



# Somebody Has to Lose

By Craig Lancaster

From the collection *The Art of Departure*



From the *Burdon County Bugle*, November 4, 1997:

*Longtime residents of these parts know what they were doing on this date 12 years ago—Nov. 4, 1985. They were settled in front of their television sets to watch 3-year-old Mendy Grunwald, from right here in Burdon City, as she made an appearance on “The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson.”*

*Well, little Mendy did herself and the whole county—heck, the whole state—proud by sinking 10 shots in a row with a foam ball into a basket rigged up for the pint-sized point guard she was that evening. After this display of shooting prowess, Johnny Carson challenged her to*

*H-O-R-S-E, and she dispatched the comedian in five shots, earning the admiration of her host and the adulation of a nationwide TV audience.*

*Things haven’t been the same for Burdon County or Mendy Grunwald since. The hoopla lasted awhile after she and her parents returned home from California (she was even featured in People magazine), and in the ensuing years, Mendy has gone on to be every bit the basketball star everyone expected her to be.*

*This is all worth mentioning now as she is finally 15 years old, finally a high school freshman, and finally eligible to play for coach Paul Wainwright and the Burdon County Broncos. Practice starts today, and it’s safe to say that with Mendy Grunwald in the fold, folks around here expect the Broncos to end a 10-year state title drought and hang banner No. 9 from the rafters....*

SOME MEN TRUST THEIR EYES, SOME THEIR HEART. That first week in November, as always, Paul Wainwright put his faith in his nose.

On the first day of practice, the particular odor in the gymnasium told him that he again had come to where he belonged. It teased his nostrils even before he pushed through the swinging double doors, beckoning him onward as he walked through the dank tunnel that connected the locker room and coaches’ offices to the hardwood, past the orange-painted cinderblock walls bearing the pictures of players who were ghosts now at Burdon County High School but remained forever fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old in Paul’s head. He next passed under those stands that held the faithful, year after year, thousands of faces that he knew together and alone. His anxious footsteps, beating out a rhythm in time and a half just this once, every year, echoed through the empty gym. First week of November. In more than half of the years of his life, Paul Wainwright had made this inaugural walk, pulled along by the pungency from generations of sweat mixed with the body heat of a thousand crowds, the leavings of leather against wood, of sneaker soles and desire and heartbreak and euphoria. The reason he kept showing up, a quarter century now, lay in the corners of the gym that never got swept, in that worn spot along the baseline where every player he’d ever coached had stood,

in the peeling paint of the scorer's table, in the steel beams crossing the ceiling where now he looked and silently counted off his legacy teams—1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1986, state champions all. Paul Wainwright strode into the gym and saw signs, visible only to him, that marked the route he had traveled as a high school basketball coach. Down on the north end of the gym, forty-five degrees up and out from the free-throw line, lay the spot where Wendy McCaig's heave left her fingers in '74, falling through the basket at the buzzer, sending Paul's first team into the playoffs on a high. East regionals, state, home with the trophy, the start of it all. As close as Paul held the memory of that shot, and of Wendy, he remembered the setup pass even more clearly. Valerie Sneed then, Valerie Wainwright today, seeing the big center from Laurel flailing toward her, slipping a bounce pass eight feet to her right to Wendy, wide open.

Draw that line back across the lane, bisecting it, to the left block, and that's where Dana Winslow crawled through a thicket of girls for an offensive rebound and a flash layup in '83 against Dawson County, giving the Broncos an unlikely ticket to the playoffs and a state championship that astounded even Paul, that he could win with so flawed a team. He could draw lines all over this gym, perpendiculars and parallels and squiggles, and at each endpoint, a memory posted up.

Paul stood in the center circle, the whistle around his neck dangling against his black polo shirt, and went over his notes. To someone in the know, it would have seemed silly for him to have written it all down—twenty-five years into a routine that seldom changed, Paul could run his practices by rote—but he drew comfort from the exercise. In precise script, he had practice segmented perfectly, from basic dribbling drills to layup lines to the first wave of installing the offense. Paul felt fortunate that he had long ago persuaded youth league and junior high coaches in town to adopt a basic version of his set; it meant that he could quickly bring the girls up to speed every November before taking them even deeper, into the multiple options and cuts to which they had not yet been exposed. In two hours, he would know exactly who was going where—in addition to the varsity, his primary concern, he would have to fill junior varsity and C teams—and what, exactly, he'd have to work with for the next few months.

“Think fast,” Susie Michener said, and the sound of the flung ball slapping against the hardwood pulled Paul's attention from his notes. He reached out a hand, and the ball stuck. It always did

“You ready, Coach?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. They ready?” He grinned at his first-year assistant, the star of his last championship team, a group now a decade in the rearview mirror. He had persuaded Susie to come home and, he hoped, let him slide away from the job in a few years, if his nose ever told him it was time to go.

“They'll be out soon,” Susie said. She slapped at the ball in his hands, stealing it. Paul

dropped his notes and scrambled into a defensive stance, playfully daring his erstwhile guard to make a move. She jab-stepped at him, smiled and then slipped the ball under her arm.

“What do you think, Coach?” she asked. “Do you think we’re going to be any good?”

Paul reached for the scattered sheaf of papers. He looked back to the rafters. “You’re the last one in Burdon City to know what that’s like,” he said, his eyes guiding her to the banners. “To know what it takes. You and me, and that’s it. But I tell you what: In a few months, I think we’ll have ten, twelve girls who know the feeling.”

Susie looked at Paul, but he kept his eyes tilted toward the ceiling. “I’ve never heard you talk like that before,” she said. “Were you this confident when I played?”

The sound of the double doors swinging open drew their attention. Mendy Grunwald, socks flopping down her long legs like loose skin, waved.

“Start stretching, Mendy, while we wait for everybody else,” Paul said. And then, to Susie, low so only she could hear: “You never played with anybody like we’ve got coming.”

PAUL STARTED WITH THE SIMPLE STUFF: layup lines to get the kids used to the feel of the ball and their movements with it. Three or four dribbles, plant a foot, go to the basket. One line of shooters, one line of fetchers. The first girl to shoot, a freshman named Oberst, drew a clank of iron, the ball ricocheting back at her. She ducked as it flew past.

“That’s a lap,” Paul said, and Oberst peeled out of line and began her plodding trip around the periphery.

Mendy was next. Two dribbles and she was off her feet, laying the ball gently against the glass, underhanded. It dropped through.

Motion drills were more of the same. Mendy was quicker out of the blocks, longer, more fluid than the other girls, moving seamlessly from one drill to the next, her long, slender, sure legs carrying her across large gaps of hardwood with quickness and grace. One of the things Paul had to get used to, years earlier when he was starting out as a scared young coach, was the peculiar way many girls moved. Basketball maneuvers didn’t come naturally to them; the motions were learned behaviors, and they often came across in herky-jerky fashion.

It had never occurred to Mendy to play that way. Paul had known her since she was a baby, and for most of that time, she had carried a basketball. It was almost an extension of her, a part of her body. Here she was, a six-foot, two-inch freshman, growth and muscle maturity still well ahead of her, and already she had more talent than Paul had seen in Burdon County, or anywhere else. When Mendy caught him grinning, he winked at her.

BY THE TIME THE JUNIORS AND SENIORS REPORTED FOR PRACTICE, an hour in, Paul had seen enough. As per usual, the freshmen—Mendy excepted—and all but two sophomores would be dropped to the junior varsity and C teams, returned to the slow cooker of the lower levels for more seasoning. He sent those girls to one end of the gym with Susie and turned his focus

to the ten who had made the cut. Looking at them together, he saw more possibilities than he had allowed himself to dream of in the parched decade behind him.

There was Reese Cacciola, a senior point guard. Paul didn't much like her mouth, but he loved the way "Cash" would crawl inside the jersey of an opposing player, never yielding, never stopping. He'd put Sabrina Newman, a junior, at one of the wings. He could find more talent down on the other end of the court with Susie's group, but Paul figured Sabrina's hustle would win a game, maybe two, and that could mean everything. Another junior, Victoria Ford, would start in the backcourt opposite Cash. Senior Vanessa Samples, the only black girl on the team (one of only four in the whole town), was a tree trunk anchor for the middle. Nancy Plummer, Amanda Newman, Jana Lundquist and Sandy Madsen would hold down the bench and provide depth the likes of which Paul hadn't seen in a long while.

That left Mendy.

"Mendy can play anywhere," he told Susie, sidemouthing, toward the end of practice, as the girls ran yo-yos—sprints from baseline to free-throw line, from baseline to midcourt, from baseline to the far free-throw line, from baseline to baseline.

"We knew that, right?" Susie said.

"Yeah, but knowing it and seeing it ... come on, Suze, imagine the possibilities. You know what we can do with her handling the ball?"

"Pick-and-rolls up high."

"Yep. We can pick teams to death. On defense, we can double-team anywhere on the court and let her play center field. We can use her as a decoy. We can shut down half the floor and dare individual players to beat us. It opens up everything."

Susie frowned.

"What?" Paul said.

"We've gotta be careful, you know. Cash figures this is her team, her year. It could be a chemistry problem."

Paul waved her off. "Cash will be fine. She's smart enough to understand what's happening."

"Smarts aren't the question, Coach. She spent her summer at Blue Star and AAU camps. By her thinking, it's her moment. I'm just saying, it'll be better if the team doesn't perceive that there's a star system here."

"There's not."

"No, of course ..."

"We're running the same sets we always run, the same options, everything," Paul said, and he was immediately taken aback by his apparent peevishness. "Only the players have changed, and in one case, significantly. They'll understand that."

Their drill finished, the girls lingered on the baseline, lacing their hands behind their heads and gulping air.

“Grab some water and then huddle up,” Paul said, and the girls stampeded toward the hallway.

“Coach?” Susie said.

“Yeah?”

“All I’m saying is, be sure you ride Mendy just as hard as you do the others, if not harder. They’ll be watching you, watching us, to see how she’s treated. They know how good she is. Plus, Mendy can take it.”

“HANDS IN, BRONCOS,” Paul said, holding his right arm up and out, his palm stretched perpendicular to the ground. The girls crowded in and reached for his hand.

“One week from today, we play Custer County,” he said. “That’s as much of the schedule as you need to think about. A lot of people around us seem to be interested in what’s happening in February and March, but that is not our concern, so when we’re here, together, I don’t want to hear a word about it, OK?” He scanned the eyes looking back at him, making contact with each set. “A lot of people will talk to you about what it means to be a Bronco. They’ll tell you that you have to live up to something. You do, but it’s not what they’re saying. You have to live up to your own duty to play as hard as you can, every minute, every step of the way. You show up to practice ready to go, out of respect to yourself and your team. You back each other up. You will never go wrong here if I have your complete effort, all the time. If you give this team less than that, you will not last. Those who play for the team will not let you stay. Do you understand?” The girls all nodded. “You pay attention, you learn, you apply what you’ve learned on that basketball court, and I guarantee you, the rest will take care of itself. This is our journey, together, and it belongs to us. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” the girls shouted.

“OK, let’s break it down. ‘Team’ on three. One, two, three ...”

In unison came the shout: “Team!”

THE GIRL SLUNG THE BACKPACK OFF HER SHOULDERS, opened the pickup door and dropped the bag into the rear of the cab as she settled into the seat. Dirk Grunwald patted his daughter’s leg.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“Nothing.”

“Where’s the smile?”

“Taking a break.”

Dirk put the truck in gear. “First day of practice, I expected a little more enthusiasm. Things not go well?”

Mendy tinkered with the truck’s radio, moving the dial off Dirk’s preferred country and western and finding something more palatable on the town’s only FM station, a hundred-watt

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basement outfit anchored by a morning deejay-sidekick combination who called themselves T.J. and the Rake.

Now, by late afternoon, the morning duo was probably halfway into a case of Keystone and the station was on autopilot, pumping out tunes and commercials in monetarily pleasing proportions. Dirk, who forbade his only child from listening to T.J. and especially the overly salacious Rake, decided to tolerate the shift in tone.

"Practice went fine. I really like the girls," Mendy said. "It's just ..."

Dirk, piloting the pickup down Burdon City's main drag, looked sideways at his daughter. "Just what?"

"The other girls don't always see what I see. I hit two of them in the face with passes today. They were open, but they didn't know it. I really felt bad."

Dirk chuckled even as his girl sat quiet in her seat. Mendy's wide-eyed innocence was perhaps his favorite thing about her; he loved that she could be so astoundingly good at something and yet not recognize her own talent enough to be arrogant about it. From the very beginning, he had approached her basketball playing from divergent points of view. On one hand, he felt boundless pride in her ability and potential, knowing that the game could carry her to incredible opportunities. On the other, he braced for the day that renown would somehow fundamentally alter her, chipping away at the underlying sweetness and replacing naivete with hard jadedness. It hadn't happened yet, thank the Lord, but high school ball—at this high school in particular, for this coach in particular—would ratchet the pressure on her, he knew.

"Honey, let that go. It's the first day. They'll get used to you, and you'll get used to them. What else is going on?"

Mendy stared at the floorboard.

"Mend?"

She looked up, red-eyed.

"Cash."

"Cash what?"

"You know, Reese Cacciola."

"Oh, right. What about her?"

"Dad, I think she hates me."



Dirk looked at his daughter, who could no longer fight off the tears. “Oh, honey, nobody hates you. That’s silly.”

“She teased me the whole time. Asked me if I’d ever missed a shot. Said she figured no one else would have to shoot with me on the team.”

Dirk reached across the bench seat and tucked his daughter’s long blond hair behind her ear. “Honey, it sounds like she’s just having some fun with a newbie. You knew this was coming. We talked about it.”

Mendy sniffled. “I told her that she knows the offense better than I do, that there’s the possibility of a shot on every pass. What a dumb thing for her to say.”

“And what did she say to that?”

“She asked me if Coach told me that, and asked me if he also told me that I’d win a state championship. She said, ‘He told me the same thing, and I haven’t won one yet.’ ”

Dirk’s gut tightened, as if gripping and metastasizing around a brick. The whole blessed town was going overboard with this thing, in his estimation. This basketball season had commenced in a perfect storm of amplified civic pride. It was the city’s 125th anniversary, the 25th season as coach for Paul Wainwright and ten solid years since Wainwright’s team had won state, and Dirk’s daughter was openly expected—destined, some believed—to make it a coronation. He could see the manifestations of overhyped interest along Main Street in the banners proclaiming Bronco Pride, in the silly newspaper article that morning that relived the ancient history and put the expectations of an entire county on the shoulders of the scared girl beside him. Reese Cacciola, a senior down to one last shot at a legacy, no doubt felt the pressure, too, and it had put her at loggerheads with Mendy.

Needing a lifeline for his daughter, if only for a day, Dirk went to the well of his own considerable, and largely forgotten, athletic career as a reserve on dominant UCLA teams in the ’60s.

“Baby, what did Coach Wooden always say?”

Mendy looked up and saw her father’s grin, and that did it. She smiled back at him.

“Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out,” she recited.

Dirk reached out and rubbed the top of her head. “Learn it, love it, live it.”

PAUL GLANCED UP FROM HIS COMPUTER SCREEN and saw Eric Embry on the other side of his office door. The sportswriter held up his left wrist, showing Paul his watch, triggering the memory: Paul had told him to come by around five-thirty. In eighteen years of dealing with the guy, Paul had found Embry to be many things, some of them not so good. But damned if he wasn’t persistently punctual.

Paul held up a hand, asking for a minute. He was done inputting the day’s grades and didn’t really need the time, but he enjoyed needling Embry. Sure enough, the reporter rolled



his eyes and paced down the hallway. Paul counted off ten seconds, twenty, thirty, then walked to the door and opened it.

“Come on in, Eric.”

The sportswriter, now at the far end of the hall, turned and came back at a half jog, a belly roll loosing the grip of his golf shirt and spilling over the waistband of his Dockers. “Thanks, Coach. I’ll be quick. I’ve gotta get back and start laying out the section.”

Paul ushered him in. “Have a seat.” Settling into his own chair and rolling back from the desk, Paul put his feet up. “What can I do you for?”

“How’d the first day go?”

“Good. Real good.”

“Do you have the varsity picked out yet?”

“Yep. We’ll go with the Newmans, Ford, Samples, Grunwald, Plummer, Lundquist, Madsen and Cacciola, at least to start the season.”

“Who’ll be starting?”

“You’ll find out a week from today, just like everybody else.”

“Oh, come on, Paul.”

Paul put his feet on the floor and leaned in. “Come on, nothing. We go through this every year, Eric. I’ll pick the starters when I’m ready. We’ve had one practice.”

“Can you at least tell me if Mendy Grunwald will start? I mean, she has to, right?”

“Says who?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Is there some law about who starts that no one told me? I mean, I’m only the coach.”

“Paul, Jesus. Stop busting my balls here.”

Paul threw his hands up. “No, I’m serious. I read your story today, and I figured we didn’t even have to play the season. I imagine they’re hanging the state championship banner right now, and you’re in here with me, missing it.”

“Oh, come on.”

Paul pulled open his desk drawer and retrieved the clipped-out article he’d stashed that morning. “Here it is right here: ‘Folks around here expect the Broncos to end a 10-year state title drought and hang banner No. 9 from the rafters.’ ”

“Paul, you know as well as I do what people are saying and expecting. I didn’t write anything that isn’t true. You know everybody’s been waiting for Mendy to get here. It’s pretty disingenuous to act as if you don’t.”

Paul stood up and moved to the front edge of his desk, towering over the sportswriter.

“No, I’ll tell you what’s disingenuous: For anybody to elevate a girls basketball team—and a freshman kid—to a matter of civic import. They pay me a \$3,200-a-year stipend to run an athletic program, and my job is to make it a positive experience for twenty-some-odd girls,

not to turn one girl into a superstar. So I'm telling you the God's honest truth, Eric. I'm still evaluating the team. And if you print any of that except 'I'm still evaluating the team,' I'll never speak to you again."

"OK. Jeez. Take it easy. This is going to be thin."

Paul sat down again and shuffled papers on his desk, trying not to break out in laughter.

"I understand the tough spot you're in, Eric. Here's something you can use: I'm really heartened by what I've seen from the team so far"—at this, Embry for the first time began scribbling in his notebook—"and I'm eager to see how we come together in the next few weeks and months. These student-athletes have been well-schooled at every level of basketball, and we have a good mix of returning kids and new talent. If we work hard and develop the way I think we can, we'll have a chance to do some really good things."

Embry wrote down the final few words, clicking his pen against the notebook when he was finished. "Great. Thanks, Paul."

When the sportswriter was halfway through the door, Paul spoke again.

"Hey, Eric, off the record?"

"Sure."

Paul gave him a look that was half smirk, half knowing grin.

"We're going to be really, really good," he whispered.

PAUL REACHED FOR THE HANDLE TO THE FRONT DOOR AND THEN PULLED HIS HAND AWAY, his fingers tickling the air in front of his face as if he had received a shot of static electricity. Sighing, he grabbed the brass knob and turned it.

A faint hint of what must have been dinner glanced across his nose.

"I'm home," he called into the dark of the house.

No answer.

He closed the door and set his gym bag down in front of it on the tile landing.

"Let's not start this again so soon this season," Valerie said, peering at him over the railing from above. "If you leave it there, I'll trip over it tomorrow morning. Put it somewhere else." And just like that, she was gone. Paul kicked the bag two feet to the left, onto the carpet, and bounded up the stairs.

"What's for dinner?"

Valerie wielded a spatula to scrape the remnants of something out of a Pyrex dish and into the garbage. "What was for dinner was lasagna," she said. "Where were you?"

"First day of practice, Val."

"I know that. Linda Grunwald called two hours ago, asking us to dinner Sunday. She said Mendy was home."

Paul opened the refrigerator and shoved his head in. "Mendy doesn't have to log grades or talk to the guy from the *Bugle* or a lot of other things I do."

“Don’t get cute with me, Paul. I’m just saying that I wish you would call if you’re going to be late.”

“Fine, all right? Is there any left?”

“Top shelf.”

While his late dinner bubbled under the glare of the microwave, Paul fished his wallet out of his pants and stacked it, along with his school ID badge and car keys, on the edge of the breakfast nook for easy retrieval.

“Hey, Hugh, how’s it going?” he said, nodding at his son. The boy had receded into the sectional in the living room, quietly wrestling with homework.

“Dad,” Hugh acknowledged.

“Where’s Zoe?” Paul asked.

By now, Hugh had floated back into his math text, leaving his mother to field the question.

“Where do you think?”

Paul stroked his goatee and squinted at his wife. “Well, I don’t know,” he said, his voice contorted into a comic impression of Inspector Clouseau. “Could it be London? No, no, no. She was there last week. How about Omaha? No? Casper, Wyoming? Gosh, dear wife, it could be so many places. Won’t you help a husband out?”

Valerie closed the dishwasher, hard. “Your dinner’s ready. It’s been a long day. Why don’t you just eat?”

Paul reached into the microwave for his plate, and then pulled back, his fingers burned.

“Goddammit!”

“Come on, Dad, I’m trying to work here,” Hugh said.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Valerie came over, pot holders on her hands, and shooed Paul away. “Sit down,” she said.

“I’ll bring it.”

Paul skulked to the dining room and took a seat. When Valerie set the plate before him, he reached out and held her wrist and felt her flinch.

“Sit down and keep me company?”

“Paul, it’s late.”

“Just for a minute?”

She pulled her arm away and moved to the seat opposite him, at the other end of the table. She smoothed her skirt across her thighs as she sat.

“Don’t you want to know how practice went?” he asked.

“Tell me.”

“OK, I will: It was fantastic.”

“That’s great. How did Mendy do?”

“Fantastic! Mark my words, Val. She’s going to be the best player I’ve ever had.”

Valerie no longer looked peeved, as she had since Paul walked in, but rather hurt. “I



thought I was the best player you've ever had," she said, and Paul knew that (a) she wasn't kidding around and (b) he'd stepped in it.

"Oh, baby, you're better than the best. You're my favorite."

The storm rolled across Val's face again, and now she pivoted to concern. "It's great that you're excited. Just don't get carried away."

"Who's carried away?"

Valerie smoothed the tablecloth, pressing her hands against the fabric, her arms extended at a flat angle. "You. Everybody."

"No ..."

She cut him off. "Just ... Paul, I'm tired. Let's talk about this another time."

She stood. He rose to meet her.

"What's up with you, Val? It seems like you're pissed off about more than my missing dinner."

Valerie moved to the other side of the table. Paul moved with her, cutting off the path she intended to take. "Paul, just drop it."

"No, come on. Talk to me."

"Give me your plate."

Paul picked up the dish, a way-back wedding gift, and handed it across the table to her. Valerie carried it into the kitchen, where she ran hot water over it and scrubbed at the barnacles of stubborn food. "It occurred to me just today that this happens every year, and yet I forget about it until it's upon us again," she said.

"What?"

"Basketball season. We won't see much of you. I can just about count on your not doing much of anything around this house for the next three months."

"Our father, the ghost," Hugh tossed in. Paul turned his head, annoyed, but Valerie started up again, retrieving his attention.

"You were supposed to go get Buster's nails trimmed this week. Did you do that?" Paul opened his mouth to answer, and she interrupted him again. "No, of course you didn't. Don't worry. I'll do it. If that dog has to wait for you, he'll sound like a tap dancer when he walks."

"Well," Paul said. "I had no idea I was such a disappointment around here."

"For you to be a disappointment, we'd have to have expectations," Hugh said, bobbing back into the conversation.

"Hugh, hush," his mother said.

"That's enough for me," the boy said, closing his textbook and standing. "I'll see you in the morning, Mom. See you in March, Dad."

Paul took a step toward following his son, but Valerie reached out and grabbed at his hand, shaking her head when he looked at her. Paul had never known such naked bitterness from the boy, although he also immediately conceded that they'd been headed to this

Paul’s policy with the kids—by design with Zoe and by the boy’s choice with Hugh—had been to give them latitude and remain available to talk. So far, knock wood, Zoe hadn’t let him down.

patch of discontent for a while. It wasn’t just that Hugh seemed to favor his mom; that had been true from the very beginning. But recent years had pushed them further away from each other, like continental drift. In eighth grade, three years earlier, the boy who came into the world as Paul Jr. opted to go by his middle name, which had wounded Paul more deeply than he had ever let on. Any common ground between father and son had long since eroded. Hugh played football, a game that Paul found to be unduly violent. The boy’s nascent sense of politics and culture fell in line with that of Valerie. He had worn out her Stephen Covey books and various autobiographies of titans of industry. (The latest, a tattered copy of *Iacocca*, had sent Paul into solitary peals of laughter, imagining such obvious and uninspired titles for his preferred reading: *Jay G.!* Or maybe Hemingway’s *Really Big Fish!*) His wife and son’s blue-chip-stock reading left Paul to share his love of Flaubert and Nabokov with Zoe, who might have evened things up in this little domestic quarrel had she not employed the good sense to stay upstairs and out of the fray.

“Where does he get the idea he can talk to me that way?” Paul asked.

Valerie smiled slightly, causing him to wonder if it was meant to calm him or reveal her endorsement of their son’s jibes. “Give him a little space on this one. He’s just frustrated.”

“Well, so am I, now.”

“I’ll just be glad when this one’s over,” she said. “I’m going to bed now.” She leaned across, giving Paul a peck on the lips. She pulled away as he tried to slip his arms around her.

IN A HOUSE GONE ABRUPTLY SILENT, Paul caught the late news out of Billings downstairs in the den, his mind a tangle of thoughts on three fronts—work, home, basketball. As ever, it was the last one that seemed easiest to figure out. He etched X’s and O’s into his gray matter, moving them around as he considered the possibilities that Mendy had opened up—overloaded offensive sets, give-and-go inbound plays, defenses that he might once have considered gimmicky but now saw as viable. When he turned off the light and headed again for the stairs, it was with a self-satisfied grin splattered across his face. In a few hours, he would commit the plays to paper. In the weeks ahead, he would see them play out in practice and, if they worked there, in games.

From under Zoe’s closed door, he saw light seeping into the carpet. He gave a knock.

“Go away, Hugh.”

“Honey, it’s me.”

Next came the audible bounce of Zoe’s bed as she moved, and in the several seconds that followed, Paul wondered if she might be stashing something. Just as quickly, he scolded himself. Suspicions about Zoe and what she did when she wasn’t around the rest of the family (which was most of the time) had certainly found purchase, but they were owned mostly by Valerie. Paul’s policy with the kids—by design with Zoe and by the boy’s choice with Hugh—had been to give them latitude and remain available to talk. So far, knock wood, Zoe hadn’t let him down.

The door opened. Zoe stood impassively, in a black T-shirt and a pair of gym shorts. The shorts were his, Paul noted, another manifestation of Zoe’s annoying, yet somehow charming proclivity for taking whatever she wanted from the community laundry.

“What’s up, Daddy-o?”

Zoe smiled as she said it, but her black fingernails thumped insistently on the other side of the door.

“Just saying hey.”

“Hey!” She smiled again, wider this time, and Paul surmised that she was being playful. He hoped so, anyway. It had become increasingly difficult to tell.

He stepped through the open door, surprising his daughter, who stumbled backward a bit as she yielded the path. “Working on homework?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess. Carlson has us reading *The Grapes of Wrath* this quarter. I’m trying to get into it.”

Paul sat on the bed and flopped an arm over Buster the bulldog. “One of the greats. You’ll love it.”

Zoe crossed the room to the nightstand and gathered up the book. Paul looked at the walls of her room, spotting a concert poster for the Feds and the Diablotones, whatever those were. Zoe had brought it back from Oregon, where she had spent a few weeks the previous summer with her cousin on Val’s side.

“You really loved it in Portland, huh?”

She tossed the book to him, hitting him in the chest. “Oh, Daddy-o, it was the best.”

“I thought Seattle was the—what do you say?—the bomb.”

“Not anymore. Now come on, talk to me about this book. Like, what’s the deal with Chapter 3? This guy gets out of prison and tries to find his family, and then there’s a freaking turtle. That’s weird.”

Paul patted the bed, inviting Zoe to sit. She plopped down.

“That chapter is intercalary,” he said.

“What?”

“Intercalary. I-N-T-E-R-C-A-L-A-R-Y. Remember it. It’ll blow Mr. Carlson’s mind if you ever say the word. Basically, what it means is it’s been interposed in the book to illustrate



something that illuminates the theme of the story. In this case, it's a metaphor for Tom Joad and his family and the migrants in general: They keep going, no matter how hard or how slow, or how long it will take to get there. They're tough and tenacious, just like a turtle."

"And they're literally carrying their home with them," she said.

"That, too."

"Sweet! I think you just did my homework. Thanks, Daddy-o."

"Why you ..." Paul reached across the bed and looped an arm around his daughter's neck, pulling the girl into a headlock and applying a weapons-grade noogie to her amid a cacophony of giggles.

"Dad, stop it." She laughed harder, and he bore down. Buster clambered to his feet and nipped playfully at Paul's sleeves, trying to join the fun.

"Dad!"

Paul released her, and she fell back onto the bed, laughing.

After she caught her breath, she sat up again.

"How was practice?"

"Really good," he said. "I think it's going to be a fun season."

"Mendy's really good, isn't she?"

"She is. But you knew that."

"Yeah. This town's going nuts for her."

"It'll die down."

"You sure?"

Paul wasn't. "Yes."

"Dad?"

"Yeah, sweetie?"

"Can we go shoot some baskets? Like we used to?"

Paul looked at his watch. 10:45 p.m. "Now? Really?"

"Please?"

IN THE DREAMLIKE GLOW OF THE SLEEPY GYMNASIUM, with the yellow sodium lights illuminating half the court and darkness lapping at the corners, Paul watched and fetched as Zoe flung basketballs at the hoop. Her form, picture perfect just as he had taught it to her years earlier, ensured that more balls went in than did not. Paul couldn't help but think that had Zoe's interests not lain elsewhere, she might have been a terrific player for him.

And then, on the next shot, he was glad it had never worked out that way. In a different set of circumstances, she might never have asked to be in the gym at this moment. The vision came on like a thunderclap—Paul, seeing himself in his dotage, remembering his life not as a sequential narrative but rather as a series of snippets that whipped through his head faster than he could make out the finer details. Superimposed on the seventeen-year-old girl in front of him

now was his memory of Zoe at birth, at one, at two, at three—her mind a sponge even then, her heart full of love and tenderness, her soul old, from the very beginning. He could see that girl, and he could see what she had become, and he felt the depth and fierceness of his love for her. He knew he would treasure this fast-dying day far beyond its end.

THE FAIRWAY SPLIT LIKE A BROKEN HEART. Valerie's ball dropped in for a soft landing and rolled to a spot dead center in the brown-flecked grass.

"Somebody's been practicing," Grant Lundquist said, whistling and cupping a hand over his brow as a hedge against an ambitious November sun.

"What can I say? Business has been very, very good," she replied, shaking her hips boogie-style as she ceded the tee box to her playing partner. "Lucky break to get such a nice day this late in the year. I'm glad you thought of this."

Lundquist's porterhouse hands and fencepost legs marked him as a former athlete, and the gut spilling over his belt gave away the office-bound years that had followed. After a rickety backswing—Valerie stifled a giggle at how her high school sweetie's head came up and his shoulders came off the line—he ripped through the release, launching the ball to a spot a good eighty yards ahead of Valerie's and well off target, into the rough.

"Damn."

Valerie laughed. "Come on, slugger. Let's get going. I need to hustle if we're going to get nine holes in."

"I NEED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT SOMETHING." Grant leaned against his passenger-side door. Valerie opened her own car and hung through the window.

"It's about Paul and the team," he said.

She dug a fingernail into the seal around the window. "I figured."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just ..."

"Yeah?"

"Look, I really hate this time of year, OK?"

Grant peeled back the Velcro on his golf glove and wriggled out of it. "Well, I don't have to tell you why this year is different—for the team and the whole town."

"Mendy."

"Yes, Mendy. And what Mendy represents. She's the closest thing to a celebrity this town has ever had."

Valerie shook her head. "She's just a baby, Grant."

"Maybe so, but there's no putting this thing back in the bottle. Frankly, I'm worried that Paul's going to muck it up. You know what I'm talking about. I don't think I'm speaking out of turn."

Valerie waved a hand. “No, you’re fine. I hear you. What do you want from me?”

Grant moved closer. The hairs on Valerie’s arm stood at attention.

“Talk to him. Try to get him to play ball, so to speak, with the rest of the town. People are really into this thing, Val. They want to hear from him—and with the first game less than a week away, they should have heard from him by now. They want to have pep rallies and fundraisers and lots of other stuff, too. Between Mendy and this team and the town’s 125th, there’s a whole lot of pride in Burdon City that’s looking to get out. Will you talk to him?”

Valerie expelled a heavy breath. *I’ve been telling him this*, she thought. *He’s been on autopilot, and I told him it would bite him. Here it comes.* “I’ll try. I can’t promise more than that. You know Paul. He does what he wants to do.”

Grant set a hand on Valerie’s arm. She tingled at his touch, one she knew as a girl and found herself thinking about as a woman. “I’ll be blunt, Val. He’s been coasting on those eight championships for a long time, running that team like his own kingdom, but people—important people who carry a lot of water around here—are getting impatient, and when Paul acts like the town isn’t a part of this thing, it only makes it worse. I saw Eric Embry at the Stockman last night, and he told me Paul wouldn’t let the *Bugle* cover practice yesterday. That’s nuts.”

An instinct to defend seized up in Valerie, surprising her. “He’s never let the paper into practice.”

“That’s not really the point, Val. It’s different this year. This isn’t just his team, not now. It belongs to everyone. I can’t remember the last time I saw Paul at a Kiwanis meeting or at the Elks. He needs to share this with the town, or the town’s going to turn on him. I’m saying that as respectfully as I can.”

Valerie pushed her sunglasses onto her nose and started her car. “I’ll talk to him,” she said.

“Thank you,” Grant said, backing away as she pulled out of the parking space.

ON THE DRIVE TO HER OFFICE, Valerie thought of a summer, so long ago and yet so cinematic, even now, when two young men drew her fancy and she chose the one a few years older, the one who stoked that feeling in her—a sort of *whoosh* that would travel from her head straight to her crotch, dancing along her spine on the in-between. The one with a nimble, tactical mind on the court and a gentle demeanor away from it. She remembered thinking how she and Paul would be unstoppable together, their similarities converging and amplifying, and their differences fitting together like one hand into another.

But that had been long ago, before she noticed or cared that Paul could be so unbending to anything but his own sense of things. She remembered thinking once that his coaching acumen would take them somewhere, maybe to a big-time college program, and she scoffed aloud at that memory now. Their life would always be like this. He coached little girls. He taught literature



to kids who didn't care, who would either end up running the family farm in Burdon County or running far, far away—Missoula or Bozeman if they were headed to college, Denver or Salt Lake or San Francisco or Seattle after that. In any case, they would leave and wouldn't be back, and most of them wouldn't give a damn about Mr. Wainwright or his notions about George Eliot once they were gone.

At a stoplight, Valerie considered all of this and slammed the heel of her hand against the steering wheel. At forty-two years old and well removed from that girl blossoming into womanhood and making snap judgments about her future with breezy surety, she wondered now, not for the first time, if she had bet on the wrong horse.

THE CLAMOR OF THE LUNCHTIME CROWD in the teachers lounge rippled around him, but Paul scarcely noticed as he fell in deep with a book he had dug out of the basement early that morning. Zoe's literature assignment had stirred something in his cranium, a remembrance of reading a book about the writing of a Steinbeck biography—a biography of a biography, Paul had once called it. Now, having found the book and renewed acquaintance with it, Paul was there in the house in Sag Harbor with the author, rooting through the great man's freezer and arguing with himself over whether to partake of an instant dinner. The biographer had been given the keys to the house for a weekend, a chance to reconcile with Steinbeck's ghost, and Paul felt the strum of envy at such an opportunity.

The uneasy settling of a body into the seat next to Paul broke the trance.

“Got a minute?”

Paul closed the book and pursed his lips, looking at Marvin Waddell. The rotund principal wriggled in the hard plastic chair and tugged at the bottom of his shirt, trying to smooth it over prodigious mounds of flesh.

Waddell leaned forward and clasped his hands on the table. Paul looked down at the man's knuckles. They were squeezed white.

“Marvin, you don't look so good.”

The principal laughed—but it was small, tentative, as if he didn't intend for it to get out. He ran his right hand through the hair at his temples, dappled with gray, to the back of his neck. “I've got a request from some of the parents.”

“Oh? Which ones?”

“Come on now, Paul. This is hard enough.”

“OK. What's the request?”

“They want to form a booster club.”

“So let 'em. It's a free country.”

“They mean the real deal, Paul. Affiliated with the athletic department, official fundraisers, a weekly meeting with you ...”

Paul picked up his book and opened it again. “Absolutely not.”

“Now, just hear me out.”

Paul closed the book and dropped it to the table. The teachers at the nearest table, Matsler and Renfro, ejected from their conversation and looked at Paul and Marvin.

“I’m not doing it, Marvin.”

“Why?”

“Why? A hundred reasons why. This town’s already half crazy about this thing, and we’ve had one practice. Now, you want to endorse this madness by bringing these people into the school under the banner of the athletic department. No way. I won’t do it.”

“Maybe it won’t be that bad.”

“Not that bad? Are you kidding me? I can think of no suffering quite so profound as having to listen to those people from the stands twenty-five times a year and then run tape for them every Monday night so they can tell me to my face what I’m doing wrong.”

Marvin unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt and rolled up the sleeves.

“Look, Paul, I’ve stomped on this thing before when it’s flared up, but ... well, it’s different now. It’s coming from more places. I was really hoping you might—”

“I won’t.”

“—you might at least consider it.”

Paul had a head of steam behind him, but he eased up. Marvin suddenly looked tired, old. Paul reached across the table and patted his arm. “Marvin, look, you’re my friend, and I’ll never forget the opportunity you gave me. I’d like to think it’s worked out for both of us. But I’m telling you, as a teacher and a coach and a friend, I won’t be able to accept something like this. If this is the way of the world now, I’ll be happy just to be a regular old English teacher and somebody else can have the headache.”

“Jesus, Paul, nobody’s suggesting that.”

“I’m just telling you where I’m at on this deal. Can you head it off?”

Marvin pushed his corpulent body up from the table.

“I’m going to have to, I suppose.”

On his way back to the classroom for his final group of the day, Paul stopped by the mailboxes in the main office and retrieved a folded piece of paper.

The stroke-perfect cursive of Elise Langley was a dead giveaway.

*Mr. Wainwright ... With the season starting up again, I expect to see your lesson plans through March by next Monday. As you know, the proper instruction of those students who don't play basketball is every bit as important as it is for those who do. Thank you, Elise.*

He balled up the note and banked it off the wall into the waste bin.

DEEP INTO THE EARLY HOURS OF THE NEXT MORNING, Paul would ponder the mechanics of cause and effect, wondering and worrying over whether Marvin Waddell and Elise Langley had insinuated themselves onto the practice floor, a place that he considered next to sacred and

belonging only to him, Susie and the girls on the team. He chewed on his sourness.

The punishments and admonitions started with the first drill, when the same freshman as the day before, Oberst, blew a layup. In quick succession, she was joined by the next three shooters, Cash and Mendy included.

“Unacceptable,” Paul shouted at them, stalking them from sideline to sideline as they made their lap around the court. “Layups and free throws, layups and free throws. Make them and you win. Miss them and you lose. You girls better get your heads into it.”

Free throws turned out no better. With every miss, the girls set out in circles, at one point leaving only two C-teamers in the middle of the floor. “This team may not win a game,” Paul told Susie.

As Paul ran through the offense, the whistle rarely left his mouth.

“Give me the ball,” he told Cash.

She fired a chest pass at him.

“Mendy, it’s like this.” He squared up to the basket, squeezing the ball between his hands and planting a pivot foot. “First option: jump shot.” Into the air he went, releasing the ball at the peak of his jump and watching it backspin softly into the net. Cash, her face red, gathered the ball and rifled it back to him. “Second option: drive.” Paul took two dribbles into the lane and then fell back to his spot on the periphery. “Third option: make the next pass.” He slung the ball to Victoria Ford, directly to his left on the wing. “You know better than to just throw the ball over without even looking.”

Paul turned to the players clumped on the sideline. “Shoot, drive, pass. When you get the ball in this offense, that’s the sequence. I don’t want anybody not following it, you got that?”

“Yes, sir,” the girls answered glumly.

“You get the ball. If the defender has collapsed into the middle, you shoot the open shot. If they’re crowding you, drive around them. If you’re covered, make the next pass. This is not difficult. Run it again.”

Paul blew the whistle, and Cash dribbled into the middle of the floor, veered right, stopped and whipped a two-handed overhead pass to Mendy on the left wing. It soared over the girl’s head and crashed loudly into the bleachers.

Paul blew the whistle again. “No! Give me the ball.” A freshman tossed the ball over from the sideline.

“Cash, what was that?”

“A pass.”

“That’s the worst pass I’ve ever seen in this gym. Give me a lap.”

The point guard, five and a half feet of angry muscle twitching like a tuning fork, set out running. Paul proceeded to chew on the other girls.

“I don’t know where your heads are, but if you don’t find them, and I mean quick, things are going to turn out very bad next Tuesday. Do you understand?”

“I want to say to you now that pride in our town, pride in our school, pride in our children—these are good and worthy things. But pride, as we all know, has an ugly underbelly. It is a deadly sin, and for good reason. It kills slowly, from the inside, poisoning our hearts and minds, sometimes without our even being aware.”

The girls answered. “Yes, sir.”

“Get a drink and then come back ready to play.”

The girls fell out.

At the fountain, as Mendy slurped from the falling water, Cash said, “Catch the ball, superstar.”

Mendy wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “Make the pass, Cash.” They moved toward each other, ready to escalate matters.

Before it could go further, Vanessa Samples stepped between them, with enough strength and girth to make her directive stick. “Both of you just shut up and do what Coach says.”

WHEN THE REVEREND GRUNWALD MADE CLEAR WHERE HE WAS HEADED with the Sunday sermon, Paul wondered how deep into the pews he could sink before it would be obvious to God and everyone that he was trying to disappear. Not far, he reckoned. The good pastor, Paul’s old hunting buddy, had a clear line of sight to him and seemed to be using Paul as a fixed point on the horizon amid the choppy water he aimed to sail into. Directly behind Paul sat Mayor Dunphy. Two rows back and to the left was Grant Lundquist, to whom Valerie had sent a big smile as they were taking their seats.

No escape.

“It seems to me that our fair city is awfully stirred up these days,” the Reverend Grunwald was saying now. “Awfully stirred up. And I do believe that it’s not for the usual reasons, with us so close to Thanksgiving and Christmas. No, I believe it’s something else, and trust me, I am not so dumb as to be unaware that part of that reason dwells under my own roof.”

A ripple of laughter—more nervous than not, as Paul assessed it—spread through the chapel. Paul could feel Dunphy’s laughter on his own neck.

The Reverend Grunwald went on.

“I want to say to you now that pride in our town, pride in our school, pride in our children—these are good and worthy things. But pride, as we all know, has an ugly underbelly. It is a deadly sin, and for good reason. It kills slowly, from the inside, poisoning



our hearts and minds, sometimes without our even being aware.”

Paul rolled his chin back and forth against his sternum, working out a knot in his neck. Valerie reached for his hand and squeezed hard.

“We love our town because we know what it has been and what it can be. We know the sacrifice we’ve given, time and time again, when something larger than ourselves demanded it. We are proud of that. At one particular sport, our town has been the best ever in this state, perhaps better than any school in any state. We are proud of that.”

Paul looked up now and locked eyes with his friend at the pulpit.

“We should be proud. But let us not ever forget that we are not here to cover our boys in glory on the battlefield or hold our girls above all others on the basketball court. We are here to love one another, and to love God. No matter the time on the clock. No matter the score. That’s why we are here. To love God, as God surely loves us.”

PAUL STOOD ON THE SIDEWALK OUTSIDE FIRST LUTHERAN, waiting for Valerie to bring the car around. The previous night had brought the first good freeze of the season, and he set the toe of his wingtip onto the grass to hear it crackle underfoot. He thought of home, north Texas, and the hellacious winter storms that would crash through the region every couple of years, encasing everything—grass, hedges, oak tree leaves, slow-moving children—in perfectly thin ice.

“Good sermon, wasn’t it?” Bob Dunphy, eyebrow raised, looked at Paul.

“Good sermon, indeed. If you know what to listen for.”

Stormy lines moved across the mayor’s pink face and then receded.

“Good one, Paul. Listen, we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“The team. The town. Waddell tells me you’re not too keen on a booster club.”

“That’s what I told him, yes.”

“May I ask why?”

“No time, mayor. Practice has started. For the next few months, I’m all booked up.”

Dunphy put a hand on Paul’s shoulder and squeezed. “Look, Paul, now’s not the time, but I think this is something worth talking about. I tell you what: Why don’t you come to our Rotary meeting tomorrow morning. Six a.m.? You can meet the fellas and hear some of our ideas.”

Paul stepped out from under Dunphy’s grip as Valerie rolled up in the Explorer. “My wife,” he said. “Listen, mayor, I can’t make it tomorrow. I’m booked solid. We’ll do just fine with the same bake sale we have every year. We bought new uniforms last year. We’ve got new shoes. We’re good. Really. But thanks. Thanks for the offer.”

Two quick steps carried Paul to the SUV and he climbed into the passenger seat. As Valerie pulled away from the curb, Paul looked back out the window at slackjawed Bob Dunphy.

“What was that?” Valerie asked.

Paul loosened his tie and unfastened his top button. “Fucking town.”

“What?” Zoe asked from the backseat.

“Everybody’s gone nuts. Dunphy wants to form a booster club for the girls basketball team. A booster club, Val.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about that,” she said.

“From who?”

“Grant.”

Paul hurled his tie to the floorboard. “Lundquist?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“A few days ago.”

“What the hell did he say?”

“He said the town is into this big time and that you ought to let people inside a little bit more. It’s not a radical point of view, Paul.”

Paul turned away from her and looked out the window at the passing stubble fields. “You know, I’ve had his kid on the team two years now. Jana? She’s pretty good. Quiet. Hard worker. Gives me no guff. She’s a lot more like her mom, luckily for her.”

Valerie ground her hands on the steering wheel. “Janet was their whole world, Paul. Grant’s raising that girl alone, has been for three years. You should cut him some slack.”

“Yeah, Dad, come on,” Hugh tossed in. “Mr. Lundquist is a good guy.”

Paul said nothing.

“Anyway, maybe you ought to hear them out,” Valerie said. “It might save you some trouble later.”

“I think Daddy-o ought to do what he thinks is the right thing,” Zoe said. “You know better than anybody else.” She put a hand on his shoulder. Paul reached for it.

“Yeah, Dad knows best,” Hugh said. “Just ask him.”

Paul turned in the seat, his face gone crimson. “I’ve heard quite enough from you lately, Junior. Sarcasm must seem like the highest form of debate to you right now, but you’re just making yourself look silly.”

“Don’t you call me that,” Hugh said, his fists forming tight balls.

Valerie slammed on the brakes. “Enough. Everybody, just cool it. Zoe, Hugh, this isn’t your conversation. And, dammit, Paul, don’t egg him on.”

She put the Explorer into gear and eased into the subdivision.

“It’s my team,” Paul said, staring out the window.

Valerie exhaled. “Yes, dear. Of course it is. It always has been.”

ZOE’S THOUGHTS TRAVELED, as they had intermittently for months, to an early July night. She

and Mendy had lain on their backs in the cool grass of the Grunwalds' backyard, staring intently into the black sky as starbursts in neon colors exploded above their heads. She couldn't remember now if she had moved first or Mendy had. It didn't matter, really. What lingered, as if Zoe were feeling it today for the first time, was the electricity that pooled between them as the wispiest hairs of her own bare leg mingled with Mendy's. Zoe dared not make a move, dared not lose the connection, and eventually, she gathered the courage to turn her head to the left and look at the younger girl, who was already staring at her. They smiled simultaneously, and then turned their gazes skyward again, and inside, Zoe felt liquid and warm.

Now, as Mendy tossed in jump shots in the driveway while their folks talked inside, Zoe fetched the ball and tried to drum up the courage to speak of it.

"Are you nervous about Tuesday, Mendy?"

Another shot fell through the net.

"Nope."

"Really? The town's gone a little nuts."

"I don't notice."

"Come on."

Another made shot.

"I don't."

"I envy you."

Another made shot.

"Why?"

"Well, you've got everything going for you, everybody is watching you. Don't you like it?"

"I guess."

Another made shot.

This time, Zoe fetched the ball and held it. For the first time, Mendy looked at her, annoyed.

"Do you think about the fourth of July?" Zoe asked, surprising herself with her boldness.

Mendy scratched the back of her neck. "Sometimes I do, I guess."

"I think about it all the time." Zoe passed the ball back to her.

"Why?"

The next shot hit the back iron and arced back into Mendy's hands.

"I liked it," Zoe said. The older girl decided to throw everything in now. It was just her heart and her desire. "I think I'd like to kiss you. Could I do that?"

Mendy pushed up another shot, straight and true and dead center. "No, I don't think so. Whatever you think is going to happen between us, it's not."

Zoe got the ball and passed it back to her. "OK, Mendy." She cursed herself in her head. *OK, Mendy?* That was all? Not "I've been dying inside to tell you how I feel and this is what I get"? Zoe thought of all the times she'd touched herself, imagining that her hand was

Mendy's, that she was Mendy, that Mendy was her, that the feeling from that night lived on in both of them. Suddenly, she couldn't get out of there fast enough, needed air, needed to be somewhere—anywhere—else. As the tears came, she ran.

Mendy shot again.

COFFEE SLUDGE AND BACON GREASE MET PAUL at the door of the Double Barrel on Monday morning, another blast of comfort for the man who trusts his nose. Most early mornings found Paul here, among the long-haul truckers and the farmers and the pensioners who had nowhere and nothing else, but on this Monday, hesitation dragged on him. Thirty-six hours from game time, he'd have preferred to be just about anywhere else, so long as it was absent of folks who wanted to jaw about Bronco basketball.

He scanned the room, nodding politely at the proliferate greetings of “hey, Coach” and “go get 'em,” finally finding Dirk sitting in the back of the room, at a table that would allow for at least a semblance of privacy. *God bless the pastor*, Paul thought. *He knows when I need to talk.*

“How's your stomach, old man?” Dirk teased as Paul poured himself into the opposite chair.

“Hanging in there. Just keep those eggs on your side of the table, will you?”

DIRK STABBED AT A WHITTLED-OFF HUNK OF WHITE AND GOBBLED IT UP. He found himself in a reflective mood. His friendship with this man across from him had been easy, right from the start, twenty-five years earlier. The young pastor, a man deeply devoted to his faith, found common ground with a younger-still educator whose own politics and spirituality were so different from Dirk's. Paul, he knew, came to church because coming to church is what a man of influence does in a small town, but Dirk never got the impression that he'd reached Paul in that place where a man finally gives himself over, no restraint and no hesitation, to the Lord. It troubled Dirk sometimes to know this about Paul, and though he knew he shouldn't, he often saw it as his own failure, that he could not shepherd his best friend to that peace and joy.

And yet, the two men had shared enough hunting trips—where in the screaming silence of solitude, they had dug into penetrating conversations about love and family and ethics—that Dirk trusted Paul implicitly and completely, and never was that unshakeable faith in his friend more important than now, when Dirk's own daughter was central to the plot.

“You OK, buddy?” Dirk asked.

Paul dumped three servings of half-and-half and four sugar cubes into his coffee. “Yeah. I need to talk to you about something.”

“OK.”

Paul stirred his drink, clinking the spoon against the ceramic rim of the cup to get at the last drops. “It's about Mendy.”

“I figured.”



“I’m going to bring her off the bench tomorrow.”

“OK.”

“Do you want to know why?”

“Is there a reason I should?” Dirk burned with the question of why, but one of the promises he’d made to himself was that he wouldn’t interfere in Mendy’s coaching. He’d given her the genes and the grounding in fundamentals, and now she belonged to Paul.

“Yeah, there is.” Paul rubbed his eyes. “Look, I don’t have to tell you what we’ve got in Mendy. You played big-time basketball. You’ve seen it. You know.”

“Yes.”

“And Mendy, she will be the starter soon enough. There’s nothing anybody can do to stop that. But there’s something about this team that’s just not right. Some of them, they don’t see what you and I see, not yet. To them, she’s this young kid who’s coming to take something from them. So I’m going to bring her off the bench, let her find her way with these girls, let them see how unbelievably good she is, how she changes everything just by her presence. Everything will sort itself out as we go along.”

Dirk considered the words and considered Paul, and for the first time, he took note of how haggard the coach looked. “You’ve been thinking about this a lot, I take it.”

“More than anything else. And look, Dirk, I’m probably not explaining it very well. Every one of these kids, I’ve asked them to prove that they deserve to be on this team. I’ve asked the same of Mendy, but maybe this will let everyone else see that, too.”

“Makes sense,” Dirk said.

“I’m glad you think so. I felt like I owed you an explanation, so you’d at least know what’s coming. It’s going to upset some people.”

“They’ll get over it.”

Paul chugged coffee. “I keep thinking so. I’m starting to have my doubts.”

“When will you be telling Mendy?” Dirk needed to know, needed to be ready to provide comfort, if comfort were necessary. This girl, his baby, had grown up with a basketball under her arm, and in all those years, she had never been a reserve. He wondered how she would take it, and perversely, he found himself excited to learn the answer. How Mendy dealt with this would, perhaps, provide some insight into his own questions about how she would handle her growing fame.

“I’m not telling her, per se. I’ll tell the team who the starters are tonight after practice. I really need to keep this focus on the team. Mendy, she’s going to go places and do things most of these girls can only dream about. I’m not worried about her, you know?”

“I get it.”

“Do you think she’s going to be OK with it?”

A slight smile crossed Dirk’s face. It was the question of the hour, and an open one at that.

“We’ll see.”

KBRK-FM, 7:42 A.M., TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1997:

T.J.: “All right, that was Chumbawumba with ‘Tubthumping,’ right here on KBRK The Brick. This is T.J. and I’m here, as always, with the Rake. Rake, my man, we’ll probably play that song eight more times today. What do you think of that?”

The Rake: “Don’t care.”

T.J.: “You don’t care? Why not?”

The Rake: “I want to talk about something else.”

T.J.: “Well, Rake, the floor is yours. This here is a democracy. What do you want to talk about?”

The Rake: “You know how we’re the Brick? How we always say that, you know, KBRK The Brick?”

T.J.: “The baddest radio station in the land.”

The Rake: “It just reminded me that tonight’s the big night, the Burdon County girls basketball team opens the season against Dawson County, right here.”

T.J.: “People are loving this team, Rake.”

The Rake: “Yeah, well, anyway, I was just thinking, for a few years now, that’s all we’ve seen from the Broncos. Bricks.”

T.J.: “Ooooooh. Rake! Unkind, brother! Besides, the Broncos have a not-so-secret weapon this time around.”

The Rake: “You’re speaking here of the lovely and talented Mendy Grunwald.”

T.J.: “The one and only.”

The Rake: “You know, I’d like to show her how to put it in the hole.”

T.J.: “Uh ...”

The Rake: “You know?”

T.J.: “Not cool, Rake.”

The Rake: “I’m sorry, man, I’m sorry. I’m just so stoked, dude! The Broncos are going to be awesome this year, man. Awesome!”

T.J.: “That’s what everybody’s saying.”

The Rake: “There’s some fine girls on that team.”

T.J.: “Rake ...”

The Rake: “I mean players, man, players. And how about Coach Paul Wainwright, huh? Coaching all that prime talent. Lucky dog.”

T.J.: “Easy now ...”

The Rake: “Everybody knows it, man. Dude picked up his wife after she played on his team. I’m just saying, he has an eye for talent, if you know what I mean.”

T.J.: “I’m pretty sure that was some years later.”

The Rake: “Whatever, dude. Have you checked out Mrs. Wainwright? She’s still got it going on. Props, Coach Wainwright!”

T.J.: “Let’s move on. Who do you think’s gonna win tonight?”

The Rake: “Burdon County, no doubt.”

T.J.: “You’re that sure, are you?”

The Rake: “And then The Rake will win later with one of those fine girls. Call me, ladies. You know where I am.”

T.J.: “He’s just kidding, of course.”

The Rake: “Who’s kidding? I’m telling you, this is the foxiest team we’ve ever had.”

T.J.: “Rake, seriously ...”

The Rake: “I’d like to dress ’em all in cheerleader outfits and ...”

THE DEAD AIR ON KBRK LASTED SIX DAYS UNTIL, just after 2 a.m. on November 18, the signal crackled to life with *Dr. Mathilda’s Herbal Remedy Hour*, a previously recorded talk show out of Chicago. Over the next several weeks, the station veered from simulcast all-talk to sixties country and western to a tri-county trading post show, and finally back to all-talk.

T.J. was seen later that week making deliveries for the Pizza Shack. The Rake was never spotted in Burdon City again.

ON TUESDAY, THE TOWN WOKE TO A HARD FREEZE. Paul, returning through the garage after taking Buster out for his morning pee, found his daughter lying on the cold concrete, between the two cars, wearing only a T-shirt and his mesh shorts.

“Jesus, Zoe,” he said, dropping to his knees beside the girl and gathering her into his arms. He could feel the shape of her bones through her frigid, purpling skin. “What happened?”

He held her close, rubbing her back, trying to bring forth heat. He wrapped her in a hug, and her chill moved through him.

“I’m so stupid, Dad.”

Enveloping her, he said, “No.”

“I am.”

“How long have you been out here?”

The girl broke down, burying her forehead in her father’s chest, telling him all in a choked whisper, her shoulders heaving, her father rubbing her back, holding her, not knowing what else to do except whisper in return, “It’s going to be OK. Everything is going to be OK,” over and over.

AT BREAKFAST, PAUL COVERED FOR THE GIRL.

“Zoe’s not feeling too good,” he said. “I told her to stay home and get some sleep.”

Buttering a slice of sourdough, Valerie said, “I think I know this ruse.”

Paul slammed a carton of orange juice on the countertop. “She’s sick. I saw her. It’s not a ruse.”

Val held up a hand, her common signal. The debate was done but not resolved. It was ever thus. Hugh looked at his father, annoyed.

“Are you coming tonight?” Paul asked.

“Not me,” Hugh said.

“I didn’t expect so. I’m talking to your mother.”

Valerie rinsed her plate. She wanted to appropriate Hugh’s answer, but she knew it wouldn’t fly.

“I’ll be there. Same as always. You know that.”

Without another word, she went downstairs.

PAUL AMBLED ALONG THE SIDELINE TO THE BCHS BENCH, the most common walk of his life, and his stomach turned on him. His final words had been delivered to his girls, and he now faced the crowd alone, before his team tumbled from the locker room in perfect lines for drills he’d choreographed nearly three decades earlier.

On the Burdon County side of the gym, you couldn’t have slipped a piece of paper between the wedged-in partisans. A roiling wave of black and orange, they waved fleshy arms holding hand-lettered signs of exhortation: the benign (“Go BCHS!”), the self-satisfyingly clever (“On this ranch, Broncs bust Cowgirls!”), and, something new this season that Paul entirely expected and yet felt offended by just the same, the ones that elevated individual over team (“The Great Grunwald!”).

Susie waited at the bench, the one face he wanted to see. He broke into a lopsided grin as he approached, and they shook hands.

Now Paul turned to the crowd, seeking orientation points. As usual, Bob Dunphy and Grant Lundquist sat two rows behind the bench, the closest they could get, and Paul knew that those two voices, kept at bay only by his own focus, would scratch at his ear all game.

Across the way, standing to the side of the visitors’ bleachers—uncharacteristically full—stood Marvin Waddell, whose duty as sentry against the excesses of his own students had ensured that he had never seen a complete game in thirty years at Burd-High.

Next, Paul found Valerie, perched on the top row of the home seats in a futile effort to stay out of earshot of the criticisms against her husband that would begin their annual bloom in minutes. He winked at her, and received a tissue-thin smile in return.

“Here comes your finest season yet, eh, Paul?” Dunphy was loaded for bear, and loaded.

Paul turned his gaze to the court and said nothing.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT, THE RAGE, didn’t come in increments. As the name of each player rang out over the public-address system, it was greeted with polite applause—restrained almost, as if not to squander genuine cheers on pawns when the queen had yet to come out to play. The names and positions tumbled forth—Sabrina Newman, Victoria Ford, Vanessa Samples,



Jana Lundquist and, finally, Reese Cacciola—and it took a couple of beats before everyone in the place realized that Mendy Grunwald wasn't among them.

At the scorer's table, Eric Embry sat agape. In his newspaper report that morning, he'd blithely noted Mendy among the starters, the surest bet in the world, a no-brainer to end all no-brainers.

Grant Lundquist leaned forward and poked a long finger into Paul's back. "What the hell are you doing?"

Paul tossed a reply over his shoulder: "You touch me again, and I'll have you escorted out."

Dunphy stomped to the end of the row, all *shits* and *fucks* and *assholes*, and made a straight line for Waddell.

As for the rest of them—Dirk Grunwald excluded, and maybe even Valerie Wainwright—they booed, their hunger and their lust and their human frustrations mingling and matching and raining down on their girls, and on the man who would presume to lead them.

MENDY YANKED OFF HER SWEATS FOUR MINUTES INTO THE FIRST QUARTER, with the Broncos behind 8-2 and the stands silent save for the bubbling ire at Paul. Her appearance on the sideline turned the mood. At the next dead ball, the cheers flew to the ceiling as Jana Lundquist trudged to the sideline and Mendy bounded onto the floor.

"You did great, Jana, good pressure on Number 7," Paul said as she reached the bench. She, in turn, looked toward her father, who was staring down the coach.

"It's about time, Wainwright," he said. His daughter, at the end of the bench now, buried her head in a towel.

On the Broncos' the next possession, Cash broke the Custer County trap and streaked for the middle of the lane. The two Cowgirls planted their feet, watching three Broncos bear down, and played the angles right, cutting off the passing alleys and forcing Cash left. A too-hard shot caromed off the glass and went the other way.

"Give it to Mendy!" came the cry from the stands.

MENDY PLAYED ON TO THE MIDDLE OF THE SECOND QUARTER and quickly imposed her talent on the equation. At ten-all, she floated downcourt on the wing, the dribble in her possession. At the three-point line, she pulled up, straight up, and sank the shot, the Broncos' first lead.

With three minutes left to go, she had staked them to an eight-point lead, 22-14, and Paul brought her to the bench. Again, the crowd's mood turned on him.

"How do you feel?" he asked Mendy, slapping a high-five with her.

"Amazing."

AT HALFTIME, Bob Dunphy took it on himself to solve the problem with Burdon County High School basketball. His first play, to storm the locker room, was turned away by Marvin

Waddell. His second idea, hatched with Lundquist in the concession area, was more direct.

“We’re gonna get this fucking guy fired,” Dunphy said. “He thinks we’re fools. He thinks he’s making fools of us.”

When the Broncos started the third quarter with the same five players who began the first, Dunphy leaned in to Grant and upped the stakes. “He’ll never coach another game here.”

Grant turned in his seat and searched out the eyes of Valerie Wainwright. She raised an eyebrow. He shook his head slowly.

AND SO IT CAME TO THIS.

With Mendy sitting, Custer County scrapped and fought and moved the score to a tie. Mendy came in midway through the third quarter, scored six points—giving her twenty-two on the night— and never took another shot.

On a broken play, a wild chase for a loose ball, Mendy dove and jammed her right wrist, her shooting hand, into the hardwood floor, tearing tendons from bone.

You could have heard a heart drop in the silence that followed.

Mendy headed for the hospital, accepting slaps with her good hand from teammates, from Paul, from fans. The Broncos, who scored just seven points the rest of the way, headed for the loss column, a two-point defeat that was sealed when a Cash jumper from twenty-five feet fell short of the basket.

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, as a school and a town tried to pin down exactly what happened in the frantic moments after the game, accounts varied.

Grant Lundquist said he would swear on a stack of Bibles that Paul initiated contact with Bob Dunphy in the hallway after the game and, unprovoked, punched the red-faced mayor in the nose, breaking it.

The Lundquist account would come to be the gospel according to the Burdon County school system, which presented Paul with a clear, if unsatisfying, choice: retire today or be fired for cause tomorrow.

Vanessa Samples, who was drinking from a water fountain at the moment in question, would tell teammates, her parents, and anybody who would listen that the mayor had said “your career is over, you fucking piece of shit” and that Paul had then punched him in the nose, breaking it.

Marvin Waddell came late to the scrum. All he could say with certainty is that someone had punched the mayor in the nose, breaking it, and that he saw a hell of a lot of blood.

The mayor’s official word was appropriately parsed: “Let’s all just move beyond this regrettable incident.”

Paul Wainwright would say nothing on the record. On a Sunday, let into the building by Marvin Waddell so he could empty out his office, he came across Susie in the gym.

“It’s your team now, Suze,” he said.

AT HOME, A CLEARER PICTURE EMERGED.

Paul and Valerie turned invisible to one another. One adrift, the other ashamed.

Hugh stayed at home for a week, unable to face the mockery he was sure would be waiting for him at school.

Zoe stayed home for longer than that, all the way to Christmas break.

Valerie began meeting up with Grant Lundquist for long lunches.

Paul sat for hours in his study, finally granted time to write, with nothing to say. Dirk Grunwald called and came by. Paul never answered the phone or the doorbell.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, Paul rapped at Zoe's bedroom door.

"Go away, Hugh."

"Honey, it's me."

Paul interpreted the silence that followed as assent and entered.

"Hon," he said. "Merry almost Christmas."

Zoe sat cross-legged on the bed. "We don't even have a tree. Some Christmas."

"Did you ask Santa for what you want?"

"There is no Santa, Dad. Come on."

"I think you should hedge your bets."

"Why?"

"Maybe you'll be surprised."

"What, I'm going to magically disappear, like none of this ever happened?"

"Maybe."

"No way."

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"I don't care. ... Wait, no, I do. As long as it's just asking a non-existent being and I'll never get it anyway, I'll just go for it: I want to go to Portland."

Paul reached into his back pocket and tossed an envelope on the bed.

"What is this?" Zoe asked.

"Look."

She opened the envelope and shook out the contents. Plane tickets tumbled onto the bed. Paul Wainwright. Zoe Wainwright. Billings to Portland. Round trip.

"No way!"

Paul sat down. "You and me, two weeks. We'll see if we can find a place and a job."

Zoe fingered the tickets. "But Mom..."

"We've talked about it. It's no good anymore, Zoe. It hasn't been good in a long while. She wants to stay. Hugh wants to stay, too. We can stay if you want, but for me, it won't be here, in this house. So let's go take a look. No commitments. OK?"

Zoe held her right hand aloft. Paul gave it a high five.

THE INSCRIPTION ON A POSTCARD (“Greetings from Portland”) fished from the Grunwalds’ mailbox on December 30th, 1997:

*Hi, Mend...*

*Sorry about your hand. You’re still the best!*

*Zoe (and Coach)*