

Seth Harwood
sethharwood@mac.com

Wigger

They called me wigger and one time this old bag bitch told me, “Keep running with the monkeys and you’ll end up back in the jungle with that black girl, swinging from a vine.”

But before any of that happened, Dub was the one who first put me on. He brought me down to the courts behind his projects knowing the others wouldn’t like him bringing a whitey, but ready to start shit with anyone who said boo. Still, they were like, “Who this white nigger?” and “You trying to bring Larry Bird up in here?”

“This ain’t no Indiana,” they said, and I got beat. Down low on the blocks and outside the paint, I got used on defense, and they beat my shot like they saw it that morning. Even though I was taller, they were all over me. One kid blocked my shot so bad he hit it twice off the backboard before he came down. That got everyone on the side all up, yelling, “Oooh Bob Cousy! Take that shit back to the farm!” and “Yo, jump white baby! You got to get up to get off in this mother!”

By the time we lost I didn’t want to stay. I just tried to disappear next to Dub, but he brought me off to the side and said, “You got to throw fakes in there, son. Either fake and then go up or kick that shit out. Motherfuckers beating your shit like this was Thanksgiving.”

“Right,” I said. “Listen, I think I’m going to just be out.”

“Nah, yo. You can’t go out like *that*. Stay one more.”

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I kept my hands down then, not calling for the ball, and went to the boards instead of posting. If I caught enough rebounds and passed them out that start-the-block-party shit couldn't happen, I figured. Our second game, the kids on the side *almost* stopped yelling white boy.

But this one kid couldn't take it. He wanted to play and we won so I was, and he couldn't take it. He kept asking how could they let a white kid up in there and how could I be on the court if he wasn't. Then he tried to come at me, but Dub caught him by the head and threw him down. He came up throwing punches, but Dub was just too big. All you could see was his top half over that kid's back, Dub's face like he was crazy and his arms pumping down on the kid like pistons. I'd never seen anyone fight like that, not that wild. Dub dropped one punch on him from high up, like a rainbow jumper. It fell hard, then the kid stood still for a second and he wobbled and fell back on his ass like he'd come in half. It was like something you'd dream about, and Dub did it. He landed that punch then started kicking, but the others broke it up.

Dub could fight. Mornings we stayed at my mom's, he'd do sit-ups and push-ups until he sweat and then he'd run for a little while, throwing punches like the boxers he saw on TV, ducking left and right. I watched him sometimes and thought about it a little when I was alone. I even tried to find my own routine of exercises to start each day with, but it wasn't me. I just played basketball, that was all I wanted.

My parents were split up and my father had just moved out to the suburbs, but my mom still lived in Cambridge. I was fifteen, living with her to avoid being where I didn't know anybody, and spending long hours on the courts, fighting through games that were anything but.

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There was another kid, Ty, who hung out with us sometimes, who wasn't black, but his mom was, so he had half-half status, which basically meant he didn't fit in on either side. Some people called him a halfie and some said he was mulatto, but none of the girls would talk to him because he had freckles and red hair. People used to call him Dennis Johnson—the ugliest player on the Celtics—because DJ had freckles too, and Ty had to fight to get past it, but eventually they eased up because his handle was nice and he could see passes that no one else could.

When Ty and Dub came over, they used to go rounds of punches, hitting each other in the stomach to see who'd give first. They both took their shirts off and warmed up by hitting themselves. Ty was tighter around the middle and he could make his stomach look like he had rocks under his skin. He had muscles on his sides, too, that wrapped around from his back. He was cut. Dub wasn't cut, but he was thick, and you knew the muscles were still there, just under some skin. He had fat, but he could take the shots.

When they started, Ty always went first because he'd lost the last time. They'd go at it until they punched hard enough to knock each others' winds out and, finally, one of them—Ty mostly—would give. Then they'd hit each other in the arms and laugh, and I'd get in on it, and we'd go play ball. The one time I went in with them from the start, tried the game, they both make jokes about how they needed sunglasses to see when I took my shirt off. But I held still and pushed out my stomach until my own set of rocks showed. They were smaller, but I took a few good punches before I quit.

I showed the bruises to Jeanna Thomas at a party afterwards, and she liked them. We went in the room to play seven minutes, and she let me kiss her. I got my hand up under her shirt too, but that was all. This other time we went beyond that when the three

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of us had three girls in a room with the lights off. I was trying to get my finger inside Jeanna's underpants through her zipper, digging until the space between my knuckles hurt and only feeling the front of her panties, but when the lights came on Dub had Paloma Perez's skirt up over her waist and he was on top of her. Even then Paloma had the body of a woman; she was dating guys from the high school, but Dub had something that made her crazy for his 8th-grade ass.

Dub had a sister they called Tish. Her real name was Tanisha, but that didn't matter. Everyone called her Tish. Even though she was only going into 7th grade that summer, she was into it all already, and people would say she fucked if they knew Dub wasn't around to hear it. She'd come find us to ask Dub for money, then they'd get in a fight and she'd start punching at him, and he'd have to hold her down until she got calm. Like it ran in the family, she could fight too.

Sometimes, like one night we were riding the bus to my mom's house, Tish used to hang with us and it wasn't that bad. She could be cool when she wanted. That time we were just cooling out after some games, Dub and I, going back to my mom's, and she was there. We used to sit in the back of the bus, where the big blue hump was under the benches. Dub would sing to make his voice stutter from the shaking of the big wheel. He did things like that a lot in public, mostly to piss people off, always looking to start something after ball, when he was crazy from the games and the heat.

But the only other people on the bus were some guys coming back from summer school and a few old people with beards—Grandmothers and Grandfathers—heading back to the home on Putnam. Dub let his voice out and held it, jiggling on the hump. Sometimes it worked, but that day there was no one interested, and if anyone did

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anything it just a couple of old people giving him a look like, I'm too tired to even hear you, kid. But one old bag lady was looking at me. She looked mad, like I stole something and she meant to break me in about it, so I made sure not to look at her. I knew I was dirty from playing, red and sweaty, but I still couldn't see what was wrong. Then she peeled her lips back and showed me her teeth. She had a goatee with white whiskers and a mustache that wasn't blonde. She must've been one of the wild ones who lived in the brick building on Linnean, I guessed, and I hoped she wouldn't want anything, that she was just ugly.

The floor of that bus had little black ridges, with white flecks in the rubber. I looked down and thought back on the games from that day, the ones we'd won and the spots on the block where I got it and what I did with it. I was learning to make moves and I was hitting shots now, starting to go up strong and sometimes clapping the board with both hands.

My arm was next to Tish's shoulder. It wasn't that either of us were moving, but the bus was, some, and it moved us so that our arms were rubbing. Tish leaned forward, elbowing her knees, and started rubbing her legs. She got some lotion out of her bag and rubbed it into her hands and then on her calves. She had socks on, and sneakers, but above that she had long thin legs that she kneaded the lotion into. Dub took the bottle and squeezed some on his arms. He told her she would still be ashy, no matter how much lotion she had, and she told him to fuck off.

Then old lady moved toward me. She stood above me, stinking, ringing the bell for her stop. She made a face like I didn't have any business in the world being there, and said, "You running with these monkeys now? Going back to the jungle to marry this one and learn how they swing from the vines?"

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I was like, What? But Dub got up fast, and told her he'd put his foot up her ass. Then the bus stopped and she was climbing out. She had her hand on the railing and held both her bags in the other. When she was gone, all the old people and the summer school kids were looking right at me. Dub's feet and the others' were all pointed my way, too, and I watched Dub's rocking on the ridges when the bus started up. It got real quiet in the back, and no one said anything until Dub asked what the fuck they were all looking at. They were trying not to, but I could tell people were staring.

“What the fuck you want?” Dub said. Then a couple of construction workers in big workboots—I don't know where they'd come from—told Dub he shouldn't have talked to that woman that way and that he should get off the bus, now. They rang the buzzer and stood over us with their arms folded until Dub and Tish got off. We were somewhere between Central Square and Harvard, where there were just brick buildings, but I got off too. The bus drove off and Dub said, “Fuck it, go back to your white bullshit.”

“Fuck,” I said. “I didn't make that happen.”

“Shit,” Dub said. He shook his head, laughed, and then spit. He told me he was taking Tish home and that I should go back to my mom's.

“No,” I said, but he took Tish across the street to wait for the bus back their way. The next one uptown was coming, and I got on because I didn't know what else to do, watching them wait while I found my seat. I saw Tish move to wave, but Dub held her wrist down. He wouldn't look my way.

After that I started staying out at my dad's house in Newton for a while, playing at the J.C.C. or shooting around in the driveway. The games at the J.C.C. were easy

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compared to Dub's complex. The other white kids tried to play defense, but if you could throw a fake you could do whatever you wanted. Plus, they played soft: you could bump into them and push your way toward the basket and they'd call fouls. They passed me the ball when they had it, but they'd make stupid passes other times and I'd be running back on defense, swearing at them. When I got it, I made my shots, which was cool for a while but then little guys kept running at me whenever I touched it, and I'd get tired from holding them off. Either way my shots dried up, then the games were less fun. The games at Dub's stuck in my head though: how kids there played into the night until you couldn't see the ball. I missed winning those games and the feeling of hating the people who beat me when I didn't.

Most afternoons, I shot baskets in my dad's driveway. He had a hoop on the garage, but the driveway was so steep you had to shoot from ten feet back for the basket to be at the right height. If you shot from anywhere else it just messed up your shot, but from up close it was low enough that I could dunk it like Jordan. Or sort of. I'd work on trying reverses off two feet, catching it off the board and one-handing it back in, but mostly I shot my ten-footers. I'd shoot a few and then take it in, try some double-pump windmill, then shoot the freethrows from ten.

One time these three skinheads walked by. Only two of them had shaved heads, and the other had long hair like a hippy. He wore a confederate flag shirt, though. None of them cared.

"You play basketball?" one said.

I took a shot and one of them caught the ball—the littlest one, with a shaved head and high, black boots. "You play basketball and that's why you have to hang with the niggers?" he said. He held the ball. "Is that right?"

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“I don’t have to do anything,” I said. “I play basketball. I have friends.”

“Fuck you don’t.” The big one stepped toward me. He was about two arms from where I stood but his hands were still down by his sides, deciding to be fists or not.

“You want to play with us?” the hippy asked.

“No.”

“Because you want to play with the niggers,” the little skinhead said—the one still holding my ball. He held the ball out toward me. “You want this?” he said.

He came at me and tried to hit me with the ball but I caught his arms and swung my elbow into his chin like I did in games sometimes, by accident. I hear the smack to the side of his face give, and that was when the big one hit me from behind and knocked me down on the grass. The little one kicked me once, but the big one just stood there holding his fists. My ball rolled down the drive and into the street.

“See what you done?” the big one said. “You lost your ball now.” He lurched his shoulders at me and then laughed when I flinched, hocked a greener on the lawn, and said, “You stick to your own, wigger.”

After that I stayed in the house and watched TV. The J.C.C. games were only at night, so I had nothing to do but watch reruns and the old cartoons. I called Dub and we’d talk for a little while, but he never said to come back and I didn’t ask. One time he told me about a few of the games, but mostly we’d get quiet and one of us would go.

One time my mom called on the phone. “It’s a beautiful day out there,” she said. “What are you doing inside? Don’t you realize how much *I’d* give to be outside? You should get out there.”

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She always talked fast when we were on the phone. “Unh-huh,” I said. *What’s Happening?* was just starting.

“*Go outside,*” she said. “You can’t sit in front of that TV all day. Why don’t you go over and play basketball with Shawn?”

In the opening for *What’s Happening?* three black guys walked down a street in their neighborhood, bouncing a ball. They looked like they were all friends, like they grew up together and, even though one was fat and one was a nerd, they all took turns dribbling, passing each other the ball.

“Honey,” she said. “Listen. Do me a favor and go play basketball with Shawn. Come back here and stay over for a night or two. You always seem so much happier when Shawn is around.”

I felt bad watching TV after that. The sun was white coming in through the window, and it would be hot out, as well as bright—it was cool and sleepy inside—but I got up and put my shoes on and went out to the front yard. I stretched like I was going to play, like they’d showed us how to do at the J.C.C., and then I got up and walked to where I could catch the train in to Cambridge.

On the green line train I sat in the back. No one looked at me or said anything about what I was or wasn’t supposed to be. I was just a kid in dirty shorts and basketball shoes who didn’t have any better place to be. A couple of younger kids got on at Brookline Village. They didn’t look at me but I gave them the hard stare like I was going to say something. When they saw it, they looked at their shoes and I felt good for a few minutes, until I got to Park Street and then rushing around in a hurry and I just shuffled down the stairs to the Red Line.

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When I got to Dub's, it was the same as ever: the games looked good. A couple of the kids recognized me and one of them said he didn't have five, that I could play on his team. Tish was there, sitting on the side, probably waiting to ask for money. She didn't see me right off, but when she did she said, "Where you been at?"

I tried to act like lacing up my sneakers was the biggest thing in the world to me, like I couldn't hear her, but I was watching her legs so I saw it coming when she kicked me. "I asked where you been at," she said. "We thought you was living with that old white bitch, trying to make up for being a nigger."

"I been around."

Tish pointed to her brother. "Dub here," she said. He fought some guy off under the basket, trying to get position for a rebound, but then someone threw up a fifteen-foot runner and it bounced long to some little guy on the other team.

Tish sat down with both her elbows on her knees and her arms crossed over. Her skin was dry and I could see the white her brother called ashy, but I could also see how thin she was and the muscles in her shoulders. I could see down the armhole of her tank top a little and the white of her bra, just a bit of the shape it held. She had a scar under her arm that looked like a burn from a quarter, like a crescent half-moon.

"You want some gum," she asked. She took it out of her bag and held a stick toward me.

"I like this kind," I said. "But the flavor only lasts about a minute."

"It's better than what you got," she said.

I unwrapped the gum and put it in my mouth. The flavor was there, how it always started out: sweet, like some fruit that grows somewhere you can't imagine. Tish added another piece to what she was chewing. "It tastes good to me," she said.

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In the game, a kid tried to dribble along the baseline, but his shot got blocked and when it did the ball came out to Dub, and he put up his soft jumper.

Tish took my hand, and said, “You want to see something?” I pulled my hand away, but when she got up I followed her. She went down an alley between two buildings, then into an empty hallway through a broken-out window. I stopped. “Come on,” she said. She led me down the hallway into a room that looked like a den, a place where people might live, or probably smoked crack in. We were the only ones there. I saw an old couch with some blankets, smoke stains on the walls, and glass vials smashed into the floor. The place looked like it’d caught on fire a long time ago and had only partly been saved from burning.

Tish walked along the wall until she got to the doorway, where I was, then she took my hand and led me inside. I could smell something like a mix of smoke and water, like the place would never come dry. She stood in front of me, up close, almost as tall as I was, and smiling. She could have bitten my face or licked my eye if she wanted, but what she did was take my hand and laid it across her thigh. She put her hand over mine and wrapped my fingers around her leg. It felt soft. “You like this?” she asked. “I seen you looking.” She moved my hand by the wrist and I could feel how smooth her leg was, like she’d just rubbed in her lotion. Her skin was deep brown but her shorts showed the line where she got lighter. She must have seen where I looked because the next thing she did was bring my hand right up there. The bottom of her shorts brushed my thumb, her skin softer here, and I felt the lightest part with the tips of my fingers, slipping them under the fabric.

“Hold up,” she said, and I pulled my hand away, but didn’t move. I took her elbow. Her arm was soft, too. Then Tish took her shorts down and she lay on the couch.

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My mouth was like it didn't exist then, like my voice had gone. I heard air blowing through the window that was louder than I could have imagined speaking. She slid back and I couldn't believe what I saw and didn't know what to do with it, but I kneeled down in front of her and put my fingers on the coffee-ice-cream-colored part of her leg where I'd been touching.

"You want this?" she said.

I wanted it so much I didn't know what to do. Between her legs I saw her everything and I had no idea. There was nothing I wanted more and nothing I was less prepared for. She put her hand down my shorts and squeezed me so tight I closed my eyes.

"Oh," I said. "Shit." I touched her where her hair was and it was softer than I could have imagined. She pushed my hand down to where it was wet and she had her hand on me and that was more than I could take.

"Fuck!" she said. She let go when she felt me coming. "Fuck."

"Fuck," I said. I rolled onto my side and pushed up onto the couch next to her. "Shit."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I leaned back into the couch with my hands on my pants. It was the best I'd ever felt.

"Go play basketball," she said. "Take your dumb ass and go play basketball and don't never come speak to me. Because ball is all you good for. *Barely.*" She pushed me back into the couch and stood up, pulled her shorts up in my face and walked out.

I just sat there. That wet smell was still in the air, but something else was too: part of Tish's lotion and part of us. It was cool inside, like a basement. The couch had

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some brown spots on it, and I saw some white powder pushed in around one of the buttons, but parts of it were clean too, with yellow and brown stripes. I wiped my hands on the pillows and picked up a little baggie with green trees printed on it. Something inside me felt like I'd done something very wrong, but part of me felt good, too. I kicked a glass vial across the floor, and heard it bounce off the wall.

After a while, I went into the hall and out the window. When I found my way back to the courts, Dub was on the side next to Tish. She was looking away. Dub had his elbows leaned onto his knees, dripping sweat in a puddle.

“What up?” I said. Dub looked up at me, tired from the game, and nodded. Then he looked at me full on, like he knew Tish had just done something wrong and I was a part of it. That, or she'd told him and he was just starting to believe it. “You got next?” I asked.

“What up, man,” he said. Then he shook his head and spat. He turned around and looked at one of the other guys there, someone I'd never seen. “You believe this motherfucker?” he said.

The other kid shook his head.

“After everything I did for this motherfucker,” he said. Then, like he wasn't tired anymore, Dub stood up. “*You* got next,” he said, pointing at my chest.

“Cool,” I said. “Who's our five?”

“No,” he said. “Just you.” He hit his stomach with his right hand. “You got next *this*,” he said, pointing at me and then at his chest.

Tish watched us. When she saw me looking, she shook her head and waved the back of her hand at me like go away. Then she looked the other direction.

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“Hands up,” Dub said. He stepped closer to where I was. “You want your shirt on, or off?”

I kept my shirt on and I tried my best that day, but I was just a confused little white boy taking his best shot at a tough black kid, and then going down from the first real punch I ever took. And when I hit the asphalt there was blood on my hands. The others pulled Dub off me after he only kicked me a couple times.