

Another draw

They had hung a large screen on the back wall. It flickered palely under the strip lighting, the soft thuds of pints on rocky tables, the chitter chatter of familiar conversations, sour jokes, the wrinkle of an eyelid they all knew so well. Manchester United scored another goal. The image was blurred from where they were sitting. The back wall was a long way away. But they kept watching because it was easier than talking. They could have done with companions to ease the tension, make it all more real. It wasn't often father and son were alone, but it was an early afternoon game and no one else had wanted to join them. Maybe people had sensed something was up. Small community. Everyone to their own game. No point getting confused and mixed up in others shit.

"They'll fuck up."

"No they won't. Too much money. They can't lose in the end of the day."

"Money won't buy everything. You watch it. Even the big teams lose."

Father and son sipped their pints. The table groaned. Not long ago it would have ached under ashtrays before tobacco had become illegal, although legality had never been a strong point in their local environment. Curious how people who lived their lives on the edge wouldn't dare smoke inside, and break that new rule considering they spent most of their lives breaking others outside. Cheap wood sagged with age and the endless risk of soggy beer mats and crusty elbows. Years of stale ale imbued the air. Father and son were waiting to decide when they'd have to go outside for a smoke: neither wanted to make the first move.

The old man fancied some peanuts. He couldn't remember if Seanie liked them. He'd think about it in a minute.

His son twisted the pint between fingers as if they were exploring a vagina for the first time. Carefully, with curiosity, as if he had never seen one before.

"Jesus Christ you can't be serious."

The old man kept his voice down but they both had the feeling the whole bar was watching. They sipped their pints before any more beer spilled. The old man nervously sopped up what had overflowed. The creaky table leg hobbled, then laughed in recognition. They put it back in its place.

"You did it."

"I did not."

"Yes you did."

Children squabbling. Seanie needed to have it out with the old man. It was just so hard to get him to say anything. He floated around as if he lived on the edge of the world, occasionally peering in to see how things were going but not wanting to get too involved. Except of course he was.

"You went to fucking prison for that bomb."

"That was different."

"You killed three kids."

"Different times."

They ordered another pint. The old man went to the bar in relief, another couple of minutes of respite. He got the peanuts in. Stress was getting to their fingers as they fiddled around glasses. They'd have to go out in a minute for a smoke. Bloody hell. Peanuts would be something. Standing outside, the two of them, with just a cigarette to fumble was daunting. The table held their elbows in place at least; the screen kept their eyes off each other, a flickering distraction attempting to veil their thoughts.

"What was different?"

"We had an idea. An ideal. A united country. That's what we have always been. Should be. Those fuckers took it all away. Invaded us for Christ's sake."

"And it's not the same out there? I've read my history. All those foreigners who fought in Spain. That was cool. You would have agreed. Fighting against tyranny. Granddad went to Spain all those years ago and that wasn't his country or war."

"You're a fucking Catholic." The words slipped out in a hiss, muttered with a force that shook the stool he sat on.

Their jeans stretched, stone washed beneath the creaky table, tightening their balls into a schism. They both handled their nuts with care. Fingers thumbed chins: they both needed a shave. A couple of girls wandered in after their shift in the post office. They looked over as they made for the bar. Eyes held for a second before looking away, not in anger, but vague recognition: it might just have been another late night. Mother would be at home with the fry. Or maybe it was her night off and they needed a Chinese. God it was all so complicated sometimes.

"Like hell. Haven't been to church for a year and you haven't been for a lifetime."

"What's the difference. I am no Muslim but I know a decent fight when I see it."

"You do like shite."

And maybe the old man was right. But you only had so many options. The chip shop paid its way but the middle east sounded romantic. Politics had done away with the violence at home. He wasn't very good at politics and had fucked up at crime. They were after him. The old man's friends. Couldn't tell the old man that. When the chips were down you might be better run away. Seanie owed on the rent and protection. The old man might be able to call them off: or they might get the old man to do the job for them. But he owed them and one way or another they would have to be paid.

"It's Aid dad." He threw in the "dad" cause it seemed to be needed. The old man might like it. Catch him off guard.

"Fight or aid? Is there a bloody difference?" The trick didn't work. A grumpy old sod, he wasn't being caught off guard. Too many years in prison for that. He could "dad" him all he liked could Seanie, but it wasn't going to make the old man any softer. A corner. They stared hard in case it was a goal.

"Course there's a difference."

"They all get killed in the end. No difference at all."

"The convey leaves Saturday."

In a moment of desperation his father relented. He breathed deeply and would have liked to stub a cigarette out there and then. "Your Ma's ill, losing her mind." He paused, had a quick squint down the bar at the match, inhaled an imaginary fag. "You know your sister's pregnant again." He let that punch line linger as they grabbed pints and hunched over, squinting at the kick out.

That was below the belt. Seanie reached for his beer but it wouldn't quite get to his mouth. There was no comfort. The glass was too heavy, responsibility waiting to spill over.

"You were away all our childhood. That prison stint. What example was that?"

"Didn't have much choice."

"Neither did those kids you killed."

The screen flickered, flickered out. They weren't sure who had won in the end.

"It's just brutality."

"Because it's over there?"

"You need a decent job not trotting off to some country on the back of a truck."

His father released a previously silent regret. "You could still go to university."

"You could still retire."

They prayed for the screen to come back on. Football was the draw they needed.

"They could still draw. Another corner. "

"Na, the others will win hands down."

They sighed. A collision of minds not unwilling, but unable to meet in anything like collusion. They did agree on another pint.

"Ok."

They watched the end of the match in silence. Manchester United scored again. They had forgotten who the other team was. The screen was too far away to read. It certainly wasn't going to be a draw. Too much money on one team. Made the whole thing a bit off side.

"Can we get your sister married first at least?" The old man was pleading beneath a disguise of concern as he stared at the distant game, losing track of the final result. "Before you go. Just wait a bit."

"I'll take care of your mother." The pint slackened. "If you can sort your sister out."

Seanie seemed to nod. He finished the pint in a draught. They were both wondering about the sense of another. The peanuts were finished. Another round would be easier than the walk home. They really needed to look at an atlas. They avoided each other's eyes, straining instead for the final minutes of the match.

Pregnant. Again. Who would it be this time? Syria was looking attractive. His father had managed to avoid their own childhood easily enough behind bars. About time the old man took care of their mother. Damn sister. Seanie was caught.

It wasn't the politics, the morality of the whole damn idea. The old man just didn't want to see his son killed. He was almost happy there was another child on the way. Another fuck up to keep them in limbo. That was what kids were all about.

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