

Vanilla Dunk

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Elwood Fossett and I were in a hotel room in Portland, after dropping a meaningless game to the Sony Trail Blazers--we'd already made the playoffs--when the lottery came on the television, the one where they gave away the Michael Jordan subroutines.

The lottery, ironically, was happening back in our home arena, the Garden, while we were on the road. It was an absurd spectacle, the place full of partisan fans rooting for their team's rookie to draw the Jordan skills, the rookies all sitting sheepishly with their families and agents, waiting. The press scurried around like wingless mosquitoes.

"Yo, Lassner, check it out," said Elwood, tapping the screen with his long black club of a finger. "We gonna get you and McFront some company."

He meant the white kid in the Gulf + Western Knicks jersey, stranded with his parents in that sea of black faces. Michael Front--"McFront" to the black players--and I were the two white players on the Knicks.

"Not too likely," I said. "He won't make the team unless he draws the Jordan." Elwood sat back down on the end of the bed. "Nobody else we'd take?"

"Nope." There were, of course, six other sets of skills available that night--Tim Hardaway, if I remember correctly, and Karl Malone--but none with the potential impact of Jordan's. In a league where everyone played with the skills of one star or another, it took a Jordan to get people's attention. As for the little white rookie, he could have been anyone. It didn't matter who you drafted anymore. What mattered was what skills they picked up in the lottery. Which star's moves would be lifted out of the archives and plugged into the rookie's exosuit. More specifically, what mattered tonight was that the Michael Jordan skills were up for grabs. It was fifteen years since Jordan's retirement, so the required waiting period was over.

The Jordan skills were just about the last, too. The supply of old NBA stars was pretty much depleted. It was only a couple of years after Jordan retired that the exosuits took over, and basketball stopped growing, started feeding on itself instead, becoming a kind of live 3-D highlights film, a chance to see all the dream teams and matchups that had never actually happened; Bird feeding passes to Earl the Pearl, Wilt Chamberlin going one on one with Ewing, Bill Walton and Marques Johnson playing out their careers instead of being felled by injuries, Earl Maginault and Connie Hawkins bringing their legendary schoolyard games to the pros, seeing if they could make it against the best. Only a few of the genuine stars had retired later than Jordan; after that they'd have to think up something new. Start playing real basketball again, maybe. Or just go back to the beginning of the list of stars and start over. "Nobody for real this year?" asked Elwood. He counted on me to read the sports papers.

"I don't think so. I heard the kid for the Sixers can play, actually. But not good enough to go without skills." Mixed in among us sampled stars were a handful of players making it on their own, without exosuits: Willard Daynight, Barry Porush, Tony Smerks, Marvin Franklin. These were the guys who would have been the Magic Johnsons, Walt Fraziers, and Charles Barkleys of our era, and in a way they were the guys I felt sorriest for. Instead of playing in a league full of average guys and being big stars, the way they would have in the past, they were forced to go up against the sampled skills of the Basketball Hall of Fame every night. Younger fans probably got mixed up and credited their great plays to some sampled program, instead of realizing they were seeing the real thing.

The lottery started with the tall black kid with the Pan Am Nuggets drawing the David Robinson skills package. It was a formality, a foregone conclusion, since he was the only rookie tall enough to make use of a center's skills. The kid stepped up to the mike and thanked his management and his representation and, almost as an afterthought, his mom and dad, and everyone smiled and

flashed bulbs for a minute or two. You could see that the Nuggets' general manager had his mind on other things. The Pan Am team was one of the worst in the league at that point, and as a result they had another lottery spot out of the seven, a lean, well-muscled kid who could play with the Jordan skills if he drew them. If they came up with Robinson and Jordan the Nuggets could be a force in the league overnight.

Personally, I always winced when a talented seven-footer like Robinson was reincarnated into the league. Center was my position, and I already spent most games riding the bench. Sal Pharoah, the Knicks' regular center, played with the skills of Moses Malone, one of the best ever, and a workhorse who didn't like to sit.

Elwood read me like a book. "You're sweatin', Lassner. You afraid the Nuggets gonna trade their center now they got Robinson?"

"Fuck you, Elwood." The Nuggets' old center played with the skills of a guy named Wes Unseld. Not a superstar, not in this league, but better than me. I played with Ralph Sampson's skills—sort of. Sampson was briefly a star in his time, mostly because of his height, and as centers go he was pretty passive, not all that dominant in the paint. He was too gentle, and up against the sampled skills of Abdul-Jabbar, Ewing, Walton, Olajuwon, Chamberlain, and all the other great centers we faced every night, he and I were pretty damned ineffective.

The reason I say I only sort of played with the Sampson skills is that, lacking the ability to dominate inside, when I actually got on the floor—usually in the junk minutes toward the end of a game—I leaned pretty heavily on an outside jump shot. It's a ridiculous shot for a center, but hey, it was what I had to offer. And my dirty little secret was that Bo Lassner's own jump shot was just a little better than Ralph Sampson's. So when I took it I switched my exosuit off. The sportswriters didn't know, and neither did Coach Van.

"Relax, fool," said Elwood. "You ain't never gonna get graded. You got skin insurance." He reached over and pinched my thigh.

"Ouch!"

They gave away the Hardaway subroutines to a skinny little guy with the Coors Suns. His smile showed his disappointment. It was down to four rookies now, and the Jordan skills were still unclaimed. Our kid—they flashed his name, Alan Gornan, under the picture—was still in the running.

"Shit," said Elwood. "Jordan's moves are too funky for a white cat, man. They program his suit it's gonna break his hips."

"You were pretty into Michael Jordan growing up, weren't you?" I asked. Elwood grew up in a Chicago slum.

"You got that," he said. His eyes were fixed on the screen.

"He won't get it," I said. "There's three other teams." What I meant, though I didn't say it, was that there were three other black guys still in the draw. I had a funny feeling Elwood didn't want our rookie to pick up the Jordan moves. I could think of a couple of different reasons for that.

The Karl Malone skills went to the kid from the I. G. Farben 76ers. Down to three. Then they took a break for commercials. Elwood was suddenly pacing the room. I called the desk and had them bring us up a couple of beers, out of mercy.

The Nuggets' second man picked up Adrian Dantley, leaving it down to two rookies, for two teams: us and the Beatrice Jazz. I was suddenly caught up in the excitement, my contempt for the media circus put aside for the moment. We watched the commissioner punch up the number on his terminal, look up, and sigh. His mouth hung open and the crowd fell silent, so that for a second I thought the sound on the hotel television had died.

"Jazz, second pick."

That was it. Alan Gornan, and the Knicks, had the rights to the Jordan skills. The poor kid from the Jazz, who looked like a panther, had just landed the skills of Chris Mullin, undeniably a great shooter, a top-rank star, but just as undeniably slow, flat-footed, and white. It was a silly twist, but hey—it's

a silly game.

The media swarmed around Gornan and his parents. Martin Fishall, the Knicks GM, thrust himself between the rookie and the newsmen and began answering questions, a huge grin on his face. I thought to look over at Elwood. He hated Fishall. He had his head tossed back, and he was chugging his beer.

The camera closed in on a head shot of Alan Gornan. He looked pretty self-possessed. He wore a little diamond earring and his eyes already knew how to find the camera and play to it.

They shoved a microphone in his face. "Got anything you want to say, kid?"

"Yeah." He grinned, and brushed the hair out of his eyes. Charisma.

"Go ahead. You're live."

"Look out, New York," said Alan Gornan. "Clear the runway. Vanilla Dunk is due for takeoff." The line started out a little underplayed, almost shy, but by the time he had the whole thing out he had a sneer on his face that reminded me of nothing, I swear, so much as pictures I've seen of the young Elvis Presley.

"Vanilla Dunk?" I said aloud, involuntarily.

"Turn that shit off," said Elwood, and I did.

That was the last of Alan Gornan for the moment. The new players weren't eligible until next season. All bravado aside, it would take Gornan a few months of working with the Knicks' programming experts to get control of the Jordan skills. In the meantime, we were knocked out of the playoffs in the semifinal round by the Hyundai Celtics. It should have been a great series--and we should have won it, I think--but Otis Pettingale, our star guard, who carried Nate Archibald's skills, twisted his ankle in the first game and had to sit, and the series was just a bummer.

I spent that off-season mostly brooding, as I remember. Ringing my ex-wife's answering machine, watching TV, fun stuff like that, mostly. Plus practicing my jump shot. Silly me. If I'd only been six inches shorter I could have been a big star ... that's a joke, son.

Training camp was a media zoo. Was Otis Pettingale too old to carry the load for another season? What about the Sal Pharoah trade rumors? And how were they going to fit Alan Gornan in, anyway? Who would sit to make room for the kid with the Jordan skills--Michael Front, who played with Kevin McHale's skills, or Elwood Fossett, who played with Maurice Lucas's? The reporters circled the camp like hungry wolves, putting everyone in a bad mood. They kept trying to bait us into second-guessing Coach Van on the makeup of the starting five, kept wanting to know what we thought of Gornan, who we'd barely even met.

And they all wanted a piece of Gornan. Martin Fishall and Coach Van kept him insulated at first, but it became clear pretty fast that he knew how to handle himself, and that he actually liked talking to the press. He had a knack for playing the bad boy, and with no effort at all he had them eating his "Vanilla Dunk" bullshit for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

At practices he more or less behaved himself. The Jordan skills were pretty dynamic, and Gornan was smart enough to know how to work them into the style of the rest of the team. It was a little scary, actually, seeing how fast something new and different was coming into being. The Knicks' core had been solid for a couple of years--but of course the Jordan skills weren't going to sit on the bench.

Gornan was initially polite with me, which was fine. But nothing more developed, and by the third week of camp what had passed for politeness was seeming a little more like arrogance. I got the feeling it was the same way with Otis and McFront. He seemed to have won a friend in Sal Pharoah, though, for no apparent reason. We played a lot of split-squad games, which meant I got to start at center for the B-team. As such it was my job to clog up the middle and keep Gornan from driving, and I got a quick taste of what the other teams were going to be facing this year, with Pharoah playing the muscle, setting picks, clearing the lanes for the kid's drives. It was a bruising experience, to put it mildly.

One afternoon after one of those split-squad events I found myself in the

dressling room with Pharoah and Elwood.

"You like protecting that fucker," said Elwood. "Why don't you let him take his licks?"

Pharoah smirked. He and Elwood were the two intimidators on our team, and when they went head to head neither had any edge. "It's not about that, Elwood," he said.

"He thinks he's fucking Michael Jordan," said Elwood.

"As far as the team's concerned, he is Michael Jordan," said Pharoah. "Just like I'm Moses Malone, and your stupid ass is Maurice Lucas."

"That white boy's gonna ruin this team, Sal."

Pharoah shook his head. "Different team now, man. Figure it out, Elwood. Stop looking back." He wadded up his sweaty shorts and tossed them into the bottom of a locker, then headed for the showers.

"What was that shit?" Elwood snapped at me, the minute Pharoah was out of earshot. "'Figure it out.' Is he trying to tell me I'm not making the cut?" "Don't be stupid," I said. "You're in. McFront'll sit."

"White boys don't sit. 'Less they suck as bad as you."

"I think you're wrong. Don't you see? With Gornan they've got their token white starter. You're a better player than McFront." What I was saying, of course, was that the Maurice Lucas skills were more valuable than the Kevin McHale skills. Which was true, but it didn't take team chemistry into account.

"Two white forwards," he said. "They won't be able to fucking resist."

"Wrong. You and Pharoah both in there to protect Gornan. All that muscle to surround the Jordan skills. That's what they won't be able to resist."

"Huh." He considered my logic. "Shit, Lassner." "What?"

"Shit," he said. "I smell shit around here."

At the start of the season Coach Van played Gornan very conservatively, off the bench. He was a rookie, and we were a very solid team, so it was justifiable. But not for long. When he got in he was averaging more points per minute than Elwood or McFront, and they were points that counted, that won games. He was a little shaky on defense, but the offensive impact of the Jordan subroutines was astonishing, and Gornan was meshing well with Sal Pharoah, just like in the practices. Otis Pettingale's offense at guard was fading a bit, but we had plenty of other weapons. Our other guard was Derrick Flash, who with Maurice Cheeks's skills was just coming into his own. We reeled off six wins in a row at the start of the season before taking a loss, to the Hyundai Celtics, on a night where Gornan didn't see many minutes. That was the night the chanting started, midway through the third quarter: "Vanilla Dunk! Vanilla Dunk! Vanilla Dunk . . ."

The next night he started, and scored forty-three points, in a game we won easily. He was a starter after that. McFront was benched, which broke the heart of his fan club, but the sports pages agreed that Elwood belonged on the floor, and most of them thought we were the team to beat. We should have been. The trouble started one night when we were beating—no, make that thrashing—the Disney Heat, 65 to 44, at the start of the third quarter. I was in, actually. I guess Gornan had been working overtime with the programming guys, and he hauled out a slam-dunk move all of a sudden, one where he floated up over three of the Disney players, switched the ball from his right to his left hand, and flipped it in as he fell away. It was a nice move—make that an astonishing move—but it wasn't strictly necessary, given the situation.

No big deal. But a minute later, he did it again. Actually this time he soared under the basket and dropped it in backward. As we jogged back on defense I heard Elwood muttering to himself. The Disney player tossed up a brick and I came up with the rebound, and when I looked up-court there was Gornan again, all alone, signaling for the pass.

I ignored him—we were up more than twenty points—and fed it in slow to Otis. Otis dribbled up a few feet, let the Disney defender catch up with Gornan, and we put a different play together.

Next time the ball got into Gornan's hands he broke loose with it, and went up to dunk. The crowd there in Miami, having nothing better to do, started

cheering for us to pass it to him. Elwood's mood darkened. He began trying to run the team in Otis's place, trying to set up plays that locked Gornan out of the action. I could feel the resistance—like being part of a machine where the gears suddenly start grinding.

Coach Van pulled me out of the game. From the bench I had a clearer sense of how much Gornan was milking this crowd, and of how much they were begging to be milked. He was giving them Michael Jordan, the legend they'd never seen themselves, the instant replay man, the one who stood out even in a field of stars. And the awful thing about Gornan's theatrics was that they worked, as basketball. We were up almost thirty points now. He'd reduced the Disney team to spectators.

A minute later Elwood joined me on the bench, and McFront went in. Elwood put a towel over his head and then lowered his head almost below his big knees. The bench got real quiet, which meant the noise from the crowd stood out even better.

Elwood toweled off his head and stood up suddenly, like he was putting himself back in. He turned and looked at me and over at Coach Van. Then he spat, just over the line and onto the court, and turned and walked toward the locker room.

Coach Van jerked his thumb at me, meaning I should go play therapist. I guess my contribution wasn't sorely needed on the court. Sometimes I wondered if they kept me around because I knew how to talk to Elwood.

I found him dressing up in his street clothes, without having showered. When he looked up at me I almost turned and ran back to the bench. I held up my hands, pleading not guilty. But of course the skin on those hands was white.

"You see that shit out there," he said. It was a command that I nod, not a question. "That's poor taste, man." "Poor taste?"

"That dunk is from the third game of the '91 finals, Lassner. That's sacrilege, hauling it out for no reason, against these Disney chumps."

"You recognize the dunk?"

"'Course I recognize the dunk. You never watch any Jordan tapes, man? That dunk is a prayer. He can't just—"

"Whoa, Elwood. Hold on a minute. You're sampling, I'm sampling. This isn't some purist thing here, man. Get some perspective."

"Michael Jordan, Lassner. You ever see the tape of Michael crying after winning in '91?"

"At least he's on our team. Jeez, what would happen if you had to play against the almighty Jordan, or somebody with his skills—you'd probably fold up completely!"

"It's not just the dunks, Lassner. He won't play defense. He's always up the court cherry-picking, waiting for the easy pass. Michael was a great defensive player!"

"C'mon, Elwood. This is a showtime league and you know it. You're one of about five guys playing serious defense. Everybody goes for the fancy moves. That's what the sampling is all about. He's just better than most, because he's got the hot skills package. Somebody had to get the Jordan skills."

"It didn't have to be some little white jerk."

Once it was out it was kind of a relief. Black and white was the issue. Of course. As much as that was supposed to be a thing of the past. I'd known all along, but in some stupid way I guess I'd thought not saying anything might make it better.

"I'm a white guy with a black guy's skills," I pointed out.

He waved it aside. "Not important. It's not Jordan. You play white, anyway." What was it about basketball that made it all seem so stark? As though it were designed as a metaphor—the white style of play so plodding and corporate and reliable, the black style so individual and expressive and so often self-destructive, so "me against the world." When a black guy couldn't jump they said he had "white legs," or if he was slow it was "white man's disease." Basketball was a white sport that blacks had taken over, and yet the audience was still pretty much white. And that white audience adored the black players

for their brilliant moves—thanks to sampling, that adoration would probably kill the sport—and yet was still thought to require the token white face, for purposes of "identification."

Solve basketball, I sometimes thought, and you'd solve everything.

"Okay," I said. "He's a jerk. But 'white jerk' shouldn't matter. Jordan wasn't a black separatist, as I remember. I mean, call me naive, but scrambling the racial stuff up was supposed to be one of the few good things about this sampling deal, right?"

"Michael's career meant something," Elwood mumbled. "Should be treated with respect."

"Look who turns out to be Mr. Historical," I said. "You gotta get hip, Elwood. Basketball is Postmodern now." "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means Michael's career might have meant something, but yours doesn't, and neither does 'Vanilla Dunk's'—so relax."

Once Gornan started hauling out the real-time poster shots, the media wouldn't let it go. He was all over the sports channels, dunking in slow mo, grinning and pumping his fists. He made the cover of Rolling Stone, diamond earring flashing, spinning a basketball with one hand, groping a babe with the other. Then his agent started connecting with the endorsement people, and you couldn't turn on the tube without seeing Vanilla Dunk downing vitaburgers at Mc-Donald's, Vanilla Dunk slurping on a Pepsi or a Fazz, Vanilla Dunk checking out the synthetic upholstery inside a new Chrysler SunFrame.

With Gornan playing the exuberant Michael Jordan game and Elwood playing angry, we kept on winning. In fact, we opened up a sizable lead over the Celtics in the division, and it wasn't necessarily a good thing. Being too far ahead was almost as bad as floundering in the basement of the division.

Without the tension of a tight race to bind us together as a team all the egos came rushing to the forefront. Otis was struggling with accepting his fading powers and diminished role, and we all missed the way his easy confidence had been at the heart of the team. McFront was sulking on the bench. Pharoah was playing hard, trying to make the new team work, trying to show by force that Gornan fit in. Meanwhile, Gornan's theatrics got more and more outrageous, and every slam dunk was another blow to the dam holding back Elwood's rage.

One afternoon in Oakland before a game with the IBM Warriors someone made the mistake of leaving the TV on in the visitors' clubhouse. Elwood and Otis and I were sitting playing cards when a pretaped interview with Gornan turned up on the sports channel.

Somewhat surprisingly, the interviewer seemed to be trying to work around to the subject of race. "How'd you choose your nickname, Dunk? Why Vanilla, in particular? What point are you trying to make?"

Gornan shrugged. "Hey, don't get heavy," he said. "They call me Vanilla 'cause I'm completely smooth and completely sweet. It's simple."

"Why not something else, then?" said the interviewer. "Chocolate, say."

Gornan laughed, and for a minute I thought he was going to grant the man his point. Instead he realigned his sneer and said: "Chocolate don't go down smooth."

"What are you saying, Dunk?"

"Nothing, man. Just that I'm not chocolate. That's why I'm like a breath of fresh air—I go down smooth. People are ready for that, ready to lighten up. Chocolate's sweet, but it's always got that bitter edge, y' know?"

And then, God help me, he turned to the camera and gave it a big wink.

I got up and shut the TV off, but it was too late. Elwood had already slammed his cards down on the table and stalked out. Otis looked sick. I prayed that Gornan wasn't in the locker room. I went through and found Elwood out on the edge of the floor, watching the Warriors take their warm-ups.

At game time we managed to get out on the floor without any explosions. But from the opening tip-off I knew it was going to be a bad night. When the ball got into Elwood's hands he drove like a steamroller up the middle and went up for a vicious dunk. Then he stole an inbound pass and did it again, only this time he fouled his man on the drive. Everyone on the floor looked nervous,

even the Warriors—even, for once, Gornan, who was usually oblivious. The Warrior hit his free throws and the game resumed. The pattern came clear soon enough: Elwood was calling for every pass, and when he got it he was going up for the dunk, every time. He was trying to play Gornan's game, but he was too big and strong, too angry to pull it off. He was stuffing a lot of shots but he'd accumulated four fouls before the second quarter. When Coach Van finally pulled him he had twice as many points as Gornan or anyone else, but the Warriors were ahead.

He sat until halftime, and with McFront in we got the game tied. During the break Coach Van called Elwood into an office and closed the door. Meanwhile Gornan was off in his usual corner of the locker room smoking a cigarette, but he had a hollow, haunted expression on him, one I'd never seen before.

Elwood was back in for the start of the third quarter, and whatever Coach Van had said to him in his office hadn't worked: he picked up right where he'd left off, breaking for insane inside moves at every opportunity, going up for ill-fated dunks and making some of them, smearing a lot of guys with his sweat. The Oakland crowd, which had been abuzz with expectations of seeing the Vanilla Dunk Revue, fell to a low, ugly murmur. When Elwood got called for another foul I was almost relieved; that made five, and with six he'd foul out of the game, and it would be over

But he wasn't quite done. On the next play he pulled down a rebound and dribbled the length of the court, flattening a Warrior on his way up. I waited for the ref's whistle, but no whistle came. The Warrior center braced himself between Elwood and the net. Elwood ran straight at him, tossed off a perfunctory head fake, and then went up with a spinning move, his bulk barely clearing a tremendous head-on collision with the jumping center. He jammed the ball down with both hands and hit the glass so hard it shattered.

Suddenly the arena was dead silent, as Elwood and the Warrior center fell in a tangle amid a rain of Plexiglas fragments. When the two men got up unhurt, the roar started. The referees called the game a Warrior victory by forfeit, and Elwood took them on single-handedly; we had to drag him off the floor.

When we got him into the clubhouse we found Gornan already showered and in his street clothes, giving his version of events to the press.

I looked up the details on Maurice Lucas's career once. I was working on a theory that the basketball skills you sampled contained an element of the previous player's personality, some kind of style or attitude that was intrinsic to the way they played, something that could be imparted, gradually, to the later player, along with the actual basketball skills.

Well, bingo, as far as Maurice Lucas and Elwood Fossett were concerned. Lucas, it turned out, spent a considerable part of his career feeling misunderstood and underpaid. Specifically underpaid in comparison to the white players on his team. As a result he spent a lot of time playing angry. I mean apart from the forcefulness that came with him (and Elwood) being so big and strong; his game was specifically fueled by rage.

Another result of the conflicts in his career was that he was widely understood to have dogged it, to have played intentionally poorly, as a kind of protest, during some of the key years of his career. Which got me thinking: the skills that Elwood inherited might also contain an element of this struggle that Lucas was waging against himself, to suppress his skills, to not give the best of what he had to the company men he hated.

Elwood wouldn't have known, either. Maurice Lucas's career was before his time. Elwood's interest in basketball history went as far back as Michael Jordan's rookie year.

McFront started in Elwood's place the next night, and Elwood went back to the lockers, got dressed, and walked out. Gornan had a great two quarters, undeniable as basketball, unsurpassable as spectacle, and in the locker room at the half he was more exuberant than usual, clowning with Pharoah and McFront, turning the charm he'd previously saved for the media on his teammates. It was a fun scene, but it made me a little sick to see Elwood being drummed out so easily, even if he'd opened the door to it himself, with

his walkout.

On the bench during the second half I scooted up next to Coach Van.

"You're letting this team fall apart," I said.

"Come on, Lassner."

"What?"

"You're not gonna start this in the middle of a game." He sounded tired of the conversation before it had even started. "Nobody's letting the team fall apart. This could be a championship team."

"This could have been a championship team. Now it's a championship Vanilla Dunk and his Dunkettes." He made a face.

"What does ownership say?" I asked.

"What do you think? Fishall wants Gornan starting every game. The fans want it, too. As long as we're winning I'm gonna have a tough time arguing for anything else."

"Yeah."

"I want Elwood out there, too, Bo, but if he doesn't even suit up—"

"I know, I know."

"Look, I can't make everybody like Gornan. I don't particularly like him. But if you get Elwood back in here, he'll see playing time. The backboard—that's no big deal. Just more headlines, is the way Fishall sees it. But this walkout deal—"

He didn't finish his sentence. Something happened out on the floor, something that, as it turned out, would change everything. There was a crash, and a loud sigh, and the crowd fell to silence. It was so quiet you could make out the squeak of the team doctor's sneakers as he crossed the floor, rushing toward the fallen player.

I got up and peered over the top of the cluster of players, but couldn't see anything. So I counted heads. It was a Knick on the floor, and height—or rather, lack of it—told me it was Sal Pharoah.

In a minute they had him on his feet, and the crowd starting buzzing again, which made things feel more normal. Pharoah walked with his head bowed, while the doctor peeled the exosuit away from his damaged wrist. They hurried him off toward the trainer's room, and a couple of kids with towels rushed over and wiped the sweat off the floor where he'd fallen.

Coach Van slapped me on the ass. "Wake up, Lassner. Get in there."

I stumbled out onto the floor and we restarted the game. We'd built up a good lead, and even without Pharoah or Elwood available we cruised to victory—mostly on the strength of Gornan's play, I have to admit. He was the only one on the floor who didn't seem a little stunned by Pharoah's going down. I did my best to fill the role of Gornan's protector, though I must admit I felt a renegade urge to do what Elwood would have wanted, and leave him out there naked.

At the start of the fourth quarter, before Coach Van pulled the starters out, it hit me that with me, McFront, and Vanilla Dunk our entire frontcourt was white—the first time the Knicks had had more whites than blacks on the floor since I'd joined the team.

Sal Pharoah had broken his right wrist in the fall, and he'd be out for at least six weeks, probably more—I learned that from the television in our hotel room that night. Elwood burst in half an hour later, and he learned it from me.

What it meant, of course, was that I was the starting center for the time being. It also meant good things for Elwood, if he behaved himself. With Pharoah out he was our only enforcer, so he'd probably get the nod over McFront. With me in instead of Pharoah we also lost a lot of defense and rebounding, and Elwood was a better defender and re-bouncer than McFront.

On the other hand, Pharoah had served as a buffer between Gornan and Elwood—also between Gornan and the rest of the league, all those teams frustrated by being beaten by a white hot dog who was getting more endorsements in his rookie year than they'd see for their whole careers. I wasn't going to be able to serve that role. I wasn't strong enough, or black



enough. That role fell to Elwood. The two of them had to play together or the team was in trouble.

Two nights later, in L.A., against the Time Warner Lakers, I saw that the team was in trouble.

The Lakers were a team that would have tested us with Pharoah on the floor. It was bad timing that we hit them on the first night without him, and the first night since Elwood's walkout. We should have had a patsy, a fall guy, to give us confidence, to give Elwood and Gornan a chance to have some fun together. No such luck.

In the first quarter Gornan was playing his usual game, to the delight of the crowd. He was scoring a lot of the time but we weren't coming up with any rebounds, and our defense had nothing, and very quickly the Lakers were up by ten points. I got all passive, starting leaning on my jump shot, and left the inside open, waiting for Elwood to take over. But Elwood was invisible. He was playing man-to-man defense so stubbornly that he had nothing left for the fast break. He was putting on a clinic, demonstrating what Gornan was doing wrong, but Gornan wasn't paying any attention, and the crowd didn't have the faintest idea what was going on.

At halftime the Lakers were fifteen points up, and in the second half things really started breaking down. Gornan tried to compensate the only way he knew how, by diving for ridiculous steals, hogging the ball even more, putting on an air show. He got fouled so hard I actually started to get a little worried about him, but each time he jumped back up with a grin. I tried to play a little post-up but the Lakers' center, who had Artis Gilmore's skills, was making me look stupid. Our guards were working the margins, trying to get us into the game from the perimeter, but the Lakers were picking up every rebound, so missed shots from the outside were very costly.

Elwood lost his patience, started falling off the defense and trying to mount a show of his own. As usual he strung together some impressive slams, and for a minute the momentum seemed ours, but another minute later he racked up two fouls in a row and the Lakers beefed up their score at the free-throw line. There isn't any way to defend against free throws—not that anyone was playing defense.

Gornan responded as only he could, by taking up increasingly improbable moves. They had two or three guys on him every time he touched the ball, and he was turning it over a lot. He was airborne, but a lot of balls were being stripped away on the way up.

By the fourth quarter I was exhausted and humiliated. Coach Van called a time-out and I jogged reflexively toward the bench, but he wasn't taking me out. He subbed McFront in for Elwood and sent in another rookie for Gornan. We lost the game by twenty-three points, our worst margin of the season so far. We lost in a similar fashion the next night, and at the end Coach Van called me and Elwood and Gornan into his office. I assumed the idea was to mediate between the two of them, and that I was there more or less as Elwood's official interpreter.

"What's happening, guys?" said Coach Van.

Gornan jumped right in. "We need a center who can play, Coach."

"What?" I blurted.

"Sorry, man," said Gornan. "But let's face facts." "I was starting for this team before you—"

"Whoa," said Coach Van. "Relax, Bo. Alan, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. Seems to me the team is suffering from what I'd call, for want of a better word, a feud."

"Feud?" Gornan played completely dumb. Elwood just sulked in his chair.

"I don't care about the personal stuff," said Coach Van. "It's a matter of how you play. You have to play like you like each other. You have to be able to pretend on the court. You guys don't seem to be managing it, and it shows in your game."

"Hey, me and Bo get along fine," said Gornan. "Far as I know. But he's just not as strong as Pharoah under the net. If me and Elwood's games are hurting,

that's the reason why."

"This is ridiculous," I said. Gornan's strategy began to dawn on me. He was going to pretend he hadn't even noticed Elwood's hostility. It was instinctively brilliant, and vicious. He'd avoid the appearance of a black-white conflict by cutting me down instead.

I looked over at Elwood, but he wasn't offering me any help.

"Look," said Gornan. "Me and Elwood are playing the same as when the team was winning. Lassner here is the difference."

"Are you gonna take this?" I said to Elwood. "He's saying that the way you've been playing in the last few games is your normal game. Can't you see what a veiled insult that is? You can play a hell of a lot better—"

"You getting down on my game, Lassner?" growled Elwood. "You a fine one to fucking talk, man."

"No, no, I mean, I'm just trying to say, look at what he's saying—"

"Enough, Bo. Be quiet for a minute. Maybe I've misunderstood the situation—"

"Coach," I protested, "Gornan is twisting this—"

"Let me talk! As I was saying, I don't know the details, I don't want to know the details. What matters is the chemistry sucks right now. All three of you are playing below your capabilities. That's my opinion, and I've told ownership as much, and I'll tell the press the same when we get home. That's all for now."

End of meeting.

We lost the last two games of the road trip and flew back to New York. On the plane I slept and dreamed of missed shots. The cabbie who took me back to my Brooklyn apartment asked me how I felt about the trade.

"What trade?" I asked, and the cabbie just said: "I'm sorry."

The Disney Heat were a mediocre team with one big star: Gerald Flynnan, their center. He played with the skills of Akeem Olajuwon, and he carried their team to the lower rounds of the playoffs each year, but no farther. The rest of the team was talented but young, disorganized, and possibly stupid.

Knicks management had offered me, Elwood, and a first-round lottery pick to the Heat in exchange for Flynnan, and the Disney team had taken the bait. The Knicks picked up a dominant center to replace the injured Pharoah, and to fill his shoes in protecting Vanilla Dunk. And they'd gotten rid of the tension in their frontcourt by unloading Elwood; McFront and Dunk would start.

What the Heat got was a midseason mess: an angry, talented star and a tall white guy with a jump shot. The lottery spot wouldn't help the team until next year. Elwood and I were flown down and in the Disney uniforms before we knew what hit us, and the coach tossed us into a game before we'd even had a chance to introduce ourselves to the other players.

The result was an ugly loss, but then the players there seemed pretty used to that.

The crowd, too. The Disney fans were a jaded, abusive bunch, mostly concerned with heckling Coach Wilder for not playing local favorite Earlharm "Early" Natt, a talented eccentric who carried the skills of Marvin Barnes. At the start of the game they cheered Elwood and greeted me with shouts of "Where's Gerald?," but by halftime they were drinking beer and shouting for Early Natt, a request that Coach Wilder ignored except in the final, hopeless moments of each game. Natt looked pretty dynamic when he got in, which explained the crowd's affection. He also paid zero attention to defense or team play, which explained the coach's resistance.

The same pattern held in the two losses that followed.

That brought us to the all-star break. Elwood and I were 0-3 with our new team, and nobody was particularly happy. I couldn't figure Elwood—he was playing quiet, walking quiet, and, I suspected, mixing a little thinking in with his brooding. For my part, I was just trying to keep my head above water—to my embarrassment, I was exhausted by starting every night. Plus management and media caught on that I was the communicative one of the new pair, which meant I was answering questions for me and Elwood both.

The all-star break gave us most of a week before we played again, and Elwood

surprised me by suggesting we get out of town. He'd located a beach hotel on Key West with a nearby high school gym we could rent. I agreed. Without having to say so, we were both avoiding paying any attention to the all-star game, which was sure to be yet another installment of the Vanilla Dunk show. Elwood shocked me again by getting up first that morning, to rouse me out of bed. He called up a breakfast on room service; I swear in all our years rooming together I'd never seen him pick up a phone before.

At the gym he said: "Okay, Lassner. I'm gonna teach your tall white ass how to play a trapping defense." "What?"

"You heard."

"What is this punishment for, Elwood? What did I do? Just tell me."

"Here—" He threw me the ball.

And proceeded to do exactly what he'd promised.

The next day word had gotten around—possibly with Elwood's help, I never found out—that a couple of pros were working out in the local gym. Six guys showed up: confident, tall kids out to impress, all lean and strong from boating on the island, a couple of them with real talent. Elwood worked them into the clinic he was giving me, and they and he spent the next four days busting my ass.

I went back to Miami exhausted, and Elwood still wouldn't tell me what he was getting at.

It quickly became clear, however, that he'd been looking at the schedule. The first team we played after the break was the Knicks. That afternoon in practice, while the rest of the team was drilling, he took Coach Wilder aside. "Let me call the plays tonight," he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"What?"

"Let me call the plays." He actually smiled.

"We're playing the Knicks."

"Exactly."

"What are you saying, Elwood?"

"You traded for me, man. Give me a night to run the show. One night. If you don't like the results we go back to your way tomorrow. Nobody will ever know."

I walked over to show my support—for what, I didn't exactly know. "Give him a half, at least," I said.

"He did this in New York?" asked Coach Wilder.

"Yes," I lied.

Elwood pulled Early Natt off the bench as we took the floor at the start of the game, saying to him only, "Go crazy."

I got Elwood aside. "Okay," I said. "I've waited long enough. What's the deal here, Elwood?"

"We're gonna defend these mothers," he said. "That's the deal. Our guards can play a zone defense if they hang back. You and me are boxing out Dunk, taking the rebounds, stripping the ball. Don't hold anything back."

"What's Early doing?"

"Cherry-picking. Outdunking the Dunk."

"I never saw Marvin Barnes play," I said, "but I didn't think he could hang with Michael Jordan. Early is stupid, Elwood."

"We're not playing against Michael Jordan," said Elwood. "We're playing against Vanilla Dunk. Jordan had an integrated game. The best there ever was. Dunk's just a show. I've played a little one-on-one with Early. He can put on a show, if he doesn't have to think about defense or passing, and if the coach isn't breathing down his neck. That's our job, Lassner. Keep Early from having to think about anything. He'll put on a show. Trust me."

Gerald Flynnan, the Knicks' new center, beat me on the tip-off, so the Knicks came up with the ball. I followed Elwood's lead—after the week of drills, it was second nature. We charged the ball, my hands up wide and high to block the pass, Elwood's hands low for the steal off the dribble. Our guards scurried behind us on the zone defense, picking up the slack.

Otis Pettingale beat us on a head fake and went up. Score: Gulf + Western 2, Disney 0.

One of our guards fed it in to me, and Elwood hissed, "Up to Early!" I did what I was told. Early Natt was halfway up the court. He twisted through three Knicks, not looking back to see if he had any support, and scored. Tie game. The second time up the court the ball was in Vanilla Dunk's hands, and Elwood seemed to go into another time signature. He was all over him. Dunk dribbled back and circled and came up again. I put up my hands and cut off a pass opportunity. Dunk hesitated, and Elwood stripped the ball away. A flip pass upcourt into Early's hands and we were ahead.

The crowd went wild. Not because they had any idea of what Elwood and me were up to, but because Early was in the game, showing off, doing the only thing he knew how to do: score. The Knicks brought the ball back to us, and this time Elwood took it away from McFront, tipping it into my waiting hands. Not waiting to be told this time, I tossed it to Early. Score.

The strategy was working, at least for the moment. No team in the league played this kind of defense, and it had the Knicks confused. High on the novelty of it, and the crowd's response, we roared to a fifteen-point lead by halftime. Elwood ran back to the bench and spread his hands in a mute appeal to Coach Wilder.

"This one's yours," said the coach.

In the second half the Knicks adjusted somewhat, and I got tired and had to sit for a few minutes. Flynnan bulled his way through Elwood for six straight points, and Otis added a couple of outside shots, and they nearly tied it. But Vanilla Dunk looked all flummoxed, and he never got into the game. A few minutes later we opened up the lead again and we ended up winning by five points.

I took Elwood aside in the locker room. The media all wanted Early Natt anyway. "When I was sitting in the third period I checked my suit," I said.

"It wasn't working."

Elwood just smiled, and made a little pair of imaginary scissors with his fingers.

"You fucked with my suit?"

"I just noticed you play better without it, man. You think I didn't see you were turning it off?"

"That's just for my jump shot!"

"I saw you in practice in Key West, white boy. You play better without it. Notice I ain't saying you play good. Just better."

"Fuck you, Elwood."

It was a nice night, but it was just a night. A fluke loss by the almighty Knicks—it happens sometimes. The Vanilla Dunk Revue went back to cakewalking its way to a championship, while we struggled on, treading water in the middle of our division, barely clinging to our playoff hopes. Surprisingly, Elwood didn't seem that interested in applying the defensive techniques we'd developed together against any of the other teams. Oh, we trapped here and there, but Elwood didn't ever take command the way he had. He seemed to go back into a trance, like he'd done when we were first traded. We won our share of games, but nobody was particularly impressed. As for Early Natt, he saw more minutes, but they only seemed to give him more opportunities to blow it, and soon enough he was in the doghouse. Elwood had abandoned him. I guess Elwood liked that one-dimensional game a little better on a hapless black man than he liked it on an arrogant white one, but not so much that he wanted to encourage Early to make it a regular habit.

Elwood and I were shooting alone in the gym when I asked, "Why don't we go back to that trapping game?"

He didn't even turn around, just sank a shot as he answered. "Element of surprise the only thing makes it work, Bo. Teams'd see through that shit if we hauled it out two nights in a row."

"Some great teams won with defense, hack—"

"Shut up, Bo. You don't know what you're talkin' about."

"What have we got to lose?"

"Shut up."

Elwood's playing got more and more distracted, and we went on a losing streak, but I didn't catch on until two weeks before the end of the season, when the Knicks came to town again. I waited for Elwood to rouse us again, to make a big demonstration, and instead he played in what was becoming his usual trance. He almost seemed to be taking a masochistic thrill in letting Vanilla Dunk run wild.

The next day I glanced at the papers, and I realized that, for once, Elwood was watching the standings.

We had to lose three games in the standings to drop out of a regular playoff spot and into the wild-card spot. The wild-card team played the team with the conference's best record in the first round of the playoffs, in a quick best-of-five series, a sort of warm-up for the real playoffs.

The Knicks, thanks to their win over us the night before, were now the team with the best record, by one game over the Pistons.

In other words, the victory over the Knicks earlier in the season wasn't the main point; that was just Elwood finding out if he could do it.

Elwood and Coach Wilder yelled at each other for a straight half hour in the visiting coach's office in the bowels of the Garden. In the meantime I was left to play diplomat with the press and the rest of the team. I'd never been in the visitors' locker rooms of the Garden before, and it frankly got me a little depressed. I'd never dared mention it to Elwood, but I missed the Knicks.

When they came out it was Coach Wilder who looked beaten. Elwood didn't say anything to me, but his eyes said he'd won his point. When we got out on the floor he flipped the practice ball to Early Natt, then crooked a finger and beckoned Early over to him.

"Remember when I told you to go crazy?" he said. Early just nodded, smiling defensively. He looked a little intimidated by the roar of the Garden crowd.

"We gonna do that again. Remember how?"

Early nodded.

"Just stay uptown, look for the pass. Stay open, that's all." Elwood turned to me but didn't say anything, just stretched his arms up in the air. I mirrored them with my own—albeit six inches higher.

Our moment was swallowed in a roar, as the Knicks came out of the lockers and were greeted by the crowd in the Garden. I looked out and then back down at the Heat uniform on my chest. I felt about as small as a seven-foot guy can feel, at that moment.

This time I somehow beat Flynnan on the tip-off, flipping the ball to one of our guards. We went up the court and scored, Elwood sinking a jumper from midway out. The Knicks inbounded and I realized I was frozen, that I wasn't following Elwood into the trap defense. The Knicks got the ball to Vanilla Dunk. Dunk flew upcourt, Elwood dogging his steps, and broke loose for a fabulous midair hook shot. I cursed myself.

Elwood grabbed the ball and hurled it upcourt to Early, who ran into a crowd and had the ball stripped away. Defense again. This time I rushed the ball—it was in Otis's hands—and forced a weak pass to Flynnan, who was too far out for his shot. I jumped on Flynnan, my hands in his face, and heard a whistle. I'd fouled him.

Flynnan went to the line and hit both shots. 4-2, Knicks.

Elwood rushed the ball to Early again, passing into a thicket of Knicks, and Early was immediately fouled. Early went to the line and missed one.

The Knicks came up and Flynnan rolled over me for an easy layup. God, he's a big mother, I wanted to whisper to Elwood, but Elwood wasn't meeting my eye. Elwood went up, got caught in traffic, and bailed out to one of our guards, who threw up a brick from outside. Flynnan and I fought for the rebound, and Flynnan won. He dumped it out to Vanilla Dunk, who immediately had Elwood all

over him. I rushed up from behind and stabbed at the ball. Dunk twisted out from between us, head-faked, made a move. The move didn't come off. He and Elwood tangled up and fell together. A whistle. The ref signaled: offensive foul, Knicks. Number double zero, Alan Gornan. Vanilla Dunk.

Dunk got up screaming. Elwood shook himself out and turned his back. The ref rushed up between them while a kid wiped the sweat off the floor. Then Dunk yelled one word too many.

"What?" Elwood turned fast and got in his face, real close, without touching. The ref squirted out of the way. "I said nigger," repeated Dunk.

They both drew back a fist. I grabbed Elwood from behind, so he couldn't get his shot off. Don't ask me why I grabbed Elwood instead of Dunk.

Vanilla Dunk's punch was off-line. It slammed into Elwood's shoulder. That was his only shot. The other Knicks were all over him.

The refs threw them both out of the game, and soon, all too soon, it was restarted. With Elwood gone it was too much a matter of me against Flynnan, and it was Flynnan's night. I couldn't hang with him. For help on offense all I had was Early, who seemed completely cowed by the Garden and baffled with Elwood gone. I tried to dump it off to him, but he'd lost sight of the basket, kept trying dumb passes instead. Whereas Flynnan had McFront, who'd found his midrange shot, and was pouring in pull-up jumpers.

They blew us out. An hour later I was sitting on the edge of my hotel bed, watching it on television. Early Natt and one of our guards were there with me, but the room was silent except for the tube. Elwood had disappeared, so we didn't have to be ashamed to watch the sportscast.

It was Vanilla Dunk all the way. He'd run straight to the press, as usual, and the tape of his interview was replayed every fifteen minutes. The commissioner had already decided: both players were available to their teams for the rest of the series. Elwood would be fined five thousand. Dunk, who'd thrown a punch, would pay fifteen thou. I'd saved Elwood ten grand by grabbing him. And probably saved Dunk a broken jaw.

They barely even mentioned the fact that we'd lost. I guess the New York press considered that pretty much a foregone conclusion.

I flipped to MTV just in time to catch Vanilla Dunk's new video "(Dunkin') in Yo Face."

Elwood showed up just in time for the second game. I never did find out where he spent that night. For a minute I was afraid he was stoned on something—I'd seen him stoned, and gotten stoned with him, but never before a game—because he looked too happy, too loose. I even wondered for a second if he somehow thought we'd won last night.

There wasn't time to confer. He flipped a thumbs-up signal to Coach Wilder, and called Early over to him. The coach just shook his head. A minute later the refs started the game.

I put my head down and vowed to get physical with Flynnan. I wanted rebounds, I wanted blocked shots, I wanted steals. I wanted Elwood not to hate me, primarily. He still wasn't meeting my eye.

Otis missed a shot and Elwood came down with the rebound, and passed it to Early with nearly the same motion. Early ducked underneath Flynnan and jumped up to the height of the basket. Slam.

The Knicks came upcourt and put the ball in Dunk's hands. Elwood and I swarmed him. He faked a move, pivoted, then faked a pass, which shook Elwood for half a second. Half a second was all Dunk needed: he went up.

But I got my hand around the ball and stuffed his shot backward, out of his hands. It bounced upcourt, to Early, who was alone.

Slam.

The Knicks came back up, and McFront hit from outside. We took it back up and this time Elwood faked to Early and twisted inside himself for a pretty backward layup. 6-2, Visitors.

Otis brought it up for the Knicks, and flipped it to Flynnan, inside. I went up and matched his jump, forced him to dump it off or be stuffed. He looked

for help, didn't find any, and Elwood took the ball away from him. Early was waiting upcourt, like a puppy dog. 8-2.

So it went for the first half. We kept Dunk frustrated with our hectoring defense, and I took my game straight to Flynnan, however bruising. McFront's hand wasn't as hot as the night before. Elwood was hyperkinetic on defense. And on offense, we were making Early look like the star the fans back in Florida had always hoped he would be. All he had was a handful of one-on-one moves, but if you kept him from having to think about anything but the basket, he was sensational.

We ended the half with a twenty-two-point lead. The Knicks nibbled away in the second half, Otis shining like the Otis of old for a few minutes, but it was our night. We dug in on defense and finished fourteen points up. The crowd drained out of the Garden in silence. We were taking the series back to Florida tied at a game apiece. There were two games on our home court, then back to New York.

Unless somebody won two in a row.

For the third game the Knicks just looked tired. They weren't adjusting to our defensive pressure. Vanilla Dunk was wearing his cynical sneer, but you could see it drove him crazy not to be able to cut loose. The Miami crowd gave Flynnan, their ex-hero, a hard time, and he responded by getting sheepish—for the first time I felt I could actually push him around a little.

This one was Early's game. He played to the crowd, and the slams just kept getting showier. Elwood poured in a few himself, but Early was the star that night. We led all the way, and the game was over by the third quarter. Both teams pulled their regulars and started thinking about the next game.

Elwood was glowing on the bench. We all were. We had a chance to take it from them. They had to beat us tomorrow to even stay alive. This was supposed to be their year of destiny, the Vanilla Dunk Victory Tour, and we had them down, 2-1. The wild-card team.

Flynnan woke up. Dunk was still moribund, but Flynnan woke up; I knew because he started punishing me. I was taking down some rebounds, but I was paying in flesh. I looked for help, but who was going to help me? That's the horror of the center: there's just two of you seven-foot monsters out there, and you're enemies. If the other guy's a little bigger and meaner, who's going to tell him to leave you alone? Some shrimpy 6-5 guard? The Tokyo army? The ref? Your mother?

This one wasn't a game. It was a trench battle. Elwood and I were working together, stripping balls away, bottling up the middle, but there was no communication between us. Just sweat and grunts. We had to keep our eyes peeled or we'd be flattened. McFront and Dunk were both fighting to open the lanes, throwing elbows, double-faking to make sure we got our faces in the way. Where were the whistles? I'm sure the Knicks were asking the same question at their end. The refs were letting us duke it out.

It was Knicks 34, Heat 30 late in the second quarter: a defensive struggle. We'd forced the Knicks into our game, and they were playing it. Every time Early touched the ball he was mobbed. He'd dump it back out and our guards would chuck it up from the outside and hope for the best.

Most of our points belonged to Elwood, who was scoring by grabbing rebounds and muscling back up for the layup.

We were holding on until two minutes before the half, when Dunk broke loose for a couple in a row, and we went to the lockers down eight points.

Elwood stood to one side, a wild look in his eyes. He wasn't playing coach anymore; he was too far inside himself. He and Dunk had been in each other's faces every minute of the first half, and I could feel the hate burning off Elwood's skin, like gasoline vapor. I could almost imagine that Elwood would rather lose this one and take it back to New York, just to maximize his crazed masochistic war with Dunk, just to push it to the very edge.

I personally had a strong preference for ending it here.

Coach Wilder, seeing that Elwood wasn't receiving, looked over at me. I shrugged. The rest of the team milled nervously, waiting for someone to break

the silence.

"Okay, boys," said Coach Wilder courageously. "Let this get away and it's just another tied series going back to New York. That's handing it to them."

No one spoke. Elwood's foot was tapping out accompaniment to some internal rhythm.

"You're only eight points back," said the coach. "Just keep tying them up on defense. They'll turn it over when they get tired."

With his voice trailing away, he sounded like he didn't believe himself. I felt like patting him on the head and sending him to the showers. The fact was it was Elwood's team now, and Elwood didn't give halftime pep talks. We would all have to feed off his energy on the floor; it would happen there or it wouldn't happen at all.

We drifted apart, and what seemed like seconds later we were back on the court. The ball was ours; Elwood hit from midway out and we fell back on defense. We stuck to our one plan, of course: I caged Vanilla Dunk with my long arms, and Elwood harassed the ball from underneath. This 250 JONATHAN LETHEM

time the gamble worked, and we forced a bad pass, which one of our guards picked up. He found Early, and Early found the net. We'd closed the gap to four points.

And that's where it stayed. We all gritted our teeth and went back to the trenches; even Vanilla Dunk and Early were playing defense. Both sides would have fouled out if the refs hadn't been squelching the whistle. We forced turnovers, then turned it over ourselves, rolled our eyes, and fell back for defense again. Elwood was a maniac on rebounds, but he'd pass it up to Early, and Early would disappear in a cloud of Knick uniforms. Otis stripped the ball from him with two seconds left in the third quarter and chucked up an improbable three-point shot from midcourt which only hit net, putting them up seven points as the buzzer for the fourth sounded.

At the start of the fourth Elwood began trying to do it all, to outrebound everybody at both ends of the court, to steal the ball, pass it to Early, then run up and set a pick for Early and rebound Early's shot if he missed. I watched in amazement, near total exhaustion myself just from our frantic play on the defensive end. In frustration with the Knicks' defensive adjustments he started going up himself, with his usual too-powerful stuff moves, scoring some points but committing fouls the refs couldn't ignore. Still, he bulled us to three points back, then doubled over with a leg cramp.

Coach Wilder called a time-out. Elwood limped back to the bench.

"Okay, Elwood, you got us close. Now you better sit." "Uh-uh," said Elwood.

"I'm stayin' in. Listen, Early—" Early leaned in, his eyes wide.

"You gotta figure out one new trick, 'cause they're bumping you off, man."

"What?" said Early in his high, frightened voice.

"Pass off when you go up now. Don't shoot. Find the big man here." Elwood jerked his thumb at me. "He's big and white, you can't miss him, man. Just throw it up to him every time you get a clean line."

"Elwood," I began to complain, "I'm not like you. I can't go back and forth. I won't make it back on defense if I'm up fighting with Flynnan under their basket."

"Don't go up under their basket," he said. "Shoot from wherever you are when you get the ball, man."

"What?"

"I seen your jump shot, Lassner. Just shoot."

The time-out was over. Elwood hobbled out, massaging his own thigh, and we took the ball up. We fed it in to Early and he drew three men. He spun out and five hands went up between him and the basket.

He didn't try and shoot over the hands. Instead he turned and lobbed a clumsy pass high in the air to me, halfway back to our end of the court.

"Shoot!" hissed Elwood.

I tossed it up, not even noticing which side of the three-point line I was on. It went in.



I panted a thank-you prayer and zeroed in on the ball, which was in Flynnan's hands. I threw myself in his path and forced him to give it up, miraculously avoiding destruction in the process. Elwood followed the ball out to Vanilla Dunk, who pumped, pivoted, pumped, head-faked, shrugged, anything to try to get out of Elwood's cage. He lifted the ball up and I batted it out of bounds. Elwood stole the inbound pass and scored on a solo drive for a layup. The Knicks brought it up and Otis, looking frustrated with Dunk, shot from outside. He missed. Elwood directed the ball to Early, who drove to the basket and was surrounded there. He threw it out to me where I stood at the top of the key. "Shoot!" said Elwood again. The ball floated up out of my hands and hit.

Tie game, four minutes left.

Elwood got too excited and fouled McFront on the next possession. McFront, ever solid, hit both from the line, putting the Knicks up two. Elwood brought the ball up to midcourt, then passed it directly to me and nodded.

Swish. My jump shot was on. Practice, I guess.

We traded turnovers again, and then the Knicks called a time-out with just over two minutes left. Their season was getting very, very small. We only went halfway to the bench and then just hovered there, waiting for the Knicks to come back out. There wasn't anything to say. We were too pumped up to huddle and trade homilies. Too much in the zone.

The Knicks brought it up and Flynnan staked out prime real estate under the net. I sighed and went in to try and box him out. He got the ball and I went up with him, tipped the shot away. Elwood took it and charged upcourt, slamming it home at the other end.

Since he was all the way up there anyway he decided to steal the inbound pass and do it again, and we suddenly had a four-point lead.

But Elwood was tired, and at the wrong end of the floor. They sent Vanilla Dunk up. I tried to stop him alone; we both jumped. I landed what seemed like a couple of seconds before he did. His jam was a poster shot, I heard later. I sure didn't see it.

We came up again and sent Early in to try and answer. He got caught in traffic and bailed it out to me, and I shot from where I stood all alone, in three-point territory.

That made four in a row for me and a five-point lead for the team.

They answered with a quick basket. So quick that I glanced at the clock; we were in a position to run the clock out. I brought it up slow, dribbling with my big body curled protectively around the ball.

"Nobody foul!" I heard Coach Wilder yell from the sidelines. Thanks, coach. I passed it to Elwood. He passed it to one of our guards, who passed it back to me. Flynnan lunged for the ball, and I passed it away again. It got passed around the circuit, everybody touching it except Early, who wouldn't have known what to do with it. He only existed in two dimensions, up and down. Time was beyond him.

The ball came back to me with two seconds on the shot clock. What the hell, I thought, and chucked it up. Swish.

We'd won. Five points up with 16 seconds. No way for them to come back. The Knicks milked it, of course, using two time-outs, scoring once, but two commercials later we got official confirmation. When the final buzzer sounded we had a nice, healthy three-point edge.

The locker room was mayhem. All the Disney executive people I'd managed never to meet wanted to shake my hand. The media swarmed, medialike. Some beer company exec gave Early Natt an award for series MVP and they stuck a mike in his face and Early just grinned and made this sort of bubbling sound with his lips, ignoring the questions. Another bunch of TV people isolated me and Elwood by our lockers, and I readied myself to do the talking once again.

"Well, Elwood, care to break your media silence for once?"

Elwood paused, then grinned. "Sure, asshole, let's break some silence. What you wanna know?"

The reporter clung to his pasted-on smile. "Uh, you were a real leader out

there, Elwood. Some would say the MVP belongs to you. You took an unconventional mix of talents and made them work together--"

Elwood stuck his big finger against the reporter's chest. "You wanna know who the star of this team is?" "Uh--"

"This dude here, man. He's taught himself to play without sampling, man, 'cause the skills they gave him sucked, and he didn't even tell anybody. Me, Early, Vanilla Fucking Dunk, all them other dudes are playing with exosuits, but not my man Lassner, man. He's a defensive star. He can hang with the exosuits, man, and that's a rare thing." He laughed. "He's also got this funny jump shot ain't too bad. Big white elbows stickin' out all over the place, but it ain't too bad. No suit for that either."

They turned to me. I nodded and shrugged and looked back to Elwood.

"How does it feel beating Michael Jordan?" The question was directed at either one of us, but Elwood picked it up again.

"Didn't beat Michael Jordan," he said angrily. "Beat Vanilla Dunk. If that was Jordan we wouldn't have beat him."

"What's going to become of your feud?"

Elwood's face went through a quick series of expressions; first angry, then sarcastic, then sealed up, like he wasn't going to talk any more. Then he went past that, smiling at himself for a minute before answering the question. What came out was a strangely heartfelt jumble of sports clichés. I don't mean to be insulting when I say that I don't think I ever saw Elwood speak from a deeper place within himself than at that moment. I really do think he was the last modernist in a sport gone completely postmodern.

"There ain't no feud. Alan Gornan is a rookie, man, and you got to give him time to put it together. I was honored to play alongside the man in New York and I'm honored to face him now. I hope we meet many times again--after the Heat wins this championship, that is. I'm sure he'll grow into the suit. Ain't no feud. I plan to beat the man every time I can, but when he beats me it ain't gonna be Michael Jordan then, neither, man. It's gonna be Gornan, or Dunk, or whatever he wants to call his ass, and when he does I'll shake the dude's hand. Here, you oughta ask the big white dufus some questions now." That should be the end of the story, but it isn't. Elwood and I were in a bar two hours later when the sports channel switched to a live broadcast of Vanilla Dunk's press conference, his last with the big Knicks logo on the wall behind him.

His agent spoke first. "Mr. Gornan has reached an agreement with United Artists Tokyo, regarding his motion picture and recording career--"

"What about the Knicks?"

"UA Tokyo has purchased Mr. Gornan's contract from Gulf + Western. This is a binding, five-year agreement that guarantees Mr. Gornan eight million a year before box-office--"

"I wanted to wait till the end of the season to make this announcement," said Dunk. "Didn't think it would come this quick, but hey"--he paused to sneer--"that's the way it goes. Look out, America, we're gonna make some movies!"

"Dunk--what about basketball?"

He smirked. "That's a little rough for me, y'know? Gotta stay pretty." He rubbed his face exaggeratedly. "You'll see plenty of action on the screen, anyway. Might even dunk a few." He winked.

Elwood and I sat watching, silently transfixed. The implications sank in gradually. The Jordan skills were gone; league rules stated that they were retired with the player. The occasion that Elwood had so slowly and painfully risen to had vanished, been whisked away, in an instant.

"Tell us about the films," said a reporter.

"Ahh, we're still working out my character. Called Vanilla Dunk, of course. Gonna do some fightin', some rappin', some other stuff. Not like anything you've ever seen before, so you'll just have to wait."

"The contract includes album and video production," added the agent. "You'll be seeing Vanilla Dunk on the charts as well as on the screen."

"Your whole sports career is over, then? No championships?"

He snorted. "This is bigger than a sports career, my friend. I'm bigger. Besides, sports is just entertainment, anyway. I'm still in the entertainment business."

"Your decision anything to do with Elwood Fossett?" He cocked his head. "Who?" I turned away from the television. I started to speak, but stopped when I saw Elwood's expression, which was completely hollow. And that is the end of the story.

I'd like to say we went on to win the championship, but life doesn't work that way. The Hyundai Celtics beat us in the next round of the playoffs. They seemed completely ready for our defense, and we were lucky to win one game. Elwood faded in and out, tantalizingly brilliant and then god-awful in the space of five minutes. The Celtics went on to lose to the Coors Suns in the final.

I myself did win a ring, later, after I was traded to the Lakers. That led indirectly to a fancy Hollywood party where I got to drunkenly tell Alan Gornan what I thought of him. I garbled my lines, but it was still pretty satisfying.

Elwood I mostly lost touch with after my trade. We partied when the Lakers went to Miami, and when the Heat came to L.A. I had him over for dinner with my second wife—an awkward scene, but we played it a few times.

When I think about what happened with him and Vanilla Dunk, I always come around to the same question. Assuming that it's right to view the whole episode as a personal battle between the two of them—who won? Sometimes I drive myself crazy with it. I mean, who came out on top, really?

Other times I conclude that there's something really pretty fundamentally stupid about the question.