

**For Real**

**2850 words**

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Richie was a chair lift operator at Heavenly Valley, and in the summer one of the resorts had an alpine slide and he worked that too.

Once someone flew off the slide and got cut up pretty good, and Richie's boss gave him grief for not instructing the customers better how to be safe out there.

Richie stood up to the guy, that was bullshit, you can't control an idiot who leans too far and flips the little imitation Swiss cart off the track. He ended up getting a promotion out of the deal, Richie thinking funny how things work.

But he was restless. He enjoyed watching YouTube videos where people lived in vans, essentially had no freaking idea where they were at or were going, but didn't seem to mind.

He'd been saving to try to buy a condo. He inherited a few dollars from his Uncle Red, who before he died of a heart attack in the hot tub hit a scratch-off state lottery at his corner liquor store in Pennsylvania.

But you had to go high 3's low 4's now to get in the game, Jeez even a simple one-bedroom. The Nevada side was a little cheaper but not much, and Richie decided this was idiotic, even if I came up with the downpayment (unlikely) I wouldn't be able to afford the mortgage.

So he hunted around and found a van in Gardnerville, a 2002 Astro, the guy claiming they only used it for excursions and she ran great, as you can probably tell since she barely has over a hundred twenty on her.

Richie didn't trust that but the man was only asking twelve, which seemed fair, and he figured as long as he made it home he had a guy who could fix shit cheap out of his driveway.

It did run pretty well, the main issue was the mesh on the pop-up was shot, and Richie got that handled and replaced the driver's seat with a more comfy one that swiveled, and that was about it, he was kind of proud of the vehicle.

So on October 1st, when the alpine slide season ended, he took off.

First stop was supposed to be Yosemite, and then Yellowstone before it got too cold.

He'd never been to Yellowstone, was a little scared of the grizzlies but wanted to check it out, and Yosemite he'd almost been to with an old girlfriend but they got in an argument on the way there and it didn't fly.

That was on account of a man and woman hitchhiking on 49 outside Sonora, Richie thinking a harmless old hippie couple, but his girlfriend got upset when he put on his blinker.

Richie picked them up anyway, and 10 miles down the road he was convinced they might be dangerous. The guy wore a big old knife in a belt-sheath and at one point pulled it out and starting cleaning his fingernails, but a couple other warning signs too--and Richie was able to get rid of them at a pull-out by forking over some money--but that was it for the Yosemite trip and the relationship.

His girlfriend shook her head most of the way home, Richie starting to think of her as an insect, and she kept repeating that he had a brain-damaged version of common sense, plus he was stubborn as a lame mule . . . the big conclusion, she felt sorry for any woman ended up with him.

This time Richie decided, his first gas stop, inside the Pilot convenience store, forget Yosemite and Yellowstone and any national parks period.

The TV behind the counter was previewing something more interesting, this week's college football matchups, and Richie thought, you know what, why not find a juicy one and go there.

Georgia versus Florida sounded good. Georgia was ranked 3rd, Florida was coming off a down year but in an SEC outing anything can happen.

So the game was Saturday in Athens, Georgia--and this was Monday, and Richie focused and got there in 3 days.

Little hiccup with the van at a campground in north Texas, a puddle of coolant on the ground when he got up in the morning, but some old RV guy took a look, said it could be the water pump but they can play tricks on you, and don't worry about it until something happens.

So he didn't, and Athens was a great college town, Richie deciding if he ever goes to one this would be at the top. Everyone was fired up and talking about the game, there was black and red Bulldog paraphernalia all over--the team mascot--and it was only Thursday night.

Saturday morning he figured get to the stadium nice and early, two hours before kickoff, get squared away in your seat and watch both teams warm-up. You'd have the quarterbacks and receivers working routes, starting short and then going deep. You had the place-kickers and punters putting on a show. The perfect prelude to the action.

But when he got to the first ticket booth there was a sign *Will Call Only*, so he tried a second one and same deal.

Richie asked the person where were the non-will call booths, and the person said the game was sold out.

Richie felt her looking at him like what planet did you just come from?

He thought about it for a second, pulled out his phone, was informed Georgia--specifically Sanford Stadium--was in the middle of the 3rd longest sell-out streak in college football.

Fuck me.

What an idiot. Even if they *weren't* in the middle of one you'd have to know that a conference rivalry game--Florida for instance, right in your face--could be an impossible ticket.

‘Well,’ Richie said to the will-call girl, ‘big difference, what I’m used to . . . That’ll teach me to underestimate the South.’

‘Oh yes when it comes to sports and such,’ the girl said, ‘do not.’

She asked what he was used to and he said well the University of Nevada for example, even when they had Colin Kaepernick you could always get in.

She asked was that the one that knelt, and Richie said unh-huh, and she said her girlfriend moved to not Las Vegas but near there. It’s nice, she said.

‘Henderson?’ Richie said, and she thought that was it, and there was someone getting ready to line up behind him so Richie said, ‘You’re pretty friendly down here, and open. You know it?’

She said she didn’t think of it that way but was glad to hear it. Richie said, ‘Lot of places, for example, you wouldn’t have a stranger telling you out of the chute where their girlfriend moved.’

‘No?’ she said.

‘Okay listen . . . I can get away with this ‘cause I’m showing up cold. How about we grab a pizza after the ballgame? . . . Even better, can you score me a ticket

anyway? Pretty sure you have the ability to, you're determined enough.'

The will-call girl said, 'Well, me and my boyfriend, that's what we do after.'

'Oh. He play in the game or something?'

'Yes he is.'

'Jesus. I was kidding.'

'I was too,' she said. 'We normally go to Manuelo's.'  
Throwing that in there. Hard to read.

Richie said, 'Sounds like a Spanish place.  
Questionable already. The pie any good? I mean Athens, Georgia?'

'May not be up to your standard,' she said. 'But see, you're starting off with a negative attitude.'

'I like to.'

'Enjoy the game,' she said.

And Richie supposed you still could do that without actually being inside the stadium . . . you had the festive atmosphere out here right up until kickoff--Jeez, the Florida marching band passing by now on their way inside, must have been 200 of them, thunderous drumline bringing up the rear--and there were big screen TV's all around the perimeter.

So you could stand there for 3 hours like a doofus, listen to the cheers erupt from inside . . . or you could find a bar, handle it that way.

Meanwhile a guy came up to him and quietly asked if he needed tickets. Richie said how much and the guy said his starting point was \$275 for an end zone single.

When Richie was in high school his mom for his birthday took him to a UCLA basketball game to see Russell Westbrook, and that game was sold out and his mom spent some hard-earned money on scalpers' tickets, and Richie couldn't enjoy the game and was never going to do that.

Richie told the guy he didn't have \$275 on him, but was there a way to sneak in.

The guy laughed, but told him try the west gate, they sometimes get distracted with the security shit.

Richie had no idea what that meant, but when he got over there he could see the guy's point, the ticket takers were half-helping the security guys check people's bags and backpacks.

Bottom line it wasn't very organized, and Richie sized it up and figured wait until close to game time when they'd hopefully get overwhelmed.



Which seemed to work, 10 minutes before kickoff, huge herd of fans and a push toward the gate, and Richie got in the middle of it, and they were checking tickets but not precisely, and boom . . . he was in. And right in front of him was a hot dog stand, so why not.

You had to give the security guard credit, he waited until Richie got his dog mustarded and saukrauted up and took a bite, and then said come with me please.

Richie followed him under the stands and down a staircase, the guy asking do you know why I'm detaining you.

Richie kept his mouth shut, didn't want to say anything stupid or obnoxious that could get him in some actual trouble.

But Jesus, there was an office with a dang holding cell in the back, just like a real police station. The guy waved him in there and closed it, and sat down and opened a computer and stuck in ear buds.

'What,' Richie said, 'I'm that dangerous you gotta make sure I haven't been committing other crimes too?'

'Nah, I'm watching the ballgame,' the guy said. 'Florida's got a slot receiver I'm worried about, set a national high school record in track.'

'What event?' Richie said.

‘Difference it make,’ the guy said. ‘But see, it ain’t so hard, you let TV handle it.’

‘That way I’m not threatening any laws, you’re saying.’

‘Bingo,’ the guy said.

Richie said, ‘The ticket booth people, they ever go out with players?’

‘Fuck you talking about . . . Need to get back on patrol though. You enjoy the halftime festivities.’

Richie asked if the guy could angle the computer toward him and turn on the sound, but the guy was gone.

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It was a long afternoon. Richie found out later the game went into triple-overtime before Georgia won it by a field-goal. The college overtime rules were gimmicky, stripped the drama out of the real game, so in that regard it wasn’t the worst thing that he missed it.

The guy never came back, it was an older woman security guard who showed up and cut him loose, and Richie asked her where the pizza place was the will-call girl mentioned, and how was it.

The woman gave him directions and said mobbed, not worth it.

She wasn't kidding, the line was out the door and angled up the block. Richie was about to say forget it--in fact hop in the van and get out of this dumb town, and probably state too--except in perusing the line he spotted the will-call girl.

'Hey,' Richie said.

'Oh hi,' she said, looking embarrassed.

She had a big red-headed guy next to her, looked like he *could* have played in the game. The guy friendly enough, reached out his hand and said his name was Dante.

'Are you Italian then?' Richie said.

'Are you serious?' the will-call girl said. She'd identified herself as Kayleen. 'How rude.'

'Nah babe it's fine,' Dante said. 'One parent liked the name, not positive which one.'

Richie said, 'Well I'll let you folks go. It's been a day.'

'You have fun at the game?' Dante said. 'Good win.'

'Uumm,' Richie said. 'We'll take it.'

'We're going to a party after,' Kayleen said, looking at Dante, who nodded sure why not.

So she gave Richie the address, and he said thanks but he doubted it, that he was set on heading to North

Carolina, maybe Boone, someone told him it was nice there, plenty of bluegrass music, which he didn't mind.

But he walked around a while, found a little burrito place in a strip mall, not great, nothing like out west, but you were eating right away and he felt better.

So he Ubered it over to the party, which was way out there somewhere, people's work trucks and junk cars filling up the block.

There was plenty of weed in play, and cheap liquor, and Richie took a couple hits of both and surveyed the situation. No sign of Kayleen or Dante. Just a guess, none of these people had anything to do with the university. Richie had been half-expecting a fraternity party, Dante had that look.

He spotted them in the backyard. Dante said it was good he could make it and Kayleen was talking to someone else, and Dante laid a few things on Richie.

Later to Kayleen Richie said, 'Pretty amazing story, when you take a step back. That he came through it okay.'

'What's that?' Kayleen said.

'The business with the mom, shepherding them around the country, Dante and his little brother.'

'He doesn't have a brother,' she said.

‘Oh . . . So the mom on the run? From something or someone? . . . Having to scramble town to town? Changing schools 20 times?’

‘He’s having fun with you,’ Kayleen said.

Richie processed it. You couldn’t blame the guy. Might as well liven things up, it was more interesting than anything else he’d heard about today.

Nothing you were going to overreact to, and go back to the van and return here with a gun for, probably.

Richie said, ‘I had a weird one myself today, after you dissed me from your ticket window.’

‘How so?’

‘I snuck in. But got nailed. Which I figured wasn’t a big deal until they actually held me.’

‘Oh yes we do that,’ she said, ‘we’re strict.’

‘They had this cage, I couldn’t believe it.’

‘Unh-huh.’

‘The dude that nabbed me, he didn’t come back. It was an older gal, gray hair.’

‘You’re fortunate anyone came back. That they didn’t forget. There was one story, a gentleman got detained until Tuesday.’

‘Okay you want to hear what really went down, or you want to continue the clown show like your boyfriend?’

‘Sure.’

‘I had to do her to get--whadayamacall--early release.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘Why would I joke around? I wouldn’t have opted for it.’

‘You mean like . . . through the bars, and such?’

‘No, *not* through the bars. She gave me a fighting chance.’

‘Wow . . . Because I was thinking, through the bars might be a challenge. Wow.’

‘Okay, you want me to revise it?’

‘If you like.’

Dante was back.

‘She enjoys my stories,’ Richie said.

‘I do too,’ Dante said. ‘I liked the one, your 4th grade teacher turned out to be a serial killer.’

‘Come on, for real?’ Kayleen said. ‘You’re being straight?’

‘3rd grade one, yeah ten years later,’ Richie said. ‘He played opera music in class. You wouldn’t have suspected it.’

‘Those things happen,’ Dante said. ‘You can’t always gauge folks.’

Dante went to get another drink and Kayleen said, ‘You know something, you remind me of someone I used to go the submarine races with.’

‘What are those? Don’t you need salt water, at the minimum?’

‘You don’t know?’

He was pretty sure he had the idea, but said here we go again, no one races submarines.

Kayleen asked will you be going straight through to North Carolina, or do you break it up?

Richie said straight through, you never break it up . . . but thinking you could stick around another day, see where we’re at. Maybe bring her with, go over it again, how the guy played opera music in class. Guy woulda played friggen *Run Through the Jungle* if he played anything.