

David Storey This Sporting Life

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THIS SPORTING LIFE

David Storey was born in 1933 and is the third son of a mine-worker. He was educated at the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School at Wakefield and the Slade School of Fine Art. He has had various jobs ranging from professional footballer to school-teaching and showground tent-erecting. He is now both a novelist and dramatist.

Among his publications are *This Sporting Life*, which won the Macmillan Fiction Award in 1960 and was also filmed; *Flight into Camden*, which won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize and also the Somerset Maugham Award in 1960; *Radcliffe* and *Pasmore*, which won the Faber Memorial Prize in 1972. (All four have been published in Penguins.) These were followed by *A Temporary Life*, *Edward* and *Saville*, which won the Booker Prize in 1976. His plays include *In Celebration*, which has been filmed, *Home*, *The Contractor* and *The Changing Room*, all published in Penguins.

David Storey lives in London. He was married in 1956 and has four children.

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FOR HELEN

Part One

I

I HAD my head to Mellor's backside, waiting for the ball to come between his legs.

He was too slow. I was moving away when the leather shot back into my hands and, before I could pass, a shoulder came up to my jaw. It rammed my teeth together with a force that stunned me to blackness.

The first thing I see is Mellor's vaguely apologetic face alongside that of Dai – the trainer – who's bending down with the sponge, whipping water at me.

'Come off for a bit,' he says. 'You've cut your mouth.'

I stand up with his hands knotted in my armpits. I call Mellor a few things; the players watch unconcernedly, relieved at the interlude. I walk off with Dai shoving an ammonia phial up my nose.

I sit on the bench till he's finished shouting some advice on to the field, then he presses his fingers round my mouth and his thumbs roll back my lips. 'Christ, man,' he says. 'You've broke your front teeth.'

'That's good,' I tell him sibilantly. 'Blame me.'

He stares in at the damage, his eyes dodging round the end of my nose. 'Don't blame Mellor,' he says. 'Does it hurt? It looks as though you'll need a plate.' The reserves gather round him to peer at the scene over his shoulders.

'How d' I look?'

Dai's eyes move up to mine for a second to see just how anxious I might be. 'An old man. You don't want to see no girls for a week.'

'It feels numb,' I tell him when his thumbs drop the flap down. 'I'll go back on in a minute.'

There's no real need to go back. We've a twelve point lead over a tired side with less than ten minutes to go. The crowd have already accepted the decision, and are standing by to be entertained by incidents like mine. Perhaps it's for that reason I go on again, to show just how much I care. Already it's getting dark and that mist is rising from the valley to meet the low ceiling of cloud. One of those cynical cheers wafts over the ground and groans through the stands, as I trot on to the pitch in the gloom, waving my arm at the ref.

I've time for one burst. The effect of the benzedrine's already worn off. I run down the middle of the field swinging the ball between my hands to give the impression of a dummy that wouldn't deceive a boy. I go down with the tackle, play the ball, and stay away from trouble until the final whistle. We troop off in ones and twos. The crowd has parted down the middle like a black curtain, to trickle through the main exits either end of the ground. The lighted upper decks of the buses waiting in a row in the street outside show above the banking. It should be, in fact, the best hour of the week for me: the same time every Saturday when the match is over, the lights flickering up through the dusk and the air clean from a day of no work, and the prospect of a conqueror's leisure before me. Instead I watch Mellor's stinking back and pump into it every kind of revenge. He's got his head down as we go into the tunnel and he isn't looking at anybody as he breaks indifferently through a crowd of eager officials. He's always wise like that - affecting to feel nothing. It could explain the imbecile stillness of his face.

He's no different when we're sitting crowded in the bath, the hot water jerking at the broken skin. A thin seep of blood and mud darkens the surface. It breaks and coils round the slumped men. The heads stick above the water like protesting animals in a pool; I give over trying to think.

Behind us the reserves, helped by a hunch-backed groundsman, are sorting out the jerseys and shorts, trying to avoid

the muddied sweat by treating it only with their fingertips. Their raincoated figures look resentful. They move slowly. Overhead the tramp of the departing crowd still echoes through the metal joists of the stand. The air in the room – the yellow lamp swinging in a draught – is thick with the smell of sweat, sewage mud, liniment, grease, and leather, circulating in a coil of steam that hides one wall from the other.

Standing in the mist is George Wade. I almost knock him down as I clamber over the side of the bath and stagger to the massage table. I don't recognize him till I feel the paw of his dog under my bare foot and hear the whimper. He comes and stands over me as Dai greases and thumps my thigh.

'How d'you feel, Art?' he says, leaning on his stick and bending over the landscape of my body. He's careful to look only at my mouth.

I grin illustratively at his old retired face. He finds it funny and laughs. 'You won't be able to shoot your mouth as you used,' he says. 'Least, not for a few days.' He sees how amused I am. 'I'll fix up a dentist for you on Monday . . . no I can't, can I? Monday's Boxing Day. I'll see what I can do.' He peers at me a while, absorbing this new impression of me without teeth. I think it pleases him, for he asks me as though I'm a reasonable person, 'Will you be coming to Weaver's tonight? I thought he said you was.'

I've already thought about this. A Christmas Eve celebration, and the chance of meeting Slomer for the first time. I can't make up my mind. 'About my teeth,' I say. 'Can you get them fixed for me tonight? It's going to be a week before I get to a dentist otherwise.'

Wade chews his lips, and narrows his eyes in affected contemplation. 'Isn't there a dentist in the Supporters' Club?' I encourage him.

He shakes his head. 'I don't know, Arthur. I don't know at all. I could see.' He looks at me to see if it's going to be worth that trouble.

'Could you find out now, *sir*?'

He turns round, and dragging the dog stumbles through

the mounds of dirty clothing to the door. The animal staggers as it tries to get a hind leg over one of these piles of laundry.

'I'll see, old lad. I'll see. Leave it to me,' he calls through the yellow mist.

'I want it tonight,' I shout. He injects a cold stream of air as he goes out.

I get off the bench and sit under my clothes. There're a few screams from the bath: somebody's behaviour below the waterline is causing objection. One or two come shooting over the bath side and stand watching the water as they scratch themselves. 'Dirty frogs, man,' Dai's telling himself as he joins the inspection before laughing. I'm in the mood I'd have given anything to avoid this particular day.

Frank creaks the bench beside me, unconsciously pressing his great bulk against my arm. He looks at me understandingly, sensing my feeling in his slow miner's mind. It's with the same reluctant concentration that he rubs his shoulders: the nearest he can get to direct sympathy. I'm smiling at him; I'm always smiling at him – he has that humility professionals acquire after a life of hard grinding. It's the lack of arrogance I like most in Frank. I don't mind him being captain, and I don't begrudge him his age. Soon he'll have finished playing for good.

'Are you going to Weaver's tonight, Art?' He pats his huge thighs and makes them tremble. 'A've just been hearing about his feast from Maurice yon.' He nods towards Maurice's stocky figure, almost contorted by precocious muscle, and Maurice grins back at us, pointing out the argument in the bath.

'I'd been counting on going. How d'you think I look?' I say.

Frank stands up to dry his body; now it's his belly hanging and swaying like a sack. 'Maurice's been behaving like a pig again, Art,' he says, and watches soberly as Maurice doubles up with laughter. 'I'm wukking nights this week, did I tell thee? And I've the lad's stocking to fill.' He looks at me sideways and asks genially, 'How's thy Mrs Hammond?'

It's a big joke to mention me and Mrs Hammond. With

Frank it's sometimes a reproach. I grope under the bench and pull out a carrier. 'I've got something for her kids. A couple of dolls for the girl and a train for the nipper.'

'How old are they?'

'Lynda's around five. The kid's just over two. The bitch won't like it though. She doesn't like me interfering.' I pull a nigger doll out of its wrapper and make its eyes flash for him. He smiles.

'They say Slomer's going tonight,' I tell him.

He turns his eyes lazily to mine. 'I wouldn't press myself to get close to him.'

I laugh and he looks at my teeth. 'Any road,' he says, straining forward to pull on his socks, 'I can't see thee going up there solely on account of Slomer. What woman have you got lined up this time?'

Frank's one of those people who either don't hear or don't listen to what you say but just fire occasional questions to keep you occupied. If you do make contact it's usually with some subject you've finished dealing with. He stands up in his socks, pats his belly reflectively, and faces the coke fire across the room. He flicks the towel to me.

'Rub us me back, Art.' He sways with the massage and something he's saying is lost. 'If I were you I'd leave well alone,' he says when I hang the towel on his shoulder. He rubs at my back. 'It's dry. Did you hear what I said?' I nod, losing interest as a numb pain makes holes in my upper jaw. 'I'd get thy mouth seen to. It's more important.'

Cold air shoots into the room as the door opens. George Wade follows the dog in. 'How soon can you be ready, Arthur?' he calls through the steam.

'Have you got somebody?'

'Shut the door, George. That's a good old lad,' a voice shouts from the bath.

'A school dentist or something. Mr Weaver's arranging it if we hurry.'

'What a way to spend Christmas,' Frank says. 'Do you want me to come?'

Wade says something about: 'That's all right, Frank. Mr Weaver says he'll take him down in his car.'

'A nice piece of luck,' Frank decides. He's coughing in the steam, resting his inflamed body against the massage table, watching me dress.

Clutching the carrier, I shout 'Happy Christmas' from the door and follow Wade through the damp coldness of the tunnel beneath the stand. 'Of course,' he's saying, 'if you have to have dentures like Dai seems to think, the club'll pay. I'll tell Weaver. How do you feel? Your teeth, I mean.'

I give him a grunt as we climb the wooden steps to the tea room and bar. Standing just inside the door, as I expected, is old man Johnson. He takes hold of my arm as I come through. 'How are you, Arthur? Are you all right?' His eyes are small with anxiety. It's all up with him. I try to swing away without hurting him. 'I think Weaver's arranged a dentist,' he says.

'Leave him alone, Johnson,' Wade's telling him. 'We're in a hurry.'

Only we're not. I've already guessed, from seeing the back of Weaver's crombie coat, that a detour to a dentist at this time of the day's going to be a real nuisance. Wade jumps from one foot to another, trying to attract Weaver from his conversation. The dog stands still. Johnson watches from the door. Eventually Wade tires of his dance and rests his hand for a second on the plush material of Weaver's shoulder. The industrialist half turns, affecting his usual surprise at the incidents of life, and glances quickly at me before studying Wade's embarrassed gesture with severe amusement.

'Yes, George?'

'Arthur's ready to go, Mr Weaver,' Wade says, and adds after a moment, 'whenever you are.'

'Is that so? I shan't be a minute, George. How's it feel Arta boy?' He turns back to his conversation in time to miss what I say.

'Business,' Wade whispers, upping his thumb at the group in front of Weaver and, measuring his redundancy accurately, adds, 'I'll be at the bar if you want me. There's no point in me hanging on his coat tails.' He leads the dog to join the committee.

Johnson sees the chance to make a second approach, but just as his mind stumbles to the idea Weaver turns his baby face to me and says irritably, 'You ready, Arthur?'

When I say 'Yes', it's with an unavoidable sibilance that softens him.

'Let's have a look,' he says, unconsciously echoing my lisp, and I show him the scene. It soothes him a bit. He moves to one side casually so that his colleagues can accidentally see the view. 'You've copped a mouthful there, old son. I don't know how he's going to fix up mashers like those.'

Weaver has certain mannerisms, and not only of speech, which he thinks reflect his background of industrial democracy. Some people never get used to it. Wade, for instance, never calls him 'Charles' but always 'Mr Weaver'. I realize, seeing the blush deepen around the puffed-up encasements of Weaver's eyes, that he's just been talking about me. 'Do you mind waiting?' he says. 'Maurice hasn't come up yet. I want a chat with him before we go . . . was he nearly ready when you came up?'

'How long are we going to wait?'

'Oh, we'll have to wait until he comes,' he replies. 'Have a drink.' Then he suddenly looks at his nails as he remembers something. 'No, better not, in case the old boy wants to use gas. I'll send somebody down to hurry Morry up - he played a blinder today. What do you think?'

'It went his way.'

'It always does, old son.' He has a slight burst of excitement, then quietens down to say, 'You played well yourself, Arthur, until your accident. Why d'you go back on the field, hero?'

'I thought it was the best thing to do. I felt shaken.'

'Did you thump him?'

'Who?'

'The tree trunk who hit you.'

'Mellor played the ball too slow.'

'Aye - that might have been it. Never mind. It happens to the best of us. Not quite the present for Christmas.' One

side of him raises itself to wave at Maurice who's just bounded through the door. 'Here we are, Morry!'

'How you feeling, Art?' Maurice says. He fidgets in his huge overcoat. The shoulders have collapsed either end because there's just no Maurice beneath them. 'Mellor,' he says. 'Did you ever see such a frog play a ball?' He looks at Weaver. 'I don't know why you have people like that on the books.'

'You think it was Mellor, then,' Weaver says, not much interested, but watching Maurice keenly.

'Aw,' Maurice pulls a face, drops the subject. 'Don't let it stop you coming tonight, Art,' he says. 'Though, Christ, are you going to a dentist? Dai said you'd gone.'

'We're just on our way,' Weaver tells him. 'Do you want to come in the car? I don't know how long we'll be, but we can go straight on up after Arthur boy's finished with his teeth.'

'Suits me. I wouldn't like to miss seeing Arthur in the chair. We might get a camera.'

'While we're about it, I think George Wade better come,' Weaver decides. 'He won't want to, but he can come all the same and see how much trouble we're going to.'

Through the rear window of the stand I can see Weaver's Bentley in the lane below. Frank suddenly appears beside it from the players' entrance, his head bowed, his throat muffled in a white scarf tucked into his dyed Service overcoat. The street light shows up the thinness of his hair.

'I might have to leave you at the dentist's if it takes too long,' Weaver says as he comes back towing Wade. 'You don't mind, do you Arthur? I've got Slomer and some other guests coming tonight so I want to be home in plenty of time. Are we all ready?' We all troop out. 'Do you mind much if we put the dog in the boot, George?' Weaver asks, leaning from the window of the Bentley after releasing the doors.

'That's all right,' Wade says uncertainly.

'It's unlocked. You can put it in yourself.' Then he says slowly, 'What about your dog, Arthur?'

'How d'you mean?'

He points at old Johnson standing at the players' entrance, his too-large flat cap hiding his face.

'That's not so funny,' I tell him. Wade and Maurice ignore my tone as though they hadn't heard.

Weaver pulls in his head and says from inside, 'Do you want him to come?'

I don't want him, but I give him a call and he comes lurching across preparing to show his gratitude. 'Get in,' I tell him. 'We're just going.'

'Where're you sitting, Arthur?' he asks. I pull him in the back.

'I only hope thy dog doesn't sup the ale, Mr Wade,' Maurice says from the front seat.

Weaver says, 'It'll have to have a mouth like a bottle-opener,' but nobody's laughing. The car slides past the visitors' bus. The three players inside stare out vacantly, and don't see us.

The lights of the town are splayed out below. We drop quickly to their level. The ridge across the valley at Sandwood, where Weaver's house stands, is lost beyond the stone buildings. We reach the Bull Ring and turn up a one-way street where the car stops alongside a brick Victorian house.

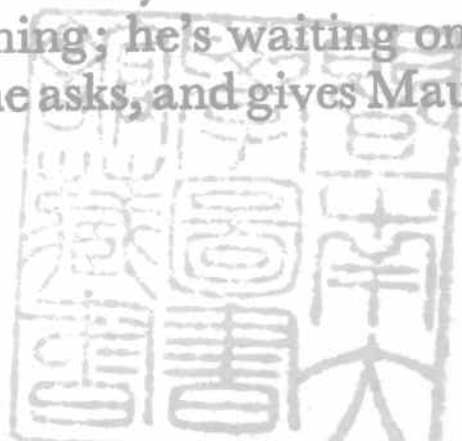
'He's already there,' Weaver says. 'That's good.' He leans over the steering wheel to point out the lighted upstairs window. 'Are you all going in, or will you wait in the car?'

'I'm off in,' Maurice answers. 'How about you, Mr Wade?'

'Oh, don't mind me.' He's lighted a cigar during the trip down from Primstone. 'I'll wait here with the dog.'

'There isn't much I can do either,' Weaver says, his usual coldness stimulated by the drive. 'I'll wait with George. If I'm needed let me know. I suppose Mr Johnson will go with you.'

The three of us get out. The front door of the house is open. 'Children's Dental Centre' is painted on the woodwork. Johnson has his hand pressed on my back as we climb the stairs. The dentist hears us coming; he's waiting on the first landing. 'Which of you is it?' he asks, and gives Maurice a preferential look.



Maurice's big coat gives him the passing appearance of an invalid. 'It's not me, old cock,' he answers. 'It's Arthur here.'

The dentist leads the way into his surgery. 'Sit in the chair,' he says. 'I've a member's ticket. That'll be how you traced me. Though I haven't seen a match this season.' He says this as though it should have disqualified him from helping. 'Where's Mr Weaver?'

'In the car. He's not in control of his knees. Isn't that right, Arthur?'

I nod, lying back in the chair and staring at the frosted glass covering the surgery light. The ether turns my belly over after the dank smell of the changing room and the plush warmth of the car. 'I won't be a minute,' the dentist says, and trots off down the stairs.

'You know what's the matter with him,' Maurice says. 'I reckon it might be up to me to remove those molars, Art.' He fingers the instruments, vibrating the wires on the drilling machine, and has just found the forceps in a drawer when the dentist starts pounding back up the stairs.

'He's coming,' Johnson says urgently from his corner.

'How much do you think he's touched Weaver for?' Maurice asks.

'A fiver.'

'Fiver at least. Remember whose birthday it is.'

The dentist's panting slightly; he glances at the forceps in Maurice's hand. 'You managing all right on your own?' he says. 'Or do you want my advice?'

'I wouldn't mind a bit of professional opinion,' Maurice says behind my head.

'Well it's this: don't meddle.' He sounds more than angry, and since Maurice doesn't answer I guess it might be serious. I half turn, but he's already holding my head. I open up and shut my eyes. His breath comes hot and fast, with an unprofessional smell. He makes a sound of irritation.

'It's a mess,' he says. 'Is it hurting?'

'Not much.' I hear noises of anxiety from Johnson; they correspond with a flow of blood from the gum.

'They might behave themselves for a few days yet without