

# HANG TIME

---

*My Life in Basketball*

**ELGIN BAYLOR**

with Alan Eisenstock

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Boston New York

2018

## 2

## RABBIT

DECEMBER 1933, CAROLINE COUNTY, VIRGINIA. DEEP COUNTRY.

Uzziel, my mother, John Baylor, my father, and their four children live on a farm, growing vegetables, caring for their few animals, and working their small plot of land. In addition to helping with the farm, Mother spends days at a time in the hospital with John Levi, her five-year-old son, who suffers from violent asthma attacks. One night, after the children have gone to bed, she reveals some disturbing news to her husband.

"I'm pregnant," she says.

My father, a stern and extremely quiet man under most circumstances, says nothing, knowing that, particularly in this instance, he really has nothing to say.

"How in the world can I do this?" my mother says, feeling overwhelmed, bordering on panicked. "It's too much. I cannot handle another child."

My mother decides to get an abortion. Someone tells her about an elderly white doctor out in the country who performs the procedure, and Mother makes an appointment to see him. My father drives her to the doctor's home office on a Saturday. He waits in the car while my mother explains to the doctor that she wants to terminate the pregnancy. The doctor says he's willing to perform the abortion but insists that my mother first consider all the implications and all the risks. My

mother leaves, confused. On the way home, she changes her mind. She decides to have the baby.

The next day after church, as my mother leaves the small sanctuary, a lady she's seen at services approaches her. Mother smiles at the woman and the woman smiles back. They have never spoken to each other before. The woman's smile brightens, and then she slowly waves her hand in front of my mother's stomach.

"Don't worry about this baby you're carrying," the woman says.

My mother's jaw drops. She hasn't begun showing yet and has told no one except her husband and the doctor that she is pregnant.

The lady continues to move her hand back and forth in front of my mother's belly, and then she closes her eyes and nods. "This child," she says. "This child is going to be a blessing to you and your family."

My mother begins to cry.

Nine months later, on September 16, 1934, I am born.

. . .

While my mother is giving birth, my father comes up with my name as he glances at his Elgin watch in the waiting room. He likes the way the word comes off his tongue. *Elgin*. It sounds regal. Plus he knows his Elgin watch to be steady, dependable, and on time, all admirable qualities that he hopes to pass on to his new son.

When I am nine days old, Mother and Pops move the family to D.C. Pops works two jobs: days as a custodian in a high school, nights driving a cab. Mother works as a maid in a hotel and then at one point goes back to school and earns a credential to become a secretary. She lands a job at the Department of the Interior, where she will work until she retires, more than thirty years later.

While Mother and Pops work, my sister Gladys, the oldest of us—eight years older than me—acts as a second mother, cooking, cleaning, and minding us. My other siblings all call her "Grandma," a nickname that spreads and sticks even among her friends, although I always call her just Gladys.

After Gladys, my siblings arrived in approximate two-year intervals: Arthur Kerman, whom everyone calls “Kermit”; John Levi, whom people call Levi or—I have no idea why—“Sal”; and then my sister Columbia, whom everybody but me calls “Fox.”

From the moment Mother brings me home from the hospital, I have a special bond with Columbia. Not yet two, Columbia trails Mother like a shadow as she places me in my crib. She then stands on her tiptoes, watching me sleep, her head not reaching the top of the crib. Columbia finds me fascinating, poking me in the tummy with her finger as she tries to get me to gurgle or smile. To her, I am more than her little brother; I am her new living, breathing doll. As I get older, she dresses me and combs my hair the way she wants it—undoing the way Mother has combed it. Columbia keeps me by her side, takes me outside with her to play. She becomes my companion and my protector.

. . .

From the time I can walk, I run. I get into everything, chasing after my older brothers, wanting to do whatever they do, racing to keep up with them. Kerman and Sal are big for their age—Kerman will grow to six feet eight inches, Sal to six foot six—and they are into sports. They play whatever sport is in season: basketball, football, baseball. They play at the park around the corner from us or on the street in front of our house. We live in a small row house on Heckman Street, and soon we move to a bigger house across the street.

On summer evenings and weekends, my mother and my sister Gladys join our baseball game. Columbia stands to the side and watches, pretending to be aloof. While Gladys is a tomboy, Columbia considers herself glamorous and not into playing sports or running after boys—she would prefer to have them run after her. Mother is tall, graceful, and athletic, and people say I look exactly like her. She’s also energetic and competitive. She swings the bat hard, makes solid contact—*whack*—hollers, and runs the makeshift bases we’ve set up. Pops never comes

out to play with us. Once in a while he’ll walk by on his way to his night shift, driving a cab, and pause for a second to scowl at us, or I’ll catch him open our front door and stare at us, grim-faced, like a judge.

We practically live outside. Unless there is violent rain or a rare heavy snowstorm, we’re on the street or at the park. When I’m younger, my tricycle is my transportation. I nearly burn rubber to keep up with my brothers. As I get older and outgrow my tricycle, I rely on my legs. We play tag, hide-and-seek, and games like war and army. I’m *fast*, the fastest kid around, even faster than the older kids, and I know only one speed: full. One time, running through a neighbor’s yard, I roar around a corner and run right into a clothesline. The rope literally lifts me off my feet. For a moment I lie on the ground, stunned, my neck burning. I sit up and hear laughing. Columbia stands a few feet away, her hands on her hips, shaking her head. She helps me up, still chuckling, but I can tell she’s not laughing because she thinks my running into the clothesline was funny—she’s laughing because she’s relieved I’m all right.

When I’m around eight, Columbia takes me to a small local carnival. Somehow we get separated. As the crowd pushes and jostles me and I try to find her, I feel more confused than panicked. I walk around looking for her, keeping cool, knowing she can’t have gone far. I’ve never seen so many people crammed together in one space, and I start to feel nervous.

“You look lost.”

I peer up. A white guy around Kerman’s age—sixteen, maybe older—stands next to me.

“I’m looking for my sister,” I say. “Columbia.”

“Yeah, I know,” the guy says. “She told me to get you. We’re gonna drive you over to her. Come on.”

He grabs me by the arm and leads me to a car idling at the curb. Inside are three other guys. I don’t know any of them.

I know that something’s not right, but I allow the guy to drag me into the car. As we pull away from the curb, I peek out the window. There, desperately looking in every direction, calling my name, is Columbia. The car picks up speed. I open the door and jump out. I roll

onto the ground as the car skids to a stop ahead of me. The car door flies open and the guy who grabbed me bursts out. I spring to my feet. The guy shouts something at me and starts to chase me.

I run.

He comes after me, closes the gap, and reaches for me. I spin away, duck, and run faster. I veer left and hit a higher gear. The guy, who's much older and bigger than I am, grunts and runs harder. I find yet another gear. I cut sharply to my right and then I bob, weave, stop on a dime, suddenly accelerate, and burn away from this guy.

I'm like . . . a rabbit.

I look back. The guy has stopped. He's bent over, panting, his palms on his knees, his face crimson.

I run even faster then, just because I can.

A while later, I look back again. The guy and the car have gone. I slow to a walk, head into the crowd at the carnival, and find Columbia. She screams at me for letting go of her hand. I promise that I will never leave her side again—ever. She clasps both her hands over mine and we start back to Heckman Street.

*Rabbit, I think. Rabbit.*

That becomes my name. That becomes my identity.

. . .

I go to Giddings Elementary, an all-black school up the street and around the corner, a five-minute walk from my house. To get to Giddings, I walk past an all-white elementary school and then, if I want to save time, I cut through the park, the one on the left—the black park, which faces the white park. It's easy to tell them apart. The white park has a basketball court, baseball diamond, football field with goalposts, tennis court, and swimming pool, as well as a playground with swings, slides, and a climbing structure, park benches, neatly trimmed grass, and freshly planted flowers.

The black park has a sandbox and a swing. Nothing else. No facil-

ities, no benches, no basketball hoop. The grass runs wild. The black park is one step up from a field.

But even as Columbia and I walk to school, past the white school and the white park with all the facilities, we don't complain, we don't question. The year is 1943, and this is how it is. We believe this is how it's supposed to be. How *we're* supposed to be. Separate. We mind our own business. We don't want to rock the boat. We don't want to cause any trouble or, worse, *be* the cause of any trouble.

Police officers in cruisers and on motorcycles watch us. White cops. I've heard people call D.C. "Chocolate City" because of the large number of black police officers who work the District. They must be working some other section, because in all my years on Heckman Street I never see one black police officer.

The cops circle around the black park and the white park and then go up and down our street. If they see more than two black kids standing in front of the store at the corner of our street, they slow down, stare at us, drive away, and then circle back. They never say anything. We have no relationship with them. They are faceless to us, and I know we are faceless to them.

We all fear them. We hear stories about random arrests and people getting beaten for no reason. I hear about a guy who gets picked up by the cops and disappears. Nobody ever sees him again. One night, someone breaks into a house on our street and the cops appear. They circle once, twice, circle back, and then pull over and round up a few kids, including my brothers. They shove Kerman and Sal into the back seat of their cruiser and haul them off to jail. My brothers are guilty of nothing except being two tall black teenagers talking in front of a store. My mother goes to the police station and the cops release them the same day. But now my brothers are on a list, because every time someone reports a crime in our neighborhood, the police arrive and take them away for questioning.

One time, after another break-in, I'm standing with my brothers in front of the store. We wonder what was stolen and who might be re-

sponsible. Suddenly a police car screeches to a stop, trapping us between the curb and the storefront. Two cops rush out of the car and herd my brothers and me toward the back seat. We fit the description of the suspects, they say.

In other words, we're black.

I dare not speak. Even if I want to speak, I can't. I am frozen with fear.

"Take your hands off him!"

Mother. Running toward us. She lopes down the street, erasing the distance between her and the cops in three graceful strides. My mother, a beauty when her face is at rest, has the look of a lioness when she is upset. And she is *upset*. She is outraged. "He's nine years old!" she shouts, and then goes into a tirade. I can't recall her exact words, but within seconds I'm standing next to her, her arm around my shoulders, her hand shaking as she watches the cops drive away with Kerman and Sal for what seems like the hundredth time. My mother returns me to the safety of our living room, where Pops looks through the window at the police car driving down the street with his two sons. I don't understand why my mother had to come to my rescue instead of my father, but I will soon.

My father, too, is intimidated by the police. They wear badges. They carry nightsticks. They carry guns. Growing up in rural Virginia, in former slave country, my father heard stories of how white cops arrested black people for anything, for nothing, then charged them with non-existent crimes and assigned them to "work gangs," code for modern slavery. My father—quiet, proud, angry, and yet made impotent by the mere notion of the police—stands silently in our living room, his fingers wrapped around a shot glass half-filled with Colonel Lee Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, his eyes clouded with hate and fear. He understands that he has only one choice, which is to do nothing, brutally aware that if he intervenes on behalf of his sons, the cops will take him in, too. And then interrogate him. Or worse.

. . .

I play basketball for the first time at night, under the flickering glow of a streetlamp, on the forbidden basketball court of the white park. We play with a tennis ball. Late one night, Pops out driving his cab, Mother passed out from exhaustion, I follow my brothers out the front door, up the street, past the corner store, and over to the chained and locked fence guarding the basketball court. Heads swiveling, keeping an eye out for cops, my brothers reveal a tunnel they've dug beneath a section of the fence. I know we're playing with fire, but at that moment I'm a nine-year-old outlaw and I'm more excited than nervous. I scramble into the hole behind my brothers and slither under the fence and onto the concrete basketball court.

We find the tennis ball, a stray, resting on the free throw line. Beneath the streetlamp light that dusts us like snowflakes, we romp, trying to guide the tennis ball through the hoop. My brothers play in a basketball league at a nearby recreation center, but I have never played the game before. My brothers play an inside game, two towers hanging out beneath the basket, and they play rough. I can't get past them—they're too tall and physical—so I have to use my speed and quickness to somehow maneuver around them. They're human trees, but I am Rabbit, darting this way and that, looking to create an opening in which to shoot. At first they swat away every shot I attempt, but that only makes me more determined. I realize, too, that, like a rabbit, I have hops. This Rabbit can *jump*. Even though my brothers have six inches on me or more, I make them work. That game dissolves into a joyful free-for-all version of keep-away and what some call "army basketball," every man for himself.

We don't press our luck by playing too long, but this becomes a ritual. We sneak onto the court nearly every night, bringing friends, including a guy I'll call Sneaky Pete, who has been blessed with a very singular and useful talent: he can get you anything. At various times Sneaky Pete steals candy bars, cigarettes, food, liquor, steaks, and, when we're older, a car, which he hot-wires and I drive to the beach for the day. Don't know how or where he gets this stuff. Don't want to know.

One night Sneaky Pete shows up at the white park with a volleyball.

It's slightly deflated, but it's better than the tennis ball. Then, finally, one night he arrives with an actual basketball—mine to keep. We greet him like a hero returning with a bag of gold. We make teams and play the mid-1940s version of the game—a lot of hard-nosed inside play punctuated by an occasional, usually errant two-hand set shot. Then everything changes.

Walking home from school one afternoon, I see a vision. In the black park, a lone basketball hoop sways slightly in the brisk autumn wind. It has a rim, no net, and a wobbly wooden backboard, but it's there, majestic, inviting, all ours. No. All mine.

• • •

Basketball becomes my obsession. I play at the park after school, on weekends, and, once the school year ends, almost every day during the stifling D.C. summer, until it gets too dark to see the rim. My basketball is my sidekick, my partner. When I'm not dribbling the ball back and forth to the park, I keep it cradled against my side, like an appendage of my hip. At home, if I'm not around, my family never asks, "Where's Elgin?" Everyone knows the answer: "At the park."

On summer nights, without benefit of air-conditioning our small house becomes as oppressive as a sweatbox. My brothers and I often sleep in the park, spreading blankets on the ground. We know we're supposed to leave the park at sundown, but sometimes we chance it, staying through the entire night even though we're technically breaking some law about loitering. Other times, at two or three in the morning, a deafening metallic roar will snap us awake and a cop on a motorcycle will roll down the street and drive us out of the park, scattering us like mice.

In my family, I'm closer to the women than I am to the men. My brothers are so much older and live in their own world, a world they keep private, often behind closed doors, even though we share a room. They plot their futures. Kerman, about to turn eighteen, plans to join the military. Sal has his own ideas and talks about going to college. And,

frankly, I try to avoid Pops. I especially try to stay away from his bad side. Pops doesn't say much. His face seems frozen in a permanent scowl. One of my sisters calls him "the original angry black man." I can see that. On the floor, by the side of the overstuffed armchair he always occupies when he's home, within easy reach of his right hand, he keeps a weathered leather strap.

So far I have avoided the strap, even though I probably deserve it as much as, if not more than, anyone else in the house. I have been spared Pops's giving me any "whuppings" because Mother always intervenes and literally saves my hide. I still live in fear of the strap, although I do wonder sometimes if it's really more of a threat than an actual instrument of torture. Pops can usually get his point across—his point being *Stop what you're doing*—just by lowering his newspaper from in front of his face and glowering. I know that parents shouldn't have favorites, but I can tell Mother considers me special. She calls me a blessing, which for me turns out to be a mixed blessing. She does save me from the strap, but this results in my brothers pounding the hell out of "Mama's favorite" when we're on the basketball court.

At home with Mother and "Grandma"—Gladys—I learn two important skills that will serve me well my entire life: how to cook and how to play cards. They teach me the joys of preparing a meal, how to bread, broil, and fry chicken and fish, how to chop and cook vegetables, and how to prepare a salad. I become their sous-chef and, by choice, their one-man cleanup crew. To this day, I can't stand the sight of a dirty dish. If I see a pile of dirty dishes, I roll up my sleeves and start scrubbing, even if I'm a dinner guest at someone's house.

On Sundays after church, and many Saturday nights, Mother entertains a group of ladies in our kitchen. They eat desserts, usually homemade pies, and play cards. I set myself up at Mother's elbow and watch, learning how to play whist, bridge, gin, and my favorite, poker. These women play for money and they play to win, which by now I've learned is the only way to play anything.

• • •

Often during summers, when the heat invades our small house and stifles us, Columbia and I escape. At thirteen, she has fallen in love with the movies. We go to watch whatever film our local theater is showing, walking the short distance from our house. Columbia refuses to see a movie once. She will sit through each movie at least twice, sometimes three times in a row. I'm no movie buff, but I do love air-conditioning, so I go with her without complaint. Usually, by the time the end credits roll the first time, I feel my eyelids droop and I fall asleep. I sleep fitfully—the threadbare seats actually feel less comfortable than the ground at the park—and I begin a whisper chant that I want to go home.

"*Shh,*" Columbia says. "In a minute."

By the time we leave the theater, it's usually past ten and I'm too exhausted to walk, so Columbia carries me piggyback all the way home. Even when I turn eleven and I'm tall enough that my feet drag on the sidewalk, she still carries me on her back. She never complains.

One afternoon, Columbia picks me up after school and walks me home. I try to jump on her back for a piggyback ride, but she ducks and I slide off. We both break up laughing. I try climbing up on her again, but she dodges out of the way and runs backward toward the edge of the park. She senses someone standing behind her and stops. She turns and comes face to face with a white girl her age.

"Nigger," the white girl says, and spits at Columbia.

Columbia stares at her, and then she slaps the white girl across the face.

Columbia strides over to me, grabs my hand, and says softly, "Let's go." We start walking through our park, heading home. In my peripheral vision, I see the white girl staring at us. I can almost feel the heat of her hatred.

An hour or so later, my father sits in his armchair, thumbing through his newspaper, sipping his precious Colonel Lee, while Columbia and I sit on the living room floor doing homework. Suddenly someone raps on our front door. Before any of us can move, the knock comes again, harder, and a loud, impatient voice shouts, "Police! Open the door!"

Dread seeps into the room like a mist. My father puts down his drink, pushes himself out of his chair, and trudges heavily to the door. He opens the door to two young, heavyset white D.C. police officers. One looks past my father and scans the room, his gaze stopping on Columbia. The other cop stands framed in the doorway, shifting his weight, his hand resting on his gun.

"That your daughter, boy?" the first cop asks my father.

Boy.

The word slices into me.

My father—older than both cops—dips his head. He swallows. He doesn't seem to be able to speak.

"I asked you a question, boy," the cop says. "Is that your daughter?"

My father nods, his head down, his eyes boring into the floor, refusing to meet the cop's eyes.

"She's under arrest."

My father jerks his head up. He blinks in confusion. "For—what?"

"Assault."

"Assault?"

"She attacked a young girl in the park without provocation. She beat her."

Columbia rises to her feet and practically sprints to my father's side. "She spit on me and called me a n— . . . a name."

"You beat her," the cop says again.

"I slapped her," Columbia says. "But she—"

"That's assault," the cop says. "You're going to jail."

My sister starts to shake. My father swallows again and looks directly at the first cop, the spokesman. "Officer, sir, please, don't take her to jail—"

"Then punish her."

Again, my father blinks in confusion. "I will. She won't do it again. I'll see to it that—"

"Now," the cop says.

"What?" my father says.

"Punish her now."

The cop points a leather-gloved finger at something he sees in the room. An object at the base of my father's armchair.

The strap.

"Whip her," the cop says.

Time seems to stop. I want to run. Bile rises into my throat. I feel sick. I'm not conscious of moving, but I feel myself sliding backward on the floor until I'm nearly out of the room.

"Now," the cop says again.

My father whimpers. "Yes, sir."

Columbia's entire body collapses and she begins to cry. I don't know what to do. I see the cops step all the way into our house and close the door behind them. I don't raise my head. I can no longer see their faces. I see only their boots.

I don't see what happens next.

I don't see because I don't look.

I can't look.

I don't close my eyes, but I narrow them to slits. I can see only blurry images in my peripheral vision.

I see my father grab Columbia roughly by the arm. I see her struggle, and then I see her wilt, her body going limp.

I see my father pick up the strap.

I see a brown blur, a whip flying in slow motion.

And then I do close my eyes.

What I hear is far worse than anything I would have seen.

I hear my father grunt.

I hear the thwack of the strap.

I hear Columbia's screams.

I try to shut out her screams. But I can't. I hear the strap. I hear the strap. I hear the strap . . .

I hear Columbia wailing like a wounded animal, then gasping, her sobs ripping through the room with pain and terror and humiliation.

Then silence.

I hear her footsteps, running.

I hear my father groan.

I hear the front door open and close.

I wait. I hold my breath.

I know that everything in my world has changed. I know that my sister will never be the same, that her soul has been damaged. I know that our relationship will never be the same. And I know that my relationship with my father will never be the same.

Boy.

Those two white . . . animals . . . called my father, a grown man twice their age, . . . boy.

He did nothing. He said nothing. He beat his own daughter in front of them while they watched.

I burn with anger. I feel so much anger, my stomach clenches.

And I feel *hatred*.

Raw hatred.

I have never felt hatred before.

I hate my father. I hate him so much.

I make myself a promise.

Someday I'm going to kill him.

I'm going to kill my father.

I tuck my knees into my chest and I sob.

. . .

I lose track of time. Months float by. I spend my days walking through a kind of darkness. I refuse to talk to my father. I won't even look at him. Columbia retreats into herself, speaking to no one, and then she begins wandering into a world outside that I don't know. She goes out alone. She comes back late. I'm afraid for her. I turn twelve, then thirteen, and I realize, sadly, that Columbia and I are coping with the trauma of that day by finding our own separate escape routes.

I escape into basketball. I don't go home after school. Instead I walk twenty minutes to the Southeast Settlement House, a recreation center that offers after-school activities, arts and crafts, music, and basketball. I join their team, even though I'm the youngest player by far. Southeast



Settlement House has no gym, so we travel, playing our games at other community centers in the area. I'm a benchwarmer, getting into games only for a few minutes at garbage time. But after I leave the Settlement House, I head to the playground and play pickup ball with kids my age. I'm taller than most of them and quicker and better than all of them. When it starts to get dark and I know my mother has gotten home from work and I won't be alone with my father, I head back to Heckman Street.

I turn fourteen and become a starter on the Southeast Settlement House team. Then I join the Southwest Boys Club team, because I crave tougher competition, and they have their own gym. The floor is uneven, the backboards have no give, and the lighting is dim, but at least we don't have to travel. I start to dominate in games, scoring pretty much whenever I want, especially inside near the basket, where I use my speed to drive by defenders who try to check me, or slip past defenders who set up underneath, trying to protect the hoop. I roar by them or soar above them, jumping higher and hanging in the air longer than they can, using English to bank soft shots off the fan-shaped backboards. I don't plan what I do. I just do it.

I try to shoot from outside the way everyone else does, with two hands over my head, but I find I have no control. I also don't like the idea of stopping, setting up, and then letting the ball fly from a stationary position. It feels awkward and inefficient and slows my flow. I start working on shooting with one hand while jumping at the same time. Almost immediately, this new "jump shot" feels natural, feels right. I have more control, better accuracy, and my jump shot allows me to shoot over anyone who guards me. I also feel a little different. Nobody I've seen shoots this way, although a few kids on the playground start to copy me. I don't care. I work on my jump shot from every spot on the court. I face the hoop, aim just over the front of the rim, and then I shoot from the sides, angling my shot off the backboard. I practice my shot for hours, sometimes on my own, most of the time in games—settling the ball onto my fingertips, arcing it, finessing it, perfecting it, making it mine.

Walking home from the park after a Sunday afternoon playing pickup ball, two friends and I stop at a corner house, drawn by a shaft of blue light coming through the front window. We crowd around the window and see that the light is coming from a television set in the center of the living room. Planted on a couch in front of the television, which is encased in a hulking wood cabinet, is a white family—mother, father, and a couple of kids. I know these people. The father owns the small market up the street, and I've seen the mother working the cash register.

We huddle closer to the window so we can see what they're watching. We make out a basketball game: our local team, the Washington Capitols, taking on an opponent I can't name. Two years ago, the Capitols became a charter member of the Basketball Association of America, the new professional basketball league. I follow the team religiously in the newspaper, reading the account of every game and studying every box score. I know all the Capitols' players, my favorite being their high-scoring forward Horace "Bones" McKinney. I've memorized his scoring and rebounding average—he leads the team in both categories—but until this moment, peering through this living room window at the small, blurry black-and-white images flickering on the television screen, I've never seen a professional basketball game. I try to pick out Bones McKinney, but of course I can't. I can only imagine.

Mesmerized, the three of us watch the game for most of the second half. It occurs to me that the family must know we're outside their house, watching the game through their window. While they won't, or can't, invite us in—that's not the way the world works in 1948—they allow us to stay by their window and watch without running us off or closing the curtains. After that, my friends and I always go home by way of this house, stopping to stand outside and watch TV through their front window.

It won't be long before my father buys a television set, one that you have to operate by inserting coins in a slot on the side, like a vending machine. My mother works long hours, my brothers and my sister Gladys have moved out, Columbia keeps to herself, and my father and I don't

really communicate. Pops plays music to fill the silence in the house, but the blues he listens to probably only brings out the sadness he carries. In my opinion, he bought that coin-operated television set for companionship.

Eventually, without saying much, I join him in the living room Friday and Saturday evenings to watch boxing and wrestling. I love boxing, as he does, but I don't really get the point of wrestling, which is more show than sport. My father totally immerses himself in the action, all of it choreographed and obviously fake. He edges forward in his armchair and shouts "Watch out!" to good guys like Bobo Brazil and Gorgeous George. And when a villain such as Dick the Bruiser or Killer Kowalski sucker-punches or karate-chops one of the heroes, he yells in frustration, "He deserved it."

One day the Southwest Boys Club holds a free-throw-shooting contest. Most guys shoot clunky two-hand set shots. A few shoot free throws underhanded. When it's my turn, I toe the free throw line, bend my knees, dribble once, and, using my one-hand technique, make every one of my shots and win the contest. A bigwig at the Boys Club presents me with my prize: a ticket to see the Washington Capitols.

I go to the game by myself. I settle into my seat and watch the players I've read about and seen only as shimmering figures on TV: Frank Scollari, Johnny Norlander, and of course Bones McKinney, a high-energy six-foot-six forward with slick moves around the basket. The Capitols dominate the other team. In 1947, the year before this, the Capitols opened the season by winning seventeen straight games, a record that will stand for decades, and now they seem even better. Their coach, a fiery young guy in a rumpled suit who prowls the sidelines rubbing his prematurely balding head—relaxing only when the Capitols clearly have the game won, and then, to the crowd's delight, sitting on the bench and lighting up a victory cigar—is Arnold "Red" Auerbach, who will become the best coach in NBA history when he goes on to work for the Boston Celtics, my greatest rival and my nemesis for more than a decade.

Back at the playground, I try out moves I saw Bones McKinney

make and then I refine them, especially around the basket. I work on a head fake designed to get defenders to jump before I take a shot or drive to the basket. I'm too quick for the kids I play with, the ones my age. I itch to play against bigger kids, older kids, and—I hate to say it this way, but—better kids.

Even so, kids challenge me.

"Let's go one-on-one, Rabbit," one guy says. "Play you for a quarter."

I don't really want to play this guy. He's overaggressive, a butcher, and lacks skill. I don't want to get hurt. But a quarter does go a long way.

"All right," I say, flipping him the ball. "Take it out."

"Game's to 11," the kid says.

He tries a move and takes a shot. I block it and grab the ball before it goes out. My ball. I make eleven straight baskets and win 11-0.

"Let's run it again," the kid says, reaching into his pocket and handing me a quarter.

"No, man, I really don't want—"

"My father's a bank teller. I got a whole roll of quarters."

*Well, in that case.*

I beat this kid like a drum. I take enough quarters from him to buy myself lunch for a month.

I look for tougher competition. I meet a couple of guys who can play, but nobody can match me. I'm not bragging; it's just true.

I become friends with a tough player named Gary Mays. Everybody calls him "the Bandit" because he only has one arm, like a slot machine. I don't ask him how he lost his arm, but I hear he accidentally blew it off with a shotgun. Stocky, strong, built like a weight lifter, Gary plays every sport, including, unbelievably, baseball. What's even more unbelievable is that he plays *catcher*. Squatting behind home plate, his right hand inside his mitt, Gary catches the ball from the pitcher, flips the ball in the air, slides off his mitt, and, with his one hand, snags the ball and guns it back to the pitcher in one fluid, blazingly fast motion.

When we play basketball, the Bandit likes to be on defense. He gets

right up on you, punishing you with his thick chest and on hot days whacking you with his sweaty nub, perspiration flying off it and flicking into your face. I can't stand Gary guarding me, because I hate dealing with that nub. He brags that he's the only one who can stop me from scoring. It's halfway true: I can score against him anytime I want; I just don't like getting anywhere near his nub.

One day I meet my match, a guy who lives on the next street over: Clarence Hanford. I find him at the park, alone, shooting around. He's taller than me and older. Much older. He plays for his college team. I ask him if he wants to go one-on-one. He tucks the ball against his hip and studies me. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Nah."

"Almost fifteen. In a month. Couple of months."

"All right. We'll play one game."

We go at each other. Clarence has good moves and plays tight defense. He doesn't concede anything. Still, I stay with him. We match basket for basket, but then he gets hot, hits three shots in a row, and beats me 11–8. We go again and again. I stay right with him. I try a head fake. He falls for it but then recovers and blocks my shot from behind. I grab the ball, dribble outside, hesitate, wiggle my shoulder, fake left, and blow by him on the right for a layup. Playing Clarence, nothing comes easy. We both fight for each basket. He wins the second game. Panting, sweating, we shake hands. We promise to meet at the park again for another rematch. And so we do, playing one-on-one, day after day. I battle him, keeping every game close—and I lose every time. Somehow I don't mind: playing with Clarence, I feel like I'm in basketball school, learning to compete against someone who's bigger, stronger, and older. Even though I keep losing, I'm living the old saying: If you want to improve your game, play against somebody better.

And then, after months of having Clarence kick my butt, I arrive at the park and notice that he and I are almost the same height.

"You've grown," he says.

"Maybe."

"Loser's outs," he says, handing me the ball.

I take the ball out and I score. Then I score again. And again. I win, easily. We run it back and I win again. We play a third time. Not only do I win, but Clarence doesn't even score. We play a few more times and I win every game.

Clarence never beats me again. We finally agree to quit playing against each other because we both know that he's no match for me. The guy I could never beat has become too easy to beat. I have only one choice now: I have to leave my neighborhood and find a tougher game.

. . .

After Giddings Elementary, I attend Randall Junior High, a thirty-minute walk from my house, where each day folds into the next . . . and the next . . . and nobody knows your name, sometimes not even the teachers. I feel like I'm stuck in a kind of holding pattern, biding my time—hell, wasting my time. I don't find the subjects boring—I particularly like history and English—but my future seems predetermined. I guess because the world sees black kids as capable only of manual labor, I'm headed for a vocational track. In ninth grade, I take courses such as machine shop, sheet metal shop, shoe shop, and automotive mechanics, courses I'll continue at Phelps Vocational High School, where I'll prepare myself for a career in automotive repair or, if I show an aptitude for plants and soil, a life of landscaping. Even though now would be the time to start prepping for college, the idea doesn't come up. I never receive any encouragement from the teachers. One of them—one of only two male teachers at the school—stops me on my way out of class to tell me that, in his opinion, I will never amount to anything. His words sting and then motivate me. *I'll show him*. I'm not going to end up fixing cars in some greasy garage. I have bigger plans. I'm going to be a gym teacher.

Once it's clear that I'm on the vocational track, I tend to drift in class.

I don't see the point in paying attention. I fantasize about basketball, focusing my thoughts on making the high school team. I'm tall, but I'm skinny, and I wonder if I'm good enough to make varsity.

Only one school subject holds my interest: music. I toy briefly with learning how to play the piano. My mother encourages me. I take a couple of lessons after school, but my buddies find out and make fun of me mercilessly. I quit taking piano lessons, but not because of them. I wouldn't mind *playing* the piano, but to do that I'd have to practice. And I hate to practice.

I do love listening to music, and especially to singers like Dinah Washington, Nat King Cole, and Joe Williams, the main singer for the Count Basie Orchestra. I even write down the lyrics to my favorite songs so I can sing along to the radio. In school, our music teacher, the funny and flamboyant Mr. Glass, makes us memorize a song and perform it in front of the class. Most of the kids, especially the boys, slouch to the front of the classroom and mumble something indecipherable into their shirts. Not me. I choose the old standard "Sylvia," and I belt it—I've been blessed with an outstanding singing voice, if I say so myself. Maybe I'll try to make it as a singer first, and if that doesn't work out, *then* I'll become a gym teacher.

. . .

I wait.

I wait as long as it takes.

I have my back to the basket. My man guards me close, both of his hands on me, his right hand leaning on my shoulder, his left hand pressing into my lower back, trying to push me out of the post. You could easily call a foul, but the ref, standing in front of us, doesn't care. He probably doesn't even see.

So I wait.

I flex my shoulder. The defender's right hand rolls off me. I dribble high, bounce the ball to my waist, showing him the ball, tantalizing

him. He reaches for it; I dribble away. He whiffs, slaps the air. I allow myself to crack a smile.

I want to say, "You can't guard me. You know you can't guard me."

I snicker to myself.

*Nobody can guard me.* That's what I think, what I believe.

I would never say that aloud. I don't brag. I don't taunt. That's not how I was brought up. But I know it's true.

And now at this moment—less than a moment, really—I wait.

I want him to commit. I know he will.

I dribble high again, tease him with the ball.

*Now* I move . . . but . . .

I don't.

I fake.

He bites. He jumps.

I don't. Not yet.

I wait until he's coming down.

And *then* I jump. My back is still to the basket. My man's in the air.

He looks like he's flailing. I look like I'm flying.

And then I shoot over my shoulder, a casual flick on my way down. The ball kisses off the backboard. I hear the delicious tickle of the net.

The crowd gasps. That's what I'd call it—a collective gasp, as if coming from one large body. Usually I block out all sound, or try to. But this sound washes over me and I perk up. What I hear seems muted at first, distant, and then I hear what appears to be a . . . *sigh* . . . like air escaping from a tire. And then, as I run down the floor, getting back on defense, I hear a flood of voices chanting, "Rabbit! Rabbit! *Rabbit!*"

This stuns me, because we're two hundred miles away from D.C.

We're in Norfolk, Virginia. My team, Phelps Vocational, is playing Booker T. Washington in their season opener, on their home court.

We have no home court, because Phelps has no gym. Every game we play involves a bus ride, though most don't go as long as this one: four hours one way, from D.C. to Norfolk. We practice at a nearby junior high gym that looks smaller than regulation to me, and we play our few

home games at a local arena when it's available. That's about to change, though, if I have my way.

A new high school, Spingarn, with a beautiful full-size gym, featuring floors so polished you could shave in them, opens this year, 1952. According to my mother, Heckman Street falls into the zone that the new high school will serve. I will be able to attend Spingarn for my senior year. Mother has seen me play a few times after work, but once I'm at Spingarn, she plans to come to every game, as will the rest of my siblings, the ones who are still around. I don't expect Pops to come to any of my games, though. He claims he can't take the time off from work. He also calls my basketball playing "foolishness." He wants me to buckle down and start thinking seriously about what I plan to do after high school, what kind of job I can get.

Mother has other ideas. We have a couple of conversations about basketball and my future. As Mother and I have talked, as we have dreamed, we've wondered if maybe the way I play basketball will attract the attention of some colleges. Especially if I transfer to Spingarn. Maybe.

The game in Norfolk ends. We annihilate Booker T. Washington, 78–53. I score 35. I have begun this year, my junior year, as our team's captain. Last year, my first on the team, I averaged 18.5 points a game. We dominated our league. You wouldn't know that, however, unless you came to our games or followed us in one of the area's black newspapers, such as *The Baltimore Afro-American*, because only the black papers cover our team. The so-called mainstream newspapers, such as *The Washington Post*, don't cover black high school teams. Every week, the *Post* ranks the top ten high school basketball teams in the area and they never mention us—or any black team. One of the higher-ups at Phelps decided that our team deserves more recognition, so this year, before we start league play, we hit the road, going on a sort of barnstorming tour, playing a half-dozen of the better all-black high schools in Virginia, including Booker T. Washington. Before Booker T. Washington, we played Peabody and Armstrong. We beat them all. I believe—no, I *know*—that we can beat any high school around, including any of the top white high schools. At least I'd like to play them and see how

good they really are. I'd like to see ten white high schools that are better than us.

Because of basketball, I am becoming kind of *known*. Mother has cut out and kept every clipping mentioning me in the *Afro-American*, like the time I scored 42 against Cardozo, breaking a city scoring record. I'm proud that she's keeping a scrapbook, but I also feel embarrassed. I love playing basketball; I just don't love the spotlight. And even if I excel, my family keeps me humble.

The first time my sister Gladys sees me play, she's married and living in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, a couple of hours away. She and her husband, Simiel, a pharmacist, drive up to see that game against Cardozo, stopping to pick up Columbia on the way. Afterward, Columbia, beaming, asks Gladys, "What did you think of little Elgin?"

"Show-off," Gladys says.

I laugh, but I receive her message loud as a shout.

*Be humble.*

I'll never forget that.

I play basketball my way, and I might even be a star on the court, but once the game ends, I'm the same as everybody else.

Still, it's hard not to notice me. I've reached almost my full height of six foot five, and I do play the game with a certain . . . flair. Some might call it flash. I don't see it that way. The way I play feels natural to me. I shoot unorthodox shots because the guys who guard me don't expect them. By improvising, I get open. There's nothing more effective than the element of surprise. You can't practice these shots, because they didn't exist before and they will never happen again. I don't plan them, I just *do* them, on the spur of the moment. Kind of like the way Miles and Coltrane play jazz: you never know what's coming.

Same with my passes. I like to snag the rebound, sprint downcourt, look one way, and pass another, to throw off the defense. These passes are no accident. I have this innate ability to *see* the whole floor and pick out my teammates out of the corner of my eye. I know exactly where I'm passing the ball. If I can get the ball to someone while he's running full stride toward the basket by throwing the ball behind my back or zip-

ping it to him around my head, I will. Most coaches drill you to throw nothing but two-hand chest passes. That's fine; I can do that. But not if it slows me down and takes away my advantage.

When the high school season ends, the pickup season begins. I'm seventeen now, it's March, the last D.C. snow has melted, and after school and on weekends my friends and I play in the toughest playground games we can find. We go full-court, five-on-five, or sometimes half-court, running three-on-three. We play to twenty baskets, by twos, and we call our own fouls. You don't shoot foul shots; you just take the ball out. For some reason, the guys who lack skills, the hackers, commit the most fouls and call the most fouls. I rarely call a foul, unless I get clubbed over the head or some gorilla tackles me. My friends name me *de facto* captain, and I choose the guys for our team. We play "winners stay," meaning the winning team gets to keep on playing. If you lose, you sit and hope someone picks you to play the next game. We don't worry about that: we don't lose.

In addition to playground ball, I join the Stonewalls, a sort of club team made up of older guys. Some of the guys are out of high school and working, some are in college, some have graduated college, and some have come back from the army, like my brother Kerman, who's gotten married and taken a job working at a furniture store. These guys play rough. I can jump higher than anyone I play with, but I won't dunk or fly to the hoop unless I'm wide open, because these guys will undercut you. Some guys go for your legs. I take elbows to the face and forearms to the throat. I learn to stand my ground and body up. We play a few games in small gyms, but mostly we run outside on concrete courts. When we play outside, there will be blood. Guaranteed.

Between dominating during my junior season at Phelps and doing the same on the segregated playgrounds of D.C., I'm developing a kind of reputation. I feel like I'm riding the crest of a wave, and basketball has taken me there.

And then life, as I know it, ends.

### 3

## LEGEND

IN MARCH, WHEN I'M SEVENTEEN, I MEET HER: BARBARA Arnold. The girl I will marry.

A friend's girlfriend introduces us at a party. She's a couple of years older and doesn't go to Phelps. She does, however, go to all my games. I guess these days you'd call her a groupie. I don't really notice any individual people in the stands when I play, but when Barbara and I meet, she tells me she has never missed a game. She calls herself my biggest fan.

Like every kid I know, I go to parties on weekends, house parties, where we dance and sometimes do more. The truth is, I don't do much more. I try to act cool, hang back, but since I'm always the tallest person in the room, I kind of stick out. And maybe because of my reputation, people think I'm experienced. I'm actually very inexperienced. I do know that girls check me out.

At one party, while I'm getting a drink, I overhear two girls talking about me. One says, "Now that's a long, tall drink of chocolate."

"One good-looking piece of beefcake," the other one says.

"I would like to climb that pole," the first one says.

"Excuse me." Columbia appears out of nowhere and pushes herself between the two girls. She eyes them both with menace. "You are talking about my *brother*."

The first one takes a step backward. "Oh, I didn't—"

"You both need to move—*now*."