

P.P.P. OF P.P.

by

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English Junior

Michael pulled on his goggles and slipped on his rubber apron. He put on his thick insulated gloves and picked up a paddle from near the wall. He turned the knob and entered the tall testing chamber, number 5. He secured the door and crouched into an alert position in the center of the room. He looked up. "Ready," he said.

The two halves of the ceiling slammed open like double doors and a shower of ping pong balls hailed down on Michael. In a blur of motion he slapped, knocked, punched, and smashed every ball within reach, constantly angling the balls off the walls and floor in a pirouette of frenzy.

Michael stood still. As the machine-gun like dribbling of the balls ceased, he cocked his head towards the window near the ceiling and said, "Fine. They're all A-okay."

"O.K., Mike. That'll be it for today," a voice said through an intercom.

Michael gingerly side-stepped his way out of the chamber and walked to the locker room. He showered quickly and then headed for the parking lot. He eased into his red Fiat and drove out the main gate.

As he waited for a break in the traffic to get on the highway, he glanced back at the tall column centered on the green lawn in front of the plant. Atop the column was a huge rotating white globe with letters encircling it that read: Ping Pong Products . . . Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

With a scowl, Michael pulled behind a big, green Peterbilt that had just left the plant and was hauling across state. An occasional ping pong ball hopped off the truck and smacked the Fiat's windshield. Michael sped around the truck and headed for Leo's, one of his three favorite after-work bars.

He whipped into the half-empty, cracked lot on the east side of Leo's, a ratty little building that was held together by dead termites. He locked the car and walked around to the front of the tavern. An old, blind beggar was juggling ping pong balls and tapping his foot to some shattered tune that he was humming. He had a little tin cup in front of him and he smiled appreciatively as Michael tossed a quarter into it.

He stepped inside the bar. Leo turned from the TV set and said, "Hello, Mike. How's business?"

As Michael answered, "The same, you know. Day in, day out, testing ping pong balls. Boring as hell," Leo drew him a beer. He plunked it down in front of Michael, slopping the head onto the counter. He soaked up the mess with the towel that he had continuously draped over his shoulder.

He jerked his thumb at the blue tube and said, "Hey, the - uh-Pan Am Ping Pong Playoffs are on. The U.S. is figured to walk away with everything again."

Michael finished the beer and said, "I'm not much in the mood for sports, think I'll head home. Put it on my tab."

Michael decided to take a little jog out of his way and get back on the highway to avoid the crosstown lights. His little Fiat threaded its way through the maze of station wagons and LTDs. He kicked her down a little, until he saw red flashing lights ahead of him. His heart jumped into his throat, and so did his beer, as he braked.

However, the cops were just directing traffic around an accident that had happened up ahead. The truck that Michael had passed earlier had slammed into another rig and crashed on its side, covering the road, the median, and the ditch up to the exit ramp with ping pong balls. Three other policemen were by the truck, supervising the men sweeping up the balls and making sure that no one stole any. The driver had been taken away in an ambulance, so a representative from Ping Pong Products was there to count the balls.

Michael turned off and angled home down 15th Street. He drove past his old high school. He saw a group of young black kids whooping it up in a ferocious game on the ping pong courts.

The Fiat crunched over orange and gold leaves as Michael drove the final five blocks to his small brown house and stopped in front.

Mr. Harrison was just coming out of the next house, carrying his ping pong bag. "League night tonight," he said, pointing to the bag. "See ya, Mike." He jumped into his green Nova and roared around the corner, sending crimson and yellow leaves flying.

Michael dashed into the house and slammed the door behind him. He walked into his bedroom and, after peering out the window, he pulled the shade. He crept to his closet and pulled a blue shoe box down from a clothes-cluttered shelf. Trembling a little, with a slight smile on his face, Michael removed a single object from tissue paper in the box and set it tenderly on his desk. It was a square ping pong ball.

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