

More than a Game

Written by Jesse McDaniel

1. Out of Bounds

A ball soared from the next court over, as if a plane dropped it from the sky, and bounced off Lawrence's head. *How does someone miss that bad?* Lawrence thought to himself.

"What the fuck?" Lawrence yelled and rolled the ball back with disgust.

Lawrence quickly shifted his focus back to his pick-up game. His teammates let out a little laugh. The game resumed. Austin, one of the frequent flyers at the park, threw the ball at Lawrence's chest.

"4 to 6. Your ball, big dog," Austin said with a grin as sweat dripped off his face.

Lawrence took one dribble and blew past Austin. Lawrence slammed down a reverse dunk. As he was hanging on the rim, he looked back to give Austin his signature stank face, but Austin wasn't looking. Instead, Austin had his head turned in the other direction. It looked like he saw a ghost. The basketball game stopped in an instant as a large silhouette started walking toward Lawrence. There was no way to make out who it was, but there was an ominous presence about him. The air became heavy, and it seemed like this mysterious man could control the weather as a dense fog followed him. Lawrence could tell the large figure had no interest in playing basketball, given that he was wearing baggy jeans, Timberlands, and a puffy jacket.

A stale fog spread over the court. The figure got close enough to where Lawrence could see his face. He's never seen this man before. He noticed that the man had a limp and a thick scar across his forehead: a type of scare that told a story of pain and punishment. *He didn't look very welcoming.* The park lights sparkled off his gold necklace. He had a cigar loosely tucked between his lips. The sound of his walking cane hitting the ground reverberates off the surrounding dilapidated apartments buildings. Without hesitation, Lawrence walked toward the man. He wasn't scared, given that he had already been to hell and back. *Nothing scared him*

anymore. The man stopped two feet away from Lawrence; he stood his ground and looked down at him. Lawrence was at least 7 inches taller than him.

“Hello, young man. You don’t know me, but I know you. You can call me Razer,” he said with ill intentions.

“Nice to meet you, Razer. Now tell me why you decided to interrupt my game?” Lawrence said with frustration.

“Your stupid game can wait. You’ll soon find out that I don’t play games. Now, you tell your brother he owes me,” Razer said with malice.

“Owes you what?” Lawrence responded.

“\$4,000. Don’t ask why he needed the money. I have to have that money in my hand no later than 9 pm, Thursday night. The clock is ticking,” the words violently escaped the large man’s mouth.

Not a second later, a ball rolled over from a court on the other side of the park. “Over here!” A distant voice cut through the brisk air.

Lawrence picked up the ball and stared at it. Razer raised his withered, wooden cane and pointed it at Lawrence, a few inches from his chest, “...and when the money doesn’t show, when we can’t find him, guess who will get another friendly visit?”

Several veins in Lawrence’s lengthy arms became visible as he squeezed the ball with enough strength to smash a pumpkin.

“I will be sure to let him know,” Lawrence said sarcastically.

“Listen. I know you have nothing to do with this, but your brother running off with our money has consequences. I always knew these low-level wannabe drug dealers were useless.

Trust me, I don't like it hurting innocent people, but if it is not them, it is me." Razer said as he pulled his Bic lighter and lit his cigar after a few attempts.

"We haven't been able to find him, and if we can't find him—

"Yeah, yeah, if you can't find him... blah. blah. blah." Lawrence interrupted.

"Listen here, smartass. 4,000 dollars. Two weeks. Oh! And good luck on your season-opener Friday. Word on the street is that you are quite the ball player," the man said while smoke rolled off his tongue. Razer slipped his Bic lighter into his front pocket as he turned around and hobbled out of sight. An interaction like that felt like a lifetime but lasted no more than two minutes.

"Hey! Did you hear me, or are you deaf? Over here," the frustrated player yelled again. Lawrence threw the ball as hard as he could in the direction of the voice.

2. Turnover

Later that evening, Lawrence walked a few short blocks back to his apartment building. On his way back, he passed several bodegas, old heads smoking cigarettes on uneven stoops, and dealers slinging rocks. *The Bridge is Over* by Boogie Down Productions was blasting out of a boombox surrounded by B-Boys. Lawrence has seen it all. Typically, he would wave to everyone, but this day was different. He held his head down as he thought about the interaction he had just had. These walks back home were a time for Lawrence to reflect and think about his future: the endless possibilities that basketball could bring him, but confusion and dread occupied his mind.

“Hey, Sky Man, what’s bothering you?” A voice came from the distance.

People in the neighborhood called him that because Lawrence was known for high-flying dunks. Anyone who frequented the basketball courts knew Lawrence was the best ball player on this side of town. They all wanted him to make it.

Lawrence stopped and turned around and saw that it was Frankie, an older man, a man many young kids saw as a father figure, as he would often offer knowledge to those who would listen. “Nothing, Frankie,” Lawrence said half-heartedly. “Just wasn’t on my game today.”

Frankie has been around long enough to know that Lawrence was lying. “Alright, young man. Keep your head up. Stay up,” Frankie said.

“Thanks, Frankie,” Lawrence said as he turned back around and kept walking.

3. In the Paint

As he approached his worn-down apartment building, which was 40 times taller than it was wide. *Man, I can't wait to get out of this city and buy my mom a nice house. Shoot, maybe pay off all of my brother's future debt,* Lawrence thought to himself. Lawrence hated to think about his brother so poorly, but as his big brother, the man of the house, he just wanted what was best for him.

As Lawrence walked down the hallway to his apartment, he couldn't help but feel bad for all those who live here. Each floor of the building had over 30 apartments. Each apartment had a different character you could find in a poorly written book. Each floor has its own personality. Regardless of race, background, or ethnicity, anyone who lived in Lawrence's building struggled in their own way. Two doors down, in room 1320, a mom of three, would sneak out at night and dance at the local club to get enough money to keep the lights on. A man, who looked to be in his 50s, living in room 1313, who had an opportunity to make it to the NBA straight out of high school, smoked crack four times a day was aging quicker than the time it took for him to score a few dime bags. The odor would seep through the vents and into his room.

Much like Lawrence, most kids in Harlem grew up poor without much guidance: without their fathers. It was hard to put blame on the men who left disappeared due to the immense pressure raising a family, the lack of opportunity, and the illusion of a luxurious life that selling drugs provided; the guilt of not providing a life that their children deserve ate away at each one of them. The only difference between Lawrence and the other families was that his dad didn't leave by choice, his dad, Tafari, died protecting his family during the move from Jamaica to Harlem.

Lawrence's apartment was on the 13th floor of a sad-looking building that looked abandoned, but that was far from the case. City officials could care less about the infrastructure and systemic disadvantages that people faced in urban areas. Police officers never patrolled these streets and city officials refused to provide funding to schools in Harlem. Harlem was the wild west. *How can anyone live in a place like Harlem and live a quality life when suits and ties didn't give a shit?* Out of sight, out of mind, I guess.

The influx of crack-cocaine into urban neighborhoods certainly didn't help things. Gang violence was at an all-time high. The homicide rate was at its peak. *Who can criticize anyone for the violence and induced frustration?* A week wouldn't go by where Lawrence heard gun shots or trivial arguments outside his door or the bus stop in front of the apartment building. Drug dealers would stand in front of every liquor store, park bench, and street corner in the neighborhood during all hours of the day. They would sell to anyone to make a few bucks: pregnant ladies, teenagers, other addicts - it didn't matter. *Lawrence didn't blame the player. He blamed the game.*

At the ripe age of 17, and mid-way through his final year of high school, and the season opener, just a few days away, Lawrence had a choice, and he made the often-ignored one. He wasn't going to throw his life away for some cheap thrills and quick money. He was going to be someone, and he would do anything it took.

4. Time Out

Lawrence walked through the door, nearly hitting his head on the door frame. He's grown 6 inches in the last two years. At 6'8, he felt like being tall was a blessing and a curse; in this instance, he saw it as a curse. His brother, 2 years younger, 30 pounds heavier, and seven inches shorter, never had that issue. Whenever Lawrence came home from school or a long day at the courts, he did his best to put a smile on his face. He hated it when his mom worried about him. She had enough on her plate.

"I'm home, Mom," Lawrence said, just loud enough for his mom to hear him but just quiet enough not to wake her if she was sleeping.

Arleen got up from the couch. "Son, I told you to come home before dark." She said with concern, "You almost scared me to death."

"Sorry, Mom. The last game took forever," Lawrence said with guilt.

Arleen knew when Lawrence was lying. As a mom, she knew the difference between a lie and the truth; she always knew when something was wrong.

"I forgive you, Lawrence, now get to bed. You have a big game soon," Arleen said as she walked to her room.

Man, I love my mom, but sometimes she cares too much, he thought to himself as he closed his door, turned off his lamp, and lay in bed.

5. Half Time

The pre-winter breeze broke through Lawrence's cracked window. He slept no more than 4 hours. Although Lawrence did not show any fear during the confrontation at the courts, he reflected on the conversation all night. He often wondered how Jaxson got sucked into street life, considering Lawrence had the same morals instilled in him. *Maybe Mom didn't whoop him enough.*

Lawrence was tempted to tell his mom that he was sick, so he could stay home from school. He knew he couldn't because his coach wouldn't let him play on Friday. He sat through his classes out of obligation. The school bell rang, and he ran home so he could get ready to watch the Brooklyn Nets game.

After ducking under the door frame, Lawrence ran to the Television. Arleen was at work, so he could be as loud as he wanted. He did his typical routine of adjusting the antenna until the local news station, WPIX, cut through the static on the television screen. It was 10 minutes before tip-off. Lawrence made it just in time. He would usually sit up and lean toward the screen. This time was different. Out of sheer exhaustion, he lay down and fell asleep.

"PATRICK EWING WITH AN EMPHATIC JAM ON SAM BOWIE TO END THE THIRD QUARTER!" the announcer yelled with unbridled enthusiasm. Lawrence immediately sat up, rubbing his eyes.

As the game went to commercial break, he heard the door swing open. He looked back and saw Arleen holding a stack of envelopes. "Watching the game, I see. Who's winning?" Arleen asked with an adequate amount of interest.

"The Nets are, but it's not looking good," Lawrence answered, still rubbing his eyes.

Arleen handed Lawrence one of the envelopes, “Here. This one is for you. I hope it isn’t your report card,” she said jokingly.

He ripped open the envelope and pulled out what appeared to be a handwritten letter. *Could it be from that asshole, Razer? I sure hope not.* Lawrence thought to himself. As his eyes hit the bottom of the page, Lawrence’s face lit up.

“Mom. It’s Saint Joseph’s University,” Lawrence smiled. “They are sending a scout to watch my game this Friday.”

Arleen almost fell to the floor, “Oh, praise the good Lord above. My baby is going to play college ball!”

“Mom, don’t get too excited. I haven’t even played the game yet,” Lawrence said.

Arleen shot Lawrence a look only a mother can make, “Oh, stop it. You’ll do great. I can’t explain how proud I am.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Lawrence said with half the excitement that Arleen had. Lawrence didn’t have high hopes as several scouts from different universities across the state watched his games last season, and he still hasn’t gotten an offer.

Despite Lawrence’s indifferent demeanor, Arleen still smiled ear to ear as she walked back to her room to take a nap.

Lawrence shifted his focus back to the game. There were three minutes left and it was a tie game. He was dialed in. Even if his apartment caught fire, he probably wouldn’t notice. The Nets called their last timeout, giving Lawrence a brief moment to relax.

“Mookie Blaylock has been phenomenal for the Nets. Nothing short of perfect,” the announcer exclaimed. The Knicks and Nets were trading buckets. Down three points and the clock winding down, the Nets called their last timeout with 10 seconds left. Mookie Blaylock

inbounded the ball and ran around two screens before catching a pass. “Mookie for the tie. AND BANG! WE ARE GOING INTO OVERTIME,” the announcer screamed as the clock hit double zero.

Lawrence jumped out of his seat and cheered. “Let’s go, baby!” During the brief intermission, Lawrence walked to the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of cereal. As he was walking back to the couch, he saw the door creep open. *I could have sworn Mom locked the door*; Lawrence thought to himself. He knew that only one other person had a key, and it was Jaxson.

“Yo. Lawrence. I need to talk to you,” Jaxson said quietly as he shut the door behind him.

“Jaxson, where the fuck have you been? You got Mom worried sick. She’s going to kill you when she finds out you’re here,” Lawrence said as he sat back down, almost uninterested in the conversation.

“I know. I know. I haven’t been the best son or brother, but I need to talk to someone. I’m in some deep shit,” Jaxson said.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Why am I not surprised?” Lawrence said, with his back to Jaxson.

Jaxson walked in front of the Television, blocking his view, which was the one thing Lawrence hated. “Bro, listen to me. He’s dead. Melvin is fucking dead!” Jaxson said with tears falling from his dirty face. Melvin was a kid around the same age as Lawrence, who ran with the same crowd as Jaxson. In a strange way, Lawrence was glad to see his brother cry: showing an emotion other than anger.

“I can’t believe they shot him,” Jaxson continued, as he took a blue bandana from his back pocket and dabbed the sweat from his forehead.

Here we go again. Lawrence thought to himself. It's almost like he has heard this same story before. "Yo, move, I'm watching the game," Lawrence commanded. "Get your sorry ass out of here before you wake up Mom."

"Man, I knew you never gave a shit about me. All you care about is your stupid basketball," Jaxson said quietly.

"I care about you. Mom cares about you, but we need you to care about yourself. You've got to stop doing this, man. Every time you come back, Mom prays that you would walk through that door as the smart, hard-working son you used to be," Lawrence said as his full attention was now on Jaxson.

"Man, I'm trying to tell you. I'm in a lot of trouble, man," Jaxson said, ignoring Lawrence's heartfelt admission. "He is after me. He tried to kill me, but accidentally shot Melvin instead. I never gave him his cut of the money I made dealing." Lawrence didn't have to ask who was trying to kill him; he already knew.

Lawrence didn't say a word. He just stared at Jaxson. He didn't know what to say or how to feel. After a few moments, Jaxson broke the silence, "Fuck you, man. You're not even listening. Have fun with your stupid ass basketball game, and if I die, it's on you!" *On me? What the hell did I do?* Lawrence thought to himself, bewildered.

"And that's all, folks. The Knicks have won their fourth straight game as they went on an 8-0 run to end the game," the announcer said. Lawrence walked over to the television and turned it off.

6. Delay of Game

Lawrence needed to blow off some steam. He walked to the high school gym to get some shots up after leaving a note for Arleen on the kitchen table in case she woke up before he got home. He wasn't going to be able to sleep, so he might as well run some drills before the big game tomorrow. Lawrence knew how important this game was. Getting a college offer to play ball was the first step to freedom.

It was a cold, gloomy night. Frost covered the outside of the building's windows; a single cloud enveloped the school. The school's flagpole pierced through the layers of dense fog. He unlocked the gym door using a duplicate key that the late-night custodian gave him. He walked to the utility closet and flipped on the lights. One by one, each light flickered on. This time, only two didn't light up. *Damn. I forgot my ball.* Luckily, he found one covered in dust and cobwebs in the corner of the closet.

He swept the floor, wiped the bottom of his shoes, and started with his dribbling routine: between his legs, behind his back, 100 dribbles with his left hand and another 100 with his right. He started by shooting 50 layups, 50 mid-range jumpers, then 50 three-pointers. It wasn't unusual for him to make just about every shot. He missed the nights when Jaxson would rebound for him, but those days are long gone. He would do every drill you could think of. Hours went by. After Lawrence felt satisfied with his effort, he gave himself permission to leave. As he walked to the utility closet to turn off the lights, he remembered that he still had to make 10 shots in a row. He dribbled to the free throw line.

A shot sprang off the back of the rim and rolled down the court to a side door. Lawrence walked over, reached down, and grabbed the ball. As he looked up, a blinding light hit his eyes. After Lawrence's vision came back, he saw a police officer standing over him. Lawrence hated

big or small surprises, especially one from a cop. The cop sported a buzzed haircut and thick mustache. Lawrence didn't know if he was in trouble or not. Who knows, maybe I fit the description of a tall black male, skinny, white shirt, and blue shorts. Lawrence sarcastically thought to himself.

"Don't worry. You're not in trouble," the cop said. Lawrence had a puzzled look on his face. Before the cop said anything else, he unfolded a piece of paper he pulled from his pocket. "Is this your brother?"

At first glance, he recognized the picture right away; it was Jaxson's school picture. He shifted his focus to the short, handwritten sentence just below it. "Dearest Arleen, you have 3 days to pay your son's debt, or you will never see him again. Call me at 817-279-1298. All the best, Razer." Lawrence read the words under his breath. Tears immediately rolled down Lawrence's face, and his lips started to quiver. He was speechless as an immense feeling of guilt riddled his weak body.

"Arleen told me you would be here, and I don't have any time to waste. I hate to tell you this now, especially before your game tomorrow, but if we don't find Jaxson soon, I fear the worst." After the words spilled from the cop's mouth, Lawrence fell to his knees.

"Please... why?... Why now? This can't happen, not today," Lawrence bellowed.

"Son, I know you're upset, but you need to listen to me—" before the cop finished his sentence, a voice came on his radio, "Officer Stan, we got word that a few witnesses claim to have seen Jaxson in the back of a silver car, possibly a Nissan heading toward the Brooklyn bridge." Officer Stan picked up the radio, "10-4."

The officer let Lawrence have his moment before helping him to his feet and putting his hand on his shoulder. "Look, no one knows your brother better than you, and I know you're in a

lot of pain, kid, but we don't have much time," the officer sighed. "Your mom explained to me that a few of your friends told her about a run-in you had with a notorious gangbanger, and that information could help us find your brother. We need you to come down to the station and help us with a composite sketch."

Lawrence took a deep breath and followed the officer. Before walking through the door, Lawrence turned around and looked at the basketball court, and felt as if he was never going to see it again. He left the gym with the officer. To Lawrence's surprise, Arleen was already in the cop car.

Arleen looked at Lawrence through the passenger-side window and said, "Thank you, son." Lawrence opened the door and slid into the backseat.

"Your game is going to have to wait, Lawrence. Your brother is in trouble, and we are still family. We need to find Jaxson. He needs us more than ever," Arleen said quietly as tears continued to fall from her face.

"Family is family. I can lose a game, but I can't lose a brother. Let's go find Jaxson," Lawrence responded after minutes of silence. The car slid out of the parking lot as the lone light in the gym flickered.