Dear Adrian,

I want you to do something for me. Listen closely. I want you to go into your mom’s bedroom. Sitting in the middle of her bed, you’ll find a box. Open it. Inside, you’ll find a small plaque. It reads: “Thank you for 30 wonderful years of service.”

The textile mill where Mom works — one of the three jobs she’s been holding down to provide for the five kids she’s raising on her own — has shut down. You’re only 14 years old, and you’re the baby of the family. Thirty years probably seems like forever to you, and it is a long time, especially when you’re doing hard labor like Mom for all those years — never missing a day. Mom has a work ethic and a toughness you’ll adopt as your own, and it’ll come in handy more times than you know.

Thirty years, and this plaque all she gets. That’s it. No pension. No severance. Nothing.

*Thank you.*

It’s going to be painful to see how this hurts her, but this is the first of many lessons about how the world really works that I don’t want you to ever forget: There are no guarantees. Do things the way you want to do them and do the things that make you happy. Whatever you do, do it for you, because you could give someone your sweat and loyalty, and break your back for them for 30 years, and in the end, get nothing more than a pat on the back. Regardless of how hard you work, it has to be gratifying for *you*. Nobody else.

Life isn’t going to be easy. Even at 14 years old, you’ve already learned that. But things are going to get worse, for you and for Mom. Then they’ll continue to get worse. But then they’ll get better. Just trust in yourself and learn from all the negative things you see around you. They’ll shape the man you become — the man you are today. And if you do that, eventually you’ll be able to look back on an amazing life you’ve built for yourself, your family and yes, even for Mom.

The summer between your junior and senior years in high school will be one of the most difficult times of your life. Your life — and your body — will change forever. You’ll hit a growth spurt that’ll see you stretch from 5’11’’ to almost 6’3’’. You’ll grow so fast you’ll develop stretch marks on your back. You’ll be self-conscious about them. When the guys in the weight room all take their shirts off to lift, you won’t. You’ll be uncomfortable. You’ll be ashamed.

Don’t be. Be comfortable in your own skin and be proud of who you are. Always.

It’s going to feel weird, suddenly being so big. Your clothes won’t fit anymore. By that time, your older brother, William, will already be 6’3’’, so you’ll start borrowing his clothes. You’ll start spending a lot of time with him. You love William, and he’s a good big brother. But he represents a part of your hometown that you’ll begin to hate. The part that sucks people in and never loosens its grip — a grip tightened by the drugs and violence you see all around you.

A grip that will prove too strong for William to escape.

One night that summer, you’ll go to the movies with William and his girlfriend. You won’t know why, but he’ll need to leave in the middle of the movie. You’ll ride along as William pulls up to a house you’ve never seen before. He’ll tell you to stay in the car, and you will. He’ll go inside. You’ll be talking to his girlfriend, just trying to pass the time until William comes back, when you’ll hear something from inside the house.

*Bop! Bop! Bop!*

Gunshots.

People will start pouring out of the front door of the house and scattering. William will be the last one out. You’ll burst out of the car and run to meet him on the front porch, his body covered in blood, five bullets in his back. You’ll be surrounded by chaos, but in that moment, you’ll feel quiet and calm, like there’s nobody else there. Just you and William.

“Go get Mom,” he’ll struggle to say. And you won’t even hesitate. You’re all the way on the other side of town, but you’ll just start running. The wind pushes your shirt, soaked in William’s warm blood, against your chest and it sticks to your skin as you sprint through the streets in the dark, following what would be your brother’s last request.

*Go get Mom.*

She’s sitting on the front porch when you get there. She sees you covered in blood and immediately thinks you’re hurt. She starts panicking. You’ll try to calm her down, but you’re so shocked, scared and just out of breath that you can’t even speak.

“What happened?” she’ll scream. “What happened!”

You’ll never get the chance to answer her. By the time you finally catch your breath, the police will have called the house. Instead of you telling her what happened to her son, she’ll hear it from a stranger over the phone. By that time, William will be dead.

At 16 years old, still the baby in the family, you’ll become the man of the house.

One thing you’ll always remember about William is that he was a great athlete. But he always told you that you have the potential to be better than him, both as an athlete and as a person. That’s why he’ll tell you to stay in the car that night. He’ll never want you to be exposed to the life of drugs and violence that sucked him in, and ultimately took him from you.

Tragedies can and will be defining moments in your life. Don’t hide your emotions. Open yourself up and allow yourself to feel that pain. That’s how you cope. That’s how you grow. You’re a closed-off, quiet kid, and your instincts will tell you to deal with this alone. Don’t. It’s up to you to shoulder this burden for the entire family.

As the man of the house, that’s your responsibility.

I wish I could tell you that will be the last time death and tragedy will touch your life. But I can’t. Just a couple of months after burying your brother, you’ll hear those same familiar sounds you heard inside that house that night — *Bop! Bop! Bop!* — outside the gas station where you and the guys from the football team hang out before games. This time, it’ll be your friend and teammate, Jacob Walker, who’ll be the one who can’t outrun the bullets.

The same cloud of chaos and emotional turmoil that fell on your house after William’s death will descend upon your entire high school. You’ll handle Jacob’s death the same way you handled William’s. You’ll be hurting inside, but outside, you won’t show it. You’ll try to be strong for all Jacob’s friends, the same way you wanted to be strong for your entire family. But there’s one of your friends who, despite your best efforts, your strength won’t be enough to help.

Montre Bullock.

The story you’ll hear is that Montre committed suicide because he couldn’t deal with Jacob’s death. You’ll never get the whole story, and you’ll never really know the truth behind what happened to Montre. But after three deaths in only about six months, you’ll come to one definitive realization: Your hometown of High Point, North Carolina, is not a place you can stay. You can’t be in that type of environment, and neither can your family. And as the man of the house, it’s up to you get them out, because your mom can’t lose another son.

Follow that instinct. That’s a survival instinct that will take you far in life.

You’ll have a lot of anger, sadness and confusion in your heart, and you’ll be searching for a place to let it pour out. And you’ll find it in an unlikely place: on the football field.

Right now, at 14 years old, you think you’re a pretty good little basketball player. And you’re right. By the time you hit your senior year in high school, you’ll be thinking about a future in college basketball, maybe even a career in the NBA. That’s going to be your ticket out of High Point.

Your relationship with football will be much more complicated. You’ll never even play a snap of football until your junior year when your basketball coach, Coach Clemons, who also coaches the wide receivers and defensive backs on the football team, asks you to come out and play. You will.

And after the first day, you’ll quit.

I know, that doesn’t sound like you, right? But it’s true. The contact, the equipment — you just won’t like football, so you’ll quit. But Coach Clemons isn’t going to give up so easily. He’ll tell you that if you don’t come back out and play football, he won’t let you play basketball, either.

That’ll get you back on the field real quick.

Remember that growth spurt I told you you’re going to have? You’re going to hate it at first, but you’ll love it when you hit the football field. You’ll finally learn to understand your new body. Your newfound size and strength will become an asset. You’ll kill it on the basketball court and the football field as a senior.

Now, this one is going to come as a real surprise, so I hope you’re sitting down. You’ll have so much success on the football field that — despite getting a McDonald’s All-American Honorable Mention in basketball — you’ll choose to play football in college. I know, it sounds crazy. But let me ask you one thing: How many 6’3’’ shooting guards do you see in the NBA?

That’s what I thought. Choose football. That’s your best chance to play professionally and get your family out of High Point. Don’t forget, that’s the most important thing: your family.

And don’t worry, because it’s a decision you’ll never regret. After a successful college career at NC State, you’ll leave school early for the NFL Draft. A lot of people will tell you that it’s a mistake to leave early, and honestly, you’ll feel the same way. But when it comes time to decide, all it’ll take is one look at Mom, and you’ll say to yourself, *I can’t watch her work this hard anymore.*

And she won’t have to, because in the 2001 NFL Draft, you’ll get taken in the third round by the Arizona Cardinals.

That’s when a new life for you and Mom will really begin.

Your first preseason game in the NFL will be one you’ll never forget for a couple of reasons. One, you’re in the NFL. You step out onto that field in a Cardinals jersey, and it’s the greatest feeling in the world. And two, on one of the first plays in your professional career, you’re going to get hit by a train.

A train named Shannon Sharpe.

By this time, you’re playing safety in a preseason game against the Broncos. Shannon will block down and then release on a little out pattern. You’ll see it coming from a mile away. You’ll be coming downhill from the safety position thinking, *I’m going to take this guy’s head clean off.* He’ll put his shoulder down, you’ll hit him square with 235 pounds behind you at 4.45 speed…

And it’ll feel like you ran into a tree.

While you’re lying on the ground wondering what the hell just happened, you’ll look up and see the No. 84 on the back of Shannon’s jersey getting smaller in the distance as he runs 50 yards down the field for a touchdown.

Next lesson: You think what you did in college is enough to survive in the NFL? No sir. It’s not. You’ll have to rededicate yourself in the weight room and become the biggest, baddest, toughest dude you can be. And thanks to The School of Shannon Sharpe, you will.

You’ll have a decent first couple of years in the NFL, but during the offseason before your third year, a strange thing is going to happen. All your top guys will start leaving. Your quarterback, Jake Plummer, and your top wide receiver, David Boston, will both get released. Your best running back, Thomas Jones, traded. And you’ll get your call to the general manager’s office, too. You’ll walk in, mentally prepared to get cut. *This is it*, you’ll think. *This is how my NFL career is going to end.*

You, a 23-year-old scared, confused third-rounder who just wants to keep his NFL career alive for one more day to continue to provide for his mom and his family, will sit across the desk from your GM, Rod Graves, and he’ll look you in the eye and shoot you straight.

“Adrian,” he’ll say. “This is your team now.”

You’ll just stare back at him with a blank expression, thinking, *What?*

“We’re going to start from scratch and rebuild this team around our best players…”

Your face, still blank.

“…and we’ve determined that you’re one of our best young players, so we’re going to build this team around you.”

Somewhere inside, you find the breath — and sense — to say the only word that comes into your mind.

“Okay.”

And that’s it. You’ll stand up and walk out of his office, still trying to process what just happened.

You might not know this about yourself yet — you’re still so young — but you’re fiercely loyal. When you walk out of that office, you’ll spend the entire offseason lifting, running and training in an effort to live up to those impossible expectations.

*We’re going to build this team around you.*

See that box on Mom’s bed? The one with the plaque inside? You’ll think about that in this moment when you finally realize the opportunity the Cardinals are giving you. The difference between the Cardinals and that textile mill is simple: The Cardinals are investing in you. You’re not punching a time clock. They’re going to pay you money that’ll change you and your family’s lives forever, and everything moving forward will be performance based. You’ll get out what you put in, so you’re going to put your heart and soul into your game and into that franchise. You’ll always be thankful that the Cardinals were the team that drafted you, and you’ll want to do everything in your power to make sure their gamble pays off.

You’ll learn firsthand that rebuilding an NFL team from scratch doesn’t happen overnight. You’re going to lose. A lot. It’s going to be hard, so get ready.

But when it comes time to hit the free agent market, you won’t. You’ll re-sign. You’ll be loyal to the team that put its trust in you to be a cornerstone to build around, and you’ll stay in Arizona to finish what you started. You’ll start winning. Then start winning a little more. Then, you’ll find yourself in a place you never could have dreamed of back when you quit the football team after that first day of practice in high school.

The Super Bowl.

I’m not going to spoil that one for you. I’m not going to tell you what happens. But I will tell you this much: When you get there, soak it all in. Take in every moment and savor it, because there are legends in this game that never even make it to that point. They never even get the chance to play for a championship in the biggest sporting event on the planet. And you, after all you will have been through — from William, to Jacob, to Montre and all the way through the losing NFL seasons — it will all bring you to that night in Tampa, Florida, for Super Bowl XLIII.

Just enjoy it, kid. No matter what, it’ll be a night you’ll never forget.

Which brings me to another night I don’t think you’ll ever forget. Actually, this one’s still ahead in *my* future as I write this, so I guess it’s one *we* won’t ever forget.

After 12 NFL seasons and five Pro Bowls in an Arizona Cardinals uniform, you’ll finally hang it up in 2015. It’ll be a hard decision, but the right one. Everyone’s time comes. This is yours. And the Cardinals will be thanking us for our 12 years of wonderful service this weekend. But instead of our name being etched into a small plaque, it’ll be raised into the Cardinals Ring of Honor high above the field at University of Phoenix Stadium, where it will live forever. And a handful of times every year, 60,000-plus fans will sit in those seats, see the name Adrian Wilson on the facade, and be reminded of everything we were and everything we stood for. The loyalty. The perseverance. The hard work. All of it.

And that’s Mom’s reward, too. She had nothing to show for her 30 years at the textile mill besides that plaque. But trust me, when I stand on the 50-yard line this weekend with Mom at my side and see our name unveiled in the Ring of Honor, I promise to look over at her, give her a kiss and say, “Thank you for 35 wonderful years of being my mom.”

Cause we both know that from the very start, it was all for her.

Trust in yourself. You’ll never regret it.

— Adrian

[Adrian Wilson](http://www.theplayerstribune.com/author/awilson/)

[Curt Schilling](http://www.theplayerstribune.com/author/cschilling/) Guest Contributor

Dear 16-year-old Curt,

Tomorrow at lunch, a kid is going to dare you to take a dip of Copenhagen. If you say yes, like I did, you’ll be addicted for the rest of your life. Well, the rest of your life up to the point when you are diagnosed with cancer.

I get what you’re thinking. You’re 16 — you’re invincible, just like all your buddies. If you were to jump ahead 33 years, you couldn’t write a better dream than the one your life is going to be.

With one exception.

If you say yes tomorrow, you will become addicted to chewing tobacco and you will get mouth cancer.

I’m going to tell you a little story that I think may help guide you. (I saw this on a TV series called *The West Wing —*great show, you’re going to love it one day — and it very much rings true).

There was a man — we’ll call him Joe. Joe lived in the same house his entire life. One day, a huge storm came. He turned on the radio: *Prepare for torrential rains and deadly flash flooding. Everyone should evacuate to safety immediately.*

See, Joe was a devout Christian. He had the Lord in his life for as long as he could remember. Church every Sunday, prayed twice a day.

“My faith in God is resolute. He will save me,” Joe thought.

The rain kept coming down.

About two hours later, water began to flood his house, so he scrambled on to the roof.

After a half-hour, with the water rising rapidly, a boat sputtered up to Joe’s house, which was now partially submerged.

Boat driver: “Come on down, I will take you to safety!”

Joe sat calmly on his roof.

Joe: “No thanks! My faith in God is strong, God will save me!”

So the boat sped off.

Another hour went by, and the water had risen to the roof.

A helicopter flew over, saw Joe and swooped down, dropping down a rope.

Helicopter pilot: “Grab a hold! I will pull you up!”

Joe: “No thank you! My faith in the Lord is strong. He will save me!!”

The man looked awkwardly at what he could only guess was someone who’d lost his mind. The helicopter flew off.

About 10 minutes later the water overtook Joe’s roof, so he swam out into the strong current. It quickly pulled him below.

When Joe opened his eyes, he saw the Lord standing at the gates of Heaven.

“Joe, what on earth are you doing here??”

“I was just about to ask you that very question, Father,” Joe replied.

“Wait… what?” says God.

“Father I have had Faith in you since my first memory. I have prayed morning and night to you. I have sinned, but you know that in my heart I have asked for forgiveness and tried my hardest to do right by you.”

“Yes, Joe I know in your heart you are a good, honest and loving man.”

“Then why did you let me die?” Joe asked.

“I sent you a radio message, a boat and a helicopter! What more did you want?”

I tell you, 16-year-old me, that story for a very important reason. From tomorrow forward, you will be given the same signs that Joe was given a hundred times over. Many will be far more insightful and far more telling than the ones he received.

You will develop sores, you will lose your sense of taste *and* smell. You will develop lesions. You will lose your gums — they will rot. You will have problems with your teeth for the rest of your life.

You will meet men — many good, honest men — who chewed. None of them will have their entire face. They will be missing jaws, chins, cheeks, noses and more. None will live more than a year or two after you meet them. All of them were tobacco chewers.

You will meet Joe Garigiola. He will introduce you to Bill Tuttle. Bill will have no lower face. His entire lower jaw is gone. It was that, or die of mouth cancer. Well, not “that or,” because that mouth cancer would kill him inside of two years.

You will brush your teeth and your mouth will bleed. Not light blood from your gums, but darker blood from deeper inside your mouth. That’s the chew destroying your tissue. You will get message after message, but your addiction will *always* win, until it wins the biggest battle.

If you say yes tomorrow, you will begin to kill yourself from the inside out. It’s difficult for you to understand in this current phase of your life, but by chewing tobacco, you are jeopardizing your participation in what will be some of your most important moments.

You will risk any chance of seeing your four amazing children graduate high school. You will potentially lose the opportunity to walk your daughter Gabriella (who, like her dad, will be blessed with simple yet outstanding pitching mechanics) down the aisle. You will risk not seeing Gehrig, your oldest son, pitch for four years at a New England college. You may miss your son Grant graduating high school and changing the world.  And you may be absent as your youngest son Garrison — who aspires to follow in your father’s footsteps and join the army — masterfully plays goalie with a remarkable passion.

You could miss the most important and rewarding days of your life with your beautiful wife Shonda.

If cancer kills you, what are you leaving them with? What are you leaving them for?

Your dad is going to die in five years. You know what’s going to kill him? A heart attack brought on by heart disease and lung cancer caused by tobacco use. He’ll die right in front of you. You two will be alone and together for his final minutes on earth. The night before he passes away, you two are going to sit up and talk until 4 a.m. You will chalk up the conversation as peculiar, but years later it will hit you like a ton of bricks. It will hit you like a radio message, boat or helicopter. He knew. It’s why the things he told you that night were things only a dad can tell a son. He knew.

Right now, you don’t listen to the messages God gives you. And if you don’t alter this habit, in 32 years you will be diagnosed with cancer.

Finally, consider this: How many kids will start dipping over the next 32 years because they saw *you* do it?

Do you want that on you? No?

Then my advice is simple. Tomorrow, at lunch, just say no.

Make the right choice,

– Curt

*Schilling currently serves as an on-air analyst for* Sunday Night Baseball *on ESPN. Shonda Schilling is running the 119th Boston Marathon on April 20 as part of the Dana-Farber Marathon Challenge team to support Boston’s Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, where Curt received treatment for cancer last year.* [*Click here*](http://www.rundfmc.org/faf/donorReg/donorPledge.asp?ievent=1115928&lis=1&kntae1115928=F64B0486F274495983A8CB376E7B9FCA&supId=125896754) *to contribute to Shonda’s run.*