

Only a Game

Ana comes back, maybe an hour later. Tears in her eyes. Tears on her cheeks.

“Tom! He’s not moving! He’s intubated and they have all the monitors hooked up to him. He’s just laying there.”

“They’re doing what they can,” I console, trying to be optimistic and build her up. “He’ll be okay. They’ll take care of him.”

“I know they’re trying. I know they work miracles. I just can’t see him like this. It’s too hard.”

Everyone else has gone except Genie and me. They all have family or commitments. They know they can’t do anything for Michael now. They have to get on with life. Genie, Ana and I have stayed. We will call with any news. The others will be back later.

“Do you want to leave? We can go home, or to dinner.... Come back later?” It is a dumb question. I know the answer. But, I want to at least give the option.

“No! I can’t leave,” Ana says. “I can’t leave him alone. I don’t know if I can make it, though. This is so hard. If I could do something, anything, to help, I’d be better.”

“You are helping. You’re here for him. That’s what you need to do now.”

We sit down again. She’s sort of hunched, shoulders bent and head down. I am not feeling too flash, either. My best friend, my soul and inspiration is on the gurney back there, hanging to life, apparently just by artificial means at the moment. The wonders of modern medical science are keeping him on this side. No telling how long that will work.

After a while, Ana starts to get angry. Her head comes up and her back straightens. She is coping.

“Why did this happen? It’s only a freaking game! He shouldn’t even be here.”

“No, but he is,” I reply. “He’s here because he was doing something he loved. He had passion for it. He knew the risk, but it was worth it.”

“Risk?” she shoots back. “It’s just a sport. It’s something you do in your

spare time. It's not something you sacrifice everything for."

She is warming up now, getting some of those pent up frustrations out. It has been building up for a long time. The fears are realized and now she needs to vent.

"We've talked about this endlessly. It's so much time and effort... and *risk*. It's just not worth it."

"I don't know how to tell you this, Ana," I start back in. "You're right. We've all talked about it forever. We all think about it. But, this isn't just 'sport' to us. It's everything. It's the reason we live. Doing this, playing rugby, defines us and makes us something; something special. At least in our own minds. And what else matters?"

"Otherwise, we're just cogs in the machine, grinding out an existence. We can't live that way."

"Yeah, what about the rest of us? What about those of us who depend on you? Care for you? Are invested in you? You can't just ignore us and forget our feelings."

Genie, who was still there with us, chimes in, "I've just started coming round, and it scares me. I'm trying to deal with that fear. Now this happens."

"But you're both attracted to it, too. There's a feeling, an essence – Michael especially had it – that brings you to us. You wouldn't be here if the benefit didn't outweigh the negative. You've made a choice. You've taken that risk with us."

"Don't lay that on me," Ana says. "I did make the choice to be with Michael, but I didn't choose rugby. I would be just as well without it."

"Can't you see that rugby is a part of Michael? Of me? Of all of us? It's part of the package. Part of our essence. You can't separate it. You get the whole thing. You take that away and, sure, you'd remove risk. But, we'd be much less than the sum of the remaining parts. You wouldn't like what was left."

"As we see now the risk is just too big, even to get all the parts," Genie adds.

"Yes, it's risky, but it *is* worth it. The rewards are so great. Even when we lose, the feeling of testing yourself makes it worth it. You have *tried*. You've done everything you possibly can to achieve an end, a goal. And that's what makes it worth it.

"Don't get me wrong, I love to win. And I hate worse to lose. Losing is abysmal. But, we have to take the chance. With that we get everything that

comes along with it. The friendship. The camaraderie. The glory – meager as that might be in our little pond – it is still something to gain the respect of our peers. It’s everything for us. It’s all part of it and you don’t get that without taking the chance, making the effort, putting it all on the line.”

Ana is back on me now, “Risk is something you take on the stock market, or in Las Vegas. It’s not something you do every day with your health or your future. You don’t go out and play in traffic because it’s exhilarating. You have to make some intelligent, mature choices about what risks you take.”

“And we do that! The risk of catastrophic injuries in rugby is very low. Especially compared to gridiron. There just aren’t that many bad injuries. And your teammates really take care of you. We look out for each other.”

“Don’t talk to me about statistics. There’s only one that matters and he’s right here. I don’t care what the probability is, when it hits you, it’s a hundred percent.”

“Yes, you’re right. Statistics don’t matter any more. What does matter is that he was doing something he loved.”

I go on a different tack, “What are we without risk, anyway? Without it, we’d be less than human. If we never take a chance, we’d just be gray, dull robots – going about our jobs and lives with no spark. Risk is an essential part of the human condition.

“We take risks and it defines us. It gives us life. It makes this existence worth living. Is life without risk worth it? I think it is more of a ‘risk’ to live a placid, staid life, to not take chances, to not really live. That’s not living while you’re living. That’s just barely existing, focusing on the next breath and nothing more, nothing beyond, not getting the most out of each ‘unforgiving minute’¹. What have you accomplished then?”

“I don’t know, but you’d still be around to live it,” Ana replies. “And you’d be around with *us* – those who care about you.”

I am not going to convince her. The situation focuses the fears and emotions, bringing them to white hot heat and intensity. It’s not academic anymore. We’re not talking what ifs and maybes. This is real and we are both feeling it. We just take it in opposite directions. We have a different perspective, and that’s the way it is. At least Ana has a chance to vent a little,

¹ Kipling, *op. cit.*

relieve some of that stress.

Dr. Stanley comes back out to the waiting room. It is late now and we are the only ones left. Even the usual inhabitants of the ER waiting room are mostly gone. He comes towards us, eyes lowered. As he gets closer, dread precedes him. It is his manner, the aversion of his eyes, his pace. Ana bites her lip as he nears.

“I’m sorry,” is all he gets out.

“Oh, Jesus, God, NO!” Ana screams, and wilts next to me.

My knees go limp, too. I summon the strength from somewhere and put my arm around her to hold her up. Her shoulders are frail, curving forward and shaking. This strong, vibrant, independent woman has faded to this, brought down by the choices she has made and the risks Michael has taken. Not only the loss of Michael, but more poignantly, the impact on Ana strikes me to the core. If it isn’t for her need at the moment, I’m sure I would give in – breaking, collapsing on the spot. Instead, the sense of duty to Ana, to the living, gives me strength to stay upright.

She is sobbing and I hold her to me, tightly. Behind me, Genie holds me.

With nothing left to do at the moment, Dr. Stanley turns and goes back.