

Ray

2200 words

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When the shock of the diagnosis wore off, I figured if I was going down the tubes anyway I might as well take some people with me. So I made a list.

On top of the list was Ray, who beat me up good in junior high school.

There were others. One guy raped my sister in a stairwell and got away with it. Another was a drunk driver who crossed over a two-lane in southern Oregon into a friend of mine. Another guy, in the newspaper, threw a little lap dog into traffic.

My doctor wanted to put me on an experimental therapy. I said how about first putting me in touch with someone who'd been on that therapy and was still around. The doc said he'd look into it, but he never got back to me.

I only confided in one person, my favorite bartender Mitch at Weatherbee's on Chestnut Street. A month in, Mitch said I looked okay, and when was the thing supposed to ramp up?

Another couple weeks went by . . . and Mitch said could they have mixed up my sample in the lab, or some shit?

I told him that possibility--long shot that it was--was starting to occur to me too. I was still doing my morning run, the Marina Safeway to the bridge and back, 6 miles. Yeah the thing could be laying low, but I had to say I felt normal.

Mitch said so go get re-tested for God's sakes.

The problem being, I'd checked off one item on my list, and at this point I didn't want to know.

Meanwhile I found Ray. He lived on Webster between Turk and Eddy. His building was a modern low-rise, a step up from where he probably lived back then, but still you guessed redevelopment money.

A security guard was sitting behind a high desk and a piece of plexiglass.

"Could you direct me to Reynaldo Holmes please," I said.

"And who should I say?" the security guard said, picking up the house phone.

"Charles Fuqua."

"He says he'll come down," the guard said. "You're welcome to wait in the lounge, right there."

I unfolded a hardback chair and took a seat. There was an elderly woman up front watching a talk show with the volume loud.

When Holmes walked in, he looked old. He'd had a high forehead and light complexion and had moved with an easy grace back then. Now he had a slight limp and had gained some weight, but it was definitely him.

"Charles, he had a rough time of it," Ray said. "He ran with a bad bunch, got into it."

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"That boy been down for some time now. Which bring me to my next question: Who the fuck are you?"

I stood up. Ray's eyes were yellow and he was missing an upper incisor.

"Matt Grady. From Marina?" I extended my hand. Ray took it, and I knew he knew.

"Man, now you taking me back," Ray said. "You're talking junior high school. Only school I remember, Galileo. Played some ball there."

"Is that right."

"Caught me a touchdown on Turkey Day at Kezar, corner of the end zone . . . We called it Strong 86 Flag, two DBs on me, I went up and got it. We lost to Lincoln . . . They was full of white boys like you."

I said, “Remember playing War Ball on rainy days?”

“Fuck you talking about?”

“You remember, give me a call.” I picked up an old newspaper and wrote my number on it.

Ray said, “I got four hours a day, they working on me in a chair . . . Mother fucker asking do I remember War Ball.”

“If you do Ray, call me.”

I thought of asking him what the final score was of that Turkey Day game, but that was getting off the subject.

A week later I get a phone message from the guy. It sounded like he'd been drinking and I couldn't understand much. I called him back the next morning.

“Yeah,” Ray said. “I phoned to tell you you're an ugly piece of shit, just like you was back then. I'm not losing sleep over it or nothing, but I remember what happened that time by the park . . . It shouldn't have happened.”

Wow.

“Oh, so now you going silent.”

I took a minute.

“Actually no Ray, you got me thinking, a little different here . . . Ooh boy. Would you want to, get a drink . . . or have lunch or something?”

“Man, you is one strange white boy. Why not? If I can squeeze you into my schedule.”

We made it for the next day, and when I got there Ray was outside waiting, talking to a guy on the sidewalk who was laughing at something Ray said.

Ray struggled a little getting in and out of the car, but it went okay. We got squared away in Weatherbee’s, not the exact table but next to one where I brought a date not too long ago that didn’t work out great.

“This is the kind of joint,” Ray said, looking around, “I’d never walk into in a million years.”

“I hear what you’re saying,” I said, “but you get comfortable with a place. They know you, start you off with a smile, no surprises. That’s worth something.”

“It is,” Ray said. “I had one like that on Grove Street, Monte’s, but they let it go. You didn’t trust the cuisine no more.”

We ordered drinks. I got a beer, Ray had scotch on the rocks. Mitch wasn’t bartending today at lunch, it was Eloise, a plump redheaded woman with a touch of an Irish brogue.

“You okay drinking that hard stuff?” I said. “Your treatment?”

“Hemodialysis,” Ray said. “I was going three days. They got a unit at SF General just for us, so we can take a piss. Then they revising it to four. That’s where I’m at now. I got Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday off . . . Answer your question, we supposed to avoid alcohol.”

I said, “Where’d you live, when you and Charles and Williams jumped me back then?”

“On Sacramento.”

“Jeez, I always figured you lived down past Geary. The projects.”

Ray said, “I can tell you getting ready to reminisce now . . . Mr. Gullickson, the PE teacher. Man, that dude kicked my ass for three years.”

“No kidding. You remember the one, a kid's looking into the girls' gym, so Gullickson makes him put on one of their uniforms?”

“That blue shit?”

“Yeah, the one-piece jobs. Then he sends him in there for the period.”

Ray was laughing now, his shoulders moving.

“I wonder how his discipline style would go over today,” I said.

“It wouldn’t,” Ray said, “but it wasn’t the worst thing. Kids’s too soft now . . . That’s not why we here though, is it?”

“No.” I leaned in and lowered my voice. “Any idea how I’d get a firearm that couldn’t be traced?”

Ray scrunched up his face. “Grady,” he said, “you a more fucked up motherfucker than I even thought. What you want to go messing with something like that for?”

“If I ended up . . . hurting somebody, . . . which I’m not sure about, but if it happened . . . wouldn’t that be one way to handle it? A short-barreled something or other they couldn’t track?”

“Sound like you playing Cops and Robbers with me now son.”

“No, there’s a situation . . . a legitimate one, not around here, but there’s a possibility.”

Ray gave me a long look.

“What would it be, something like twenty years ago we messed you up?”

“Eighteen. It was 2004.”

“You been carrying it around with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me work on it. And I wouldn’t mind a refill.”

On Wednesday afternoon I dropped in on Ray in the dialysis department at SF General.

“Well now, looky here what the cat brung in,” he said.

Ray had two strands of red rubber tubing taped to his forearm that continued into a couple canisters. There was a big computerized machine. He was on a recliner, wearing a sweater and Oakland A’s cap, partially covered by a blanket. There were nine or ten identical patient set ups, and several TV's blaring.

“I called you back,” I said. “But there was no option to leave a message.”

“And there never will be,” Ray said. “I hate the telephone. I’m a fan of direct contact.”

“Good thing I remembered your schedule, then. What’d you want?”

“I got your thing is all.”

“You did?”

“Told you I’d look into handling your business, didn’t I? So why you surprised?”

“No, it’s just, I thought you might like put me in touch with someone. Not finish it off.”

“You want it or not?”

“Oh, yeah. Listen, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t be jumping for joy like it Christmas morning. You setting up for some serious shit now.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“You owe me nothing. If you want, you can buy me another drink.”

“Ray, you’re a good man, you know that?”

He was quiet for a second. “So all these years later . . . that’d be your conclusion then.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re *still* a white boy piece of crap,” he said. “But looking at the whole picture, I guess I’ll take it.”

I got together a couple more times with him. Once we heard some jazz.

That fall I moved to Manhattan Beach. The loose idea was reinvent myself, now that it looked increasingly promising I wasn’t going to die off.

I came back for Thanksgiving and dropped in on Ray.

The security guy in the lobby said Ray was in the hospital, Saint Francis.

God damn it.

Ray was sitting up, looking irritated, pointing the remote control at the TV.

“Grady, you little prick,” he said. “Now that you here, how ‘bout finding me some fresh batteries.”

I never knew whether to shake hands, give the guy a hug, whatever else, since he didn’t particularly like any of it.

“What happened to you, man?” I said.

“Ah I fell.”

“You mean like at home? What’d you do?”

“Naw, picking me up some wrestling tickets . . . They got so much dog shit on the sidewalks now, was trying to avoid stepping in a pile, got tangled up and went down.”

“Jeez . . . Well, not the worst thing. I mean at least you were out and about, compared to *old* people reaching into an upper cabinet and having a problem.”

Ray said, “Whyn’t you shut up while you ahead.”

“What kind of wrestling?” I said.

“Only one kind. Why you asking that?”

“You mean, the stuff we watched as a kid? Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage?”

“Yeah. The Honky Tonk Man coming over the top rope. The Junkyard Dog and shit. They re-enacting it next weekend, the Cow Palace.”

“Not . . . bringing the same guys back, you’re not saying . . . you mean re-igniting it? The sport?”

“You call it what you want,” Ray said, “and you can take the tickets too. I won’t be able to make it.”

I said, “Hold on, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here . . . You look good, I’m not seeing any casts anywhere. You just got shook up, hit your head, what?”

“My hip. They calling it a hairline fracture. Not putting me under the knife or nothing, but I got to go to a rehab joint.”

“Oh no Ray, don’t do that. If you can avoid it. Something like that, it can beat you down, the atmosphere. You can lose your motivation, start thinking like the permanent ones.”

He laughed. “The lifers. I keep saying it, you pulling out the surprises . . . Didn’t know you was now a medical doctor too.”

I asked the nurses’ station for new batteries. No one could find any, but they gave me a fresh remote and I tested it out on Ray’s TV.

“You got college ball this weekend, some good rivalry games,” I said.

“Fine. I’ll keep it in mind.”

I felt awkward standing there, but I didn’t want to sit down.

Ray said, “I appreciate it, you checking on me. I know you got more important business to take care of, now that you a Hollywood type.”

“Okay,” I said, “Let’s don’t be going all serious. You got my number, nothing’s changed. I’m an hour away, hour and a half tops, on the airplane.”

“I know,” he said.

And that was that.

I walked out of the place, good to get some real air, the medical smells were tough.