A Mother’s Son by Michael Croft

**ISAAC NEWTON** said it right, what goes up must come down. But that night in the Burley, Idaho, gym, I wasn’t so sure. I saw the ball spinning high above the rim, and I wondered if it wasn’t lost in an orbit of its own making. When it did come twirling out of the air, it hit the front of the rim and went flying upward once again. But the real trouble didn’t start until Lane Philips, my one and only star, leaped and tipped the ball to one of the Spartans standing underneath the basket. In his haste to make it right, he reached out and slapped at the ball, missing the other player’s hand by a good three or four inches. At least that’s how I saw it, but in those days, I was always a step back from what was really happening. Unfortunately, the ref saw it differently, as did everyone else sitting in the stands. He blew his whistle with a long shrieking trill, and I had no choice but to come flying off the bench and fight for what I thought was best for my team. “You better start making the right calls, Peawood, or we’ll be talking about it in the parking lot after the game.”

“We’re going to get you for that one,” Peawood screamed, blowing his whistle once again.

Peawood was Peawood, my nemesis from birth. We’d come out of our mothers’ wombs vowing to take the other down. Our first dustup came when we were only fourteen years old. We were playing marbles, and I swore I saw him slip one of my favorite steelies into his pocket, though he pretended otherwise. After a long verbal blast, I wrestled him to the ground, and despite his wide girth and a good thirty-five pounds on me, I let fly with both hands and bloodied his nose. That evening my father, a hard slip of a man, backed me into the bedroom and told me if I ever harmed another Peawood, he’d whip me until I was black-and-blue and limping.

The kid that Lane had fouled stepped to the line and let go with three free throws, one for Lane’s supposed misstep and two more for my threat to pummel Peawood in the parking lot. Each one lifted into the air with the ease of a butterfly, putting their team up by two points, with only seconds left on the time clock.

“Let that be a lesson to you,” Peawood shouted from the foul line.

I wiped the sweat off my brow and thought about the terribleness he had put me through, and the fact that we couldn’t agree about anything, beat-up Chevys, girls in the parking lot, all driven home by the time I saw him walking down the street hand in hand with his mother. I picked up a rock and aimed it directly at the back of his head. Luckily, it veered to the left and tumbled into the street.

I tried settling back into the game, but my mind was elsewhere. Smathers, my water boy, nudged me in the side and suggested I calm down. But the next time down the court, Peawood gave me a dirty look, and I slipped over the line. “You know, having you was the biggest mistake your mother ever made,” I yelled.

Peawood’s face flashed from red to white, and by now the score meant nothing to me. I despised every inch of his wide, heavy jowls, not to mention his lumbering gait up and down the court.

“We’re running you to the showers for that one,” he said from center court.

I never did know what came over me, but an impulse took control, and I figured public shaming was my only recourse. I let loose with a series of dance steps, something I usually reserved for the privacy of my own home. But reducing Peawood to nothing more than a pile of ridicule was my only desire.

“Would you please get off the court,” Peawood said.

I wiggled my hips and held my hands in the air like I had an imaginary dance partner. I was a Cuban fireball in the making. I spun and twirled and aimed my rear end right at Peawood, as if to say there was no difference between the two.

Peawood’s mouth gaped open and closed, and I declared myself a winner. By now everyone in the Burley gym, parents and students, Spartans and otherwise, were standing up and applauding my every move. I had no choice but to bow to the uproarious crowd like I was hailing the end of a Broadway play. Turning, I had one place in mind, the dark dang basement, otherwise known as a locker room. But before I could disappear, I had to face my biggest challenge of the evening, my wife, Marie, a teacher of grades one through three. She was sitting high in the stands, staring directly at me over the long rows. Her face was delicate and white, as if carved out of ivory. I offered up only a glimpse before disappearing into the locker room. After all, I knew what she was thinking. Downstairs, I sat and stared at a cold cement floor. Not far away was a chalkboard that read “Beat the Spartans.”

**Driving home,** I was lost in a swirl that got the best of me. The frosty fields and long vistas barely drew my attention. Our farmhouse looked lonely and out of place. My wife had parked the family car near the back door, closer to the porch than she had ever done before. I parked my beat-up truck right alongside.

The only light was a soft glow emanating from the living room. I thought for sure Marie would be sitting at the kitchen table, staring out the far window. Instead, the bedroom door was closed, and for a moment I thought the couch was my only option, but that might have made her mad, and I’d probably done enough damage for one evening.

Opening the door, I saw Marie sleeping slightly curled up and with both hands clinging to her pillow. Naked, I slipped beneath the sheets, still humming with thoughts of what I had done to my team. Scooting even closer, I thought of nuzzling her shoulders or even kissing her on the neck, but breaking her silence would have been a violation of the code that defined us.

In the morning we reconvened in the kitchen, me on one side, her on the other. “Peawood really gave it to us again, didn’t he?”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Everyone knows he has it in for me, always has.”

“But everyone thinks he made the right call.”

“Not from where I was sitting. I swear Lane never even came close to touching him.”

“But telling him he should have never been born, wouldn’t you say that was a bit much?”

“The guy irks me, that’s all I can say. Besides, how are we supposed to win a state championship with him in the way?”

“Is a trophy that important?”

“It is for me. I want to be the first coach in the history of the school to bring home the big prize.”

“But do you have to be a maniac in the process? What if I taught my classes like that?”

“Last place is very unappealing”

“So is having to learn how to shoot a free throw in the middle of the supermarket.”

She was referring to another day when I was off the mark. My team was missing free throws, and that’s all I had on my mind. One day in the grocery story, I suggested Marie practice lofting a loaf of bread into a shopping cart from seven feet away. “Everything is in the follow-through. You have to dream it into the basket.” Needless to say, she declined.

She leveled a look at me. “But what about other things, like going for a drive, having your family over for dinner, or even taking a ride over to Twin Falls?”

I wanted to say we had a farm to groom and a group of boys who couldn’t shoot straight, but I knew divorce was trilling through her mind, and I didn’t want to push her any more than I already had.

“Maybe you should leave the rumba to those who know how to do it,” she said.

Later that day, the phone rang. I had a feeling it was for me, and sure enough it was.

“Good morning, this is Principal Mayweather. I think we need to have a talk.”

“On a Saturday?”

“I hate waiting around. How about coming in and hearing what I have to say.”

“Can I feed my cows first?”

“Sure. How does noon sound?”

**Noon would** give me time to rehearse my apology and possibly save my season. Pulling up to the high school, I saw Mayweather’s black sedan sitting not far away. Other than that, the lot was empty. Students were home, like they were supposed to be, tending to their chores. Playing out in the background of all our lives was the threat of Hitler marching through Europe, and none of us knew what to think.

Inside the modest construction of brick and mortar, I looked around. Not long ago, these hallways were my home, me a smallish forward with a slashing style and an eye for the basket. Close by was a trophy case with seven or eight statements of victory sitting on the other side of the shiny glass. One of them belonged to me and the class of ’31, the year we brought home a conference championship, only to lose in the finals to a bigger and faster team from Boise. I envisioned one more trophy idling in the case that my Bobcats and the whole town of Burley could enjoy.

At the end of the hallway, I saw Mayweather’s office was closed. The only sign of life was a bar of light running across the bottom of the door. Knocking, I waited for a reply and then stepped inside. Mayweather was sitting at a small desk with a typewriter off to the side. He was a thick man with a foreboding presence. It was there that he and a staff of three oversaw the lives of thirty-seven students and six or seven teachers, of which I wasn’t one. My only job was to coach, and coach to win.

“Thanks for coming in on such short notice. I thought it best to settle this matter before the whole town is in an uproar.”

“I didn’t know they were.”

“My phone’s been ringing nonstop. Apparently, you put on quite a show.”

“We all know that Peawood and I have never gotten along.”

“But telling a man he should have never been born. I would say that’s pretty severe, wouldn’t you?”

“The heat of the moment, I guess.”

From there, he fell into a diatribe about manners and morality, and I listened the best I could. “I’ve been on the phone with the superintendent. We’re going to sit you down for five games without pay. It’s either that or face a revolt from many of the parents.”

“Was I that bad?”

“We don’t like a lot of commotion. We’re a quiet people here in Burley.”

“But who’s going to coach the boys?”

“Smathers can do it. I hear he’s a smart little lad.”

“But he’s the water boy.”

“Maybe he’ll keep his cool.”

**Going home** was my only thought, but why? So I could spend more time with Marie staring at me like I was a ghost? Besides, I needed to bring my father into the loop. If not, I’d hear about it in a big way.

Everyone called him Larry, but I went with Dad, and then only when it was necessary. A house painter by trade, he kept Burley High shiny and bright. When we passed in the hallways, he’d throw me a firm but hardly friendly nod.

I knocked on his door and waited for an answer. Most likely he was reading his morning paper and dousing himself with a few beers. He never drank to excess, just enough to maintain a steady hum throughout the day.

“Ah, it’s the showman.”

“So you heard?”

“Who hasn’t?”

“I didn’t think I was that bad.”

“I hear Mrs. Peawood took to her bed.”

“I can’t help it if her son acts like he’s nearly blind.”

“The Spartans are sure happy that he is.”

“We’ll get them next time. If, in fact, there is one. Mayweather just sat me down for five games.”

“I’m assuming you came to borrow some money?”

“Most likely we’ll have to dip into our savings. If not, I’ll find something on the side.”

I couldn’t help but survey the room. The only thing calling to me was a photo of my mother on the mantel. She was dressed in white, and the picture was taken only days before she was slain by a burrowing set of germs, otherwise known as the flu epidemic of 1918. After a mercy mission to Salt Lake City to help her befallen sister, she came home and took to her bed. On day three, my father called the doctor. A short, wiry man, the doc came right over, but her lungs were filling with fluid, and she was flirting with a fever of 103.

On a Sunday, he came back for a second visit. After tending to her for nearly an hour, he emerged from her room and stared at the floor. “She’s gone,” he whispered, barely loud enough for me to hear.

With that, my father drove his fist into the wall. The loud smack did little but drive my seven-year-old body into the corner of the room. His echoing cry of “Goddammit to hell” floated over me like a blast of heat, before settling into me and overtaking my pores and permanently sealing me into place.

“Do you think much about her?” I asked, pointing at the photo.

“I’ve gone numb doing that very thing.”

“What do you think she would have thought of my shenanigans?”

“She was gentle in ways I never understood, a lot like Marie is.”

“That’s what everyone says.”

“They have a softness you don’t always see around here.”

**Driving home,** I revved up my thoughts about money. If sliding into our savings was too troubling a thought, I’d offer to paint houses. After all, I’d heard my father going on about brushes and how to cover a wall in smooth, even strokes many a time. What I couldn’t do was sit at the kitchen table and draw up plays without a team to perform them.

To my surprise, I saw Marie’s father, Horatio Summers, standing in the driveway. Not far away was his brand-new Lincoln, a 1940 Town Car. A Supreme Court judge by day and a controlling father by night, he nodded the moment I stepped out of my car.

“Marie called me last night. We think it’s best if she comes home for a while. Until you’ve had time to sort out your priorities.”

“I’m paid to win championships.”

“But at what cost?”

“The cost that comes with not finishing in third place.”

Inside, Marie was sitting at the kitchen table. Her face was serene but not very far from worry. Next to her on the floor was her suitcase. The one I’d bought for her when we first made the trek from Reno to Idaho.

“I’ll come back when you calm down a bit. I was nearly sick to my stomach last night after the game.”

“But what about school? Who’s going to teach the kids?”

“I just got off the phone with Mayweather. He said he’d make arrangements.”

“He’s set me down for five games.”

“I know, he told me.”

“What’s that tell us about decorum?” Horatio said, patting his daughter on the shoulder.

“I crossed a line. But do we need to go this far? I’ll see to it that it won’t happen again.”

“We’ve always respected all you’ve done for Marie. There’s no question you’ve provided wonderfully for her, but it’s the obsessiveness we worry about.”

“I call it paying attention to details.”

“I understand you’re thinking of coaching your team through the summer? Isn’t that the time of year they should be playing baseball?”

“Rounding the bases never helped anyone shoot a free throw.”

**On day five** of my lonely exile, I woke to a light layering of snow and a coldness I hadn’t experienced in more than a year. Sitting at the kitchen table, I learned from the radio that my Bobcats had fallen to the Jerome Tigers, 57 to 39. Most likely Lane Philips had 37 of those points. My only refuge was out back behind the barn, where the crows flew and the cows bleated in the distance. Hanging from the side, not far from where I parked my pickup, was a basket with a raggedy net. It was there that I’d won many a game, darting with a lean look in my eye, each time scoring a point that propelled my imaginary team to victory.

Despite the darkening clouds and the hint of more snow on the way, I kept shooting. Some shots found their mark, and others didn’t, but after I made three in a row, the ache in my inner thighs vanished. Soon I was dashing and darting, convinced I could play again. If only my players had the same desire to win that I did. If so, we’d line the rafters with banners, and I would be the grandmaster of Burley.

Shortly after nailing a free throw, I heard the phone ring. My first impulse was to ignore it. Explaining my love for the rumba was not my idea of fun. But by the third rings, I thought otherwise. Maybe it was Marie. Maybe being back in Reno wasn’t the fun ride she thought it was going to be when she loaded her bags into the car and snuggled close to her father.

I tossed the ball aside and ran into the house. By the seventh ring, I had it. I heard a voice, but it wasn’t Marie’s.

“Hey, Coach, how’ve you been?”

Instantly I recognized Lane’s voice. “I’m fine, putting in my time here.”

“That’s good.”

“I understand the Tigers were a bit too much for you.”

“They had more muscle under the basket than we did.”

“How was Smathers?”

“Let’s say the water tasted good.”

“Four more games, and I’ll be back patrolling the sidelines once again.”

“We’re all rooting for you, but that’s not why I’m calling. My father is wondering if you’d like to come work for him at his dance studio. He says you’re a natural.”

“Me teach dance. That’s impossible.”

“He said not to worry about it. Besides, it comes with a paycheck.”

I hung up the phone and thought about it. Living in solitude was not for me. Besides, I needed to earn some money. The next morning, I was up early, standing in front of Mel’s Wonderful World of Dance, a tall gray building not far from Burley High. Inside I saw the wide expanse of a dance floor. On three sides of the room were giant mirrors, all shiny and clean. Before I could take a step, Mel came running up to me. “Thank you so much for joining us. We’re excited about having you on board.”

“But I’m not sure I can be of much help.”

“I saw you in action the other night. You practically glided across the floor.”

“I’ve never given this any thought, but you know, I do teach my players how to tap.”

“We know. Lane loves it.”

“I tell them there are three rules for being on my team. Tap, listen, and do what you’re told.”

“We do think it’s best if you audition first. We have to be careful who we throw to the wolves around here,” he said. “Let me get Aubrey, she’s more than a little thrilled about this.”

A minute later, a tall blonde woman in a black leotard swept into the room. “We both think you’re going to be a great addition to the staff.”

“I tap all the time at home. I don’t think I’ll need any music.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got under the hood,” Mel said, taking a step backward.

I slipped off my jacket and stretched my arms over my head. With only a count of three, I let go with a long flurry of steps. Tipiti-tipiti-tap. Tipiti-tipiti-tap. With ease, I found my timing, and right after came that all-important glow. I could have tapped until my legs fell off.

Mel laughed and clapped his hands. “Simply marvelous. You’re everything we’ve been looking for.”

“And we’re going to have a rumba special next week. Two for the price of one,” Aubrey said.

“Are you sure you want me doing this? That’s how I got in trouble in the first place.

“We’re going to make you a star,” Mel said, patting me on the back.

**The following week,** it was rumba, rumba, and rumba some more. Big and tall, sure-footed and wide, we didn’t give a damn. The First Annual Rumba Festival was a mind-bending success. It felt like half the town showed up for lessons. For six long days, Mel, Aubrey, and I held forth with swirls and twirls, not to mention dips and dives. We didn’t care if they were farmers, merchants, or down-in-the-dirt dropouts from Burley High. For seventeen dollars and thirty-five cents a head, we slithered and dithered until our legs ached, and our eyes glistened every time another dollar bill floated into the cash drawer and laid there like an Olympian who had crossed the finish line and won a gold medal.

Right before lunch, Mel came up to me and smiled. “Marcella Peawood is coming in today for what we hope is a series of lessons.”

“Rob Peawood’s sister?”

“One and the same.”

“But we all know about me and the Peawoods.”

“We’re not worried about that. Besides, Marcella is very nice. When’s the last time you saw her?”

I ran through the dark corridors of my mind. “Been some time. Is she still running the farm out on the highway?”

“Damn near all by herself. She says she needs a break in the action. And besides, she was very excited to hear you’ll be teaching her.”

“But a Peawood?”

After finishing my sandwich, I saw her pulling up in a big hay truck with a dented front end and a faded right door. She hadn’t changed much over the years. Tall and lumbering, very much like her brother, with wide hips and thick, muscular legs.

“I couldn’t believe it when Mel told me you were going to be giving me lessons.”

“Well, I need to stay employed.”

“I heard you and Rob put on quite a show.”

“Seems to be what we do best.”

“Somebody needs to pin his ears back every now and then.”

Mel yelled from across the room. “Nice to see you, Marcella. Let me get the music going.”

“Have you ever rumbaed before?” I asked.

“Only in my dreams.”

The warm, driving sound of a Latin band soon filled the room.

“Nice,” Marcella said.

“Follow my lead, and you’ll be fine.”

I cupped my hand around Marcella’s and lifted it into the air. I wrapped my other arm around her waist and pulled her a step closer, telling myself not to think about her brother. Our first step was awkward and out of sync, with the heavy beat hovering over me.

“Relax into me, if you can,” I said.

She let her shoulders sink, and the touch of her hand on my shoulder softened. “This is so exciting.”

“I like what I’m seeing,” Mel said.

Marcella followed right along, slipping and sliding, letting her wide hips guide her across the floor, perfectly in line with the music.

“Way to go, Marcella. You’re getting the hang of this,” Mel yelled once again.

Diving deeper into the sounds, I saw the wet glint in her eye, and I fought the urge to hold her more tightly. Though Marie was still in Reno, she was very much on my mind.

“I think I was born to do this,” Marcella said.

I let her words swim over the top of me, and in my mind’s eye, I saw myself wearing a wide Panama hat and swaggering down the streets of Havana.

“Now I want you to really let go through the hips and feel the music,” I told her.

“I swear that saxophone player must be rolling in lava,” Marcella said.

Both of us were dipping and sliding in perfect harmony to the music, and the more we danced, the more I yearned for the hard, driving pulse to never end. Near the end of a luxurious piano solo, I let my arm swing out, and Marcella twirled with the ease of a ballerina. Shimmering from side to side, she stared at me with a warm glow in her eyes, and I never once let her escape the light grip of my fingertips.

“Bravo!” Mel screamed in a high-pitched voice.

The music ended with a long, soothing comedown that was baked at the right temperature. Marcella was breathing heavily, and her face was lined with perspiration. “I think we flirted with ecstasy,” she said.

Less than three feet away, I fought the need to feel the warmth of her body pressing into mine, and the thought of her willingness to ask for more caused my breathing to heave up and down in ways I found embarrassing. Who would have thought the secret of life was hiding inside the steamy beat of a saxophone from somewhere in South America.

**On my way home,** I thought only of Marcella. Could she truly be the one I needed to be with for the rest of my life? And what would that be like, sitting with Peawood and his surrounding tribe? What were Marcella, he, and I supposed to talk about? The art of refereeing a game?

Glancing at the clock, I saw that suppertime was not far away. That meant Marie was buried inside a book while her mother tended to a plate of spaghetti in the kitchen.

I dialed a number that came easily to me, Fairview 3-7476. In the middle of the third ring, the Judge answered.

“Hello, can I speak with Marie?”

A pause lingered on the line. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. She’s having one of those days.”

“What does that mean?”

“She’s been resting. This ordeal has been hard on her.”

“Are you saying she wants to come home?”

“I’m not saying anything of the kind. Why don’t you call back in a few days?”

Hanging up, I thought maybe this was something we could work our way through. Me, the rebellious coach, her the tender surveyor of children.

Around nine, I heard the loud roar of a truck coming down the driveway. I hoped it wasn’t one of my students wanting a long dissertation on the history of dance. Glancing outside, I saw Marcella finding her way across the front yard. Suddenly my breath was fluttering, and I thought of turning off the lights and hiding. But by the third rap, I knew I had to answer the door.

Opening it only a few inches, I saw her face surrounded by a halo of light. “Next week was too far away,” she said.

“Come in, come in.”

She stepped into the kitchen and stared at the floor. “I think the music is still beating inside me.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“I’m not sure, but I can’t stop thinking about our lesson.”

“I do think we shined it up a bit.”

Marcella moistened her lips and stared right at me. “I might regret saying this, but I need to know if Marie is ever coming back.”

“Let’s say we’re taking a time-out.”

“But for how long? Days, weeks, years, what?”

“The rigors of coaching have taken their toll on us.”

“But I have to say, I’ve seen the two of you at games. Neither of you ever looks very happy.”

“I’ve been drawn to her since the day I met her.”

“But round pegs and square holes. You know how that goes.”

“One day, they might find their way.”

Bear-like and ready, she wrapped her thick arms around me and squeezed until a warm flush flowed through the center of my body. My first impulse was to break away and not get lost inside her. But the more I wiggled, the more I felt the brusque slide of her overalls across my clean white shirt, and I finally had what I was looking for, flesh to flesh, bone to bone, the mother lode in every way.

“Please don’t let go of me,” she said.

“But Marcella, I’m married.”

“But I have visions of you tap dancing on my chest.”

Closing my eyes, I saw a long white valley, and it was like tumbling inside a cavern of nothingness, so I took a step backward. I wasn’t ready to be so deep inside my own breath. “Not now, Marcella, it wouldn’t be right.”

She flexed and took a step back from my lingering body. “Oh, the music we could make.”

I thought of Marie tucked safely away at her parents’ home in Reno. “I need some water. I feel a headache coming on.”

I closed my eyes and saw myself in an orchard with a bright shiny apple spinning just beyond my fingertips.

**Later in the week,** I sat in a room down the hallway from where Mel and Aubrey seemed to live most of the time. Over coffee I thought of Marcella and our illustrious near miss. Some part of me needed another flash in the middle of the night. Another told me to stay away.

Mel scooted into the room and tapped his fingers on the table. “You’ve got a call. I’m not sure who it is.”

Marie and her family came to mind. Walking into Mel’s office, I cleared my throat and told myself not to sound desperate. “Hello.”

“Principal Mayweather here. I’m wondering if we can’t have a talk?”

“I’m listening.”

“What do you think about coming back early?”

“I thought I was out for five games.”

“We can’t go zero and five, I’ll have anarchy on my hands.”

“But I have an obligation to Mel and Aubrey. We’re in the middle of a rumba festival.”

“Maybe you can do both. Tap by day, coach by night.”

I held the phone in the cup of my hand and stared up at Mel. “They want me back.”

“We knew this was coming. We’ll have to work something out. Besides, Lane says the team is about to strangle Smathers.”

“Mr. Mayweather, tell the team I’m back in action.”

**I thought** I was going to ebb between two worlds, but Mel and I came up with a plan to bring the team over to his studio for a day or two and let them dance away. That evening at five, I had my boys standing in front of me. “From what I understand, we need to get our legs back. Without them, we don’t stand a chance against Minico High.”

I lined my boys up in an even row and motioned for Mel to turn on the music. Soon some big-band music filled the room. I glanced at Lane, and he gave me a smile that swept from one side of his face to the other. But there we were, eleven little warriors adorned in gym shorts and shiny black shoes with metal taps on the bottom of them.

I gave them one dazzling rat-a-tat-tat after another, yearning for us to be one large ensemble. Naturally, the smaller boys were right there with me, their little taps echoing with a steady beat. The bigger, more shabbily built boys struggled to keep up. Of course, Lane was a mountain stream in every way.

“That’s it, listen to the hum. That’s all there is to it, tap, and be willing to hear the song of life.”

I closed my eyes and one long tapping sound led to another. Soon I was swimming in a sustained rhythm of my own making. Suddenly the anguish of always wanting more out of Marie thinned down to a whispering vapor. Along with it went the farm, the need to win, and any lingering thoughts of Marcella.

Finally, I brought my tapping to a halt, but I jabbed my finger in the air and motioned for my team to keep going. Their young legs tapped with a sustaining pulse until the only thing that mattered was the loud booming sound that engulfed them.

“Now let’s finish with a flourish,” I said, walking back and forth like the dance instructor I had become.

I quickly returned to my own brand of rat-a-tat-tat, but it was nothing more than a splash of dessert after a gourmet meal.

“Fellas, we’re going to tap our way to victory.”

**The next day,** I opened the barn door and stared down my livestock. Seven of them were cows, and five needed to be milked and readied for the day. Glancing out the window, I stared at our forty acres of productivity, nothing more than frozen soil waiting for the call of spring. Later, I counted the rest of the day minute by minute. The past few weeks had been a spinout, an aberration of sorts. Soon Marie would be home, and the victories on the court would be piling up.

By late afternoon, I was in the locker room. I dispensed with the blackboard and any slogans about the Tigers being our one and only focus. Instead, I waited until everyone was dressed and ready to go. Upstairs we could hear the band warming up. With it came the call of the dance studio, and I was almost ready to slip back into my other life.

“This is what we do. We play ball, and we play with a sense of freedom. That’s all we need to know. We let the game come to us. The court is nothing more than a dance floor, and we’re going to dance like no one has ever seen.”

Smathers lowered his head and mumbled what sounded like a prayer. Lane stood up and smacked his hands. “Let’s show them what we got.”

The boys slithered their way up the steps, with Lane in the lead. I chose to hold back until I heard the band strike up a long spark of music, and I followed soon after, making sure not to attract too much attention.

On the court, both teams ran through their layups. I folded my arms across my chest and looked around. Sitting in the bleachers, about ten rows up, was Marie. Next to her was her father, impassive and indifferent to the outcome of the game. But she was eager for us to win. Gone was the tepid look that seemed to be so much a part of her. In its place was one of quiet reflection, the very one that drew me to her when we first met. I waved and made sure the gesture was smooth and inviting. She smiled back at me, and I told myself not to make any assumptions, but thinking that maybe we could still be a happy farm couple with the team as the center point of our lives.

In the huddle, I caught sight of Marcella sitting high up in the stands, slumped forward with her arms resting across her thighs. Turning, I had to shake any thoughts of her away. “Let’s play loose. Remember, we’re here to have some fun,” I shouted to my team.

Both teams wandered onto the court, lonesome boys with little thought of anything beyond what was right in front of them. Before tip-off, Peawood pulled up his pants and gave me a look that said he was up for more. Him and me in the parking lot, I’d pick him apart in little time. But I was beyond that now; dance had brought me to the hilltops, and that’s where I wanted to stay.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Smathers whispered in my ear.

With the tip, the Tigers controlled the ball, but I wasn’t worried. We looked spry and springy in the legs. After their shot went up, we took possession and sprinted up the court. The first pass, once we set up around the key, found its way to Lane, my slip-and-slide serpent of a player. Dribbling once, twice, he bled across the free-throw line, and three Tigers collapsed around him. He leaped with the pure grace of who he was, a by-product of Mel’s Wonderful World of Dance. At his peak, he raised the ball above his head and let go. I watched it sail as if it were nothing more than a puff of air.

Arching high over the rim, the ball hung there, seemingly for seconds. It descended without any players altering its flight. I saw it fall, and the shimmering whiteness of the net engulfed me. If my arms had been longer, I would have reached out and cradled that ball, maybe more than anything in my life.