

Some Kind of Grace

The basketball spins off the rim into a crowd of hands. Beneath the basket one player is banged out of bounds. The game stops.

Picking himself up the player walks back onto the court and confronts another player. Both are tall and thin, but muscular. One is black, the other is white.

"Hey, cut the bush-league stuff," the white says. He's smiling, yet it's intense. He does not seem to care that, as the only white player on the court, he would have no allies in a fight.

His opponent's eyes flicker downward; in an attempt to be cool he grins. No one moves to step between them. One of the white's teammates, standing at the top of the key, begins to bounce the basketball. Others raise eyebrows and move into positions. The game resumes.

Next time down on offense the affronted man calls for the ball. Holding it low to the floor, his hip to the defender as a shield, he moves the ball side-to-side rapidly then lifts up, his body extending into a smooth shot—right wrist flicking the ball away in a rainbow arch that flutters through the net some twenty feet later.

Each time on offense now the man calls for the ball. One of his teammates refuses to give it up, but the other three, sensing something of interest, pass the ball to him and then watch as his now-sullen defender has problems with this guy—who's a bit older and seemingly no quicker yet is somehow beating him to the hoop every time. The way the man sets up; misdirection or something as he seems relaxed and off-guard, as if he has no intention whatsoever of making a move towards the hoop, and yet, as his opponent's awareness slips just a bit, the man seizes a half-step advantage and slips by on a drive to the basket—or, as he

was doing to his opponent now, veering off the drive and pulling up for a ten-foot fadeaway jump shot.

"Whoo!" one of the man's teammates says, laughing, "Face, trick!"

Two of the defender's teammates have angry words for him, as they have been trying to help him by double-teaming the man to cut off his drive.

At the other end of the court, the defender is out to salvage his bruised ego. He tries his favorite shot—an eighteen-foot jumper from the top of the key—but the man blocks the ball, spins around him and drives the court's length for an easy slam-dunk—right arm swinging up, bent wrist cradling the ball as the forearm brushes against and down the rim, the ball shooting through with a resounding whoosh.

"Good game gentlemen," the man says to his teammates, "That was last game for me." He walks off the court towards the locker room.

Showers hiss and steam. Heat-flushed bodies scamper across the tiled floor, as naked men become little boys, snapping towels at each other, yelling ho and hee. Bare feet hurry over the cold, grey-blue smoothness to the steamy entrance of the showers.

On one of the wooden benches running between banks of grey lockers the man sits. Slowly he unlaces stiff leather sneakers—tightly crisscrossed to above his ankles. A sharp pain flashes in his knee. Already it is swelling. The broad nylon strap of his knee brace crackles as he separates the velcro fastenings, unwraps the outer gear and loosens the thin tubular frame. Splitting the mold around his knee he slips the brace off and sets it on the bench.

He knows he should get his knee ice-packed at the trainer's room. Yet he sits, forearms on thighs, and stares at the raised vents in the lockers before him. His frame fills the bench. He is six-foot-six or so, with dark hair trimmed short

yet still unruly. His high cheekbones and thin jaw-line look a bit delicate above the muscular neck and shoulders, the broad flat plane of his back. Except for his rippled abdomen, there are no abrupt bulges in his muscles. Long smooth contours. Even the legs, the thick hard thighs, are sleek as a greyhound's.

Fifteen minutes pass, finally he dresses. He shoulders his bag of gear, tightens his face into the stoic's mask and strides by the faces—casting glances at him, though discreetly, some puzzled at a faint recognition.

He takes the stairs two at a time and walks onto the Columbia University campus. He's headed towards Broadway, to the subway station and the safety of anonymity. His knee naggingly reminds him that he shouldn't have lost his temper. It was just a pick-up game—nothing on the line. Yet when he felt the two hands push his hips while he was in the air, his hand about to drop the ball in the hoop, and instead the ball spun off the rim as his body fell off-balance out of bounds—well, that was it. He was tired of being hammered by hacks.

Recalling the incident has angered him and quickened his pace; as he rounds the corner of a building and steps onto Broadway, he bumps into a short black man wearing a dark porkpie hat and carrying a battered saxophone case, nearly knocking him down. in a flash of anger he sidesteps the man and strides away.

His name is Sean MacFinn. He's twenty-five. On the official "New Jersey Net's" arena program he's listed as six-foot-seven, two-hundred-and-ten pounds,, but he knows it's six-foot-six, one hundred-and-ninety-five pounds. Which figures are right no longer matters; he will not be listed on the upcoming season's program. Two weeks ago the Nets cut him. His injured knee had not responded to rehabilitation. Or at least it didn't respond well enough for the team physician, who termed it "not 100 percent redeemable."

Where he is hurt most is on defense, when he has to move suddenly to match the player he's guarding. The mind will sense where to move, but his knee, suffering from the shock of a second cartilage operation, lags and wobbles slightly—slowing him just a fraction of a second. But at the level of the "National Basketball Association," where every player not a superstar becomes marginal, where the filling of a team roster has become a science—in short, when the role you've fought for is seven minutes a game of harrying some high-scoring opponent, Sean knows a micro-second may as well be an eternity.

Because knees are to basketball players as hooves are to horses—this thought strikes Sean as he stares at the back page of the "Racing News" being read by the man across from him on the subway car.

A grimace creases his face as he pictures the team doctor plying his trade at the track—perhaps spiking the horses oats with his cure-all painkillers. Called "butes," these drugs are quite effective; Sean barely felt his knee snap. Drifting along in that seemingly magical state of being there, he was at the peak of his game. A quality having nothing to do with the pharmaceuticals and everything to do with being smooth and natural. *With some kind of grace.* Time seemingly slowed. everything sharp, intense, crystal-clear.

He sways forward on the handhold as the train lurches to a stop. Eighty Sixth Street. He joins the line of people filing out and ducks through the exit.

Long slants of light greet Sean as he emerges onto the street. He turns to the right, towards Central Park. The sidewalk is crowded, a throng slowly herds. He attributes the people to a rumor that Elizabeth Taylor, Dustin Hoffman and other *glitterati* have decided that the neighborhood is *tres chic* and are snapping up the aging brownstones.

A mischievous grin breaks. "My God, it's Woody Allen!" he says.

Several people stop and look around. "Where?"

Not making eye contact, looking far down the street, Sean keeps walking—his face taciturn, features inscrutable.

He crosses Central Park West and enters the park. Every morning at six A.M. he rides his bicycle here on a five-mile loop. At least he did until he was cut. When he was given the bad news from the front office by phone—by that public relations jerk Tom Wilbur, not even by the coach—he was sitting with the bicycle directly in his line of vision and he slammed down the phone, jumped up and grabbed the bike—ready to take it to some junkyard in New Jersey and have it compacted into a small cube.

A stiff breeze sends a few leaves scraping across the sidewalk and he shrugs his overcoat tighter around him. At the fork he bears left, back towards Eighty Sixth Street, to his apartment,

Freshly-polished shoes click off large chunks of sidewalk. A closed umbrella taps in accompaniment. Sean, dressed to kill, walks rapidly. The creases of his pants snap smartly for-ward, cutting the night air.

From the shadows a lanky figure steps. A woman, dressed in a short skirt, her slender thighs showing a hint of baby fat as the stockings whisk back and forth. Leather boots reach just below her knees; well-polished, the shine of each boot is creased by laces crisscrossing the exposed backs.

Stopped by her "Hi there," Sean says, "Hello."

"What's a hunk like you doing out alone?" She smiles, coyly. "Want a date?"

As though considering he looks at her. A slight flutter of her blouse, three buttons open, reveals an upturned breast and a nipple wrinkled like a walnut by the chill.

"I'm sure you're worth it. But no thanks."

Behind her he sees a bent-over woman in a faded overcoat who has stopped about twenty feet down the sidewalk.

Turning, spotting the old lady, the hooker says, "Bitch! I thought I told you to git. Damn old hag. What you want, this?" She slides up her leather skirt and flashes a bare ass.

The woman's red eyes water with hate as she reaches down for the two overflowing bags at her sides.

"Git!" the hooker shouts. The woman turns and waddles off, a low moan escaping as her head bobs, the bags swing, sneakers plop.

Shrilly laughing the hooker turns back to Sean. "Well if you change your mind let me know; I'm usually around."

Sean has drawn away a step. "Yeah." Distracted, he stands motionless. She tilts her head suddenly and, backing off, studies him warily. He nods goodbye and walks away.

Once, he supposes, he was in love. She was a woman he kept seeing at the corner market. Something about the way she carried herself attracted him-the tilt of her chin, the poise of her shoulders, perhaps (he wasn't sure).

He'd said hello, finally, and walked her to her building, just a few blocks from his.

At first they saw each other quite often. They found an ease of intimacy with each other neither had ever experienced before.

Yet in less than a year the romance began to founder. Everything got difficult; she was under a lot of pressure at her advertising firm; he had the frequent absences of road trips. There was never enough time, when they met the sense of urgency saddened rather than satisfied...

Ahead of Sean now is the sign for the "Village Vanguard." He crosses the street and checks the club's billboard, where reviews of the jazz trio playing are

posted. He changes his mind about going to this show and walks towards the subway station.

Annoyance creases his brow. He's thinking that in Europe, where he played ball for two seasons before making the Nets, he never had to think about what type of jazz the act was. They were all good. Many of the musicians were Americans, drawn to Europe by the better pay, better audiences. There was much camaraderie, an easy rapport. *The common bond of exile.*

Green and red glimmerings dance on the wet oily tarmac . Two lines of traffic, engines idling, wait at the far side of the intersection.

Exhaust fumes mix with engine steam and rise through murky shafts of headlights. Then the signal light changes, engines roar and the cars are off to the next light.

People on the sidewalk take down umbrellas and shake beads of rain from the limp folds of fabric. With brisk strides they weave between the metal poles of construction scaffolding covering the sidewalk.

Through the shutters of the 'West End Cafe,' Eagle Russell watches people work through the rusty maze. Faces, flushed pink, hurry past the window—heads tossed back in thin-lipped laughter, the teeth glinting.

Eagle turns back towards the stage. Past the tables of patrons huddled in conversation is the service bar. Two waitresses stand, shifting weight from one foot to the other as they talk and joke with rapid gesturing of hands and gleeful looks.

To their right, on the other side of an archway, are pinball machines and video games. One man, short, balding, his feet splayed wide, ducks and bobs his

shoulders as he jams a joystick from position to position on a basketball game. "Whoee!" he says, "I got more moves than Ex-Lax!"

From the stage, Eagle, his mind elsewhere, distractedly watches the man's pregnant belly bounce around.

A waitress walks by, says, "Five minutes, Eagle."

He checks his watch, searches the bar for his musicians. They disappeared at the end of the last set with the stage manager, for whom Eagle has an intense dislike. The manager thinks the world of Eagle, though, always acts like a puppy dog trying to please. With a faint smile Eagle remembers the time the boy offered him some cocaine. He declined, to which the kid responded, 'You sure, I mean this stuffs as bad as your daddy's dick.'

At the kid's not quite getting it right Eagle had laughed.

Across the room from Eagle a thin crack of light broadens as the Manager's door opens. Three members of the quartet, escorted by the manager, walk towards the stage.

"About time boys," Eagle mentions.

At the sounds and motions of the band warming up the audience quiets. The manager—a tall, thin man wearing a dark, loose-fitting jacket and white sneakers—steps up to the microphone, slips it out of the gleaming pole, and, gesturing towards Eagle, says, "Welcome again ladies and gentlemen. For those of you who just got here, tonight we are proud to present one of the all-time greats in jazz..."

Eagle's cue. He walks into the spotlight. He hates this part; he has to stand there and grin like a monkey while the kid goes on and on about Eagle's twenty years with the Duke in that damn affected accent of his.

From a few rows back comes, "Man, how about letting them play?" The interrupter, a man dressed in a sky-blue, silken suit—his broad upper body too big at the shoulders for the chair in which he's tipped back—is a fresh arrival.

The stage manager pauses, glares down his nose.

Eagle nods thank you to the kid. Clarinet in his right hand, he turns to the band and motions a four-count.

They run through an old standard. Nothing very challenging. Easing into a set is what he tells the band, George, usually on the baritone sax, calls it easing through the set.

Finishing the song Eagle says, "Thank you. Now we'd like to do '*I'm In a Bad Way and That Ain't No Good Way*,' also by the Duke."

The man who interrupted before laughs and says, "Yeah, that's the song now *play* it." He twists sideways and holds up his glass. A waitress, on her way up another aisle, catches his signal, hesitates, then nods curtly and continues to the bar.

Eagle, not amused, nods to his band and they begin to play. His face is flushed; he saw that smile tighten on George's face. The thin mustache arched in contempt. High and mighty George. He's been with Eagle the longest—almost five years—but lately he's been distant, perfunctory. Besides being newer, the other boys are quite a bit younger than Eagle, so he hasn't expected much closeness with them. But with George it's always been different. They were in the Duke's band together. They were young, cocky and oh so cool then. Eagle can still see the faint smile of amusement on the Duke's face as, checking the tour bus before a gig, he would ask if the two badasses were on board.

Smiling himself at the memory he wraps up the song and moves into the next one on the set list.

"Jesus." The man sits forward, shakes his head. "Hey waitress, another Johnny Walker Black."

Nervous laughter races through the crowd. Eagle starts the band, tilts his sax up, as if wailing, and his suit coat sleeve slides down so he can check his watch. He decides to run straight through the set list.

In his younger days he never let hecklers or drunks bother him. He always had a reserve he could call upon, what he called his bank account—all the time he put in practicing, the highs from good gigs, those were the deposits. These days, though, it's as if a big rubber stamp, *Closed for Lack of Funds*, had come down hard. Too many gigs in holes like this one. Too many nights of playing—as legend had it Charlie Parker once did—to a gum-blot ground into the dance floor. Blowing at some mythical illusion, some fanciful wad that one imagined had far more sensibility than the so-called audience...

The band winds up the set and they take a break. Eagle heads by himself to the bar. He sits alone; his dark almond eyes, the set of his face, say *Do Not Disturb*. At a table to his right is his heckler.

"So you're saying I made a mistake playing in that game," the man is saying to a friend. "But it's the third game of the playoffs, for Christ's sake. We're talking the motherfuckin' N.B.A. No wimps allowed!" He takes a long sip of his drink.

His friend shakes his head and chuckles. "I'm not arguing that point. What I'm saying is that you knew your knee was banged up; you said it took a pretty good shot in practice. With one operation under your belt I would think you would know enough not to trust some team physician."

"Aghh," the man says, dismissing him with an imperious wave of his hand. "Easy for you to say."

"Look, I'm your friend, I'm just telling you what I think."

From the stage Eagle listens with amusement. He always likes to hear someone boring somebody else with talk of the glory days. Especially white boys. They always think they got it so tough.

A tap at his shoulder. George motions towards the stage. Eagle slides off the stool, they walk in silence, pick up their instruments, go through the motions of checking them out. The drummer and bassist show up. Before the manager can make his appearance Eagle launches into the last set.

They finish the song to scattered applause. Eagle sees his heckler throw a palm up, sigh with exasperation.

"It's all a matter of being there."

"I know what you're..."

"No you don't. You don't know anything about what I've been saying." The man looks to his right, sees the couple at the next table staring at him. The woman leans away, the man grips the arm of her fur coat to him. Both faces are drawn tight with displeasure.

"You don't have a clue either," he says to the couple, shaking his head, returning his attention to his friend.

Eagle has been staring at the man, so George steps up to the mike and announces the next song. Eagle pretends not to see George and gives the cue to start.

When they wrap that number the manager and the man are engaged in a discussion about whether or not he should have another drink. Made nervous by the sudden quiet the manager says, "Well, okay, one more. But only if you pay attention to the musicians."

"Why? These niggas can't play."

The man holding the woman in the fur lets out, "Oh, God."

"God? Dr. J—Mr. Julius Erving to you, he's God," the man mutters, his head down. Then he raises up and looks at the couple. "What do you know about God, about being there, huh? You ever play on the same court as God? Well I did." His eyes widen in glee. "Hah! I guarded God! What do you think of that?"

A large, tee-shirted bouncer has arrived to assist the manager, suddenly bold. "Sir, you're going to have to leave. Now I've seen you here before and I'm afraid I'm going to have to ban you for life."

"Whoo! Ban me from this hole. " He tips his chair forward until the legs are back on the floor. "You're doing me a favor."

The bouncer huffs his shoulders and moves to grab the man.

Eagle, still amused, says, "No, it's all right, he's not bothering us. Let him stay."

George raises his eyebrows and stifles a grin, then busies himself with fingering the valves of his sax. The bouncer stops mid-stride. The manager looks to the stage, his mouth hanging open in confusion. "But..." He looks around. About a third of the audience has left.

"We'll play some Coltrane, see if we can't liven things up for you," Eagle announces. He feels his musicians staring at him behind his back. They're nowhere near the set list now. He picks up his tenor sax, tells the band, "My Favorite Things."

The sax is slippery in his hands. Rivulets of sweat drip from his chin. He doesn't know why he picked Coltrane; he's always found him difficult, and, in fact, he usually stays closer to shore and avoids that territory—the so-called anti-jazz all the kids seem so hung up on now. For Eagle playing Coltrane is kind of like being in bed with a real fine woman but there's this chalkboard on your back and she's scratching her fingernails up and down on it. Beauty and the screech.

With a sidelong glance he sees the man watching him. He feels anger growing and he moves into the dark, brooding, farther reaches of Coltrane's melody. No longer is it notes he's reworking, it's whole chords now—fragmenting them, shifting the tonal centers, the notes becoming fresh echoes of the whole as he finds the unfettered.

A slow dull ache, something tucked away in forgotten corners within him, begins to build. Anger and ache rumble and mix, way down inside, and then move up his spine in a now familiar way, getting cooler and lighter before reaching his mouth, finally, where, blossoming like a flower, the feeling floats away, like a breeze.

He's home now. He glides through the end of the composition and, his sax sweet and soulful, eases back into a ballad.

When he finishes, what's left of the audience applauds. He turns to the band and murmurs, "Not bad. Meet me at the bar, I'm buying." Stepping up to the mike, he says, "Thank you. Good night."

He unclips his saxophone, disassembles it and gently places it in the case. He lets it shimmer in the stage lights a moment, then closes the top. He feels suffused with strength.

Behind him in the audience he hears a soft low whistle. It's that man, sitting by himself. "Now that's there," he says to the seat where his friend used to be.

Eagle steps down from the stage and walks towards the man. His features have softened; with rapt attention he stares at the tabletop.

Then, as if struck by something, the man chuckles, raises his head.

Reaching him Eagle stops. His right hand draws back, then he pushes an open palm forward. Two hands move together, spread fingers connect, lightly, as they rise up in a high five.