

THE LAST JUMPSHOT

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Xtra practice? say the old ladders, the old leg timbers Parish and Bo. You mean xtra on top of xtra?

Well, practice makes perfect, I point out cheerfully. And anyway, Coach wants us there. For one last run-out.

S'all right for you – Captain Fantastic.

Yeah, Mr Campbell Jones!

But what about us, man? says Chip. We're whacked out.

No! No! I got plenty left in the tank, says Id, the Valleys Boy. Let's go for it!

Silence.

I vote we go for it—?

Everyone looks at the white boy 'gone off'. As if they've just been dealt a kick to their collective sensitivities.

Then Chip-chip jumps to his feet, suddenly re-energised, resurrected, almost. Yo, let's go, he says, breezing past Id #1, as if Id #1 had never spoken. Come on guys, what're we waiting for, yeah?

The guys jump up. Yo, let's go!

Great, I say. Now we're all agreed.

Bouncing the orange basketball I follow them out of the flat, thinking, smiling. It's because of me that Idris #1 got involved with the A team in the first place, along with his sub and namesake Idris #2. I recommended them to the new Coach, Mulrooney. The two Ids, bible-black and paper-white. Outside competition. Works like clock.

Standing by the bus stop. Waiting. Fooling around, waiting, in an afternoon sun that gives off plenty of light, but no heat. Maybe it's too late for heat this time of year. Even so, we six black guys (one honorary) standing on the green hill, under the lone, battle-scarred bus shelter must appear potent. Sunlit. At least in the sunken eyes of elderly shoppers on the supermarket free-bus, which hoves into view before we've been standing there five minutes.

Hey look what's coming, says Chip. *FAZZDERS!*

And the guys start yelling *fazzder! fazzder! fazzder!* as the bus crawls up the hill. The uniformed peaked cap behind the wheel looks as though he'd like to drive straight past. But we step out into the road, all six of us and flag him down. A shade uncool for young gods lately fingered by the sun, agreed. But we can brazen this out. Easy. After all, why pay more, as *FAZZDER* says?

Thank you, driver!

Yeah, thanks, drive!

You boyz all goin' shoppin'?

We are, drive, says Chip. Gonna buy... washing powder. Ain' we, guys?

S' right, yeah. Big bogzz size!

Inside the bus, the chit-chat drops to a murmur as we crowd on board. Then a few bold whispers follow us up. Whispering, all the way up the winding stairs: look... look how many... Somalis?

Innit Somalis?

All praise be to God I say, seeing the upper deck empty; like a breath of fresh air.

Old fogies. Though that type of misidentification doesn't bother me at all. Because I'm secure in my Keltic black heritage, come whatever? But it riles the hell out of Parish and Bo, because Parish and Bo are Docks. And being 5th or 6th generation Docks Boyz (from 'Old Doggz' as they kindly explain to the rest of us) means being black in a way that is

knee-high to royalty. At least the way they tell it. Though Lisha – who knows – reckons the nearest Parish and Bo come to being royal, is when they're sat on their butts in the Big Windsor holding forth. There the guys get serious admiration and respect (from flocks of daredevil scribes, tourists and whatnots) simply for sitting and being: Old Doggz.

Which is why they feel particularly hurt now, and aggrieved.

D'fuckin dee-crepts, says Bo. I'd like to punch their lights out. One by one.

Yeah, dee-crepts, says Parish. One arf of em are wearin NHS eye glass an they still carn see! I mean, do I look *Zomali, me?*

The two Ids seated down the front of the bus throw a quick look back. Then they make cartoon-type eyes at one another, and burst out laughing. *Zeeong!*

Oi, shouts Bo. What you got to laugh about, *Warrior Boy?*

The cut in his voice is directed at Idris #2, who is indeed Somali, and very tall timber. Which fact perhaps Bo has forgotten as Id is seated. Now the Somali boy shoots his long legs from under the seat and thunders down the aisle of the bus.

I'm Warsangeli, he yells, right up in Bo's face. You get it right, OK? Warsangeli Welsh!

Guys, I raise my hand peaceably. Let's all remember we're a team, OK?

The only response to this is a simmering, mutinous silence.

And then my mobile goes off. And suddenly everyone is transfixed as this wondrous new ringtone hits the air.

Orr, man, now that is just—just—

Awwsome, supplies Id #2.

Aye, awwsome! agrees Bo. I mean, d'fuckin US Cavalry Charge?

S' what they use on the NBA clockshot, innit? says Id.

Correct, Mr Hassan. Grinning, I let the mobile play on, unwilling to break its spell. And when Lisha gives up and rings

off, the famous US bugle call continues to root and toot in our headspace. Like mood music. Linking us, each and every one of us six guys sat there on the *FAZZDA free-bus*, to the place where we know we wanna be, which is Planet NBA!

Though the bus actually drops us off at the out-of-town shopping complex. And while the pensioners shuffle forward with their bags and four-wheel trolleys, we're down the stairs, off the bus and out, into the sunshine. Green fields. The guys look round. Birds and shit. For them, this is always, *always*, the back of beyond. But not for me, I grew up here. I'm Pontprennau through and through.

Dotted across the fields are the familiar black and white splotches, sturdy young calves chewing up the grass. It's like those pretty pictures you get on cartons of *Ben & Jerry's* ice cream. Except that these are male, Bobbi calves and therefore useless for dairy; but great for kebab meat. Nowadays donner kebab is all these big-eyed spindly legged guys are good for, apparently.

So it's Friday afternoon still. And very late in the afternoon for some of us, standing around courtside, kitted up and ready to go. At only 5 feet 8 inches tall, and with the *Big Two O* approaching fast, it's beginning to dawn on me – that I'm only growing older, not taller. While lags like Parish and Bo are even further down the hill.

But right now? Our spirits are sky. Keyed. Because incredibly, this last-minute run-out has coincided with a VIP visit. Up and coming Councillor Ms Susannah somebody, has turned up here at the sports centre (actually a discontinued warehouse) with a TV camera crew in tow.

And while the Councillor lady and Coach Mulrooney talk to the cameras about disaffected youth and the need for *blah blah blah*, we await the whistle. Excited, expectant and more than ready to roll. Then, unfortunately the Councillor lady trips over her tongue, and starts talking about *disinfected* youth. And they have to start over again.

Orr, man!

The guys fall out, and begin to goof around a little.

Hi there, whispers Chip, pretending he's on camera. My name is Michael Jeffrey Jordan and I'm not *disinfected*, bold-assed bitch. Y'hear? I'm still catchin'!

Yeah, he's catchin, he's catchin—

An we catchin!

Orr, c'mon guys, behave—

OK. Hi, I'm Kobe, whispers Id the Valleys Boy. And everyone cracks up laughing.

Including me. Until I note that Coach Mulrooney, all black beetling eyebrows and Irish-American red face, is looking hard across the floor. At us, at me? Immediately I'm reminded of the need to keep a serious head on here. I mean, once we get to London and tomorrow's final – who is to say who's out there? Watching? But for now Coach Mulrooney, the man who successfully rebranded us from the Karbulls to the Crows (post-9/11) is calling the shots.

OK guys, let's keep it down, now, I say briskly. Just 24 on the clock, and it will be the *Big One!*

Yeah!

When Kardiff Crows go toe to toe with the London boyz.

D'cocker knee boyz?

Yeah, d'cocker knee boyz! Suddenly I slam the air with my fist and yell out loud: Hey, no con-test!

At last Coach Mulrooney blows his whistle. That heart-stopping shriek. And for half a nanosecond I freeze – like a five-year-old, back on the school playground. Until I break free, shake free from the loop of time and go charging forward—

Great shot there, Campbell! shouts Coach Mulrooney, as we go three on three for the cameras, and I make the first basket.

Great jumpshot!

Then everything spools forward for me. Faster and faster. And despite my best efforts to play it cool, (keep it for

tomorrow, play it cool) I'm suddenly on fire. Smoking. The heat is in the house, as they say. And what a fantastic house it is! This echoey space we're running in; this *huge* aluminium-walled warehouse, that we still call Goodz 4-U. Once it housed an empire of wonderful, wonderful things: like Nike Classic, Air Force, Converse, Zoomerific; and the sneakers I favour today, which are Jumbo Lift-Off.

And again, we have lift-off, because I'm playing out of my skin! Hey where's the D? shouts Coach Mulrooney, abruptly switching sides. Watch Campbell! he shouts in irritation. Stop *Soup* Campbell! (Is *Soup* some jokey kind of put-down, I wonder, designed to halt my flow?) Too bad if it is. And too late. My feet push off the ground, my arm comes up. I grab the orange rock and it's a steal.

They're stealing it! cries Coach Mulrooney. *They are stealing it!* As Id #1 and I rotate the glowing orange rock between us. Tossing it back and forth, back and forth between us. Like a magic ball on invisible string. Invincible as we gallop up court for the nth time. Throwing a fake on Parish, throwing a fake on Chip. We thunder for the line, dropping Bo's D-fence for dead, as Id #2 pops up on the inside. And I toss the ball to Idris, that tall Somali timber. And get it back *smack!* as I run into space and stop. Right foot slam on the edge of the paint.

All at once, the famous US bugle call rings through my head. Fifteen seconds I calculate coolly, or one last jumpshot. And everyone out there will know who I am. I will alchemise my name Campbell Jones. ID-ing it. Gold-plating it to *Campbell*. Period. Aka the Can Man, aka the first Welsh Black who is destined to blaze a trail through the NBA!

The Bible tells us that your old men shall dream dreams, while your young men shall see visions. And when I finally make the shot, the ball leaves my hands and soars through the air. Like a vision. Spinning into space, like a dazzling orange sun that arcs, then fades. Drops and fades... fades...

fades. Until... hey, hey hey! *It's BIG BASKET and another three pointer!*

But, I thought I caught a sound back there? As the ball dropped on its way through hoop and net. *It hit the rim.* It hit the rim! So naturally, I have to try again. And again. Leap on the glowing ball and try again. For the perfect throw, the perfect throw. Until united to a man, the guys grab a hold of my arms, just to make me stop. Stop! Then Coach Mulrooney comes rushing up, and thrusting his angry red peasant face right in front of my eyes, he screams: *Are you crazy, or what?*

I suppose crazy must be the answer. No question. Because when he tells me I'm relegated to the bench for tomorrow's final, all I can think to do, right there in front of the cameras, the Councillor lady and everyone, is to throw my head back. Right back, and just... bellow out my misery, like a bull calf in a field. Then bring my head down hard, in a replicating action and nut the guy... and nut the guy... and nut the guy...