

## **The Kickball in Question**

We were supposed to get the basketball the Saturday of Hudak's party, as soon as my mom returned from grocery shopping. When she did, I was lifting the hatchback before she even had the engine off.

"Such service."

I rushed four bags in at a time, coming close to spilling one, dropping it on the counter just as the brown paper gave out.

"One at a time, Hulk. What's your hurry?"

As I jostled the last two bags in the back of the station wagon, a red kickball rolled between them and over the bumper and into the street.

"What's this?" I demanded inside.

"Is that everything? It's the ball. For your friend."

"What? Mom! This isn't a basketball."

Hudak and I had shot baskets with his lopsided ball last weekend. A new basketball was the perfect gift.

"Did the eggs make it in? It's a ball, honey."

I stormed out and got the eggs. This was ridiculous. A kickball would not cut it. It was the kind of lame present Jenkins would get someone. And Broussard would

probably waltz in with a Mattell electronic football game, no less. But maybe my mom just meant this as a bonus ball. Surely that was it.

“Are we going to the sports store still?”

“I got him a ball, dear, they were on sale at Safeway, this week only. Here, I’ll wrap it later. Do not look at me like that, Patrick.”

“I’m going to play tennis.”

“Fine. Do you have time? When’s the party?”

“Four.”

“Okay, be back in time to clean up and change. And don’t be such a little prick.”

I ran upstairs to get my racket. And all the money I had in the world. Four dollars, three of them in quarters and dimes. Downstairs my mother had repaired to the guest bathroom with her *Us* magazine.

“I’m going!” I shouted.

In the garage, I stashed my racket and can of balls in the tool shed and hopped on my ten speed. Change jangled in one pocket as I pedaled. The ten dollars I’d lifted from my mom’s purse burned in the other.

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It wasn’t enough. My lungs still searing from the long ride to the Rockville Mall, I stood in the basketball aisle of the Montgomery Sporting Goods store, dying. I wrested a Spalding Indoor/Outdoor Larry Bird Autograph from its cardboard and

tossed it from one hand to another. *Official size and weight.* In the next aisle, I'd seen air pumps. If I stuck the spike from a pump into the air hole, could I deflate it and sneak it out of the store, then reinflate it at home? I sidled over to the pumps.

"Is that one flat? Let me see."

A skinny young man in the store's official red shirt wagged his knuckly fingers above me. I stood up and handed him the ball. He pulled the pump spike out of it and bounced it three times.

"Feels pretty good to me. We don't really encourage in-store pumping anyway, chief."

"Sorry."

"Hey, try to steal it." He hunched down and dribbled, circling around me, knocking against me with his bony butt. "Come on, chief, try to steal it!"

I ducked down another aisle. Bikes. The skinny guy did not reappear. My heart slowed. On the shelf beside me was a stack of small, thin cardboard boxes labeled, in large letters, OAKLEY. I was no BMXer, but I was pretty sure I had heard Hudak extol the awesomeness of Oakley grips at one point or another. My fingers closed on a box, slid it down the neck of my t-shirt. I wiggled until it was wedged between my elbow and ribcage.

A few steps from the door, a cold hand clamped around my wrist.

"Come with me, chief."

The skinny guy hauled me back to the shoe section and behind it to the rows of shelves where they stacked the boxes of sneakers.

"Lift up your arms."

I lifted up my right arm. Size ten Converse were at my eye level. Too big for me.

“Both of them.”

I did, and the package slid down my side and fell to the floor.

“Pick it up,” he said. “Hand it to me.”

He snatched the shaking cardboard and read, “*Oakley B-1B Guidance System.*”

He was about twenty, with lank blond hair and a pimple shining on the side of his nose. He shook his head.

“I was going to pay.”

“Take your t-shirt off, chief.”

“What?” Size tens and ten-and-a-halves.

“Take your t-shirt off, and I don’t call the cops. Or your mommy.”

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When Hudak opened my badly wrapped present, he and Broussard looked at each other and laughed.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing,” Hudak said, crumpling up the wrapping paper. “Oakley grips are decent. I’ll use them for back-ups.”

He opened the package and slid them out. Long, thin and pocked, they were somewhat reminiscent of what we’d discovered in his mom’s bedside table last week.

“They’re yellow,” Broussard said.

Your fucking hair is yellow, I wanted to say, but it made no sense. Hudak opened Broussard’s present – a Mattel electronic basketball game.

“Sweet,” he said, and they high-fived.

And then Hudak ripped the paper on Jenkins’ present, the last one. A red kickball that had been on sale at Safeway, that week only. Exactly like the expertly wrapped one I’d stomped into the sewer on my way here. Jenkins started to stammer an apology for his mom’s lame idea of a gift, but he stopped short when the kickball in question bounced smartly off his forehead, knocking his glasses askew, and then plopped right into Broussard’s lap.

“My nuts! You bastard.”

Broussard threw the ball at Hudak, who sidestepped it, and then a boisterous game of dodgeball broke out in the basement. Pringles flew. A lamp bit the dust. And I nailed Broussard right on his pretty little nose. It was quite a shock to see him crying like a baby, his blood a slightly brighter crimson than the kickball’s.