

# HOOPS OF STEEL

JOHN FOLEY



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*An ode to my youth, when the game of  
basketball ran deepest and loudest and  
clearest in my soul.*

—David Shields, *Heroes*

*The game is tied with twenty-five seconds left to play. I'm on the wing, covered tightly by a tall girl. Pushing her a little, trying to get free, and she's pushing me right back, very competitive. I notice she has a pretty face. I take my mind off that because it's crunch time. And finally I get a step and Angelo flips the ball to me. He's naked as usual, and I wonder why the girl is wearing a white uniform. I think of popping the jumper right then—I only need a few inches to get it off—and most girls can't jump very well. Pelvic structure, I heard: good for babies, bad for hops. Anyway, with just twelve seconds left now I don't want to give her or her team a shot at glory, I want it all for myself. So I wait, faking with the ball, staying low. She crouches down too, looks me in the eye, and smiles. I can't help but smile back and she flashes a hand at the ball, almost slapping it loose. Sly temptress, I think, and then drive to the baseline with a flying first step, leaving my feet and . . .*

Crashing to the floor next to my bed.

“What the hell was that?” Granny calls from the kitchen.

“Just getting up,” I say lamely.

“Sounds like you're falling down, Jackson.”

“No, it’s all good.”

“Breakfast is ready.”

“Be right down.”

Another hoop dream. Weird. I know from psychology class last year that it’s ripe with symbols, and that I can learn from it if I think about it in the Jungian sense. The symbols have some basis in reality, I remember. The girl seemed familiar in a way, though I’m not sure exactly why. And I do play basketball every day, lots of times in pickup games with a guy named Angelo who likes to walk around naked when he’s not running the point.

At breakfast Granny says that I could be on time to school for the first time this year. “That would show motivation,” she smiles over her coffee. My guidance counselor wrote on my report card last spring that I lack motivation, and Granny took that line and ran with it. Pretty much true, I have to admit. But mostly I lack motivation in my first period Algebra II class. I was not meant to divide negative integers at seven-thirty in the morning.

My favorite classes are Honors English and Journalism. In Journalism I’m learning how to be an objective reporter, which isn’t easy. I’m the sports editor and so I have to write about some guys on the football team who I can’t stand, and it’s been tempting to hit ’em with a shot between the eyes. Something like, “Joe Fridley, a flaming asshole who naturally plays tight end, caught four passes Saturday to lead the Highlanders to victory.”

God, I’d love to write an honest story.

I know I can’t, though. Wouldn’t be fair or objective. Mrs. Ford, the Journalism class teacher, is forever telling me and the other Journalism students to keep “I” out of our copy, to write in the third person, recording events like a camera. The exception is a column, so naturally everyone wants to write a column. But Mrs. Ford won’t allow more than two columns per issue of the *Highland Beacon*.

Granny Dwyer begins cleaning up. I start to help, carrying over my dishes, and she shoos me away, telling me to get to school on time. So I grab my pack and head out the door.

I’ve known Granny since I was seven, and she hasn’t changed a bit in ten years, at least not that I can tell. Maybe her hair is a little whiter. She’s seventy-

four but doesn't look near that old. She laughs when I tell her she could pass for fifty-five.

She's not my real grandmother. Both of them died when I was young. The truth is she's just a nice neighbor lady who took me in after things went crazy last year. She treats me like I'm a relative, though, and I can talk to her about just about anything. Plus, she's a basketball nut.

The Dwyer house is just up the hill from the one where my family used to live, and I'd see her watching me out the back porch window while I shot around in the driveway. And when her real grandson, Gerry, invited me up the hill to play on his driveway when I was twelve, she'd pull up a lawn chair and be our lone spectator, clapping and laughing and offering advice, or just watching quietly.

Gerry is six years older than me, and what's so random is that he's now my English teacher at school. We're both cool with it—he didn't have to tell me not to act all buddy-buddy in class, like I was kissing butt for a better grade. Not that I care about grades anyway, but I just knew it would be better not to go around telling everybody that we were friends, and that he taught me how to shoot the jumper off the dribble long before he taught me to appreciate Shakespeare.

It bugs me sometimes that Gerry doesn't play much basketball anymore. He told me last year that he prefers golf now. Told me with a straight face. And he's the golf coach at school, not the basketball coach.

I ride my bike to school in September when the weather's nice. It's about three miles of easy pedaling, and I like to look at the tall trees and think about stuff. Plus, riding the bus sucks big time.

Morning is my favorite time of day. The air is sweet, the world new, the adults pumped on caffeine. I like the way the light hits the trees and fields. Not many cars use the back road I travel, so I don't really have to concentrate too much. I can just look around and sort of lose myself in the good feeling, the way I can when my shots start dropping through the hoop like guided missiles.

On this morning I think about the journal I have to keep for English class. I forgot to make my entry last night—read *Sports Illustrated* instead—so I remind myself to get it done first thing . . . I see a barn and hay stacks in a field, really pretty, and remember that my mom used to joke that Highland is a nice town, but unfortunately surrounded by New Jersey.

Back to the journal. Should I write in the first person, which seems natural, or third, which doesn't? "Jackson O'Connell had a wonderful day today, not including two additional zits on his chin." Sounds strange. Like those ballplayers talking about themselves in the third person. Whenever this is pointed out, most of them look blank—or worse, they start looking around for this third-person dude.

I once saw a football player asked about his constant third-person references in an interview. He smiled at the reporter and said, "God bless you." Like he thought "third person" was part of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Linebacker.

A lot of jocks are pretty dumb. I know that's a cliché, but it's true. Maybe half are average or better. But it sure doesn't take a genius to hit a running back or a twenty-footer.

Mostly, I think my journal will be a diary of the basketball season. Our team at Highland isn't going to be spectacular, but I'm hoping to have a great year myself. It will also be fun to follow my friends' season at Shoreview High. Technically, Shoreview is Highland's arch-rival, but I'm not about to lose friends over that. Besides, it's fun to watch Shoreview play. They could go all the way to the state championship.

My goals are to average sixteen points a game and get a scholarship to a Division I college. Of course, I'd like to average twenty a game, but Gerry keeps urging me to be realistic, to face things honestly.

I suppose my journal will be mostly like a column, since I do have opinions and plan to include the word "I." But I'm going to be objective, too. Kind of look at it neutrally and report on the season, rather than spew out a bunch of opinions.

I gotta say, though, that my opinions about basketball are solid. If I don't know much else, I know the game. Maybe a few coaches around have read more books on the subject—maybe. I read every book in the school library my freshman year, every book in the public library my sophomore year.

Since then I've been hitting the bookstores and buying books when I have the money—which isn't often—and reading for hours. The clerks in the upscale bookstores with the soft chairs and classical music smile and say, "Still here?"

And the clerks in the used bookstores tell me to get the hell off the floor and ask more often, and with an edge, “Still here?”

I also read all of Granny’s library, and she has quite a few hoop books that are out of print. Autobiographies of Jerry West and Oscar Robertson, to name a couple. Granny has always been a fan, and I found out gradually, from Gerry, that she was one of the best women basketball players in the state when she was in high school.

One night over the summer, when I was going through her bookshelf, she brought me an old picture of herself posing with the ball. She acted a little strange—blushing and stuff. I could tell she was both proud and embarrassed to be revealing part of her past.

She looked great in the picture, lanky and pretty with her brown hair in a bun. I teased her about her uniform, which was a knee-length white skirt and white blouse. “Lawn bowling, anyone?”

“You laugh, but New Jersey was pretty liberal for its time,” she said. “Most girls elsewhere weren’t allowed to play organized basketball.”

I asked if I could have a copy and she said of course. I really did like the picture. She had the ball close to her shoulder, eyes focused on some unseen hoop, and her mouth was determined but held a little hint of a smile. Sort of like Jennifer Love Hewitt shooting a trey.

Anyway, to return to the subject, I guess I’ve read a couple hundred books on basketball by now—instructional, biographies, histories, novels, you name it. I also practice at least three hours a day and watch games and commentaries on TV. So even though I’m still in high school, I’m really an authority on hoops.

So my take on our team this year is pretty well-informed. I think we’ll be average, maybe a little better. We have two sophomores who look okay, seven juniors who are decent, and me, the outstanding senior forward. Another senior who played last year is a better baseball pitcher than basketball player, so he decided to focus on the slow sport in hopes of getting a scholarship himself. Leaving me alone at the top of the ladder.

I hope I have a year to remember.

## TWO

*Those friends thou hast, and their  
adoption tried, Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel.*

—Willy “Shake-n-Bake” Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I pop in to give Granny a hi and bye after school, grab my ball and head for the door. “Going to Danny’s,” I say.

“Okay, call if you’re going to stay over.” She waves at me from the couch, never taking her eyes off her game show.

It is exactly four miles from Granny’s house in Highland to Danny’s in Shoreview, and downhill, steeply or gradually, all the way. I start easy, waiting for the rhythm of the dribble to match my running rhythm. Sometimes synchronization comes after a hundred yards, sometimes after almost a half-mile, but it always comes.

I love running for the same reason I love basketball—I can disappear from real life into a dream world. Sometimes I go beyond dreams and enter a really peaceful kind of place. Sort of like where meditation is supposed to get you. A few years back Mom got into yoga and meditation as a way to cope with Dad, and she tried to get me hooked. So every day for about a month I’d do the strange stretches and then sit cross-legged on the floor, saying “om” and trying to box out stray thoughts—which is tougher than you’d think. I got bored, and decided that I needed to meditate on the move.

Running, I can reach that free and happy feeling more easily. Then the

exercise becomes effortless and it feels like I can run all day.

A basketball meditation is even better. I can get into a zone shooting around by myself, and in my best one I made 118 straight free throws. The best ones, though, take place during games. Then every shot drops because I have absolute control of the world, and the players around me become sort of like partners in a dance that I lead.

Today, running to Shoreview, I just daydream, which is okay. I smile thinking about what Danny would say if I told him he was a dancer on the basketball court. We became friends just last spring, but we're real tight.

It's pure coincidence that Danny Larson is my best friend and also has the best driveway basketball court in the known universe. We met as competitors when we were freshmen. I burned him for eighteen points, which of course I never let him forget. We played against each other a couple of times as sophomores on the junior varsity team too, although he was improving and I only averaged about twelve points against him. Then I had to sit out my junior year with a broken shooting hand, but we ran into each other again last spring on a playground in Midland.

We were shooting at opposite ends of the court. We nodded to each other and checked out each other's jumpers, thinking about a game of one-on-one. Finally he walked over. "You're O'Connell from Highland," he said. "Sorry, I don't know your first name."

"Jackson," I said, shaking hands.

"Hey, Jackson, good to meet you. I'm Danny Larson."

"Yeah, I remember playing against you." Out of politeness I didn't add that he was a step slower than me.

"How's your team looking next year?" he asked.

"Okay, but not anywhere as good as yours. Bunch of juniors, couple of sophomores and me."

"Why didn't you play last year? I figured you moved."

"Nah, broke my shooting hand," I said, holding up my left. It was still pale and thin from the cast then, though getting stronger.

"How'd you do that?" he asked.

"A fight," I shrugged.

“That sucks,” he said. “Probably hit the guy in the head, right?”

“More or less, his eye.”

“That’ll do it. Next time go for the gut. Keeps your hands unbroken and nobody expects it.” He demonstrated with a couple of uppercut air jabs.

Danny plans to be a lawyer if a pro sports career doesn’t pan out, and he is one of the few jocks I know who openly admits that it probably won’t. The rest of us have the dream, even if we don’t say so. You can feel the vibe.

Sometimes he’ll say stuff like, “My backyard is probably as far as I’ll ever get as a ballplayer.” Everybody just stares at him, and he shrugs and laughs, cool with it.

Still, he’s giving himself a chance at greatness, playing, besides basketball, tight end in football and catcher in baseball. As a basketball player, Danny’s best attribute is his strength. He’s a ferocious driver, almost impossible to stop once he gets a step and head of steam. He’ll either get the hoop or a foul call. Occasionally he’ll be called for a charge because the ref feels sorry for the poor idiot writhing on the floor, but most defenders aren’t that brave.

I took a charge from him once our sophomore year and woke up in the locker room ten minutes later with an ice pack on my head and the trainer saying, “Jackson, how many fingers am I holding up?” Danny likes to tell that story whenever I recall burning him for a lot of points.

Danny’s outside shot is a little streaky but solid enough to keep defenders honest, so he’s really an effective scoring threat. He’s fast—a couple of weeks ago I saw him catch a pass across the middle and break a sixty-yard touchdown—but not really quick. It takes him too long to get up to full speed. Otherwise, the only flaw in his game is a tendency to keep his head down on his hellbent drives to the bucket. As a result he doesn’t see defenders come over to help or, more importantly, his wide-open teammates. They are forever trying to break him of the habit.

We played one-on-one that first day. I won three of five games, and could have won three straight but I let up a little out of politeness. I do that sometimes, to be nice or just keep things interesting. My dad used to say I didn’t have the killer instinct.

After the games, Danny asked me if I wanted a soda. I told him I was broke.

“No problem, so am I.”

“I’m not up for shoplifting.”

“Not stealing, Jackson,” he said. “Trust me. Follow me in your car.”

“I don’t have a car. “

He stared at me. “You must be the only guy in Highland without one. I thought it was pretty much required that you all had Corvettes.”

“Not everyone in Highland is rich,” I said. “I’m not.”

“You’re in the minority. How’d you get here?”

“Ran. It’s only a couple miles.”

“Well, come on, Jackson, hop in my Rusty Yellow Dog and let’s blow this place.”

So that’s how our friendship began. A few miles of high speed driving and loud opinions later, he pulled up in front of a small store in Shoreview and beckoned me to follow him inside. Then he went over to the cooler, grabbed two sodas and handed me one. He popped his open right in front of the guy behind the counter and started drinking, making no move to pay. I hesitated opening mine, looking at the clerk. He was a guy in his fifties with a bald head. Then I noticed the resemblance.

“Dad,” Danny said, “this is Jackson O’Connell from Highland.”

“What, you bring the enemy into my place of work?” his father asked with a wink at me. Then he came over and shook hands. “Sure, I remember you, lefty with the quick step. Was wondering what happened to you last year.”

“Broken hand,” I said. “Had to sit out.”

“How’re you guys looking next year?”

“Not as good as Shoreview.”

“That’s because you don’t have any niggers up there in Highland,” he said. “You need some niggers to compete nowadays.”

“Dad,” Danny complained, noticing my discomfort. “Remember you promised Mom to stop using the N-word?”

“Okay, blacks, coons, whatever, you know what I mean.”

Danny rolled his eyes and smiled at me. “African-American is the preferred reference,” he said.

“You’re sounding more like a lawyer every day,” Mr. Larson said. “And it’s

not preferred by me. What a stupid name. Too long, and it gives the idea they're some special kind of Americans. You hear me calling myself an Anglo-American, for crissake?"

"We're gonna go shoot some hoops before you really get rolling, Dad."

Mr. Larson put his hand around Danny's shoulder. "Yeah, go have some fun," he said. They were close, talking to each other like friends, and it made me a little jealous.

Outside, we headed to the court in the Larson's driveway. It was my first glimpse of what was known as The High Court.

Soon after meeting Danny, I met Angelo and Thaddeus and the rest of the Shoreview players. At first they treated me with suspicion, like I was a spy, but eventually they realized that I just loved to play basketball. And so we all became friends.

I think it bothered Angelo a little that Danny and I became instant best buddies. They'd grown up together and everything. He didn't hold grudges, though, and we were cool.

Basketball brought us all together. Without the game they would have thought all guys from Highland were spoiled snobs. And Thaddeus Fly never would have set foot in the Larsons' neighborhood without the bond of basketball.

I'm still running, and my daydream ends when I look up and see Danny's house and The High Court coming into view. Four miles zip by in a good dream. And most of mine have been good lately.

## THREE

*How the team does affects my feelings about the game and myself; sometimes, I think, too much. I am obsessed with my work of team basketball . . . Some friends say I am functioning in a world that bears little resemblance to reality. At times I feel as if I am an artist in the wrong medium.*

—Bill Bradley, *Life on the Run*

Gerry Dwyer's class is on the second floor, near the back, and is avoided by teachers while attracting students like a hip new club. And in a way, it is. He purchased some used furniture over the summer and set up comfortable chairs and couches in place of the all-in-one, plastic seat, fake-wood desks that were not meant for people over six feet—or really people in general.

The walls are decorated with prints of famous paintings, mostly by the Impressionists, and all that color gives the room a vibrant and friendly feel. He also placed large-print quotations from writers all around. Shakespeare: "To thine own self be true." Robert Frost: "Always fall in with what you're asked to accept. Take what is given and make it over your way." Aesop: "No act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted." And a favorite of mine from an Irish writer named Kendall Hailey: "Happiness is like everything else," she wrote. "The more experience you have, the better you get at it." And dozens more reflecting his literary taste.

Some students mistake Gerry's room as a sign of weakness and try to take advantage. He doesn't let them. Sleeping on the couch, for example, means you

have to stand for the rest of the period. He always gives you a choice, though: stand or go to the office. Put a quarter in the cuss bucket if you slip, or go to the office. I've never seen him have to send anyone out. Maybe because he handles students with more care than most teachers. Like the ballplayer he was, he always keeps his cool no matter how angry or inappropriate the student might act. And he listens.

Gerry's only real pet peeve is cell phones. He told me when we were shooting around one time that he thinks it's really rude to pull out a phone when someone is trying to teach you. By the way, I'm about the only student at Highland High without a cell phone or a car. But Granny lets me borrow her car all the time, and she'd get me a phone if I asked. She's already done so much for me, though, that I'd feel bad asking. Plus, Danny and my sister are the only people I call on a regular basis.

Anyway, Gerry enjoys catching "cellphonics," as he calls cellphone addicts. "The hunt begins when I spot the inattentive prey," he explained. "Nearly always the young beast has his or her head down and therefore does not spot me as I slyly move toward the lair. I keep the other beasts distracted with rhythmic patter, and when I'm close enough, I pounce."

I've seen him in action. He really does pounce. It's funny and the student is too shocked to argue with the detention penalty.

Gerry's also a tough grader. He'll flunk you if you don't do the work. He told me privately, though, that he doesn't go strictly by what the computer average indicates. For example, he'll bump a high C to a B for a student who worked really hard, or one who started slow but made a comeback. "Don't tell anyone," he winked at me when I dropped by as he was finishing up grades last year, when he was a rookie teacher. "I want to keep my rep as a tough grader. It's about the only thing Edwards and I agree on."

I could understand why Gerry rubbed Principal Edwards the wrong way. He doesn't look the part of the typical conservative Highland teacher. He wore jeans last year until they banned them for the staff, and open collared shirts until a tie was required. Still, his tie is never knotted tight, and his khakis, while clean, seem to have a permanent case of wrinkles.

One time when he was over for dinner at Granny's, he joked that he was

personally responsible for the new teacher's dress code at Highland. "They didn't need one until I showed up," he laughed.

Gerry has a small apartment down at the beach, but he drops by Granny's for dinner once a week, to see how we're doing. Last time he got to talking about how he doesn't really have too many friends on the staff, and how some of the older teachers flat-out despise him.

"I don't socialize much with them. Most of them are older, and they hang around the lounge and gossip, complain about students, teachers, administrators. I was getting depressed over lunch. And when I had the gall to disagree with some of them on a few issues, boy, it got ugly. So I eat in my room now, and I'm sure they've since added me to their complaint list."

"You're a fine teacher, Gerry, it runs in the family," Granny said. "Don't you pay those bitter teachers any mind."

"Believe me, Granny, I don't. They're just putting in time until the weekend—and retirement—and could care less whether students learn anything about their subject or life."

This afternoon, as we file in, Gerry is giving us high-fives. Every class has at least one "Dwyer Moment," as we've come to label his quirky ideas. For example, a few weeks ago, on a beautiful autumn day, he felt so inspired he scaled his desk and sang "Climb Every Mountain" from *The Sound of Music*. Just as his fine tenor reached a crescendo, Principal Edwards walked in. We all applauded. Edwards didn't join in the clapping, he just stood there with an annoyed expression. Then he cleared his throat and asked if he could speak with Gerry privately in the hall for a moment.

Some of us worry about Gerry being a rebel without a future.

"Today being a Friday," Gerry announces, "I thought we'd play a little game. First write in your journals while I take attendance, and then I'll explain. The journal topic today is touch. Not shooting touch, O'Connell," he says with a wink at me, "but human touch, like we just had at the door. Some questions you might consider: Why is touch important? How can you establish touch without being offensive?"

"Take a shower!" shouts Marvin Renker, a linebacker in the back row.

"Okay, Marvin, I'll buy that," Gerry smiles. "Now write about it."

We set pens to paper. I don't write the same things in my English journal as I do in my Journalism journal. Gerry usually provides a topic, so it's more like a commentary than a journal. So now I write about touch, and how the flirty sweep of a girl's hand across my shoulders—pretty rare, but it's happened—can make my day. Gerry, meanwhile, finishes attendance and walks over to the computers in the back of the room and fiddles for a few minutes. Then he sets up two chairs side by side, facing a garbage can on top of a table ten feet away.

“What's going on, Gerry?” asks Kelly Armstead.

“It's Mr. Dwyer, Kelly,” Gerry says.

“Well if you're going to be that way, it's Ms. Armstead, Mr. Dwyer.”

“Fine. Finish your journal, Ms. Armstead. I'll explain in a minute.”

Kelly looks over at me, smiling and shaking her head. We're kind of friends, sharing mutual interests in basketball and journalism. Everything about Kelly is long. She's six feet tall, has dark brown hair that falls halfway down her back, long arms, long legs, long nose, long jaw. Kelly's long on smarts, too—she's a lock for valedictorian, spends first and second period taking a college math class at a community college, and has a full academic scholarship to Princeton. She took the SAT as a sophomore and scored close to perfect.

Sometimes, if we're talking basketball or writing or everyday stuff, I can actually communicate fairly well with Kelly. When she gets riled up about politics or economics, I need a translator. Usually I don't even know why she's mad, so I just nod my head until she realizes I'm not capable of debating the topic and moves on to someone more informed.

“Okay, finish your journals and listen up,” Gerry says. “I know I'll have to explain this twice, but I'd like to not have to explain it a half-dozen times, so please listen. I'm going to divide you into two teams. The first representative from each team will start at the computers. I've written the first sentence of a story. You have to add three sentences to the story. The idea is to keep the story going and provide someplace for your teammates to take it. The caveats for the story are: no profanity, no sex, no violence, no drugs or alcohol.”

“What a bummer story, dude!”

“Hey, Mr. D, is shooting an AK-47 violent if, like, no one gets killed?”

Gerry shakes his head. “Let's leave out guns, Trevor, okay? Use your

imagination, don't regurgitate what you've seen on TV . . . Now, after you write your sentences, you move to the dictionaries. You need to look up a word with four or more syllables. It can't be a proper noun—someone's name, for instance, or a place like Mississippi.”

“Do we have to use the dictionaries?” Renker asks.

“No, Marvin, not if you can think of a long word without it, although you might want to check the spelling.”

“Cool,” Renker says with a mischievous smile.

“Okay. After you have your word, you write it in a sentence on the board, trying to use it precisely as possible. And make the sentence as clean as possible, paying attention to grammar, spelling, all the conventions.”

“Is it a sentence from the story?”

“No, the sentence on the board has nothing to do with the sentences you write on the computer.”

“How come?”

“Because it's my game and that's the way I designed it. Now, after you finish your sentence on the board, the one containing the four-syllable word, you have to shoot this ball into the basket.” The ball he pulls out is larger than a softball, smaller than a basketball, and made of newspaper and Scotch tape. The “basket” resembles a common Highland High garbage can. “The last person on the team to go will be the rebounder. You shoot until you make the shot, then you tag a teammate and the process is repeated until everyone has gone. Questions?”

“You stay up at night thinking of this stuff, don't you, Mr. D?”

“All night every night, the D is for dedication. Now let's talk scoring. The first team to finish gets twenty points, the second team ten points. The team with the best story gets ten points. And the team with the best sentences gets ten points. Do the math—you can finish first and still lose. Understand? The idea is to be fast *and* good.”

“We should play guys against girls,” says Ivory Lewis, “because the guys in here are fast but definitely not good.” There is whooping from the girls and howling denials from the guys. Ivory is a knockout with a bad reputation. Comments like that are typical for her and don't help her image. Not that she cares. She's smart, can pass for twenty-four, works part-time as a model, and has

basically left high school behind.

“Ivory,” Gerry says after getting everyone settled down. “Let’s keep our remarks appropriate for the classroom, okay? In fact, I’m going to charge you a quarter for that.”

“I didn’t cuss!”

“Innuendo,” Gerry says, “which by the way, is a four-syllable word. Now pay up or head down to the office.”

She pulls a quarter from her too-tight jeans and sways over to the cuss bucket and plops in the money, knowing every eye is riveted to her. The walk involves a lot more innuendo than what she said, but Gerry lets it pass. He explains the rules of the game again, and promises to help anyone who struggles during the contest.

“What do we get if we win?”

“My everlasting admiration and two extra-credit points on your essays due next week, which you can work on while waiting for your turn,” Gerry says.

The game begins. I’m the designated rebounder for my team, and Gerry stops the game briefly to amend the rules when I use my chest as a backboard. “Just toss the ball back to the shooter, rebounders,” he says. “No bank shots off the human backboard allowed, O’Connell.” He always calls me by my last name in class, maybe just to put a little formality between us, let me know we’re not shooting hoops in the driveway.

After a few players from each team complete the rounds, everyone catches on and the game proceeds smoothly. Until it’s Renker’s turn. When he gets to the blackboard, he looks around to be sure he has an audience, then writes, “Edwards is a motherfucker.”

“Marvin!” Gerry snaps. “You know the rules about profanity! Erase that!”

“I thought that was just verbally, not for the game,” Marvin says, erasing while everyone continues to laugh.

“No, I specifically mentioned that no profanity could be used in the game.”

“For the computer part, yeah,” Renker says. “You didn’t say anything about the sentences on the board.”

Technically, this is true. I can see Gerry debating whether to send Renker out or let him stay because of the loophole. “Marvin, I think I made it clear I don’t

want to see profanity in your writing, either. Now use another word or you're going to have to personally explain to the principal why you've written such an offensive sentence about him."

"How do you know I'm talking about that Edwards?" Renker asks, drawing another laugh. Before Gerry can reprimand him again, he says, "No sweat, Mr. D," and turns back to the blackboard, pondering. And pondering. The game is close, so his teammates get on his case, urging him to look for a word in the dictionary. This makes him more stubborn. His feet are planted and he's obviously not going to move until he can catch a big word swimming around inside his massive skull.

"Marvin, Marvin," Gerry says sadly. "If that's the only four-syllable word you know, you've got to get some new CDs."

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