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Opening Extract from...

Losing It

Edited by Keith Gray

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LOSING IT

edited by

Keith Gray

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SCORING

Keith Gray

SCORING

It hurt. A lot. There was a lot of blood too.

I took my eye off the ball for only a second, maybe two. It smacked me in the face so hard that my feet lifted off the ground, my nose popped with a sound like bubble-wrap, and I went down on my arse in the wet mud.

The small group of spectators gasped. Everybody on the pitch froze. Then when they saw I wasn't dead, when they heard me swear, the rest of the team came rushing over. Matty was the first to get to me – it had been him who'd kicked the ball.

'Jase, I'm sorry, really sorry. You OK? I didn't . . . I wasn't . . . '

A couple of the others shouldered him out of the way, thumped him hard on the back, glared at him. I

heard someone say, 'How're we supposed to win tomorrow if you go and kill Jase?' One of the spectators shouted, 'Nice kick, donkey-boy!' But it wasn't Matty's fault. I'd been the one looking off the pitch, not taking notice of what was happening on it.

At least a dozen hands were reaching down to help me up but I didn't think I could stand just yet. Mr Walsh pushed through to get a good look at how injured his star player was. He was a big bloke, whose 'big' might have been muscle when he was our age. He also taught German, but those lessons almost always included talk of *Fußball* because the school's footy team was what he really cared about. He shook his head at me, tutted. But couldn't hide a look of relief. I could read it on his face. Thank God it was my nose fountaining blood, not my feet. Even so, he didn't smile. He never smiled on the pitch.

'Hurt bad?' he asked.

I blinked twice. It was agony. But I just nodded.

'Good,' he said. He prodded at the end of my nose, making me yelp. 'It's not broken, you'll live.' He glanced over his shoulder at Tara standing on the touch line, hovering and concerned, but knowing full well Mr Walsh would never allow her to set foot on his pitch in this lifetime. When he looked back at me he was scowling. 'Let's hope it teaches you to stay focused on the game.'

He gave me a couple of tissues, told me to shove

one up each nostril to stop the blood. They just added to the agony, not that I was going to show it.

He gathered up the football. 'That's gonna have to do us, lads. Go get changed. But no one goes home until I've had a word with you all.' He waved over at the sports hall. 'Come on. Move.'

The team headed off. I got up, feeling a bit shaky and swallowing a thick gob of blood. One of the spectators cheered as I stood up, setting off a dribble of applause. Somebody else chanted, 'There's only one Jason Collins . . . ' We didn't often get people watching practice sessions but I supposed this was kind of an important one.

Tara had come to watch even though it was wet and cold. She was in big boots, hat and scarf, thick gloves, fighting against the wind under her dad's golf brolly. Beneath all those layers I knew she was beautiful. I wanted to let her know I was OK but didn't want her to see my face if my nose was splattered across it like roadkill. I half-waved at her, keeping my head down. Then held up eight fingers, trying to say I'd still be going round hers at that time, like we'd agreed.

She shouted, 'Are you OK?'

Mr Walsh put a heavy hand between my shoulder blades, steered me away towards the sports hall before I could reply. 'Save it for when you're off the pitch,' he growled into my ear.

A pale and panicky Matty kind of danced beside me. 'Honest, Jase, I didn't mean to. I wasn't aiming or nothing. I just—'

'Hell of a strike,' Mr Walsh told him. 'Just aim balls like that at the back of their net tomorrow, OK?'

Matty nodded, relieved I wasn't dead and he wasn't bollocked. I trudged alongside him across the school field to the sports hall, ignoring his fussing. I didn't know what I was more worried about: tomorrow's final, or my battered nose putting Tara off me. And it struck me just how much I'd changed these past couple of months because of her.

The changing room was loud, everyone's voices clanging off the bare walls. School uniforms were strewn across the benches, a couple of ties had fallen to the floor. As soon as I walked in I was asked how I felt, if I was all right, was I sure I'd be able to play tomorrow? I answered 'Yes' again and again. Matty, however, was on the receiving end of more stick and grief. And then the towel-whips started. I could have told everybody to leave him alone but in the mirror I looked like a horror story – blood and snot like war-paint, and bruising under my eyes. I was quick to get into the showers. I didn't dare rub at my nose, just let the water run over my face to wash the mess away.

A lot of lads hate the showers at the end of a games lesson; most think they're the worst kind of torture.

Getting bullied is always shit anyway, but getting bullied when you've got your cock out is a nightmare. At my old school we all kept our shorts on – would rather carry around a soaking games kit all day than show our classmates whether we had a length of pipe or a stub of pencil. When I'd moved here to Stonner Secondary last year I'd soon found out stripping off was the best way to avoid hassle. The rumour here is only paedos and virgins keep their shorts on. It's like, covering up just proves you've got something dodgy going on down there.

But what I couldn't figure out was, when had it all become a competition? Sex and stuff. Only a couple of years ago we'd been happy to avoid girls. Back then it wasn't that we didn't understand them, we genuinely didn't want to – most of them seemed so boring. We competed at football, or the Xbox, and they were the kind of things that had scores you could boast about. But then we hit fourteen, fifteen and getting a girlfriend became the biggest competition of all. And you had to do stuff with her too. Girls became yet another competition you tried to get a high score with.

None of the other lads in the showers were wearing shorts; even so, I'd have bet good money we were all still virgins. Apart from Tony Podmore – he always had eye-popping photos on his phone of this older girl he was seeing. But maybe after the match

tomorrow I could join him, and be one hundred per cent truthful when I stripped off my shorts for the showers.

Eight o'clock at Tara's. Her parents were going to be away all night. So I was staying over. I'd nicked one of my brother's johnnies. She'd promised. And was it wrong that I felt more excited about hers tonight than the big match tomorrow?

We were all dressed and waiting for Mr Walsh. He wrinkled his nose at the heavy fug of Lynx when he walked in. He came over to the bench where I was sitting and leaned in close to inspect my nose. It had swollen to twice its size but looked a bit better without all the blood and snot. I'd tried to blow it when I'd been in the shower and it had felt like an explosion of red-hot razor blades in each nostril. Sniffing was much less painful. The bruising under my eyes was purple.

'Not as pretty as you were half an hour ago,' Mr Walsh told me. 'But that's not gonna stop you playing tomorrow, is it?'

'No, sir.'

There was a small cheer of approval from the team and a quiet rumble of feet on the tiled floor.

Mr Walsh slapped my shoulder. 'Good lad.' He stepped back, took up his usual position by the chalk