

**A Man and His Lawn**

By J. C. Bass

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## The Texan

“STRIKE!”

Bill stood in front of the bedroom mirror, straightening the collar on his black baseball umpire shirt. He put on his umpire hat and made sure it looked as straight and professional as possible. He took a deep breath and then pumped his fist.

“STRIKE!”

Bill went into his closet. There were five basketball referee uniforms, five for football, four for baseball (unless you count the one he was wearing), five for hockey, five for soccer, and about a dozen t-shirts and old pairs of jeans. He picked up a wooden box that sat on a shelf. Inside, on a plush purple cushion, sat a sports whistle. He put it around his neck. Baseball umpires had no need for whistles, they just yelled their calls. But it made him feel better to have it on him, just in case.

Bill walked into the kitchen just in time for his popcorn to finish. He took it out and added some extra artificial butter and salt. He grabbed a pitcher of sweet tea and poured himself a glass.

Bill brought his popcorn and drink over to the couch and sat them down. He pulled out the footrest, scratched his belly, and flipped the TV on.

The Yankees were playing the Red Sox.

The pitcher threw one right across the plate.

“STRIKE!” Bill said. The umpire on TV mimicked him.

Knock knock.

Bill looked over and could see that somebody was standing out on the front porch. He sat his popcorn aside and went to the door. He took a glance through the peep hole. A curious looking older man wearing a white cowboy hat and a bolo tie stood outside. Bill opened the door.

“Howdy,” the old man said. His teeth were perfectly white and Bill thought the man might just have the sharpest blue eyes he’d ever seen. “I’m Colt Beecham. How are ya, son?”

Bill noted the twang in the man’s voice, reminding him of people he’d seen on *Walker Texas Ranger*. Bill’s voice was filled with awe. “Are you from Texas?” He asked. Cause that would be just swell if he was.

Mr. Beecham’s perfect white smile widened. “Why yes sir, I am. Born and raised in Dallas. I see you’re a man who knows his accents.” He extended a hand. “Put her there, sport.”

Bill smiled as he shook the man’s hand. He liked being called sport. It made him feel very athletic, which he wasn’t. Mr. Beecham’s hand was cold and dry and hard, with a grip that made Bill unable to squeeze back.

“So you’re Mr. Baxter, right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Bill said. “How did you know?”

“Says so on your mailbox.”

“Oh. Of course.”

Mr. Beecham cleared his throat. “Well Mr. Baxter, I’d like to talk to you for a minute about your future.”

“My future?”

“Yes sir, that’s right.”

Bill heard the sprinkler kick on. Instinctively, he glanced over the Texan's shoulder and watched as it twirled round and round, spraying water on his lawn. Bill had taken a great deal of time calibrating the thing to make sure that it covered enough area. His front lawn wasn't large, about 20 by 30 yards, and of course it was impossible to cover all that with one sprinkler. He'd wanted to get several but his wife Susanna wouldn't let him. She had also made a point to limit the amount of times he could use it, cause it would run up the water bill.

The Texan followed Bill's eyes. "That's a mighty fine lawn you have there, Mr. Baxter."

Bill brightened immediately. "You think so?"

"Sure do. That's the best lawn I've seen in this whole neighborhood, and I've been going door to door all day. I see you're a man who knows the importance of lawn care."

Bill was outright giddy. "I've got a whole shed full of equipment, if you wanna see."

The Texan laughed. "I imagine you could teach me a thing or two."

Bill gave a modest little smile. "Well, I guess I'm pretty good at it..."

"Pretty good?" The Texan clapped him on the back. "I oughta hire you to handle my ranch."

Bill and the Texan laughed. Bill couldn't remember the last time a stranger had complimented his lawn. It took a lot of effort to keep it green during those long Southern droughts, like the one they were currently in. With the sweltering heat and humidity making most people's lawns look so bad, you'd think more people would notice how nice his was.

"Well it's real hard work," Bill said. "When we first moved in parts of it were real patchy."

"Well ain't that something," the Texan said. "Now Mr. Baxter, I wanna talk to you about--"

"I got a brand new Artful Dragon mower in the shed," Bill said. "You wanna see?"

"Uh, maybe later." The Texan clapped him on the back again. "You think we could sit a spell, Mr. Baxter?"

"Oh sure," Bill said, giving way for the man to enter. "Come on in."

The Texan stepped inside and for the first time Bill noticed the man's boots. They were pure white alligator, as perfect and as unblemished as you could imagine. Bill wanted to run and get his camera so his friends would believe him.

There was a real life Texan in his living room.

"You've got a lovely home, Mr. Baxter," Beecham said. "I can see you're a man who knows the importance of keeping a good home."

"Well, I can't take all the credit," Bill said, trying not to stare at the man's boots. "My wife does a lot of it."

"Is the misses home?"

"Sure is." Bill walked to the hall. "Susanna! We have a guest!" He turned back to the Texan. "Have a seat if you want, I think she's on the phone."

"Alright." Mr. Beecham sat and removed his hat, revealing short cropped gray hair beneath. He pulled out a little handkerchief and dabbed his forehead with it. "You have kids, Mr. Baxter?"

"No sir. And you can call me Bill, if you want."

"Alright, Bill. So, is it you or the missus who makes the financial decisions?"

Bill took a seat across from him. "Financial? Oh, that's Susanna. She does all the bills and stuff. I'm not very good at that kind of thing."

"May I ask what it is you do for a living?"

Bill brightened. "I'm an official."

“Well ain’t that something,” the Texan said, flashing that perfect white smile again. “I thought that might be the reason for the getup you’re wearing.”

“Yeah, I like to dress out for the big games on TV,” Bill said. “Susanna thinks it’s silly, but I like to put myself in the game, you know?”

“Sure,” Mr. Beecham said, like maybe he really understood. “So what do you officiate, exactly?”

“I work basketball, baseball, football, and everything in between,” Bill said. “And I’m the only person in town that can do all those full time.”

“Well I declare...”

Bill hopped out of his chair. “I even won an award.” He went to a little shelf by the TV and picked up a small glass plaque. “The AOC gave me this a few years ago.”

“AOC?”

“Oh, the Alabama Officiating Commission. They’re the board that directs all of us.”

“I see. Well you must be pretty good at what you do to get that.”

Bill gave a meek smile. “Well, I do alright.”

The Texan laughed. “I imagine I’ve seen you on TV then, and not known it. I watch a lot of college sports myself.”

“Oh no, I ref for youth leagues. Junior Pro, Little League...stuff like that. Still trying to work my way up to the college level, but you gotta pass a test and it’s pretty hard. But I figure I’ll get there one day.”

The Texan gave a wry little grin. “Ah. My mistake.”

Susanna came walking in. She was overweight and frightfully pale, with strands of scraggly dark hair falling about her face. She had her cell phone pressed to her ear. The Texan rose and extended a hand.

“How do you do, ma’am?”

Susanna eyed him for a moment and then shook his hand. She glanced at Bill. “What is this?”

“This is Mr. Beecham,” Bill said, unable to contain his excitement. “He’s from Texas.”

Susanna gave Bill that old familiar look, the one that made him feel like a little bug that was somehow in her way. Bill couldn’t help but feel ashamed. He hoped the Texan didn’t notice.

Beecham cleared his throat. “Ma’am, I’m here to talk about your family’s financial future. You see, I’m a businessman who-”

“I’m sorry, what?” Susanna said. She raised a hand to interrupt the Texan while she listened to somebody on the other end of the line. “No Molly, trust me; you don’t want to get the checkered napkins for the reception. Bill wanted those for our wedding and it made all the pictures look awful. It was a disaster.”

Bill winced. Please, not in front of the Texan. He still wanted to show the man his mower.

Beecham spoke up again. “Ma’am, if you’re busy, this is something your husband and I-”

“We’re not interested.” And with that, Susanna left the room.

Bill was aghast. She hadn’t even let the man speak. “But Susanna, he has a business offer.”

“He’s just a salesman,” she snapped. “Get rid of him.” And with that, she walked away.

The Texan gave a little laugh, putting his hat back on. “Alright then.”

“Oh no, don’t go,” Bill said. “She’s just busy. Her friend is getting married again and Susanna is gonna be the maid of honor.”

The Texan’s voice came out more scraggly now. “Sorry partner, but I think this well is pretty dry, anyway.” He went to the door.

Bill didn't know quite what he meant by that, but knew it wasn't good. "But please," Bill said. He glanced back to make sure Susanna wasn't listening. "You know..." He whispered. "We can talk out on the porch if you like."

"I appreciate your interest Mr. Baxter," he said, opening the door. "But I get the impression she's the one who wears the pants."

Bill was crushed. A few moments ago, the man had been complimenting him about his lawn care and his career as a referee. But now Susanna had pushed him away, and without even hearing what he had to say. Bill wanted to know what had made this man so successful, as he clearly was. You could tell just by the way he carried himself, by the command he had as soon as he walked into the room. This was a man to be admired. Bill knew there was something he could learn from him.

"I'd like to hear whatever you have to say," Bill said.

"Sorry, but I don't think we can do business." The Texan took a step off the porch.

"I'm good at business," Bill said, though the lack of confidence in his voice betrayed the fact that he clearly wasn't.

The Texan walked away without saying anything. There was something awful about the sight of him walking away down the drive.

"I have twenty thousand dollars saved," Bill blurted.

The Texan stopped dead. He turned around to Bill.

"I beg your pardon?"

"...Well, it's our money. But I made most of it," Bill said. He realized how weak his voice sounded compared to other people, especially the hard whiskey-soaked voice of the Texan. He tried to steady himself. "I suppose that gives me the right to do with it what I want, no matter what Susanna says."

The Texan grinned, those sharp blue eyes narrowing on him.

"Son, that's the first sensible thing you've said all day."

The sprinkler kicked on again, and while that was normally enough to entertain him as he sat on the porch, he didn't even notice it while the Texan was speaking.

"It's called Diamonds Unlimited," the Texan said. They were sitting in Bill's rickety plastic lawn chairs. "Here's our card."

Bill held the thing in his hands. It had Colt Beecham's name and title surrounded by shimmering diamonds. As Bill moved it back and forth, the light reflected off of it like a kaleidoscope. Bill was mesmerized.

"So you're the president?"

"That's right. And I'm the one who found the mine, too."

"Wow. How did you do that?"

"The good Lord blessed me with an instinct for it. One day I just took out my shovel and started digging. Found the biggest mine in North America."

"Wow. In Dallas Texas?"

"Yes sir. Right on my own land, too."

Bill carefully put the business card in his pocket and reminded himself to take it out before he put the shirt in the wash. He didn't want it to get ruined.

"Boy that's lucky," Bill said. "That reminds me of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. They just walked right out one day and struck oil. I wish I could get that lucky."

“Well, you just did. You see, I’m looking for investors, but not just anybody. It takes a real special sort of investor for this type of deal. And I got the feeling you’re just the type I’m looking for.”

Bill went wide-eyed. “Me? Really?”

The Texan looked him over with those vivid blue eyes. “Well if you ain’t, I don’t know who is.”

Bill tried not to show how excited he was. “So how does this whole thing work?”

“I’ve got the diamond mine on my property, so that means I own it already. Only problem is, before we can get in there and start digging, we need to hire a whole mess of workers and buy the proper equipment. And that takes a great deal of start-up money.”

“How much?”

“Well, I won’t bore you with the details. But suffice it to say, I’m real close. Just a handful more investors, and we can get started digging.”

Bill thought for a moment. There was something important his mother had told him once about business and money, some sort of phrase that summed up everything he knew about business. He tried to remember, and then suddenly it came out.

“If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

The Texan raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

Bill flushed. The last thing he wanted to do was scare this man away, especially after how rude Susanna had been. “...I was just remembering something my mother said.”

“Ah. She sounds like a wise woman. I can tell you were raised right. There’s a lot of godless immoral people out there that might try and take advantage of you, Heaven forbid. You gotta watch out for those types. They’ll skin you all day long. I’ve encountered a few in my day.”

“You have? What did you do?”

The Texan leaned forward. “I looked ‘em square in the eye and asked ‘em one question. When can I get a return on my money? And you know what? The ones who are scammers can’t answer that question. They’ll go back and forth and talk all kinds of hogwash about how it could be real quick or real long, but they won’t give you a set time. See, that’s because they don’t want you bothering them about when you’ll get your money back. So you can guarantee if you don’t get a straight answer, that person is trying to scam you.”

Bill felt like he was learning a lot already. “That’s the secret?”

“Sure is. So to put you at ease, I’ll go ahead and tell you. If you choose to take this opportunity, I can personally guarantee that you’ll get a return on your money in seven to eight weeks. And I’ll swear that on a whole stack of Bibles wrapped in an American flag and in front of a Republican president, too.”

“That’s only two months!”

“That’s right,” the Texan said with a smile. “Two months. And I’ll tell you something else, too. You go and invest with those New York types at those big fancy firms and they’ll tell ya that it’ll take years before you see any kind of profit. Well that’s just a bunch of malarkey. They’re scamming people. You hear about it on the news all the time. But what do they do? They tell you ya gotta be careful with door to door salesmen.” The Texan scoffed. “I’ll tell ya this much, friend. I’d trust a man who will look me in the eye with my money before I trust some New Yorker I’ve never met before.”

Bill nodded. He understood perfectly. It all made sense to him. “So what do you need me to do?”

“What I need from you is to decide what kind of future you want to live in,” the Texan said. “How old are you?”

“Forty-four.”

“Well, you’re not getting any younger,” he said. “Do you want to keep working away at a job where you’re lucky to save just a little for retirement each year? Or do you want to be smart with your money? You invest in the right things, and your money can work for you, instead of you working for it. But I’ll tell you this: we gotta do it quick, partner. We gotta do it quick.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because,” the Texan said, suddenly looking quite grave. “I’m afraid to say it, but there are people in this country that don’t share the same values that we do. These radical liberal New York types don’t have any respect for a man’s private property. Would you believe that I’ve been getting death threats since I found this mine?”

Bill gasped. “No...”

“Yes sir. It’s true. They’ve been threatening my whole family.” The Texan took a solemn look downward at his alligator boots and for a moment Bill thought the hard Texas man in front of him might just cry. And if the Texan cried, then oh Lord, Bill would cry too. “That’s why we gotta keep this thing quiet, me and you. The more people that find out about this, the more they’ll want to take it for themselves. They’ll force me off my land and take it from me.”

“But they can’t do that!”

“That’s what the Constitution says, but try telling them that. They got no respect for it. To them it’s just a piece of paper.”

“That’s awful. Just awful.”

“I know it,” Mr. Beecham said. “But you know what? I’ve outsmarted them. You see, according to the Texas Mining Act of 1947, all I have to do is pull out the first diamond for it to be considered official. And when that happens, nobody can touch it unless I tell them to. But until that happens, the government won’t recognize it as a mine. And that means that anybody with enough power and influence can force me off my land and take it from me. That’s why we gotta get started digging quick.”

“But you say you’re close?”

“Should be ready within a week or two. I just gotta raise that money real quick.” The Texan looked quite grave again. “I just don’t know how many more threats Loretta and my kids can take.”

“I wanna help, Mr. Beecham,” Bill said. “I really do.”

“I appreciate that, Bill. I can see you’re a man who knows the value of family.”

Bill cleared his throat. “Well you see Mr. Beecham, I’ve been hearing a lot of stuff on the news about how bad the economy is. Susanna and I have been saving all that money for our retirement, but she says she’s not sure that we’re saving enough. We don’t have to live a fancy life or anything, we just want to have enough to get by. So, I guess what I want to know is: Do you think I can do that if I invest my money in your company?”

The Texan looked him dead in the eye. “Not only will you have enough to retire on, but you’ll have plenty more.”

Bill resisted the urge to jump for joy. This might be the most important decision he ever made in his life. He just wanted to make sure...

“I uh...” Bill tried to find the words. “I just don’t know how my wife will react to this.”

The Texan eyed him for a moment longer. “Well, you said that you earned most of it, right?”

“That’s right. Most. She’s been out of work for the last year or so. She’s got shin splints.”

“...Shin splints?”

“Yes sir. Really bad, too. A lot of times they hurt her so much that she can’t even get up from the couch all day long. The poor thing has to just sit there and watch TV all day. Bless her heart...”

Mr. Beecham raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Well what did she do before that?”

“She worked the cash register at Slippery Dan’s Car Wash. She made good money there, about sixty grand a year.”

“Sixty grand a year as a cashier?”

“Yeah. She was real good friends with the owner. She and he used to spend all night together in a hotel room figuring out ways to have the business make more money.”

The Texan grinned a little. “Did she, now?”

“Yeah. And she’d always come home exhausted, so I guess they were working hard.”

Mr. Beecham laughed. “I bet they were.”

“But she’s really good with numbers, and she’s always made a lot of money. She doesn’t have to pay taxes or anything.”

“...At all?”

“Nope. She’s got the blue-eye green-eye exemption.”

Mr. Beecham blinked. “...The what?”

“She’s got one blue-eye and one green-eye, so she doesn’t have to pay taxes.”

“...Is that what she told you?”

“Yeah, she really lucked out. But I don’t have anything like that, so I never get anything back come tax time. I don’t understand any of that stuff.”

Mr. Beecham snickered. “I’m beginning to realize that.”

“Anyway, I just don’t want her to be mad at me for doing this, that’s all.”

“I’m gonna give you some friendly advice, Mr. Baxter,” the Texan said. “And I’m saying this to you as a business partner. This here is your money. And you being the man of the house still means something in my book. You’re the provider. That means it’s your job to go out there and make sure you bring home the bacon. Know what I mean?”

“Yes sir.”

“Alright then,” the Texan said, leaning back. “It’s settled.”

“...I just don’t want her to get mad.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“But what if she-”

The Texan groaned. “Oh for God’s sake, man. Just don’t tell her.”

“...Don’t tell her?”

“No.”

Bill thought about that. He’d never kept a secret from his wife before. “...But what do I tell her when the money starts coming in?”

“You can tell her all about it then. But until you get the first check, you don’t mention it.”

Perhaps that would be okay. After all, once the money started coming in, she’d see him as a hero, wouldn’t she? She’d realize that he could handle things. Before she had always criticized him for the things he wanted to spend money on and handled all their expenses herself. But once they started making money off this, it would change things forever. Things might be different for a change.

Bill looked to the sprinkler, which had just kicked off. In the sweltering heat of the day, the grass could still use more water. One day soon, they wouldn't have to worry about how much water they used.

Bill smiled at the Texan. "Tell me where to sign."

## JaMarcus

The gym at Waverly middle school smelled of old wood and fresh popcorn. The parents had filled about half of the seats, which was the usual for a fourth grade Junior Pro game. They munched on snacks as they chatted amongst themselves.

The two teams were on the court warming up. In white was Jefferson Carpet and Paint, a short, runty team full of white kids who couldn't dribble. Their coach was an elderly man who was reading the newspaper from the sidelines.

The other team was sponsored by Piggly Wiggly. Every one of them were tall for their age, with long arms and good dribbling skills. They wore actual jerseys and even had their names on the back. Their coach was a sharply dressed Italian with slicked-back hair. He yelled at the kids to pick up the pace.

Bill and two others were standing on the sidelines in their referee uniforms, watching the teams warm up. One was Steve, a middle-aged man with sallow skin and a very poor comb-over. The other was Alfonso, a scrawny twenty year-old referee who had a thin, patchy mustache.

"Look at those Piggly Wiggly kids," Steve said. "They look like eighth graders."

Bill looked at the roster information. "This says they're all ten."

"Yeah, but just look at them. Jefferson's gonna get slaughtered. You think we should give them some friendly whistles?"

Alfonso's eyes went wide. "That's cheating!"

Steve gestured out to the Piggly Wiggly team. "What, and that's not? Where the hell did Gilletto find them all, anyway? They look like grown men."

"But this says they're all ten," Bill said.

"Forget what the paper says. You know why Gilletto got booted from the University of Idaho?"

Bill looked across the court at the well-dressed Piggly Wiggly coach. "No. Why?"

"He got busted for bringing in some French player who had been in the pros for seven years over in Europe. Passed him off as just some college exchange student, but the NCAA caught him since he was under suspicion for all sorts of other stuff, too. Gilletto's school made it to the finals of the NIT because the teams they played against kept making stupid mistakes. They couldn't prove anything, but they suspected that he was paying off the opposing players."

Alfonso looked aghast. "No..."

"I watched those games, and there was definitely something fishy going on. That would have gotten him in some serious trouble, and not just the kind where you lose your job, either. But nobody would talk so all they had against him were the recruiting violations. Now he's banned from all NCAA games for life. He's like the Pete Rose of college hoops."

"So why is he here?" Bill asked.

Steve shrugged. "I guess it was the only job he could find. He's been blackballed."

"Ah, Mr. Baxter..."

Bill looked around and saw coach Gilletto walking toward them.

"Can I have a minute of your time please?" Gilletto asked.

"What do you want?" Steve asked.

"Just a moment with the head referee, if you don't mind."

Steve eyed him carefully. "We're watching you Gilletto. Don't try to pull anything."

“Pull anything?” Gilletto said with a laugh. “Come on, it’s Junior Pro. It’s all for the kids, what would I try to pull?”

“Just know we’re watching you.” Steve and Al walked away.

“You wanted to talk with me, coach?” Bill said.

“Yes sir, I do,” Gilletto said. He put an arm around Bill and led him toward center court. “You see, I’ve been reading the Junior Pro guidelines and there’s something I need a little clarification on.”

“Oh, well I’ll be glad to help.”

“Great. You see, it’s my understanding that the only requirements for a player to participate in our league is that he must be male and currently enrolled in a fourth grade class within the tri-county area. Is that right?”

“As I recall,” Bill said.

“And if a kid were to be held back for poor academic performance, then he would still be allowed to participate, correct?”

“Right.”

“I mean, we wouldn’t want to discriminate against a kid just because he can’t, say, do long division.”

Bill thought about it. “I guess that sounds about right.”

“Wonderful. Then I’d like to add another player to my roster.” He snapped his fingers, and a towering six and a half feet tall behemoth came walking toward them from the bench. His eyes were vacant and his mouth drooped open.

Bill stared. “Um...”

“This is JaMarcus. Say hi to Mr. Baxter, JaMarcus.”

JaMarcus just stared into nothingness.

“...Okay then,” Gilletto said. “Well Mr. Baxter, if we can go ahead and add him-”

“...I’m not sure we can do this,” Bill said.

“Well what’s the problem?”

Bill eyed JaMarcus. “...He can’t be a fourth grader.”

“Ah,” Gilletto said. “I thought you might say that.” He whistled and a good-looking female assistant in a business suit handed him his briefcase. “Thank you Claudia. My secretary took the liberty of finding the proper documentation beforehand.” He handed Bill a piece of paper. “JaMarcus has been held back a few times, and as you can see, he’s currently enrolled in a fourth grade class at Dairy elementary. In fact, he sits next to a couple of the other kids on the team.”

“But how old is he?”

Gilletto laughed a bit. “Does it matter? You just told me that it doesn’t say anything about age in the rulebook, as long as they’re enrolled.”

“...Well yeah, I guess I did. But how old is he?”

Gilletto cleared his throat. “Thirty-four,” he muttered.

“...Thirty-four?”

“That’s right. But like you said, it doesn’t matter as long as he’s enrolled in a fourth grade class.”

“But he’s thirty-four.”

“So? Big whoop. You just told me that if a kid got held back, he could still participate. So what’s the difference whether he’s a year behind or...” He did the math. “...Or twenty four years behind?”

“I just don’t think it’s proper.”

“Proper? *Proper*, Mr. Baxter? Are you sure that’s the word you want to use?”

“Coach, I-”

“Let me tell you something, Mr. Baxter. My ancestors came to this country from a small village in Italy because they wanted a better life for themselves. They came to this land of opportunity with nothing but the clothes on their backs and hope in their heart. And it wasn’t easy. You see, my great grandfather couldn’t find a job because nobody would hire an Italian. And you know why, Mr. Baxter? Because they didn’t think it was proper.”

Bill didn’t know what to say.

“So how can we in good conscience say that it isn’t proper for JaMarcus here to play basketball? So what if he’s a little bit older. According to the rules, it’s perfectly legal.”

“...But he’s *thirty four*.”

“But he reads at a fourth grade level!”

Bill shook his head. “I’m sorry coach, but I don’t think that I can allow this.”

Gillette sighed. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but alright.” He snapped his fingers again, and his assistant Claudia handed Bill a packet.

Bill looked at it. “What’s this?”

“You’re being sued.”

“What!?”

“I didn’t want it to come to this, Mr. Baxter,” Gillette said. “But the rules say that JaMarcus should be able to play. And if you refuse to obey those rules, then we can only come to the conclusion that you have some type of personal bias against poor JaMarcus here.”

Bill read the first page of the packet. “Racial discrimination!?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Gillette said. “And in this day and age...”

“But-but I’m not a racist. I could lose my job!”

Gillette shrugged. “We’ll have to let a judge decide. Unless, of course, you change your mind...”

The people on the Jefferson Carpet and Paint side of the crowd had been muttering to themselves ever since the tip off. A dozen angry parents yelled and jeered at the referees, who did their best to ignore them.

The Piggly Wiggly fans however, seemed to be thrilled and were laughing and cheering at the spectacle before them.

They were winning 47 to 8.

JaMarcus stood beneath the rim and blocked another shot. He trudged back up the court to play offense, lagging well behind all his younger and faster teammates. They waited for him to catch up, threw him the ball, and he dunked it. The Piggly Wiggly side erupted in cheers and began chanting his name.

With the way Gillette coached, you’d think they were losing. He was screaming his head off, yelling out complex commands and calling plays for his team. The kids were far more athletic than the other team, even without JaMarcus. They ran circles around the others.

“What the hell are you thinking, ref? That guy’s an adult!”

All of the referees were getting their fair share of ridicule, but most was going to Bill.

“You’re a disgrace, ref! You’re a disgrace!”

Bill felt terrible, but he tried to ignore them.

JaMarcus blocked another one, sending it into the stands where Piggly Wiggly fans laughed and gladly threw it back.

The Jefferson Carpet and Paint side chanted: "TAKE HIM OUT! TAKE HIM OUT! TAKE HIM OUT!"

The Piggly Wiggly side started to yell at their opposition. Two parents got face to face and started screaming at one another.

Steve ran over to Bill. "This is getting heated, we gotta do something."

Bill struggled to think of anything. "Like what?"

Somebody threw a soda onto the floor, splashing all over the hardwood. Steve blew his whistle and pointed at the man who threw it.

"You're outta here! Get out!"

Suddenly that side of the crowd erupted. All the Jefferson Carpet and Paint fans started throwing trash onto the court, drenching Bill and Steve and everyone else who happened to be in the way.

Bill ran for his life as the crowd charged at them.

## Checking the Unit

The parking lot was filled with police cars. Several cops were dragging the man who threw the soda, but he was kicking and screaming the whole time. The rest of the crowd was leaving, trying their best to avoid the police who were stalking about and looking for troublemakers.

Bill's referee shirt was drenched in soda and he still had little bits of popcorn stuck in his hair. As he sat in his truck, he listened to an old Kenny G CD to calm his nerves. Whenever he moved, there was a sticky *schlep* sound from the soda sticking to the leather.

Steve knocked on the window, making Bill jump.

"You okay?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Bill said. "I just sort of...panicked."

"Can't blame you for that. It was getting crazy in there."

Alfonso ran over and joined them. "Did you see me? I punched a guy!"

"Don't say it like that, Al," Steve said. "You were defending yourself. When you say it like that, it makes you sound like you were the aggressor."

"Well you should have seen me, Bill," Alfonso said. "I defended *the hell* out of myself."

"I can't believe the crowd was so...violent," Bill said.

"It's amazing what this kind of heat will do to people," Steve said. "It works them into a frenzy. Those people were ready to explode as soon as they walked in. You ask those cops over there and they'll tell you. Stuff like this always happens in the summer time."

"I don't think it was the heat."

"What do you think the AOC will say about this?" Alfonso asked. "I won't be fired for clobbering a guy, will I?"

"You didn't clobber anyone," Steve said. "You were defending yourself."

Bill shook his head. "I have no idea what they'll say. I've never heard of anything like this before."

Alfonso looked around the parking lot at all the cops and cruisers. "You don't think I'll go to jail, do you?"

"For what?" Steve said. "Alabama is a 'stand your ground' state. You have every right to defend yourself."

"Yeah but even after the guy fell down I kept...defending myself."

"You were well within the law," Steve said.

Bill flipped through a little book marked 'Junior Pro Guidelines.' "Is there a passage in here on how to deal with riots?" Bill asked.

"Try chapter three," Steve said.

"Maybe they should start issuing referees pepper spray," Alfonso said. "Or guns."

"Now don't be ridiculous," Steve said. "They're not going to give referees guns. Tasers, on the other hand, are still in the cards."

Bill tossed the little book aside. "It's all my fault," Bill said.

"What? No it's not," Steve said. "You're not the one who started throwing soda onto the court. As soon as that happens it's up to us to lay down the law, like Stalin if we have to."

"But I'm the one who let JaMarcus play," Bill said. "That was my decision."

Steve and Alfonso glanced at each other. "Yeah...well there's that."

As Bill turned onto Wellington Street and came near his house, he saw that there was a gray truck parked next to his wife's car. It was shabby and full of old rusted tools in the back and said 'Romero Heating and Cooling' on the side.

That damn air conditioner. Bill groaned and pulled up next to the curb and got out.

The heat was enough to take your breath away. Bill made sure not to step on any of the grass. He bent down and felt a little bit of it and saw that it was dry. Bill sighed. Susanna always turned the water to the sprinkler off, even though he kept telling her the grass needed it. He walked to the side of the house and turned it back on.

The house was cool when he entered. He wondered what Marco was here for, if the air conditioner was alright. "Susanna, I'm home," he called. He heard nothing back, so he started sifting through the mail that was stacked on the desk by the door.

Nothing but bills. And nothing yet from Mr. Beecham, but then again it was still a few weeks before he expected the first check to come.

Bill trudged up the stairs. He wanted nothing more than to get a nice shower and put on his comfortable clothes. Maybe he'd fix himself a glass of sweet tea and get Susanna to sit with him out on the porch. But Bill thought she would probably rather be inside where it's cool.

The bedroom door was closed. "Honey? What's wrong with-"

Susanna opened the door about two inches. Bill could see that she was wearing her robe. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"The game was canceled. There was an incident."

"Oh..." She opened the door just enough for her to get through and then carefully closed it behind her.

"Where's Marco?"

"Marco?"

"Yeah, I saw his truck. Was the air conditioner out?"

"Uh, yeah," she said, straightening her hair. "It was for a while."

Bill sighed. "That damn air conditioner. You know, we're gonna have to get another one soon. Marco keeps fixing it but it just keeps breaking down again. Where is he, anyway?"

"He's out...checking the unit."

"Oh. I didn't see him. Well, I need to get a shower." He went to open the door.

"You can't," Susanna blurted, blocking the door.

"...Why not?"

"Because," Susanna said. "The shower is...clogged."

"Clogged?"

"Yeah. I just tried to take a bath," she said. "That's why I'm in my robe," she added.

"Oh. Well I'll use the other one." Bill trudged back downstairs, shaking his head. "That darn air conditioner..."

Bill sipped a glass of sweet tea as he watched the sprinkler kick on again, spraying round and round, round and round. It was late afternoon but the humidity of the day still lingered, the kind that felt like it got into your clothes and under your skin. Maybe Steve had been right. Maybe the heat really does get to people.

Marco stepped out onto the porch, buttoning up his shirt. He was in his early twenties, handsome and fit. He stopped when he saw Bill.

"Hey there," Bill said. "How's the unit?"

"...The unit?"

“Yeah. Susanne said it went out for a little while.”

“Oh, right,” Marco said. He giggled a bit. Bill noticed that Marco had a tendency to do that around him. “Yeah, um...it’s like, on the skids a bit.”

“That’s a shame. I keep telling Susanna we need to replace it. What do you think is wrong with it?”

“...It just needs checking every now and then.”

“Anything I can do?”

Marco grinned. He had a tendency to do that, too. Bill wondered why. “I guess if you checked it every now and then, I wouldn’t have to.”

“Okay. Will you teach me what to do?”

Marco giggled again. “Nah, man. If you don’t know by now, I’m not gonna tell you.” He went to his truck.

Bill wasn’t sure what that meant. Susanna was dressed now, and she stepped out onto the porch. As Marco pulled out of the driveway, he waved. Susanna blushed a bit.

“Bye Marco,” Bill said, waving.

Marco grinned. “Bye Mr. Baxter.”

## Summer Cold

A crazy little Jack Russell terrier named Bucko foamed at the mouth as it yelped and tried to pull away from its leash. It had been tied around a metal post on the porch. Bucko yanked and yanked at it, barking in mad lunacy but couldn't pull itself free.

The porch had half a dozen lawn chairs of the old metal variety, the kind with multicolored plastic strips that ran across the seat and back. All of them sagged from years of use. A dead plant sat on the end of the porch, only partially shielded from the relentless summer sun. The leaves that didn't fall under the protection of the roof were brown and withered, beyond all hope of ever being green and healthy again.

Bill went up the walkway, noting the size of the grass as he did. It was shamefully high, and it put him on edge to think of the city ordinance that said they could fine a person who didn't cut their yard consistently.

Bucko barked like mad as he approached.

"Hey there, Bucko. How ya doing buddy?"

The dog was in a state of utter lunacy from being so close to what he wanted, but not quite being able to reach it. It flailed about, lolling its head around and gnashing its tiny teeth as it tried to get at Bill's heels. Thick white foam dripped from its mouth.

Bill reached down to pet the dog, but then thought better of it.

"Bucko!" Came a harsh female voice from within the house. "If you don't shut the hell up I'm taking you to the pound."

The dog wouldn't relent. It didn't even look tired.

Bill's sister Molly, a big woman with graying brown hair and a battered pink nightgown came to the screen door. "Bucko damn it, you shut the hell up and leave Bill alone." She glanced up to Bill. "How do you like my little guard dog?"

"He's...fierce."

"Yeah he is. He just barks and barks all night. The neighbors complain, but what the hell can I do about it?"

"He didn't used to do that, did he?"

"No, he didn't. I don't know what got into him, but he's been that way for about a week. I guess he's been that way ever since he got in a fight with that Schnauzer down the street. You should have seen that dog, Bill. Foaming at the mouth and everything. I've never seen two dogs go at it like that. They damn near tore each other apart. But Bucko held his own, didn't you Bucko?"

The dog was convulsing with rage, lashing out at its leash but was far too small to do anything to it.

"Are they supposed to foam at the mouth like that?"

"Yeah, he's just a little thirsty, that's all. I'll give him some Mountain Dew, that'll cheer him up. Come on in."

Bill tried to edge by the dog. The chain kept him mere inches away from Bill's feet. Finally he managed to get in the house and shut the door.

The house was crowded with furniture. Chairs, desks, old sewing machines, vanities, tables and all manner of other things clogged all but a single path that corkscrewed through the madness. Covering nearly every surface in the house were statuettes, mainly of porcelain but a

few were made of wood or ivory or, frighteningly enough, bone. Most were cute and dainty, little brightly colored knick knacks. But some were inscrutable and apparently home-made.

“You want something to drink?” Molly said. She had already wound her way through the path and into the kitchen.

“Sure, I’ll take a Dew.”

Bill could hear the TV to his right, but couldn’t quite see it. He found the path that led to it, but it was particularly narrow. As he squeezed in between an old schoolhouse desk covered in carved names and obscenities, his protruding gut knocked over one of the little statues, though it didn’t break. It was a well-dressed man from the Victorian era, taking a solemn bow. Bill took care to place it back as it was.

Once he squeezed through, he found an area that was a little less crowded. An old TV that still used rabbit ears was showing *The Price is Right*. It was sitting on top of an even older TV that had probably stopped working sometime during the Regan administration. A relatively clean coffee table sat in front of it and behind that were two blue recliners placed side by side. Sitting in one was Ned, Molly’s husband.

“Hey there, Ned.” Bill found a smaller, more ragged recliner that was for guests and plopped down. “What’s shaking?”

Ned’s eyes were closed and his ‘Stacey’s Bar and Grill’ hat was pulled down tight. He wore an old blue work shirt with suspenders that held up his blue jeans. His arms were folded in front of him. He was perfectly still.

“He’s napping, you leave him be,” Molly said. She came through the mess of furniture and opened the screen door where Bucko was still yelping. She poured a can of Mountain Dew in the dog dish. “Now you settle down Bucko, you hear? Don’t make me get a switch and tan your hide.”

She came back in and handed Bill his soda, then took her seat beside Ned. She was breathing heavy. “That damn dog wears me out. I love him, but phew.”

“Yeah, puppies are like that,” Bill said, sipping his drink. “Remember when Momma bought that Lab for us when we were kids?”

“Yeah, I remember. Damn thing didn’t last a week out there by the highway. What was its name?”

“Butterscotch. Daddy let me name it.”

“Butterscotch,” Molly said, laughing. “Yeah, I knew it was something like that. I remember coming home from school and seeing you with it, just bawling your eyes out. But I guess that was the first dog you saw get killed. I had two or three before that, but you were too young to remember. They never lasted long. Sooner or later they’d wonder off and get hit, but I couldn’t stand to see them on a leash. I’d like to let Bucko off it, but the damn city says I can’t.”

“Yeah, they’ll fine you if you do,” Bill said. “Speaking of which, I’m worried about your grass.”

“I know it. It’s getting long. But Ned likes to do the mowing, so I thought I’d wait until he felt better.”

Bill looked over. Ned still hadn’t budged. There was something a bit curious about the way he was just sitting there.

“...You said he’s sick?” Bill asked.

“Oh, it’s just a summer cold. And those are always the worst. It’ll pass in a couple days.”

Bill kept looking at Ned. “He-he sure breathes easy.”

“Yeah. Can’t hardly tell he’s doing it, can you?” Molly said with a shrug. “But then again, he’s never been the type to snore or nothing.”

“Hmm...”

“Lost his appetite a bit, though. I guess he’ll eat when he gets hungry. I’ve called down to the diner and told them he was sick, so he could rest. Old fart never wants to take a day off.”

“Um...how long has he had this cold?”

“Just three or four days. All he wants to do is sit there in his chair and sleep, so I let him. He sleeps in that thing better than he does in the bed, anyway. Hey, you want a Hot Pocket? I was just about to fix me one.” Molly got up.

“Um...sure, yeah.”

Molly disappeared into the maze of furniture again. Bill studied Ned for a little while longer. “Ned...” he said. “Ned?” He reached out and shook Ned’s arm. “Hey Ned.”

Nothing. Ned didn’t budge.

Bill started to tear up. “Oh Lord...”

“What?” Molly called. “Did you say something?”

“Molly...”

“What?”

“Come here, would you?”

Molly waddled back through the maze of furniture. She saw his tears. “What’s the matter with you?”

Bill wiped a tear away. “Molly, I think....I think...”

“You think what? Come on, spit it out.”

“I think...Ned is dead.”

Molly scoffed. “No he’s not. He’s just resting.”

“Molly, I tried to wake him.”

“He’s just a heavy sleeper, is all.”

“But I called his name and he-”

“Oh, Ned’s as deaf as a post,” Molly said. “He can’t hardly hear nothing anyway, much less when he’s sleeping. You just leave him be.”

“But Molly, we should-”

Molly glared at him. “Leave him be, Billy.”

Bill hesitated. He glanced back and forth between Ned and Molly. “...Are you sure?”

“Course I’m sure. He’s my husband, after all. I know him better than he knows himself.”

“You don’t think we should call a doctor?” Bill gulped. “...Or a funeral home?”

Molly gave him that look again. “A what?”

Bill shrunk back into his chair. “...Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought. Now you just sit tight, and I’ll bring you a Hot Pocket.”

Bill cringed a bit as he looked at Ned. “...Can we eat in the kitchen, please?”