



The
HOOP KID
FROM ELMDALE PARK



CREATED BY HOOP KID, LLC

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Created by
HOOP KID, LLC

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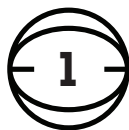
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*To the children of the world—never stop dreaming,
believing, and striving for greatness.*



SUMMER VACATION

EYES CLOSED AND BASKETBALL AT HIS FEET, BERNARD JONES stood stoically on the grass in his backyard. In his mind he heard the public address announcer elatedly shout, “And now . . . introducing one of the greatest and fastest point guards ever to grace an NBA basketball court . . . the newest member of the Dream Team . . . the MIGHTY Bernard Jones!” Bernard’s eyes flipped open. He picked up the basketball and ran onto his basketball court while imagining slapping high-fives and leaping into the air to chest-bump teammates amid the flashing camera lights and the roar of the crowd.

An ESPN reporter dashed up to him. “Bernard, how do you feel about playing in the World Championship game?”

“Excited! This will be one of the toughest games I have ever played, but I’ve trained for this moment my entire life. Bring it on!”

The referee immediately tossed the ball high in the air

for the tip off between the centers. The ball was tipped to Bernard. He grabbed it and quickly dribbled the ball, whipping it around his back and between his legs as he sped down his driveway toward the hoop. He spotted Stephen Curry on one wing and LeBron James on the other. He faked a pass left and then right and abruptly stopped at the free-throw line, causing the invisible defender to stumble past him. He shot a jumper over the telephone wire, and... “The basket is good!”

The opposing team promptly took the ball out, but was met by a stifling defense. The ball handler panicked and struggled to throw a pass, but Bernard intercepted it and raced back for an easy layup. Except, in the middle of the shot, the ball was blocked from behind. What? This was not part of his fantasy...

He spun around and discovered his mother shaking her head, with one hand on her hip and the other holding the ball.

“You need to be quicker than that,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I didn’t see you!” Bernard replied defensively.

“No excuse. The best point guards are like hawks. They see everything on the court.”

Bernard reluctantly nodded, peeved that he was so wrapped up in his basketball fantasy that his mother was able to sneak outside and block his shot.

“Bernard, did you pack all your things like I told you to?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Perfect. Are you ready to go to the airport?”

“I guess so...”

“You don’t sound too excited about it.”

Bernard sighed. “Mom, do we have to go to Elmdale this summer? I should be out here practicing every day so I can make the freshman basketball team this fall.”

“Honey, you’ve got all summer to work on your game. I’m sure you’ll find a park with some basketball hoops. Don’t you want to see your grandparents? And Maurice? He asks about you all the time. You haven’t seen him since you were six years old.”

“Yeah, I know... I really do want to see them.”

“Good! Then we’ve got to get going so we can make it to the airport early.”

“Where’s Daddy?”

“He got called in at the last minute for a new property development project.”

“Again?” Bernard rolled his eyes.

“I’m afraid so, Bernard. You know how busy your father is. The company needs him to draw up a blueprint for a new building they’re planning. He promised to join us in another week or two. So for now it’s just you and me, kid.”

“OK, Mom.”

“But before we go... here’s one for the road.”

She carefully aimed the ball at the basket and then shot. The net barely moved as the basketball sailed through the hoop.

“Whoa, nice shot!”

“Don’t act so surprised, young man...I may be a beautician now, but I was the captain of the girls’ basketball team in high school.”

“Wow! You were? I didn’t know that.”

“Ha! There are a lot of things you don’t know about your old mom. Looks like we’ve got a lot to talk about on the plane.”

She started to go inside the house before abruptly halting at the back door. “Oh no!” she cried out.

“What happened?”

“Ooooh, I think I broke a nail!” his mother inspected her fingernail in mock agony.

Bernard chuckled as he retrieved the ball.

“Oh my goodness!” his mother exclaimed.

“Now what?”

“I can’t believe I forgot to tell you...A package arrived for you this morning all the way from Japan!”

Bernard’s eyes grew larger than the basketball he dropped. “What? Are you serious? You mean it’s here?”

“It is,” his mother replied with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Where?”

Before she could answer, he shot past her into the house.



When Bernard and his mother arrived in the living room of his grandparents’ home in Elmdale, they were lovingly greeted with warm hugs.

“Ohhhh, I am just so happy to see y’all...And little Bernard, I’ve got to hug you one more time!” Grandma Jones exclaimed.

Grandpa Jones shook his head. “Lena, if you don’t stop hugging that boy, he’s not gonna have any meat left on his bones!”

“I can’t help myself, Charles...It’s been so long...and he’s gotten so handsome! I hope you don’t mind, Bernard,” she said without awaiting his response as she hugged him again.

“Not at all, Grandma. I’m happy to see you too!”

“I must admit, Faith, he is pretty good-looking...must have come from my side of the family,” Grandpa Jones deadpanned as he winked at Faith.

“Must be,” Faith agreed, rolling her eyes.

Grandpa Jones laughed as he embraced her. “Where is that son of mine?”

“Busy on a big new project. He’ll be here next week!”

“He works too hard,” Grandma Jones mumbled. “I wish y’all would move back to Elmdale. We really need somebody like Walter to help put this town back on its feet.”

Grandpa Jones wagged his finger at her. “Don’t start, Lena...You know things moved too slow here for Walter. And that scoundrel Victor Franco didn’t help either. He blocked Walter’s every effort for our community!”

“I know...” Lena tightly folded her arms as if to resist giving Bernard another hug.

Faith smiled. “Lena, right now we view it as a temporary

move until Walter determines how well his business is doing. You never know.”

“All I know is I hope you guys move back here!”

“I think they get the point, Lena,” Grandpa Jones said, giving her a look.

“You want them to come back too, Charles!”

Grandpa Jones ignored her. “Bernard, you’ve been holding on to that basketball like it’s stuffed with a million bucks.”

Bernard’s eyes danced. “To me it is, Grandpa! I saved up for months to buy this ball...plus my mom and dad helped a little too.”

“A little.” His mother smiled.

“The G5000 is a high-tech basketball that I got from the Fukazawa Sporting Goods Equipment Institute in Japan. The company only produced a few prototypes.”

“What makes this ball so special?”

“Wait till you see what it can do, Grandpa. Watch this!”

Bernard laid the ball on the floor and pulled a remote control from his backpack. He aimed the controller at the basketball and flipped the power switch. After a few seconds, a digital face with two rectangular eyes and a smiling mouth emerged on one side of the basketball accompanied by a touch screen user interface with bright buttons, graphs, stats and video panels of people shooting the ball in a variety of ways. The videos featured people shooting free throws, hook shots, layups, three-pointers, mid-range shots, bank shots, and more.

Both grandparents jumped when a loud computerized voice emitted from the ball. “Hello! I am G5000, your basketball-shooting coach. I have been specifically designed to monitor and improve your basketball-shooting skills and fundamentals. Welcome back, Bernard Jones! You completed eighty percent of your free throws yesterday—good shooting—but there is twenty percent room for improvement...”

One of the panels instantly showed a video of Bernard’s form while shooting a free throw. Another one zoomed to his wrist.

“G5000’s analysis of your free throws, Bernard Jones, indicates that you are not holding your follow-through and must further relax your wrist. Doing so will allow you to improve accuracy percentage on your shot attempts. Would you like to continue free throws or analyze layups today?”

Bernard shut off the device, and the ball stated, “Good-bye.”

Grandpa shook his head in amazement. “Well shut my mouth...just when you thought you’d seen everything! The things they can do with technology today...”

“Charles, I said the same thing.” Faith laughed. “It’s astounding!”

“Bernard, you seem like a little gym rat. You as good as your father used to be?”

Faith rubbed Bernard’s shoulder. “He’s getting there.”

“Uh-huh...so what do you know about basketball, youngster?”

“I don’t know... a few things.”

“Don’t let him fool you, Charles. Bernard is like a walking encyclopedia.”

“Oh yeah? All right . . . who scored one hundred points in a single basketball game?”

Bernard rolled the ball in his hands. “It depends, Grandpa . . . Cheryl Miller scored one hundred and five points in a single high school game and Wilt Chamberlain scored one hundred points as a professional in the NBA.”

Grandpa Jones’s eyebrow raised. “Hmm, not bad. OK, who . . .”

“Time out!” Grandma Jones interrupted. “You guys have the whole summer to do this dance.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Grandpa grinned at Bernard. “Youngster, later on I’ve got a treat for you. I’m gonna take you into my study and show you some photos I’ve kept in storage of NBA stars like Dr. J, ‘Pistol’ Pete Maravich, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan.”

Bernard was awestruck. “Are you serious? You’ve got pictures of them?”

“Hundreds!”

“Before he retired, your grandpa traveled around the world shooting pictures for National Geographic, but he was also assigned to take photos of NBA players during the seventies and eighties,” Grandma Jones proudly explained.

“Cool!” Bernard exhaled. “Can we see the photos now, Grandpa?”

“Absolutely! Come on!”

Faith quickly blocked their paths. “Hold it, you two... We just got here and haven’t unpacked or eaten dinner yet. There’ll be time later to see those amazing pictures.”

Grandpa Jones and Bernard exchanged a look and resignedly shrugged.

“How’s Maurice doing?” Bernard’s mom asked.

“Faith, he’s doing just fine,” Grandma Jones replied. “Although, he can be a little wild and rambunctious at times...”

“A little?” Grandpa Jones smirked, hitching his pants.

“Yes, but with all he’s been through in his life, I’d say that’s pretty good!”

“Can’t argue with that,” Grandpa Jones agreed.

“I just think it’s so wonderful you guys took Maurice in when Gina passed.”

“Well, you know Maurice’s mother was my late sister’s daughter. When Gina died of cancer, Maurice had no family left but us. I still can’t believe his father abandoned the family when Maurice was a baby.” Grandma Jones shook her head. “We just tried to do the best we could to raise him like one of our own.” Clearly unable to stand it any longer, she reached to give Bernard another hug.

“I’m sure you two have done a remarkable job!”

“Thank you, honey.”

“Where is Cousin Maurice?” Bernard asked.

As if on cue, Bernard heard the sounds of a roaring car

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engine, screeching tires, desperate braking, a long car skid, and a huge crash!

The Joneses locked eyes and declared in unison, “Maurice is home!”



HEY, COUSIN!

THE JONESES' FRONT yard looked like a windstorm had hit it. A bright red sports car sat halfway on the driveway and halfway on the front lawn. The engine idled and the radio blasted reggae music. Three trash cans had been knocked askew, and one was rolling down the street. Debris was strewn across the lawn. Bits of paper floated surreally from the sky like confetti. Maurice poked his head out of the vehicle. His large mane of hair was all helter-skelter as he sheepishly peered around to survey the havoc he had created. Seeing Grandpa Jones's annoyed expression, Maurice promptly shut off the music.

Grandpa Jones folded his arms and sternly tapped his foot.

Scratching his head, Maurice struggled for words. "Uh, I forgot it's trash day. I'm sorry...but don't you worry, Papa Jones...I promise I'll clean up everything."

"Oh-yes-you-will!" he replied, the words running together.

"Hey, Cousin Bernard! Hi, Aunt Faith!" Maurice yelled after he spotted them.

Before they could respond, Grandma Jones gasped. “Oh my God, Maurice! Did you *kill* somebody?”

They all followed the direction of her panicked eyes. A body lay facedown in her garden. Maurice didn’t bother opening the car door. He unfastened his seat belt and vaulted out of the car with his hair flopping. He looked like a human version of a powerfully built lion. He joined his family gathered around the prostrate body.

“Oh no, Charles! I think it’s Alex. Is he dead? What are we going to tell his parents?” Lena cried.

Grandpa Jones cautiously bent down, but before he could do anything else, Maurice roughly grabbed the limp body by the shoulder and rolled it over.

“Wait, Maurice, be careful! You don’t want to—”

“It’s fine, Papa.”

Maurice coolly studied the teenager with muddy face and pieces of grass and flower petals in his spiky hair. The boy was cradling a skateboard to his chest. “Get up, you faker!”

Alex’s eyes popped open. A broad grin spread across his face. “I won!”

“No, you didn’t!”

Alex jumped up. “Yes, I did! When you turned the corner, I leaped over your car and onto my skateboard. Man, I hope somebody videotaped that. It was awesome! I beat you!”

“No way! If those trash cans hadn’t been in the way—”

Grandpa Jones raised his hands. “Hold it! Are you telling

me you almost gave us all a heart attack because you two were *racing*?”

“Papa, he bet me he could beat my car with his skateboard. That’s outrageous! So we started the race a few blocks away. I’d have beat him if it hadn’t been trash day!”

“No way, dude!”

“Then let’s do it again!”

“Let’s go!”

“Stop it!” Grandpa Jones shouted. “Don’t you know that both of you could have been killed?”

“Uh-uh...Not me, Mr. Jones. I’m like a samurai warrior...We have no fear,” he asserted, tugging on his T-shirt featuring the emblem of a fist crunching lightning bolts. “You should have seen how high I jumped over his ride! I’ll show you!”

Alex dropped his skateboard to the ground.

“That’s all right...we believe you,” Grandpa Jones said, grabbing his arm.

“That is just too cool,” Bernard gushed.

“*Don’t* even think about it,” his mother warned.

Alex tapped fists with Bernard. “Thanks, man.”

“That’s my cousin, Bernard, and this is my auntie Faith.” Maurice wrapped his arms around both of them. “Alex is our next door neighbor.”

“Maurice, your car is seriously the bomb!” Bernard trumpeted.

“Thanks, man. You like the color? I painted it the hottest

red I could find! You should check out the black-and-white interior. It's a 1978 Pontiac Trans Am four hundred, automatic, V-eight."

"Man, that is so awesome!"

"Yeah, it's a classic. Papa Jones gave it to me."

"And what Papa giveth, Papa can also taketh away if this mess isn't cleaned up!" Grandpa Jones barked. "And if this happens again—"

"I'm on it. C'mon, Alex! Papa, this lawn will be spotless by the time we're done."

"It had better be!" Grandpa tiredly rubbed the back of his neck. Lena traipsed around in the garden and examined her flowers.

"I'll help you guys," Bernard offered. "That OK, Mom?"

"It's fine. I'll unpack our things."

"Thanks, B... Let's do this!" Maurice exuberantly slapped hands with Bernard.

Grandpa Jones sidled next to Faith. "What were you saying about how well we raised him?"

"He's cleaning up, isn't he?" Faith chuckled as they watched them.



The cleanup work was finished and the fellas hung out in Grandpa Jones's study. Alex lay on the floor using his skateboard as a pillow while intently reading an *Avengers* comic

book. Maurice sat cross-legged on the floor while paging through an auto magazine and doing bicep curls with a small hand weight. Meanwhile, Bernard was completely overwhelmed by the incredible library of books, the artwork and photographs on the walls, the antique furniture, exotic musical instruments, sports jerseys, and artifacts from around the world his grandfather showed him. Bernard didn't remember seeing any of this the last time he visited.

"Grandpa, this is all your stuff? It's like a museum in here!"

"That was the idea." Grandpa beamed. "I've been fortunate to be able to travel around the world photographing people, events, and cultural rituals from Nepal to New Orleans. I naturally started collecting things and bringing a little of the world back home with me.

"This is unbelievable!"

"That's what your grandmother screamed after the house filled up with so much stuff you needed a map to find your way to each room. So I decided to convert our garage into my little museum. And if I say so myself, it worked out pretty nice."

"I wish I could travel around the world." Bernard sighed wistfully.

"You're a smart kid; your time will come."

Bernard reached for a long, wooden instrument on one of the bookshelves. "Grandpa, is this a flute?"

"That's a Choctaw river cane flute that a Native American

friend of mine gave me after I photographed a Choctaw ceremony in Oklahoma. In Choctaw society the medicine men used it for many purposes, but sometimes played it before and during important stickball games to inspire a team to win. Go ahead and blow it!”

Bernard blew into the flute and was enthralled by the pleasant, mystical tone emanating from it.

“Now you’ll win every game you play from this day forth.”

Bernard clenched his fist triumphantly. Next he pulled a large book off the shelf.

“Hey, the cover says ‘Photographs by Charles Jones’! Is this you?”

“Yes! National Geographic published a coffee table book of my work.”

“That is so cool.” Bernard sat down on his basketball and balanced the book on his lap. He carefully paged through it as Grandpa Jones pulled a chair beside him.

“These photos are beautiful, Grandpa.”

“Thanks, son... That one there is a photo of Stonehenge in England.”

“It’s kind of ghostly looking.”

“Makes sense... those prehistoric stone monuments were erected centuries ago”

Bernard turned the page. “Oh, I heard about this tribe—the Masai Warriors—in school!”

Alex looked up from his comic book. “Did you say warriors?”

“You heard right, Alex. I photographed them during my

time in East Africa. They are a seminomadic people and their lifestyle centers around raising and herding cattle, their primary source of food.”

“Where’s the warrior part come in?” Alex peeped over Bernard’s shoulder.

“Centuries ago they were some of the fiercest warriors around and raided cattle from other tribes. It’s been said that at one time, a young man had to kill a lion before he was circumcised, which was their rite of passage into manhood.”

“Kill a lion? OK, these guys are now on my top five warriors list!”

“They were experts with spears and shields, and were feared most for throwing a club called an *orinka*, which could be accurately thrown from up to seventy paces.”

“I wouldn’t want to be hit by one of those,” Alex remarked in wide-eyed fascination.

“Not if you wanted to keep your head.”

“That’s crazy! Dudes’ outfits are nice too,” Alex said. “They remind me of samurai with their wild clothes.”

Hearing all this prompted Maurice to join them as he continued his reps of bicep curls.

Grandpa Jones pointed to one of the pictures. “Do you see how the men are gathered together in a circle and jumping? That’s their famous traditional dance in which they leap as high as they can to prove their strength.”

“I bet some of these guys could throw down some serious dunks if they tried!” Maurice said.

“Bet you’re right. Wish I could recruit them for the Elmdale basketball tournament.”

Bernard cocked his head. “Elmdale has a basketball tournament?”

“Yeah,” Grandpa Jones replied softly. It didn’t seem like he wanted to discuss it though, because he flipped the page and started talking about the Egyptian mummies he had photographed. Bernard decided he’d ask about the tournament another time.

Hours passed as they perused Grandpa’s book collections and photographs. They would have kept going if Grandma Jones hadn’t announced dinner.

As they walked out, Bernard said, “I love being in your studio, Grandpa!”

“Bernard, you are welcome to spend as much time as you want there as long as you follow the rules...and those are, Maurice?”

“You can’t eat or bring food in the studio, and you can’t roughhouse or throw objects around. The museum must be treated with the utmost respect!”

“I promise I won’t break any of the rules, Grandpa,” Bernard assured him.

“Never doubted it, son.”



ELMDALE PARK

MAURICE AND BERNARD cruised the neighborhood in his Trans Am. With one hand on the steering wheel, Maurice used his other hand to fumble around in the glove compartment.

“Ah...got it! Hey, cousin, check out this CD.” He popped it into the CD player and then waited while the music began. “Huh? What do you think?”

“Nice!”

“Yeah. It’s crazy good, isn’t it? A buddy of mine, Eric, put it together. He’s got a mix of rock, hip-hop, salsa, reggae...all kinds of stuff. I play it to death!”

They listened for a while longer until Bernard broke the silence. “Where can I go to play basketball?”

“Elmdale Park. It’s only three blocks from the house.”

“They got some good games there?”

“Used to...now all the best pickup games are at Oakdale Park.”

“How far away is Oakdale?”

“A couple of miles from here. But you don’t want to go there.”

“Why not? I might be short but I can compete with the best!”

“It’s not about that. There’re a bunch of guys there who don’t like strangers—*especially* people from Elmdale—on their court. Don’t ever go there without me.”



The next morning Bernard worked up a sweat on the Elmdale Park outdoor basketball court. His G5000 basketball sat on the bench, volume turned up high. As Bernard skillfully dribbled up and down the length of the court, it critiqued him. “Keep your head up, Bernard Jones. You are too focused on the ball!”

After the ball-handling drills, Bernard proceeded to shoot an array of layups, mid-range jumpers, and three-pointers at each basket.

“Bernard Jones, you will achieve a higher shooting percentage if you keep your elbows in, body straight, and squeeze your thumb against your index finger on your guide hand. Do not fade away on jump shots!”

“But I make a lot of them!” Bernard hollered back at the ball.

“G5000 assesses you will increase your shooting percentage if you follow instructions, Bernard Jones.”

Bernard was so focused that he didn’t notice his grandfather standing near a tree and observing him.

“You really *can* play, son, no matter what that ball says!”

“Thanks, Grandpa!” Bernard grabbed a towel from his backpack and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“G5000 must remind you, Bernard Jones, to shoot fifty-five more jump shots before ending practice.”

“Hold on, Grandpa.” Bernard turned off the ball.

“Good-bye.”

“How long have you been standing there?” Bernard asked his grandfather.

Grandpa Jones glanced at his watch. “Oh, I’d say about half an hour... I was taking my morning walk. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard the sound of a basketball bouncing around here. I thought I’d investigate. You know... you may be about as big as a minute, but you’re faster than a second! I like the way you get down that court!”

“Grandpa, you’ve got to be quicker than everybody else when you’re my size.”

“True. The best part is, you’re smart too!”

“Thanks. Hey, Grandpa, I wanted to play in the gym, but it’s locked tight. Do you know when it opens? I didn’t see any posted hours.”

“There are none.”

“How come?”

“Cutbacks, kid!” his grandfather said disgustedly.

“See all the trash lying around here and how messy the playground area is? Nobody cleans it up. We’ve got this gigantic beautiful park with acres of land and the city council doesn’t want to put a dime into landscaping it or hiring staff to keep it in great shape! It just makes me crazy to think about how much they’ve let this park run down. This place is a landmark and was a high point of the community for generations. But

there are certain folks out there who'd rather see it deteriorate so they'll have an excuse to level the grounds and turn it into a stinking landfill!"

"That's awful!"

"Tell me about it! Turning it into a dump is a slap in the face for all the people who made our town a wonderful place to live. There's a lot of history here. Victor Franco and his greedy cronies want to throw it away for their own purposes."

"I'm sorry, Grandpa."

"Yeah, me too, partner... Say, you feel like taking a break? I was going to walk over to the library and check out a couple of books."

"Sure! I love the library!" Bernard snatched his ball and backpack.

During the walk Grandpa Jones asked, "Did your father ever tell you that Elmdale Park used to be a basketball powerhouse?"

"No. It was?"

"Oh yeah! If you were a serious player and wanted to prove your stuff... all roads led to Elmdale. The best of the best played here. We won the Elmdale Park tournament every year—nobody could beat us! But sadly, that all changed. The last time we won the tournament, your father was the point guard."

"I wish I could have seen him play!"

"Oh, your daddy was a monster on the court... had an unstoppable jump shot! The whole crowd hollered 'Swish'—his nickname—whenever he shot the ball. And that's exactly how the ball went through the nets—swish!" His grandfather flicked his

wrist and held his hand up high in the air as though he were following through on a shot.

“Yeah, Bernard, I’ll never forget...The last game of the tournament, your father had scored thirty-five points, and the Elmdale Warriors were ahead of the Oakdale Bulldogs by fifteen points with only about two minutes to play. Victor Franco, who sponsored the team, rushed out of the stands and entered the Oakdale huddle. He whispered something to a kid named Tank, a burly offensive tackle on the Oakdale High football team, who had a reputation for being a dirty player.

“Your father casually jogged down the sideline and then one of his teammates tossed him a pass. That’s when that despicable bruiser slammed into him from behind with a crackback block. Blindsided, Walter had no way of bracing for such a hit. It was the most vicious, flagrant foul I have ever seen in my life!

“Tank, of course, argued he was only going for the ball. He was thrown out of the game and banned from the league...but the damage was done. Your father ended up with a shattered kneecap and Tank ended up with a brand-new Mustang, which he brazenly drove around town. You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out where it came from.”

“Victor Franco?”

“Put it this way: the license plate frames on his car read ‘Franco’s Dealership.’”

“I wish someone had taken a baseball bat and smashed his car up.”

“Don’t think the idea didn’t occur to me or your father. But violence never solved anything and it wouldn’t have changed

what happened to Walter. Several surgeries later, his knee eventually got better, but Walter never played at the same level again. He had to forego scholarship offers he'd received from dozens of universities. Thank goodness your father has always been ambitious. He quit thinking about what he lost in athletics and concentrated on his studies. By the time he graduated from high school, he'd managed to earn an academic scholarship and later a BA and an MBA. And, as you well know, he's been a successful businessman ever since."

"Why didn't they ever arrest Victor Franco?"

"No one could prove Franco conspired against Walter. Tank certainly wasn't going to snitch. But Mr. Tank got what he deserved. He's been doing time in prison for an armed robbery he committed years later."

"I hope Victor Franco becomes his cell mate someday."

"Me too. One of these days he'll pay for all the shameful things he's done."

"Why is he that way, Grandpa?"

"Bernard, some people are just naturally vile and greedy like that. Franco comes from a very oil-rich family and never learned to appreciate the value of money earned through hard work. He thinks he owns the world and can do anything he wants."

Bernard pounded the ball onto the pavement. "I hate him!"

"You need to let that go, son. Hate means nothing to a man like that. Franco thrives on other people's misery like a fish to water. The man did everything he could to contribute to the demise of the Elmdale Park basketball program. We haven't

won another tournament in the past twenty years since Walter's injury. It was like overnight that suddenly our rival, Oakdale, got ten times better. They even stole the best players from Elmdale, mysteriously establishing residencies in Oakdale even though their parents' homes were here. We haven't fielded a team in the tournament in ten years. That's why Victor Franco is on the verge of convincing the city council to get rid of the Elmdale tournament after this season."

"That's not right!"

"No. The only way to defeat Victor Franco is to beat him at his own game."



LAYLA

GRANDPA JONES AND Bernard headed to the library's circulation desk to check out their books. Grandpa carried two books, but Bernard carted a stack of ten bulky books, which he hoisted onto the counter. The library aide rushed out of the office.

"Hello, Mr. Jones!"

"Hello, Miss Layla. How are you this beautiful morning?"

"Fine, thank you. And you?"

Bernard thought she was not only pretty, but very perky.

"I'm great! Layla, I want you to meet my grandson, Bernard."

"Hi, Bernard!" She warmly smiled and reached out to shake his hand.

Bernard was mesmerized and completely paralyzed.

"Bernard?" Grandpa Jones gave him a subtle elbow.

Bernard finally stopped gawking and quickly extended his hand. In the process he accidentally knocked over half the books on the counter.

“I’m sorry, I’ll get them!” Bernard hustled to pick up the books.

Grandpa Jones covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

While Layla checked out the books, she asked, “Bernard, do you live here?”

“Huh? You mean here...like in the library?...No, you mean Elmdale, right? Uh, where do you mean? I was born here in the states...Is that what you mean?”

Layla laughed. “You’re very funny...”

“Isn’t he? Just wait until he learns English,” Grandpa Jones joked, much to Bernard’s chagrin. “My grandson is staying with us this summer.”

“Oh, that’s great! How do you like Elmdale so far?”

“It’s—it’s—it’s really gorgeous...” Bernard replied while dreamily gazing at her.

Layla blushed as she checked out the last book. “Nice meeting you, Bernard. I hope I’ll see you again.”

“You too...Uh, I mean me too...Yes, it was nice...You will.”

“Bye, Layla.” Grandpa Jones began to walk out the door, until he noticed Bernard was still glued to the circulation desk while a line of people formed behind him.

Grandpa Jones looped his arm through Bernard’s. “Son, don’t you think we ought to give some other people a chance to check out their books?”

“Good-bye, Bernard.” Layla giggled.

“Uh-huh...bye...” Bernard sputtered as Grandpa Jones ushered him away.

“She’s a pretty girl, isn’t she?”

“She’s all right,” Bernard replied nonchalantly as he covertly wiped his sweaty palms against his shirt.



The rest of that evening, Bernard reflected on his bumbling demeanor with Layla at the library. It really bothered him that he didn’t come off cool and laidback around her. She’s just a girl. There are lots of nice-looking girls around! She was no big deal, he told himself!

The next morning he was still trying to convince himself Layla was “no big deal” as he waited anxiously for the library doors to open. After security unlocked the doors, he immediately charged to the book stacks nearest the circulation desk. He quickly pulled a book from the shelf and peeped between the shelves to see if he could catch a glimpse of Layla. He was hugely disappointed to see another girl working at the desk.

Someone tapped his shoulder, and Bernard almost shot through the books like a cannonball.

“Bernard, right?”

He spun around faster than the Looney Tunes Tasmanian Devil. The prettiest brown eyes he’d ever seen greeted him.

“Hi,” Layla said with a big smile as she pushed a book cart. “I’m sorry; did I scare you?”

“Who? Scare me? Oh no, I’m cool.”

“You finished all those books already?”

“No. I was just checking out what other books the library has.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Layla snatched the book before Bernard could stop her.

“Hmm...so you’re interested in *How to Decorate a Cake*?”

A flush of embarrassment whipped through Bernard, but he managed to regroup. “Why not? I might want to decorate a cake for your birthday one day.”

Now Layla blushed. She began playing with her hair. “Oh, that’s soooooo *sweet*!”

Her innocent play on words made them burst into laughter. They also got shushed by a couple of library patrons.

“Oh, I better get back to work.” Layla grabbed a couple of books off the cart and placed them in order on the bookshelf.

An awkward silence ensued until Layla whispered, “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Y-you are?” Bernard tried to act indifferent, but he knew it wasn’t working.

“Yes, Bernard...I like talking to you.”

“I like talking to you too.”

“If you’d like, we can talk some more on my break. That is, if you’re still around in an hour.”

“Um, yeah...I’ll probably be here.”

“Great, then I’ll see you later,” she said, flipping her pony-tail and sashaying down the aisle pushing her cart.

Bernard smiled and watched her. Even if she’d said *ten* hours, he knew he’d still be there.



Bernard and Layla were sitting on a bench in front of the library and animatedly discussing their favorite movies when Layla suddenly groaned. “Oh, great...”

“What’s wrong?” Bernard asked, surprised by this sudden change in her demeanor.

“You’ll see.” Layla sighed and rolled her eyes.

Three guys their age swaggered up to them. They wore Oakdale High sports jackets, caps, and all the current basketball sportswear ranging from the most expensive shoes to T-shirts and sweatpants.

“There’s my baby! What’s up, Layla! You been waiting for me?” The lanky guy who asked the question stood about six feet five inches with attitude to match. The vain expression on his face clearly indicated he viewed himself as a ladies’ man.

Layla blatantly ignored him and refocused her attention on Bernard. “So what were we talking about?”

“Yeah, what *were* we talking about?” the tall one interrupted as he obnoxiously plopped down in the tiny space between Layla and Bernard.

“That’s right, Big Al, you’re the man!” hooted one of his buddies.

“No, he’s rude,” Layla retorted. “No one asked you to sit down!”

“Uh-uh, you got it wrong, babe... The dude next to me is *no one*. Hey, No One, thanks for watching my honey for me.”

Big Al turned his back on Bernard and slipped an arm around Layla.

Layla shoved his arm away. “I’m not your honey and his name is Bernard.”

“Oh, forgive me,” Big Al replied sarcastically. “Does Burr-nard work with you? I swear I hear some library books calling for him. Wait... Listen...”

Big Al cupped his hand over his ear. “Hey, dork—I mean, Burr-nard—we need you to come to the library pronto... so Al and Layla can have some private time together.”

His buddies cracked up as Big Al reattempted to slide his arm around Layla. Once again she slapped it away.

“No, we don’t work together. Bernard is my friend.”

Big Al still refused to look at him. “OK, Burr-nard. Maybe you’ve heard of me, and if you haven’t, you should have. I’m Allen Banks. That’s my boy Stephen ‘Smiley’ Drake.”

Smiley grinned, except his smile looked more like a snarl. And his crooked teeth made him look like a reject from a Dracula movie.

“The big dude is my homey Matthew McQuire. We call him ‘Biscuit.’”

Bernard didn't say a word and clenched his jaw and stared at the ground.

"You know why we call him Biscuit? It's because you can see by that three-hundred-pound model's figure he *loves* to eat. He's that way on the basketball court too. If you don't feed him the ball...man...he gets downright maaaaad! And like the Hulk, you don't want to be near him when he gets angry!"

"Yeah. And you know what, dawg? I'm kinda hungry right now. What you got in that bag, short stuff?"

It was more of a demand than a question. Biscuit lumbered menacingly toward Bernard's backpack.

"Don't *touch* my bag!"

Something in the ominous timbre of Bernard's voice coupled with the granite stare made Biscuit stop dead in his tracks and actually step back. Big Al turned and acknowledged Bernard for the first time. Even Layla was stunned but seemed to marvel at the resolute tone in Bernard's voice.

Big Al raised his hands in mock surrender. "My bad, Burrnard. We didn't mean to mess with your bag. I had no idea you were such a sensitive fella."

Biscuit pointed at the backpack. "Hey, Big Al, I think I see a basketball poking out of dude's bag."

"Whaaaaat? Are you serious?" Big Al adjusted his cap and jumped up from the bench. "Yep, I see a basketball too. Well now, fellas...this discussion has taken on a whole new life."

Layla pleaded, "Leave him alone, Al, and just go. He's not bothering you guys."

“Oh no, Layla. This is getting good.”

Big Al paced back and forth like a prosecuting attorney. “So what do you know about basketball, Mr. Burr-nard?”

“Enough to hurt your feelings,” Bernard responded icily, his eyes locked on Al’s.

Big Al tried to laugh it off.

“My, my... Look at ol’ Burr-nard jumping bad. You know, I ain’t ever seen you around here. Where you from, Burr-nard?”

Bernard let the question dangle in the air for a few seconds. “Right now I’m living in Elmdale.”

“Elmdale?” Smiley snorted. “That explains the funky smell in the air. I thought a sewer backed up.”

“It’s the same way you’ll be backing up if you ever get the nerve to face me one-on-one on a basketball court.”

Smiley’s snaggle-toothed grin disappeared as he balled his fist and made a move toward Bernard. “Hey, chump, we can go at it right now...”

Big Al held him back. “Uh-uh, Smiley. I like trash talk. Tell you what, Burr-nard, we’ll be defending our championship basketball title at the Elmdale Summer Jam soon. Since Elmdale ain’t had a team in years, I’d like to invite you to play some horse with us during our warm-ups before the game. And, if you’re *real* nice and bring your ball, we’ll generously autograph it for you after our game.”

They howled so loud with laughter that they almost didn’t hear Bernard fire back. “You may not be in the mood once we beat you.”

Big Al wiped away the tears of laughter as his eyes narrowed. “What did you just say? Are you telling us Elmdale is going to be in the tournament and led by miniyou?”

Bernard stared blankly at him.

Big Al clapped his hands and then rubbed them together. “Man, I can’t wait! We’ll be looking for you and the Elmduds. What’s your last name, Burr-nard?”

“Jones.”

“Jones? You’re not related to Maurice Jones, are you?” Biscuit inquired, still holding his belly and snickering.

“He’s my cousin.”

Biscuit’s eyes deadened and he stopped laughing. “Do me a favor. Tell Mo I said hello.”

Big Al patted Biscuit on the back. “Come on, y’all. Let’s take this party elsewhere.” He doffed his cap and blew Layla a kiss. “See you, girl of my dreams.”

They strutted down the street, cackles of laughter trailing behind them.

“What idiots! I’m really sorry, Bernard.”

“No biggie.”

Layla affectionately rubbed his shoulder. Ordinarily Bernard would have melted at her touch, but the only thing on his mind right now was doing battle with Oakdale.



CAN I PLAY?

YOU KEEP SHUFFLING that food around and sooner or later it might actually end up on your fork,” Grandpa Jones quipped at the dinner table that evening while Bernard lackadaisically picked at his food.

“Bernard, your mother makes an outstanding macaroni and cheese!”

“Thank you, Lena. It’s the least I could do after all the cooking you’ve done since we’ve been here. Maurice, would you like some more?” Faith asked.

“Yes, thank you!” Maurice held his plate out as Faith served the pasta.

“You’d think after a third helping he’d slow down...but not him...This boy eats faster the more servings he gets!” Grandpa Jones chuckled.

“Oh, leave him alone, Charles; he’s a growing boy. I just wonder what happened to my son. Macaroni and cheese is Bernard’s favorite dish. You’d think I cooked veggie burgers!”

She waited for a reaction but got nothing. Bernard was deep in thought as he picked the skin off his chicken.

Faith sat beside him. "OK, what's on your mind? *Bernard?*" She tapped him on the forehead.

"I'm just not really hungry tonight." Bernard pushed his plate aside.

"You don't want the rest?" Maurice asked.

"Uh-uh. It's all yours."

Maurice grabbed Bernard's plate and loaded the leftovers onto his.

"No, Bernard...I'm not going for that. Talk to me!"

Bernard paused. "I want to play in the Elmdale Summer Jam!"

Maurice stopped chewing and laid down his fork.

Grandpa Jones looked overjoyed. "You do?"

"Yes. I want to get a team together and help win the championship for Elmdale!"

Lena touched her husband's arm. "I think he's serious, Charles!"

"No doubt," Faith assured her as she got up and cleared everyone's plates.

"Bernard, I'm all for it, but you've only got a couple of weeks before the tournament starts. This is no easy task. It's going to take a lot of work."

"I can do it, Grandpa."

"I believe you. And I'll help in whatever way I can. In fact, I'll handle all the paperwork and fees...But how are you

going to pull a team together in such a short span of time? Nobody wants to play for Elmdale anymore.”

“Must be some players left in Elmdale, Grandpa. How about you, Maurice?”

“I don’t know, cousin...I’m all about football. The season’s gonna start in a couple of months.”

“I understand,” Bernard said, not hiding his disappointment. “Oh yeah...I forgot to mention, some guy named Biscuit told me to tell you hello.”

A wry grin crossed Maurice’s lips. “A walrus-looking dude? You saw him today? Did he have a couple of attachments named Smiley and Big Al with him?”

“Yep. That’s them.”

“Count me in.”

Bernard’s face lit up. “Thanks, Maurice! See Grandpa? That makes two!”

“Good deal, but you’ve got to have at least six—five starters and one sub.”

“We can do it!”

“You never asked *me* if you could do it, Bernard...”

Faith’s voice sounded far away. Her back was to them while she busily rinsed the dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher.

Bernard hugged her waist. “Mom, please...this means a lot to me.”

Seeing the look in Bernard’s eyes, Faith’s chest heaved and

she said, "OK. I'm good with it, but you're still going to have to ask your father. Let's call him."

Bernard glanced at his grandfather, whose expression wasn't exactly reassuring.



Bernard couldn't stop fidgeting. He sat on the living room couch, holding a cell phone to his ear while he waited impatiently for his father to say something. His mother sat across from him, flipping through magazines and pretending to read.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Bernard. I'm still here."

"Can I play... please?"

Once again an ungodly silence fell.

"Mom said it was OK," Bernard tried.

"Fine, but you're asking *me* now. And to tell you the truth, I don't like it."

"Why?"

"You don't need to play in any stupid tournament. Aren't you trying out for the high school basketball team in the fall? What if you get hurt?"

"That can happen anytime or anywhere I play."

"I don't know... I've got more on my mind than basketball right now. I need to think about it."

"But, Dad..."

“You heard me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me say hello to your mother. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

Bernard dismally handed the phone to Faith, who smiled sympathetically. He trudged into his grandfather’s study and closed the door behind him. Bernard slumped down in his grandfather’s lounge chair and sat for a long time in darkness. He assumed his father was not going to let him play. He banged his fist on the chair’s arm. *Why should I have to pay the price for what happened to my father twenty years ago!* he thought.

Eventually he turned on the lamp next to the chair and searched around for something to read. Reading always made him feel better.

Later that evening the door of the study creaked opened.

“You OK?” Grandpa Jones asked compassionately as he peeped in.

Bernard beckoned him excitedly. “Grandpa, come here! I want to ask you something!” Bernard sat engrossed in the paperwork spread out across the table. Grandpa Jones scooted next to him. “Grandpa, my father did this?”

Grandpa Jones smiled when he recognized the documents. “Ah, you found your daddy’s business plan for ‘A New and Improved Elmdale Park.’”

Bernard held up the drawings he withdrew from the folder.

“These designs show a state-of-the-art basketball court,

baseball diamond, tennis court, soccer field, skate park, concert theater, learning center, wildlife zoo... this would transform Elmdale Park into something amazing!”

“That was your father’s intention when he developed the project six years ago.”

“So what happened?”

“Victor Franco.”

Bernard grimaced. “Not him again.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Your dad made a fabulous presentation to the city council in a private session outlining his business and marketing plan, but the council refused to approve it—or rather, Victor Franco refused to approve it.”

“But why couldn’t they see how great this plan is?”

Grandpa Jones angrily drummed his fingers on the table. “Bernard, you have to understand... Franco has used his wealth for years to buy friends and get people to cater to him. Most of the council members are afraid to go up against Mr. Franco.”

“I’m not afraid of Victor Franco.”

“Neither was your father. Franco offered your father zillions of dollars under the table, but your father wouldn’t take it, which did not make Franco happy. Walter knew it would be akin to signing a contract with the devil. Your father lives for a much higher incentive—integrity. That’s why Franco shot down every plan your father conceived.”

“But Dad’s plans will help the community!”

“Franco doesn’t want to *help* the community, he wants to

control it. That's why your father left, so he could find success elsewhere."

Bernard grimaced while he paged through the business folder.



The next day Maurice had just washed his car and was drying it when Bernard ambled by him on his way inside without saying a word.

"Hey, man, I was just about to come and get you."

Bernard waved him off. "Not now, Maurice."

Maurice jogged over to him. "What's wrong? You look like someone just died."

"While I was playing basketball at the park, G5000 started malfunctioning. He's all messed up!" Bernard cried, hands shaking as he withdrew it from his backpack. "Listen to this." Bernard flicked the power switch.

"Good-bye, good-bye, Bernard Jones, shoot...Hello, I'm G5000...free throw, miss, ballgame, score, good-bye, warning, Jones Bernard..."

"See!"

"Oh, man, that's pretty bad," Maurice empathized.

"It'll cost me a fortune to get it fixed. Plus, I have to send it back to Japan!"

"Don't sweat it, cousin. If it's a computer problem, I know a guy who can fix it!"

Bernard got excited. "Really? You think so?"

"I know so. Julius is our neighborhood genius. This dude is great with computers and techno gadgets. I call him the Wizard of Elmdale. I'll take it to him right now."

"Let me go with you."

"No. I planned to pick you up from the park because there's a surprise waiting for you inside."

When Bernard walked inside the house, he was shocked to see his father, luggage next to him, in the living room chatting with the family. He wasn't supposed to arrive in Elmdale until tomorrow. Bernard flung his backpack down and rushed to his father as he stood up and gave him a prolonged hug. Ordinarily the two would just shake hands, but this time it felt different.

Walter was taken aback. "Hey, kid, you act like I've been gone for a year."

"I missed you, Dad," Bernard said, still holding him.

"I missed you too, son."

Bernard grabbed his dad's luggage. "Here, I'll take your bags to your room!"

"Thanks. Wow, you're being so nice...I hope you don't think it's going to influence my decision," Walter half-joked, and Faith socked him in the shoulder. "Ow," he cried. "What did I say?"

Bernard didn't say anything, but his feelings were hurt. He wasn't being nice to his father for that reason. It was

because he had learned so much about him from his grandfather and was proud and appreciative of what his dad had accomplished.



That evening during supper, Bernard finally understood what the phrase “there’s an elephant in the room” meant. The family talked about Walter’s work, politics, sports, social issues, TV shows, family gossip, everything...but they all avoided discussing anything related to the Elmdale Summer Jam. And Bernard was not about to broach the subject after seeing his father’s tired, red eyes. His father often worked ten to twelve hours a day. Experience taught Bernard to let his father rest before broaching sensitive issues.

So it surprised him when his father brought up the subject while the four guys hung out in Grandpa’s study after dinner. Grandpa Jones put Miles Davis’s classic jazz album *Kind of Blue* on the turntable and kicked back in his armchair. “Man, it doesn’t get better than this...spending time with Miles Davis and my boys!”

“No it doesn’t, Pops,” Walter agreed as he put his hands behind his head.

“Papa Jones, after this can we put on some hip-hop?” Maurice, who was sitting on the floor, was prepared for Grandpa’s response as he mimicked him shaking his head and mouthing “no” to Bernard, who tried to suppress a giggle.

Grandpa vigorously shook his head. “No!”

Walter clasped his hand to his chin as he rocked back and forth in Grandpa’s antique rocking chair. “OK, Bernard, let’s talk... Why in the world do you want to play in this tournament so doggone bad?”

“You might also want to ask him about that pretty girl at the library... She might have a little to do with it,” Grandpa joked and winked at Walter.

“Yeah, Uncle Walter. She’s super hot!” Maurice pretended to strike a match.

“Uh-huh. Now I’m beginning to see the picture.”

Bernard turned red. “No, that’s not it... well, not totally...” Bernard waited until they stopped their good-natured teasing.

“Dad, those dudes at Oakdale think they are invincible, like nobody can beat them.”

“Maybe it’s true.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Me either, Uncle Walter. And if we don’t win the game, I guarantee you we’ll win the fight!” Maurice flexed his pecs.

“You know I don’t stand for that kind of talk, boy!” Grandpa Jones said sternly.

“I’m just kidding, Papa.”

Walter rocked harder in the chair. “Maurice might be kidding, but what he said’s not far from the truth. What I’m afraid of is that once they see how good you play, Bernard,

those boys won't hesitate to try to hurt you. I'm sure Franco is still out there breeding thugs."

"You got that right," Grandpa lamented.

Bernard folded his hands. "Dad, I promise...I'll be real careful. I won't get hurt."

"You can't promise that."

"He can while I'm there watching his back, Uncle Walter!" Maurice earnestly intoned, pounding his chest over his heart.

This time Grandpa didn't chastise him.

"And what about when you're not there, Maurice?"

Maurice's eyes darted around. No comment.

"Dad, Elmdale hasn't won a championship since you stopped playing because of your injury. Don't you think it's time to bring back a winning tradition?"

Walter's eyes rifled over to Grandpa, who suddenly found a spot on the ceiling to study. "Seems like *somebody* has been doing a whole lot of talking lately—"

"I don't remember anybody telling me I shouldn't," Grandpa countered.

"Dad, can I?" Bernard beseeched him.

"I'm sorry, Bernard. I'm still wrestling with this. Let me sleep on it. I'll give you an answer tomorrow."

"OK." Bernard wanted to say more, but he knew not to push it.



THE TOWN HALL MEETING

I DON'T KNOW HOW you convinced me to come here this morning," Walter murmured. "I don't need to be a part of this!"

Walter was clearly agitated and repeatedly squeezed his palms together while scrutinizing the crowd in the auditorium. Bernard sat between his father and grandfather and fiddled with the backpack on his lap. He watched in fascination as people filed in.

"Yes you do, Walter. You grew up in that park just like I did, and they want to take our landmark away from us. It's not right!"

"I agree, but why did you drag Bernard here?"

"I wanted to come, Dad."

"Yeah, it's his park too! He needs to know what's going on."

"OK, whatever, but I don't know how long I can sit through this."

“You do what you have to, son. OK, here we go.”

Tapping sounds hushed the antsy crowd as Victor Franco walked in with his cane followed by members of the Elmdale City Council. They seated themselves at a table on the stage. Seemingly oblivious to the scattered boos and catcalls filling the air, Franco smiled grandly and waved at the audience of townsfolk.

“OK, that’s it for me...I’m done,” Walter huffed and rose from his seat.

Grandpa Jones reached over and grabbed the sleeve of Walter’s sport coat. “Son, just a little longer...then we’ll all leave together. OK?” he implored.

Walter sighed heavily and sat back down. He removed his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose.

Bernard patted his knee. “Don’t worry, Dad. It’s gonna be all right.”

Walter smiled as he adjusted his glasses, only to then frown when he replaced them and viewed the wretched face of Victor Franco speaking magnanimously into the microphone.

“Hello, good citizens of Elmdale! We are quite pleased to welcome you to our town hall meeting. And as always, any suggestions, comments, or feedback you’d like to contribute to our discussions are greatly appreciated. Of course, the contributions we enjoy best are of the ‘moneyed’ kind,” he jested and glanced at the council members, who smiled despite the low grumbles from the crowd.

“Nonetheless, one of the reasons for our meeting is to keep you folks in the loop about the fate of Elmdale Park.”

“You mean *noose*, don’t you?” Grandpa Jones shouted, initiating laughter from the crowd.

Franco’s brow slightly furrowed as he scanned the audience. “Anyway, we’ve finally got closure on this issue. With your approval, of course, by the end of the summer we’ll finally rid ourselves of that eyesore of a park. Plus, the City of Elmdale will be paid a lot of revenue to turn it into a landfill.”

“Sounds more to me like you plan on filling *your* pockets!” Grandpa Jones put in.

A few “Amen” shouts hit the air.

Franco spotted his heckler. “I should have known...our favorite community gatekeeper—Mr. Charles Jones.”

“At your service!” Grandpa stood and bowed amid the fanfare of the crowd.

“OK, you’ve had your fun, Mr. Jones, but I want everyone to take this matter seriously. We’ve done our research, and landfills provide a service to the community. The property can be used for recycling and waste alternatives, and to store trash.”

“Oh, I get it now...so you’re planning to move into Elmdale Park!”

Franco ignored the whooping and hollering in the crowd.

“As I was saying, a landfill can also be used to create energy from methane gas. I think that puts it to better use than a worthless ghost town of a park.”

“I think the only one who spooked everyone out of the park is you, Mr. Franco. You managed a long time ago to turn a splendid park into an unofficial dump by firing park employees and providing no upkeep in service!”

“Does anyone else have an opinion on the matter other than Mr. Jones?” Franco asked, dismissively slapping his hands together.

“I do.”

Franco’s left eye squinted nefariously when he saw Walter Jones stand up.

“It seems you left out a couple of things, Victor. According to *my* research, landfills can sometimes pollute the air and groundwater, and attract pests and animals. And building a landfill can be a very time-consuming and expensive endeavor.”

A sea of rumbling swept through the hall.

Franco twirled his moustache. “We thank you for your opinion, Walter. And please say hello to your lovely wife when you return home from your *visit* to Elmdale.”

“Just saying,” Walter remarked as he took a seat.

“As I mentioned earlier, we appreciate your comments and I do encourage a healthy debate! Mr. Jones brought up some relevant points but with the proper regulation, we will be able to address those concerns. I still think constructing a landfill is the best usage for all that park acreage. So if no one else has a better idea, I—”

“My father had a much better idea that you killed!”

“Who said that?” Franco angrily queried, pulling himself up by his cane and frantically surveying the room.

“I did, Mr. Franco,” Bernard loudly responded, digging in his backpack and then withdrawing a thick folder.

Walter recognized the folder immediately. “No, Bernard, don’t. It’s over...”

Bernard looked his father squarely in the eyes. “No it’s not, Dad!”

He got up and determinedly marched down the aisle.

Walter rose to stop him until Grandpa grabbed his arm. “Leave him be, Walter.”

“But, Dad, he’s going to embarrass himself.”

“No, I don’t think so. Let’s be patient. If he needs rescuing, we’ll be there.”

Walter took a deep breath, clasped his hands and leaned forward.

Franco leaned on his cane and yelled, “What’s going on here? Who is this kid?”

One of the stagehands handed Bernard a microphone as he strode up the stairs to the stage.

“My name is Bernard Jones and that’s my dad, Walter, and my grandfather, Charles.”

“Good gracious. Are there any more of you Joneses here?” Franco moaned. “Listen, kid, you have no authority here. You can’t just come up on stage. You need to go back and sit with your dad.”

“Hey, let the kid speak his piece!” someone yelled.

“Yeah! What are you so afraid of, Franco?” someone else screamed.

“See what I’m talking about, Walter?” Grandpa grinned. “You, unfortunately, met with Franco and his associates alone. Bernard has a whole audience of listeners.”

“I see, Pops . . . and I’m loving it!”

Franco appeared flummoxed as he watched the townspeople rise to their feet, yelling and stomping for him to allow Bernard to speak.

Aware that the clamor was speeding toward a fever pitch, Franco put his arm around Bernard and grinned so broadly it looked like his teeth might break. “Son, you’ve got the floor, but please make it quick so us adults can resume our business.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll try to finish before the bell rings for recess.”

People laughed, and Franco pretended to as well, but under his breath he spouted, “Like father, like son.”

“And grandfather!” Bernard smilingly added.

“Hurry up and say what you got to say, kid!” Franco grumbled.

“Well, this whole thing started because I wanted to put together a team to enter the Elmdale Summer Jam basketball tournament—”

Someone shrieked, “Yay! Beat Oakdale!”

The room echoed with shouts of approval.

Franco’s ridiculous smile remained plastered on his face.

“I was looking for a sheet of paper to write some potential

team members on when I stumbled across a folder containing plans my father drew up six years ago. He wanted to turn Elmdale Park into this really cool state-of-the-art indoor/outdoor recreation park with world-class sand volleyball courts, tennis courts, a baseball diamond, a soccer field, a supersplash water park, basketball courts, a playground, an outdoor theater... all kinds of things!”

A woman cradling a baby slowly rose. “My older kids would love to play in a park like that. And when my little one gets older, he will too! I don’t understand; why wasn’t this plan accepted?”

“Mr. Franco and the city council turned my father down for no good reason!”

Boos coursed through the assembly.

A man in a business suit leaped to his feet. “What? No one said a word to us about this!” He turned to a few other members of the crowd. “Did you know about this, Fred? What about you, Stewart? How about you, Lucille? You?” Everyone he questioned shook his or her head no.

Meanwhile, panicked eye contact was exchanged between city council members as the crowd grew more incensed.

Someone angrily shouted, “How come no one mentioned this option to us, Victor?”

Franco wiggled his hands as he attempted to settle down the crowd. “Are you people kidding me? This is just a kid here... you know how much they can exaggerate!”

“Don’t take my word,” Bernard calmly said. “You are all

welcome to look at my father's designs and see for yourselves. I'll leave them on the table. I can make copies too, or you can just talk to my father. I'm sure he'll answer any questions you might have."

"We're waiting for an answer from you, Victor," another person yelled.

Franco looked at the city council members, but they all stared straight ahead.

"Look, folks..." he uttered in his most appealing voice. "The reason I didn't bring it up was because of the tremendous expenses it would entail."

"Sure, but if you look at the plan, my dad projected how the park would greatly profit from all the children, families, and visitors flocking to it. And it would create jobs and give us kids a great outlet for working, playing, and learning all year long."

Franco obviously thought he had flipped off his mic before he leaned over to whisper to a council member. Instead, the entire crowd heard him on the loudspeakers. "This stupid kid is really starting to get on my nerves. He's worse than his father!"

The entire hall quieted.

Realizing his faux pas, Franco tried to amend it. "Just a joke, folks. You know how much I love kids...do you really think I'd mean something like that?"

"You're the joke, Franco!"

An audience member asked from across the room, “Is what your son’s saying true, Walter?”

Smiling, Walter crossed his legs and coolly sat back in his chair. “Absolutely.”

This produced more audience uproar. “What are you going to do about it, Franco?” a man shouted.

Victor Franco seemed bewildered until suddenly a devious expression emerged on his face. “Hey, kid, so you plan to enter a team in Elmdale’s basketball tournament?”

Bernard’s eyes drifted to his father who mouthed “yes” and raised his hand signaling a made three-point shot.

Bernard felt like he had grown six inches taller. “Yes, sir!”

Franco faced the audience. “For the record, our treasury does not have the funds to implement Mr. Jones’s state-of-the-art park venture—”

He was interrupted by a chorus of boos.

“Please, let me finish. However, if Elmdale Park wins the basketball tournament, which is highly unlikely...” he announced smugly. “You have my word that I will fund the entire construction of the project with my own money.”

Franco followed this statement by shaking Bernard’s hand. While the crowd roared its approval, Franco leaned into Bernard and whispered, “Don’t get too excited. Not only will that park still be turned into a landfill, my Oakdale team is going to dump all over you!”

Franco patted him on the head and then walked away.

A beaming Walter strolled over to Bernard and gave him

a prolonged hug and a kiss on his forehead. "I'm so proud of you, son, and touched by what you did up there."

Bernard gazed up at him. "Swish, are you just being nice to me because I might win the championship?"

Walter laughed heartily as townspeople came over to shake their hands and shower them with congratulations and good-luck wishes.

Grandpa Jones noticed that Victor Franco and city council member and Oakdale coach, Gill Rutherford, retired to a corner of the auditorium. They were engaged in a very intense conversation. It wasn't the first time he'd seen that disdainful look in Franco's eyes. He recalled a similar expression about twenty years ago.



Later that same night, Elmdale was hit with one of the worst thunderstorms of the summer season. Bernard gazed out the window as he watched a spectacular display of lightning followed by torrents of rain. Ordinarily he would have loved Mother Nature's fireworks show, but all he could think about was whether it would be dry enough the next day for their first basketball practice.



BUILDING A TEAM

S TRAINS OF ENCHANTING classical music flowed from inside the house as Maurice rang the doorbell.

“You seem pretty pumped about this dude. Is he really good?” Bernard asked excitedly. Maurice had driven them to pick up Eric for the first Elmdale team practice.

“Oh, man, he’s one of the best DJs in town! Eric knows his music!”

“That’s great, but can he play ball?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? We’ve got one week to get it together!”

“I’ve never played with him before. But I’ve got a feeling you’ll be happy.”

“Happy about what? You don’t know if—”

From inside, a woman with a strong German accent yelled, “The door’s open. Come in!”

They stepped inside and were greeted by intense classical music. They peeked into the living room and saw a man

playing the cello and a woman on violin. She glanced up from studying the sheet music on her stand. “He’s down in the basement!”

“OK. Thanks, Mrs. Karolis! Hi, Mr. Karolis!”

Mr. Karolis raised his bow and then resumed energetically playing his cello.

Maurice relayed to Bernard, “Eric’s parents are from Lithuania and they are phenomenal classical musicians. I’m surprised to see them. They’re rarely in town; usually they’re traveling around the world with the orchestra.”

“That’s cool, but I still want to know why I would be happy about Eric?”

When they stepped down into the basement, they were assaulted by hip-hop music blaring from gigantic speakers. The room was cluttered with dozens of open cartons filled to the top with comic books, CDs, albums, cassettes, and DVDs. The walls were plastered with posters of comic book superheroes, musicians, and avant-garde artwork. What particularly captured Bernard’s attention was a life-size poster of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar launching his famous sky-hook.

Maurice surveyed the room and then yelled, “Eric?”

“Hey, what’s up?” Bernard heard a voice but didn’t see anything until, from under a tabletop loaded with a half dozen turntables, came forth a head-bobbing figure wearing headphones. As he stood up, it seemed like he kept rising higher and higher, much to Bernard’s joy and amazement. He

stopped at about two inches shorter than the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar poster.

“You must be Maurice’s cousin. What’s up, bro?”

“You’re what’s up!” Bernard shook his hand. “How tall are you?”

“About seven feet, but Mother swears I’ve got more growing to do.”

Bernard made eye contact with Maurice. “Cousin, I’m happy.”

Maurice’s grin was more mischievous than the Cheshire Cat’s.

Bernard grinned too, as he suddenly envisioned them traveling in a convertible, waving at cheering crowds and hoisting the Elmdale basketball championship trophy while confetti rained down on them.

Eric turned over a couple of boxes. “You guys have a seat. I want to get your opinion on some new music I mixed.”

“Actually, bro, we need to get going. Alex just texted me. He’s at the park waiting on us. And we’ve still got to pick up Julius.”

Eric shifted uncomfortably. “I kind of wanted to talk to you, Mo... I don’t know if I’m going to have time to do all this practicing and games and stuff.”

“Say what?” Bernard gasped. “You can’t do this. We—Elmdale—needs you!”

“I know, but I really need to focus on my music and line

up some gigs. My dream is to start my own record label and become a music producer someday.”

“Hey man, you’re only going to have to pause the music for about a week and a half,” Bernard cajoled him.

“Yeah, but that’s still gonna be lost time.”

Maurice scowled. “Hey, man, this ain’t right, you promised me you’d—”

Bernard interrupted him. “Hold on, Maurice . . . Eric is just thinking like a businessman.”

“Yes, I’m a businessman,” Eric echoed.

“So let’s appeal to his business sense. Eric, if we win, Elmdale Park will be built with state-of-the-art facilities. And we will make sure you’re set up as the resident DJ and sound guy for all the parties and events. Now remember, thousands of people will swarm to the park weekly and guess whose music they’ll be listening to?”

“Mine?”

“Bam!”

“Then I’ll do it!”

“Aye! We’re in business!” Bernard whooped.

Maurice hurriedly jingled his car keys. “Good! Now let’s go!”

Before Eric climbed into the car, he asked, “Can I do a hip-hop version of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at the start of the tournament play? I’ve always wanted to—”

“We’ll work it out later. C’mon!” Maurice pushed him into the car.

Eric sat scrunched in the backseat of Maurice's Pontiac. "Mo, you sure you want Julius to play with us?"

Maurice peered into his rearview mirror at Eric. "We don't have many choices, Eric. I know Julius is...different...but I've played with him. He can shoot the rock."

"Yeah, but he's...weird."

"Wait...isn't this the guy who's supposed to be fixing my ball? Exactly how weird is Julius?" Bernard asked.

"Extremely," Eric replied.

"Aw, come on, Eric...I think his weirdness is more genius than anything. No one knows computers better than Julius. My boy's a techno wiz and is always working on new stuff. You watch. One day he'll own a huge tech company."

"Maybe...but he's still a weird dude."



Maurice, Bernard, and Eric trekked down a narrow path alongside Julius's expansive home to a guesthouse sitting directly behind it.

Maurice knocked on the door. "Julius is so brilliant, his folks let him use one of the guesthouses as a lab for all his experiments."

"That's because they don't want his Royal Weirdness in the house!" Eric insisted.

The boys heard Julius yell, "I'm coming!" But it was followed by an odd-sounding voice screaming, "No, Doc! Don't

go out outside by yourself. There could be hoodlums out there! Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!”

“Shut up! They can hear you!”

“I don’t care! If you leave, I’ll call nine-one-one. Hey, nine-one-one, we’ve got an emergency! Doctor Julius is about to go outside and be attacked by stupidity! Can you bring a dictionary over here as soon as possible so he can be saved? Oh no...it’s too late...*help!*”

Julius ran out the door and then slammed it shut, followed by a loud bang that sounded like something had been thrown at the door. He planted his back firmly against it and then wiped his brow. “Whew.” He exhaled. “Hi, guys!”

They just stared at him. Finally Maurice said, “What’s going on in there?”

“Nothing. Just some crazy radio program I turned on.”

“Hi, Julius. I’m Bernard. Did you fix my ball yet?”

“Oh...hi, Bernard...um, yeah, I’m almost finished...I just need a little more time to tweak it,” Julius replied uncomfortably and flinched when there was another loud bang at the door. “So, we should get out of here...Isn’t Alex waiting on us, Mo?”

“Yeah. Come on!”

Eric whispered to Bernard, “See what I mean? Dude is weird.”

As they headed to the car, Bernard could have sworn he

heard a voice from the guesthouse yell, “Let me out of here! Bernard, is that you out there? Bernard?”



When they arrived at the court, Alex was executing skateboard tricks from one end of the court to the other. A couple of times he popped the skateboard and launched himself acrobatically to the rim and then slam dunked the ball.

Meanwhile Julius, who was talking to himself, proceeded to walk to specific spots on the court with a tape measure in hand.

“What’s he doing?” Bernard queried.

“I’ve seen him do this before. He’s pinpointing and measuring the spots he likes to shoot from,” Maurice informed him.

Julius wet his finger and held it up as he moved to various locations on the court.

Bernard looked at Maurice.

“He’s checking the wind speed,” Maurice remarked.

“*Weird*,” Eric clamored as he changed the playlist on his iPod, adjusted his headphones, and dribbled onto the court.

Weird or not, Bernard discovered that Julius was a deadeye spot-up shooter on the court. When Bernard passed him the ball, Julius rarely missed a shot from his previously marked spots, whether it be from behind the three-point line or free throw.

When he did miss, he complained as he ran beside Bernard down court. In his proper English countryside meets Elmdale speaking style, Julius said, “I miscalculated the steady breeze we were receiving and didn’t prepare for the gust that just occurred. I’ll have to work on that as long as we play outdoors.”

What Julius *really* needed to work on, Bernard noted, was taking the ball to the hoop. Spontaneity was not Julius’s best friend. He wasn’t good at creating his own shot. He was also too literal. Bernard found that out when Julius abruptly disappeared from practice.

“Where’s Julius?” Alex asked Bernard.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s in the men’s room.”

“For twenty minutes?” Maurice chimed in. “You were the last one who talked to him. What did you say?”

“We talked basketball. I asked him where he’d like me to pass him the ball—”

“Oh no...” Alex groaned.

“Big mistake.”

Bernard was confused. “What did I do?”

He got his answer as Julius, carrying sheets of paper, ran back from Maurice’s car. “Here you go, Bernard. And thank you for asking. Since you’re our point guard, I realize it is your job to make sure everyone gets the ball in their favorite spot.” He handed the papers to Bernard. “I hope you can read them okay.”

Bernard couldn’t read them at all. The designs and

sketches looked like hieroglyphics. What Bernard did figure out, though, was that these were all the designated spots Julius wanted to receive the ball.

Bernard summed up their first practice as a major success. Eric showcased an excellent jump hook and occasionally a sky-hook like his idol Abdul-Jabbar. Alex was an exciting and acrobatic scorer, as well as a tenacious defender. And Maurice, as he anticipated, was a beast on the boards, scooping every rebound like it was a piece of candy.

With only a few days left to practice, Bernard was confident they would be ready for tournament play. Even if they failed to find one or two more team members, he felt they were in good enough condition to beat Oakdale. They were committed to that goal and practiced long and hard. The biggest problem was that they had only enough players to do two-on-two or three-on-two drills with each other. They needed a scrimmage against a team with five players to assess how good they really were.



OAKDALE'S VISIT

WITH THREE REMAINING days to practice, Grandpa Jones secured the gym key from one of the park directors Franco had laid off. The guys were ecstatic to finally be able to play inside in the gym. However, this made Julius discom-bobulated. He had to reconfigure the best spots for his shots.

Everybody was thrilled when Layla, lugging a huge picnic basket, showed up during practice.

“Hey, guys, I thought after all your hard work you might be a little hungry. I brought you some sandwiches, chips, juice, and water.”

They gave her a big hurrah as they jogged over to her.

“Maybe you’d like some *dessert* too!” The words reverberated throughout the room as five of the Oakdale players cockily strutted into their gym.

“Hey, Layla. Did you bring something for me . . . a kiss?” Big Al puckered his lips and held his arms outstretched.

Layla ignored him, but Maurice didn’t.

“What are y’all doing here?”

“Relax, big boy. We just wanted to revisit the site of our last championship!”

“Your tour is officially over,” Maurice notified them as they all met at half-court.

“I can make him relax,” Biscuit growled as he got up close to Maurice’s face.

Maurice bumped chests with him. “We can get busy right now, Biscuit-head! And you’ll lose today just like you lost your linebacker spot to me, Second Stringer!”

Big Al stepped between them. “Wait. Hold on, fellas. I’m sure we can resolve this in a more peaceful manner.”

“We’re listening,” Bernard said, bouncing the ball hard.

“Let’s have a preliminary game. If we win, we’ll partake in that spectacular lunch the beautiful Layla brought you.” Big Al winked at her.

Smiley licked his lips. “Yeah!”

“And what if we win?”

“Hope is such a precious thing, Burr-nard.” Big Al sighed in his smarmiest tone. He yanked out a wad of bills from his pocket. “You *won’t* win, but in an ideal world anything is possible, so I’ll give you money to splurge on pizzas tonight.”

Bernard flipped the basketball to Big Al. “Play ball.”

The game was scored by ones with the three-point shot counting as two. The winner would need twenty-one. Elmdale surprised them by jumping out to a twelve to two lead. Right off the bat, Alex stole a pass that was instantly converted into a basket. Bernard was an unknown entity to them and

they were not prepared for his speed. He penetrated at will and they had no guard that could keep up with him. Bernard dished the ball out to Julius in his favorite spots and he was on fire, sinking every shot. Eric also contributed with several hooks.

Big Al angrily pulled his team aside and barked, "We spotted them enough points. Are y'all ready to play?" He pointed at Julius and then yelled at a guy named Knuckles. "You're making him look like a freaking all-star! He can *only* hit set shots; make him move around! And Biscuit, stop wasting your time banging with Mo and switch to Eric; push his skinny behind off the block. And y'all know to feed the Big Dawg! Give me the ball and I'll take you *home!*"

And that's exactly what they did next. They got the ball to Big Al, who made an assortment of spectacular baskets ranging from bank shots to twenty-footers to triple-reverse slam dunks. Initially Elmdale's intensity flustered them, but once they settled down, Bernard saw why they were the reigning champs. Their defensive adjustment worked to perfection. They forced Julius away from his favorite spots and he shot several air balls, which led to easy baskets for Oakdale.

Biscuit bullied Eric and kept him from camping out in his comfort zone near the basket. At times they ran a full-court press, flustering Elmdale and leading to multiple turnovers. The only one who could truly handle the ball was Bernard. Consequently, they double-teamed Bernard and made it difficult for him to get off good shots and passes. Oakdale gained

momentum and they began clowning Elmdale until the game mercifully ended: Oakdale twenty-one, Elmdale thirteen.

Big Al crowed, “Thanks for everything, Elmduds! Let’s do lunch again!”

The Oakdale players danced around the gym while cradling the sandwiches and drinks in their arms.

“Hey, Mo, I left you a couple of crumbs on the floor... You better hurry up and get them before the birds do.” Biscuit cackled.

Maurice had to be restrained by the team.

Big Al yelled, “Burr-nard, I do have to give you props. You got skills, baby. We may have a surprise for you *if* you get to the finals. Ta-ta, boyzzzz!”

The team sat on the floor next to an empty picnic basket lying on its side. Head down, Bernard hugged his knees to his chest and rocked back and forth. He had no choice but to listen to the gales of laughter outside the gym. He also heard the continuous bounce of a basketball coupled with the continuous swishing of the net.

“That’s eight out of ten, Miss Layla,” Julius noted. Bernard glanced up and observed Layla draining shot after shot from beyond the arc when Julius passed her the ball.

“We could have used her earlier,” Alex muttered in astonishment.

Bernard walked over to her. “Why didn’t you tell me you could play?”

"You never asked. I'm the top scorer, not only on my high school girl's basketball team, but in the league."

Having said that, she drilled five consecutive baskets from the corner.

"Yes, I'd love to play with you guys...thanks for the invitation!"

"You're welcome." Bernard, as flabbergasted as his teammates, replied softly.

Later the team held a serious meeting in the middle of the gym floor. Maurice repeatedly smacked his fist into his palm. "I'm not going down like this...that was humiliating! We *have* to beat all the other teams so we can play Oakdale again in the finals!"

"Maybe they won't make it to the finals," Eric inferred, bobbing to the music from his headphones. "Great teams have been upset before."

Maurice shot him a look. "Get real, Eric. I guarantee you they'll be there."

Bernard looked distressed. "*We* need to be there, but if we're gonna beat Oakdale, we desperately need someone to coach us. Anybody know someone?"

"Bernard, what about your father or grandfather?" Layla suggested.

"My Dad had to leave town again and won't be back until the tournament starts. My grandmother won't let Grandpa coach because he gets himself too worked up!"

"That's for sure," Maurice seconded.

Julius cleared his throat. "I might know someone."

"You do?" Eric asked suspiciously.

"Yes...he's a little unorthodox...but he knows basketball."

"Well what are you waiting for? Ask him. We've only got two days left. See if he'll come tomorrow!" Bernard said encouragingly.

"Oh, don't worry, he'll come," Julius said, eyeing Bernard strangely.



MEET THE COACH

THE NEXT DAY the team waited for Julius to arrive with the new coach. Finally Julius shuffled into the gym, alone, carrying a duffel bag.

“No luck, huh?” Bernard said disappointedly. “It’s all right... at least you tried. I mean, it was last minute and you can’t expect any good coach to—”

“He’s here.”

Bernard got excited. “You mean he’s on his way in?”

“No... not exactly.” Julius unzipped his bag. “He’s here.”

Out of the bag bounced Bernard’s high-tech G5000 basketball that Julius had worked on. But this was not the same ball. Bernard’s jaw dropped. He was stupefied, like everyone else, to see the computer-driven basketball bouncing euphorically of its own free will as if it were alive! Not only that, but shockingly, G5000’s facial expressions appeared more humanly natural and subtle than ever before. When Bernard heard G5000’s voice, he was doubly blown away. There was nothing mechanical about it, and G5000 was no longer an

analytical speaking automaton. His speech and articulation was just like a regular person's—particularly one who *loves* to talk.

“Whoo-hoo! I feel good! This is what I live for—to drop my pearls of wisdom and coach a team to greatness! However, somebody needs to do some major renovations on this floor; that’s all right, we’ll deal with one problem at a time. It’s not the kind of arena I’m used to, but I’ll adjust once I get warmed up.”

The ball bounced into Bernard’s hands.

“Bernard Jones, what’s up, bro? How do you like me now?”

“G-G-G5000, is this really you?”

“In the leather, baby! How have you been? I sure missed you! Why didn’t you come and visit me while Doctor J nursed me back to health? I was going crazy in his lab! There’s so much we need to talk about...”

Bernard felt crazy, and faint, as he gaped at his talking ball.

“But we can catch up on everything later, partner. Right now it’s time to get down to some serious business! Doc informed me about what’s going on. And I’m all for it. People need to realize, there is no better basketball coach or consultant than the actual ball. But I’m more than a coach... I’m a specialist.

“Before I was turned into some robotic zombie, I played in hundreds of college games, NCAA finals, you name it! I’ve led fast breaks, played half-court ball, slow-down games, been

slam-dunked countless times, launched from half- and full-court, kicked, swatted, and even kissed. I have the ultimate floor experience and witnessed every angle on the court. No human can boast that! I'd go on, but it's time for me to get these players ready for the tournament."

G5000 bounced out of Bernard's hands and dribbled back and forth.

"So what college team am I working with? Duke? Kansas? UCLA? Kentucky? North Carolina? Florida? Huh?"

Julius scratched his head. "I think there's been a huge misunderstanding, G5000. We really need you to coach us for the upcoming Elmdale Summer Jam basketball tournament!"

G5000's eyes ballooned. "Bernard, is he kidding me? Please say it isn't so!" His eyes zigzagged back and forth. "Have you lost your mind? You want me to waste all my years of experience on this group?"

He rolled his eyes and they kept on rolling until they circled around the circumference of the ball. He continued. "How much time do I have?"

"We only have two days of practice left," Bernard replied.

"No, no. Bernard, I'm about to bounce up out of here! You guys need a team of doctors and nurses to get better. Do I look like Mother Teresa? I'm not a miracle-worker."

"Now that's just being mean, G5000," Julius scolded.

"Give me time to roll the idea around in my head first."

And with that, G5000 bounced right back inside the duffel bag.

No one uttered a word as they gawked at the bag.

Finally Eric said, “W-What did I just witness?”

“Genius,” Maurice murmured.

Perplexed, Bernard faced Julius. He didn’t know whether to thank him or punch him. Finally he said, “This is your idea of a coach? A talking basketball? *My* talking basketball! How . . . what did you do to it?”

Eric looked at Bernard and Maurice. “See! What have I been telling you guys?”

Julius embarrassedly glanced at Bernard. “I didn’t do anything. I mean, I fixed him—perfectly. Mo told me how special this basketball was to you, so I couldn’t wait to show you the results of my work. I was really proud of myself until . . .”

“Until what?”

“The bad weather.”

“Huh?”

“Remember that crazy storm the other night with all the lightning?”

A mystified Bernard nodded as he stared at the duffel bag.

“I had G5000 hooked up to a recharging device, and in the middle of the night, lightning struck my home’s transformer, creating a major power surge. Suddenly G5000 started blinking his eyes and he came alive! He started bouncing around and spouting words faster than the speed of light. I grabbed the remote and tried to switch off his power, but it was useless. Every time I flicked the switch off or on, he laughed and begged me to stop because it tickled.”

“He’s a basketball, Julius!” Eric yelled.

“Yes he is, Eric, and a sensitive one at that. But I’m telling you, he knows the game like no one else! The problem with him is that he wants to achieve basketball glory again by being on the court. I told him he may be healed, but it’s a younger ball’s game. I tried to convince him that the best way for him to reclaim his basketball glory is by coaching us!”

Alex clapped his hands to his head. “Man, this is crazy!”

Maurice gaped at Julius. “You created him just like Frankenstein did his monster.”

“Julius-stein,” Alex quipped.

Julius extended his hand to Bernard. “Dude, I’m sorry... I...”

Bernard clasped Julius’s hand. “No need to apologize, man. I really appreciate you fixing G5000. Everything else that happened is fated. It’s just going to take some getting used to.”

“Well, you guys may be cool with each other,” Layla remarked, “but we still don’t have a coach. And it doesn’t look like G5000 wants to be it.”

“Yes, I do,” G5000 replied softly as he slowly rolled out of the bag. “I was wrong for bouncing to a conclusion. I know how good Bernard is, and you guys look like you might have some potential too. And I could especially roll with that pretty girl.” He winked, causing Layla to blush. “But

seriously, sometimes you've got to play with the hand you've been dealt. As Nike once said, 'Just do it!'

Julius clapped. "Great! So the rest of you should introduce yourselves."

Eric mumbled, "I feel kind of stupid talking to a ball."

"Good, because it matches your looks," G5000 fired back.

Everyone laughed, including Eric.

"OK, let's get started. Play ball!" G5000 bounced onto the court and waited for them to join him as he dribbled steadily in place.

It didn't take long for them to realize how great of a coach G5000 was. He barked out instructions, installed new schemes and plays, and had them execute offensive and defensive drills. He was particularly effective in critiquing their ball handling and shooting skills. Now they clearly understood what Julius meant when he remarked that G had a unique view of the game due to his experience on the court.

"I've got better hands than that!" G5000 fussed at Julius when he missed another pass after cutting to the basket. "You've got to be ready for that pass on a pick-and-roll because they're going to be expecting you to take a set shot!"

He improved Bernard and Layla's passing skills and cross-over dribble by allowing them to use him as the basketball while he tutored them during the drills.

He spun around in anger on the floor when he noticed Maurice lazily pulling down rebounds. "Are those muscles just for show, Hercules? Don't just grab the ball, pose, and

think you're done. If you get an offensive rebound, put it right back in! Stay hungry!"

G5000 also grew disgusted watching Eric shoot brick after brick on his free throws. "Focus on the rim, Eric," he emphasized, dribbling beside him. "Visualize the ball going in."

"I just can't get it right." Eric stomped his foot and threw the basketball at the backboard in frustration.

"Get a grip, man!"

"I'm trying, Coach!"

"No, I mean get a grip on *me*." G5000 surprised him by bouncing into his hands. "OK, position your hands on me. Spread your fingers wider... That's right. Try not to get them in my eyes... never mind... I'll close my eyes. Now take a breath, aim me toward the center part of the rim, slightly bend your knees, and shoot me when you're ready. Don't forget to follow through and put a little backspin on it.

"*Wheeee!*" G5000 shouted as he flew through the air. He landed to the right of the rim. He intentionally teetered there on the edge for Eric to see. "You recognize how you keep shooting to the right? That's what we're going to work on." He then leaned to the left so he could drop into the basket.

Eric's free throws improved dramatically from about 30 percent to 70 percent with G5000's help. During one of the drills, Eric stood beside Julius. "Hey, man, I'm sorry about calling you weird all the time. Maurice is right—you really are a genius. Coach G is fantastic!"

"No worries. I've been called weird my entire life. I took

it as a compliment.” Both Julius and Eric laughed as they clapped each other on the back.

At the end of practice, G5000 rolled into Bernard’s backpack, which was lying on the floor. He yawned. “Let’s go home, bro. I’m exhausted.”

Bernard hoisted the backpack onto his shoulders. “You’re exhausted? You’re a computer! I’ll be the one tired out from all the explaining I’m gonna have to do about you to my family.”

G’s eyes blinked tiredly. “Don’t worry. After I get some rest, I’ll do all the talking.”

“That’s the one thing I’m not worried about.” Bernard chuckled.

THE BIG SURPRISE

THE HUMILIATING DEFEAT of two days ago and the intense practices the team underwent with G5000 brought them closer together. Despite the lack of time to prepare for the tournament, they truly believed they were ready to compete. Coach G's mantra was: "Teamwork, execution, and heart is what you'll need to win!"

And great uniforms!

Faith surprised them at the end of the last day of practice when she and Grandpa Jones carried a large box to the middle of the court.

"What's in the box, Mom?" Bernard asked as the team crowded around them.

"You'll find out in a minute, Mr. Nosey! Hello, Coach G5000!"

"Hi, Faith!"

Grandpa Jones amusedly watched G5000 dribble himself around the box. He raised his hand and G5000 bounced off

his palm. Since G5000 couldn't shake hands, he dished out high-fives in his own special way.

"Can we win it all, Coach G?" Grandpa Jones asked.

"Can a dolphin swim?"

"That's what I'm talking about!" Grandpa laughed as Coach G bounced off his palm again.

Faith kneeled down and reached into the box. "OK, Coach? Is practice over?"

"You're good to go, Faith!"

Faith opened the box and everyone screamed in delight. Inside were the most spectacular uniforms they had ever seen!

"I hope you like them. It took me a long time to piece and sew the designs together."

Layla held up her uniform against her body. "I love it, Faith. These are better than my high school's basketball uniforms!"

"They're beautiful, Mom. Thanks." Bernard kissed her on the cheek. He loved seeing his name on the back of his jersey.

G5000 quietly rolled backward so the team could get to their uniforms.

"Where are you going, Coach G? We didn't forget about you." Faith pulled out a large cap with "Coach G5000" written across the front and placed it on top of his head.

G5000 was speechless as the team applauded.

"Ordinarily, I can't shut him up." Bernard laughed.

"Thank you so much..." Coach G said, his voice cracking.

The loud tapping of a cane on the hardwood floor caused everyone to turn. G5000 closed his eyes and mouth in order to look like a normal basketball, and his screen shut off.

“What do we have here? A celebration?” Victor Franco inquired as he strolled in with his assistant, the roly-poly Coach Rutherford.

“It will be when you leave,” Grandpa Jones pointedly remarked.

“Ha-ha, the ever delightful Charles Jones. I am curious though, who let you in?”

“We let ourselves in. This is the Elmdale Community Gym, supposedly open to the public. We should be allowed to practice here anytime we want.”

“Of course, Mr. Jones! No one would begrudge you that right! In fact, I’m glad you’re all assembled here. You will be the first to hear our announcement about tomorrow night’s tournament play.”

“Oh no...has it been canceled?” Bernard asked nervously.

“No, nothing like that!” Franco answered, thumping his cane to the floor. “Although, I must admit, I’m surprised you sound so anxious to play, Master Bernard, considering it’s rumored that a debacle occurred here on these very floors the other day.”

Bernard and the entire team rifled him a hard stare.

“Nonetheless, you all know Gill Rutherford, who will be coaching Oakdale’s squad tomorrow night. He can provide more information on the change of events. Gill?”

“Yeah,” Rutherford said uneasily. “All the teams have canceled their participation in this year’s event. It looks like the only game scheduled will be between Oakdale and Elmdale.”

“Unless you wish to cancel your participation too,” Franco pompously interjected.

Grandpa Jones folded his arms tightly. “Just keep your wallet handy, Franco,”

“This is not good,” G5000, his eyes shut tight, muttered from behind Bernard. “We needed those early games to develop our chemistry before facing Oakdale. This is not good...not good at all.”

Bernard turned and held his forefinger to his lips. “Shhhhhh!”

“Why would six teams pull out of the tournament at the last minute like that?” Faith asked, folding the new uniforms.

“Maybe because they heard about our last minute addition.”

Grandpa Jones frowned. “What last minute addition?”

“I’m so glad you asked. Tell him it’s OK to come in now, Gill.”

As if he’d been poked by a cattle prod, Gill rapidly waddled to the gym door.

Moments later a kid sauntered into the gym sporting the slickest and fanciest red-and-white warm-up outfit Bernard had ever seen. He acted like he walked on water with his expensive prime-time basketball shoes. He was hugged up to his cell phone and deeply engaged in conversation. An entourage of about fifteen people followed him. He barely raised

his eyes when Franco, displaying a cocksure smile, introduced him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is our latest addition to the team. I want you to meet Dale Winkleschmitz!”

G5000’s eyes burst open. “Uh-oh.”

Bernard tugged on Maurice’s arm. “*The Dale Winkleschmitz?*”

“Yep.” Maurice sighed. “*The best high school point guard in the state. Big Al didn’t lie when he told you they had a surprise for you.*”

“And this is his father, Coach Winkleschmitz.” Dale’s father didn’t acknowledge anyone as he stomped around with a hard expression on his face, examining the gym’s hardwood floor as if it was a minefield.

Meanwhile, G5000 was hyperventilating. “I need air.”

Bernard picked him up and whispered, “You want to go outside?”

“No, nut-bucket, just get that air pump out of the bag. I’m feeling deflated.”

Franco sidled next to Bernard. “Any thoughts about what kind of landfills you and your buddies would like to play in, Master Jones?”

Bernard bit his lip. “It’s not over yet, Mr. Franco.”

“Yes, it is, Bernard. I have one last move at my disposal.”

Irritated, Bernard stood rigidly with his hands on his hips as he watched Franco walk away. The tapping of Franco’s cane matched the pounding of his heart.



IT'S GAME TIME!

ON THE NIGHT of the big game, Elmdale's gym was packed to standing room only. The energy in the air crackled and people could barely hear themselves speak with all the noise in the room. It was more than just a game; the future of Elmdale Park and all its history was at stake.

The Elmdale Warriors were treated to the greatest fire-and-brimstone, head-bouncing, body-dribbling, basketball-spinning locker room speech that they had ever heard. G5000 was so charged up that he again got deflated and had to be pumped full of air before they rushed out of the locker room, inspired to do battle.

The Elmdale Warriors were so pumped up after G's fiery rant that they didn't even pay attention to Dale Winkleschmitz, who conducted interviews with the local news reporters as they ran by.

Bernard concentrated solely on what he needed to do in the game. He focused on the concepts of *teamwork*, *execution*, and *heart*. In his head he was in his backyard preparing to

play against the pros again. He didn't fear the Big Als or Winkleschmitzes of the world because he envisioned himself as an unbeatable NBA star.

That's why it was so disheartening when the refs pulled him away from the pregame warm-up drills and met with him beside Coach G. Grandpa Jones suspected foul play and came out of the stands with Faith.

"This is absolutely the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" G5000 raged as Alex held him up to the refs. And it wasn't easy for Alex to contain him because he was spinning angrily on Alex's finger like a Harlem Globetrotter's basketball.

"What's going on?" Grandpa Jones demanded.

One of the officials looked kind of dizzy from watching Coach G. "Like we told your coach, we were informed by an anonymous party that Bernard shouldn't be allowed to play due to a new rule that states that the tournament is for players born in Elmdale or living within a one-hundred-mile radius of the town. And without his birth certificate to prove that he was born here, he will have to sit out this championship game unless you can come up with it. I'm so sorry."

Grandpa Jones seethed. "This is preposterous! Why weren't we told about this weeks ago? I've never heard of this in all the years the tournament existed."

"I don't know. We were told you were given notice. Again, we apologize."

"Oh, somebody is gonna be sorry," Grandpa Jones

threatened, scowling at the smirking Victor Franco, who sat entrenched behind the Oakdale bench.

“Charles, calm down. You know how your heart is.” Faith jerked out her cell phone. “I’ll try to reach Walter before he gets on that plane.”

“It’s not fair, Mom! It’s just not fair!”

“I know, honey. Keep the faith... somehow, you’re going to play.”

Bernard, eyes watering, trudged toward his bench. Big Al stepped in front of him. “Did you bring your lunch, Burrnard? I’m gonna be real hungry after the game!”

Bernard pushed him away. “Leave me alone, Al! Why don’t you go bug your boss and ask him why he’s not going to let me play until I show my birth certificate? He knows it’s too late for me to get it now! I guess you guys really need to win that bad!”

“Uh-uh, man, it ain’t like that...”

Bernard didn’t care to hear his explanations and he kept walking.

Big Al seemed truly stunned. Victor Franco raised his arms victoriously to him. Big Al did not return the gesture. Instead he jogged over to a woman in the stands.

Bernard could only pray that by halftime his father would arrive with his birth certificate and Bernard could rejoin the team.

In the meantime, the game was about to begin and the team was rapidly falling into a depression. Bernard knew

that in order to be a true leader, he needed to support and root for his teammates even though it killed him to sit on the bench and not play.

In the huddle prior to tip-off, Bernard said to the team, “I know you guys are as furious about this as I am, but remember that Victor Frankenstein over there is banking on you to fall apart. Don’t give him that. Be angry, be mad, remember what they did to us, and go in there and play ball. Maurice, I need you to come up with superpowers tonight, and Eric, I need you to be Kareem for one night! C’mon, guys, let’s do this!”

When the horn for the start of the game blared, they joined hands and yelled “Warriors!” They ran onto the court, ready to play.



Layla was now the starting point guard for the team. Just like in the game prior, the element of surprise initially worked in Elmdale’s favor. Oakdale was not familiar with Layla and backed off of her until she ripped off nine points from the three-point area, keeping them even with Oakdale for the first few minutes of the game. She wasn’t as quick as Bernard, nor did she have the ability or strength to penetrate against the Oakdale players, but she held her own for a while with her myriad of skills.

Once Oakdale assessed her limitations, Dale went to work

on her, beating her with his speed and strength. He controlled the game, feeding the big guys and splashing the outside jumper when they backed away from him. Maurice did the best he could, pounding the boards and collecting eleven first-half rebounds, but there weren't many more to grab as Oakdale wore Elmdale down physically and mentally, and scored at will. They shut down Julius and Eric. Oakdale was too experienced, and once they increased their lead to twenty-five points, the clowning began.

"Is that the best you can do, skateboarder?" Dale taunted Alex as he dribbled the ball skillfully through his legs and behind his back. Dale intentionally showed him the ball on a dribble. Alex angrily took the bait, diving for the ball and getting nothing but hardwood in his face. Dale hurdled over him and scored on a resounding dunk. The halftime horn blew and Elmdale stumbled to their bench, disoriented, heads down, the Oakdale players in their ears, and a thirty-point deficit.

THE WARRIOR DANCE

IT DIDN'T GET any better when Bernard caught sight of his father's downcast expression when he entered the gym. Coach Rutherford, Victor Franco, and the Oakdale team had just returned to the court from the locker room. Walter tramped up to his old rival, Coach Rutherford, and confronted him nose to nose.

"You would think after all these years you might have learned how to win with some class, but I see you haven't changed." Walter's eyes shot to Franco and then back to Rutherford. "When all is said and done, you're still a classless flunky."

Rutherford was no fool; he stepped aside hoping Walter would maintain his cool, particularly when he saw the look brewing in his eyes.

After much consideration, Walter chose to walk away.

Franco weakly yelled behind him, "Don't go away mad...just go away!"

Walter didn't care about Franco's idiocy, he was more

concerned about his son. "I'm sorry, Bernard...I was already on the plane when your mother called about your birth certificate. There was nothing I could do."

Bernard's jaw tightened as he tried to quell the tears welling up in his eyes.

"Son, now do you understand why I didn't want you to be in this tournament in the first place? You're dealing with scum who don't know the meaning of integrity."

A woman wearing an Oakdale shirt approached them.

"Excuse me, are you Bernard Jones?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"This is for you." She handed Bernard a folder. He opened it and almost tumbled backward. It contained a copy of his birth certificate!

His teammates leaped around him ecstatically!

"Thankyouso much! ButIdon'tunderstand...who...why...?"

"I work in the Elmdale County Clerk's Office. I happen to have a key, and someone asked me to do him a big favor. Let's leave it at that."

Bernard joyfully shook her hand. "I don't know who you are, but thank you!"

Big Al ran up to them. "Hey, man, don't touch my mother!"

This time Bernard was the one who looked stunned.

Big Al escorted her away, stating loudly, "C'mon, Mama. It's dangerous up in here with those Elmduds!" Then, sporting a sly grin, he glanced back at Bernard. "What you waiting on,

Burr-nard? Let's do this! I want to *beat* you with your whole team!"

Bernard nodded appreciatively to him and mouthed, "Thank you."

Walter and Bernard briskly walked up to the official's table and slapped Bernard's birth certificate in front of them. Victor Franco's face contorted and he gagged like someone was choking him. He heard Walter state, "Gentlemen, I think this should clear up any confusion." Then Walter stared intently at him as he voiced loudly to Bernard, "Son, let's show them how we play ball in Elmdale!"

When Bernard joined the huddle, Alex said to the team, "Now that Bernard can play, let's do what we planned and show them what the Warriors are really all about."

The team gathered in a circle and enthusiastically jumped up and down like the Masai.

Faith and Grandpa and Grandma Jones couldn't believe their eyes! Walter had been invited to sit on the bench as an assistant coach, but instead of sitting in the stands dispassionately analyzing Bernard's game, he was out there enthusiastically jumping up and down with the kids.

When the horn sounded, the Elmdale Warriors ran onto the court, bursting with renewed energy and spirit. Even Coach G was revitalized, dribbling himself up and down the sideline exhorting his team to put on an unexpected full-court press.

"Remember what I taught you! Don't watch the ball, watch

his feet,” Coach G instructed Alex as Dale casually brought up the ball. This time when Alex dove for the ball, he poked it out of Dale’s hand and slapped it to Bernard, who streaked down the court for an easy layup.

Shortly thereafter, Maurice stole a cross-court pass attempt and bounded down court. Biscuit, practically salivating and muscles flexed, stood between Maurice and the basket. He tried to bang into Maurice with a hard foul, but instead got flattened as Maurice elevated for a rim-rattling slam dunk that rocked the backboard. It rocked the Elmdale crowd too! They rose to their feet, cheering wildly as Maurice made his free throw, resulting in a three-point play. The Elmdale crowd was back in the game and momentum seemed to be swinging Elmdale’s way.

Oakdale had gotten lazy and overconfident with their big lead. They paid the price as Elmdale’s press netted ten quick points due to hustle plays. The lead was cut down to twenty, and Oakdale called a time-out. During the break, Big Al clapped his hands and tried to motivate the team, warning them they could lose if they don’t get their heads back into the game.

Except one member of the team didn’t bother with the huddle. Dale stood about fifty feet away from his teammates and flirted with a girl in the stands. As Oakdale sauntered back onto the court, Big Al tried to relay to Dale what he told his teammates in the huddle. Dale waved him off. “Relax, bro. I’ve got this.”

“But you haven’t practiced with us so you don’t really know the plays.”

“I don’t need to know the plays. I just need to take control.”

“*We* need to take control,” Big Al corrected, but Dale wasn’t listening.

It turned into a real battle as the teams exchanged baskets. But when a group of Oakdale girls started chanting Dale’s name, it quickly turned into the Dale Winkleschmitz show. He began making hundred-dollar moves to woo the crowd, but ended up with zero-dollar finishes. Eric blocked two potentially easy layups because Dale decided to go show-time and razzle-dazzle the crowd. He launched thirty-foot misses resulting in long rebounds, which Bernard capitalized on with his blazing speed.

Bernard didn’t play in the entire first half so he had more energy than anybody on the court. He dogged Dale whenever he had the ball and forced him to work harder on defense when Bernard had the ball. Consequently, Oakdale’s lead dissipated to ten points, with the scoreboard reading eighty-seven to seventy-seven with six minutes left in the game.

Oakdale called another time-out. Big Al was more than furious and grabbed Dale by the arm as they ran off the court. “Look, dawg, you need to stick with the game plan and pass the ball around so everyone can get involved and get good shots.”

“I *am* the game plan, fool! Go home and read your sports page,” Dale snapped and wrestled his arm away.

Their bickering escalated, and they soon had to be separated by their teammates. But it didn't end there. Coach Winkleschmitz marched down from the stands and accused Coach Rutherford of not using his son properly in the game.

Walter and G5000, sitting in the crook of Walter's arm, smiled as they observed the splintered Oakdale huddle.

"Coach G, I believe the pressure is getting to the Bulldogs," Walter said.

"I believe you're right, Coach. Let me see what I can do to increase that rupture." Coach G shot himself out of Walter's arm and bounced to the sideline.

As Biscuit and Smiley walked onto the court, G5000 yelled, "Hey, Ref, who let the dogs out? Call nine-one-one! No, better yet, call Dr. Dolittle; he'll know what to do with them!"

Smiley said to Biscuit, "Is that stupid-looking ball talking about us?"

"Yeah, I'm talking about you. Have you had your rabies shot yet?" yelled Coach G, dribbling away at them.

Smiley scowled at G5000 as he inbound the other basketball. Likewise, Biscuit scowled at G5000 too, until the other ball bounced off his face and right into Alex's arms. Frustrated, Biscuit angrily slammed Alex to the floor. Order had to be restored as the benches cleared. The refs wound up penalizing Biscuit with unsportsmanlike conduct. The flagrant foul culminated in two successful free throws by Bernard. Elmdale was also awarded possession of the ball, although a technical was called on Coach G for name-calling.

Fortunately, Dale, distracted by a self-dribbling ball smiling at him, missed the free throw.

Then Layla, reentered the game and without hesitation, drilled a three-pointer. The scoreboard now read eighty-seven to eighty-two. Dale dribbled the ball up court and heard G5000 holler, “You probably dribble better than that when you’re asleep on your pillow!”

Dale tried to ignore Coach G and the crowd’s laughter. Big Al waved frantically at him to pass the ball. Dale looked past him. Biscuit pushed and shoved Maurice and fought for position to receive the ball. Dale looked past him. His goal was to create a shot for himself.

“Hey, superstar,” G5000 shouted. “They may call you the best point guard in the state, but you’re barely number two in Elmdale!”

“Dude, please,” he replied to G5000. “Get you some glasses!” He faked Bernard and juked to the hoop, but the thirty-five-second clock violation buzzer sounded before he could score. Big Al and Biscuit angrily threw up their hands.

Elmdale took out the ball. Smiley was mad because he had not gotten the ball and loped down court. He didn’t get to his man fast enough, and Julius, who had been scoring like a machine in the second half, canned a three-pointer. Oakdale, eighty-seven; Elmdale, eighty-five.

Oakdale was shocked to find the score so close with only a minute and a half to go. Dale penetrated and threw a behind-the-back pass to Big Al, who scored easily.

Elmdale failed to score on the next possession and Biscuit rebounded the ball. Dale tried to lob the ball to Big Al, but this time it was anticipated, and Eric stepped into it and stole the pass. He was fouled immediately. He stepped up to the free throw line, hearing G5000 in his head: *Get a grip, focus, and visualize it falling in.* He nailed both of the free throws.

The crowd went berserk.

With forty seconds left, Oakdale remained in control with an eighty-nine to eighty-seven lead. In the huddle, Dale acted like he was paying attention as Coach Rutherford instructed them to pass it around and kill as much time as possible on the clock before attempting a shot. But Dale was actually paying attention to his father, who gave him a fist up signal meaning “It’s *Dale* time!”

Oakdale took the ball out at half-court. As soon as Dale’s fans chanted, “Go, Daley! Go, Daley! Go, Daley!” he broke into the Dale dance while dribbling the ball. His Oakdale teammates were bewildered as they fought to gain position for a pass making excellent cuts. But at this point, it was all about Dale’s heroics as he looked at Bernard and started talking trash. Bernard was oblivious to Dale’s antics. He was as focused on making a great defensive play as he was when he played the NBA legends in his backyard. When Dale planted his foot, head faked, and made his patented move to the basket, he did so without the ball. Bernard stripped him and immediately called a time-out with fifteen seconds left.

Everyone in the gym stood nervously during the time-out. Victor Franco was so irate, he dropped his cane and didn't bother to pick it up as he limped over to the Oakdale huddle. Charles and Walter exchanged worried glances when they saw Franco whispering in Coach Rutherford's ear. Coach Rutherford immediately pulled Smiley aside and talked to him.

"I don't like this. They're up to no good..." Walter said anxiously to Coach G. "There's too much at stake. They're planning on doing something to Bernard!"

Coach G said, "Don't you worry about it. I'll handle it."

"What can you do?"

"Roll with me on this. Now hold me to your ear and I'll tell you."

Following the time-out, Layla dribbled the ball down court. Bernard was near the sideline preparing to receive a pass and take over. He was shadowed by Smiley, who wore a devious expression on his face. Just as he ran and prepared to lunge at Bernard's legs, he got tripped up by a fast rolling basketball on the court and crashed facedown on the hardwood.

"Watch out! Ball on the floor!" the ref yelled. "Where did this come from?" the ref pondered aloud as he picked up the ball.

"Here, Ref, give it to me. I'll take care of it," Walter offered from the sidelines.

The ref tossed him the ball. "Thanks, Coach!"

Walter let the basketball bounce so G5000 could smack his palm in a high five.

Coach G opened his eyes. “Now that’s what I call teamwork, Coach!”

“Yes, indeed, Coach G! Believe me it was hard for me to resist saying ‘Strike!’ when I bowled you out there! Thank you.”

They both grinned as they watched Big Al help Smiley to his feet.

“Man, what the heck were you trying to do?” Big Al screamed.

Smiley shrugged.

“Get over there and guard someone this time!”

Smiley hobbled over to his man.

The ref blew his whistle and play resumed with only twelve seconds remaining. Knuckles guarded Layla closely as she dribbled the ball and kept an eye on the clock.

Coach G screamed, “Watch out, Knucklehead! She’s got a killer crossover dribble! She might break your ankles!”

Knuckles waved him off.

And that’s when Layla did an unreal crossover dribble that sent Knuckles flying in another direction. A snarling Biscuit, hands raised high, met her at the basket. She faked the shot and passed it to Bernard, who calmly heaved a rainbow three-point shot (just like over the telephone wires) and the ball swished through the basket to win the game!

The crowd went ballistic as they madly dashed onto the court with balloons and confetti raining down from the ceiling. Bernard’s mom and grandparents danced in the stands.

Bernard and his dad embraced. His father proudly gazed at him. “Son, I thought I knew everything, but you taught me that you can never quit the good fight. I wanted you to concentrate on the big game, so I didn’t mention this to you, but after you showed off my blueprint and designs at that city council meeting, I was offered a new role as a City Planner for Elmdale. So your mom and I decided we’re moving back. That OK with you?”

Bernard thrust his fist up in the air and then hugged him again. “But what if Franco doesn’t live up to his promise?”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about Victor Franco.” His father pointed to the exit.

Apparently Franco tried to sneak out the back door, but those same council members who once supported him blocked the exit. One of them tapped the floor with his cane as they ushered him into one of the private gym offices and locked the door behind them.

“I think your friends are waiting on you!” Walter laughed as the team waved at Bernard to join them in the huddle.

Bernard ran to them and they all raised their hands together and shouted, “Elmdale!” The team celebrated with uncontrollable joy as Coach G5000 bounced happily around them!

The End

