

## **The Balls Don**

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Young Ricketts looked neither at his mother nor his father. His aimless, hazel eyes followed the cigarette smoke that streamed from his flared nostrils. Young Ricketts would have liked to blow smoke rings, but couldn't learn how. In fact, the brain that sat between his elephantine ears hadn't learned much of anything in its twenty years of largely untested existence. Old Hickory, Louisiana was Young Ricketts' physical and mental boundary. The young man rested his stocking feet on the window sill, balancing the kitchen chair that was tilted back on its rear legs. It was from this perch that Young Ricketts passed judgment on his parents and the world.

Elton "Ellie" Ricketts, Jr. was an unemployed and mostly unemployable weight on Elton and Wanda Ricketts. Thanks to Mrs. Ricketts, the son's jeans and tee shirt were clean. His slicked back black mane was kept in place by a long comb, stuck in his back left pocket, which he raked through his head every couple of minutes. His face had a sun darkened outline that extended from his chin to his eyebrows. His forehead, shielded by his feed cap, was alabaster. Young Ricketts displayed two expressions: disdain and an open mouth bewilderment.

Across the main room of the trailer house, Old Ricketts stared at the small television set resting on the trolley that rolled wherever his wheelchair rolled. His legs had been useless since a tractor trailer bisected his pickup truck at a highway intersection. For fifteen years, blameless but crippled, he survived on a minimal disability pension and Mrs. Ricketts' part time work at the washeteria.

Old Ricketts pushed down hard on the seat of his wheelchair with both fists, rearranging his trunk in hope of lessening the pain in his knees. The wife and son, noticing the movement, glanced his way.

Mrs. Ricketts, voicing a rote concern for her husband, spoke first. "Knees bothrin' you again, Elton? That medicine says you cain't have no more till bedtime, and it ain't but four thirty." Then Young Ricketts made his contribution. "Don't never stop; his knees hurtin'. You gotta know that by now."

The son shook his head in disgust, popped open the screen, and flicked his cigarette butt outside. He waved away a fly that weaved through the gap offered by the airborne Lucky Strike, let loose a stream of saliva, and latched the screen. Rebalancing his chair, he resumed his maternal lecture.

"Mama yotta find him a new doctor, new medicine, somethin'. He's all the time hurtin' and they don't do nothin' bout it." Young Ricketts spit again; not bothering to open the screen this time, moving no muscle except in his neck for propulsion. With the movement came a sneer of clear disapproval for Mrs. Ricketts' management of Old Ricketts' disability.

"Ellie, the state don't let you pick and choose the doctor, and you take the medicine what they give you," Mrs. Ricketts answered softly. Miz Wanda, as she was known to the Uorwee Washeteria clientele, considered blessings and sufferings as equal gifts of the Lord. Only she categorized Old and Young Ricketts as blessings; likewise, only she counted her thankless position at the Uorwee Washeteria as a blessing.

Miz Wanda's waking life was lived in thirds. She divided it equally among the Ricketts men, the Uorwee Washeteria, and the First Baptist Church of Old Hickory. Her day's duties at the washeteria complete, Miz Wanda was shucking a bowl of field peas at a fall sunset before her evening church assembly. A flowered house dress flowed loosely from her lumpy frame. Her curled hair failed to flatter a once attractive face lined from years of providential sufferings. She paused to stare briefly at a sunbeam that crossed the lap of her now sleeping husband.

Miz Wanda's daydream ended suddenly when Ben, the mostly German Shepherd asleep at old Ricketts' wheels, began a menacing guttural growl that quickly grew into a sentinel's bark. A rhythmic ticking sound on the front steps, quickly followed by a firm knock on the front door, drew the attention of all the Ricketts.

Young Ricketts rose slowly, hitched his pants, and quieted Ben. "It ain't for me. I'll run 'em off if you want. Goddam trespassers. Probably some kinda Jehovah's Witness."

"Ellie, see who it is. Might be the man from the electric company. Be nice, son." Miz Wanda dried her hands, Old Ricketts came to, and Young Ricketts meandered toward the door. Ben sat at attention, panting in expectation.

Young Ricketts opened the door and immediately changed expressions. His snarled look had left in favor of a level of bewilderment previously unreached. Before him stood a stumpy man, old enough to be retired. The stranger wore a shiny black suit in need of cleaning and pressing. His entire moon of a face was the color of young Ricketts' forehead. In his left hand he carried a black case that looked like leather but wasn't. In his right hand he gripped a long, thin, white metal stick with a red tip. It was the source of the ticking sound. Young Ricketts peered at the stranger full face, straight into his threatening grin and milky, sightless eyes.

"How'd you get here mister? I didn't hear no car and a blind man cain't drive anyhow. What you doin up here anyway—you trespassin'. We shoot trespassers, you know that? Do ya? Speak to me mister. I ain't messin around." The stranger grinned silently and confidently, which only made young Ricketts more angry. Old Ricketts wheeled around to get a better view and Miz Wanda ambled towards the door.

"Ask the gentleman in, Ellie," Miz Wanda requested politely.

In spite of the humid autumn day, not a trace of perspiration showed anywhere on the stranger's face. At the sound of Miz Wanda's voice he removed his black bowler hat

revealing a head matted with sparse strands of hair, and a forehead that looked to be fully half of his countenance.

His grin widening, the blind man turned toward Miz Wanda and spoke. "I heard you had a handicap livin here that's in pain. I got somethin that might could make him feel better. May I," he hesitated. "May I come in?" Young Rickets rolled his eyes, returned to his chair, lit another smoke, and stared disgustingly out of his window. Old Rickets watched with interest while Ben awaited a cue from Miz Wanda.

"Why I suppose you can. I'm just cookin' supper and I got to leave for a church meetin here shortly." Miz Wanda treated trespassers and washeteria customers with equal grace.

"I unnerstand, ma'm. Church goin is mighty important. Cain't overlook that, no ma'm. Christians gotta sho nuff stick together."

Instinctively Miz Wanda gripped the stranger's upper arm and led him to the worn orange sofa that faced the television set. Old Rickets and Ben watched in silence as the stranger eased himself into a position of comfort. Miz Wanda sat down, a respectable distance to his right. The blind man laid down his stick and lifted the black bag to his lap. Suddenly the grin suddenly disappeared and his expression grew serious. His lips pursed intermittently like a fish processing water.

"Man up at the quick stop tell me y'all the Rickets, and Mr. Rickets a handicap. Say his knees painin' him all the time. I was just passin through Old Hickory and thought , well maybe I just might help the Rickets family out. I'm what you might call a medical missionary. That is, I spread the word and do whatever healin' I can along the way. Brother Hobart's my name. Ain't ordained or nothin, but I'm in the word, praise God..."

Old Rickets gaze was more intense. Pain in his knees and relief from it filled most of his mind. Brother Hobart, seemingly unaware of Old Rickets' presence, inquired about him and was quickly reprimanded by Young Rickets.

"He's settin' in his wheelchair acrost from you, brother blind man. And whatever you do, you better do quick cause we havin' supper as soon as you leave."

"My pleasure, Mr. Rickets. God bless you. I hope the Lord and I can give you some relief." Brother Hobart looked directly at Old Rickets as he spoke and unzipped his case. He began searching through it with his hands, then stopped.

"Mr. and Mrs. Rickets and young man. In my hands I hold a pair of steel balls. Don't be fooled by their ordinary look. They was invented by a famous medical scientist searchin for a cure for arthiritis. By sendin' out contrary magnetic fields, they work to get out the disease thats causin pain in your joints or whatever. They's no side effects and there's nothin in them that's contrary to your scripture. Christians can use them. In fact they

tell me that medical scientists that invented them was himself a Christian. Yessir, sure was."

He drew his hands holding the balls out of his bag, and motioned Old Rickets closer. As the wheelchair rolled toward him, Brother Hobart slid from the orange sofa to the floor. Kneeling down, he closed his eyes and mumbled what seemed to be an appeal for divine guidance in his undertaking. Then he reached out until he made contact with Old Rickets' leg.

Old Rickets flinched slightly at the touch, but relaxed after reassurance by Miz Wanda. Brother Hobart held one ball behind Old Rickets' left knee. He then began to roll the other ball over the surface of the front of the knee. He grimaced intently as he increased the pressure.

"He'll be gettin' relief here shortly, Miz Wanda." Brother Hobart was obviously operating with confidence. Within seconds an open mouthed Miz Wanda and young Rickets stared amazingly at old Rickets' serene smile, as Brother Hobart moved his therapy from the treated to the untreated knee. His work complete, the visitor wasted no time getting down to business.

"As you can see, these are your Parmalee Spheres. That's what they're called, after Dr. Parmalee the inventor. These here Parmalee Spheres, as you saw are very effective." He cleared his throat as he hoisted himself slowly to the orange sofa. "But they must be used every twenty four hours cause the effect ain't permanent. That's why theys classified as ex-spearimental, while they work on the permanent kind. Doin this time I been arthurized to sell the spheres for \$200 a pair. But since y'all are good Christians and in need of help, I'll let ´em go for a hundred cash. Instructions included."

The expectant hope of the Rickets was quickly dashed and the mood of grim resignation returned. Old Rickets rotated his wheelchair three hundred sixty degrees, Young Rickets reaffixed his sneer, and Miz Wanda stared shamefully at her feet. Politely, she took the steel balls, returned them to the case, and zippered it closed. She took Brother Hobart's arm and began a dutiful escort towards the door.

Her voice, lowered almost to a whisper, trembled with apology and embarrassment. "Brother Hobart, we just ain't got that kinda money. Much as I'd like to help my husbands hurtin', the rent and electric don't hardly leave enough for food. Not to mention our tithes."

Brother Hobart was aware that this was a can't pay not a won't pay, and that any further salesmanship on his part would be wasted. "Unnerstood Miz Wanda. Best be on my way doin the Lord's work. Don't suppose you'd like to make a love offrin' towards the mission, would ya?" The beckoning grin had returned to Brother Hobart's face.

Miz Wanda left the blind man's side and reached for a small coin purse on the kitchen counter. Inside were four quarters, three one dollar bills, and a penny. She studied it

carefully. Not needing to count the contents, she removed one of the dollar bills and two of the quarters, and quietly placed them in the blind man's palm.

"Much obliged, Miz Wanda. The Lord'll bless ya ten times ya know." Brother Hobart pronounced with assurance. He continued his forward gaze, maneuvered his walking stick under his armpit, and pocketed the gift.

Young Rickets was riled. "Your ass may be blessed ten times, you hustlin' mother..."

"Quiet Ellie, Brother Hobart`s doin the Lord's work as he sees it. Ain't his fault the Lord don't see fit for us to have the wherewithal at the moment."

"At the moment? We ain't never had no wherewithal, and we ain't gonna. What's all that prayin' gotcha but a cripple for a husband, and every dirtdobber that comes along takin' what little you got." Young Rickets head jerked around like a cockerel surveying his ground.

Brother Hobart commenced a scurried shuffle toward the door, reattached his hat, and after assuring Miz Wanda that he could find his way, climbed carefully down the front porch steps. As the door closed, he raised his voice to insure he would be clearly heard. "Now folks, if you should get that money together, I'll be down at that Travelodge til about noon tomorrow."

As he picked his way carefully to the sidewalk, Brother Hobart steadily increased his pace until he was carefully out of view of the Rickets. Once he was safely clear, he removed the theatrical implants from his eyes, climbed into his dented Dodge, and drove away.

Once Miz Wanda had fed the Rickets men, she hurriedly prepared for the evening bible study. Old Rickets returned to his position before the television set and Young Rickets lit up and scowled out of the window from his tottering chair.

Miz Wanda removed her curlers and gently informed Young Rickets she was ready. "You otta think about gettin a driver's license. That old man ain't never gonna drive again and I may be leavin'town. Find me an opportunity. They sure as shit ain't nothin' here." He launched a parting stream of spit through the screen and landed his chair loudly onto the floor. Twirling the truck keys on his index finger, he pointed his head toward the door followed by Ben. Miz Wanda placed a loving kiss on Old Rickets' forehead and mother and son headed into the barely operable compact pickup truck. Ben jumped into the bed which had long since lost its tailgate. Young Rickets shook his head as the engine hesitated at the start. It finally turned over as Miz Wanda sat patiently with her hands folded prayerfully on her lap.

They rode in silence to the church, where Miz Wanda disembarked, thanked her son, and reminded him she would have a ride home from a friend. Young Rickets headed

directly to the Pleez-Ur-Sef Quick Stop. He and Delbert Sims, proprietor, were the only ones in the store.

"Mister Del, I been thinkin' bout your offer. Might could give you a few hours a week til this outta town deal works out. You still lookin' for someone?"

Delbert Sims was sorely in need of help. He had been in the store fourteen hours a day for weeks. Young Ricketts' obvious shortcomings were at least a known quantity and the boy was not a thief.

"Seems like I been behind this counter since I was in school with yo daddy, Ellie. Can you get back heah now so I can drink me a beer over at Murph's?" Young Ricketts knew the ropes at the Pleez-Ur-Sef well. He had had three previous stints at the store. Delbert Sims and Old Ricketts had been team mates on an almost state champions baseball team in high school., and Delbert knew the Ricketts family plight all too well. Young Ricketts' limited powers of concentration always seemed to scuttle his career as a quick stop clerk, but he would certainly do in a pinch. Delbert Sims was in a definite pinch.

Just as Delbert Sims prepared to leave the store, he heard squealing brakes and the thud of two fenders colliding. A white man in an aged Lincoln had rear ended a black man in a similarly aged pickup truck. There were no injuries apparent so Delbert Sims and Young Ricketts continued their changing of the Pleez-Ur-Sef guard.

Young Ricketts stared open mouthed as the accident participants drove off in harmony. The clerk's expression remained fixed while he awaited the challenge of the evening's first client. Delbert Sims, nodded at the police car tucked in next to the Uorwee Washeteria, and crossed the highway to Old Hickory's only bar.

The small establishment was busier then usual and the only empty seat at the bar was next to the blind man that had stopped in his store earlier that day. Delbert Sims ordered a beer, sat down and spoke to his neighbor.

"Hey there, preacher man. Spreadin' a little hops gospel, are ya?" He laughed at the incongruity of the holy man with a beer before him. "That's a preacher for ya. Do as I say, not as I do."

Brother Hobart was unperturbed. "Sounds like Mr. Sims. Brother, St. Paul said a little wine is good for the stomach, praise God. Went to see them Ricketts folks you told me about. The mister's in a bad way, poor fella. I coulda done him some good, but they ain't got a cent, no sir. And this ministry don't run on air. Them Parmalee Spheres I told you about gave him relief, sure did. I even gave him half off, but they just couldn't get any money together. Too bad, Mr. Sims, too bad. "Brother Hobart's grin widened as he gazed straight at Delbert Sims.

" What'll you take for them Parmalee Spears, preacher. I ain't talkin' askin, I'm talkin takin."

"Well, Mister Sims. Here's where it's at. I'll be honest with ya. I can't come out on these here spheres, and they are spheres, not spears. What with all the research and all. I can't come out, forget about the ministry, I can't come out—; for no less than a hundred."

"Preacher, I've been here all my life. I seen all kinda preachers. Tall, short, skinny, fat, young and old. Eventually it all gets down to money. Ever time they leave a house, they either pickin' their teeth or zippin' up their pants. Now that ain't a hundred per cent true but close too it. That ole Catholic boy may be an exception, but he's sendin' everything to the pope in Rome. Mormon's same thing. Everything goin out to them boys in Utah. Now Brother Whorebart, I don't think you sendin' money to nobody but your own self. What's your best price on them spears?"

"Hoowee, Mr. Sims., you plum die-reck now ain't ya. The Lord works in strange ways. Sure does. He's talkin to me now, tellin' me he wants them Rickets to be blessed. I can hear the Holy Spirit. Seventy five cash, Mr. Sims and they yours with the Lord's blessin."

Delbert Sims reached in his pocket and extracted a thick roll of bills. He peeled off a hundred that was at the top. He motioned to the bartender for change, carefully counted out seventy five dollars, and placed it in Brother Hobart's outstretched hand.

"God bless ya, Mister Sims. I know I'm dealin' with an honest man, no need to verify the count. The bible says the road to damnation is wide, and that the path to salvation is narrow. We both just gave a little for them poor Rickets."

"I don't know about all that preacher, but I wan't you to take them spears of yours over to my store. The Rickets boy is lookin' after it for me right now. You give ´em to him and tell him you makin'em a doe-nation."

Brother Hobart's grin went away just as it had in the house. "Mister Sims, that boy scares me. Threatened me, he did. It'd be dangerous for a blind man to be alone with him."

"The deal is this preacher. Seventy five, delivered to the quick stop. I'd suggest you roll your holy ass over their directly, cause I'm havin' second thoughts." Delbert Sims' authoritative tone made its point.

"Of course, Mister Sims. As you say. I'll just down the rest of this glass and be on my way."

The proposition was sealed. Brother Hobart gathered himself, his case, and his stick and moved slowly toward the door. Delbert Sims returned to his beer in silence.

Brother Hobart stood at the highway until he heard no traffic, then shuffled toward the quick stop. Young Rickets gauged Brother Hobart's approach, closed his' mouth, and prepared a sneer.

"Don't come in here hustlin' me, you no count. I ain't gotta cent. And if I did, you wouldn't get near it." Young Ricketts' fire breathing clearly made an impression.

"Now hang on there, young man. The Lord's done spoke to me and sent me a message to make them Parmalee Spheres a gift to the Ricketts. I want to see your daddy feel better. He's a good family man, and these here spheres is yours for nothin'. Unnerstand?"

Young Ricketts melted. The lottery ticket that bought his wreck of a truck was the only good fortune in his memory. "You ain't shittin' me now, are you preacher." A faint smile crept into his visage. An image of Old Ricketts' peaceful expression, when the balls were rolled across his knees, passed through Young Ricketts mind. "Mister, I guess I owe you a ...."

Brother Hobart interrupted. "Don't owe me nothin', son. The Lord's done blessed ya." He handed the balls over to Young Ricketts, grinned, and made his way to the door. He quickly disappeared into the night.

Young Ricketts held the balls to his chest as he locked the door to the store. He set the cardboard clock so that the message read: "We are out, will be back in fifteen minutes." He hastened to his truck, awakening Ben who balanced himself near the cab. The engine turned over on first asking and Young Ricketts was soon in his house.

He was about to speak to his father when a loud snore informed him that Old Ricketts was fast asleep. He looked at him intently trying to decide whether the news was important enough to wake him. Sound sleep came to Old Ricketts with such difficulty that Young Ricketts decided not to wake him. He placed the two silver balls next to his father's side on the wheelchair, and stepped back triumphantly. Miraculously the truck started again and the son hurried back to the quick stop. Three customers waited patiently at the door.

Ellie climbed from the truck waving his keys and apologized sincerely to those waiting. The customers thought they saw a smile on his face. At Murph's, Delbert Sims, oblivious to his store's unscheduled closing, ordered another beer. At the First Baptist Church, Miz Wanda nodded with certainty as the leader of her bible study group read the beatitudes. A few miles up the road, Brother Hobart, studied a map of Louisiana next to his open trunk. Marking his next destination with a felt tip pen, he withdrew two silver balls from a box in the trunk and placed them in the black case. He placed the case, his hat and stick in the back seat, got into the Dodge and headed north.