

No Easy Game

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Paul doesn't say much when he appears. Just sits down silent like and sorta sad. Glasses, hunched shoulders, no eye contact. Where did this guy come from? This is supposed to be a Writers Workshop. Maybe he's only visiting, trying us out or has nothing else to do. No one has to register. We welcome drop-ins. But we're all hoping he'll drop out. We're a close knit group. Been together for years. Most of us unpublished unless we're self-published. We're running out of time so we take the shortcut. See our work in print before there's no print available.

Paul has been reading ever since he sat down. Some sports book or other while the rest of us catch up on our personal lives until the moderator bangs the gavel. Then we all pretend to come to attention. Some of us are still on our phones. Others are snacking on some cookies from the cafeteria which serves healthy lunches for seniors. We smell cookie dough for the next hour. One of our members brings a triple deck ham and cheese sandwich and chips. His crunching adds a kind of syncopation to our readings to say nothing of the salty after-smell in a small room with no windows. I've often complained about that, the windows that is. In one ear out the other. Nothing changes. Bureaucracy at its best.

Paul doesn't live in our town. He's from inland, Laguna Lakes or some other senior parking lot. As the weeks go by he shows up on time every time with his sports books and glasses and belly that he can hardly shove under the desk. Only now he's started reading his own stories aloud. He's always the last one to read because his surname begins with a Z. Slavic perhaps or maybe Middle Eastern. We read in alphabetical order. It gives us a sense of professionalism.

Paul's stories are usually about baseball or soccer. Always about some kid who couldn't make the team. He writes in short sentences, the way he speaks, a kind of staccato. His grammar is not the best. We try to correct it. But it doesn't help. Next meeting another story with identical errors. He listens to our critiques, nods his head in agreement but nothing changes.

Because we need bodies we let him stay. Most of our members have died or become so disabled they can no longer attend. You might say we're desperate trying to keep some semblance of a group together until we can't recall there was one.

So this one windy day, the Santa Anas are in full swing, smacking the palms with such force their fronds litter the street, and dust sears our lungs. It's on this kind of day that Paul arrives, on time as usual, striped T-shirt stretched over his gut, sagging blue jeans, receding hair slicked back. No gray in it yet so maybe he's a bit younger than the rest of us or maybe he touches it up. Guys do that nowadays.

The wind blows him through the door. He rubs his fat hands together before he passes around his story. His face is flushed, maybe from the wind, maybe embarrassment. Hard to tell. As a lark we decide to read in reverse alphabetical order so Paul is up first. It isn't his usual sports story. Paul's voice is flatter than ever, no trace of emotion.

"When—when I—I was t-ten," he mumbles. "My b-best friend p-pushed my head hard into a desk. Next thing I-I w-was in the h-hospital. My c-coma lasted for months. When I-I finally recovered, my parents were so relieved they b-bought me that sports book I'd been wanting, *NO EASY GAME* as a "G-Get Well" gift. It took me a l-long time before I c-could read it. My b-brain was so confused. A c-concussion d-does that."

We look at each other. We look at Paul. He looks back at us, his face blank as always.

"Is this a memoir, Paul?" I ask, hoping he'll say no, just a story. But he says, "Yes."

Somehow we can't find any grammatical errors.