



## Two Hours

The last game of the season left the town folk wanting more. Our football-crazy town had developed a case of basketball fever. A win tonight would have sent us to the state semi-regionals. We lost in overtime. As always, player parents waited around the gym for the players to emerge from the locker room. I joined a small group of Dads near the lobby.

“Hate to quit now, just when things are coming together.”

“Yeah. I’ve been looking at stats. During this last month, all of our benchmarks have improved. Team scoring, up. Seven players’ individual scoring, up. Rebounds, up...”

“Yeah. Hate to quit now.”

To make a long story short, we formed a high school travel team. This would be a non-sanctioned team consisting of several of our own players along with a few boys from neighboring communities. We were able to pick up a few of our former rivals’ better players. Of course, there would be no involvement of our state athletic association. The intent was just to let the boys continue to play, maintain skill level and hopefully improve aspects of their game - all while having fun.

Right from the start we did well. We played weekend tournaments and after a month we’d won more games than we lost. There were a couple of powerhouse teams around, teams comprised of blue chippers headed to play college ball, but we held our own. We gained respect on the circuit. As we chalked up wins, we began to grow a local following. Soon we were traveling



to tournaments in convoys. The local weekly newspaper even provided regular coverage.

Toward the latter part of the travel season we signed the boys up for a day tourney in the northeastern part of the state. As always, a convoy formed on Main Street and we commenced on a two-hour road trip. My car was an older Chevy, a little beat-up but in good running condition. Because I had a big back seat, a few of the players hopped in and made the trip with me.

It really was a nice drive into the hills. There were ranches, both dairy and equestrian, for most of the trip. The air was fresh and the roads clean.

“Seems like another world,” one of the boys commented.

The ride seemed longer than it actually was. At precisely the two-hour mark we pulled up a “Main Street” that seemed remarkably similar to our own. Their Town Hall on the right sat directly opposite the First Baptist Church, just as in our own town. A short way down on the left was a dry cleaner and then a coffee shop. Ditto our town. There was an old café across from the town’s meat market. A barber shop, a couple of antique stores, a pawn shop, a shoe repair... all sprinkled along their Main Street. Every establishment along Main Street was arranged in identical order to our own Main Street. I don’t know if anyone else in the convoy noticed. No one said anything about it. In any event, we were less than an hour until our first match so there wasn’t time to speculate. There was a parking lot across the street from the gymnasium and volunteers directed the convoy into the lot and to a series of parking slots. We unloaded quickly, the team assembling and going straight to the gym to begin warmups.



We started the tournament on a good note. We were hitting shots, snagging rebounds and scooping-up loose balls. Balls were bouncing our way on a consistent basis and impressive fast-breaks were numerous. We came back to earth after the first two games. From there we won a couple, lost a few.

I'd found myself making frequent visits to the concession stand between games. I admit, it wasn't solely to get a coke or bag of popcorn, though I did both. I had struck up a conversation with one of the volunteers working the stand and, as would go without saying, the volunteer was a 'she.'

Most of us remember the scene in 'The Godfather' in which Al Pacino saw the village beauty and was hit by a "thunderbolt." This may not have been quite the same but maybe it was similar. We seemed to have been drawn, if you know what I mean. I made so many trips to the stand that I was bestowed a free chili dog and coke for my troubles. I feel obliged to offer that perhaps my eloquent conversation contributed as well.

She joined me on a bench, on the sidewalk in front of the center, as I downed my dog. We talked. We laughed. A couple of times she used a napkin to blot a spot of chili from my chin.

Now, allow me to serve a clarification to what I just related. The fact is that I'm no Romeo or 'lady's man' in any sense. Never have been. In fact, just the opposite. However, today's circumstance was dreamlike. She was drawn to me. I was drawn to her.

I don't know how long we sat out there. Maybe an hour. Maybe two hours. Before I even gave further thought to the basketball aspect of this tournament, it was over. Our conversation had not yet begun to slow. We'd even made hypothetical travel plans. We both wanted to visit Europe, her to France, me to Italy. We



laughed and decided on both. In the back of my mind I began to develop a plan that would allow us to maintain contact. As I said, I'm not the smoothest cookie.

I thought I could get her number and let her enter it directly into my phone. You see, I had yet to even get her name, nor tell her mine. Smooth as butter. Yeah, smooth. I'd left my phone in the car. I could give her my card. That might impress. I'd left my wallet in the car, too.

It was then that I noticed activity across the street. A few men, one the sheriff or a deputy, were arranging a row of tables along the sidewalk. At first it occurred that they could be setting up for some kind of cake sale or something. That notion was dispelled when five or six of the men placed a number of folding chairs on either side of the table and took seats, each with a stack of folders.

"What's up with all that?" I asked.

"They always do that," she replied.

"Hey. I'm gonna take a walk to my car and get my phone. Care to take a walk?"

"No. I'll wait here."

"Be right back. In a minute." I flashed what I figured to be my best smile.

I crossed Main Street, walking past the row of tables. One of the guys looked up and smiled.

"Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon to you. What are y'all setting up for?"



“Just some insurance business.”

I continued toward the parking lot, probably a puzzled look on my face. When I turned the corner, I stopped short. The entire row in which our convoy had parked was empty. I stood and stared, looking around.

*“Had the folks moved their cars while I was engrossed on the sidewalk bench?”*

*“Had they left?”*

My car was not there either.

I quickly walked back across the street. My new flame wasn't on the bench. I went inside to the floor area and the awards ceremony was in progress. Our folks were in the bleachers politely applauding the tournament champions. Our players sat amongst them.

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The sheriff assured us that he'd do whatever he could to find out what had happened to our vehicles. He'd leave no stone unturned. In the meantime, we'd each have to go across the street to the tables on the sidewalk to fill out the required paperwork. We were confused. Trancelike we all followed the sheriff across the street and took turns filling out police reports and, somehow, insurance claims. The sheriff eventually summoned a couple of county school busses to bring us home. The folks began loading, not really saying much.

“Hey, sheriff,” I said. “I'm gonna run in real quick and use the can before we go. It's a two-hour ride.”

“He smiled and winked. Go ahead. Yeah, it's precisely two hours.”



By now the place was nearly empty. I did in fact use the restroom. However, when I came back into the lobby I looked around for my friend. She was nowhere to be found. I turned and headed toward the front door, suddenly pressed with an urge to board the bus and get back home. Two hours. Heading straight for the door, I came upon a couple of items carefully laid in the middle of the floor. It was my phone and wallet. I timed the trip home. It was exactly two hours.

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The folks eventually recovered, at least financially, from the ordeal. In fact, some made out well with new cars. Those were the ones with insurance, I suppose. I wasn't included in that number. All I had was Liability.

Here's one more oddity. From time-to-time, folks who had filed insurance claims began receiving notices that serialized pieces of their cars had shown up in various locations: junkyards, insurance company salvage yards, etc.

Suffice to say that, in future local discussion, this tournament trip was always referenced as our venture into the twilight zone.

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