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Markus Zusak

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FIGHTING RUBEN WOLFE

MARKUS ZUSAK

Definitions

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For Scout



★ 1 ★

The dog we're betting on looks more like a rat.

'But he can run like the clappers,' Rube says. He's all flannelette smiles and twisted shoes. He'll spit then smile. Spit then smile. A nice guy, really, my brother. Ruben Wolfe. It's our usual winter of discontent.

We're at the bottom of the open, dusty grandstand.

A girl walks past.

Jesus, I think.

'Jesus,' Rube says, and that's the difference, as both of us watch her, longing, breathing, being. Girls like that don't just show up at the dog track. The ones we're used to are either chain-smoking mousy types or pie-eating horsy types. Or beer-drinking slutty types. The one we watch, however, is a rare experience. I'd bet on her if she could run on to the track. She's great.

Then there's only the sickness I feel from looking at legs I can't touch, or at lips that don't smile at me. Or hips that don't reach for me. And hearts that don't beat for me.

I slip my hand into my pocket and pull out a ten-buck

note. That should distract me. I mean, I like to look at girls a bit, but it always ends up hurting me. I get sore eyes, from the distance. So all I can do is say something like, 'So are we puttin' this money on or what, Rube?' as I do on this greyish day in this fine, lecherous city of home.

'Rube?' I ask again.

Silence.

'Rube?'

Wind. Rolling can. Bloke smoking and coughing close behind. 'Rube, are we betting or not?'

I hit him.

A backhander.

To my brother's arm.

He looks at me and smiles again.

He says, 'OK,' and we look for someone to con into placing our bet for us. Someone over the age limit. It's never hard around here. Some old bloke with half his crack pouring out the back of his trousers will always put one on for you. He might even ask for a share of the winnings, if the pooch you bet on wins, that is. However, he'll never find you – not that we would leave him out anyway. You have to humour those poor old alcoholic please-don't-let-me-turn-out-like-him sort of fellas. A cut of the winnings isn't going to hurt them. The trick is to win something at all. It hasn't happened yet.

'C'mon.' Rube stands up, and as we walk, I can still see that girl's legs in the distance.

Jesus, I think.

'Jesus,' Rube says.

At the betting windows we encounter a small problem.

Cops.

What the hell are they *doin' here?* I wonder.

'What the hell are they doin' here?' Rube says.

The thing is, I don't even hate cops. To tell you the truth, I actually feel a little sorry for them. Their hats. Wearing all that ridiculous cowboy gear around their waists. Having to look tough, yet friendly and approachable at the same time. Always having to grow a moustache (whether male, or in some cases, female) to look like they have authority. Doing all those push-ups and sit-ups and chin-ups at the police academy before they get a licence to eat doughnuts again. Telling people that someone in their family just got mangled in a car wreck . . . The list just goes on and on, so I'd better stop myself.

'Look at the pig with the sausage roll,' Rube points out. He clearly doesn't care that these cops are hanging around like a bad smell. No way. It's actually the exact opposite, as Rube walks straight towards the cop with the moustache who is eating a sausage roll with sauce. There are two of them. There's the sausage-roll cop, and a female

cop. A brunette, with her hair tied under her hat. (Only her fringe falls seductively to her eyes.)

We arrive at them and it begins.

Ruben L. Wolfe: 'How y' feelin' today, Constable?'

Cop with food: 'Not bad, mate, how are you?'

Rube: 'Enjoyin' that sausage roll, are y'?'

Cop devouring food: 'Sure bloody am, mate. You enjoyin' watchin'?'

Rube: 'Certainly. How much are they?'

Cop, swallowing: 'A buck-eighty.'

Rube, smiling: 'You got robbed.'

Cop, taking bite: 'I know.'

Rube, starting to enjoy himself: 'You should haul that tuckshop in for that, I reckon.'

Cop, with sauce on edge of his lip: 'Maybe I should haul you in instead.'

Rube, pointing at sauce on lip: 'What for?'

Cop, acknowledging sauce on lip and wiping it: 'For plain smart alec behaviour.'

Rube, scratching his crotch conspicuously and glancing at the female accomplice cop: 'Where'd y' pick *her* up?'

Cop, beginning to enjoy himself now as well: 'In the canteen.'

Rube, glancing at her again and continuing to scratch: 'How much?'

Cop, finishing sausage roll: 'A buck-sixty.'

Rube, stopping the scratching: 'You got robbed.'

Cop, remembering himself: 'Hey, you better watch it.'

Rube, straightening his ragged flanno shirt and his pants: 'Did they charge you for sauce? On the sausage roll, that is.'

Cop, shifting on spot: silence.

Rube, moving closer: 'Well?'

Cop, unable to conceal the truth: 'Twenty cents.'

Rube, staggered: '*Twenty cents!* For sauce?'

Cop, obviously disappointed in himself: 'I know.'

Rube, earnest and honest, or at least one or the other: 'You should have just gone without, out of principle. Don't you have any self-control?'

Cop: 'Are you tryin' to start somethin'?'

Rube: 'Certainly not.'

Cop: 'Are y' sure?'

At this point, the accomplice brunette female cop and I exchange looks of embarrassment and I consider her without her uniform. To me, she is only wearing underwear.

Rube, answering the cop's question: 'Yes, sir, I'm sure. I'm not trying to start anything. My brother and I are just enjoying this wonderfully grey day here in the city and admiring the speedy beasts on their way around the

track.' A showbag, he is. Full of garbage. 'Is that a crime?'

Cop, getting fed up: 'Why are you talking to us anyway?'

Female accomplice cop and I look at each other. Again. She has nice underwear. I imagine it.

Rube: 'Well, we were just . . .'

Cop, testy: 'Just what? What do you want?'

Female cop looks great. Brilliant. She's in a bath. Bubbles. She rises up. She smiles. At me. I shake.

Ruben, grinning loudly: 'Well, we were hoping you might put a bet on for us . . .'

Female cop, from the bath: 'Are you kidding?'

Me, smashing my head up through the water: 'Are you bloody jokin', Rube?'

Rube, smacking my mouth: 'My name's not Rube.'

Me, back in reality: 'Oh, sorry, James, y' tosser.'

Cop, holding scrunched-up sausage-roll bag with sauce smothered inside it: 'What's a tosser?'

Rube, distressed: 'Oh God almighty, this can't be happening! How ridiculously stupid can one man be?'

Cop, curious: 'What *is* a tosser?'

Female accomplice cop, who is about five foot nine and uses the police gym I'd say four nights a week: 'You look at one every morning in the mirror.' She's tall and lean and great. She winks at me.

Me: speechless.

Rube: 'That's the way, love.'

Female unbelievably sexy cop: 'Who you callin' love, lover boy?'

Rube, ignoring her and going back to ignorant don't-even-know-what-a-tosser-is cop: 'So will you put a bet on or not?'

Tosser cop: 'What?'

Me, to all of them but not loud enough: 'This is downright bloody ridiculous.' People mill around and past us, to place bets.

Female accomplice cop, to me: 'You wanna taste me?'

Me: 'Love to.' It's my imagination, of course.

Tosser cop: 'OK.'

Rube, shocked: '*What?*'

Tosser cop: 'I'll put the bet on for y's.'

Rube, floundering: 'Really?'

Tosser cop, trying to impress: 'Yeah, I do it all the time, don't I, Cassy?'

Hundred-per-cent-pure-female cop, clearly *un*impressed: 'Whatever y' reckon.'

Me: 'Is that ethical?'

Rube, incredulous, to me: 'Are you mentally challenged?' (He's recently become tired of the word *spastic*. He reckons the new way makes him sound more sophisticated. Something like that, anyway.)

Me: 'No, I'm not. But—'

All three of them, to me: 'Shut up.' The bastards.

Tosser cop: 'What's the dog's number?'

Rube, happy with himself: 'Three.'

Tosser cop: 'Its name?'

Rube: 'You Bastard.'

Tosser cop: 'Pardon?'

Rube: 'I swear it. Here, look at our programme.'

We all look.

Me: 'How'd they get away with a name like that?'

Rube: 'It's 'cause today's just a lot of amateur stuff. Anything with four legs'll get a run. It's a wonder there aren't any poodles out there.' He glances at me seriously. 'Our fella can run, though. Take my word for it.'

Tosser cop: 'Is that the one that looks more like a rat?'

Accomplice gorgeous cop: 'But he runs like the clappers, they reckon.'

In any case, while the tosser cop takes our money, walks away, throws his sausage-roll bag in the bin and makes the bet, the following things happen: Rube smiles incessantly to himself, the accomplice cop has her hands on her honey hips, and I, Cameron Wolfe, imagine making love to her – in my sister's bed of all places.

It's disagreeable, isn't it?

Yet.

What can you do?

When the cop comes back, he says, 'I put ten on 'im myself.'

'You won't be disappointed.' Rube nods, accepting our ticket. Then he says, 'Hey, I think I'm gonna dob you in for this – puttin' bets on for minors. It's a dis-grace.'

(In all the time I've known him, my brother has never said just simple *disgrace*. He has to say it in two parts. *Dis* and *grace*. 'Dis-grace'.)

'So what?' the cop says. 'And besides . . . who y' gonna tell?'

'The cops,' Rube answers, and we all smirk a little, and head for the open grandstand.

We all sit down and wait for the race. 'This You Bastard better be good,' the cop announces, but no one listens. You can cut the air with a knife as the trainers, gamblers, thieves, bookies, fat guys, fat girls, chain smokers, alcos, corrupt cops and juvenile punters all wait, with their scattered thoughts scattering onto the track.

'It *does* look like a rat,' I say, when the greyhound we've chosen trots ferret-like and scrawny past us. 'And what the hell are clappers, anyway?'

'I don't know,' the cop says.

Rube: 'We don't know what they are, but we know they're fast.'

'Yeah.'

The cop and Rube are inseparable now. Best mates. One has a uniform and black, close-cropped hair. The other is in rags, stinks of sweat and No-Name cologne and has wavy brown-blond hair that staggers towards his shoulders. He has eyes of stomped-out fire, a wet nose that sniffs, and he has bitten claws for fingernails. Needless to say, the second one is my brother. A Wolfe, a dog, through and through.

Then there's the female cop.

Then there's me.

Drooling.

'And they're off!'

It's some tosser, dare I say it, over the loudspeaker, and he's rattling off the names of the dogs so fast I can barely understand him. There's Chewy on a Boot, Dictionary, No Loot, Vicious and Generic Hound, and they're all in front of You Bastard, who scampers around the back like a rodent with a mousetrap stuck to his arse.

The crowd rises.

They shout.

The female cop looks great.

People scream.

'Go, Pictionary! Go, Pictionary!'

People correct. 'It's *Dic*tionary!'

'What?'

'Dictionary!'

'Oh . . . Go, *Pic*tionary!'

'Ah, forget it!'

People clap and shout.

Great, I tell you. Great, she looks. Brunette.

Then, finally, the rat gets rid of the mousetrap and makes some ground.

Rube and the cop get happy.

They scream, almost sing with joy. 'Go, You Bastard! Go, You Bastard!'

All of the dogs chase the ludicrous rabbit around the track and the crowd is like an escaped convict.

Running.

Hoping.

Knowing that the world is catching up.

Hanging.

Hanging on for dear life to this moment of liberation that is so sad that it can only lurk. It's the deception of something real inside something so obviously empty.

Screaming.

'Go, Vicious!'

'Go, No Loot!'

Rube and the cop: 'Go, You Bastard! Go, You Bastard!'

We're all watching, as the rat comes flying around the

outside of the track, clipping first place and losing balance to fall back into fourth.

'Oh, you bastard!' Rube winces, and he isn't calling the dog by its name, as he pedals like hell to make it back.

He does.

He runs well, our bastard.

Runs into second, which makes Rube look at our ticket and ask the cop a question. He says, 'Did you bet each way or on the nose?'

By the look on his face, we can tell that the cop has bet on the nose. All or nothing.

'Well you're a bit useless then, aren't y', mate?' Rube laughs, and he slaps the cop on the back.

'Yep,' the cop says. He isn't a tosser any more. He's just a guy who forgot about the world for a few moments when some dogs sprinted around a track. His name is Gary – a bit of a Nancy-boy name, but who cares?

We say our goodbyes and I dream one last time about Cassy the cop and compare her to other imagined women in the lecherous soul that is my youth.

I think about her all the way home, where the usual Saturday night awaits us:

Our sister going out. Our brother staying in, staying quiet. Dad reading the paper. Mrs Wolfe, our mother,

going to bed early. Rube and me talking briefly across the room before sleep.

'I liked her,' I say on our front porch.

'I know.' Rube smiles and he opens the door.

'Hey, Rube, are you awake?'

'Whatta y' reckon? I've only been in here two lousy minutes.'

'It's been longer than that.'

'It hasn't.'

'It has, y' miserable faggot. And tell me — what do you want, ay? Can y' tell me that? Whatta y' want?'

'I want you to switch the light off.'

'No way.'

'It's only fair — I was in here first and you're closer to the switch.'

'So what? I'm older. You should respect your elders and switch the light off yourself.'

'What a load of bloody—'

'It stays on then.'

It stays on for ten minutes, and then, take a guess. It's me who switches it off.

'You suck,' I tell him.

'Thank you.'