

The Soccer Game. Darren Sylvester

Three months of full time employment being contracted data entry operators in a finance company have been completed. Yesterdays pay contained the contractual thousand dollar severance fee and on this, the final Friday afternoon together, a picnic has been organised on behalf of the temp agency. One of the many supervisors arrives with a plastic bag for each of them containing not only obvious stationary items but also more interestingly a frisbee, baseball style cap and a coffee cup displaying the temp agency logo as farewell presents. The supervisor has also brought along a soccer ball and naturally supervises everyone in an office boys v. girls match before they head for home. They get the feeling this sort of thing has been done many times before. For some of them, this is already their second frisbee.

A wooden park bench is set out with simple food such as crackers, eggplant dips, bottles of white wine, orange juice and beer. Napkins are handed out in a similar fashion to a take one pass it along information sheet at work. Someone is complaining about leaving food in the open air which insects are landing on.

The majority haven't played any sport since university or earlier which results in most people trotting after the ball slow paced and kicking it aimlessly. Those that attend gym after work have outfits that match. Someone is actually wearing office clothes. Someone secures hold of the ball, shuffling it away from them and holds their hands aloft whilst shrieking out, jumping up and down, amazed they'd even moved it at all.

Everyone is relaxed and comfortable, laughing together like old friends. Everyone is genuinely afraid of getting their trainers dirty. A goal is scored. Then another. One of the goalkeepers is smoking a Benson & Hedges.

Then after a simple cross field pass, the ball travels directly and solidly off a blue Reebok firing straight towards Rachels face. It splits her head back almost ninety degrees - sending her backwards and into the ground. Everyone stops and stands still for a second, then rushes over as she begins to wince and contract in pain.

The kicker murmurs when ambling over, raising both hands skyward and then when arriving at Rachels feet, drops both hands to their face. "Jesus."

Not only has Rachel's nose started to bleed and the ball skidded off burning her pale face, however more seriously, the impact has caused her front tooth to drive and puncture right through her bottom lip which is now bleeding profusely over her neck onto a white t-shirt. She's crying and slowly raising her hand to the lip. Slowly arching her back and rolling over on her side, bringing her knees up.

"I'm sorry, so sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry." The kicker is down on their knees placing a hand gently under her head.

Rachel has now managed to dislodge her tooth. She's still crying, although it's a little louder now after feeling the slit beneath her lip.

Everyone stands around, unsure of what to do. The ball is now thirty metres away after ricocheting off her head into the air and sailing back over the picnic bench.

Someone running over shaking their head begins to remark. "It starts off fun and games..." Until they arrive close enough to see Rachels face. "Oh..."

Someone runs off, only to turn back shouting they're getting a car. Everyone gathered stands in a circle. Napkins placed over Rachels mouth and nose, decorated in Christmas trees and Merry Christmas font is slowly dissolving into a brown coloured red. People are just standing there looking at each other, disbelieving.

In the office Rachel is discussed and cherished. She is naturally likable, with blonde hair always pulled tightly back into a ponytail or bun. She oversees a meticulously organised desk. She never worries to read or pass on insignificant group emails, she simply deletes them. Rachel gets on with the job. She organised the ten or so commemoration cakes they had for lunch when it was a birthday. The finance company had discussed about keeping her on full time, then changed their minds.

CJ was one of the many impressed by her. CJ would go home and take on some of Rachel's habits, develop them into their own life so they could feel closer to her. For example, CJ only began watching Friends knowing Rachel would be too. They could then laugh about Chandlers misfortunes in love the following day during break at the base of the finance building.

The two of them had become close friends and often talked about deeply personal matters, how when parents died they packed all the household belongings and furniture and had it put into storage. For how long in storage they didn't know, when they could handle it they guessed. How nothing before had prepared them for this, how it really wasn't that expensive. They would each listen, nodding and placing a hand gently on the others shoulder.

Now that Rachel is crying and also murmuring sorry to everyone around her, CJ offers to help her up and into the second hand Audi just arrived, reassuring her. "It'll be fine. You'll be fine Rachel."

The supervisor hops in the back seat, a hand covering their mouth. The car turns, accelerates, then speeds away.

Turning, they walk back and stand around the complimentary bags and notice that Rachels small handbag is still on the ground next to her paper plate and cup almost empty of Diet Coke. CJ picks up the Diet Coke and before dropping it into the trash, with their back to the rest of the group, with eyes closed, lost in a daydream, slowly runs their tongue all over and around the rim. CJ lets the Diet Coke fall into the bin and with a face flushed red from embarrassment, turns back to the group where it seems no one noticed.

And today the two of them watched each other very closely. Looking for like, oh... I don't know - all the signals you could give to someone in this situation.

Everyone is packing up. Someone collects the ball. A couple of people are throwing a frisbee. People are exchanging numbers and waving goodbyes as they drive off, to some people for the last time. CJ offers to take care of Rachels handbag before anyone else.

In the evening CJ is watching television where Friends has just finished. The handbag sits half open on the kitchen table. The telephone rings. CJ bends down and answers quizzically. "Hello?" A pause, then suddenly surprised and awake. "Oh hi! How are you?"

CJ straightens up and whilst talking, walks with the cordless phone into the kitchen where the handbag is. As they talk CJ holds out and stares at Rachels drivers license running their thumb slowly and delicately over the thick plastic laminate of her photograph.

Darren Sylvester is an artist who lives in Melbourne Australia

