

"THIS IS A RELATABLE STORY FOR EVERYONE."

—Cabral "Cabbie" Richards, sports broadcaster

THE HOOP AND THE HARM



JAWARA PEDICAN

Yoosie Clendon is a first-year university student and passionate hoopster. From very young, he's been pushed relentlessly by his family on a troubling pursuit for an athletic scholarship. After his showtime dunk in a rivalry game goes viral, his life is stirred into dismay, leading to an act of violence that leaves him traumatized and thrown off his game.

Burdened by expectations and self-doubt, Yoosie tries to reignite his passion for basketball. Now, he's been given one last chance at the city-wide tournament to rediscover his confidence and sense of purpose—both of which he fears losing forever. With this final shot, will he prevail?

Jawara Pedican is a former member of both the McGill University and University of Toronto men's varsity basketball teams. With a wealth of memories from his playing days, he decided to offer young readers a semi-autobiographical account of his experiences and trials and tribulations as a collegiate athlete. He lives in Alliston, Ontario.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Dad, this is for you. With love.

PROLOGUE

To You:

I'd be grateful if you ever read this. Because I'm sorry. Sorry for what happened to you. Sorry for what happened to us. Sorry for it all. I just hope one day you come to believe, as I do, that it's just better this way. For everyone.

It wasn't long before I knew you were special.

I was proud of you then, and I still am to this day. I kept an eye on you from afar and listened closely to the chatter around your name — the praise and the slander, all along. I knew what you went through and exactly how you felt, not because I'm familiar with your struggles — because I'm not — but because I know you. A zillion times better than you think I do, and quite possibly more than you'd recognize yourself in any mirror.

I've seen you in your brightest moments, but also within that place — that deep, ugly, dark place where doubt filled your heart. I knew when you felt mighty and thought you had it all figured out; but also when your vision was clouded by fear, when having faith in your own self seemed impossible. Like I said, man: I know you. Inside and out. Flesh and blood. Thoughts and feelings. Your hurt, your bliss, and everything that lies in between — I've felt it all. Through you. With you. Always.

Until that one time, some months ago.

You'd been in pain before, but never like that. For once in my life, I couldn't imagine what you were battling.

Moments before then, I saw this twinkle in your eyes despite your trying past, despite the bits of hope you'd lost, despite the times you'd felt like giving up. You were thriving. Happy. With a heart that was full and a soul serene. You found yourself again.

Though right then and there, in an instant, everything took a turn for the worse. You were just lying there, all agonized, not too far from me. It seemed like you were quick to forget the bliss that came and left so cruelly.

You were broken. Again. And I couldn't take it any longer, seeing you there like that.

So, I had to go.

And I can't begin to think of the defeat you've felt since then. I've spent hours — if not, days — trying to justify my leaving. I have my reasons, but hey, maybe you wouldn't

wanna see me anyway. Maybe I'm the reason you need time for healing to begin with. Maybe we're like this because of all that pressure I put on you. Or maybe, just maybe, it's because I gave you reasons to feel afraid of failing, or wary of falling into that deep, ugly, dark place where you scorn yourself for achieving less than what you'd set out to accomplish.

I thought you would've despised knowing that I saw you at your lowest, so I couldn't stay. Yeah, I'll wrap my head around that excuse.

I should've been there, though. And I know it. So, if you're still reading this, I can only hope you'll someday forgive me.

Because I apologize...

I apologize if I ever gave the impression that you were anything less than gifted. Because you were. No — you are.

I apologize if, because of me, you now lead a life lived the wrong way.

A life of caution.

A life of safe, dull, uneventful days.

A life that avoids risks or moments that call for the utmost courage in yourself.

A life that shies from adversity and challenges.

A life riddled with fear.

And I apologize, I so deeply apologize, if I'm the reason you ever find yourself hesitant when the world needs you certain. Bashful when the world needs you bold and proud.

Afraid when the world needs you brave.

*Because the world needs the best you that you can be. So,
take your shot.*

Take care of yourself, too.

Goodbye.

CHAPTER I

PERCHED ON PIERCING THORNS

Breathe. Don't think. Just breathe. "In through your nose, out through your mouth," as they say. Relax. Close your eyes, slowly, calmly. Block out all the frantic action. Let those tense, shallow breaths effortlessly seep out of your lungs. Remove yourself from the worries, the pressure.

Gather your racing thoughts. Envision *you*. Not the *current* you in this trying time of angst, but the *ideal* you, the *best-version-of-yourself* you—thriving in whatever you do and loving every blink of it, flourishing in your own perfect world.

Now, take a moment to imagine how different life could be if you practiced mindfulness during tough times — y'know, meditation or self-affirmations or what have you. What might that feel like? Would you

be more successful? Wiser? Happier? Where would you be? Perhaps in a drastically different position?

Well, don't invest too much thought in the *what-ifs*, because if you could rewind back to any single moment when you should have been calm or clear-headed, instead of caught in your worries and fears, then your life could've spun into infinite outcomes! But since you have only a moment (*remember?*), don't you dare think too deeply.

Just breathe. *Breathe*. Yeah, I'll repeat it: *breeeathe*. You can get lost in your imagination for as long as you choose, but at some point — typically sooner than you wanted — you'll reopen your eyes and take on the challenges that the world has set out for you. Just inhale slowly, then exhale even slower.

And listen. Breathe and listen.

Listen closely. Because there's a stress-sweating, panicked someone crouching in front of you, just inches away, yelling at the top of his lungs. He's got something to say, and by the frenzied look on his face, it's gotta be important.

"We've dug ourselves outta quite some hole, guys!" he shouts. "Time's against us, but now's our last chance to pull through!" Here we are, among the deafening roars from the home crowd. We're exhausted, breathless, peering into the X's and O's on his smeary clipboard.

This is our final timeout.

"We're gonna switch into our zone trap just this one

play. They're expecting man-to-man, so this'll force their audible. Look, we need one solid possession of defense! Box out, crash the glass and get into our transition game. Early! If there's a scramble, get into a quick play call. But remember..." Coach Maythorn says, pointing at the scoreboard. "We don't have much time!"

"One stop, one bucket!" a hoarse Louis hollers, panting for deep breaths. "That's all we need, fellas!"

The first timeout horn sounds.

"Coach!" the referee firmly interrupts. "We need your guys on the floor."

"We're coming!" Maythorn barks, before regaining our attention. "Listen, we've got no timeouts left! Solid defense, then we need the ball back. If you get a good look, don't hesitate! Be ready to shoot it!" About eleven seconds remain, but the shot clock has Carleton hard-pressed to shoot within only five.

"We got this!" roars a cheerful voice within the huddle, followed by several hands and fists reaching aloft and stacking upon one another.

"Lotta time left, boys!"

"Make a play!"

"Bring it home!"

"And no fouls!" Maythorn bellows. His voice drowns in the crowd's noise just before our closing five disperse onto the court.

Down by two. This is our final go. Ready as ever.

The ball gets handed to Carleton's forward, and I'm counting each time the ref swings his arm during the inbound. *One one thousand ... two one thousand ... three one thousand ... four...*

The hurried inbounder flings an ill-advised pass to avoid a costly five-second call. Even so, Louis, with his freakish near-seven-foot wingspan, manages to get a fingertip on the ball, deflecting it into Carleton's backcourt and disrupting their entire scheme to get a clean shot off. The shot clock winds down as the crowd shouts, "*Three! Two! One!*"

Carleton's All-Star guard hoists up a prayer against the suffocating defense we pledged to Maythorn. The shot misfires off the back of the rim, causing a scuffle under the basket where both teams wrestle for the rebound.

She spills toward the baseline, but I hustle to corral Her before surveying the floor and dribbling swiftly up the court. Four seconds left. I scoop Her behind my back, evading a would-be double-team at the centre line.

Three seconds.

"Right here!" I hear to my left. "Find me, I'm open!" to my right. I weave through the defense, feinting one direction to attack the other with the destiny of our season unfolding.

Carleton's defense is air-tight, but it's my own self-doubt slowing me down. In a blink, I envision the times I'd spent in empty gyms fantasizing about last-second

shots like these. If there's any time to be unshakably confident of something, it's gotta be right here, right now! *Breathe*, I tell myself, feeling the shrieks from the crowd. This game's in the palm of my hands, just like the leather skin and round seams of the ball itself.

Two precious seconds remain.

Within the clock's final ticks, I take one last bounce before stopping on a dime, inches behind the arc. "Shoot it!" screams Maythorn. I fight past my hand-checking, jersey-tugging defender. He doesn't hinder my poise — not even in the slightest. Sweat trickles down my cheeks. Doubt or no doubt, this game's mine to win.

Final second.

Over a pair of defenders and their outstretched arms, I let Her go — a fingernail from deflection. She ascends like a work of art. I watch Her float in what seems like slow motion. She kisses the backboard before circling around the basket, slowly, as though She's too wary to enter.

Suddenly, the buzzer sounds...

* * *

"Coach!" the referee intervenes once more, urging our five to take to the floor after the second timeout horn.

Ah, shucks. Remember that spiel about not thinking too deeply into the whole "mindfulness" thing? Yeah, *guilty*. But I can't blame myself for daydreaming at a

time like this. After all, this is what I've been waiting for since I was a scrawny little youngster ... I just never envisioned living out this moment from the bench.

"Shut it! I heard you the first six times," Maythorn barks at the rightfully impatient ref. "This is our season, guys. Every set of lines you've run this year. Every early-morning practice you've woken up for. Your blood, your sweat, your pain..." He glances at the looks on our faces, ensuring we seem determined, focused, solemn. "*Everything* was paid at the cost of what's at stake. Rise to the occasion!"

"This is it!" adds Elvin, supporting Maythorn's rally. Everyone's fired up. In a conference quarterfinal, from a late seventeen-point deficit, to trailing by a single basket before the game's final play, how couldn't you be? I'm baffled by such a question.

It's mind-boggling — infuriating, even — that the answer is somehow beyond me.

What's nearby, though, is an open spot along the bench near the other freshmen, away but not too far from the coaches so that I won't have my ears rung off for tuning out of the game. I despise submitting to this, but I can't say I'm surprised. I'll have to let this game unfold without me.

* * *

My head rests against the chilled window; my cheek is clammy and numb. Into the never-ending carpet of barren land, we ride. Many are fast asleep, probably already fantasizing about their glories of next season. But oh, not me. I'm overwhelmed and confused and tormented by the conflict between disappointment and satisfaction. Regret, yet relief. It keeps me wide awake as the team bus sweeps along the vacant freeway. I wonder how this reality came about. I could have done more. I *should* have done more.

"Is it my fault?"

"Say what?" Elvin responds, awoken by my voice. He removes his headphones, although I'm close enough to notice his music is either playing very faintly or not at all. I forgot I wasn't alone in my row.

"Nothing. My bad."

"Aight, man." He wraps his headphones across his face and drags them onto his ears, one side at a time.

A silence plagues the ride in the few hours after our loss. All I can hear is the subtle ticking of the indicator when the driver changes lanes, and the drone-like undertone of the bus's raspy engine. No one is speaking. Not a whisper. Not a mutter.

Until, of course, someone does: "Final game of the season and all I had was four points. Six turnovers, too. Damnit, man," whines Louis, I assume. I remember him having an awful game. I wonder if he's seeking our pity

or simply poking a needle into this bubble of unbearable silence.

“Don’t worry, bro. You scored with that sweet Tinder match from last night, though! Probably had a couple turnovers too, I bet!” Several heads turn; chirps and giggles arise.

“Shut up, man,” Louis snickers.

That must’ve been Conrad. He’s got a knack for lightening the mood. There’s a better chance of scoring nothing but net on a full-court heave than having him turn down an attempt at levity. But we love Conrad for that, his daft and often untimely antics. Blabbering about your affairs from the night before a playoff game (a game lost, I might add), especially with a disgruntled Maythorn possibly listening from a near row ahead — yeah, this has Conrad written all over it.

He’s our do-it-all, Swiss-Army-knife power forward who isn’t in the starting line-up but definitely finds his way into the rotation because of his lockdown, low-post defense. Conrad oozes upside, and having just concluded a breakout season as the team’s leader in rebounds, steals, and nearly atop the team in scoring, I suppose he lets his game excuse him from the nonsense he blurts. Had he been glued to the bench all season long, his clowning wouldn’t fly with anyone on this bus.

I look for Maythorn and anticipate his reaction. “C’mon, we just lost, guys!” he shouts, turning his head with a glare.

Maythorn and I share a mutual frustration. We just let a winnable playoff game slip away like sand seeping through a tightly clenched fist. And the chatter of the team — Louis’s whereabouts with some shallow swipe-right the night before the most important game of his career.

In an instant, I can feel the mood take a one-eighty. It seems like no one’s troubled about the loss anymore, as though droopy postures and sulking faces were just a temporary phase. We were a basket away from a possible trip to Nationals, yet everyone seems so content now. And all it took was some silly locker room gossip.

I, like Maythorn, would have preferred silence on the ride back home. Just like how it was minutes ago. How it should be after a tough, season-ending loss. So this snide “it’s just a game” attitude going around is not helping me.

But then again, I’m reminded of my own hypocrisy.

Of course I wanted us to win, but it’s not like I was able to snap my fingers or take a swig from “Michael’s Secret Stuff” and magically become all mighty and fearless for a clutch final play. No, I don’t play for the Tune Squad of ’96, and no, it doesn’t work that way, either. So, despite the voice in my head telling me I should’ve fought to be out there, I had no business playing in the heat of crunch time, anyway.

And I hate to admit it.

* * *

I'm wakened by something grazing my neck, tapping to the bounce of the bus as it speeds along the 401. I turn my head to find it's someone's foot covered in a smelly, dark green sock with a silver flash across the ankle. It's Elvin's. He's out cold with his feet on my headrest, lying along the seats adjacent to mine. And I can't blame him. Road trips are super uncomfortable to sit through, and it's tough getting some shuteye while confined at the hips and knees for several hours — especially if you're six-foot-nine, like he is. Even still, his reeky feet dangling in my face leave me no choice but to shove them away. He wakes abruptly.

“Ah! My bad, big dog.”

“It's all good, man.”

He yawns. “Yo, Duke.”

“What's up?”

“You want the last one?” Elvin snags the remains of the team's post-game meal, a lone Hawaiian slice shuffling from one end of the box to the other as the bus turns sharply.

I glance at it, then at him. “Nah. Thanks, though.” Usually, I find an appetite to munch on something, even cold, brittle pizza. But not this time.

This time's different. I played an awful game; it was unsettling to think about, not only for my stomach. As poor of an outing Louis had, I'd cringe checking the spread for my stats. See, at least Louis contributed.

He still made winning plays to help us cut down the deficit. He drew a pair of offensive fouls late in the third quarter. He was vocal. He snatched maybe six or seven rebounds and moved the ball so others could score. He didn't score a bunch of his own, but he helped the team like he usually does.

As for me, I played timid. Tentative. Afraid to make a decisive play or get a couple shots off. Everyone knew I was having a lousy game — my teammates, Carleton's squad, the fans hollering from the stands. They could sense my jitters, the stiffness in my moves. It was like *DO NOT PASS TO ME* was stitched boldly on the back of my uniform above my jersey number, instead of my last name. I mean, it's upsetting thinking that my teammates no longer believe in me. Yet what's worse is realizing my wrong in playing the victim, my wrong in fretting about what others believe I can or can't do when it's apparent that the little belief in *myself* is the problem.

"On second thought," I eventually reply, glancing again at the leftover pizza, "nah, never mind. I'm straight."

"Cool," replies Elvin. "Offer's still on the table."

"Seat."

"Huh?"

"The offer. You mean it's on the seat. Y'know, beside you?" I suggest, giggling subtly, hoping a jab at his misused figure of speech will lighten us up. He raises an eyebrow instead. It was pathetic, snarky humour, Elv. I know.

“Yeah,” he hisses, “whatever, Duke.”

Ah, *Duke*. I hear a teasing echo in my head and find myself smirking, slightly annoyed but light-hearted nonetheless. It’s not like Elvin, or Maythorn, or anyone else in these rows couldn’t pronounce my name — Udoka — because they all can, and perhaps I can’t even blame them for the “*Duke*” thing, since I’ve been too meek to oppose it, but there’s a history behind the nicknames I’ve been given.

When I was little, maybe four or five years old, my mum used to enunciate each of my name’s three syllables to strangers because I was too shy to assert myself on my own. “*Oo-doh-kuh*. See, it’s easy! Say it! *Oo-doh-kuh*. *Udoka!*” she’d exclaim to them, whether they were distant relatives or whoever I’d meet for the first time. “No, it’s not ‘*You*,’ it’s ‘*Oo!*’” I’d hide behind her, wrapping myself around her leg, feeling embarrassed and unwilling to cause a scene or make a big deal about a grown-up butchering my name — as if their inability to say it properly was inconvenient to *them* and not me. Maybe I was too young to realize those battles should’ve been mine to fight.

As I aged, I would groan whenever people confused me with *Utica*, the small city in the state of New York. Ideally, I would have fired back with something like, “Say it right or don’t even call for me, period!” That is, if the prideful and assertive and no-bullshit-taking

version of me trapped inside my mind and screaming to come out would ever get a chance to take over. But nope, it never broke the lock.

See, where I'm from — my humble grounds in the city's west end, Jane and St. Clair, to be specific — they call me *Yoosie* because of my initials: *U.C.*, as in Udoka Clendon. It makes me think of my old middle school teachers when I'd ask if I could go to the washroom right after recess. They'd say, "Can you? Can you get up and go relieve yourself? You seem capable. But *may* you? *May* you go right before this lesson begins?" Their answer was often "no."

So, likewise, the hidden, no-bullshit-taking version of me should've been saying, "Can you call me *Yoosie*? Sure, it's doable. Now, *may* you call me by whatever you choose, simply because it's easier for you? Nuh-uh! Ain't gonna happen!" I'd envision this "me" kissing his teeth and storming off from the scene.

But eventually, the actual version of me — the one that's unfortunately not as brash or unapologetically intolerant to bullshit as it needs to be — came to ignore the tag *Yoosie* instead of opposing it. Then came acceptance. Then, soon enough, I ran with *Yoosie* and didn't respond to anything else — until now.

So, to the team, I am Duke. Which isn't the worst deal, because I like that I was given a nickname — since, on any team, it represents a fondness, a bond between you

and your crew. I mean, yeah, this whole “*Duke*” thing is still foreign to me — especially since having been a die-hard fan and past hopeful of donning the Carolina Blue when I was younger — but it’s not all so bad because the team embraces me all the same.

* * *

The sun rises behind a forest of skyscrapers on the downtown horizon, where the CN Tower’s needle pokes through the sky. We’re finally a few stoplights from campus as a blade of sunlight shoots into the bus, from the front row to the rear. I’ve been wide awake for a while now, caught thinking about what’s next for me without a clear sight in mind. It has me all tripped out. Stuffing gear into my duffle bag hasn’t turned out to be the distraction I hoped for.

Because inside the bag, I find my practice jersey, reminding me of that early-morning rush to get on the court in time for training, and how quickly I’d scramble to suit up while fighting that minutes-to-6:00 a.m. lethargy that I shared with the rest of the guys. Crammed somewhere in the side compartments are my ankle braces. I think of the nagging tweaks and sprains I’ve sustained in the past year but more so the guys’ encouraging words that had driven me to recover as soon as I could. My game shoes are jammed somewhere in here too, bringing me

back to the sound of squeaks on the hardwood, the calling of my name from the scorer's table, the proud victories and the humbling defeats. The jersey, the braces, the sneakers — they're all bringing me to realize that the season is over. And that sucks, because I love these guys, man.

"You're in a hurry," says Elvin.

I shrug. I guess he's right.

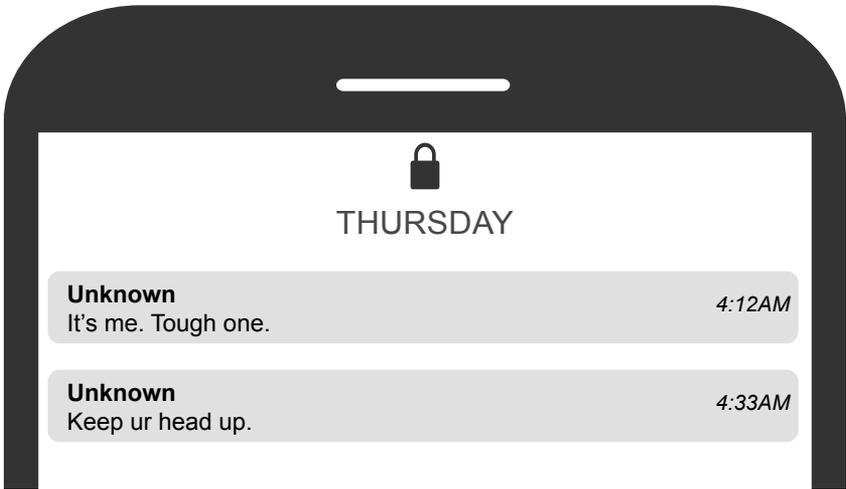
The *take cares* and *best of lucks* from the seniors are nearing, and I could imagine season-ending goodbyes being tear-jerking for some of them. For guys like me, there aren't many situations more awkward than struggling to reciprocate something heartfelt for a teammate who's typically so tough on the outside. Should I get sucked into a farewell, I'll probably go with, "*Imma carry the torch for you, bro,*" then follow with a dap and a hug with my other arm, hoping not to break a straight face.

But aside from that reason, I want to hop off this bus without a peep at anyone because I fear situating myself on the seniors' end of the goodbyes too. I mean, the guys knew this was a crummy season for me, but they'd all be surprised if I told them it might be my last.

I nudge Elvin. "See you around," I tell him, shuffling past the rows while the bus comes to a halt. He nods at me, so I nod back.

* * *

My duffle bag sways back and forth as I waddle along the platform at St. Patrick Station, and I'm beginning to feel the rumble approaching the mint green tunnel. I reach into my pocket and feel for my phone, the thin button along the side that gets it vibrating once held for a beat. I notice three things from its lock screen — one, it's *6:48 a.m.* on a calm Thursday morning; two, my phone is destined to die, proving my theory that travel bus outlets are reliably unreliable; and three, this:



I'm caught staring at these texts as the train gusts toward me and screeches to slow down. I can only wonder who'd sent them and why at such an early hour. If it is you, though, and if this is the end of my journey, for what it's worth, I hope I made you proud.

Wherever you are.