

Playing Handball Off A Curb

By James W. Fried

It was Jodi's idea to bring Nate and Josh to Boston. I thought it was a bad idea. Not that I dislike the twins, it's just that watching two chubby ADHD thirteen-year-olds constantly picking on one another is something I could live without. Take right now for instance: the boys are in the jump seat facing us, poking, and prodding one another and giggling incessantly. But her other idea—getting a limousine—*was* a good idea. We're in the middle of a thunderstorm and the limo can drop us off right outside the door of the Italian restaurant on Beacon Hill where we're having dinner.

Jodi turns to her sons and says, "Boys, you can ask Noah anything about Boston, can't they, Noah?"

The boys respond with wide-eyed stares. They're good kids, I guess. They just get in the way, and I don't like having to explain everything to them. Jodi knows this but it doesn't seem to matter. I turn toward her with a sardonic grin.

She's a looker: silky white skin, apple cheeks that turn a darker shade of red when her anger is up, almond-shaped baby blues that frame a perky nose, and beautiful full red lips. Her hair is blonde...naturally so. At thirty-three, she's three years younger than I am. We met two years ago when I was going through an ugly divorce. She was a divorcee too. She says the boys were her anchors while she lived through a marriage that she describes as "three years in Dante's Inferno."

Jodi's the one who pushed me to continue writing, and I give her credit for keeping me on track. We enjoy one another's company when we're alone and that's been reward enough up to now; but lately she's been insisting that I get to know the boys

better, which can only mean that thoughts of a more permanent relationship are spinning through her pretty little head.

She looks at the plastic go-cup in my hand. “You shouldn’t have that in the car, Noah. That’s not setting a good example for the boys.”

I take a long drink from the cup I’ve brought from our hotel’s bar. “What the hell’s wrong with bringing a drink in the car? I’m not driving.” I look at the boys. “You see, boys, the idea is that you shouldn’t drink and drive.” I take another swig. “But there’s nothing wrong with drinking when you’re being chauffeured.”

Josh elbows Nate and they both giggle.

Jodi frowns. “That’s no way to have a positive influence on the boys. They look up to you. You’re a role model for them, isn’t he, boys?” They look stupefied. “And please don’t cuss in front of the boys.”

“What in the hell are you talking about? I didn’t cuss.”

“You most certainly did. And you just did it again.”

“What’d I say?”

“You used the H word.”

“Hell isn’t a cuss word.” I turn to the boys. “Boys, you can find the word hell in the Bible. You can’t go wrong using words that are in the Bible.”

Jodi’s eyes narrow and deep lines crease her forehead. “It’s cussing and you know it. I just wish you’d think about that before using the word.”

I sip from my cup, so it won’t runneth over. “Well, boys, your momma is so sweet she doesn’t know what real cuss words are. Now if I started using the S word or the F word—”

“Noah, please!” She sits back in her seat, folds her arms across her chest and stares at the squirming boys. I gaze out at the rain and finish my drink.

“You really are in one fine mood tonight,” she says as we pull up to the restaurant. “One fine mood.” She puts her hand on my arm as I reach for the door handle. “Listen, you’ve been drinking since early this afternoon. I’d appreciate it if you would lay off during dinner.” She nods in the direction of the twins. “For the boys’ sake.” Then she steps from the car and tap-dances under a green awning to the restaurant door, her sons’ heavy steps splashing the puddles of water behind her.

“Stay close,” I whisper to our driver as I ease out the door. “I might need you.”

His smile tells me that he understands.

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I’ve developed an attitude about Jodi, and now that we’ve reached the Boston stop of my book tour, I have concluded that she needs to peddle her long-term scheme in some other poor soul’s direction. I plan to make a clean break tonight, which explains my afternoon drinking binge.

Jodi and the boys are standing next to the restaurant’s maître d’ when I enter. He informs us that there will be a short wait until our table is ready, but we are in luck because the piano bar has four empty stools just sitting there waiting for us. Jodi grimaces. She recognizes an open invitation for me to get another drink when she sees one.

I hoist myself on a stool with the twins to my left and Jodi to my right. Two older women sit on the other side of Jodi, both smartly dressed. I put them at sixty-five, maybe seventy. One has bright red hair—a bad dye job—and the other sports a nice, blue-tinted

nursing home special. I listen to their slurred conversation and surmise that they have consumed more than their share of booze while sitting here.

I wave to a waiter and order soft drinks for the boys and cosmopolitans for Jodi and me. She starts to protest, but then surrenders with a what-the-hell shrug.

“Play a little Sinatra,” the redhead says to the piano player and beams with delight when he rolls out a soft *Summer Wind*.

When our drinks arrive, I raise my glass in a toast to the boys. Jodi sips her drink, her eyes staring daggers at me over the rim of her glass.

Sitting behind us at a long table are five couples and one elderly man. The old man, who looks like he just walked off the set of *Good Fellas*, is immaculately dressed. The younger men are loud and compete to pay tribute to him. One of them—he’s built like a bull, has creamy skin, and looks about thirty-five—approaches the piano player and whispers in his ear. The pianist abandons Sinatra and moves seamlessly into an Irish melody. The old ladies at our piano bar are not pleased, but the long table behind us responds with applause.

“What have we here?” whines the blue-haired woman. “A meeting of the Irish mafia?” Her redheaded friend cackles a little too loudly for my liking. The boys crack up.

Jodi leans into me and cocks her head toward the table. “You think they really could be? You know, *mafia*?”

I turn and look. The men at the table certainly look the part. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Well, you’re the writer. You should know.”

“Look, just ignore them and enjoy your drink. I don’t know what they are, but they’re not bothering you, so stop eying them.”

“I’m just curious. I would think that you, of all people, would feel the same.”

I wave at the waiter, ordering another drink.

The routine continues over the next half-hour—the bull making a request, the pianist responding with a song, the table behind us breaking into applause, the old women next to Jodi making catty remarks, and the boys eating it all up. Then the redhead, who has had enough, stops the bull’s retreat to his table by saying, “What are you requesting now—*Danny Boy*?” She draws out the words in pronounced derision.

The bull stops, looks back, and then steps up close to her stool. The corners of his mouth turn up into a sneer. “Listen, lady,” he says. “You mess with me, and I’ll cut you so low you’ll be playing handball off a curb.” He keeps his eyes locked on her, begging for a reply, but for the first time all night, the redhead is speechless.

Not Jodi. “That’s about the rudest thing I’ve ever heard,” she says.

The bull takes his eyes off the redhead and shifts them to Jodi, examining her from head to toe. Then he moves his tongue over his top lip, smiles, rolls his shoulders, and strides confidently back to his chair.

“Well, I never!” exclaims the blue hair-haired woman, as the pianist starts a new tune, seemingly oblivious to the entire affair.

Jodi watches the bull until he takes his seat at the table, then turns toward me with a look of disgust. “Thanks for the help.”

“What?”

“You saw how he looked at me.”

“And did you hear what he said to me?” the redhead demands.

“I did, and I heard what you said to him first. I thought you were out of line. He wasn’t bothering you. He was just making requests like you’ve been doing.” I look at Jodi. “And why did you have to stick your face into it?”

She stares through me. “I should have known better than to think you would come to my defense.” She leans across me to the twins. “Boys, there’s a good lesson for you to remember. When you’re with a lady, you should always defend her honor.” She pulls back and takes a sip of her drink.

“I agree, boys,” I say. “When you’re with a *lady*, you should always defend her.”

Jodi freezes with the cosmopolitan at her lips. We stare at one another like two heavyweights sizing up their opponent before the opening bell.

“We’re ready for you,” a waiter says, breaking the tension. Then he leads us to a table close to the Irish family. As we pass by, the bull makes a scene out of examining Jodi again, repeating his full body survey.

Jodi has given up on the evening and decides to join me in some heavy drinking. She orders a fresh cosmopolitan and consumes it in gulps, as if arming herself for the coming battle. After another round, I can tell that she’s primed for the fight.

We order from the menu, though I don’t have the slightest intention of putting anything more solid in my stomach than a couple of ice cubes from my drink. Jodi just picks at the chicken on her plate. Finally, she turns her eyes on me and the onslaught begins.

“You’re changing, Noah, right in front of my eyes.”

“How’s that?”

“You didn’t use to be this way...didn’t used to *act* this way.”

I snicker and shrug my shoulders. “Well, you’re different too.”

“Oh, really? And how might that be?”

I tilt my head toward the twins, who are busy devouring thick sirloins. “For one thing, we never used to have company when we went out. Now each date is like a family reunion.”

Jodi leans over and whispers loudly in my ear, “How dare you talk like that in front of those two babies! They’re not bothering you in the least, so you keep them out of this.”

I rear back and almost shout. “I’ll say whatever I damn well please!”

The boys jump, and Jodi’s eyes show her surprise at the decibel level of my voice. But she recovers and says, “It’s because of the money, isn’t it?”

“What’s because of the money?”

“Your new attitude. It’s the money. I always knew it would bring you down.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I’ll admit that this life hasn’t been what I thought it would be. Hell, I’ve been engaged or married for virtually every year of my adult life. So, when I finally got out of the marriage, I thought I might be able to enjoy myself.”

“Meaning you’d hook up with some pretty college-aged young thing and live it up. Instead, you’re dating—”

“Instead, I’m dating wrinkles.”

I regret the insult as soon as it passes my lips. Jodi’s look tells me that my words have cut deep. She sits back, her eyes welling. Now I have two choices. I can reach over,

grab her, and tell her that I didn't really mean it. That it's just the alcohol talking. That I'm sorry. Or I can do what I choose to do: tilt my head back and take another long drink of whiskey.

The relationship is pretty much in the toilet now. But unfortunately, it doesn't end the evening. As I hold the glass to my lips, I notice that Jodi is glaring over my shoulder. I turn and follow her stare. What I see is the bull looking at her and laughing. Jodi wipes her eyes and grits her teeth.

She turns back to her drink and I to mine, while the twins put the finishing touches to their meal. There's not much more that can be said. The only question is how much longer we'll sit here before returning to the hotel.

I'm contemplating my retreat when I feel a presence next to us. I look up and see the bull staring down at Jodi, completely ignoring me.

"You got a problem, lady?" he says.

She nods. "Yeah, I've got a problem. I'm looking at one asshole standing up"—she swivels toward me—"and another sitting beside me. Two assholes in one night. How could a girl get so lucky?"

The bull laughs. "A girl? Don't you mean grandma?"

Jodi has spunk, I'll give her that. As the bull glances at me and grins, wondering I guess, whether I'm going to defend her honor or not, Jodi grabs his pants at the belt buckle, jerks them out, and pours the remainder of her drink into his crotch.

"You bitch!" he yells, grabbing her roughly by the hair.

I stand up and slap him on the side of his head. It's not much of a blow. But the floor is wet from the drink that has poured down his pants, and I guess that's the reason

he slips, because there's no way my lame punch put him down. Anyway, the bull's feet fly high in the air, and, as he crashes to the floor, the back of his head strikes the edge of a nearby table, making a vicious clapping sound. He lays perfectly still, and the restaurant becomes deathly quiet.

I'm drunk but I have enough sense to realize that I'm probably a dead man. I look back at the bull's table and see two burly men heading my way. But they stop cold when the old man barks their names. "Get back over here and sit down," he orders, and they return to their seats.

I look at Jodi and then at the bull on the floor who is groaning and beginning to move. I try to prepare for the inevitable beating that's coming my way when he rolls up onto his knees, leans over, and pukes the contents of his meal onto the wood floor.

The old man has gotten to his feet by this time and is slowly walking over to us. He peers down at the pathetic looking man on the floor. The color has drained from the bull's face; he has the look of a whipped pup. The old man stares at him with an expression of utter contempt, then snaps his fingers, and two of the younger men rush over to help their fallen associate.

"Take him home and put him to bed," the old man says. "I've had enough of his nonsense for one evening." I watch the men usher the bull slowly out the front door.

The old man looks at me. "Sit down," he says, and I immediately follow his order. He pulls up a chair from another table and wedges it between Jodi and me, as a waiter cleans up the mess behind us.

"That was Leonard," he tells Jodi. "My nephew. He thinks he's tough, but he's really not." He smiles. "Are you all right, young lady?" His voice is soft, dignified.

Jodi returns the smile. “I think so.”

The old man looks at Josh and Nate. “Do these fine-looking young men belong to you?”

“They’re my sons.”

The old man extends his hand over the table and shakes each of theirs. “Well, tonight you two boys got to see a good example of how *not* to act in a restaurant. Real gentlemen never act the way these men acted here tonight. Do you understand that?”

The boys, suddenly quiet, nod in unison while Jodi beams.

“Listen,” the old man continues, “what can I do to make up for this mess?” I start to answer, but he raises his hand to cut me off. “I’m asking the young lady.”

I look at Jodi, who is taking it all in.

“Why don’t you and your two handsome sons join me at my table for some dessert? It’s my birthday, and there is nobody I would rather share it with more than the three of you.”

Jodi practically leaps from her chair. “It would be an honor. Come on, boys.”

Obviously, I’m not invited, so I watch them go to his table and sit down. Jodi slides up close beside the old man. Not once, not even for an instant, does she look my way.

I finish the last drink of the evening and pay our bill. Then I make my way out the front door, stopping just long enough to look back. Jodi wears the sweetest smile I’ve ever seen on her face. And the twins are in hog-heaven, too, devouring huge dishes of chocolate-covered ice cream. Just sitting there all quiet and proper, like two perfect little gentlemen.

The rain has stopped, and I find the limo sitting out front, my driver leaning against the front fender. “Where to, boss?” he asks.

I consider the question for a minute. “You know what, I think I’ll just walk back to the hotel.”

“You sure?”

I take out my money clip and peel off five one-hundred-dollar bills. “I need the exercise.” I look back at the front door of the restaurant. “And you can call it a night,” I add, handing him the money. “Momma and her two piglets have found another ride back to the hotel.”

He looks at me with arched eyebrows, but I don’t bother explaining. I’m already organizing a new story in my mind and don’t want to break my concentration.

I remove my jacket and sling it over my shoulder as I walk down Boylston before turning onto the sidewalk at Exeter. The more I think it through, the more I like the story’s plot. With a little luck, I can have a rough outline by the time I get back to the hotel.

I feel a sense of freedom, although I am melancholy too. The rain-soaked air cools my skin, and I can smell the Back Bay in the wind. Then I stop, close my eyes, and inhale. The refreshing air rushes through my nostrils, filling my lungs with a cleansing rush that chases the wretched whiskey from my body.