

Step Over

by **John McCaffrey**

The best year of Allen Iverson's life was my worst. Determined to shed a "me-first" image, AI had bought into a team concept under new coach Larry Brown and propelled the underdog 76ers into the 2001 NBA Championship series against the star-powered Los Angeles Lakers. On the way, he had won the All-Star and League MVP trophies, dazzling fans and fellow players with his mercurial quickness and relentless offensive attack. He was relentless and fearless going to the basket against much larger foes, flinging his tat-laden, skinny body into thick seven-footers, finding a sliver of an angle to arch the ball up and under massive arms, taking the invariable hit, and falling, his cornrows glinting in the arena light, like a spent bottle-rocket. The miracle was never that the ball went in, which it almost always did that year, but that he got up off the floor after such a beating. But he did, every time.

For a while that year, I wasn't sure I'd get up. Not literally, but emotionally. The hit I took was my wife leaving me, and while it might not have been as breathtaking as an AI swoop to the hoop, it had still been a six-year journey together as a married couple, and it hurt to have it end. Basketball helped to relieve the pain: watching, as well as playing. Like AI, I was a guard, and while I held none of his absurd athleticism, I could move well, dribble well, and shoot, I must admit, very well. I excelled in pick-up games, or at least held my own, and while I had never stopped playing once I got married, my forays to the court multiplied, and intensified, after my separation. I literally wore sneakers out, and nearly my knees and feet, but the game, the competition, the sweating and striving, helped me let go of tension, ease depression, and forget my troubles for a while.

Nights were spent scouring the television for games, and, as I had gone to school in Philadelphia (Villanova University) I gravitated toward the Sixers, and, naturally, AI. He

was an underdog and so was the team that year, overachieving and winning games in bunches. I identified with them and felt inspired by them—if they could beat the odds and make a run for a championship, I could surely overcome my grief and feel good again. But like an NBA season, it was a long haul—feeling good again, that is. There were times when the grief was overwhelming, and with it came doubt and insecurity. Bouts of sadness led to fits of anger, tears produced clenched fists. I hardly ever felt comfortable, or at peace. I had trouble enjoying things I always enjoyed: reading, writing, even day-dreaming. About the last thing I wanted to do was spend time in my head, but that’s the only place I seemed to dwell, deep inside, a dark place. It was like a self-inflicted prison sentence, and my pain was the warden. Break time from this metaphorical cell came from hoops. The basketball court was “my yard,” a place where I could breathe fresh air, even if it smelled of sweat, where I could loosen my limbs, release anxiety and let go of aggression, where I could feel like myself again, or at least as long as I held “winners.”

About the same time the Sixers made it to the NBA championship that year, I was taking steps forward, small, incremental movements of progress, moments when my shoulders would release tension and I would take a whole breath in, rather than just an anxious sip. The growing sense of ease encouraged me to take chances, to be less isolated, to think again about a life lived and not hidden from. To this end, my family had a vacation house out in the Hamptons, in the bucolic town of Wainscott, just a mile from a beautiful beach and the Atlantic Ocean. It was just after Memorial Day, the start of the summer season, and I had a hankering to go there and spend the weekend away from City life. I also was looking forward to playing basketball.

Wainscott, at that time, contained in its small confines one of the few remaining one-room school houses in the country (it since has added a separate building to accommodate an increase in students), and on the grounds was a sun-bleached (and cracked) concrete basketball court. It was here that an evening hoops game was played

every evening during the summer. There were no lights on the court, but from early June to late August games would last until darkness, or until the players gave up from exhaustion. I was a habituate of the game, considered it my home court, and must have launched thousands and thousands of jump shots (during contests and alone) at those two rusted rims over the years. There were others who were regulars, but none as regular as me. I lived for the game throughout my high school and college years, never too tired from a summer job or from having too much fun the night before to be first on the court. Graduation from college, moving to Hoboken, getting a full-time job, and, eventually, getting married, limited my time in the Hamptons. But I still put in enough weekends to maintain a presence at the evening game, gaining comfort in its continuance and my place in its history.

That Memorial Day weekend, 2001, I left New York City on a Friday afternoon, taking as a mode of transportation the Hampton Jitney, a bus by any name, but one jazzed up, perhaps, by its destination, the haughtiness of the mostly wealthy riders, and the provision of free orange juice and peanuts for the just-over-reasonable fee. The Jitney was good for me because it dropped me in Wainscott, and I could walk to my house. It was something my ex-wife and I liked to do, that walk, easing the transition from the cacophony of the City, the long bus ride (always traffic on the Long Island Expressway), enjoying, finally, the quiet calm of passing under a tree-lined, non-lighted street and, when conditions were right, the distant sound of ocean waves finding the shore. This was the first time in years I had done the trip solo, and, truthfully, the first time I would be at the house alone for such a long weekend. It was a bit daunting, but I comforted myself that it would be good for me, give me time to reflect, and, mostly, play lots of basketball.

Unfortunately, for the first part of the evening, time alone was not good for me. I paced the house as the sun dipped in the sky, starting to feel sorry for myself, thinking about my ex-wife, feeling sad and lonely. I finally called my parents, not wanting to worry them

about my state, but to connect and let them know I was safe. Of course, I worried them. I wept openly to my mom and dad, telling them all my struggles. They showed their support for me, let me know they loved me and that I would be okay, and my mother, in infinite maternal wisdom, told me there was a casserole dish of baked ziti in the freezer. I hung up and felt better. It was enough to give me an urge to take a jog. I laced on sneakers, shorts, T, and with headset on, took off.

I had never run so hard and for so long in my life, not before, and not after. Sweat and fury poured out of me, and when that was extinguished, out came all the other emotions I was holding. By the time I made it back to the house, more than an hour later, covering at least ten miles, what was left inside me, what I felt, was one thing: relief.

I was also starving. Remembering my mother's suggestion, I took out the ziti and popped it into the microwave. Then I turned on the TV. About the time the ziti was ready to eat, Game One of the Lakers vs. 76ers was starting. According to the announcers, and just about anyone who followed the game, it was going to be rout. So dominant were the Lakers that season (they had won twenty games in a row), and so stellar was the play of their two stars, Shaq and Kobe, and so steady their coach, the renowned Zen-Master, Phil Jackson, that few, if any, gave the 76'ers a chance to win even one game. A sweep, it seemed, was inevitable.

Which was what the LA faithful, including Jack Nicholson and other Hollywood glitterati, were standing and chanting in unison before the opening tip that night at the newly-opened Staples Center: "Sweep, Sweep, Sweep!" The sound of their chanting reverberated throughout the arena, like a Roman Coliseum crowd calling for a fallen gladiator's head. But as I gorged on ziti, still clad in my sweat-drenched shorts and shirt, it was clear the 76'ers had not gotten the message, were not defeated yet, at least not that night.

And it was all because of AI. Basically, he played out-of-his-mind, doing everything he did all season and more, taking it to the rack with fearlessness, ball-hawking on

defense, breaking down defenders and causing uncontrolled chaos on offense. His brilliance willed them to overtime, where he hit the shot that has been since called the “Step Over,” a far-right baseline corner juke of a “j” over a fallen, “ankle-broke” Tyron Lue, the then back-up point guard for the Lakers, and now head coach of the Cleveland Cavaliers. They were just two of the forty-eight points AI scored that night, but the most memorable. Sportsmanlike or not, what AI had done, after hitting the j, was take a giant monster-truck stomp over Lue’s prostate body. I saw it not as bravado, but defiance, an unwillingness to concede to a more powerful enemy, a David vs. Goliath triumph (even though Lue was shorter). I stood, and with ziti sauce caked to my mouth, cheered like a maniac. Then I cried. I cried and cried and cried. And at the end, just like my run, what I felt was one thing: relief.

I finally did clean up that night: showered, went to bed, and set my alarm. There was supposed to be a special game the next morning, at nine am, and I planned to get there early, to warm up and be ready. But when I got there, and waited and waited, no one showed up. My information had been wrong. There was no game that morning. Rather than go back home and risk feeling depressed again, I ventured to the far right baseline corner and started to shoot jumpers, and, whenever one hit the mark, I emulated AI, lifting my leg up and stomping over my imaginary, but very real foe, feeling, at least for that moment, defiant and in control.



John A. McCaffrey grew up in Rochester, New York, attended Villanova University in Philadelphia, and received his MA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York. His stories, essays and book reviews have appeared regularly in literary journals, newspapers and anthologies. His debut novel, *The Book of Ash*, was released in 2013. His collection of short stories, *Two Syllable Men*, was published by Vine Leaves Press in 2016. John is also a Development Director for a non-profit

organization in New York City, and teaches creative writing at the College of New Rochelle's Rosa Parks Campus in Harlem. He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey. Find him @jamccaffrey.