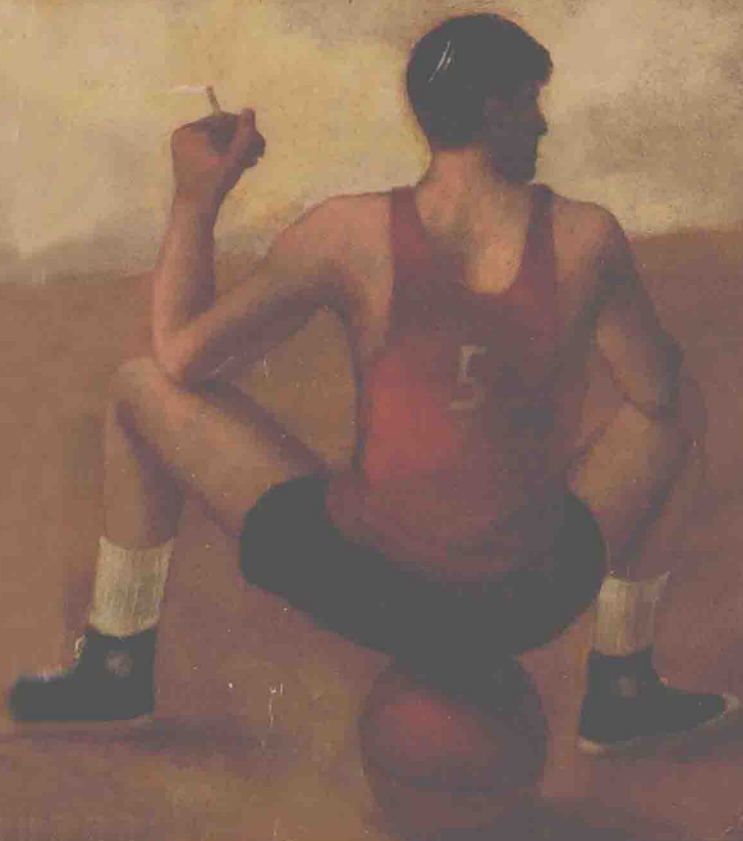


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WINNING
THE CITY

THEODORE WEESSNER

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For Janet

PART ONE

This was it. Today. The first practice of the season was scheduled to take place after school. Time to do the deed.

All these months he had been able to think of little else. Since last spring. It was his year, his time to be the oldest, and now it was here. Practice today. Tryouts. But he was a returning starter and he sure wasn't trying out; he was leading the way. His excitement was such that all day he had been telling himself to be cool. Cool was the way to be. Time to be cool and not a fool.

Dale Wheeler was fifteen, though, and however he tried to maintain that certain temperature, he did not know how not to dream. He had grown an inch and a half since last year and he was growing right now. This very moment he was pushing up through five-nine. Sitting at his desk in school, he could look at a forearm and see it growing larger, stronger, longer. He could call up his arm muscles at home before the bathroom mirror. One, then the other. Pop, pop! Pow, pow! He could call up excitement within, too, in the approximate location of his heart.

Dale knew he was good. And there was no doubt he had worked. Like a saver saving every penny, he had given himself to little else. At times it seemed it was all he had done, all this time, work-work, practice-practice. He had

worked on anyway. Worked into work. Sweated into sweat. Work was commitment. Work, as every athlete knew, was the key. The more you practice, the luckier you get. He had done it, was doing it, would do it. An athlete was what he was. Maybe he was only fifteen years old, but he knew what he was. And now it was his year, it was his turn to take all of them downtown to win the City. "Here comes Dale Wheeler," said the Sportscaster in the sky. "There he goes . . . he takes the shot, he fakes the shot, he drives! he shoots! he SCORES!!"

Even asleep at night Dale dreamed of the season to come. Moments and moves from outdoor pickup games earlier in an evening—spectacular things happened in pickup games—would blend in his dreams into the season to come, to games indoors before bleachers filled and rocking with all the students and teachers he had ever known or passed in the hallways of Whittier Junior High. Waking from a dream he would feel strangely filled with rainbows. Don't go off the deep end, he had to remind himself. Be cool. Cool is cool. Don't be a fool—play it cool.

Everything's a game. He knew that. Life, he told himself with clarity, is a game. It's a game all the way, and everything depends on how you play it. It was something he *knew*. He had no notion of himself as any kind of thinker, nor as a smartass fifteen-year-old either—not yet—but he knew what he knew and he knew by now that life was a game.

"There he goes . . .," said the Sportscaster in the sky.

One night during the summer his father came in late from working second shift at Chevrolet Plant Four—a silhouette in Dale's bedroom doorway; a weaving silhouette for sure, as per usual—and invited him to the kitchen for a middle-of-the-night snack of Coney Island hot dogs. That night, as on most other nights during the summer, Dale had played outdoors at the park until the lights had gone

off at ten, had dribbled the mile home on dark sidewalks, in and out of corner street lights, had showered with the landlady's garden hose in the basement, had fallen asleep easily and slid into the dreaming of his dream. There came the figure of his father, the tender words, hey son, old sleepytime pal, Coney Island dogs. They had to be the best hot dogs in the world, and middle-of-the-night snacks were his father's way of telling him he liked him, loved him, they were father and son, pals in the face of all obstacles and until the end of time. Dale mumbled that he'd be out in a minute.

Then sunlight was filling his window and it was time to get up—to return to the park for a day of practice—even as a spur of something was picking at his mind. Slipping into the bathroom to wash and brush his teeth, he heard music—"Slipping Around," Margaret Whiting and Jimmy Wakely circling on his father's old phonograph in the living room—and Dale was stopped as he always was by music drifting through their handful of second-floor rooms at an odd hour. The message was familiar; his father was up and sloshed, sweet and sentimental, drunk and dangerous. Waiting for his son to appear, for there was no one else upon whom to visit his love and pain, his loss and regret.

Dale had no choice, finally, but to leave his bedroom and make his way into the kitchen.

Curly Wheeler stood there. He wasn't sitting, as Dale had expected, but, on his feet, was leaning against the wall. He looked as if he had been leaning there all night. His neck seemed made of rubber as he rolled his head to take a look at his son, to say, "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

Dale opened the refrigerator door, explored the chances for breakfast, generally ignored his father, as he did at times like this. Life with an alcoholic.

"YOU'RE the guy who stood me up!" his father an-

nounced. "That's who you are. You're that guy! Bring home a special meal for the only person in the world who plays tunes on his weary old heartstrings—in the middle of the night—guy gets left standing on the corner."

Dale had remembered by then. "My gosh, I went back to sleep!" he said. "I fell asleep."

"Musta been dreaming about something a hell of a lot better-looking than Coney Island hot dogs," his father said with a grin.

"Basketball," Dale said, deciding all at once to take a chance on the truth. "I was dreaming about basketball."

"Basketball?" his father said. "You said basketball? Did you say basketball?"

"This is my big year," Dale said.

"Well, what's that mean? First time I knew anything would keep you away from your favorite meal. Figured it had to be something a lot prettier than some fat old basketball."

"It's my big year at school coming up," Dale said. "I've been working like a demon. Everybody else is just doing nothing. I've been working all the time. All summer. It's my big year—we're gonna win the City." He did not add how proud he hoped to make his father, how he dreamed of saving their lives in some small way. Turning things around. Leading them both to some promised land.

His father was squinting at him, closing one eye. "Son, goddam, gotta tell you one thing. Hope you dream about other things, too. You hear me talking? Don't wanna put all your eggs in one little basket, do you?"

Dale nodded, to say, well, he knew, he was cool, he knew.

Of course, he did not know, and anticipation remained his closest companion. Even when school was under way in the fall and he wanted to do homework—or just think about something else, anything else, of the day's Word

Power Challenge in homeroom, of Zona Kaplan sitting in front of him—some basketball moment, comments from the Sportscaster in the sky, a make-believe sports page headline from the season to come would slip into his mind on its own, would present itself as irresistibly as a puppy eager to play. Go on, get out of here, he'd tell the pup, but she'd keep snuggling, playful as a girlfriend he had never had, licking his face, smiling and breathing into his ear as she unbuttoned her blouse and let fall free those items his father thought not unreasonable competition for Lower Downtown's famous Coney Island natural casing hot dogs smothered in their secret recipe chili sauce.

Be cool, Dale kept telling himself. Don't go off the deep end. One step at a time. Put it together. Don't be a jerk—do the work!

He had done the work, however, had worked to put it together, and the flame which burned within seemed to be his to claim. The previous day after school he had practiced yet again on the outdoor court at the park. No one else was there. For sure. For no one worked like he worked. None of them knew commitment like he knew commitment. He rehearsed his moves, took his shots, dreamed his dream until the air was chilled and the ball was a black moon against the lowering autumn sky. He worked into the dark. Get outta the way, he told the invisible opposition. Get outta the way, here comes Wheeler and he came to play.

And that very morning at seven, sweeping his school's two gyms—as he did every morning, in exchange for time on the floor—he had jumped, checked with his eye, pulled the trigger a hundred times or more, shot free throws for five minutes, too, made himself make five in a row, then five more, then five more, before hurrying into the hallway at the last second to join the sleepyheads (they would fill the stands when the season was under way) who were just wandering into the building for the start of the school day

and had no idea at all about commitment or that life was a game and everything had to do with how it was played.

Oh, it was his year and he was more than ready. To say the least, as Zona Kaplan, as all the girls in his ninth grade class seemed to say. A flame of desire burned within him. To say the least.

There all at once was Sonny Joe Dillard, the school's star, its legendary athlete, walking in the other direction, not hurrying at all. "I have a name for City League!" Dale said.

"What's the name, Wheels?"

"Not gonna say right now," Dale said. "Tell you later."

"What if we don't like it, Wheels?"

"You'll like it. We'll like it."

"Thought we were going to get a sponsor this year, Wheels."

"Aah! You have to go around begging people. That's a drag. Who needs it."

"Tell me at practice," Joe said, ambling on his way.

"What practice—what're you talking about?"

"Yeah, as if you didn't know," Joe called back. "Tell me at practice, Wheels."

"Everything in due time, Joe," Dale called after him.

This was it. It was starting right now. Dressed way ahead of the others, the old tingle of goose bumps alive on his naked legs, Dale left the locker room and passed through the brief tunnel into the boys' gym. Before him, however, was a modest surprise. The wall between the two gyms was folded away. The last two years they had used the boys' gym alone for the first and all other practices. Now it was different. Before him was the great sweep of the double gym, and Dale asked himself in passing what it was that Coach Burke was up to this year.

No matter and about five-eight, he thought as, continuing into the vast space, new tingles of goose bumps traversed his legs and forearms, ran over his bare shoulders and into his faintly smiling face.

Each of the two courts was full size, but when the floor-to-ceiling panels were folded away and the larger backboards on either end were lowered and locked into place, as they were now, and when light from the entire line of high windows was allowed to reflect upon the whiskey-colored floor, then Dale might find himself moved in a way that some other person might be moved by the cavernous silence and stained glass of a cathedral. The future was in his hands.

Then, oh God, for an instant the old painful incident of seventh grade stabbed him. He should have known. It was always returning to stab him—his father coming that one time to see him play, for some reason not working second shift that day, coming that one time and losing a leg through the bleachers, losing a bottle from his coat pocket, too, a bottle in a brown paper bag that fell through the planks of wood, hit the floor and broke, and kids, and teachers and parents, too, said, "Who's that man?" and "He lost his bottle!" and "Look at that guy—he's half in the bag!"

Dale moved a little, shook out his arms and legs to loosen up, to think of something else. He raised his arms, went to his toes, fired an imaginary shot with his fingers. Another. The future was right there in his hands.

"Belly high . . . without a rubber," he sang aloud, to get himself further away from the old bugaboo thought of his father. The lyric was one he had dared recite to Zona in homeroom two mornings ago, and she had raised her eyes in disgust. "Ninth grade boys are so immature," she said at last, and Dale had liked her even more than he had liked her before. She seemed to bounce in his heart. To say the least.

He walked on, looking to the vast cathedral space of the empty double gym. He shot imaginary shots at other baskets.

Oh, this is like love, he thought in his silly but cocky, not-so-silly frame of mind. This—is what love feels like. If you've done the work, he thought. It's what it feels like to sit in homeroom and have the hots all the time for Zona Kaplan. This. He shot again. "Shake Marilyn Monroe!" he sang out. "I'm gonna shake . . . Marilyn Monroe!"

There were the tighter, heavier nets on the two orange-rims, from which hemp cords he imagined emanating that sound which thrilled him so. For even in the gym when it was empty, and sometimes when the bleachers were full, and certainly in his continuing dream—in a sport in which to practice is to dream—he could call into his ears that most reassuring of sounds. There would be this sudden stopping-pushing hard into the air, the certain gasp, the lining up, up-fixing of periscope, the hanging for an instant to aim, hanging unto the pulling of the trigger—fire one!—sending the ball tumbling through space, through momentary silence, through pause of heart and mind, too, arriving, alas, upon that snapping of nothing but threads (the "swish" that wasn't that at all), transmitting, delivering its payoff, the feeling within that said he was okay, yes, he was right with himself and with all things. He was real. He was good. He was. At least for the moment. *Whipp!* Two points! Score! All things on target at once and forever. *Whipp!* Take that, all you sonofabitches! Did you think Dale Wheeler did not come to play? Take that, world! *Whipp!* Take that and stick it up your ass, all of you! Dale Wheeler is here to do the job and the next time around you won't be laughing at his old man, because his old man won't be doing anything anymore to be laughed at. Never again.

Without a ball, Dale jumped again, aimed, popped again. Dreamed.

"Wheels, what're you doing?" a voice called behind him.

Dale looked over. Thinking it would sound clever, he called to the boy, a third-stringer at best, "Getting ready to win the City!"