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Out Of Bounds

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I bounded into the locker room full of excitement. It was game day, and as usual, I was longing to play. There is nothing that I would rather be doing, I thought, as I headed to my locker to change. I wanted to go on and make millions of dollars, and tonight's game was my ticket because in the bleachers of our rinky-dink little high school gym there was a college scout that came all the way from Kentucky to watch me play. I wasn't worried though, because I knew I would play well. I always did."

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I bounded into the locker room full of excitement. It was game day, and as usual, I was longing to play. There is nothing that I would rather be doing, I thought, as I headed to my locker to change. I wanted to go on and make millions of dollars, and tonight’s game was my ticket because in the bleachers of our rinky-dink little high school gym there was a college scout that came all the way from Kentucky to watch me play. I wasn’t worried though, because I knew I would play well. I always did.

As usual I was the first of my ten other teammates to finish getting ready, so I headed out to the floor. Jimmy told me to wait up, but I couldn’t. I had to get out on the floor and touch a ball. I had waited all day, went to my classes, and would not wait any longer. Jimmy would probably be mad, but who cares. He just plays because he has nothing better to do. He doesn’t feel the game like I do, nor does he care about it. Yesterday I told him we were skipping school to go shoot. That’s when he gave me a sob story about going to class because he needs good grades. I don’t need good grades; almost every college in the country wants me at their school. So I skipped and shot hoops all day by myself. The first time I had ever skipped school to play basketball was in seventh grade. I shot all morning before taking a lunch break, and then came back outside to shoot some more. I hadn’t gotten two shots off when Dad’s Toyota turned into the driveway. “Oh my God,” I thought, “I’m a dead man! What’s he doing home?” Then I remembered that he only worked half days on Fridays. “Tommy, you are the biggest idiot that I have ever seen,” I mumbled to myself as he opened the car door to get out. I just stood there in disbelief, with the ball pinned against my hip as I watched him reach back into his car and pull out his briefcase. I decided to play it cool and just keep shooting, but my body had already decided it was going to stay right where it was. As he approached, my mind began to race as to what kind of trouble I would be in. When he reached speaking distance he said “Aren’t you supposed to be in school right now?”

The calmness in his voice surprised and confused me, so I decided to play it safe and try a lie. “No! We only had a half day today?”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“OK! OK! I’m supposed to be in math class as we speak.”

“Is this the first time you have skipped?” He said, and then calmly added, “And don’t tell a lie.”

“Yes!”

“Truth?”

“Yes sir!”

“How does it feel?”

“Excuse me,” I said, as I almost choked on my tongue.

“How does it feel to skip school and play basketball all day?”

This question totally baffled me because I wasn’t sure if this was one of his tricks where I say the wrong answer and then he grounds me till I figure out the right one. I was scared to death. I had never seen him so easy going. I thought that I was really in for it this time. I finally replied, “It felt;” and then I looked at him hoping he would give away the right answer, but he just looked back blankly so I took a chance and finished the sentence with, “great?”

“Good,” he said, “sometimes you deserve a break.” Then he added, “But don’t let it happen often.” Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out two slips of paper and handed them to me. They were two floor level tickets to the Kentucky Wildcats game scheduled for later that night. When I finished reading I looked up and he smiled and said, “Think you can make it?” I couldn’t
answer him. I just stared blankly at him like an idiot as he put the tickets back into his wallet and went into the house. I could not believe what had just happened. Did some genie give me a wish that I didn’t know about? I was stunned. This was the same guy that grounded me for a month when I forgot to call him one day to tell him that I would be late getting home. I was still pondering these questions, and the idea of going to my first college basketball game when he came out in shorts and sneakers and said, “Let’s play some one on one. Take the ball out.” I was still so stunned I actually let him have first ball instead. Then I let him win. It was the first and last time that I ever let anyone beat me at one on one.

As I trotted in I noticed that the gym was starting to fill up even though there was still a while until tip-off. I saw a few people I recognized when I first came in, but, as soon as I grabbed the roundball, I didn’t notice anything, because nothing else mattered. I bounced the ball a few times between my legs and then pulled up for a jumper. The swish of the net reminded me of when I used to play down at Michael Turner’s house after school. It was nothing spectacular. Just an old bent rim that we had nailed to a tree in his backyard. We’d play for hours, and wouldn’t stop until Ma called me for supper. The game was so different back then. Not a care in the world. Nothing on the line. Just two good friends playing hoops in the backyard. No coaches, fans, referees or statistics. Just me, Mikey and a ball.

I remember we were playing one afternoon when Mikey’s older brother came out with a friend. He was carrying his own ball and coming towards our worn-away-grass court when he said, “Mikey, why don’t you and your little boyfriend go somewhere else, cause Jason and I want to play here.” To which I quickly replied, “What’s the matter, you get kicked out of the YWCA?” I turned and smiled to Mikey and then turned back in time to see Todd’s ball go whizzing by my head. Then he said, “Listen you little geek, we are going to play you two up to eleven by ones, and will spot you ten points up front. The winners get the court, and the losers hit the road.” Again before Mikey could answer, I accepted the challenge and before we knew it, the score was ten to ten and the ball was in our possession.

Mikey threw me a bounce pass, and Todd flew by for the steal, but missed. I was finally open for a shot. It was our first actual shot of the game. I let it fly from about fifteen feet, and knew it was good. At that moment I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and I started the pursuit by running straight home and interrupting the N.B.A. play-offs on TV to tell Pops that I wanted to be a professional basketball player. He waited for a commercial, and then just laughed and said, “Yesterday you wanted to be an astronaut. And besides, you don’t know how to play basketball.”

“Well then, you could teach me.”

He sat quiet for a moment, mesmerized by the television as the game came back on and finally said, “Why don’t you go get your old man a beer.”

I had listened to coach’s pregame speech a thousand times, and needless to say, I could probably give it. So when he asked me to say something to the rest of the team before our game against McKinley High, I gave his speech. He didn’t find it at all very funny, but I didn’t really care. He couldn’t bench me, I was his best player. He replied, “I don’t expect that kind of attitude from a senior captain.” That was funny, because I didn’t even want to be a captain, I just wanted to play hoops. I didn’t need this kind of crap, and it made me feel like I was listening to my dad and his lectures. “You need to have more respect for me and the game,” he would say. Hearing that phrase became more familiar to me than hearing my own name.

I remember one of the first times I heard that phrase escape from his mouth. It was during the summer after my eighth grade year in Junior High. I had been the starting point guard for the Varsity basketball team that year, and was the youngest player in the school’s history to ever play on varsity. It was a nice warm June day and I was shooting out in the driveway as usual. The
weather was so nice that I decided to shoot all day. It was about eight in the morning and I had slipped out of the house in hopes that I wouldn't wake up Pops. I hoped to get an hour in without him, but he must have heard the ball smacking against the pavement though because I wasn't outside fifteen minutes when he walked out of the garage wearing his grey sweatsuit and old canvas converse sneakers. "Great," I thought, "the know-it-all-about-basketball coach has arrived." He took the ball from me and started his lecture. "The game is not all shooting," he said, and then continued to my silence, "You need to work on your defense, it was horrible last year."

"Dad, come on, Coach doesn't play me for my defense."

"Do you think a coach at the college level is going to play you if you can't play defense?"

He was right, and we both know it, so I didn't answer. Then he replied, "I thought so. Now give me the ball and let's see if you can cover me." He bounced the basketball a few times until I moved up to guard him. Then he spun around leaving his back towards me and started to back me down towards the hoop. I held my ground for a few dribbles, but was very much outweighed, so I kept losing ground. When he made his move to the right, I decided to let him go, and he scored on the layup. Then I said, "Great move Pop! You could be the greatest forty year old basketball player I have ever seen."

"Do you ever take anything serious?" He replied in the angry father tone.

"No!"

This only made him madder as he said, "You know, Tommy, you have no respect for me, and you have no respect for the game of basketball," his tone got louder as he continued, "and it is really too bad because this is a hell of a lot better game to play if you really love it. You think you love it but you don't, because you don't respect it."

When I heard his last sentence, something inside of me exploded. How dare he say that I didn't love the game? There were times when I loved it more than I loved him, and hearing him say this brought out my temper and I retaliated the only way I knew how; I shot back, "Well if you know so God damn much about basketball, then how come you can't even get a job coaching a Junior High team." I knew these words would pierce deep because I knew how bad he wanted to coach. Ever since I could remember, he had been trying to get a job coaching a team, any team. But he never seemed to get a chance. I didn't look him in the eye after I said this, I just watched the ground. Before I looked up I felt the leather of the ball slap hard against the side of my face with enough force to knock me to the ground. I still didn't look up at him, and he didn't speak a word as he walked back into the house. The left side of my face stung like I had been burned, so I pressed against it with my hand. Then the tears began to flow. I was surprised, because I hadn't let my tears run freely since that day when I vowed never to cry again. It was a day I tried to forget, but sitting in the driveway with the tears rushing from my eyes let the memories all come back like it had happened yesterday. I tried to forget, but no one can ever forget the worst day of their existence.

I was asleep when Dad came into my room to tell me. He shook me a couple times to wake me, and then he sat down beside me. I groggily sat up and said, "What is it Daddy?" but he didn't reply. The room was still dark, but I could see what was wrong in his eyes. They were like I had never seen them before. They were full with an emptiness that can never be refilled. There was something missing, and that's when I realized what it was. He had wanted to say it, but couldn't. He just reached over, hugged me, and let me sob into his shoulder for the rest of the night. The next day he put a basketball hoop over the garage. I was too small to physically throw the ball all the way up to it yet, but I wasn't too small to realize that this was going to be my way of coping as I tried most of the day to make a basket. As soon as I was big enough to shoot on that hoop I spent as much time out there shooting as the days would permit. Just shooting, coping, and trying to fill that emptiness in my heart that was left behind by my mother's death.

Coach called a time-out with about ten minutes
left in the game. Macklery was up on us by four points and had been on a 15 to 2 run. We hadn't scored in the last five minutes, so coach called time in hopes to get us a bucket. He diagrammed the play, and we set back out on the floor to execute it. The ball was going to be inbouned to me and everyone in the gym that knew basketball knew that. So, when I got it at the top of the key, it was no big surprise. I faked my man left and drove the lane to the right easily beating my defender. Macklery's center stepped up to stop me, actually believing he could, as I floated into the air. I was releasing the ball when he undercut me and I lost my balance in mid air. I knew I was headed for trouble because there was nothing I could do. I broke my fall with my back and felt the pain instantly. As the whistle blew, I saw the ball fall through the basket.

I was lying on my back just staring blankly at the gym ceiling. I closed my eyes to ease the pain and could feel the sweat drip in them and it was beginning to sting. I closed them tighter, and then I noticed something.

I wasn't at the gym anymore, I was at a playground. There were a bunch of kids picking teams to play a game. I rushed over hoping to get picked, but they didn't even notice me. It was like I was invisible. There were two bigger kids that were picking teams, and they were surrounded by a bunch of littler kids. The one big kid picked first, followed by the other. They each took turns in succession until there was only one boy left. One of the teams only had four players while the other had five. That still didn't stop the undermanned team from not picking up the extra boy. So they started playing five on four and left the outcast on the sideline. I couldn't stop staring at this poor boy and wondering how bad he must really be. As I watched him sit on the side peering through his open fingers on the hands that covered the face that watched the other play without him, I noticed that he seemed very familiar to me. At first I thought I was watching myself, but realized I wasn't because I didn't recognize the boy. But I knew that I knew him, and it even felt like I loved him. I walked closer to take a better look.

I finally decided to answer coach because he was starting to bother me. "Yes," I said, "I can play. I'm fine." My back was still in great pain, but I didn't tell anyone because I wanted to play. I didn't want to watch the game from the sidelines. I wanted to stay in the game. I could have cared less about winning or the fact that coach wanted me to play injured or not just so he could win. Something was keeping me out on that court and that scared me because I really didn't want to risk an injury and hurt my chances for a basketball career. It wasn't my love of the game that kept me in either, because my back hurt all over and I was ready to call it quits. But I didn't and I wasn't sure why. My mind was clouded with thoughts about that boy on the playground that didn't get a chance to play. He was the first person that I had ever seen that loved the game more than me. When he wasn't picked on the team, he just stayed and watched the others play. He didn't cry or complain. He just kept watching. He was just a dream, but I felt inferior to him. I could feel that he was a part of me, but I didn't know why. I felt so close to him, even though we had nothing in common, yet I could not recognize what he really meant to me. He was a part of me I felt I owed.

I headed to the foul line to make my shot. "I hate these dumb things, they shouldn't even be a part of basketball, they just slow it down." What was the sense anyways. I knew I would make it. "Christ, Dad has made me shoot at least a million of the damn things at home," I thought as I bounced the ball twice on the floor. I looked over at the bleachers to see if he was watching me participate in one of the "most important aspects of the game," as he put it. When I saw him sitting there, I saw something that I had never seen him do. He had tears in his eyes. I was not sure how I felt because I had never seen my father cry. Not even when Mom died did he shed a tear. I hated him for that, and now I wanted to know what it was at a stupid basketball game that could make him shed the tears that didn't stream for my mother. I threw the ball back at the ref, and walked off the court towards my father. He stood up from his spot on the bleachers.
and was on the floor when I got to him. He gently put his arm around my neck and said, "Come on son, let's go home," and we walked out of the gym. I didn't understand why I was actually listening to him for once without complaint, and I didn't understand why I was actually leaving in the middle of the game with him, but for some reason it felt good.

That night I had a dream about that little boy that I had seen during that short blackout. We were at the cemetery looking at my mom's grave, and there were tears streaming down his face. I asked him how he knew my mother, but he didn't answer, he just kept crying. I hugged him and then we turned and walked out of the cemetery together.