

**what  
we  
lost  
in  
the  
fire**

**& OTHER STORIES**

**WENDELL RICKETTS**

# Yard Ball

**T**ony's on the rec yard, shirtless and sweating in the slantways dusk of a late June evening. He's short, about five-six, but tight, with good definition showing these days, especially on his upper body, which he works on whenever they get a chance to use the weights. Plus he's down to must be eight percent body fat from flat-weeding seven to three and from not eating most of the pig slop they put on your tray at chow.

The weight shed is in the inside corner of the L-shaped rec yard, where the laws can't see unless they get up off their fat, gray-suited asses and walk over there, and so, a lot of the time, that's where guys go to hit it. It ain't cool to be trying to bench press when some dudes are getting down four feet away from you, not that anybody's all that shy. And if it isn't a couple of moes with eyes for each other, say it's somebody turning out a new punk, he's most of the time gonna offer you a chance to knock off a piece, too, 'cuz that's all part of it.

Tonight, though, it's b-ball, and he knows he's moving good. Tony throws both arms out to his side to block the guys closing in on his boy who's carrying the ball. He's concentrating on the game, awright awright, but that doesn't mean he doesn't feel the

thickness of a bicep, round and solid, against his forearm, or hard pec muscles rubbing up against his back, the rasp of chest hair.

The best part of getting worked out like this is afterwards. He's lucky; their block gets rec from six to nine, and now that the evenings are longer, there's time for a couple of games, or maybe a game and hit the weights, and then just stand on the strip of grass alongside the double chain link with the razor wire curled on top like some kinda sick ribbon and look out while the sun is still up, let the breeze blow on you, dry you off. You don't wanna put your hands up on the fence, 'cuz that's a good way to get shot, but you can lift your arms like wings, with your fingers laced behind your head, let the wind blow into your armpits, like a warm tongue teasing up and down your sides, until it's ticklish and your nipples pebble up.

Nobody else needs to know, when he's standing there like that, why he's doing it.

Getting ripped on the weights was part of a plan to get respect—that and all the ink, most of which he bought on the inside. When Tony was in the world, and needed some fast cash, looking like a teenage jarhead meant he only had to spend about ten minutes at the bar, pretending to play pool, before he'd turn a date, and most nights he was home in his own bed before one. He was back living with his dad then, near Houston. But when you were on the inside, being twenty-one-years-old and sweet-faced is like blood in the water, and a pretty white boy's either got to catch a ride or get a rep, and he was gonna be dead before anybody did him like some punk in the weight shed.

The hard edge of a voice cuts in. "Yo, yo! Cherokee! I'm open!" That's Vince talking; they call each other litter mates, have matching tats. Tony takes a step left, brings the ball to his chest as if to pass, then jams right and throws around the guy guarding him. The pass flies wild. "My bad," Tony says as they jog down the cement slab toward the opposite hoop.

Part of being hard is having a nick, so most of the guys know Tony as "Cherokee." His dad started calling him that back in the day, he said so Tony wouldn't forget they shared that blood, on his side, even despite the pale skin that came from Tony's mother. The name followed Tony inside, plus the rumor that he'd stabbed

some guy to death with a hunting knife, then cut off his scalp. That last part wasn't true, but it was good if some people believed it was true. He had a shank now, because you had to have one to show sometimes and also to keep up with the rumor, but the only way the laws didn't find it was if he left it taped up behind the electrical plate and how was that gonna help him if he ever did need it on the yard or in the showers, which is where they hit you? Anyway, he thought his plan was turning out all right the day he overheard one of the eses say to his homies, "That vato there is firme, man, he's down." If the Hispanics respected you, you could stay pretty safe. They'd get your back against the bloods. Not that they wouldn't cut your throat and spit down your neck if it came to a real race fight, but you knew where you stood then was with your color. There weren't enough Injuns inside to click, so his color was white.

It was Saturday, which meant visits, and Tony's mom had driven in from Normangie. When he walked into the visiting room she was sitting there on a metal folding chair with a wide-ass pair of mafias across her face to cover up that she'd been crying, and the first words out of her mouth were how sorry she was she had to come tell Tony that his daddy finally died. No shock there. His dad had that shit for years, and moving back in with Tony's mom so she could take care of him only slowed down what was coming. "He died in my arms," she kept saying, stuffing a wad of Kleenex in behind the eyeglass frames and pushing at her eyes. That and, "Antonio, I just don't know how he could of got it."

Someone threw Tony the ball, and he caught it and started running. Damn if he wasn't open all the way to the hoop. He was thinking about the year and a half he'd lived at his dad's place in Houston—up until just after he turned seventeen—shooting up, freakin' with the bitches his dad brought home all share and share alike, and being so high and so horny, it didn't always matter which peg went in which hole, so to speak, which was true sometimes even when they were just the two of them, because his dad said there were things he needed that he couldn't get from a woman but he wasn't going to lower himself by going to no stranger. Better keep that in the family, 'cuz we share the same blood, his dad told him. We got the same blood.

All respect to his mom for taking his dad in when he was sick, Tony thought, but she was a clueless bitch. As he ran, he worked the ball into a steady beat—the metallic slap on the concrete, then the softer rebound against his palm. She didn't know how his dad got the shit. The words in Tony's head matched the double rhythm of the ball. They came fast, like fucking: "I do. I do. I do."