

BASKETBALL GODS

by Richard A. Sanchez

My older brother had biceps and calf muscles like halved apples tucked under his skin, he had a great jump shot that required nothing of him other than a tiny hop and a flick of his wrists, and the gap between his two front teeth – the one that everyone in my family had, that you could wedge two nickels into and still have room – grew close enough together between fourth and fifth grade that when school started up again, none of the kids in his class remembered that they used to tease him about it. I followed him around (and did my best to walk and talk like him), but Danny always said that he wished he were more like me. I was a quick learner and had skipped kindergarten and second grade. At that rate, he said, I'd be done with school before him.

By the time I was eleven and my brother was fourteen, he had quit treating me like a little brother and more like a peer. If we did something knuckleheaded together and one of us got hurt or broke something, our mother would look at *me*, a full foot shorter than my brother, and ask if *I* had properly thought the situation through beforehand. That was around the time I began to forget what my father looked like. I had to look at pictures to remember the salt-and-pepper eyebrows and the creases that decorated his cheeks, proof that he did in fact smile from time to time, just not in photographs. I knew my father's chin by heart, the way his jaw was set; I only had to

look up at my brother to remember those. It didn't bother me most of the time that he was gone, but my brother had memories that I didn't, an air show during which he'd ridden our father's shoulders for a closer view of the jets overhead, an elaborate train set they'd assembled together over a period of months, complete with tiny, fake trees and a general store that the boxcars sped past and around.

Danny and I played basketball most days then, three or four hours after school and all day on weekends, when we stopped only for a quick lunch. In the summers, when we spent more time on the courts than at home, Mom cooked dinner like we shot hoops: according to the sun. The park was down the street from our house, and we knew that it wasn't time to wrap up the last game until you stood at the top of the key and your shadow spread beyond the free-throw line. This celestial method of timekeeping always got us home as dinner was being set on the table, and we were never late, which was important to Mom. On the short walks home, my brother and I would pass the ball back and forth, practicing various skills we hadn't yet mastered. As the sun sank behind the faraway buildings and the outlying foothills, we would alternate dribbling between our legs and firing behind-the-back passes to one another until we got to our driveway, and everything from our clothes to the concrete we walked on was blue in different shades, and our lips were the same dark gray as the ball.

I was pretty small, I remember, and the ten-cent opening between my upper incisors was still my most prominent feature, as it would be until I got braces in junior high. On the courts, prospective opponents looked at me with a mixture of skepticism and scorn, thinking I wouldn't be able to keep up. They didn't know that I'd been playing against my older brother for years by then, and that our one-on-one games were

beginning to get somewhat interesting before he beat me each time. Mostly we had the park to ourselves, so Danny and I would alternate one-on-one games with rounds of “Horse.” Every so often, a couple of guys would dribble up and challenge us for the court. Danny and I made a decent team; we held our own most of the time, anyway.

We played a pair of older guys once, after Danny assured them I wouldn’t be a hindrance to the game. They were probably twice my brother’s age, both with stubble-smudged cheeks and tube socks pulled up to the middle of their shins. We couldn’t have played tackle football against those guys, but a friendly game of blacktop basketball was not out of the question. They had played as a two-man team before – that much was apparent – and they were big, but they couldn’t shoot to save their lives. That didn’t matter, because Danny and I couldn’t get a single rebound against them. They could miss as many as five inside shots and still eventually score.

Both of them were sweaty and tired halfway through the first game. They played stiff under the basket, though, extended their hands fingers-spread as high as they could when we drove the ball in close where the easy baskets should have been. Danny challenged them head on, either losing the ball or throwing up what we called “prayers,” desperate, unorthodox shots that were often lucky just to get airborne. These most frequently bounced off the rim or missed it entirely. I didn’t get much of a chance to do anything, because my brother refused to pass to me. We took a water break after losing a few games, and Danny said he wanted to go home early.

“We’ll never beat them,” he said, hunched over, looking up at me with his hands on his knees, the posture he favored when engaged in a losing contest. If he was

winning, Danny never got tired. He never showed it at least. “They’re slow. I should be able to get around them.”

“We need to pass more,” I said. “One of us can draw our defender outside and break for the hoop.”

“Let’s just beat these guys,” Danny said.

I urged my brother to believe that we could win if we used our brains, but he wanted to beat them with his body, to inflict upon them some of the frustration he was feeling. We had plenty of opportunities to utilize my new game plan. Whenever Danny had the ball out past the three-point line, I run toward him, then spin around and dash for the basket. I got open under the basket quite a few times, but Danny each time, Danny chose to dribble straight at his defender, who’d plant his feet and stick his hands up like he’d done a hundred times that day, to block the prayers Danny eventually flung over his shoulder when there was nothing left for him to do.

The night Danny and I played one-on-one for the first time in a decade began not entirely unlike others we’d shared over the years since my we’d moved out on our own, taking our own apartments on opposite ends of town. We saw each other, but not often enough for either of us to escape a twinge of exacting guilt when we parted. It was hard not to recognize that we were now separate people living in different homes, when we used to be part of a family. I had been long asleep when my brother tapped on my bedroom window, but I knew before my eyes were open what was happening: Danny had a problem and had come to me, as was his custom when he needed someone to talk to. Didn’t call, didn’t think about what I might be doing, or what he might be interrupting

(even if it was, in this case, only sleep). He just showed up at my doorstep, in his faded Stuart High P.E. shirt and the Red Sox cap he wore whenever we shot pool or went to Mom's house together to move furniture or pull the weeds from her front yard.

"This time was...different," he said as we watched the smoke feather dance away from his lips toward the street in front of my cement doorsteps. Normally, when Danny came by unannounced, we'd go out for some beers or rent a movie, but that night he didn't want to do anything but sit outside and drink beer, speaking only as often as cars drove by or cans emptied. He sat on the bottom step, reclined on his elbows, looking at the dark sky. I sat two steps above him, staring at his old Mazda pickup across the street, with nothing to offer as condolence for the fact that his girlfriend wanted him to move out other than the remaining half of the six-pack at our feet and the fact that I was awake and dressed at three in the morning. He shook his head, and flicked the butt of his cigarette at the curb. "This time she means it."

Danny didn't say anything for a while, leaving me to wonder if his silence indicated surprise or resignation concerning his closing remark. He got up, removing his hat long enough to run his fingers through his short, wavy hair and rub his palms over the top of his head down to his forehead. I watched as he applied pressure to his eyes with the heels of his hands and exhaled a deep breath. He looked tired, but not sleep-deprived, as he slapped his hat back on with a 'How do you do, ma'am?' tip of his bill and a weak smile.

"I don't even smoke, Rob," he said, lighting another one.

His smile froze then, into something that wasn't a smile anymore, and it made me feel like shit all of a sudden. Sitting on my porch steps, looking up at him, I realized that

my older brother wasn't bigger than me anymore; we were nearly the same height and build. I'd chased after him my entire life, graduated high school with him, and college before him. After all the summer classes and equivalency exams, after even my body had joined the cause and continued to grow in the years after puberty, I realized that I had caught up to Danny in every way that was possible, and I wished I could be the little brother again. I didn't want to be the one to offer advice, or condolences, or reassurances in the middle of the night. I didn't want to play the smart one or the sensible one or the one with a head on his shoulders anymore, when I was just as unsure of everything as he was. I couldn't turn to Danny when I had a problem; our relationship did not allow for it. I had to maintain an appearance of stability for my brother, solidity, so he knew he could count on me when *he* was in need. These were roles we'd chosen long ago, there was nothing to be done about them anymore. Danny took a drink of his beer, so I took a drink of mine.

He had smoked for years, but quit when he began classes to become a certified emergency medical technician. That was six years ago, and the only times I'd seen him with cigarettes since then was his first two months riding shotgun in the ambulance, the week that he lived on my couch summer before last, between the time he and his girlfriend split up and reconciled, and that night on my porch, as we watched the sliver moon, thumb tacked to the middle of the sky, wondering how we'd gotten where we were.

"What am I going to do, man?" he asked me, not for the first time that night. I was tired of saying that I didn't know in my most sympathetic tones, tired of the way it made *me* feel, tired of the how it must have sounded to him, so I said nothing.

“We gotta do *something*,” he said. “I can’t just sit here.” He got up, brushing his hands on the back pockets of his jeans. He got up, so I got up.

“It’s late,” I said, as if it were something I found surprising and not at all bothersome. Danny fished his keys out, twirled them twice around his index finger and wrapped his fist around them.

“Let’s just drive, man,” he said, not asking, not leaving room for an objection.

Something you should know about my brother is that in the last year, he’s worked in an office supply store, a sporting goods store, and he waited tables for a few weeks at one of those restaurants where they make their employees wear Hawaiian shirts for no apparent reason. What I’m trying to say is, his first two months as a paramedic were his only two months as a paramedic. Danny told me that he’d beat a man’s chest for fifteen city blocks while his partner drove eighty miles an hour, and had to close the man’s mouth and eyes with his fingertips as they pulled into the parking lot. Most recently, he quit a job delivering and assembling futons and waterbeds after three days of employment because an opportunity to work at the local Boy’s and Girl’s Club became available, the same job he held during high school and the squandered years just after. I should’ve known as soon as we got in his truck where it would take us.

“Can you believe I’m back here?” he asked, as he unlocked an equipment closet in the corner of the large, rectangular basketball gym. From the closet, he pulled a metal rack that held five indoor/outdoor basketballs and a smaller red rubber dodge ball.

Something you should know about me is that I graduated college when I was nineteen, and shortly thereafter accepted a position bagging groceries at the store closest to my

home, where I've received three promotions in four years, and now open the bakery five mornings a week. I didn't know what to do when I was nineteen, and I didn't know what to do four years later, but I made my bills every month and that made one thing I didn't have to worry about. So I was a baker.

The gym was the same as it had always been. There was a full court and three hoops along each of court's long sides. When school let out each day, dozens of kids filed in and shot on all eight baskets, and the sound of dribbling basketballs and errant bank shots echoed so loudly within the gym that you didn't hear it anymore after a few minutes. Danny flicked me a ball, hard enough that it snapped in my hands when I caught it, stinging my fingertips. He removed another from the rack for himself and we shot around for a while before settling into a game of "Horse." I hadn't touched a basketball in years, and Danny beat me pretty handily. He was kindly deferent, admitting that he'd been playing in a men's night league for a month or so. He beat me a second time, but it was closer; I'd gotten the letters h, o and r before losing. I was beginning to find my rhythm, discovering what had stayed with me and what I could no longer do. It was four-thirty in the morning, and neither of us seemed tired. He challenged me to a game of one-on-one, and I just nodded my head.

One-on-one and "Horse" are a lot different in terms of strategy and game play. In "Horse," you can get lucky and sink a shot that your opponent finds difficult to repeat. More often, you can miss an easy one when it's your turn to match, for no reason other than the basketball gods looking the other way as you let go of the ball. One-on-one – for my brother and I – was simply two guys, a ball, a hoop, and a race to eleven. Winner gets the ball, and you have to win by two. That meant that you retained the ball after you

scored, and the game couldn't be won by a single point. You had to keep going until a definitive winner emerged. That night, in the gym where he worked shooting baskets with kids all day, on the court he hustled up and down Tuesday and Thursday evenings with the 21-and-over league, I was up on him 10-8 in less than half an hour, and it was my ball.

Danny and I hadn't changed as much as I thought since the last time we'd played basketball together; we were just older, not as optimistic as we had once been. Playing against him again was strange, as if I'd traveled through time surveying all the events of my life, and upon returning to where I belonged, the only confusing thing was that I was holding a basketball, synthetic leather sticking to my hot hands, as if something from the past had mistakenly come back with me. Once I got past the initial wave of competitive spirit that had come over me, I knew I wanted nothing in the world as much as I wanted my brother to score the points he needed to win while I sat and watched, so he could drive me home and I could sleep for a very long time.

I was fifteen and Danny was eighteen when we played the game of basketball that changed things between us. We had graduated together a week before, and while I had already been accepted to the nearest university, my brother had made plans to share an apartment with his girlfriend and another couple closer to the city. He'd had his things boxed up for weeks, but the lease wouldn't start for a few more days. He didn't have a particularly off day, nor I a particularly lucky one. On a humid afternoon in June, I was simply better than my older brother at basketball for the first time. It was real, it was permanent, and that was that. For the first time in our history of hundreds, if not

thousands of one-on-one games, I was going to beat him. Our lives were diverging. Who knew when we'd get a chance to play like this again? I could sense what was happening. So could Danny.

I dictated the pace of the game, frustrated Danny by repeatedly stealing the ball from him, and made shots from all areas of the court. No matter how well I played, Danny kept hanging around that day. For every perfect jumper I swished from twelve or fifteen feet, he managed to wriggle his way inside for a lay-up or a two-footer just over my outstretched fingers. My brother wasn't playing pretty; he just wanted the ball in the hoop, and he was doing what had to be done to make that happen, as much through will as anything else. We were tied at eleven, tied at thirteen. A light drizzle came and went. We didn't notice but for wiping our wet hair back on our heads so as not to interfere with the game. I almost beat him 20-18, but my shot rolled off the rim, and he scored to tie it again. We went on for hours that way, until we realized sunset had approached, making it a sudden death game. Mom was making a special dinner – meatloaf and mashed potatoes, Danny's favorite – for what would be one of our last nights together. One of us had to win before it was time to go home.

Fatigue hit us as the day's light began to fade. We began playing an even faster-paced, more physical game. Every shot took more out of us than the last. Every dribble fake, every time we raised our arms to defend, it felt like there was almost nothing left. There were fouls, called and uncalled. I was ahead by a point, about to end the game with a lay-up, when my brother hit me in midair, his forearm batting my wrist down as I went up with the ball. We crashed at the hips, the shoulders. I landed hard on my butt,

back and elbows, and saw through squinted eyes the difficulty Danny had landing without falling.

Bent at the waist, he sucked air as he looked up at me, hands on his knees. I walked slowly to retrieve the ball, which had rolled away until it was halted by the chain link fence that separated the court from the street. It was a blatant violation of the rules, what my brother had done, and it left no doubt that I was entitled to a foul shot. I approached the free-throw line with apprehension, dribbling only every second or third step. I looked Danny in the eyes, not sure what I saw. If it had been a normal game, I would have asked him why he had done that, told him to calm down and that, what the hell, it was just a game, right? But it wasn't a normal game; it wasn't even *just* a game anymore. So I didn't say anything.

We were both wet with sweat and rain, so that the two were unapologetically commingled in our clothes, our hair, our skin. My left shoulder ached dully, and my tailbone stung with every other step. I looked at Danny and wondered why I wanted to beat him so badly, wondered why he couldn't allow that to happen. I stood there at the line, not dribbling, not looking at the basket, not even breathing. I gripped the ball tight in both hands and looked down at my shadow.

"It's your shot, little brother," Danny said, using a name he'd never called me.

I looked closely at him then, the jaw line and chin just like our father's. I listened as he said nothing, noting the breadth of his shoulders, his arms, his legs, the way he stood. I could see everything about him that made him different from me, and all the things that made him my brother. I stood there at the free-throw line, ball in hand, looking at Danny and looking at myself, not doing anything but standing and being, and I

waited. I waited for the time when everything would become blue once more, the time when all games had to end, finished or not, when my brother's lips would darken in the absence of light that told us it was time for dinner.

END