

Excerpt from “Who’s Got Next?”

By Mike Pemberton

After the fire works Hank followed Jake and Mary thinking they were headed back to Jake’s for ice cream and cake. But Jake took a detour and pulled up to the old Victorian house in which they were raised. As Hank pulled the SUV onto the white gravel next to the court he felt the familiar crunch of rubber to rock beneath the chrome rimmed tires as small billows of bone dry dust puffed and powdered the edges of the shiny car. Even with the dim glow from the street lights, Hank could see the house’s lavender wood siding and starched white trim were worn and faded, and the gray shingled roof needed to be replaced.

But as Hank, Bev and the kids slipped out of the car, Jake flipped the switch located inside the unlocked garage and flooded the court with light. There was barely a crack or crevice to be seen over its bleached concrete surface. The green steel poles Hank’s father planted like flags all those years ago, stood straight and strong. The squiggly yellow free-throw line, faded to a shadow, and the warped wooden backboard and rusty rim, the only things marking the passage of two and a half decades.

“What’s up?” Hank said to Jake.

“I got the key from the realtor. Guy’s a friend. Place is vacant. Anyway, told him it was first time in years we were all together and thought it’d be fun to look at the old homestead. Just haven’t had time this week.”

Jake tossed Hank a faded red, white and blue basketball he had carried from his

car.

“Wait here,” Jake said. “I’ll turn the house lights on and let everyone inside, then we can play.”

While the others wandered over to the house, peering into streaked windows, gingerly testing the floor boards of the wrap-around porch, then stepping through the softly lit doorway, Hank toed the free throw line, dribbled the ball a few times, and let loose a shot. As the ball swished through the net, Hank closed his eyes and remembered the honor he felt when Jake let him join his friends. The joys of playing make believe games with Mary. The racing of his heart, when his father, home from work, the burnt orange sun sinking in the gloaming, launched a kiss shot which Hank happily rebounded and flicked back, then tried to steal away. His father, giggling like a kid, dribbled in circles, keeping Hank at bay, before hoisting another shot for his son to retrieve. Eyes still squeezed shut; Hank inhaled and the long lost scent of his mother’s fried chicken engulfed him in an ephemeral hug. When Hank opened his eyes and turned to look at the house, Bev was walking towards him.

“I’d forgotten what a great home this is,” Bev said. “It must’ve been a wonderful place to grow up.”

Bev stopped directly in front of Hank, gazing into his brown eyes. But they were not the eyes of her 40-something husband. They were the eyes of a boy she had never known, the eyes of a young brave immersed in the visions, who had seen things on this court, at this house, that she had not. Eyes which revealed a life long since lost, but which could yet be reclaimed. Bev lifted her hands to her cheeks, blue eyes beaming. Hank shrugged his shoulders, flashed a lop-sided grin and caught Bev as she fell into his

arms.

Within three months they sold their condo with the postcard view. In six, Hank accepted a buyout from his law firm partners, but not before he resolved Pete Lucas' case, out of court, stealing it away from Hamilton, but doing what was right by all concerned. Soon after, the appellation known as "J. Henry Anderson" was deleted from the firm's masthead and stripped from the office doors as if it never existed. Hamilton took control of Hank's corner office.

The family moved out of the busy city and back to Hank's hometown, in the middle of America, in the middle of the state, in the middle of his life, to the beginning of his life, to the next part of his life, back to his mother, brother, sister, and the rambling Victorian – back to the court.

And before a piece of wood was painted or a shingle replaced, Hank and Tommy set a new hoop with a glass backboard on top of the old steel poles. New lights were hung off the garage so play can extend well into the night and Hank's kids taught to play the game the right way. Wilt, Pistol Pete, Jerry, the Hawk and Collins are present most evenings. Iverson and Kobe show up, but they only get to play if Bird, Magic, and Michael say so. The kiss shot enjoys a renaissance as Hank and Jake do historical reenactments and Mary, Bev, and the kids scramble for the rebound.

If some people, standing in the grass beside the court, ask why a middle-aged man left a multimillion dollar big city law firm to ply his trade in a small, Midwestern town for a tenth of the pay, Hank tells them he is not here to practice law but to play ball. The people laugh, say "no, really," and again ask Hank why a guy with salt and pepper hair and skinny legs is playing imaginary games and shouting trash at unseen opponents.

Why is he representing kids for petty crimes and drawing up wills for old folks with little or no assets, when he could be sitting courtside at Bulls games and arguing cases on behalf of multinational corporations before the Supreme Court.

“What’s up with that?” they say.

All Hank can do is pickup his dribble and look at them with the smiling patience the true believer bestows upon the skeptic. Hank cannot explain he is not shooting three pointers, but seeking solace. He is not dribbling a basketball, he is invoking his mantra. It is like being an Elvis fan or having faith in God. It simply is. You either take the leap or you don’t. Some people pray, some people seek therapy, some people work until their heads hit the oak desk in their plush corner office, forcefully reminding them to visit a place called “home,” some drink their devils into the ground only to see them rise another day. As an adult Hank tried each to varying degrees in aborted attempts to achieve true contentment, a life fully and totally lived in the moment. He struggles still. Yet there are times with his wife, with his children, with his family, and sometimes, on the court, where all is clear and good and timeless and right.

There are moments.

Hank could try to tell them all this, but what would be the point? If they have to ask, then they cannot understand anyway.

So be still, Hank tells the interlopers, weary of their disbelieving queries. Show some respect. This is where the saved congregate. Non believers need not apply. The court is magical because he says it is. It gives him the faith to dance like a child, to dance with his children, his wife, to live in the moment, if only for a moment, because he says it does. On this piece of concrete, this sacred ground, time stands still as life roars

by.

Hank dribbles and he is thirteen and his father is with him. He shoots and he is in the prime of his life, Bev and his sons and daughter surround him. He scores and he is an old man, limping and ravaged by time, with a passel of fair haired grandchildren chasing the ball down for him. Generations past and present come and go on the court as the aroma of his mother's and Bev's home cooked meals waft on an eternally gentle breeze and Hank, the boy, the man, the father, shouts to all who will listen, who believe, who think they got game:

“Who's got next?”