

GREEN WAVE

FEBRUARY 3, 2016

I'm flying. Heading home.

I'm going to D.C., where I grew up, to visit my family and retrace my roots, maybe for the last time in my life. I'm eighty-one, and I haven't been back in more than twenty years. I'm not sure when I'll go back again. *If* I'll go back again. I hesitated to come on this trip, if you want to know the truth. I didn't know if I wanted to

dredge up a lot of memories, to relive my time in D.C. Don't get me wrong: I have a lot of good memories—time with my family and friends, and mostly, of course, playing basketball. But the District was a different place back then. A hard place. A racist place. Segregated parks, schools, movie theaters, lunch counters. I had run-ins with the police. I experienced ugly, unforgettable things. One event in particular changed my life. I told myself that once I left D.C., other than to visit my family, I wouldn't go back. A lot of people who grew up in D.C. at the same time as I did feel the same way. They love the people; they don't love the city. Something about it makes you uneasy. You're always looking over your shoulder. The only place I ever felt totally comfortable was on a basketball court. That was home.

One time, I was walking from my house to school, Giddings Elementary. I was eight or nine. All of a sudden, a hawk swooped out of the sky and snatched a rat that had darted right in front of me on the sidewalk. Came right down, *whoosh*, grabbed the rat in its talons, and flew away.

That's the D.C. I knew: Rat City.

Now, flying east, heading home, I feel something stirring inside me, a stab of memory, and I find myself suddenly yearning to take a look into my past, if only for these few days. One last look.

The captain announces that we've reached our cruising altitude, and I settle back in my seat. I tilt to my right and continue listening to the man across the aisle, the man who's talking to me. A man I know well: Jerry West.

I had no idea he'd be on this flight and sitting across

from me, aisle seat to aisle seat, nearly elbow to elbow. Jerry, who works for the Golden State Warriors, is flying to D.C. because the Warriors will be playing the Washington Wizards. The next day he'll go to the White House to meet President Obama, who will honor the 2015 NBA champions. That's become an annual tradition. You win an NBA championship, you get invited to the White House. At the moment, Jerry is talking about Steph Curry, the Warriors' star, the league's MVP, the greatest shooter in the world, the best shooter I've ever seen. I played with the second best—the man I'm talking to across the aisle.

"Oh, he's *great*," Jerry says. "Except for the turnovers—"

I have to smile. Leave it to Jerry, an all-world perfectionist, to bring up Curry's one flaw. I don't feel like mentioning that I, too, will be going to the White House to

visit President Obama. I'm not going with any team—I've never been on an NBA championship team—but I will be having a private visit with the president, just me and my wife, Elaine, who set it up.

Jerry and I talk for a while, then he reaches for a magazine in the seat pocket in front of him, rolls it up, and says, "We had some team, Elg, didn't we?"

"We did."

"We came close, what, how many times, *seven*?"

I nod. "We couldn't match up with Russell."

Jerry pauses, then rests his hand on my arm and whispers with an urgency I don't expect. "You should have a statue."

"What?"

"At Staples. There should be a statue of you. Believe me, I have asked . . ." His voice trails off. "I'm going to keep on

asking."

I don't say anything. I picture the Star Plaza at Staples Center, a cluster of eight life-size bronze statues of Los Angeles sports legends that greet everyone who enters the arena—Wayne Gretzky, Oscar de la Hoya, Magic Johnson, Chick Hearn, Luc Robitaille, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Shaquille O'Neal, and Jerry West. All deserving. All L.A. heroes. Funny, though—I go further back than all of them. I was a *Minneapolis* Laker when the team was struggling to stay afloat. The owner, Bob Short, drafted me number one and later said I saved the franchise. He told me that I made it possible for him to move the team to Los Angeles.

I laugh to myself. I was a Laker when the name actually made sense. Minnesota, Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.

L.A. is known for a lot of things, but *lakes* are not one of them.

Jerry, it's all right, I think. I don't need a statue.

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February 5, 2016, 2:30 p.m.

Sunlight bounces off a snowbank and causes me to squint. I shiver underneath the collar of my leather jacket, shove my fists into my pockets, and follow three D.C. police officers as we crunch across the snowy blacktop to the back door of the boarded-up building.

Spingarn High School, my old school.

One of the officers fumbles with some keys, shoves the door open with his shoulder. I take a breath, duck my

head, and enter the dark-as-night hallway. The police lead the way with flashlights as I stumble behind them, stepping through a layer of rubble. In the hazy light I see that we're walking through mounds of plaster and torn slabs of drywall. I step slowly, carefully. The air smells of smoke and dry rot. I feel as if we're edging down the hallway of a bombed-out building. The officer in the lead shouts back, "Watch your step, Mr. Baylor."

We go another few feet and turn right. Two officers pull open a set of double doors, pale light shimmering behind them. I lower my head and walk into the gymnasium, where more than sixty years ago I played forward for the Spingarn Green Wave.

"It looks . . . smaller," I say, blinking into the funnels of daylight that pour through a half-dozen high, barred windows. The blond wood floor looks surprisingly shiny:

not exactly polished, but in good condition. I start to walk toward the far basket, the floor squeaking beneath my loafers. I peer down the length of the gym. The light falls in orbs before me, splashing onto the floor. The effect is almost celestial. In comparison with the wreckage of the hallway, this gym feels like a cathedral.

“You could almost still play in here,” I say, and the people around me laugh.

I keep walking toward the far basket. “Glass backboards,” I say at half-court. “We didn’t have them. We had fans.”

I take a few more steps, reach the top of the key . . . and my mind plays tricks on me . . . messes with me . . . because, ridiculously, I hear—

A crowd cheering.

A deafening roar.

Kids screaming.

Feet stomping.

A chorus of voices rising, chanting, “Rabbit, RABBIT, RABBIT . . .”

I let the memory dissolve, the way I used to mute all sound around me. When I played, I blocked everything out—all noise, all distracting motion—focusing all my attention on just the game: the man guarding me, my teammates, the ball, the rim, this play, this moment.

I played in silence. I played without thought. I played by instinct. I played with complete concentration.

Sixty-three points in one game. D.C. high school scoring record. That record still stands.

I step up to the free throw line and look to my right. Unfurled from one of the barred windows, a banner flaps

slightly. I make out my name and my number—22—and beneath those, a list of accomplishments scrolls down—

FIRST TEAM ALL MET

D.C. AREA BEST BASKETBALL PLAYER 1954

LEAGUE SCORING AVERAGE: 36.1

COLLEGE ALL-AMERICA 1957–1958

NBA #1 DRAFT PICK 1958

NBA ROOKIE OF THE YEAR 1958–59

10 TIME ALL NBA FIRST TEAM

11 TIME NBA ALL STAR

27.4 POINTS PER GAME

13.5 REBOUNDS PER GAME

ELECTED NBA HALL OF FAME 1977

“Elgin?” Elaine arrives behind me and gently rubs my back. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I say, my eyes riveted on that banner, my thoughts jumbled, memories pummeling me now, overwhelming me. “I just—”

“I know,” Elaine says. “It’s a lot.”

“Yeah,” I say, drifting to below the backboard. I reach up and brush my fingers against the rough twine of the net.

“It is,” I say, and for a moment I picture myself back on the plane, talking to Jerry West.

Jerry, I’m not asking for anything. I never have. I’m happy with what I’ve got. Oh, I’ve gone through some things, like everybody else, but I’m a survivor and I consider myself very lucky. No: I consider myself blessed.

But I guess I wouldn’t mind that statue.