

About 4,670 words

UNSPORTSMANLIKE CONDUCT

Their first argument. Their first argument ever. Leaving Naylor sucked dry of all the well-being that had accompanied them like a pleasant companion from Dallas to LAX. Getting up from his chair in the United section, he told Vicky he needed to make a pit stop, though mainly he needed to cool off. He walked away and Vicky kept her eyes trained on her book.

A tall man wearing a Dodgers cap was the only person Naylor saw in the men's room. He watched the man leave without washing his hands, before he carefully washed his own hands. Rubbing them briskly beneath the blow dryer, he heard a toilet flush. When a stall door banged he didn't bother looking around.

And then his head exploded.

The next time he opened his eyes he was sprawled face down on the floor. How much

time had passed? His watch dial was a blur, his left eye was on fire. He closed his right eye and was jolted by the sudden darkness. Covering his face with both hands, he felt a warm stickiness. When he took his hands away and opened his right eye, his palms were bloody. When he covered the left eye he thought he felt a bulge protruding from the socket.

He staggered to his feet, keeping one hand pressed over the injured left eye. His heart was hammering. It seemed vital that he do something—but what? Any moment now someone would walk in and see him, someone all too eager to confirm the unacceptable, to proclaim what he couldn't bear to hear.

He refused to look at himself in the mirror as he stumbled over to one of the booths. Locking himself inside, he eased down onto the commode. Someone came in and entered the next booth. Naylor stifled the urge to scream. In a heartbeat, for whatever reason, he'd been turned into a one-eyed ophthalmologist. The irony of this was as maddening as it was horrifying.

Little more than an hour had passed since they arrived at LAX. After checking the monitor to make sure their next flight was on time, Naylor suggested they find a place to watch the Cowboys and Redskins on Monday Night Football. An ardent Cowboys fan, Vicky was all for that.

They came to a crowded cocktail lounge and Naylor set their carry-on bag on the floor behind an older couple seated at the bar. He ordered an old fashioned for Vicky, a Glenfiddich for himself, and paid with a fifty-dollar bill. As they stood watching the TV attached to the wall

across the room, drinks in hand, their eyes occasionally sought each other out, prompting them to grin like goofy teens.

The last three days had been exhausting. But Naylor was pleased with Saturday's wedding in Highland Park, attended by well over two hundred guests. He was pleased with Sunday's visit with his and Vicky's parents, pleased by his lovely bride's youth and the fact that she was fresh out of SMU with a masters in social work and a fervor for helping others. She was not only bright and sincere, she was genuinely good, so good that she elevated Naylor's already high regard for himself.

During a commercial break his attention was drawn from the TV screen to a burly man standing alone behind a table near the far wall. The man waved one arm above his head and jabbed a finger of his other hand at Naylor. Tapping his chest, Naylor mouthed *me?* The man nodded and pointed at the table.

"Looks like he wants us to join him," Vicky said.

"Crap," Naylor said, "What's that all about? He'll probably want to gab. Can't he see we're watching the game?"

Vicky looked down at her drink and whispered, "He's not going to stop waving, honey. Look at him."

"Might as well see what he wants. Crap."

Threading his way through the tables, Vicky right behind, Naylor decided the man looked vaguely familiar. His gray hair was closely cropped, his protruding ears similar in color and substance to dried apricots. Naylor pulled out a chair for Vicky, shoved their bag beneath

another chair, set his drink on the table, and sat down. The man remained standing.

“Don’t remember me, huh?”

Naylor looked more closely at the bloodshot eyes and high shiny forehead, the flattened nose and churlish mouth. He shook his head.

“Guess I’ve changed some. But not you, man. Still a lean, mean fightin’ machine.

Harry Naylor—*Racehorse* Harry.”

Naylor raised one finger to his lips. “Strosnyder?” The big man beamed with boyish delight. “Hell yes,” Naylor said. “Vicky, this is Stro. Derek Strosnyder. We played football together. My wife Vicky—we were just married.”

Vicky extended her hand and Derek enveloped it in both of his. Performing an awkward bow, he said, “I’m betting you’re on your honeymoon.”

“We’re on our way to Kauai,” Vicky said.

“Congratulations.” Derek released her hand and sat down. He seemed too large for his chair, his bloated belly inflating his tan-and-black-striped shirt. His eyes lingered momentarily on Vicky’s diamond ring before her warm smile drew him back.

“Great to see you again, Stro,” Naylor said,

A sudden recollection sent a rush of goodwill washing over him. Long ago, at their town park, Derek had intervened when an older boy picked a fight with Naylor over some childish provocation. Naylor was maybe ten, the other boy—a crewcut, bucktooth kid they called “Bumper”—twelve or thirteen. Naylor had once watched Bumper beat another boy bloody and senseless. As he faced off with Bumper, fists raised, knees quaking, more boys

gathered around, egging them on—when out of nowhere stepped Derek Strosnyder. Pushing Naylor aside, Derek assumed a fighter’s stance in his stead. Derek was Naylor’s age, though almost as big as Bumper, fearless and tough—a little crazy some thought. Bumper slowly lowered his fists and that ended it. Naylor later heard that the boy Bumper had savaged was Derek’s cousin.

“You’re a real sweetheart,” Derek said to Vicky.

“Why thank you.”

He nodded toward Naylor. “Your new hubby was a hotshot at Ranger High, but maybe you knew that. I always looked up to him. He must still be a hotshot to hook a honey like you.”

“Harry’s an ophthalmologist,” Vicky said. “That’s how we met. He did laser surgery on my eyes.”

“Hope it worked.”

She laughed. “I don’t wear contacts any more.”

“There you go.”

“What about you, Derek?” Naylor asked. “How’s life been treating you?”

Derek shifted his gaze from Vicky to Naylor and his eyes lost their sparkle. “Truth is, I’ve had my ups and downs. Lately more downs than ups.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Naylor caught the waitress’s attention and pointed at Derek’s empty Sam Adams bottle.

“Care to tell us about it?” Vicky asked.

Derek gave this some thought. Finally he furrowed his brow and launched into a litany of despair: assorted health issues, a bankrupt roofing business, problems with the IRS, a messy divorce, his teenage daughter. “I’m on my way to see Joleen now,” he said. “She’s in a hospital in Frisco, lives there with her mother. Joleen caught something. Half her JV basketball team caught it, but my kid got it the worst. Swine flu, maybe? Who the hell knows. Poor kid’s fighting for her life.”

“My goodness,” Vicky said.

“If I lost her . . .” His voice broke. Only when the waitress arrived with a fresh beer was he able to regain his composure. Naylor paid her, added a generous tip, ordered refills for himself and Vicky. If only he had some means of signaling Vicky not to encourage Derek to continue waxing maudlin.

“So, Stro,” he said, “I’m guessing you live in LA?”

“Trailer park over near Palmdale,” Derek said. “Me and my current galfriend. Not sure how much longer she’ll last.” He sipped his beer and squinted at Naylor. “This your first go-round?”

“And my last,” Naylor said, patting Vicky’s arm.

“Good luck with that, my friend. I flunked twice.” Naylor remained silent. “Tell the truth, I’m a miserable failure on all counts. That probably doesn’t surprise you.”

“Things are tough all over,” Naylor murmured, and immediately regretted his flippancy.

“Not all over,” Derek said. “Not for some. Not for you, man. You’re sittin’ on top of the world. Anybody with eyes can see that—pardon the pun.”

Naylor felt a little embarrassed. Did Vicky mistakenly assume they'd once been pals? He hoped not. Naylor's father was a prominent physician; he recalled Derek's father as a shambling, loose-limbed grease monkey who may have worked on one of their cars at one time or another. The large, rowdy Strosnyder family had lived in a rambling two-story clapboard with a falling-down front porch and a pack of roguish dogs. Naylor remembered them coming to all the home games in a beat-up VW van. Derek made himself the locker-room clown. His stock in trade was to cut putrid farts in the shower that resounded like thunderclaps and sent naked boys scurrying.

"I have to admit," Naylor said carefully, "to being satisfied with my life."

"I can see that," Derek said. "You *look* satisfied. But then you always did. That's one of the things that impressed me about you—your high self esteem." He turned to Vicky. "What about you, sweetheart? Is that what first impressed you about Racehorse?"

Vicky smiled at Naylor. "Actually, I think it was more his quirky sense of humor; that and his pug nose." She playfully reached over and tapped the end of his nose.

Derek turned to Naylor. "Some guys thought you were arrogant, Racehorse, but in my view they were referring to your self esteem. Sure wish some of what you had could've rubbed off on me. But I had no cause to feel the least bit superior. I'm sure you'll agree."

Naylor chose not to respond.

"Superior?" Vicky arched a brow. "I wouldn't say Harry views himself as superior. He *is* confident. I find that attractive. An ophthalmologist needs a healthy dose of self confidence."

"All I know is he never let stuff bother him," Derek said. "Not like me. If I fucked up I

took it to heart. I was a brooder.” He leveled a steady gaze at Naylor. “But not you, man. You never let nothing bother you.”

Naylor managed a faint smile. “What is it you’re getting at, Stro?”

Derek cocked his head. “You really don’t know?”

“Haven’t a clue.”

“That last game?”

Naylor thought back. “You mean the state semifinals?”

“Bingo!”

“We made it to the states our senior year,” he explained to Vicky. “We lost. I guess that still gives Stro heartburn.”

Derek’s chin came up. “*Heartburn?* That’s like calling a spear through the gut a gas pain.”

“Oh my,” Vicky said. “I’d like to hear about this.”

Naylor forced a humorless laugh. “You just did.”

“Not quite,” Derek said. “It’s *how* we lost that’s interesting. Would you like to hear about *that?*”

“Not if you’re talking play by play.” Naylor tapped his watch. “We have a plane to catch. And what’s the point, Stro? It was just a game.”

“Why don’t we let her decide? The dedicated fan. I could see that when I saw her watching the game on TV. Boy she was into it. Let’s let her decide if it was just a game.”

Naylor was growing increasingly annoyed at Derek. He frowned at Vicky. “I don’t

think my wife cares to hear a boring rehash.”

And yet there she sat, elbows planted on the table, hands clasped beneath her chin, eyes shifting from one man to the other. Naylor felt a twinge of betrayal.

“You’re upset about this game,” Vicky said to Derek, “even after all this time. That’s apparent. If airing it out will make you feel better . . .”

“I doubt that,” Derek said, “but let’s give it a try.”

With that he plunged into the story: how *his* team—the undefeated Ranger Rams—had only to beat the Forest Trojans to make it to the state championship game. He quickly summarized the first half, which ended with the score 7-6 in favor of the Rams. Naylor was impressed by his keen recollection of details. There was no more scoring through the third quarter, but in the fourth the Trojans mounted a long drive that resulted in a touchdown. Their two-point conversion attempt failed. Late in the game, with the score 12-7, the Trojans once again driving, Racehorse intercepted a sideline pass and took it to the end zone. The Rams’ two-point try also failed. They led 13-12.

Vicky gave Naylor a triumphant thumbs up.

“It *did* look good,” Derek said drily. “It definitely did. Little over three minutes left, Trojans with one timeout remaining. Looked like we had the game in the bag. We *should’ve* had the game in the bag.” He paused meaningfully, watching Naylor fish a sliver of ice out of his glass to suck on. Naylor wished the waitress would hurry with those drinks.

“Okay,” Vicky urged. “We know the Rams lost. So *how* did they lose?”

Derek made a show of gritting his teeth. “A defect in character, you might say. The

Trojans have the ball around their own thirty. Fourth and eight, clock ticking. Gotta go for it. All our D has to do is stop this play. *One play.*”

“One play,” Vicky repeated, causing Naylor to wince.

“Their quarterback—kid named Ramirez—fades back and throws a duck. Their ace receiver, black kid named Henry Harvey—funny how those names stick with you—breaks free and runs under it. But nobody on that field is faster than Racehorse. He gets to Harvey the same time the ball does. They go up together and Racehorse wins.” Derek slapped his hand on the table and Vicky jumped. “*Hit the turf!*” Coach Bullard yells. *‘Hit the goddamn turf!’* If Racehorse goes down—if he goes down right there—Eddy Quinlan, our QB, takes some knees and runs out the clock.”

Naylor looked at his watch for the umpteenth time.

“But Racehorse doesn’t go down.” Derek leaned in closer to Vicky, dilating his nostrils in a piggish way. “Can you believe it? He keeps running.”

Vicky glanced at Naylor in dismay.

“Harvey lunges from behind and yanks the ball loose. Everybody scrambles. The ball bounces like a jumping bean through half a dozen hands . . . till the Trojans recover.”

“Shit,” Vicky said softly.

Derek nodded, chewing his lip. “Yeah. Shit. First down for the Trojans on the Rams’ twenty-two.”

“Go on,” Vicky urged.

“Ramirez throws into the end zone. Racehorse bats it away. Ramirez throws a second

pass. Same thing. Trojans run the ball up the middle. One yard gain. Call their final timeout. Two seconds left. Ball centered between the hash marks. Their kicker, pint-sized kid named Pawlawski, gets set. Coach Bullard calls his last timeout.”

“Hoping to ice Pawlawski,” Vicky said.

Derek pointed at her to highlight her brilliance. Naylor rolled his eyes.

“Highschool players don’t kick many field goals. Not eighteen years ago, maybe not today. Pawlawski has already missed an extra point try. This is a thirty-some-yarder. He pulls it. Ball bridges our D’s raised hands by a skosh. Hits the crossbar next to the left upright.”

Vicky squeezed her eyes shut.

“Flips over. Right on over. Good. Good as a mile.” Derek held up both arms. “Good as a goddamn fucking mile! Trojans fifteen. Rams thirteen.”

“End of story,” Naylor said.

“Not quite,” Derek said. “Pawlawski’s a hero. Our man Racehorse . . . he’s the goat. *The* fucking goat. And here’s the grand finale: One week later, Forest rolls over Hillsdale in the state championship game.”

Derek’s story was essentially true, except for the liberty he’d taken in interpreting Naylor’s actions. Naylor of course knew the safest play for the Rams would be an incomplete pass. But he and Harvey were fighting for the ball, and when Naylor gained possession he recalled stumbling—not running—propelled by his own momentum, trying to secure the ball and avoid the appearance of a fumble. But Harvey punched the ball free before Naylor’s knee touched the ground. The ref ruled an interception—then a fumble.

The waitress appeared and Naylor took time to pay and collect his thoughts. It had happened so fast, but in his memory the sequence of events seemed to take forever. He tried not to sound defensive as he told Vicky, “What Derek fails to acknowledge is this: If I hadn’t scored a touchdown on my first interception we wouldn’t have been in a position to win.”

Derek tapped a stubby finger on the table. “But then you went and turned another outstanding play into a piece of shit.”

Vicky unclasped her hands. “What I don’t understand, Derek, is what you’re accusing Harry of. It sounds like he played a great game.”

“He was *hotdogging*, dearie. Can’t you see that? He always was a hotdogger. He wanted another touchdown. A *meaningless* touchdown.” Derek leaned toward her, eyes bulging. “The rest of us wanted to advance to the championship game . . . what Racehorse wanted, what he craved, was personal glory. He knew he could outrun Harvey. Once he got his hands on that ball he was bound and determined to score.”

“That’s bullshit,” Naylor said. His cheeks had turned hot when Derek called Vicky “dearie,” which to him sounded demeaning.

“You were thinking about yourself, man,” Derek said, his voice rising, “not the team.”

“I wanted to win that game in the worst way, Stro.”

“So why didn’t you just fall down?”

“I *was* falling. Why can’t you understand that? I was falling when Harvey punched the ball out. I was falling, I wasn’t running. I was *falling*.”

“You were running, man. You were fucking running.”

“The ref could’ve ruled either way,” Naylor said.

“But he ruled a fumble. I’ve seen it in my nightmares a million times. Ten million. There’s not a day goes by that I don’t see it all again.”

“C’mon, Stro. It was just a goddamn game.”

Derek clenched his fists and leaned toward Naylor. “You keep saying that. Do you have any idea how being state champs could’ve changed my life?”

Naylor was astonished. “Changed your *life!* For Christ sake—”

“I’m telling you—”

“Maybe if you’d been paralyzed or something. Like Bruce Shapiro in the Roosevelt game, spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair. But the outcome of that semifinal game had little lasting effect on anybody’s life.”

Derek leaned back. “Oh, man. You really don’t get it, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“It changed how I thought about myself, that’s what I’m saying. It made me feel like a loser . . . when I could’ve graduated feeling like a winner. It changed everything.” Naylor had to laugh and Derek thrust a finger at him. “Not funny, man.”

And then Naylor remembered something. Momentarily he considered keeping it to himself, but he was pissed now and Derek’s belligerence was just too overbearing.

“You know, Stro, I’m thinking about how vividly you just described that game—after all these years. How’d you manage to do that? How’d you remember it in such detail, right down to what Bullard yelled?”

Derek seemed perplexed.

“Want me to tell you how?” Naylor asked.

“Go right ahead.”

“Because you weren’t out there. You didn’t play. You were on the sidelines.”

Derek groped blindly for his beer.

“*Did* you play? Did you play at all?” Naylor shook his head. “The only time Bullard put you in a game was when we were way ahead. You were too slow. You’re dumping on me for a game I gave my all in—a game you weren’t good enough to get into. You might as well not have suited up.”

Vicky covered Naylor’s hand with hers. “I think I understand what he’s saying, honey.”

Outraged by her misguided empathy, Naylor jerked his hand away. “The hell you do. You just feel sorry for this fat fuck.”

The people at the next table turned to stare, and yet Naylor couldn’t seem to rein in his furor. Glaring at Derek’s florid face, all he could think was how to make it go away, how to put distance between himself and Derek’s bewildering rationale.

Derek finished his beer and set the empty bottle down. “I could use another one of those.”

“Get it yourself, asshole.”

Vicky gasped and Naylor jumped to his feet so abruptly his chair clattered to the floor. Everyone in the lounge turned to look. Vicky remained seated, her face crimson. Naylor yanked his chair up and grabbed their bag. He slipped his other hand beneath Vicky’s arm and

lifted her roughly to her feet. He met Derek's glare and the hatred that passed between them was venomous.

He went on ahead, jaw set, not sure or even caring if Vicky was following. When he entered the traffic stream she pulled abreast of him. They came to the United gate and found a couple of seats against the wall. Naylor sat rigidly, staring across the aisle at a frizzy-haired woman in a gray suit talking on her cell phone. Beside him, he could hear Vicky breathing hard.

"What you did back there was so unlike you," she said at last. "I realize you're tired. I'm tired too. But how could you be so callous?"

"Callous? For Christ sake, Vicky, am I supposed to just sit there and let that fat fuck crucify me for no reason?"

"Stop calling him that. It was just a game, you're right about that. But that game was important to Derek. It still is. And I do feel sorry for him—you're right about that as well. Where you crossed the line was the way you belittled him."

Naylor grunted. "The guy's a total loser, sweetheart."

"Of course he is. He *is* a loser. He *feels* like a loser. All because of that game. That's the point."

"Can't you see the absurdity in that?"

"Maybe to you it's absurd. You're fortunate enough, like Derek said, to have high self esteem. *His* self esteem is a shambles. It'll only get worse. You can afford to be charitable. But the aggressive way you went after him only made you look small."

"Why the hell are you on his side?"

“Please . . . lower your voice. I’m not on anybody’s side. I just feel sorry for anyone who’s that unfortunate. What you said was hurtful.”

“The truth can hurt.”

“But it doesn’t have to. You insulted him. A pathetic shell of a man who was once your friend—you shamed him. That’s not like you.”

“We were never *friends*.”

“You played on the same team together.”

“I hardly knew the guy. He hardly played. I’m surprised I even remember his name.”

Vicky sighed. “Well, that’s sad, that’s truly sad. Do you realize you’re acting exactly like he portrayed you? Derek wasn’t as well off as you, or as gifted, so he’s not worth bothering with.”

”Actually, he’s not.”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I said I wasn’t on anybody’s side, but I’m starting to reconsider. I’m starting to feel like maybe I *am* on Derek’s side. I know you. I’m starting to wonder if maybe you could’ve won that game by being . . . a little less flamboyant.”

“Flamboyant? Is that your synonym for hotdogging?”

“*Were* you hotdogging?”

Naylor threw up his hands. “For the last time, I tried to make a play.”

“If his story wasn’t true, why are you so upset?”

“If you can’t understand why I’m upset, you’re as obtuse as he is.”

Vicky stiffened. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. If I was hotdogging, you’re obtuse.”

“I did hear you, Harry. And I don’t like what I heard. Not one bit. If you think you can treat me with disrespect now that I’m your wife—”

“That door swings both ways.”

The frizzy-haired woman closed her cell phone and fixed her gaze on them. They both fell silent. After a minute Vicky bent down and unzipped their carry-on bag. She rummaged around and came up with a copy of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Naylor had brought along Nabokov’s *Lolita*, which he’d read in college and wanted to revisit. Only now he was too rattled to concentrate. Why were they allowing Derek to do this to them?

It all seemed like a bad dream. Naylor remained seated on the commode for a few more minutes, before rising unsteadily to his feet. Tugging his handkerchief from his hip pocket, he used it to cover his left eye. A wave of nausea forced him to bend open-mouthed over the toilet, but he could only gag.

Someone entered the restroom and went to a urinal. Someone else moved to a sink. Naylor heard a faucet running, a urinal flush. He opened the door and stepped out of the booth. Nobody appeared to notice as he hurried from the men’s room.

He walked as fast as he could without running. At the United gate he saw passengers gathering around, some holding passes in readiness to board. He looked for Vicky and saw her chatting with the frizzy-haired woman. The frizzy-haired woman saw Naylor first and nodded in his direction. Vicky turned to look and her eyes widened with alarm.

She hurried over, set their bag down, raised both hands to his face, then jerked them back. “Good Lord!”

“Just tell me what you see,” Naylor said.

“What I *see*?”

He lowered the bloody handkerchief. “My eye . . . my left eye.”

She studied his face as Naylor held his breath in grim anticipation. She took the handkerchief and tenderly dabbed around his eye before she said, “You have a terrible gash—”

“What about my eye?”

She peered more closely. “Your eye—it’s covered with blood.”

“You mean it’s not . . .”

“Your eye looks okay, honey.” She nodded to confirm this appraisal. “The gash is right above it. Your eye looks fine.”

“You’re sure?”

Vicky stepped back. “Who did this? Derek?”

Naylor shuddered and sobbed. Tears of relief washed away enough blood to enable him to see blurrily when he closed his right eye. *Thank God!* He blinked several times to further clear his vision.

“Harry,” Vicky said, “was it Derek?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t *know*?”

“I was blind-sided.”

“It had to be Derek.”

“I honestly don’t know. We need to get on that plane.”

“You can’t get on the plane like that. That gash is really deep. You’ll need stitches. It must hurt.”

And then Naylor stopped crying and started to laugh. *Hurt?* At that moment a little pain meant nothing—nothing at all. Stitches meant nothing. He could handle the pain; he could handle the stitches. He could handle anything, now that he knew his eye had survived.

“Let’s find a doctor,” Vicky said, slipping the handkerchief back into his hand. “We’ll have to miss our flight.”

Walking along the concourse, Naylor kept the gash covered. Vicky hurried ahead. She was looking around for a security guard when she did an about face and grabbed Naylor’s arm.

“There he is!”

Naylor followed her scorching gaze. Derek had his back to them. Standing with his arms crossed, he stared out the window at a plane touching down.

“Don’t let him out of your sight,” Vicky said. “I’ll go find security.”

“Wait.” Naylor pulled her back.

Then, seeming to feel their vibes, Derek turned slowly. As his eyes skimmed over Naylor’s face to finally focus on the bloody handkerchief, something mercurial passed between them. Let him go, Naylor thought—just let him go. Vicky wanted Derek held accountable, but why? How would that help matters? Could retribution of any sort make Naylor feel better than he felt at this moment? The adulation had reappeared in Vicky’s eyes, his own eyes were intact,

he had his sweet wonderful life back. Nothing else mattered. Let Derek go and good riddance.

Let him go.

What Naylor did next was incomprehensible, even to himself, though on some level it seemed exactly right. He started to give Derek the finger, and ended by blowing him a farewell kiss.

END