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PLAYING THE GAME

Bobby clung to the bar stool, his long, gangly legs wrapped tightly around its shiny metal frame. The acrid smell of warm beer hung in the stuffy room and Bobby's mouth tasted sour. His right arm rested on the beautifully varnished table, supporting his aching head. Across from him, on the other side of the table, sat Albert and Jacob, best buddies. A bag of salted pretzels, one end savagely torn open, its contents spilled, was between them. Tiny grains of white glistened dimly under the buzz of a fluorescent light like minute jewels which had poured from a bag of treasures. Bobby's fingers traced the outline of his full beer can in front of him, lightly following its smooth, rounded contour. A clock radio blared from the counter beside the sink. It read 9:13 P.M. as an old Beatles tune, "Hey Jude" played. The chorus of na-na-na-na's was just beginning, accompanied by some occasional static interference.

"...so the elephant says (snort), 'that's great but how do you eat with that thing?'' Albert burst into a high-pitched guffaw. Jacob joined in, chuckling, and Bobby smiled. Albert was a large, extremely wide, muscular jock. A typical teenage athlete; not much in the way of looks but a fun guy to be around. He was currently in the process of guzzling his ninth beer and had also assumed the position of "entertainer for the night." He recited every single one he had ever heard, that he could still remember. And, the delivery he used was truly more amusing than the jokes themselves. Recklessly, he would tell the first part of the joke, paying almost no attention to detail or specifics. It was as if he had a breathtakingly beautiful picture in his mind but was only allowed twenty-five words to describe it. Then, as he neared the end, he would snicker or giggle, anticipating the best part. Finally, he'd reach the punchline, spitting it out with a roar of laughter, or sometimes with his high-pitched titter which made him sound like a little girl laughing at a playful puppy. It really didn't matter that he told some of the jokes more than one time, for he seemed to be having so much fun telling them, Bobby and Jacob just had to laugh right along anyway. Bobby liked Albert sometimes, but a little of him went a long way.

Jacob was a fairly handsome, lean, dark-haired seventeen-year-old with the ability to get along with anyone, when he felt like it. He had a charming smile, not a pimple on his face, a good share of girls chassing after him... But, he was different. There was something about him that Bobby couldn't quite understand. He and Albert were best friends but Albert never seemed to notice Jacob's occasional weirdness. Bobby knew he wasn't alone, though. There were others who were uncomfortable around Jacob. Jerry Brooks, a good friend of Bobby's, had said one day, "Jacob gives me the creepes sometimes. I've known lots of people who like to make themselves look good, but, he's the only one who really seems to get a kick out of making people look bad. I just stay away from him."

Bobby had usually stayed away from him too, until tonight. Albert had called him on the phone around six o'clock.

"Are your parents gonna be gone to the Gardener's New Year's Eve party?"
"Yea, I guess," Bobby had replied knowing for sure they would be.
"Good, I'll see you later then," (click).

Bobby hadn't really minded that Albert invited himself over, that was...
just his obnoxious personality. Besides, Bobby really didn't have much planned for New Year's Eve, anyway. But, when Albert showed up with a case of Budweiser and his good 'ole buddy, Jacob, Bobby was apprehensive. He had always felt intimidated by Jacob and the way he was able to influence people. "We can't get too wild," Bobby had warned. "My parents would kill me if they found out about this." The fact was, Bobby just never liked to drink booze. Whenever he went to parties that had alcohol, he always found an excuse to leave before anyone noticed he wasn't drinking.

"Sure, no problem," Albert had said, as he plowed through the living room toward the kitchen. "Hey, ya got any ice?"

"In the freezer," Bobby had said uneasily. He had turned to shut the door and saw that Jacob was still in the doorway, staring at him blankly. "Are you coming in, Jacob?"

"Oh, yea," he said, "Thanks." He smiled and entered the room.

The party had gone fairly well as far as Bobby was concerned. They watched a comedy with Jerry Lewis on television, ate a couple of pepperoni pizzas, and then went into the kitchen where the beer was stashed in a bucketful of ice. But every once in a while, Bobby would look over at Jacob, who had been pretty quiet the whole evening, and catch him staring. As soon as their eyes met, Jacob would look away. His face showed almost no expression, as if he were deeply concentrating on something. Albert never noticed, for he was too absorbed with the movie and pizza.

Jacob was perched on his stool, now, much more talkative since drinking a couple of beers. "Here, Albert, an addition to your collection," Jacob said as he rolled an empty can two feet across the table where it came to rest against Albert's thick forearm. Bobby watched as Albert picked the can up in his huge hands and stacked it on top of the pyramid that he had been meticulously constructing for the last twenty minutes. It was incredible that he didn't knock the whole thing over, as drunk as he was.

"Great! I only need about five more to finish my masterpiece," Albert grabbed a handful of pretzels and chomped them into paste. "Bobby, how 'bout tossin' me another beer?"

"Sure." Bobby reached down into the bucket at his feet.

"So, how's it goin' with that Sheila girl, Bobby?"

"Pretty good," Bobby replied, surprised. He realized it was the first statement Jacob had directed at him all night. He was suspicious. A can bumped against the back of his hand and he pulled it out of the ice water. Shaking off the excess water, he set the can on the table and gave it a push. It went halfway across and Albert scooped it up, pulling the ring opener in the same motion. Pshht! The beer spewed up out of the opening, frothing down the sides of the can.

"Shit!" he exclaimed as he jumped from his bar stool. The front of Albert's shirt and blue jeans were soaked. "Somebody get me a towel!" Bobby jumped up and looked around the kitchen, searching for a dish towel.

"Please don't let it stain the rug," Bobby thought. He spotted a yellow towel wrapped around the handle of a cupboard above the sink, took one long stride, grabbed it and tossed it to Albert.

"Man, I gotta get this stuff rinsed out," Albert whined as he rubbed his shirt with the towel. "My old man will have my butt if he catches me drinking again." Albert stumbled off toward the bathroom, still holding the half empty beer can. Bobby glanced over at Jacob, who was giggling.
"God, he is such a jerk sometimes! What a klutz. Don't you think?"
Jacob said, taking a sip from his beer. "So tell me, what does Sheila see in
someone like you?"

Bobby was stunned by the question. "Oh, I don't know. We've only gone
out a couple of times. Nothing really serious. But I do like her." He didn't
know what else to say.

"I think she's a beauty." Jacob looked down at his beer. "I wanted to
ask her out about a month ago but you sort of beat me to the punch." His eyes
looked over at Bobby's beer. "How 'bout another beer, Bobby?"

"Yea, sure." Bobby leaned to his right and fished in the cold water again.
He held the dripping can out to Jacob.

"Not for me, for you," Jacob said innocently. "You drink it." Bobby felt
his face flush.

"No thanks, I'm not finished with this one." Setting the unopened can on
the table, Bobby picked up his beer, feeling its heavy liquid weight slosh ar-
round inside, and put it to his lips.

"Yea, I noticed you've been drinking the same one for quite a while.
What's the matter, you don't like to drink, Bobby?"

"It's all right," Bobby replied, his fingers running along the wood grain
of the table. He didn't want Jacob to notice that he was uncomfortable but he
feared Jacob already smelled blood.

"Ah, just how many have you had?" There was a short pause.

"Three or four, I guess," Bobby lied. It occurred to Bobby that Jacob's
tall, lean figure, slouching slightly on top of the bar stool with his shoulders
curled made him look vulture-like.

"You know, Bobby," Jacob began, "you are really lucky to have Sheila. She
only goes out with a certain type of guy... the kind with a good reputation, you
know? He can't be some wimpy square that doesn't like to have a good time. It
would be terrible if she ever heard that you weren't cool." Bobby felt his
stomach turn upside down. The toilet flushed, diverting Jacob's attention.

Albert entered the room wearing Bobby's blue Adidas T-shirt.

"I had to hang my other shirt in the shower," Albert said, pulling the bot-
tom of Bobby's T-shirt. "Hope you don't mind."

"Well, you could have at least taken one of my old ones. I just got that
shirt for Christmas," Bobby said, obviously annoyed.

"Well, EXCUSE me, Bobby. Here, take it, I don't want your crummy shirt!"
Albert began to peel it off.

"Oh, just forget it." Bobby didn't like the way things were going. Albert
pulled the shirt back down and slid on to his stool. Reaching across the table,
he grabbed the full can of beer in front of Bobby.

"Hold it, Albert. That's Bobby's beer."

Bobby glared at Jacob. 'Why does he have to play these games?' he thought.

"Well, there's no way I'm gonna do something I don't want to do." "Look," he
began, "I don't want another beer, okay?" Bobby was looking directly at Jacob,
who had a cock-eyed grin on his lips.

"I wonder what Sheila is doing tonight?" Jacob said. I'll bet she's out
partying somewhere. Celebrating with her friends. Don't you agree, Albert?"

"Mmm. Probably out getting bombed."

"Here, Albert," Bobby said angrily, "Take the beer." He gave the can a shove
with his left hand and it tipped over, leaving a trail of water as it rolled across
the table. It strayed off course and crashed into Albert's tin pyramid. The
empty cans toppled on top of each other with a noisy clank and rolled off the table, landing on the carpeted floor in a series of thumps.

"Smooth move, Ace! What is it with you tonight anyway? You've been acting like a total jerk." Albert turned to Jacob, "What do you say we go somewhere else, Jacob?"

"Yeah, Okay. I don't think we're welcome here anymore." Albert stormed off toward the bathroom to retrieve his shirt.

"I wish I'd never even come here. Wasted a good New Year's Eve..." Albert mumbled down the hallway.

"Me too!" Bobby yelled after him. "I didn't invite you in the first place!"

He turned to Jacob.

"Sheila is at Lane's party tonight. I talked to her earlier on the phone, before we came here." Jacob was walking over to the couch where he had left his jacket. "She likes you, Bobby, but you're just not her type. I think she'd have more fun with someone like me. You know what I mean?"

"No, I don't know what you mean. I think I'm very much her type. I'm just not the type that goes along with the crowd just to be popular. You know what I mean, Jacob?" Bobby stood up and carried his three-quarters full beer can over to the sink. "I don't need you and I really don't care what you say to Sheila." He tilted the can slightly and its contents began to splash in the sink. "She knows me and she likes the way I am." Bobby watched the last couple of glubs of beer pour out of the upturned can. He set it on the counter by the sink and looked at Jacob. Albert returned wearing his beer-soaked shirt. He picked up his varsity jacket and slipped it on.

"You really are a trip sometimes, Bobby. There's some things about you that I just can't understand." Albert walked toward the door. "Let's go Jacob."

Bobby followed them through the living room. Albert swung the door open and let it bang against an end table.

"Sorry!" he said as he exited.

Jacob paused in the doorway and turned toward Bobby. "You got guts. But you ain't nothin. You're a nobody from now on."

Bobby slammed the door in his face. He turned and walked back into the kitchen. It was only a little before ten o'clock and he knew his parents wouldn't be home until long after midnight. His gaze fell to the floor, where the tin cans that had once been Albert's pyramid, were scattered. Bending down, Bobby began picking them up, one at a time. He carried them over to a waste basket and let them drop. Then, he carefully took hold of the plastic trash bag, lifted it out of the basket, and spun it around until its neck was wound tightly. Reaching into a nearby drawer, he pulled out a twist tie and wrapped it around the neck. "What a couple of jerks," he said aloud as he slipped his jacket on. "Well, I really DON'T care if they tell everybody." He paused, thinking for a moment, then picked up the bag and carried it toward the back door. "Sheila wouldn't really believe them..."