

TEN ON SUNDAY: The Secret Life of Men

Chapter One: Home Court

Los Angeles is burning.

It is spring of 1992. Even though a videotape clearly shows four Caucasian police officers brutally beating and kicking an African-American man named Rodney King, the all-white jury delivers a verdict of not guilty. The four officers are freed. Outraged, people in South Central Los Angeles begin to burn the city down. They set fires and loot stores in their own neighborhoods, then head north toward other areas, such as Hancock Park, where I live.

Less than a mile away from me, buildings burst into flame, windows exploding, panes of glass dissolving into powder. Looters lug television sets out of the rubble that was once an appliance store and dodge police in riot gear. Fear grips my street. People I know, friends and neighbors, reveal that they are armed with handguns and rifles. They are going to keep watch at their front windows and they are going to wait.

"Lock and load," a neighbor tells me.

I have no weapon. I stand guard in my living room, staring in disbelief at the news on television. In the sky above me, helicopters hover, circling rooftops with flames that lunge at their metal bellies. Samy's Camera, five blocks away, shines fiery in the moonlight as a throng of rioters tromp through what was once the showroom, hauling off the entire contents of the store. I move outside to my driveway and watch white ash from Samy's flutter onto the hood of my car like snowflakes.

While my children sleep, I pace, ears cocked to the sound of sirens and blasts I'm sure are gunshots. In the morning, an eerie silence shadows me as I crunch across small hills of glass along the curb. Every car parked on my street has had its windows smashed. I decide to take my family -- my wife, two children, and my cousin -- and flee. I call for hotel reservations in Santa Barbara. Every hotel is booked. My last call is to the Pancho Villa, a sprawling Spanish hacienda on several rolling green acres.

"I need a room. Do you have anything available?"

"You're in luck," a sweet female voice says. "We have one room left. It's five hundred dollars for the night."

I'm desperate and I'm scared.

"I'll take it," I say.

In Santa Barbara at noon, nursing a margarita, shell-shocked from the city, my home, that smolders two hours away, I consider my life. All of those sure things I once held so tightly in my grasp feel as if they are skittering away. I am forty-three, careening toward midlife. All around me I see other men I know becoming clichés.

They are leaving their cushy corporate jobs and taking up carpentry or an Eastern religion, forming forty-something rock bands or training for triathlons. They are buying vintage red two-door Mercedes coupes and having affairs with twenty-two-year-old flight attendants. They are putting everything at risk.

I have tempted fate in my own way. Just a month ago, my wife and I bought a house in Santa Monica, a big house, an expensive house. We looked for two years. We settled on a two-story New England farmhouse, originally built by the Borden family of Borden Dairy fame. The house has a newly remodeled restaurant-style kitchen and a master bedroom suite comparable to what you'd find in a five-star country inn.

But there are problems. As you walk in, the living room, as long as a bowling alley and as wide as a tennis court, veers off to the left behind haughty French doors. Once inside the vast room you become aware of the slope of the floor, discolored and wobbly beneath a carpet destroyed by the former owners' pets, and you pull your collar up against the room's permanent chill.

"Needs work," I mutter to the empty room, as Bobbie, my wife, entranced by the New England charm, wanders away.

The upstairs master suite sells us. Bigger than our first apartment, it features beamed ceilings of golden pine, a fireplace, a bathroom with double sinks, a bidet, an oversize tub with a Jacuzzi, and behind another French door, a walk-in closet, formerly a bedroom. The only blemish is the hot-pink carpeting, which reminds me of a costume worn by the star attraction in a show I once saw in Vegas called "Eros on Ice."

"That carpet's a do-over," I say, and this time Bobbie shakes her head and utters a tiny "*Duh.*"

There are other obvious trouble spots, including a postage-stamp-sized third bedroom, which will need to be opened up and redone for our daughter, and a guest apartment over the garage, which will have to be gutted and converted into my office. I have no vision for makeovers, can't imagine how this will all turn out. I'm ready to walk away.

"We've found it," my wife says.

The search is over, I guess, but I'm not sure. I do love the location. Santa Monica is on the ocean, ten degrees cooler than Hancock Park, with noticeably less smog. I have had my fill of choking on muddy brown air so thick I have to push it away as I jog daily down Fourth Street, toward downtown. I'd much rather run by the beach in the crisp salt air. Maybe take up rollerblading. I said *maybe*.

Then there is the upstairs factor. I have always dreamed of living in a two-story house. As a child of the early sixties, I escaped nightly into the sitcom households of *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*. In fact, I wanted Ozzie to adopt me. I wanted a father with infinite patience, an appreciation for rock 'n' roll, and a great sweater collection. But that wouldn't be the best part of being a Nelson; the best part would be at the end of the day. I would say good-night to my doting, well-dressed parents and my ultracool, ultrapopular brothers, and I would go upstairs to

bed. Yes, I am forty-three, and I have never gone upstairs to bed. I want that. I will pay for that.

But mainly this house is about the driveway.

As we stand together, facing the two-car garage, Bobbie slips her hand onto my arm.

"Room for a hoop," she says.

I nod, taking it in, scrunching my mouth like an architect, surveying a high stucco wall on the right side and the open expanse of the backyard lawn on the left. In front of the wall are five equally spaced maple saplings, providing, I'm told by the Realtor, a splash of color in the fall. Behind us is a large, intriguing tree, a carob, its trunk and branches twisted in intricate pretzel shapes. Occasionally, a half-mooned carob pod whaps onto the concrete, leaving a small chocolate blotch. I turn back to the garage, squint up at the apex of the roof.

"We could hang the backboard there," Bobbie says.

"Uh-huh."

"Or" -- her favorite word -- "we could drive a pole right here."

She mashes her foot into the cement as if she were putting out a cigarette. I nod and smile. This could work. I have wanted my own hoop forever. Again.

I grew up in a small mill city in western Massachusetts with a hoop attached to my garage. It wasn't a fancy hoop; it was crude and a little too high. My father hammered the rim into a large square of plywood that he'd painted white then drilled into the garage to serve as a backboard. Two houses away, Joey Leighton's father had gone to a sporting goods store and purchased a basketball hoop with a fiberglass backboard, which he had installed by two burly men wearing shirts with their names stitched over their pockets. When these guys were finished, Leighton's hoop protruded perfectly from his garage, the backboard gleaming in the midday sun, held in place by a spiderweb of metal supports, beams, and extensions. From my house, his driveway looked like the Boston Garden. The problem was that Leighton's driveway was narrow, barely big enough for a one-on-one game. My driveway began thinly, then widened out to accommodate a three-car garage. He had the better hoop but I had the better court. No contest. We always played at my house.

There were a couple of hazards. The worst was the left side of my driveway, which dropped five feet straight down into the Zwirkos' backyard. If you attempted a fadeaway jump shot on the left and you faded too far away, you'd suddenly sail out of sight and plummet down, as if you were falling off a cliff, and land with a clunk in the Zwirkos' trash cans.

Facing the hoop from the right side were my back steps, which descended from our closed-in mud porch. A ball clanking off the rim, bouncing toward the porch, had a fifty-fifty chance of shattering one of the windows and a 100 percent chance of bringing my grandmother out of her downstairs apartment. Her name was Gussie. I

called her Nana. She was short, buxom, and built like a linebacker. She was from strong Russian stock and regarded every first-generation American with suspicion. She would clomp down the back steps on arthritic knees, grab the ball, hold it tight against her aproned hip, shake her fist at me, and scowl.

"Alan!" she'd scream.

"Sorry, Nana."

"If you break window again, you *be* sorry! *You* pay this time!"

"Fine, I'll pay." I just wanted the ball back and for Nana to go inside.

My friends, the other five neighborhood kids my age -- Leighton, Kirkhoff, the Zwirko brothers, and Dean Nowak -- were staring at me, staring at her. I was eleven and this was humiliating.

"Can I have the ball, please, Nana?"

She tucked it tighter against her hip. "No. You no play. Tell them go home. Go to school."

"It's Saturday," I muttered. "Give me the ball, *please*."

"*Acchh*," Nana uttered in disgust, and dropped the ball in front of her like a rotten cabbage. It rolled over to me, and without a word about my grandmother, we continued the game. Nana stood on the steps and watched for a moment, hands on hips. I took a shot. Banked it in.

"*Echhh*." She shrugged, apparently satisfied that I was at least here, in my driveway, and not roaming the streets with a gang of hoodlums. she turned around and trudged back into her kitchen, where she would oversee three dishes cooking at once -- a pot of *shav* (spinach borscht), simmering on the stove next to a tall pot of red cabbage leaves stuffed with hamburger meat, and inside the oven, a slab of flanken, a round cut of roast meat stewing in its own juices -- all of which she'd force me to eat an hour before my mother served me dinner upstairs.

Nana died at 103. My parents eventually sold the house. I was long gone. I was slowly making my way across the country, beginning in Amherst, Massachusetts, for college, then Ann Arbor, Michigan, for graduate school, then on to Los Angeles, carrying with me the odd dream of wanting to get paid to make people laugh. At some point, though, that dream became lost. I'm not sure where or how. Drowned out perhaps in a cacophony of compromise and Hollywood politics and the relentless pursuit of lifestyle instead of passion, recognition rather than art.

But if I focus on the reason I came to L.A. and embrace that I am standing here, seriously contemplating buying this four-thousand-square-foot house with six bathrooms and a driveway wide enough for a three-on-three game, I must remember that my dream has come true.

"What are you thinking about?" Bobbie asks me, brushing my sleeve.

"A hoop. I've always wanted to have my own hoop."

"I know. I want you to have one. It's the family game."
I press my thumb against the garage door and, my back to my wife, I wonder,

"What are they asking for this?"

She tells me. Seven figures plus.

"And it needs work," Bobbie reminds me.

"Well, sure, what do you expect for that kind of money?"

She grins. "Maybe they'll come down."

They do. They come down more than \$200,000. We jump at it. We put 30 percent down in cash. That plus the mortgage on the Hancock Park house leaves us with two mortgages totaling in excess of a million dollars.

It's okay. I can afford it. I'm coexecutive producer of a hot new sitcom and the money is rolling in, no end in sight.

What I can't admit yet, what I don't actually know yet, at least not consciously, is that I am miserable.

It's not because of the two mortgages lashed to my back like two grand pianos. There is something deeper, a hole inside me, related to the midlife crisis I am facing and the numbing sense that, despite all the financial success I have achieved, I have, in fact, achieved nothing at all. The work I do, the television show I produce, and the more than one hundred television shows I have written and produced before, throb through my skull in a low-level hum, accompanied miraculously by an obscene amount of money that I receive every week, an amount that no one could possibly deserve. It's like some crazy game that I've gotten stuck in. I really don't want to do this, but I keep playing and they keep paying and I am scared to death to stop. Because if I stop, I'm afraid I will have to give up everything else in my life. I will have to live my life on spec.

These thoughts come to me in daydreams, mostly when I'm shooting baskets alone at Fairfax High. When I was a kid, shooting baskets in my driveway, my hoop dreams were ambitious fantasies, graphic afternoon novels. In them, I was a college phenom, some days a tricky point guard, other days a slashing forward, sometimes even a lithe and powerful seven-foot center. I would see myself in March Madness, driving and spinning to the hoop, stopping on a dime, spotting up. *Swish!* I was unguardable. I'd score the winning basket in every game, usually at the buzzer. My fantasies took me as far as my rookie season in the NBA, where in my first game I scored fifty against Larry Bird, held him scoreless, and left him shaking his head, gaping at me, wondering aloud, "Who *is* this guy?"

A couple of Sundays before the riots, while shooting hoops at Fairfax, I rewind the tape of my life, stopping at the point where Bobbie and I made the decision to move out West. The choice was either graduate school in Minnesota and settling into academia or moving to California to pursue the Hollywood high life. We went Hollywood. Promised to give it five years. Within a year, I was a writer on *Sanford and Son* and Bobbie was pursuing her Ph.D. at USC.

My basketball dreams are gone, but as I brick one off the front of the rim at Fairfax and chase down the rebound, then pop it in from the left side, jingling the metal net, I fantasize about moving back to New England or taking a shot at New York City. Becoming a *real* writer, my friend Ken, a sitcom writer, calls it, referring to someone who writes articles or short stories or books. This has gone beyond fantasy for me; it is now a full-time ache. But I dare not speak it aloud, not with those two bone-crunching mortgages and my two kids in private school.

Bend my knees. Breathe. Dribble once, twice. Get into my rhythm.

Flash.

I'm sitting in my accountant's office. I'm nervous, uneasy, as he goes over the figures.

"You made a lot of money this year," he announces, pinching the fleshy area between his nose and his lip.

"What if," I say, squirming in my chair, "I decide to move to New England for a year and write a book?"

He blows out a laugh. "You *can't!*"

"I'm serious," I say.

"So am I," my accountant says.

I shoot.

Air ball.

I think about all of this as I stare at a surreal scene before me at the Pancho Villa in Santa Barbara. Twenty or so flabby, pasty-skinned tourists, all of a certain age, stand in a wading pool doing aquatic aerobics led by a twig of an instructor in a blue bathing cap. The people in the pool splash their fleshy biceps in and out of the bathlike water, oblivious or unconcerned, as ninety miles to the south, L.A. chokes on its own fumes. I shake my head and turn away, nearly smacking into Brad, a TV writer I know. He wears dark glasses and a baseball cap to hide his mostly bald head. Brad cocreated a smash sitcom that's about to begin its tenth year. Brad, the lucky son of a bitch, is set for life.

"White flight," he says, indicating us both.

"I just couldn't stay at my house. I was too scared."

"I know. Me, too. I got really lucky, though."

"How so?"

"I got the last room in the hotel," Brad says. "Cost me five hundred dollars a night."

Now, I could let Brad off the hook. I could let him in on the scam that the Pancho Villa is running. I could make him feel better by revealing that he's not alone, that the two of us are a couple of marks, hiding for cover while L.A. smokes.

"Huh," I say. "That's a *rip*."

"I know. How much are you paying?"

"A hundred fifty," I say. "They gave me a suite, too."

Never liked Brad.

A week later, the riots, or as the mayor insists on calling them, the unrest, are over. A prickly calm hangs in the air as those of us who've fled return. No one will deny that buildings in my neighborhood were ablaze and there was insanity in the streets -- I have glass from my neighbor's windshield embedded in my shoe to prove it -- but those days feel far away, like an episode of a television show I glimpsed while flipping channels late at night before dropping off to sleep. This couldn't have happened here, in paradise, where it never rains, it's always seventy degrees, and the breeze brushes your cheek like a kiss. The weather's all wrong for rioting.

Friday at noon, Bobbie and I sit in a stuffy escrow office near our new house, preparing to sign a sheaf of legal documents that will strap us to a thirty-year financial commitment broken down into monthly payments that are more than I made the entire year I worked in advertising. The escrow officer has left us alone, stuck to the vinyl love seat in her office, as she scrounges around for a couple of pens and a glass of water. I have a ferocious headache.

"You're sweating," Bobbie says quietly.

She presses my forehead, checking for fever or a pulse. She stares at me.

"You're *pale*. Are you okay?"

"Been better."

"What's the matter?"

What's the *matter*?

Let's start with the *two* houses I will now own, one of which has just dropped two hundred grand in value since the riots, excuse me, *unrest*, five days ago. Talk about timing. We have to do something, change real estate agents, lower the price, offer free gifts, *anything*, to unload that place.

"Here we go."

The escrow officer returns. She has a chirpy telephone operator's voice. She hands me a clear plastic cup half-filled with filmy water. I guzzle it, thanking her with a wave of my pinkie. Through the haze that's dropped in front of my eyes like a curtain, I can barely make her out. I see only nondescript features, a square in a dress the color of lemon ice.

"Okayyy."

Back to business. She peers at the mound of legalese in front of her, red X's dotting the first page like drops of blood.

"It simply indicates here what your down payment will be and that you will pay it, in cash, as you've agreed -- "

I sneak a glance at the number on, literally, the bottom line. It is a frightening number. Mid-six figures. Is this right? It can't be. I have miscalculated. I look up into the fluorescent light and the room starts to spin.

"I um."

I can't find my tongue. I feel Bobbie's touch on my arm.

"I wonder if we could do this after lunch," she says, her eyes boring into the escrow officer's face.

"Well, I, sure," the escrow officer says. "Is everything -- "

"Everything's fine. We just need...give us an hour, okay?"

We're up and out before the escrow officer can climb to her feet.

Sitting at an outdoor café downstairs from the escrow office, I slurp vegetable soup. Bobbie, occasionally biting a piece of bread, studies me with emerald eyes, trying to scope me out, get a feel for this latest change I'm putting her through.

"Can you talk about it?" Her voice is kind.

"I don't know," I croak. "I've been going over and over the numbers in my head. I thought we had...*more*."

I feel weak. I reach over and tear off a piece of her bread. It's sourdough and stale. A man squeezes by us, balancing three bowls of bumpy brown chili on a tray. The smell makes my stomach flip.

"If you don't feel right, we can get out of it," Bobbie says.

"And do what? Stay where we are? The neighborhood's not safe. The house is too small. And what about school? We're paying for private school in *Santa Monica*. What are we gonna do, schlep the kids forty-five minutes one way?"

"People do it," Bobbie says.

"We back out now, we'll pay a big penalty. It's in the contract."

"The penalty's less than the down payment."

"Money down the drain," I say.

"A *lot* less," she says.

She's exasperated and tired. I finger her bread and close my eyes, trying to stop my world from spinning.

"I think we should back out," Bobbie says, hard. "When in doubt, don't." Her motto.

"But you love the house."

"I do. But it's just a house."

Her eyes glimmer with the truth. I look deep into them and see no judgment. She is giving me permission to fail, the okay to walk away.

But I can't.

My upbringing and my gender will not allow me. I am bred to be the breadwinner. The man, damn it. I can't shake that. In the sixties, Ricky Nelson was my role model, but in the nineties I have become Ozzie. I am The Dad. Sire of two children, king of the castle, lord of the debt.

"Let's go for it."

"What?"

I draw myself up, push aside the soup, pull out a pen. I scratch numbers on the napkin. Big, scary numbers. I nod and swallow.

"We can do it. See? My income can cover it. And we'll still have savings after the down payment. It's a great house, great neighborhood. We deserve it. It'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"But your headache -- "

"Gone. It's gone."

"But I want you to be sure. I don't want you to be sick -- "

"Honey," I say. "You're right. It's just a house."

I curl my lip into a tough-guy smile, a thin red line. "I can always work in TV. If we need money, it's always there."

"And, I guess," Bobbie sighs, "if worse comes to worse, we can always sell it."

Six months later.

I see a face.

If you connect those two dots, right there, then make a curvy line *there*, yep, in the middle, that's the mouth. Then those two knotholes are the eyes, that wavy line the hair, and that squiggly deal could even be a *hat*. Wow. It's *Waldo*. He's right up there, in my ceiling. Hold on. Is that...*water damage*? Just what I need. Another shit sandwich to swallow. Man. Gotta have Kyle get up there tomorrow and take a look. Wait wait wait. It's a shadow. Sure. I see it now. The way the moonlight hits the middle beam through the skylight. Definitely a shadow.

Whew. So...Where's Waldo. Bizarre. But not as weird as last night when I saw Larry King at the top of the fireplace. Oh man. What the hell time is it?

I press the alarm clock: 2:13 A.M.

Blinking digital burgundy.

Welcome to my typical night. Home from the show at 11:45, straight to bed, instantly asleep, and, wham, right back up at 2 A.M. It's been this way for...? How long have I owned this house?

So far nothing helps. Medication, herbal or otherwise, speeds me up. Meditating makes me tense. And reading gets me wired, especially the book by my bedside, *Hope and Help for Your Nerves*.

The only thing that seems to work, eventually, is mentally tracing celebrity faces in the ceiling. If I'm lucky, I'll finish a face, then nod off again by three. I wake up for good at six, Bobbie's legs swishing out of the covers for her walk being my alarm clock. I stagger downstairs, swig down half a pot of coffee, and I'm good for the day. Running on fumes.

My semiwaking hours are spent at Sony Studios, where I write and produce *A League of Their Own*, a television series based on the hit movie. The movie starred Tom Hanks, Geena Davis, and Madonna. The TV show stars actors who sort of *look* like Tom Hanks, Geena Davis, and Madonna. And that's where it ends.

Still, CBS has high hopes. They believe the show is going to be a big hit. I've heard executives standing by the bagel table murmuring words like "smash," "monster," and "sleeper."

This is a relief. Let's say *A League of Their Own* becomes another *M*A*S*H* and runs for eleven years. That might be pushing it. Let's be a little more realistic, lower our sights, and say *League* runs seven years like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. If I stick with it, we are talking *megabucks*. Set for life.

Which is good because remodeling this house took a lot more money than we thought. Why is that? We had a budget. A drop-dead bottom-line number that we absolutely could not exceed, which we have now exceeded by seventy grand. How did that happen?

I guess because we had choices.

For example: floors.

You can lay a nice level plywood floor in the living room or you can go oak. Plywood is what they use for the newer construction. Those spec houses that are thrown together in a weekend. Cheap and ugly and any minute the plywood could just crap out. Goddamn buffet for termites, too. But oak? Durable, solid, warm. *Classic*.

Fine, fine. Go with oak. Must have oak. It's our *home*. Money doesn't matter. Even when we're talking about a room the size of Kansas, a room that I haven't stepped foot in since we put down the miles of oak over a month ago. *Nobody's* been in there. I could've thrown dirt in there and nobody would've noticed.

Then my office. Have to have a fabulous office. A writer needs an inspiring workspace. We stayed within budget here. Until we came to the cabinets and bookcases. I wanted built-ins all around, filled with books, circling me like a cocoon. I was fine with Ikea, but Kyle the contractor found this guy. Italian kid. Not a carpenter. An *artist*, whose milieu happens to be pine. You have never seen such cabinets. Or such artistry. Or such a bill. I asked Kyle to talk to him. Kyle is six-two, handsome, muscular, with a reedy voice and this annoying habit of sucking in great lungfuls of air when he laughs. He somehow manages to be likable and imposing at the same time. Kyle was pretty sure the Italian guy would give us a break.

"If they no like, I tear them out," the Italian guy said.

"No, no, they *like*. But the price -- "

"That ees my price!"

"I know but -- "

"THAT EES MY PRICE!"

Okay, so no break on that then. The house, our updated designer faux New England farmhouse in sunny Santa Monica, is finally finished. In celebration, I lie awake, night after night, mouth agape, eyes round as quarters, imagining celebrity faces in the ceiling, the sound of cars whooshing by way up on San Vicente Boulevard like waves breaking onto a beach.

This night, a chilly April breeze bouncing off the carob tree, I sigh. Hearing me in her sleep, Bobbie grunts and knuckles her pillow. I want to talk to her. But what good would that do now? I would feel better, for the moment, and she would feel better for helping me feel better. In the morning, though, she would second-guess the whole move, regret the cabinets in my inspirational office and the oak floor in the barren living room. I would accomplish nothing except to infect her with my panic. Better to carry this burden alone. She's going to find out soon enough anyway.

Because the sheets that we share are soaked.

Drenched in my sweat.

When I fly awake each morning at two, I discover this, to my horror. A second later, I'm shivering. I slide my palm across my forehead and mop it dry. I brush my fingers in front of my nose and inhale the surprising scent of vanilla.

Fear, it seems, comes in flavors.

Yes, I am afraid.

Afraid of...?

It's complicated. This is no simple night terror; this is a twisted paradox of terrors. Starting with two frightful what-ifs.

What if I really do run out of money?

Not likely since *League* has the network's blessing.

Then what if *League* is a hit?

I will have to stay in television. I can't turn my back on setting my family for life. I need the show to be a hit. Mortgages, taxes, private school, retirement. I need it. But I'm so *stuck*. Trapped by my own...*excess*? Is that what this is? I didn't think so. I was just trying to be a good man and *provide*. I kept getting in deeper, denying that I was miserable working in TV. I'm not jaded and I don't feel above it. I just don't want to be here.

But here I am...sleepless in Santa Monica, shivering in a pool of my own sweat, my midlife crisis defined in this appalling paradox:

(a) I have to work in television because I desperately need the money.

(b) I just can't work in television anymore.

Hear that rumble in my chest?

It's the hand of death slowly circling my heart.

I hear a faint noise. An echo in a tunnel.

CRUNCH GRIND GRRRRR.

I wake up, one eye at a time. I fumble for the alarm and read 10:23 A.M. Jesus. I haven't slept this late since college.

GRRRRRR CRUNCHHHH.

What *is* that?

My head pounding, crying for caffeine, I clutch the damp sheet around my waist and hop toward the window as if I were in a potato-sack race. I peer through the contorted limbs of the carob tree. Kyle, my contractor, stands, hands on hips, squinting into the sun. Manuel, his wide-shouldered Mexican muscle, hunches over a jackhammer. His whole body shimmers as he blasts the machine deep into my driveway, chunks of concrete exploding up and whistling by his ear. Kyle turns, watches, nods, directs. It looks as if they're digging a grave.

An hour later, stoked on three cups of coffee, dressed in T-shirt, shorts, and running shoes, I approach Kyle and Manuel. They whip around, caught in the act, reddening under sheepish grins.

"Damn," Kyle says. "We wanted to surprise you."

"Almost," Manuel says. He is packing a gooey beige cement funnel around a black metal pole, which they've shoved into the depths of their trench. Looming above is a basketball hoop attached to a flimsy backboard constructed, it seems, out of cardboard.

"A basketball hoop," I say.

"*Woo*, got it the, *woo*, first time," Kyle roars, sucking all the air out of the immediate vicinity.

"You remembered," I say.

"Oh *yeah*," Kyle says.

The day Kyle handed us his estimate in a sealed envelope, I told him that the deal had to include a basketball hoop with a fiberglass backboard. Adjustable, so the kids could play.

"I wanted a *glass* backboard," I remind him.

"I know," Kyle says. "Those are crap. They cost twice as much and last half as long. They get all weather-beaten and ugly."

"Uglier than this?"

Manuel coughs out a tiny laugh.

"You don't like it?" Kyle asks. "I thought you'd love it. Take a shot."

He picks up a basketball, which has been lounging against the garage door, and hits me a little too hard with a chest pass. I take a couple of dribbles to get the feel, step back, and launch a picturesque jumper. The ball clangs off the rim. The backboard jiggles like a stripper. Kyle pretends not to notice.

"Well?" he says, beaming.

"*Well? It sucks.*"

"Hmm. Maybe I didn't pack the pole in enough cement." He jogs after the ball, scoops it up, turns, and flings a clumsy left-handed jump hook from approximately the foul line. The ball whams off the rim and rockets toward the lawn, the backboard swaying like a windshield wiper. Manuel hustles after the ball, yanks it off the grass, skips once, and drives toward the hoop. No form, all power. He stops and pops. All net.

Swish, sway. Boing, boing, boing.

"Bad," Manuel says.

"Shit," Kyle says, scratching his head as if he had lice.

"Yeah," I say.

Kyle glares at Manuel. Sure. Must be his fault. Manuel leans heavily on the jackhammer.

"Shit," Kyle says again.

"Bad," Manuel says again.

"Coffee," I say, and head for the house.

Late that afternoon, the hoop, jerry-rigged in place, immovable, stands majestic in my driveway. I stare at it through the kitchen window and feel a sense of pride. I have my own hoop. I can shoot baskets anytime I want. I *always* got next.

I grab my basketball, jog outside, and start to pop. The backboard is soft and dead, causing more shots than not to drop through the net. I'm used to playground baskets, gunmetal backboards sporting tight rust-colored double rims. Nothing falls unless it's dead-solid perfect. This is better. Shoot, swish; shoot, swish; shoot, swish. I'm in a zone. I got the feeling. Flush with success, I lower the rim to six feet and I am Shaq. Quick power bursts to the rim, two-handed over my head. *Slammmmmddunk!* I return the rim to regulation and hit thirteen foul shots in a row. Exuberant, I huff into the kitchen, where Bobbie, a silent smile on her face, sits at the table, flipping through the newspaper. I swig a glass of water.

"Nice shooting," she says.

"It's the hoop. It's perfect."

She smiles wider.

"How would you feel about having a game here?" I ask her.

"When?"

"I don't know. Sunday morning, how's that?"

"This Sunday or every Sunday?"

I wipe my mouth with the bottom of my T-shirt.

"You know I've always wanted a weekly game."

"I know. Okay, call some people," she says.

"I think I will."

"No assholes," she warns.

"You're making this tough," I say.

I take a shower and start calling. I phone Phil, Gabe, and Brick, close friends and dads at my son's school. They've already said that if I build it, they will come. They're in. I ask Stewart, the school's director. He's dying to play and knows another dad he can bring. I invite Kyle. He's a nice guy, an inside presence, and he can fix any problems with the hoop. I bump into Duff, my neighbor, mention the game to him. He's good to go. That's eight definites, including me. The game is set for the following Sunday at ten.

The next morning I get the word.

A League of Their Own has been canceled after three episodes.

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