

BASKETBALL BLUES

I'd been going on at him for a bit — asking, prodding, digging deeper — when he said, "Hey, what is this — some kinda Twenty Questions, or somethin'?" His voice was sharp, but not testy — yet. Then Jerry spat, the gob just missing my foot.

I ignored it and said, "Nope ... just want t'know what makes you tick." I waited. After a long life in the business, I'd learnt when to wait. A lot of people find it hard to buck silence. So, I waited some more.

After a bit, he spoke again — he had to. "I just don't like being pushed around, is all."

Now Jerry looked at me, and I wondered if he'd made a pun and didn't know it, or whether he was playing dumb. His bright, blue-gray eyes seemed almost luminescent, the sort of eyes that women always stop for.

"So ... who does?" was all I said, as he pushed his chair back, spun around with a quick flick and threw the ball towards the hoop. It missed and went bouncing on.

"So, I've had enough of you riding me, okay!" He paused; then, "Ever since I can remember ... *he* was always riding me".

Now, we're getting closer, I thought.

He spun back to face me, "Y'know, *you* remind me of my goddam father." I *hoped* that was good. "He was always goin' on at me, do it this way, do it that way, do it *my* way." His voice rose an octave or two.

Maybe not so good, after all.

I could see sweat on his face, as he forced himself to think about it.

"Y'know, when I was seven, my father took me to my first football match." For the first time, he grinned crookedly, but there was nothing happy about it. "I — *hated* — football!" His eyes were glittering, as though with tears, as the three words came out with the impact of bullets ... but in slow motion. "But, he *made* me go, just so that he could tell me how good *he* was."

Time to say something, so I met his eyes and said, "Fathers like to think that sons look up to them. You know that." I kept my voice measured, calm. It seemed to work, because he slumped back in his chair, head down. But only for a moment.

Quickly and fiercely, he pushed forward until his face was too close and screamed, "Fuck *you*. What d'you know, just fuck you!" Some spittle spray hit my face, so I used my towel to wipe it clean.

He back peddled his chair, and now he was shouting, "Look up to him? Look up to that *asshole*?" His breath came heavily, his chest was heaving. "What sort of a father beats up *my* mother and then takes me to a football match? To tell *me* how *good* he was?"

I didn't know that until now — how could I? I said, "I'm sorry Jerry, that's a bad scene — I hope...."

But he wasn't listening, he just carried on: "That goddam bastard ... always bragging, always showing off, and always in fuckin' debt, goddam mug punter." He paused a moment, and then said quietly, but savagely: "He never had a mortgage, never could afford a home, but y'know, I

bought *my* first home at the age of twenty-five." I heard more than a touch of self-satisfaction in that last bit. "Long before I got these," he added, pointing to his withered legs.

"Shows you got gumption, Jerry. You're resourceful, and you've got determination. I like that in all my players."

He looked at me, and now the ferocity was fading. "So, coach, *why* d'you keep *pushing* me?" His voice was low, almost plaintive.

"Jerry, I recently joined this wheelchair basketball team for two reasons: the first is obvious," as I spun around in *my* wheelchair, "the second — I was a lousy football coach." I grinned at him. "Now I need to win — and I need winners like you."

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