

THE GAME

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I first met the children because of The Game.

Their parents had played, and Lost, under what the investigators called “unusual circumstances.” The Game is always unusual. But the investigation shows the husband was trying to set up a murder of the wife. Imagine that! In this day and age, someone thinking about murder. If he lived, the media would have sunk their teeth into that one, and given us flak about it for months. That’s what they warned about from the first. He didn’t live of course. You can’t play The Game without full concentration, and he was obviously thinking of something else.

I’m a Game Manager. It’s a Civil Service position, because we also have the job of notifying the proper agencies and finding next -of-kin. Good job, for all the blood. You never get used to it, you know. You see bullet holes on television, and pictures of car wrecks and spectacular suicides, but it’s different when you’re there, next to the body, putting your finger in a hole with shreds of flesh puffing up around the edges like a sea anemone.

Go down to a Game Field some day. Ask one of the attendants to look over the bodies in the holding area. They’ll let you It happens all the time, don’t be shy about your curiosity. Put your finger in one of those holes. Take a look at someone whose jaw was torn off by a shotgun blast. Gives you a whole new perspective on life. I know I think about living and dying – and children – a whole lot differently since I became a Game Manager.

Everyone’s seen the all-black Game suits and the helmets on video. But did you know there’s a built-in blind spot? You know the three black zigzag bars across the face? Those are designed to prevent good peripheral vision. At first, the Game’s designers let people think it was for protection. But the helmet is attached to the suits by that thick metallicized strip at the back of the neck. When a Player would try to adjust the helmet to get rid of the blind spot, he wasn’t able to shift it because of the neck strap. And each helmet has a different blind spot. Puts another dimension in The Game, doesn’t it?

Players that live through several sessions sometimes get operations to change the direction of one eye to avoid the blind spot. You may have seen them. They look a little crazy, because one eye is pointing at a strange angle. But then, I’m sure I’d look a little crazy too if I had lived through a Game session and still wanted to go in again.

You’d be surprised. If a Player lives, he’ll come back time and again. They seem to come back wanting to Lose. Friend of mine, who’s actually done it, says it’s an incredible adrenalin rush. Very primitive, a “you and them” feeling, he says. Says he’d do it again, but his wife won’t let him.

The mother of those kids wanted out of The Game before she Lost. The rules say that any player who takes off their helmet is out of The Game – you cannot shoot at that person, or you’re penalized ... and there is only one penalty in The Game. But it’s dark in the Arena, and the Managers figure if you’re in The Game, you’re there willingly and you have to take the consequences.

If you've never been in an Arena, I can tell you exactly what it looks like. It's easy to describe. It's huge, take up a space the size of a small theme park. It's totally flat, but there are oddly-shaped geometrical walls here and there. There are lots of places to hide, but a person can always be seen from at least one other spot in the Area. Everything is flat black: the walls, the floors, everything. Everything except a person's helmet. That has a shiny finish. Like the old motorcycle helmets, though you hardly see those anymore. It's pretty dark. The only light is sent through diffusers, so it's like moonlight in a fog. On the ceiling are the Managers, in bullet-proof bubbles, watching for Losers and any irregularities. They have special viewers to see through the dark, but they didn't see the mother fast enough.

I'm told this woman staggered out into an open area – very dangerous, as you might guess – she pulled off her helmet, and started shouting, "I don't want to play! I don't want to play!" She apparently was struggling with the helmet for a few seconds, and was hit at least once before she got the helmet off. One of the Managers got on the intercom and announced a cease fire to get her off the floor, but a big blast came through and took off half her face. At the same time, someone hit her husband from behind, three times. It's hard to say if it was her husband who shot her. The weapons go from hand-to-hand in there pretty quick.

The investigators did a really good job on this one, though. They had to, because of the stink the media would have made. No one pays too close attention to them any more, but it can get pretty uncomfortable for the political types, so we try to keep things in hand.

The investigators said the husband the woman and another Player came in, already suited up, helmets on. The cameras showed the men were laughing. The woman may or may not have been conscious. She had been drugged, we found that out during the autopsy. But the attendants don't pay too much attention to who's coming in. They figure – they have to – that if you're going into the Arena, you know The Game. Attendants were shot just asking for tickets in the early stages. Now, it's all computerized, you can't get through the gate without tapping in your bar code. Attendants keep an eye on the cameras, that's all.

Anyway, the three of them went in, and about a half-hour later, the woman staggered to the center of an open area, and Lost. She must have been drugged. Anyone with their wits about them wouldn't go into an open area in the Arena. The computer record showed the two were married. The other guy who came in with them was just another guy. We never connected him up. Probably just another Player, trying to be helpful. We talked to him. He said all the husband told him was that he need help to get a drunken friend inside. We have to believe the story. There's no evidence to the contrary, nothing to show he was interfering. The investigators looked high and low for a motive for murder. The couple had two kids, both in a good school. Husband on his way up in a company, lots of pressure there. Wife stayed home with the kids a lot, most of the time, in fact. Neighbors said that was a big problem. Husband wanted her to either work, or spend time with him at company functions. She insisted the kids were more important, poor things. Neighbors said the fights they had were hellacious.

The kids were in trouble a lot at school. That surprised me, after I came to live with them and I got to know them. They were very well-behaved. Never fought with each other. Very quiet. Apparently their mom used to give them all sorts of idea about interfering with a person's rights. Turns out she was radical, politically, and didn't like the fact that a person has a right to do what he or she wants, without interference, as long as that person doesn't become a nuisance to someone else.

The mother told these kids – and they repeated to me what she said – that if they saw someone “in trouble” they should step in. The kids took it seriously, too, and didn’t listen to their teachers or to their father, for that matter. The boy was thrown out of school for a week when he tried to break-up a school yard fight in which both kids were voluntarily involved. Told the principal they “shouldn’t fight.” Principal told the kid that each person has a right to determine what his or her actions will be, but the boy was unimpressed.

The girl was just as bad. She would argue with her teachers for hours, about something she called “governmental complicity.” She talked to me about it, and I couldn’t get that stuff out of her head. I tried to tell her that everyone has a right to do exactly what they want to do, as long as they don’t become a nuisance to others. That’s how the law reads. That’s what we do. Natural freedoms – it’s in the Constitution, I told her. The kid had a good head on her shoulders, but what could I do? They came to me when they were six and seven years old. Their thought patterns were pretty well set by then. I didn’t have any reasonable chance of getting them to change. Counseling is useless, I think. It would only make them sad, and drag up bad memories. No need to do that. Life’s awful short.

Anyway, I keep getting off track. Sorry, but if you only knew what these poor kids grew up with. Their dad was getting flak at work about his wife, and she wasn’t adding anything to the family, staying home with those kids all the time. And there was talk his kids were getting grief from his boss’ kids, and that was the last straw. He really wanted to make it at that company, and his wife and his kids were just slowing him down. It would have made a lot more sense if he had just left and started fresh: new wife, new kids. He must have been on a bad edge. Figured he’d kill her. I don’t know what he thought he was going to do with the kids.

So I go over to their place the next day to see if the kids are home. Like I said, it’s my job to notify the next of kin. By the time I get there, it’s already past eight, so it’s dark. Kids being kids, they’re probably hungry and want to hit the house for dinner.

Well, the house is dark, no one answers the door. I use a government code to get in, and find them hiding in the kitchen. There they are. Two little faces behind three plastic kitchen trash bins. The boy’s nose is peeking out over a mound of cans for recycling. The girl doesn’t look up for the longest time. Her face is pressed into the boy’s shoulder and her hands are white-knuckled into his pajamas.

I moved aside those cans. I’ll never forget that moment. Two kids, cuter than could be in matching Death Skeleton PJs, looking at me with the biggest eyes in the world. Their faces with wet with tears and their noses were running, and they didn’t say one word. They just looked at me. She finally swallowed and got some air and said, “She’s dead, isn’t she?” And she hiccupped and started crying out loud even before I could nod my head.

Mind you, I’d never been up against anything like this before, and I’d been a Game Manager almost four years back then. The legal changes had taken a long time, but even then, it was pretty standard for someone to play The Game or suicide or just disappear. No one—not even the kids – acted surprised when I’d go by to notify them. Only the smallest ones, the two or three year olds, would whimper. By the time they got to school, though, they were all pretending they could play The Game. Every six year old knew the rules. Every 12 year old could hide better than the best. Fourteen was the age of consent back then, and many kids were waiting in line on their birthdays. Few of them made it out of the Arena. But they knew their rights. They all knew what it means to Lose. They know.

When I saw these kids, who were old enough to know better, crying out loud about someone losing, I knew there was a problem. I thought for sure I would regret it, but I took them home with me that night. Next day, I realized my place was too small, so we all moved back to their place, and I took over the lease.

Their parents had some money left in their account, so I never had to worry about paying for little extras, even on a Manager's salary. And it was fun. I really liked having them around. But they had been badly abused. Their mother had cooked for them, bought their clothes, did everything for them. I had to teach them everything, as if they had been toddlers. They didn't even know how to get downtown by themselves. Never ridden the subway. Didn't even own an infra-red to spot the "MDSO" stamp on someone's forehead. These kids had been so insulated, they were a danger to themselves.

It was kind of fun, though, looking back. They cried so much in the beginning. I had them for more than seven years. When they turned 14 – first the girl, then the boy – I had to let them go. It was time for high school, and there was no way I could afford the fees they charged for living off-campus. I don't know if you have kids, but they charge you ten times as much if you want your kids to live at home rather than live on campus. I'm sure there are valid security reasons for this, but these kids were special. They were still so different from the others. They needed extra help. Still, what could I do?

Like most parents, I lost track of the children when school was over. I heard the boy left the country. At least, the computer shows him getting a passport, then there are no other entries.

As for the girl, I'm afraid she might have signed on with a slaver. You know these young girls. They hit the age of consent, spend a few months being wined and dined by some slaver, and they think that looks exciting and sexy. Next thing you know, they relinquish their citizenship. After that, well, you've probably read about it. They get sterilized and sold by one slaver to the next, until they hit 30 or 35 years old. Then they're sold for organs. It's a sad life. It must look so good to those kids. Someone spending all sorts of time on them, paying attention to them like they have nothing else to do with their time. Then, a girl gives up her citizenship and – wham! – she's passed from hand-to-hand until her skin loses the firmness it once had or she gets too scarred up and then she's sold for parts. I shouldn't keep saying "she." Boys, too, I'm told.

I only hope she didn't do that, though. Last thing I heard, a friend told me she was hanging around on the North Side with a very high class slaver. She was very beautiful, you know. Shortly after that, he turned up dead. With luck, that scared her off slavers. You know, he was the first slaver killed before that string of slaver deaths that started a couple years ago. I heard it's up to 59 of them dead now. All slavers. Media loves it. Slavers are a strange breed, but there's always another to take a dead one's place.

So, why do you want to know?