

Lotto Lang Syne

I started seeing Kyle at the Inn Cahoots bar shortly after the Cavs fired Mike Brown. God, the first time I saw him, he was just a scrawny, twenty-something-year-old kid. By the time the Browns had fired Eric Mangini, he came to the bar at least once or twice a week, and we had small talk. By the time the Indians fired Manny Acta, he came to the bar almost every day, as he got laid off as a teacher and had more free time. So we spent that extra free time bitching about Cleveland sports. Actually, I just bitched and complained. Kyle didn't know too much about Cleveland sports, but he knew enough about Progressive Field.

“Let me tell you something,” he would say. “I have been to Progressive Field, and the Hot Dog Races are intense. Onion always appears to have a shot, but then Ketchup just pulls away, which is crap.”

He was at least interested in what I had to say about sports, that by the time the Cavs rehired Mike Brown, we had gone to watch the Indians play the Red Sox and White Sox. Kyle didn't say much about the game, other than when something big happened, but he said enough about the Hot Dog Races, hot dogs, and beer.

Even though we went to the games and always met up at the bar, it was still surprising to see him that one Saturday at Parmatown Mall. As I walked towards J.C. Penney, I saw him scratching something against the Pepsi vending machine, with his black, spikey hair and coin. He leaned his face closer to whatever it was, where I thought his glasses would actually fall off his face.

Then he shouted “Yes” loud enough, that some people stopped and looked at him.

“I just won the lottery,” he said, showing what looked like a scratch-off ticket to everyone. Some people just continued walking.

Kyle and I made eye contact. “Stan!” he yelled, waving.

“Hey,” I said. “What are you doing here? How much did you win?”

“Two dollars.”

“That's it?”

“What do you mean that's it? I put in a dollar. I won twice that amount.”

“Okay.”

“A win's a win.”

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“Just seems like something not to get too excited about. What’s that smell on your breath?”

“What are you doing here?”

I groaned. “Mother’s Day is tomorrow, and I need to find Mom a gift.”

Kyle erupted in laughter. “Really? Your 90-year old mom? I mean, wait, I’m sorry. That came out wrong. No, actually I meant that. No disrespect. It’s just that you waited so long, and what more could she possibly need?”

I could have punched Kyle in the face. I should have punched him in the face. Instead, I looked down and shrugged.

“Hey, you,” Kyle continued. “Chin up. Don’t look down at Ohio State.”

“Ohio State?”

“Jesus. Your hoodie. They’ll win it all eventually. Actually, I came here to find a gift for my mom, too. Last minute. Let’s shop together.”

“That’s okay.”

“Why not? Is it too weird to see a young guy shopping with a 60-year old for their mothers? Let me tell you something. You need a sip—make sure it’s a sip—of water.” He pulled out a water bottle out from his jean pocket and handed it to me, grinning. It was a larger bottle of Dasani water and at least three quarters full.

“I’m good.” I tried to give him back the bottle, but he held his hand up.

“Just take a sip.” He winked at me.

I took a sip. I felt a slight burn run down my throat, but it was a smooth burn. My cheeks started to feel warm.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s definitely not Smirnoff.”

“You think I go for that cheap stuff?” Kyle answered. “You know me better than that, Stan. Where should we go first?”

We walked away from J.C. Penney and towards the record store. Something played over the speakers that sounded like heavy metal. The singer screamed words I couldn’t understand.

Kyle said, “Metallica.” He then draped the hood of his Kent State hoodie over his head and jumped up and down, flailing his arms. He started bumping into me and chanting, “Blood. Death. Blood. Death.” He used a deep, groggy voice, like a heavy metal singer.

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I pushed him away and asked, “Do you know this song?”

“No. It just sounds like Metallica, but I don’t really listen to them. Blood. Death. Blood. Anne Murray. Older people like Anne Murray, right?”

We found a few Anne Murray albums, which were near John Denver and Barry Manilow.

“I came here more often in high school,” Kyle started, “when this mall was more lively. I heard Anne Murray do a cover of ‘Daydream Believer’ over the PA system. The Monkees must have been flattered.”

“Why?”

“When someone does a cover of your song, I think that means you made it big.”

“Even if it’s Anne Murray?”

“Hey.” Kyle pointed his finger at me. “My mom listens to Anne Murray. Nice lady, with a nice voice.”

Mom listened to Anne Murray all the time. About ten years ago, when we still lived at the house, and Mom had just celebrated her 80th birthday, I was watching the Browns play the Eagles, but I had to keep the television on mute, as Mom was cooking in the kitchen, and Anne Murray’s singing helped her focus. I could hear the chicken frying in the fire pan, as Mom sang “The Tennessee Waltz” with Anne.

Meanwhile, Terrell Owens was ripping the Browns defense to shreds, and I wanted to throw my Miller Lite at the television. My mom walked into the room, bad knees and all. She wore her pink kitchen apron and large reading glasses.

“What’s the score?” she asked.

“Not good,” I answered.

“You’re upset, aren’t you?” She sighed. “Too bad you don’t just listen to music.” I didn’t look at her, but I could feel her looking at me.

“Don’t you like Anne Murray?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Nice lady. Sorry, but I’m watching the game.”

Anne Murray was now singing “Always On My Mind” in the kitchen. Mom then grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned off the television.

“Hey,” I started.

She lifted a finger to silence me. “I’m only going to say this once,” she hissed.

“You have no room to call someone a nice lady. Okay? The naked ladies in those

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magazines I found years ago under your bed were not nice ladies.”

“What? That was only one—”

“Stop it,” she said. She smacked her lips. “Those women are not nice. The naked ladies you look at on the computer? They are not nice. You don’t even know what a nice lady is.” She tossed the remote control on the table. I looked out the window, out towards the street and sidewalk. A woman was walking a golden retriever.

As Mom walked away, she said to me, “Tell God you’re sorry. For everything.” I listened to the chicken sizzling on the frying pan and said sorry to God.