposed to get up to 60.” I had no idea what he was getting at.

“Yeah, it’s like that here, too. Except here it’s supposed to get up to 78 tomorrow.”

“Hmm.”

Silence. Suddenly, “you know, this is really sad. He lived a lie. He’s just living a lie. His life. This is terrible. I hate to hear it. I don’t know what to do about it. I hate to see someone with the potential he has living a life to prove things to other people. I’m guilty of that myself, but not to the extent that he is. I’d love to help him, but I don’t know how.”

In Golden’s apartment, there is a black and white picture between the bathroom and his son’s room. It is a series of three pictures. In the first, Golden is racing downfield alone, arms cupped, eyes fixed intently on the ball coming down. In the middle picture,
the moment of contact, he clutches the ball, eyes closed, suspended in time. In the last picture, he has the ball held under his right arm, his back to the camera, a wide-open end zone awaiting as he sprints toward it.

"When I read about Golden's arrest in the papers, I called and got a message to him," said Thomas Henderson, who battled a cocaine addiction for years. "I said, 'if you need help, give me a call.' He never called. I've been sober for ten years. I was addicted to crack cocaine. He might think his addiction to pills is tough, but wait until you get your mouth around that little crack pipe. I wouldn't give him any money, any pills. But I can tell him that I've been through the hell of addiction, and I know what that's like. But I also know the beauty of recovery. And I know how to live. But does Golden Richards want to live?

"I had to get over the myth of Hollywood. Can Golden get over the myth of Golden? Can he be John Richards?"

Maybe he can. Danny White thinks he can.

"There is a lot of greatness there, a lot of character. It may have been covered over a couple years, it may have been tainted, but it's there. I know his family, his background, and I know he has the potential to overcome anything he needs to overcome."

But maybe he can't. Maybe no one could. Could you? Could you let it go? Could you relinquish looking through the roof of Cowboys Stadium, looking at the sun through your yellow hair, hearing the cheers of thousands, knowing at one point all eyes would be fixed on you?

Maybe he tries every day. But when an adoring fan comes to the door, telling him how he was always a hero, asking if he remembers this catch or that play, maybe it all comes flooding back. The memories come back of when he was famous, a man who happened to fit America's definition of perfection. The speed. The hair. The grace. A
Mormon boy from a big family in Salt Lake who captured the national imagination, and who thought no one would want him if they knew of the habit he had developed.

And, just as he needed his pills, America needed him. We needed a Golden Richards to somehow tell us there was such a person who had it all, who was perfect. I needed him as a man who made me believe that pain went away, that the glory of the touchdown would go on forever.

I haven't read much Joseph Campbell, but I am familiar with him enough to know about the fall of the hero. Perhaps I couldn't have accepted Golden with any flaws; even if he had had a big house and a good job and had never become addicted, I would have found some reason to be disappointed. It would have been too surprising to know that he was a man, just like any other man, except once he had been the fair-haired boy on America's Team. And so maybe he was right—maybe no one would have wanted him if we knew of his addiction. We would have found someone else to take his place, and Golden Richards would have been forgotten.

I anticipate Golden will never speak to me again after reading this, which is difficult. I will become the bad guy. I can't stop thinking that it might have better if I had never contacted him. That way, he would have been forever the hero; I would have known about his arrest, but I could have projected my own fantasies of recovery onto him, and my memories would be the ones in *Sports Illustrated*, the one on the cover of the *Chicago Tribune* magazine.

As it is, my images of Golden Richards, my hero since the age of eight, will be of him opening the door that first night, standing over my shoulder at the phone booth, lying prostrate on the floor of his living room. But there is another one that will always remain with me.

There is a Golden Richards file in the BYU sports information office, and it is pretty sparse. It has a few pieces of memorabilia, including some black and white pictures of
Golden as a student. They are nondescript—except for one. In it, a heart-breakingly youthful Golden sits on the bench during a night game looking out at the field. Bundled in a large BYU windbreaker, his yellow hair tousled, his arms clutched around him, he looks so vulnerable—you don’t want to see him near the barbaric game of football. He is looking intently out onto the field, his team probably behind. You wonder what he is thinking, if this beautiful young man has any idea of the fame and the pain that await him. You don’t want him there, you want him tossing the paper onto your porch, singing in the BYU choir, dating your daughter. Not being the target for a strong safety with anger seething in his eyes. He looks lost amid the roars and the screams and the rage.
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