

CHAPTER ONE

A Man Without a Her

A man without a *her* is a man without hope. That's what my buddies and I used to say when we were in college during the last of the eighties and the first of the nineties. We formed this club called *The Brothers in Pursuit* and pledged to support one another in our quest for God, compassion, knowledge, and the company of a good woman. When I tell people about the Brothers, sometimes I'm asked about the priorities of our pursuits, as in whether our quest for God was more important than our pursuit of women. Priorities can be difficult to compose. There are overlaps. I'm a high school basketball coach. What's more important? Screening or cutting? This I do know: when I was in college, I used to talk to God a lot about giving me a chance with a girl named Abby Grant. Thoughts of God and women were tightly intertwined.

It was my friend Cowboy who'd first developed the concept of a romantic *her*. While we Brothers could overcomplicate anything from the release of Reggie Miller's jump shot to the meaning of Biblical love, most simply defined, a *her* was a woman one of the Brothers wanted to date. A single man, the theory went, ought to have at least one *her*, preferably three. After all, we were young men who left to our own devices could allow an entire sixteen-week semester to pass without actually speaking to a member of the opposite sex. The idea of three *hers*—as opposed to one—was only meant to propel us out of our shells and into some conversation that might lead to an actual date. To wake up as a college student with a girl or two in mind was to bring a little good energy to an otherwise dreary day of classroom lectures and an ornery basketball coach who got after us every afternoon. It's no different now that I'm an adult, a high school English teacher and basketball coach at the school I attended myself, a man known to most of the community as Coach Zuke. I always found it much better to wake up thoughtful about a woman than to think only about what must be accomplished

at work. Having a *her* takes some of the grind out of having a job.

As the summer of 1994 dawned, I was a man without a *her*, a coach without a wife. The first thirteen months of my post-college life passed without so much as a date. When I looked down the long country road of my life, I saw that if I kept up like I had, I'd be making the trip alone. Because of that, I'd made a pledge to myself that I would show some initiative over the summer to try and meet some women. I'm a man who can get stuck in his routines and my routine was morning workouts with the high school basketball players I coached, my job as an English teacher, practice after school, and then the many nights I competed as a member of a variety of adult rec league basketball teams. In the Midwestern town where I'd grown up consuming the romantic comedies of the eighties, (*Dead Poets Society*, *Say Anything*, *When Harry Met Sally*) I'd always expected to graduate from college, get a job, and get married. Given that default programming via my environment, the summer after my first year as a grown up with a job, I felt the next logical step was to get married. There was no *Pretty Woman* up in the bleachers watching me coach, nobody at home in the evenings, nobody to go out to the movies with or share dinner. If, for example, John Mellancamp came to Deer Creek outside of Indianapolis for a concert, I had no girl with whom to sit on a blanket and share a cold beer under the summertime sky. My bed was noticeably roomy at night.

For weeks my buddy Cheese had been trying to get me to meet this woman Julie Becker and the day he finally got around to trying to introduce us was June 17, 1994, the very same day O.J. Simpson famously took to the L.A. freeways in his white Ford Bronco. It was also the year Kurt Cobain killed himself—suggestions by the doc film *Kurt & Courtney* notwithstanding—Jackie Kennedy Onassis died, and Prince Charles confessed on television to having cheated on Lady Di. Love isn't all royal fairytales and Hollywood endings.

Anyone who knows my history would probably be surprised to hear me identify Cheese as a buddy. That girl I was telling you about—Abby Grant—was Cheese's girlfriend. Abby is a redheaded beauty, the kind of lady who can teach *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight in the morning, coach the volleyball team after school, and supervise the newspaper staff at night. There was a month or so stretch of time my sophomore year in college when Abby broke up with Cheese partially because she thought she might be in love with me. Later, the three of us—Cheese, Abby, and I—all became friends. On the night that Cheese brought Julie into my life, he and Abby were on sort of a break. The two of them were going to get married and then all of the sudden they weren't.

Cheese and I had been sitting outside for a couple of hours at the Winthrop Tavern. It's in the Village of Broad Ripple, a section of Indianapolis where there is art, interesting shops, good food, and a high-density level of bars. If you're in Indiana, Broad Ripple is about as good as it gets. The night was warm and lots of people were out on the town, happy with the summer weather and the dawn of a weekend. The "Winnie," as we called the place, has fifteen or so cast iron tables with chairs set out on a well-landscaped deck. There are televisions tucked under awnings so a person can keep track of whatever sporting contest (or O.J.) they may want to in a way that won't interfere too severely with conversation. Those of us in the coaching profession often carry the perception of being not so deep minded, but personally I value interesting company over any of the six thousand or so games the Indiana Pacers will play before I die.

Cheese is also a basketball coach, and for me, the moment sitting there with him was one of those great little moments in life that you've likely experienced: we'd exhausted ourselves working very hard all week, and now that effort was behind us and we were ready to blow off some steam. We'd been at the Winnie for just over an hour, drinking Long Island Iced Teas out of Ball canning jars and talking about Abby. Earlier in the week, Cheese and Abby had been checking out a hotel ballroom as a possible location for their wedding reception, and they'd somehow migrated from picking out centerpieces to arguing about the cost of the centerpieces, to arguing about the cost of the wedding, then to how many kids they'd have and whether or not they would continue to attend a Nazarene church. Cheese was on the record as not caring whether or not they had kids, and since he and Abby were social drinkers, he believed they

should stop attending a church whose conduct guidelines stated that alcohol was not to be consumed on the grounds that the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The fight had been serious enough that Abby had handed Cheese his ring and told him he needed to think through what he wanted. When Abby had taken off her ring and handed it over, she'd probably hoped that he'd immediately press it back upon her. Cheese isn't really the kind of guy who can be manipulated like that. Once when the father of one of Cheese's players complained that he wasn't a starter, the kid didn't get into another game for three weeks. Cheese kept the ring and a few days had passed, perhaps a week. I had it figured Cheese and Abby would reconcile; they'd leave the Nazarene Church, and I'd attend their wedding before a year had passed.

"I'm telling you, Zuke," Cheese said, shifting conversationally from his life to mine. "Julie's a real doll." Cheese is the kind of guy who'd make you nervous if you saw him coming down the sidewalk. He's got the look of an FBI agent, or in today's world, one of those Mixed Martial Arts fighters. He's a religious practitioner of conditioning and weightlifting, and I'm on record for saying he reminds me of Drago from *Rocky IV*. "Did I ever tell you how tall she is?" Cheese asked. "Six foot at least." He'd told me that plenty of times before. "Completely gorgeous. Totally excellent breeding material. I'm telling you Zuke, with her height and your lefty jumper, you two would have the second coming of Chris Mullin."

Mullin was a basketball player for St. John's University in the '80s, and along with Farmer Ted, Bob Knight, and Lloyd Dobler, he was one of my high school role models. For Cheese to say Julie could give birth to my son, who might then grow to be 6'7" and make over eight hundred three-point shots in the NBA, was to demand my maximum consideration. Some women are surely troubled by Cheese's breeder comment, but I have to admit I sometimes fantasized about a woman who could give birth to multiple sons, and that those sons would be my best players for the better part of a decade. In college, I had twin teammates—one lefty and the other righty—who claimed their mother had meditated her way into their existence so that there'd be a brother to attack each side of a full

court press. Next, Cheese would tell me how smart Julie was. His spiel was like mowing the lawn. It traveled along predictable paths.

“Have I told you about our little side bet on the tests?” Cheese asked. He and Julie were in an anatomy class together at IUPUI. The letters stand for Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis and people often pronounce the school as if it’s spelled *Ewwy Pooey*.

“Like five times,” I answered. Cheese and Julie bet alcohol (a case of beer for him; a bottle of wine for her) on whoever scored the highest on the tests. So far, Cheese—who was a Dean’s List kind of student—had zero wins, four losses, and one tie versus Julie on the test scores. We were the kind of guys who kept track of all the ways one could win and lose. The competitions ranged from test scores to best of seven series of Madden Football.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Cheese challenged. “Do you want a girlfriend or not?”

“Interesting perspective,” I said, “from someone who just called off his wedding.”

“We’ve been talking about my life for two hours. Now we’re talking about yours. When was your last date?”

“Either introduce me to her or don’t,” I said. Cheese was a man who met challenges. If I’d told him I thought he was chicken to get married, he’d probably have called Abby and not Julie. Cheese got up from the table and went inside the Winthrop Tavern. Five minutes later he had news: “A one Julie Becker will meet us at Fins around midnight.” Fins was a beach-themed bar named for a Jimmy Buffett song just down the street among a stretch of bars dubbed The Big Three, after the Boston Celtics triumvirate of Kevin McHale, Robert Parish, and Larry Bird. During the ’80s when Bird was in Boston, lots of Hoosiers in Indiana become fans of Beantown basketball. This lack of loyalty to the home state Pacers was probably aided by the fact that the team had a grand total of two winning seasons between 1976 and 1992.

“Midnight?” I asked. That was very late.

“She’s working.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a stripper.”

That was an exciting and worrisome answer. Back in the nineties, I was a regular visitor to strip bars, and I usually ended up huddled in a corner booth with a glittery woman who told me tales of cavernous credit card debt, merciless relationships, and all forms of dreams gone sour. Midnight, it occurred to me, was way too early for a stripper to get off work. “She’s not a stripper,” I told Cheese.

“She’s a waitress at The Winner’s Circle up at Keystone.” I knew The Winner’s Circle. It was a trendy place for singles to hang out, a kind of Chucky Cheese meets Morton’s Steakhouse complete with putting greens, fire pits, and dimly lit corner booths.

“She knows she’s coming to meet me?”

“Not exactly.”

“Uh, huh.” I waited a second. Cheese was grinning. “She knows about Abby?” I asked.

“She knows I was engaged.”

“And now she knows you’re not.”

Cheese lifted both of his hands as if I’d accused him of taking something. “No doubt, Zuke, you’re right. This will be a little bit tricky, and we might make a mess, but I’m telling you, this girl is totally worth the trouble.”

“So Julie’s in love with you,” I said, “but it’s your plan that she’ll come to meet us, and somehow she’ll end up falling in love with me.”

“Why do you have to be so dramatic?”

“Dramatic, how?”

“By using the word *love*. At most, she’s got a crush, that’s all. I mean, when she gets the idea that I’m going to marry Abby, then what’s she going to do?”

“Be hurt? Get pissed and leave? Maybe key your truck on her way out?”

“No,” Cheese paused. “Do you think?” I heard a little fear in his voice. Cheese had a new 4Runner, and he was momentarily sidetracked by the notion a jilted romantic hopeful might choose to engrave it. “Okay, good point, but it’s not like I have to hit her over the head with the news that I’m going to get back with Abby.”

“I didn’t know you’d decided to get back with her.”

“Well,” Cheese said. “I just did.”

“Just like that?”

“What do you think,” Cheese asked, “about me just leaking the news into conversation? Like we all just hang out tonight and in the right spot I slide in that I’ve worked things out with Abby.”

“Can a person just decide to get married like that? Over drinks at the Winnie?”

“Yes,” Cheese said, a big grin on his face. “I’ll slip in that I’m getting married, and then you can start doing that talking thing you do.”

“What do you mean, *talking thing*?”

“All of your questions.”

“It’s *a thing* to ask a woman questions?”

“Damn right, it’s a thing, and it works like a charm. How else could an ugly bastard like you almost steal Abby away from a handsome devil like me? Especially when you listen so hard to the answers. I don’t even think you’re faking. All that bullshit about dating, books, movies, and Jackson Browne songs...”

“Or the Psychedelic Furs.”

“Right. I’ve never met a girl who didn’t flip out over *Sixteen Candles*.”

“Actually, the Psychedelic Furs song was on the *Pretty in Pink* soundtrack.”

“*Sixteen Candles. Pretty in Pink. Same thing.*”

I laughed. Maybe Cheese was right. “It could work.”

By 12:30, Cheese and I had relocated to Fins and we were waiting for Julie at a small table back along the bamboo-covered bar and near the door. At least half of the patrons dressed as if they were actually going to a Jimmy Buffett concert. The chance to dress up in flowered shirts, bikini tops, and other beach attire was probably the primary attraction of the place. A popular drink was a whole aquarium of brightly-colored alcohol, complete with plastic fish, sharks, and little surfers or boats floating on top. Fruity drinks with cutesy umbrellas abounded. We drank Coronas.

Cheese and I had scooted around the table so we could watch the door while most of the crowd faced the dance floor. The place was packed. There was a limbo contest going on to the rhythm of metal-drum Caribbean music. “Maybe it looks weird,” I said, “for me to be sitting so close to you.”

“Fine then. Move. I’m the one who knows what she looks like.”

A tall blonde walked in wearing a white linen shirt over an orange bikini top. She fit the only description Cheese had given: tall and blonde. “Is that her?” I asked.

“God no. Julie is classier than to wear a bikini top out to a bar.”

“Classy?” I asked. “I’m not sure me and classy belong together.” Any woman I went with would likely spend a fair amount of time sitting in the bleachers of high school gymnasiums. Horseshoe—the little town I’m from—is not exactly a bastion of fine dining. My hometown is a place for Fourth of July in the park, BBQ pizza sauce from the Pizza King, homecoming parades, and the annual Power of the Past show held each summer.

“Relax,” Cheese said. “Stop being such a Nancy boy.” Cheese looked up and behind me to where a plastic Great White Shark had a bloodied and torn John Starks Knicks jersey in its mouth. We of the Reggie Miller Pacer crowd have no taste for New York sports teams.

“I never thought about how dumb this bar is,” Cheese said.

“How so?”

“We’re a thousand miles from the ocean. Why isn’t it called Racers or Corn Stalks or The Tractor Bar?”

“The Tractor Bar,” I said. “There’s a name with real potential. Just think: Daisy Dukes, women in overalls, hayseed hats, that sort of thing.”

“Why Fins?” Cheese asked. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s a Jimmy Buffett song. It’s all about guys in bars trolling for women in a predatory way.” I sighed. “Totally appropriate.”

“That’s why I like hanging out with you, Zuke.” Cheese laughed. “You get me thinking about all that philosophical shit.”

Another tall and blonde-haired woman came walking in wearing a snug fitting black dress quite a few notches over what was appropriate at Fins. The woman turned out to be the Julie Cheese

planned on trying to introduce me to. There was something about Julie's dress that caused it to glow like the neon fish in the bowls of liquor. Cheese raised his hand to try to get her attention, but she was staring down the length of the bar looking for us. Some random guy in a tight-fitting pink muscle shirt looked back to where his buddies were sitting. He gestured to them as if they should be sure to watch what he was about to do. I thought maybe he would snag one of the fishbowls of alcohol off the end of the bar. This was what Cheese sometimes did when he got drunk: steal pitchers or fishbowls of booze. Perhaps this man was showing his friends that he was going to dare and talk to Julie.

By now, Julie bit down on her lip as if she were anxious. The man I'd spotted reached her, cupped his hand, and placed it on the curve of Julie's ass. She jerked at his touch, a moment of panicked surprise on her face. Next came anger and then the weariness of someone who has endured something again and again. The man held his hand up like a trophy as he walked to the back hall where the restrooms were. He signaled success to his buddies with a big thumbs up. They laughed with approval.

Before I could ask Cheese if this was the girl, I saw Julie's eyes sparkle with recognition. It was as if she'd been wearing a dark mask of protection, a guard from the evils of the world, including ass grabbers and eye rapists. The mask lifted when Julie saw Cheese. From my vantage, it was easy to see she was smitten. Cheese absolutely had to have known this.

"My favorite person," Julie said, arriving to our table. I stood from my chair and moved it over so Julie could sit in it. "That's so sweet," she said, barely looking at me as she sat down. Julie had obviously been waiting for this particular night for a long time, the night where Brett Chezem asked her out. She looked young, but I assumed she was a graduate student like Cheese. Julie's face was flushed, probably from the heat of meeting Cheese. I walked off in the general direction of the restrooms with the knowledge that I'd just become the third wheel.

I didn't know I was going to leave the bar until after I'd washed my hands. People who've been out with me know that I can get

overcome with the urge to disappear. One moment I'm out with the group, everything's cool or mostly cool, and then all of a sudden people are asking, "Where'd Zuke go?" I only do this at bars when I'm drunk, and I think it has to do with me not feeling included in the group. On the night I first met Julie, I was at least three Long Islands and a couple of beers deep into inebriation. I wasn't consciously aware that my feelings were hurt, or that I'd been hoping for Julie to turn out to be a possibility. When I was going out to the bars, I wanted to meet a woman. When the situation I was in didn't seem to offer that possibility, I was out of there.

Leaving Fins, I went to the The Time Machine, one of The Big Three bars I mentioned earlier. It's a name that gives the place lots of rhetorical space to do themed nights based on different eras. Obviously their bread is buttered on the decades of the '70s and '80s, but they also do Caveman and Toga themed nights. This was a Friday, and I knew Fridays belonged exclusively to the eighties, so I was probably thinking that a little Loverboy or Tiffany would cheer me up. How could a person born in the sixties or seventies hear "I Think We're Alone Now" and not want to barf and smile at the same time?

I wasn't ticked at Cheese, and I didn't see this as a rejection of me by Julie. I had never even met her, and she had no idea that Cheese had allegedly wanted to introduce me to her. I didn't even blame Cheese if he was using me as an excuse to get Julie down to the bar. His subconscious was probably working the steering wheel on that plan, and that's mainly how guys are with their friends, especially when it comes to women. Marriage and family can change this sometimes.

It is true that if I had my druthers I would have liked for Cheese to include me in the conversation, but I hadn't given him much of a chance to do that. Maybe I sensed that he and Julie weren't even going to feign attention for me, or maybe I was afraid that they wouldn't, and so I split. If you take off before people have the chance to ignore you, then you really haven't been ignored, have you?

At Time Machine, I realized my mouth had puckered from all

the sour in the Long Islands, and so I switched to Jack and Cokes. There was a pretty good cover band called The Breakfast Club doing “Jessie’s Girl.” In my state of inebriation, it was an easy mental substitution for me to insert *Abby* or *Julie* for the woman in Springfield’s song, but I knew I didn’t want either of Cheese’s girls. I had just started to consider what it was I might want, when I felt a hand slip into my back pocket. A man’s voice, sexually provocative, spoke into my ear from very close. “Hey, good looking.” I jerked back as if I’d felt a spider crawling on my neck or stepped on a rattlesnake looking for morel mushrooms with my father in Michigan.

Upon turning to face the voice, I recognized the man before me as Rob. I usually refer to this man as “Gay Rob” as to differentiate him from a different guy I know, “Coach Rob.” I met Gay Rob (dropping the *gay* now because Coach Rob doesn’t figure into this story) during the three days (two of them training) I worked at the Gap. Before I was offered my current job at Horseshoe High School, it had been my plan to live in Indianapolis and work at the Gap. After having grown up in rural Indiana, I was determined to graduate from college and move to a bigger city, so much so that I’d put a picture of downtown Indianapolis over my desk just to remind myself of my goal. I lost my way when my father, who was the athletic director at Horseshoe where I’d attended high school, arranged for the interview to be the head basketball coach. There was one interview to teach and be the coach at Horseshoe, and there were FOUR interviews to get the job at the Gap. I quit the Gap to teach and coach at Horseshoe.

“It’s been awhile,” I said to Rob sizing him up. Originally from Puerto Rico, Rob is an extremely fit little guy with the energy of a popcorn popper.

“I see you still don’t know you’re gay,” Rob said.

I took a deep breath and shook my head. “That, Good Sir, is a realization I’m never going to reach.”

Rob laughed. “I’m just messing with you, Zuke.” He pointed over to a corner of the bar up near the stage. “I think you know those two?”

I was surprised to see Rob was with a couple of people I used

to know pretty well. The guy's name was Phillip Leardini, a friend of mine I knew from college and whom I have always called "The Dini." It was as if Phillip didn't need a last name, as if he was in the social company of people such as Prince, Homer, or Madonna. I hadn't seen the woman they were with for over three years. Rebecca Sampson, or Becca as I had known her, had gone out on a couple of dates when I was a sophomore. My college buddies and I used to call her "Ratio" for her off-the-charts good looks. I'd never even kissed her. The last time I'd seen Becca, she'd slammed the door of my little red Chevette at the end of a not-so-great date. I once wrote about the experience in an essay entitled "The Royal Castle."

"I see you've met my beau?" asked The Dini as I sat down at the table next to him and opposite Becca. "Did you enjoy our little joke?"

"Hilarious. I almost punched Rob." I wondered how my friend from college had ended up with my acquaintance from The Gap, but on the other hand, the number of bars someone like The Dini and Rob would consider worthy of their time was not so big.

Rob put his hands on my shoulders and began to massage them. "Don't get rough with me, buddy," he said. "As you just heard, I'm off the market."

I wriggled away from Rob. "Congratulations," I said, looking from Rob over to The Dini. He'd updated his appearance by forgoing his bulky glasses for contact lenses and buffing up his body to where he was lean and toned. I looked at Becca. Like me, she's a knee bouncer, somebody with more energy than is possible to expend in a day.

"What's up, Zuke?" Becca asked. "I didn't know you lived down here."

"I don't," I said. "I didn't know that you went to bars." Ratio had been an incredibly conservative college student who once was miffed I took her to a place where people were drinking beer. She appeared to have a margarita on the rocks in front of her. "That's got alcohol in it?"

Becca grinned and raised her glass. "It damn well better."

"Oh, you curse too."

“A lot’s changed,” Becca said.

Within the span of thirty minutes, we’d shared the details of our lives: Rob and The Dini had just bought a four-bedroom brick home near the corner of 52nd Street and Graceland Avenue. They rented a bedroom to Becca and one to her friend Melissa, a young lady I would meet soon. Rob managed the Gap at Keystone and The Dini worked at Eli Lilly. After transferring from Pison where I’d gone, Becca had graduated from Wheaton College and was a nurse at St. Vincent Hospital.

Becca frowned at me. “You’re out by yourself?” As I’ve mentioned, I have on other nights, in fact, gone out by myself, but I was glad that I could claim Cheese—sort of—on this night. I explained the thing with he and Julie Becker: what the plan had been and what had actually happened.

“Sounds vaguely familiar,” The Dini said. “I can’t believe Cheese and Abby aren’t married. I would have had them down for a baby and one on the way by now.”

Rob fidgeted in his chair. “This is boring,” he said. “I want to dance.”

“The Dini doesn’t feel like dancing,” said The Dini. “The Dini is tired and wants to watch you two dance.” By *you two*, The Dini meant Becca and Rob, not me and Rob or me and Becca. Becca took my wrist.

“Come dance with me,” she said. Unlike the girl I’d known when I was twenty, the woman before me had glammed up her appearance and used a little more makeup. In fact, she’d sprinkled some glitter on her face and who knew where else. Now she’d transcended “cute” into someone “sexy.” She wore a blue-sequin tank top and a pair of black stretch pants of the style I remembered from college when I’d likened her to one of Prince’s backup singers.

I tried to see myself out on the floor jumping around to The Cars’ “Magic,” that song about summer turning the narrator upside down, the one where in the video Ric Ocasek walks on water while everyone else tumbles into the pool and gets wet. Perhaps there is something miraculous about Ocasek in that he did marry and stay

married to supermodel Paulina Porizkova. Considering The Dini and his crowd, I tried to see myself having fun, perhaps doing a little dirty dancing with Becca, or maybe sharing a kiss near the end of the night to Poison's "Every Rose Has It's Thorn." A man can dream. This band The Breakfast Club could easily have a GNR ballad on their play list, and I was drunk enough to shout out requests.

Although the future with the kiss was the one I wanted to see, I saw another more likely one: Rob was surely a good dancer, Becca would enjoy dancing with him, and I would be forgotten and left off to the side shifting my weight from one leg to the other as if I were back at the 8th grade dance.

In truth, I do not belong on a dance floor. I belong standing in front of a group of students or else the young men who are on my basketball team or sometimes singing Rod Stewart songs (I recommend *Rod: The Autobiography*) to a karaoke crowd. Becca had put me in left-out spots before, and so I told her and Rob to go ahead. It started to make complete sense to me that Becca was out with a homosexual male couple. It was a very romantically and psychologically safe place to hang out.

"Are you leaving?" Becca asked.

I didn't know I was leaving until she asked me. Cheese would be pissed at me for taking off. He and I had planned to sleep over at some guy's house everyone knew as "Stinky." The guy had been a ball player at New Castle—the largest high school gym in the country, capacity 9,325—and now he was the junior varsity coach at Broad Ripple High School. We all thought of ourselves as coaching geniuses—in the spirit of Rick Pitino's book *Born to Coach*—except that in my first year the team had lost way more games than it had won. That created a lot of static on the program announcing me as future coaching legend. If the night wound down and I was AWOL, Cheese would stay out until he found me. He wasn't the kind of guy to leave a friend behind, at least not in the literal and physical sense. "I need to get back to Cheese."

"He's not your coach," Becca said. "You know?"

It was an irritating thing for her to say, and it took me back to all the ways I had been irritated with her when we were college

students. “He’s my friend,” I said. “I have a bad habit of taking off. I’m going next door to check in and see what he’s going to do.”

Becca bent down and picked up a small and glittery purse from under The Dini’s seat. She pulled a pen from it and wrote her name and number on a napkin. I was surprised at the rounded and tender features of her script. She seemed more like the sort of person who would have little daggers at the corners of her letters. Becca looked at me and then she kissed the napkin. “Call me,” she said. “I was fucked up at Pison. I’m still fucked up but in a less uptight way.” She smiled very pleased with that self analysis. “I’ll be a lot more fun than Cheese.” She kissed the air between us. It was almost enough to convince me to stay, but I left.

Back at Fins, Silk’s “Freak Me” was playing. The bar was beginning to empty of people, but the dance floor was mostly full of couples making out. There was a guy just in front of me who had one of his hands all the way down the back of some woman’s jeans. And I’m talking *inside* her jeans. I used to think when I saw a couple of this sort that they always left the bar and had sex. Now I know that what happens on the dance floor is often all that ever happens. Phone numbers might be exchanged, but calls are rarely made or returned. It takes a lot more to bring people together for a date than it does for them to get drunk and make out on a dance floor.

In the center of the throng of skin and colored lights and the smell of booze and sweat, I spotted Cheese and Julie. Because they had their hands strumming up and down each other’s bodies, I headed over to a barstool knowing I’d be in Fins by myself until the place closed. I wondered if Cheese would end up going home with Julie, and if he did, whether or not there might be a couch—maybe even a roommate—for me.

I felt drunk and tired but not so bummed out. I put my hand into my pocket and pulled out the napkin Becca had given me. I looked at the red imprint of her lips on the white tissue. She’d left her mouth slightly open when she’d kissed it. Above the red curve of her lip print, she’d written her name and number. I wondered how many times Becca had written her number on a napkin and passed it along to a boy. For all I knew, she’d been doing this since

the sixth grade. The napkin I held could be the 150th napkin Becca had distributed, but it could also have been the fifth or even the first. That she'd described herself as "fucked up" made me think she knew things now that she hadn't known before. It implied a degree of self-awareness and perhaps an ability to empathize with the lives of others.

One thing for sure: if I called Becca, she would call me back. She'd proven in college not only that she'd return phone calls, but that she was also likely to initiate several calls a week at all hours of the night. It wouldn't be that surprising if she showed up at a Horseshoe basketball game to watch me coach. I used to read those as signs she liked me, but nothing else ever happened to confirm that notion.

Sitting there at the bar in Fins by myself watching Cheese make out with Julie, I could have felt bad about being ditched by my friend, but I was okay. My interest now was in seeing what would come of me, of The Dini, Rob, and Becca. I felt engaged in the unfolding saga of Cheese and Abby OR Cheese and Julie. My best guess was that Cheese would not marry my old crush Abby Grant, and he would instead begin dating Julie. I marveled at how a fork in the road had presented itself in the form of a dance-floor make out, and that the lives of Cheese, Julie, and Abby would be forever changed.

Fins always closes with the Buffett song that it's named for, and most of the patrons point their hands on their heads in order to make shark fins so they can enact the whole ruckus of fins to the right, fins to the left, and then shouting the line about being the only bait in town. It's a good one. Well played Jimmy Buffett.

When the lights came on signaling all of us to get the heck out, Julie and Cheese kissed again, and then Cheese looked around to where he caught my eye. I wondered if he'd thought of me in the previous three hours. I waved and popped up from my seat. Julie radiated with the glow of someone who has finally realized a longtime hope. It's a moment I've felt (however falsely) plenty of times. In college, I'd once run across campus thinking I'd received the news that Abby had broken up with Cheese for me. As it turned

out, she'd gotten engaged. For me, the thrill of dreams coming true had always ended in disappointment.

Julie and Cheese waited for me to come over, and Cheese let me know that we were giving Julie a ride home. Julie didn't look at me. I guessed she might be embarrassed at the make out performance or maybe she was just annoyed that I would be coming along. I cheerfully offered to find somewhere else to stay. I was thinking I could see if Becca was still around or just go down the street to the Speedway Lodge, a dumpy one-level motel that would be perfect for a slasher movie. The rails of Cheese's life had carried him down one long trip with Abby, but at the last possible moment, he'd decided to throw a switch that sent him barreling off in another direction. This happens: people walk deliberately up to a big decision, take a moment (or a decade) to survey the landscape of possibility, and then suddenly dive into the underbrush of a direction that has just become known.

I rode in the backseat of Cheese's 4Runner for the trip home and watched the new couple's clasped hands resting on the center console. It made me feel alone, but I was better at being alone than I used to be, and I tried to believe I wouldn't be alone forever. Worst case—eventually—someone would see me coaching my team, and they'd pass the word they were interested. Something like that had happened a couple of times, but so far none of the women had been the right woman.

"Julie," Cheese said, "lives right down the road from Stinky."

"Great," I said. I mean, what could I say? How excited can a person be to stay at a guy named Stinky's house? I felt as worn out as some of the flickering streetlights that tinked by as we drove down College Avenue toward the city. "So," I said, trying to establish myself as inclusive and friendly, "I hear you work up at The Winner's Circle." It was a place I really liked, a kind of paradoxical fancy steakhouse with a big bar out back with the putting greens I already mentioned, a basketball hoop, ping pong tables, fire pits, and even a driving range where you could hit balls into an oversized man-made pond. Good times.

Julie let go of Cheese's hand and swung round to look into the

back seat at me. Her pretty and smiling face was framed by the front window. The streetlamps and the dotted line down the middle of the road blipped up on us and passed under the car. I was drunk and tired in the backseat and feeling spacey, as if I were in a pod hurtling away from the Earth. I sensed Julie was seeing me for the first time. I could almost hear her thinking, *this guy Zuke seems okay*. I found myself studying her. She wore a lacy black choker with a single red rose in the hollow of her neck. It was sexy and stylish, and as I'd come to find out later, inspired by Princess Diana.

"It's a blast," Julie told me about working at The Winner's Circle. "It should just be a job, you know, until I get my degree, but I'm really thinking it could be a career."

"Do you mean like becoming a manager?" I had no idea how much a manager of a place like The Winner's Circle could make. Maybe 40 or 75k? Thinking of Cheese and Julie, I tried to imagine the two of them together. As a professional in the service industry, would she be able to attend Cheese's games? Did he care if she couldn't? There's an infinite number of ways a relationship can work, but I don't think "hope for the best" is one of them.

"More like event planning," Julie explained. If asking questions was my thing, maybe I was doing it now. Julie's attention started to drift away from Cheese and toward me about what her future might contain. "I'd love to plan weddings," Julie said, "or even the Oscars."

I thought I should probably shut up. This was Cheese and Julie's show. Not mine.

"That sounds ridiculous, I know," Julie said.

I couldn't help myself. "Not any more ridiculous than coaching in the NBA. Someone's going to, right? Why not one of us?"

"Having dreams makes life bearable," Julie said.

Her word *bearable* got my attention. It certainly didn't suggest a wonderful life.

"Julie went to Broad Ripple High School," Cheese offered. Was he trying to change the subject or had he just not been listening?

What I knew about Broad Ripple High School was that a guy named Michael Swisher went there. I'd once lost to him in a 1-on-

I game at a summer basketball camp, and now he was a second year starting quarterback in the NFL. Anyone who'd gone to Broad Ripple High was probably sick of hearing about Swisher.

"She knew Swisher," Cheese said.

"You probably get tired of hearing about him," I said.

"You have no idea," Julie said. "I don't have anything good to say about the kid."

I thought I saw something go a little dead in Julie, as if her spirit had leaked into the seats. Then she looked at Cheese. This seemed to help. She reached over to Cheese's leg and took his hand.

"You got buddies at work?" I asked. Clearly, I'd forgotten all about shutting up.

Julie looked from Cheese back to me. Her smile returned as fast as it had gone. "My best friend Andi works with me," Julie explained. "I'm having fun, and it's been awhile since I've had any fun."

"Good," I said. I wondered if Andi was a boy. Cheese would never let on that he'd wonder such a thing or show jealousy of any kind. He's fantastic at pretending he doesn't care, and it's amazing how many women find that attitude attractive. Sometimes it's as simple as wanting what we can't have. I wondered what had happened bad, sad, or otherwise to Julie, and that I'm prone to wonder such things is exactly what Cheese means when he refers to my *Pretty in Pink* bullshit.

"What are you studying?" I asked. It was physiology that Cheese and Julie had together. That certainly didn't point to any kind of study in event planning.

"Well," Julie said, "I originally declared nursing, but I don't think that's going to work."

There was an obvious question to that—why not?—but I finally decided to stop intruding on Cheese and Julie's night. It might, after all, be a night they'd point to the rest of their lives. Right, I have a way of getting way ahead of myself.

Julie directed Cheese to a townhome community built on a street named Royal Court, one of those streets that doesn't go anywhere

and has just been created for a housing development. The residences were brightly painted and reminded me of gingerbread houses. The whole community seemed to be costumed in a cheerful robe.

“It’s the one on the right,” Julie said, pointing. “That’s Andi’s Jeep.” There was a red Safari Edition Wrangler in the drive. I knew about Wranglers because I was thinking of getting one. “And that’s my black Accord.” Julie’s car was parked out front on the street.

“It’s nice back here,” Cheese observed. He lived in what I’d call a total dump. The place was about the size of my garage, and he still slept on a bed he’d used when he was twelve. It even had little drawers underneath. I’d helped him move when he’d gone from being an assistant coach at South Bend Adams to the headman at a country school west of Indianapolis called Pineville.

Cheese turned his truck so that it nosed into the drive next to the Jeep. I got out and walked into the front yard so that he and Julie could have whatever privacy they might want. I noticed the night was a little cooler, probably in the sixties, and there was a nice breeze blowing. The morning sun was not so far off, and for the first time I thought it would be pretty easy for me to just sleep in the Jeep or maybe over in the mulch between the hedge and the wall of the townhome. My car was all the way over at Butler University where we’d spent the week working basketball camp in the same gym where the state title game of the film *Hoosiers* takes place.

A truck shifted gears out on College Avenue, but mostly the night hummed with crickets and cicadas. The day had been clear and sunny and now the night was clear too, and the Indiana sky was full of stars. A giant boulder rested in the space where the drive met the street. It was taller than the roof of Cheese’s 4Runner and half as long. I walked up and put my hand on the damp and cool surface of the rock. Where had the boulder come from? Had it been brought specially from somewhere because someone thought it looked good? In the world I understood, if the boulder was already there, it would cost extra and if you wanted a boulder, then there would be a charge for it too.

I gained a toehold on the boulder by putting the tip of my boat shoe into a pock in the rock. I pushed off the ground with my other

foot and hugged the rock, scraping around with my foot to see if I could find a second place to stand. There was a narrow ledge. The boulder had a layer of cool-damp dirt on it, and I could feel its grit on my bare arms and legs. I wore a blue polo shirt and a pair of khaki shorts.

The last bit of my climb was the trickiest. I had to lie on my belly and reach up with both hands to where I could place my fingertips into the grooves along the surface. I was getting very dirty, but I pressed on and shimmied to the top.

From atop the rock, I looked down the front of my chest where my shirt and shorts were filthy. Looking at my palms, they were a mess too. I peeled off my shirt and used it as a towel to wipe my face and brow. The breeze felt great on my exposed skin. I heard a chuckle. Less than twenty yards away and slightly higher than me, a woman smoked on a balcony. I didn't know it yet, but this was Andi, friend to Julie who turned out not to be a boy. Standing there atop the boulder with my shirt off and my skin smeared with a film of dirt from climbing, I waved to Andi. Had I not been drinking, I might have been embarrassed, but as it was, I felt my quiriness could be read as endearing.

Andi and I had just taken our initial looks at each other when the passenger door to Cheese's 4Runner opened, and Julie got out in a hurry. She popped the door shut as if Cheese had a dog in there and it would get out if she wasn't careful. From my perch, I was well above Julie, and she didn't see me. Her face became visible in the moonlight and the illumination of security lamps. Her eyeliner was streaked, as if she'd been crying, or maybe it had become smeared during all the sweating, dancing, and making out.

I looked back to where Andi was on the balcony. She stared at Julie as if she were her little sister who'd been bullied on the playground. Andi looked mad, and she seemed determined to make sure someone paid for hurting her friend. She'd certainly forgotten me. She flicked her cigarette into the night and turned and went back inside the apartment. The downstairs door to the townhome closed, and I was left standing in the dark, under the stars, on the large boulder. After a second or two, the passenger-side window

came down on the 4Runner. I heard Cheese call my name. There was a hiss to his voice, a *let's get the hell out of here* tone, but I raised my hands and felt the cool breeze tickle my sweaty flesh. Now where would we go?

Cheese got out of the car and stared across the front lawn. It was a shitty thing for me to do, just stand there and watch him, but that's what I did.

"Zuke!" Cheese said louder, as if I were three and trying to start an impromptu game of hide and seek as a way to avoid bedtime.

I called out, and he looked up to where I was. Cheese smiled at seeing me atop my boulder perch with no shirt on. That he smiled is an excellent example of why he is my friend. Who would put up with me?

"You're a piece of work," Cheese said. "Can we go now?"

I spread my arms wide. "Super Zuuuuke," I called out, jumping from the rock as if I might leap into a new life. When I landed, I heard the cartilage in my right ankle crunch. "Not smart," I said, some squeakiness in my voice from the pain. I've broken bones, had my face split by pointy big-man elbows on a basketball court, and even fallen from a balcony onto the corner of a heating unit shredding the skin on my shin, but nothing has hurt—except for maybe strep throat—as much as the sprained ankles I've suffered over the years.

Cheese walked over to me and held out his hand. Both of us had done many dumb things in our lives. Once, Cheese spent the night in jail for painting speed bumps to look like candy canes. Lying on the ground, I accepted Cheese's hand, and he pulled me up to where I could put my arm over his shoulders. Cheese helped me into his truck.

It wasn't until we took a left and headed north on Keystone Boulevard that I realized we weren't going to Stinky's house. Cheese had been silent, and I thought he was likely thinking about his previous relationship with Abby and looking ahead to what might happen with Julie. Given my injury, I had temporarily spaced that Julie hadn't exactly looked joyful going from Cheese's truck to her front

door. "What's up?" I asked.

"We're going to the Holiday Inn." Cheese looked over at me, somewhat angrily. "My treat."

"I think I saw Julie's roommate up on the balcony."

"Uh, huh."

I thought about what the night was supposed to have been—Zuke, meet Julie—and how it had gone instead. "Maybe you and Julie can set me up for a double date."

"I'm not going on any dates with Julie."

So it had been tears I'd seen on Julie's face. "I guess you told her that before she went inside."

"I did."

"So what will you do now?"

"I'm going to marry Abby Grant as soon as possible before I screw everything up."

"I think that's a good plan," I said. "No offense to Julie."

"Will you be my best man?" asked Cheese.

"Sure," I said. "Of course." It made sense to me. Abby was great. We didn't know Julie very well. If Abby's great, and we both knew that she was, then Cheese ought to marry her as soon as he could. It was a plan I certainly endorsed.

I thought about my own self. Back when Cheese had been talking about bringing Julie out to meet me, I thought maybe she'd be a *her* I could possibly date. Then it looked as if my hopes for a *her* had deflated like a basketball in the cold. But then there'd been Becca. Maybe sometime in the next year, I'd end up taking Becca to Cheese and Abby's wedding. At least I had someone to think about. At least I had hope.