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The Best

Player in Town

Collin Helwig

At this rate, the Nike Elite 2006 logo should scratch off my new basketball just as quickly as your dad's hand stamps from the bar around the block, likely to warrant the same head shakes and eye rolls from my parents. Our road's unforgiving cracks combined with the misty rain pouring across it weather the ball without patience or mercy. But as eight-year old kids, we instead worry about our spelling tests next week, those jerky older kids on the bus, and how much longer until the already setting sun bids us farewell. The ball whips through the net and falls straight into a puddle, causing some ice-cold water to splash up into my face.

"Fuuuuck!" I immediately shout before stretching out my sleeves to dry my face. It feels good to throw around the F-word freely without any parents or teachers around to scold us. Still immersed, the ball soaks more water into its artificial leather, and it bounces with a heavy thud after I pick it up and begin dribbling it back out from under the rim. It feels like a distorted bowling ball that might sink if it were to bounce past us into the nearby creek. The ball's surface feels terribly frigid, and I even consider wrapping up my hands with my batting gloves.

"You remember when Kobe wore that Adidas glove during his second season with the Lakers?" I ask. Snapping my wrists, I throw a chest pass right to your hands.

"Yeah, I think there's a reason he only wore it for one game, though," you reply after catching it.

"Maybe then I'll be the one to bring it back into style," I joke back while watching you cross the ball over between your legs.

We both loved Kobe Bryant, though over 2,000 miles stood between us and the Staples Center. That "Mamba Mentality," focused on winning and nothing else, etched itself into our brains with ease. The ball bounces off my foot, but I chase it down before it begins rolling down the hill.

Toward our road's darker end, your house sits quietly, with your dad's car once again absent from the driveway even with nightfall soon approaching. With you and I as the only exceptions, our street looks deserted, lifeless even. Although we see lights from within every other house glowing with warmth, likely with Mr. McGee inside reading his *Golfer's Digest* magazines and Mrs. Clarke with her fiftysome cats, we feel well removed from civilization. It certainly differs from the professional environment typically present at Kobe's past games. The bouncing ball's sound echoes, seeming almost like a siren at a nuke town.

This time your shot misses, and I collect the rebound. I soon realize how ridiculous I might look wearing my gloves, even without an actual audience to witness it, so I drop the idea. Instead, I turn and toss up a shot

Layout by Kyle McDonald. Photograph by Dapo Abideen.

from behind our road's farthest crack, the one we all accept as a three-point line despite never having actually measured it out. "Cash money!" I shout while mimicking Carmelo Anthony's "three point to the dome" celebration. Few things sound better than a ball unapologetically whipping through a net, giving birth to the insuppressible self-confidence we both chase every time we pick up a ball. My satisfaction doubles, though, when I watch your shot clank off the rim's back side after beautifully arcing through the air. But after flying beyond my reach, the ball takes a short hop and bounces off the curb before rolling under a car parked along the street. We both nervously wait, hoping to see it roll back out toward us, but the ball refuses to show itself. With it unmistakably stuck, an issue we both often describe as "literally the worst thing in the world," we simultaneously let out a heavy

your turn. Having seemingly forgotten how to miss, you knock down shot after shot as things start to feel like episode 503 of *You Besting Me on the Basketball Court*. I even roll the ball over to you before your next shot rather than passing it, as a foolish attempt to try and throw you off your rhythm. Just like every other time, it fails to work.

During almost all our meetings under the rim, you always seem to get the upper hand on me, make the final shot, or grab the game-sealing rebound. Our honest friendship keeps any potential jealousy at bay, but I recognize your talents. As seen through my eyes, you have it all. A kid's equivalent of wealth, education, healthy living, freedom, and a job with paid vacation days plus dental.

Although the sky turns from gray and gloomy to complete and utter darkness, we continue playing. The flashlight apps on

“Our honest friendship keeps any potential jealousy at bay, but I recognize your talents.”

sigh. Wedged under the car's back bumper, the ball awaits rescue while we grin at each other, each hoping the other will get down and dirty to snag the ball. "I got it before," you lazily argue, as if you actually remember the last time the ball snuck away from us like this. Motivated by my desire to play rather than your reasoning, I pick up a nearby stick and poke the ball free, though only after some crawling under the car that leaves my shirt covered with pebbles, dirt, and a few blotches of gray snow.

I'm unable to keep the momentum, and my next shot ricochets off the rim, making it

our iPod Touches strategically placed at the hoop's base illuminate the rim just enough to keep it visible. Neither you nor I see walking away from the game early as a viable option, although anyone who viewed a H-O-R-S-E game as something other than prime-time basketball action might argue otherwise. At last you miss one, but my relief quickly reverts to despair. I miss my next shot, trying once more to pull off a between-the-legs layup. After I toss it back your way, you drill a three-pointer like the Ray Allen game winner we'll talk about the next day before social studies at 1:45 p.m. Around the corner, some

headlights begin to shine our way, fighting through the heaps of darkness.

"Car! Car! Car!" I holler, prompting us to retreat to the sidewalk.

A rusted truck passes by with snow salt residue all across its sides and some exhaust smoke black as coal jetting out behind it. We dash back to the street through the truck's gaseous cloud, hoping its taillights might offer some visibility even for a brief moment. But the darkness returns, and the brief jog fails to warm me up. After breathing some heat back into my fists, I rise up to shoot, but this time my three-pointer rattles off the backboard, leaving a splat of water stretched out across it that slowly begins to drip down onto the gravel. I've lost the game. Denied the chance to banter with you about how the sky's growing darkness stands solely responsible for my demise, I hear my mom's calling voice, forcing us to part ways, but only after we finish our two-minute secret handshake. I should feel relieved at the chance to step inside and warm up, but I do not.

I corral the ball, still soaking wet and with its leather now beginning to peel off like onion skin onto my hands, before I run up the street to my house, glowing from within. My wet sleeves, which I used earlier to wipe off my face, now feel somewhat stiff, with the temperature now likely below the freezing point. Running through my garage before entering the house, I aimlessly toss my ball into a corner. I hear the ball crash into something, with a few more bangs following shortly thereafter, but I choose to ignore the mess at least until tomorrow.

Surrounded by my house's warmth and with some chicken soup on deck, I soon realize the comfort I have missed out on over the last

two hours. My parents make this abundantly clear, contrasting my situation with yours, attempting to teach me a lesson. "Just remember how lucky you are," they say. "Be thankful for what you have." But none of this completely resonates with me, at least now, when I am just a kid, uneducated about real-world hardships. Still, I nod and continue inhaling my food. While the grown-ups watch the news every night, I watch *Drake and Josh* with my siblings, and Nickelodeon's explanation of the world doesn't exactly line up with reality.

The drug issues, alcoholism, and financial woes endured by your family remain difficult for me to imagine. They fly by me as indigestible factors completely foreign to my typical nuclear-family suburban lifestyle. Instead, I only notice that you won the H-O-R-S-E game. I continue struggling to understand almost half the things I hear, with no option but to aimlessly cast them aside. What the hell is a DUI? It sounds like a new character name from my *Transformers* video games. All I know is that my parents won't let me ride in your dad's car to go snowboarding on Saturdays anymore.

My mom's poorly hidden displeasure every time she sees me trot over to meet you outside for another game constantly leaves me feeling puzzled. I reckon it has something to do with my inferior basketball skill set, as compared with yours. That feels like the only logical explanation. Maybe if I win this time, that frown will disappear from her face. The softly spoken "He needs to spend time with a better group of kids" comments I hear my parents exchange behind closed doors leave me thoroughly confused as well. What better kids could they be talking about? You're the best basketball player in town.