

Two Man Game

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My truck broke down outside Shamrock, Texas, after making a grinding noise all across Oklahoma, a state that's just bad luck for me. They said it was the trans-axle, and after the tow and the repairs I only had a hundred dollars left. I didn't want to hit LA without any money, which is where I was headed, so that's why I stopped in Albuquerque.

I spent the night under the cap of my pickup, and at seven I put my name on the list at Western Temps. Around eight they sent me to a grocery warehouse that needed a man for three days. All morning I stacked cartons on pallets, which the guys on forklifts loaded into trucks. When lunch came I bought a sandwich from a machine and went outside.

Across the parking lot a big guy with his shirt off was shooting at a basket on a pole. I shoved the last of my sandwich in my mouth, and when I got close I held my hands out for the ball. He tossed it to me, and I banked in a short jumper.

"Randy," I said, holding out my fist.

"Jimmy," he said, touching knuckles.

"One on one?" I said.

"Can't."

"Can't?"

"We used to play, but management made a rule after a couple guys got hurt."

I went into my warm-up, which is to start short and work my way out. Pretty soon Jimmy was just catching the ball out of the net and tossing back to me.

"Let's play 'round the world," he said.

I made everything going out - lay-up, corner, wing, top of the key, wing, corner, left side lay-up - then missed corner on the way back and waited my turn.

Jimmy made three shots, missed from the top of the key, chanced it, and put himself back at the start.

I hit the corner and the wing and moved to the top of the key.

“You work here now?” he said, throwing me the ball.

“Three days,” I said. “I’m a temp.”

“Where you live?”

“In my truck. I just got to town last night.”

He watched two more pop the net.

“You’re a shooter, aren’t you?” he said.

I shrugged and moved to the corner, where I got careless and missed.

“Tell you what,” Jimmy said. “Chance it and you can stay at my place tonight.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

Jimmy tossed the ball.

“You gotta miss, though,” he said.

“No way,” I said, putting it up, but a little hitch in my follow-through made it clip out off the heel of the rim.

After work we stopped for beer at a Circle-K, then I followed Jimmy’s black Camaro until he turned into a neighborhood of small stucco houses with flat roofs. He pulled into his driveway, and I parked my truck on the street. The yard was bare dirt, spotted with weeds.

“Two rules at my place,” Jimmy said. “Keep your hands off my woman, and never drink the last beer.”

“You got it,” I said.

I followed him inside, into a living room with a couch and two green beanbag chairs. Shelves made from planks and cinder blocks held a stereo and television. Straight ahead was a table and chairs, and sitting at the table, smoking, was a woman with cropped black hair and a nose ring in one nostril. She was medium size, with round cheeks and full lips. She wore jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, and a lightning bolt tattoo zigzagged down her left arm. She didn't seem that happy to see us, and when the cigarette went to her mouth I noticed the last traces of a shiner under one of her eyes.

"You off tonight?" Jimmy asked her.

"Like every Monday," she said.

Jimmy pulled three cans from the ring tops and set them on the table.

"This is Georgia," he said. "This is Randy. Randy just got to town and needs a place to stay."

I lifted my chin at her. She looked, then gave me a barely noticeable nod of her head. We sat at the table and opened our beers, but no one said anything.

"Where'd you play ball?" I asked Jimmy, to break the ice.

"High school in Denver," he said. "Then college in Texas for two and a half years."

"Two and a half?"

I saw Georgia roll her eyes as she lit another cigarette.

"They kicked me off the team junior year. One of the assistants was always on me, and one day in practice I clocked him."

"That'll do it."

"What about you?"

"High school outside Detroit. Then juco in Oklahoma."

"You any good?"

"Twelve a game senior year. Then eight, first year college."

"What about second?"

“Didn’t play. Got kicked off the team.”

“You punch a coach?” Georgia said.

“No. Me and some buddies ran out of beer one Saturday late. We wanted more, so we broke into a Magic Mart.”

“For beer?” said Jimmy.

“Yeah. Broke the front window, took two cases from the cooler. Silent alarm brought the cops before we even got it in the car.”

Georgia snorted.

“Another genius,” she said. “You two are made for each other.”

“What you don’t seem to realize, Georgia,” said Jimmy, “is you learn from things. I remember sitting in coach’s office. He told me I was off the team, I hadn’t given him any choice. He said if I couldn’t use my temper in a positive way, it was always going to use me. I’ll never forget that.”

Georgia looked from Jimmy to me.

“What about you, Magic Mart?” she said. “What’d you learn?”

“Don’t run out of beer.”

That made her laugh, which is always the most important thing. I didn’t mention what Coach told me. When he bailed me out the next day we went straight to the gym to clean out my locker. Then he dropped me at the dorm. “You’re a fuck up, Jensen,” he said. “Pure and simple.”

We ordered pizza and kept drinking. Around ten Georgia brought the last three beers from the refrigerator and gave Jimmy a questioning look. Jimmy shrugged.

“Smoke some weed?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

Georgia got a bag from the bedroom, filled a paper, wet it with her tongue. She took a long drag with her eyes closed and passed it to Jimmy, who was in the middle of telling what an asshole the assistant had been. Jimmy took a hit, talked while he held his

breath, took another hit. When it was done Georgia dropped the roach in an empty can and stretched, holding her arms over her head and arching her back so her T-shirt tightened over her breasts. Then she smiled and leaned over to kiss Jimmy's cheek.

"You feeling better now, baby?" Jimmy said.

"Yeah. I had a wicked hangover."

Jimmy told me to get my stuff and put it in the extra bedroom, so I went outside. The night had cooled off, and walking to my truck the reefer made me feel the muscles moving in my arms and legs. The street was quiet except for a dog barking and the background noise of car engines.

Jimmy and Georgia had disappeared, so I closed the door and carried my stuff to the bedroom, which was empty except for a bare mattress and three cardboard boxes stacked in a corner. I spread out my bag and turned off the light, but lying in the dark I heard noises. Soft at first, then louder and more regular, something between a grunt and a groan. It wasn't hard to track her progress, and when they finished I wasn't thinking about sleep anymore. I heard someone up walking, and then the hall lights went out. From the steps I could tell it was Georgia.

The next night Jimmy took me to a park downtown where there was always a game. We teamed with three other guys, then waited along the chain fence. On the court I mostly fed the ball to Jimmy, and he made probably ten of our fifteen buckets. The pass I liked best came in our second game. He made a post move that sealed his man on his back, and I whipped one that was halfway there before he looked. He barely got his hands up in time, and as we jogged back on defense I made him laugh by imitating the way his eyes had bugged out.

We gave up the court after three games, and driving home I could feel the air through the windows cooling my hair. We stopped at a light, and while Jimmy drummed

on the steering wheel he told me about the two-on-two tournament they have every year at his health club.

“I think we should enter,” he said. “I think we could win it.”

“I’m up for it,” I said.

“We’ll have to train, though,” he said. “You play a lot of games in three days.”

“Let’s do it,” I said.

So the next afternoon we started training on a cement court at a school near his house. We ran drills, we set up plays, we talked over how we’d play defense. We did four laps on the dirt track, and then we finished with some sprints. Back at his place we stopped after splitting just one six.

I finished my three days at the warehouse, and on Thursday I was back at Western Temps. I got a half a day cleaning some apartment grounds, then nothing on Friday. When Jimmy came home from work I was on the couch watching TV.

“Bad news,” he said. “They gave me night shift the next two weeks.”

I turned off the remote and sat up.

“What’s that mean?” I said.

“That means I’ll be all screwed up. Haven’t you ever worked nights?”

“Not really.”

“You can’t shit. You can’t think. It messes up your coordination.”

I waited while Jimmy thought for a minute. Then he said to get my stuff because we were going to his club.

“I want to see how we do while I’m still sharp,” he said.

In half an hour we were walking from the locker room to the gym and I could hear the hollow sound of bouncing balls and the squeak of sneakers. There were two small courts, and on one a game was going. On the other two guys were shooting. We warmed

up and asked them to play, but after a few baskets we all knew it was a mismatch, and when it was over they drifted away.

We shot again for a few minutes, and then Jimmy said to check out the two black guys at the other end. One was tall and lanky, maybe 6'8". The other was only about 5'6", but stocky.

"That's Ron Gaines and Greg Green," Jimmy said. "High school stars seven or eight years ago. They came in second in last year's tournament."

I watched Green, the short one, pop a shot.

"Let's play them," Jimmy said, and started walking.

Green tossed in another long jumper, and Gaines caught it.

"You guys want a game?" Jimmy said.

Gaines turned and raised his eyebrows.

"With you and who else?" he said.

"Just us," Jimmy said. "Two on two."

Gaines gave a little laugh.

"You guys must be superstars," he said.

"Let's find out," said Jimmy.

Gaines flipped the ball.

"Go ahead," he said. "You start."

I could tell from Jimmy's eyes he was pumped like I hadn't seen him before. I carried the ball out front and checked it with Green, who tapped it back and set himself. I passed to Jimmy at the foul line, made a cut, and took his pass back, but before I did anything else Green poked the ball loose and was running it down toward midcourt.

I didn't look at Jimmy. Green came at me and gave a hesitation move that shifted from quick to gone. When Jimmy came to cut him off Green passed to Gaines for a lay-in.

Jimmy popped the ball once between his hands and threw it to me. We ran the same set, but this time Jimmy kept the ball, took three dribbles, and backed Gaines in with his butt before swinging into the lane and hitting a jump hook.

Gaines nodded his head with a trace of a smile as he threw the ball out to Green. I stayed a step back so Green wouldn't beat me off the dribble again, which gave me a nice view when he hit his jumper.

I passed to Jimmy, who backed Gaines again with his dribble, but Gaines didn't give ground like the first time. He and Jimmy bumped three times, then Jimmy tried an up and under move that Gaines swatted away. Green ran it down and banked in a short jumper.

Jimmy carried the ball to me.

"Can't you stop that guy?" he said.

I didn't mention the last basket came off his blocked shot.

"Not so far," I said.

"Get it to me inside," he said.

So I got the ball to him low and Jimmy started throwing himself around like a madman. He banged again with Gaines, rocked him back, then picked up his dribble and pivoted twice before lowering his shoulder and launching himself at the basket, leading with an elbow that hit Gaines' arms, then pushed through to clip the side of his head. Gaines pulled the rebound and hesitated, then glanced disdainfully at Jimmy before passing the ball to Green. Green sent it back and Gaines made a move to the basket, scoring right over Jimmy.

Jimmy called for the ball again and I gave it to him. I knew he'd take the shot, but I made a cut anyway as he lunged to his right. Then the next thing I knew the ball was bouncing away and Jimmy was tangled up with Gaines. They stumbled, almost went down, then pushed off, with Gaines backpedaling and throwing jabs as Jimmy wheeled and threw a hook. Green and I got between them, and Jimmy didn't resist much as I

pushed him away. I stood with my hands in his chest, both of us panting, and he looked over my head at Gaines. Then he turned and walked away.

I glanced over my shoulder, but they weren't looking so I followed Jimmy. He stopped at the drinking fountain, then headed toward the locker room. I jogged after him.

"That what you call using your temper?" I said.

He turned, and at first I thought he was coming for me.

"What are you, stupid?" he said. "We were losing in there."

When I came out the next morning Jimmy was eating breakfast at the table. I got a bowl of cereal, but when I sat down Jimmy stood up. I figured, fuck him if he's going to be that way about a pickup game, and started eating. That's when the front door opened and Georgia came in. Until then I'd thought she was asleep in their bedroom.

Jimmy's plate clattered in the kitchen sink and he came out.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he said.

"Out," said Georgia, tossing her purse on the couch.

"Out?" said Jimmy.

"Anita wanted to party after closing. She's my ride."

"Party? With who?"

"Oh, fuck off, Jimmy. It's not like you pick me up after work."

"I have to sleep. Take a cab."

"I don't need a cab. Anita gives me a ride."

"Yeah? And who's giving you a ride while you wait for your ride?"

"You're pathetic," Georgia said.

Jimmy sent a chair crashing with a kick and took a step toward her. Georgia had already run to the other side of the table.

“Don’t you fucking hit me!” she screamed. “If you fucking hit me again I’ll kill you in your sleep! I swear to God I will!”

I sat with my legs tensed, not knowing if he was going for her, not knowing whether I could stop him if he did. But he just knocked over another chair and walked out the door.

“Kiss my ass,” he said over his shoulder.

Georgia slammed the bedroom door. Jimmy’s Camaro roared away outside. When my heart slowed down I went back to my cereal.

Monday I left the house before Jimmy got back from his Sunday shift, but I didn’t go to Western Temps. A guy at work had told me about a view from the top of the Sandia Mountains I should see, so I drove east on the interstate and took the winding road up the back side.

At the top I parked and climbed some stairs to an observation deck. The city and the Rio Grande were below, and the sky was all around with just a little haze on the horizon. Cliffs and trees were on both sides, and out in front, except for the city and the river, there wasn’t much but brown desert and a lone mountain way to the west.

Somewhere past that mountain was California, and the ocean. I stood in the middle of all that space, and I asked myself what the hell I was staying for. We weren’t going to win any tournament - those guys had kicked our butts, and they hadn’t even won the year before. I didn’t know what was up with Jimmy and Georgia, but after wanting to kill each other Saturday morning they had made it up that night. I didn’t need to be around for that. All I was doing was what I always do - make a good plan, then fuck it up.

Driving back down the mountain I decided to leave on Wednesday, after Western Temps paid me. I got back to town and ate a hamburger, then drove around some more

just to check things out. Around nine I bought a six and went back to the house, where I found Jimmy watching TV.

“Want a beer?” I said.

He shook his head.

“Where’s Georgia?” I asked.

He shrugged and turned back to the screen.

Jimmy left for work at ten-thirty, and around eleven I finished my six. I didn’t feel sleepy, so I started on the three tallboys I found in the refrigerator. I drank two of them, and I was getting the third, when a car door slammed outside. I popped the beer as Georgia came in, and I could see she’d been partying.

“Any more of those?” she said.

“Last one,” I said. “I’ll split it with you.”

She took the can and tilted her head back to drink. My eyes went from her throat, down her body, and up again.

“What’s got you up so late, Magic Mart?” she said.

“Maybe I’ve got something on my mind,” I said, and that made her laugh.

She put down the beer and stood close.

“Maybe I do, too.”

She didn’t say anything else, and then her tongue was in my mouth. We took about two minutes to get to my mattress, and pretty soon I was hearing those noises again, only this time they were right in my ear.

That week I was up every morning, but I wasn’t going to Western Temps. I just didn’t want to be there when Jimmy came home. I’d drive to a quiet spot and sleep most of the day in my truck, then go back to the house at night. I trained with Jimmy at the

school on Monday, but the rest of the week he said he was too tired. Every night I was in the parking lot behind Georgia's bar at closing to give her a ride.

Saturday Jimmy said we needed to practice. We shot baskets and ran a few laps at the school, but neither of us was into it. We came back and showered, and Jimmy went to buy beer, tequila, and limes. We turned on an NBA game and Jimmy put the tequila bottle, the cut limes, and a shaker of salt between us.

"I thought this lime and tequila thing was just in the movies," I said.

"No," said Jimmy. "It's for real."

"And the beer?"

"The beer is for fluids. So you don't get dehydrated."

The first time I hit the tequila it burned like turpentine. After that I didn't mind. The game ended with the bottle three-quarters gone, and I was almost drunk enough to forget I'd been banging Jimmy's woman every night that week. Jimmy went to the kitchen for a beer, then sat on the couch and popped it open.

"You remember those two rules at my place?" he said.

I had a beer at my lips, and I stopped right there.

"Yeah," I said.

"You broke one, didn't you?"

If I'd thought I had a chance I would have run for it right then, but I didn't see any way I could get past Jimmy and out the door before he brought me down.

"There wasn't a single fucking beer the other morning," he said.

"I guess I forgot."

"Just don't do it again," he said.

He hit the tequila and bit into a lime.

"Night shift sucks," he said.

"Big time," I said, reaching for the bottle.

"Listen," Jimmy said. "You're my friend, right?"

“Sure. Of course.”

“And friends do things for each other, right?”

“Right.”

“Like me giving you a place to stay.”

“Exactly. That’s what friends do.”

“Good,” he said. “Because there’s something I need you to do for me. As a friend.”

“You name it.”

“I want you to kill Georgia.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I’d do it myself, but I’m the first one they’d suspect.”

“You’re joking, right?” I said.

“No. No joke. She’s cheating on me.”

“What, you mean when she came home late that one day?”

“No, man. I’ve been through this before. I can tell.”

“How?”

“One morning this week we did it, and I could tell I wasn’t the first one there.”

I wasn’t sure what I thought about that.

“She’s a nympho,” Jimmy said. “She’s cheated on me ever since she moved in.”

“Then why don’t you break up?”

“You mean kick her out?”

“Yeah.”

“The last guy who did that, she brained him with a brick and put him in the hospital.”

“Bullshit. Who told you that?”

“The guy. That’s why you’ve gotta kill her.”

“No fuckin’ way,” I said.

“You’ve got to. You heard what she said. She’ll kill me in my sleep.”

“She said if you hit her.”

“She’ll do it either way. She’s crazy.”

“You’re crazy.”

“If you’re my friend, you’ll do it,” he said. “Just take her out of town, do her, and bury the body. No one will know.”

That was when my stomach started to heave.

“Fuck it,” I said. I pushed to my feet, almost went down, got my hand against the wall. Everything wheeled, and then I was on one knee at the toilet, spewing a vile yellow stream that splashed into the bowl and burned my throat. The first few heaves brought the most up, but the sour, dry ones that came after were the worst.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Jimmy’s big sneakers in the doorway.

“If you’re my friend,” he said, “you’ll do it.”

I got up at noon and left the house to think. I drank coffee at a donut shop, but that didn’t help much. I still felt sick, and I still didn’t know what to do. The way the tequila blurred everything, I couldn’t decide if Jimmy knew about me and Georgia or not.

The smart thing was just to leave, but I couldn’t. I had to warn Georgia Jimmy had flipped out. I went back to the house, and neither one was there. I still felt pretty bad, so I lay down on the mattress to rest. Next thing I knew Jimmy was standing over me.

“You still hungover?” he said.

“Kind of,” I said. “Aren’t you?”

“Not too bad.”

Jimmy looked at me.

“Get up for a minute,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

I stood, still half asleep, and Jimmy led me to the stack of boxes in the corner. The top one was filled with magazines, and Jimmy lifted it. Sitting in the second box, on top of a lipstick ad, was a silver .22 pistol.

Jimmy set the top box back on the stack.

“Do it tonight,” he said. “While I’m at work.”

I sat in the parking lot and watched Georgia walk toward me. When she got in the truck she gave me a kiss. I pulled out of the lot and drove east on Central, toward the mountains, without saying anything.

“Where we going?” she asked after a minute.

I looked at her, then back at the street.

“We need to talk,” I said.

“Talk?” she said, with a little smile.

She drew on her cigarette, making the tip glow.

“Yeah,” I said. “Last night Jimmy asked me to kill you.”

“What?”

“I thought he was just drunk, but today he gave me a gun and said do it tonight.”

“He’s crazy,” Georgia said.

“I know. And I think he knows about you and me.”

“Fuck.”

For a couple of blocks we didn’t say anything. The street lights and neon signs glided by.

“So what are you going to do?” Georgia said.

“Split. Tonight.”

“Figures,” she said.

I swallowed, even though my mouth was dry.

“I want you to come with me,” I said.

“Come with you where?”

“California. LA.”

She stared out the windshield for about three seconds.

“Okay,” she said.

I backed my truck in the driveway and opened the gate, and when I went inside Georgia had already filled a suitcase. I carried it out and threw it under the cap. When I went back in Georgia had filled one black garbage bag with stuff and was working on a second. I carried the full one to the truck, and when I turned around Georgia was there with the other.

“You got everything?” I said.

“Everything I want.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I went inside to my room and turned on the light. There was no reason to leave the gun where Jimmy could put his hands right on it. I lifted the top box off the stack, shifting it to my right arm so I could reach with my left, but the only thing I saw in the second box was the magazine lipstick ad.

At first I couldn’t make sense of it. I dropped the box I was holding and used both hands to lift magazines, searching for the gun. Then I did the same thing with the box I’d dropped. For a second I thought maybe there hadn’t been a gun at all. Then I thought Jimmy must have come back while I was out getting Georgia. That meant he might be somewhere close, and that made me stop thinking.

I slammed the gate of my pickup and jumped in the cab with Georgia. Leaving the neighborhood it was like I was running a fast break, aware of everything all around - the street through the windshield, the houses to the sides, the street in the mirrors.

I drove straight to the freeway, took it through town, and blasted up the long hill to the west. Then we were cruising at seventy-five in the desert night. Georgia was right beside me, staring out the windshield, smoking, still wearing her short skirt from work. I didn't want to think about anything except that sometime tomorrow, somewhere in Arizona, we'd stop and get a room. But next to her was her purse, and I couldn't help thinking about that, too.

“So, Georgia,” I said. “Where you from, anyway?”