Fern Park: Story Three

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A sunny day in the park in the small suburban town of West Hartford is the backdrop for this story; two old rivals want to fight one more battle.

Published on
Booksie

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You have been to this park before today. You have lived in West Hartford, Connecticut your entire life. Though you have visited Fern Park thousands of times, it has never occured to you to wonder why they gave it this name. You like things to be simple. You like action, not words. You are not an attractive man. You are short, with powerful arms and legs that you have made strong with exercise. People have often mistaken your quietness for ignorance. You are quick-tempered, with a thousand slights piled high in your heart. You have experienced much failure and frustration in your life. Much of it at the hand of your rival.

You look around the empty basketball court. You notice the cemetery at the top of the hill, bordering one end of the park. You have jogged through this cemetery many times in your youth, the cool wind rushing painfully through your lungs as you pushed yourself. You are old and gray now; the years ahead are less than the years behind. You turn your attention to the orange basketball in your hands. You wonder why you agreed to meet him here on his terms. You know that he is taller, faster, and more skilled than yourself. But you are stubborn. Your hatred of him is strong. You remember every insult, every barbed comment he has made at your expense. You despise him so much, you fancy that your will can overcome his skill.

You hear him before you see him. But this is always the case. He is showing off to a large group of boys wearing Conard High shirts. He is charming them, and they are eating it up like candy. He is handsome, with perfect eyes and a short, straight nose. Your nose is big and crooked. You would like to smash his nose in with one blow of your large fist. But you know you wont. He wants you to lose your temper, as he has a thousand times in the past. he knows he can set you off with one cocky grin, with one look of contempt. You don't want to fight him. You want to beat him.

He comes over and shakes your hand. You smile as he does this. You know that he despises you, and you wonder why he agreed to this game. He begins to brag about his son the lawyer. You know that his son the lawyer is the biggest crook in West Hartford. But he is a rich crook. You mention your own son. He is a mechanic in a small gas station. You know he is going nowhere in life; you seem to blame yourself for not motivating him. You remember how many times you screamed and beat him, imploring him to make something of himself. But you cannot mention this now. You struggle in vain to put a positive spin on your son's life. You will admit nothing to this hated rival.

You begin the game. It is one-on-one, and he scores first. He brings the ball to the hoop effortlessly, despite his age. You marvel at his long, muscular legs. But you don't give up. You muscle your way in, scorin several times despite your short height. You both notice two young teenagers at the end of the court. They seem to be waiting for your game to finish. This enrages you. Your rival is amused. He makes a lay-up, hanging on to the hoop for a few seconds to show his mastery over you. You notice one of the two boys wandering over to the cemetery to take a look. The tall, thin one with the toothpick in his mouth reaches down and picks up an object from the tall, green grass. It is a plastic toy gun. You stop playing for a moment. staring at the boy. He smiles in embarrasment; he quickly stuffs the gun into his shorts. You notice his friend returning to the court. You refocus your attention on the game, as you see the youths walking away out of the corner of your eye.

You have fallen behind. Your hated rival has scored several unanswered points. You grit your teeth, stealing the ball and forcing yourself toward the hoop. You shoot in desperation. The ball bounces off the rim. Your rival recovers it, making an easy layup. You realize that he has beaten you again.

You see him suddenly hunch over in pain. You see him collapse to the court. You stand there, unable to make yourself move to help him. You hear a noise from the pond. From a distance, you see the boys with the Conard shirts surounding the two teenagers. You look to the other side of Fern Park. You notice a short,

stocky girl with a Mongolish face crying as she makes her way toward the sidewalk. You gaze at the sun, bouncing off of the beautiful trees.

You think of how much you love West Hartford.

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