

My Only Son

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Big Derek paced back and forth. His legs were growing numb. His wife Lynn came in the room several times over the last hour stealing glances at their son and begging him to “please sit down”. He was a man that always used his hands when he was stressed but he didn’t want to, no he could not leave his son’s side. So his feet just seemed to take over. He wished that he had something he could fix, put together, take apart (though he was much better at putting things together), anything to keep from walking down the ghostly hall of memories.

After reaching the head of his son’s bed for what felt like the millionth time, Big Derek’s legs finally gave out just as he hit the old chair that he brought in for Lynn a week ago. The pacing and the memories served to keep him from looking at his son but now that he was immobilized from the stiffness that seeped into his limbs as he sat, he looked over and truly saw his son for the first time since the hospital sent him home.

Derek Jr. was much thinner than Big Derek remembered. There were bags under his closed eyes, his skin was ashen and his chest rose and fell with each shallow breath. For some reason, though the house was deathly quiet now that Lynn had finally gone to bed, he listened more intently for DJ to take each breath. It was as if not listening meant that DJ would stop breathing. Seeing him this way made Big Derek do something that he hadn’t done since the night his son was born almost twenty years before- he put his face in his hands and wept.

The small, bespectacled doctor at the hospital told Big Derek and Lynn that their son contracted pneumonia as a result of a compromised immune system. He went on to say something about DJ’s immune system being compromised due to exposure to the Human Immunovirus. Both parents regarded the doctor as if he were speaking in another language. When it was finally explained that Derek Jr. had contracted HIV and that it quickly progressed to the AIDS virus, Big Derek was crippled with shock. His son was admitted for shortness of breath and a few bruises that they all assumed were basketball related. Now they were telling him that his son had AIDS? Lynn cried for four days straight after the news and lived inside her own head, inconsolable for at least two weeks after that. Of course they had heard of the big disease with the little name. Who hadn’t? And even though several years earlier in ’82 or ’83 there were reports of women who had contracted the disease, it was still considered by most to be a gay disease or a drug user’s disease. Big Derek knew for a fact that his son was not a drug user. A former All American and the starting power forward on the university’s Division 1 basketball team, DJ would never touch drugs of any kind. The doctor that questioned DJ when he was first admitted confirmed what Big Derek also knew for sure; that his son wasn’t a gay or a homosexual or whatever they were called now. He remembered being pissed that the doctor had even asked DJ something so ridiculous.

Now as he sat with tears streaming down his face, Big Derek asked himself, what the hell did it matter? Either way his son was dying. Except now he wished he had pressed DJ about using some form of protection every time he had sex. He and his son shared everything. Besides Lynn, DJ was his best friend so he knew about the three women his son had slept with in his young life. Three! DJ didn’t deserve this. The young guys out there today were trying to have sex with anything that had breasts and a pulse. The 80’s sexual revolution rivaled the hippie movement of his generation and promoted blatant sexual images in the

music, the movies, and every video that played on The Music Television station. Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On" was a church hymn compared to what these kids listened to. Even Nate, one of DJ's best friends seemed to be headed in the same direction of the bed-hoppers paradise but DJ wasn't a hyper-sexed kid. Three just didn't seem like a number that warranted a fatal disease. He certainly didn't encourage his son to sleep around and as his ball game got better, he warned him that women would be coming out of the wood works with dollar signs in their eyes. "Some might even try to get pregnant 'purposely by accident' just to have a kid with a smile like yours and future NBA sponsored child support payments" he said jokingly after DJ has scored his third triple double in as many games. "Don't make me a grandpa before you finish school, get the contract *and*

marry a good woman, like your mama." "Uh pop, the idea of that is kinda weird" DJ laughed "but I get what you're saying." Neither of them talked about diseases, especially ones for which there was no cure.

"My only son, God" Big Derek said aloud. "He's my only son! Please don't take him away for a mistake!" He tried to hold in his sobs so as not wake his wife and his body shuddered with the effort. It was all too much and his legs popped and snapped in protest as he rose up from the chair and began his pace anew.

His guilt was carnivorous, making a meal of the part of his brain that knew he was to blame. He had one kid and his job was to protect him. He couldn't look Lynn in the eye and he felt powerless to try and help her out of the dark place she'd been since the diagnosis. Their communication was a series of three to five word sentences between her bouts of crying and his pacing. He wanted to ask her if she blamed him, to tell her that he blamed himself but he was terrified of her response. He was called Big Derek even before DJ was born, since high school actually. He was massive even back then. Now six foot, seven inches and two hundred and eighty pounds, he couldn't remember being scared of much since about the eighth grade. Back then it was frogs. Something about the way they looked at him on that cold, stainless steel table in lab class, so accusing and damning. He figured that the frogs' last line of protest was that dead-eyed stare. They were just as powerless over their circumstance as he, having to cut through their slimy mucus membranes. Now, scared didn't begin to sum up the way he felt. He felt terrified and powerless; terrified of losing his son, powerless to be there for his wife the way that she needed him to be.

Each day he wondered if anything in their life would ever be normal again. Then one morning, three weeks from the day DJ came home from the hospital, Lynn got up kissed Big Derek and left their bedroom. It was the first time she kissed him in those three weeks. It was also the first time that both of them slept in their bedroom since DJ came home. At least one of them, sometimes both of them slept in his room on the floor. Neither of them got much rest. The night before, Lynn actually fell asleep leaning against DJ's doorpost. Big Derek had been lying on the floor with his hands behind his head looking up at the ceiling. He didn't know if Lynn was looking at him or DJ and as soon as he got up the courage to look her in the eye he saw her lean forward as if she were going to fall. "Baby!" he jumped up and caught her in his arms. "I'm fine" she said but was asleep before he got her back to their bed. He held her close to him and whispered "I'm so sorry, babe. I'm so sorry" over and over until the rhythm of it put him to sleep as well.

By the time Big Derek came downstairs thirty minutes after Lynn, she had made breakfast enough for ten men; eggs, bacon, grits, biscuits, home fries and freshly squeezed orange juice. Tears filled Big Derek's eyes just then but he didn't let them fall. Lynn's passion was

creating a comfort zone of delicious food for her family and all the friends that would stop by. There was never a shortage of people at the house, all fans of Lynn's food. But that was before DJ's illness was the talk of their suburban neighborhood. Most of them wouldn't know anything about what was going on with DJ except that when he found out the real reason for his shortness of breath and lesions, he made the hard decision to call each of the three women he had slept with to confront them. At least that's what Big Derek thought he was going to do when DJ, from his hospital bed, asked for some time alone. As Big Derek stood outside his son's door he couldn't hear what he was saying but his voice was calm as if he were discussing nothing more than plans for Saturday night. Big Derek however, was incensed. One of those little hussies had given his son a disease that was basically destroying his immune system. Still, he gave his son the privacy that he asked for and refrained from barging in the room to scream at the top of his lungs about fast-ass girls and no count parents. As he paced the hall, he stopped short as a thought occurred to him; if it was the first girl DJ slept with that had given him the disease then DJ could very well have infected the other two. Big Derek's heart sank. Somehow he knew his super smart son thought of this first. Less than thirty six hours later, DJ slipped into a coma.

In the kitchen he thought maybe Lynn was expecting company as she flitted about piling food on his plate. He thought better of it. Over the course of their 22-year marriage, they discussed pretty much everything- until recently. Still, it was silly to think that she would keep it from him if they were having company. He was unsure of the reason for the breakfast overkill, seeing as neither of them could get down more than some eggs and a few slices of toast in the days since... Well, it didn't matter. He was happy that at least she had her thing back.

He was also grateful for the brief distraction of his neighbor Tania. She wasn't 'company'. She was DJ's other best friend and at one time the absolute love of his life. She and DJ were born within minutes of each other and her parents had been like a second set to DJ and vice versa. Big Derek was angry that they hadn't been by the house since learning of DJ's illness. He was sure that Tania had defied her parents by continuing to come by but she had always been headstrong and super protective over DJ. Big Derek remembered one of their early arguments. Tania was trying to boss DJ about one thing or the other when DJ turned to her and said "You're taking this being twelve minutes older thing waaaay too seriously". There was one incident during a high school game that made Big Derek smile to this day. DJ was in a scoring zone and a member of the opposing team got angry and threw a punch at him. A fight broke out. Big Derek was there to pick DJ up and outside of the principal's office in a row sat the entire home team-and one cheerleader. It was Tania, hair mussed and clothes askew. Still, her chin stuck out as if she were ready to take whatever punishment was coming her way. "You have to be more careful, Tania," Big Derek said, gently scolding her. "You could have been hurt tussling with these boys." He left it at that, leaving the hard job for her parents. How could he be upset with someone that cared for his son so much? Even back then everyone could tell that her love for DJ ran deep. DJ knew it too but one day he realized that Tania was in fact in love with Nate. He never said but when Big Derek finally figured it out, he could tell that his son was crushed.

Big Derek figured that Tania's parents were probably worried sick that she and DJ may have at some point, had a sexual relationship. He didn't know if she talked to her parents the way that DJ talked to him. Somewhere inside him, he wanted to let them know they had nothing to worry about but he was angry. This was still his son and they were acting as if they never cared for him! To hell with them, he thought. But on the outside he wore a smile for Tania's sake.

She came in just as Big Derek was plodding through a second helping of home fries. Lynn hugged the girl as if she were grabbing onto a life raft in the middle of the ocean and then admonished her for being so thin. "You should eat" she said as she served up a heaping plate of food."Momma Harris, I really couldn't..." Tania stopped short as she looked into Lynn's pleading eyes. They welled with tears as did Tania's and she looked away as she said "sure, I'll have a little". Big Derek never looked up from his plate. He knew how this would go. Tania would stay for awhile as she had every day since DJ came home. She and Lynn would chat about school and her family until one of them would reference DJ. A simple "DJ laughed at that all the time" or "Yeah, DJ would say that too" was all it took. One or the other would realize that they were speaking of him as if he were dead instead of in a pneumonia induced coma. Then one would start crying and then the other. Then Tania would leave.

And so it went. And as usual, Big Derek felt like he could do nothing to comfort the only other two people in the world who seemed to care for his son. In all the days that Tania came over, she never did make it all the way up to DJ's room. But at least she visited which is more than he could say about the rest of their so called friends.

For Lynn, the least he could do was to eat and though he had no appetite again that morning, he tried to get down as much as he could. Now as he sat in the dark, fingers soaked through trying to hold back his tears, he could feel his stomach getting ready to stage a revolt. Thank goodness it was only one meal a day thus far. As great a cook as she was, he thought his stomach would erupt if Lynn started making three meals a day again. He apologized silently to his wife.

He was so lost in his thoughts and the sound of his son's breathing that Big Derek nearly jumped out of his skin when the bedroom door creaked. Apparently, he scared her too because Tania jumped back when she saw him jump. He quickly wiped his face though it was too dark in the room for her to see him crying. "I'm sorry Big D" Tania whispered. "Momma Harris said to come over whenever I wanted and I couldn't sleep. I just had to see him". Big Derek's heart broke for the pain he heard in her voice. "It's ok sweetheart. Come on in." He tried to keep his voice down but it was hard to muffle his rich baritone as it bounced smoothly through the quiet room. "I was just heading back to my room. Here". He handed her the extra blanket that was folded at the foot of DJ's bed. "Big Derek?" her voice was barely a whisper. "I hope you're not too angry with my parents. They're scared that's all. I keep trying to tell them that you can't catch what DJ has, if that's what has them worried. It isn't spread through touching or even kissing. I've been reading up on his" she paused, "his illness". He could hear the dry click in her throat as she spoke. "They're so worried about him, Nate is too but they're all just scared." She lowered her head as she said the next words "I was scared too but it's more than that. I feel so helpless. I love DJ more than life..." She choked back sobs and Big Derek hugged her to him. He knew exactly what she meant. He would readily fight or give his life if that's what it would take to save his son. "Don't worry, T. I know it and DJ knows it. Don't you worry." She let go and looked up at him. He stood in the moonlight that was creeping around the edge of the curtains. There was no way to hide his watery eyes now. He smiled. "You go on in now. I'll call your parents and let them know that you're here." Big Derek stood in the door a moment longer. It was just long enough to see Tania bypass the chair and ever so gently, as if touching him would break him, climb in the bed next to DJ and close her eyes.

Big Derek stretched when he awoke the next morning. He felt limber and clear headed. He

hadn't slept this well in weeks and though he was grateful that the groggy, hang-over-even-though-you-haven't-had-a-single-thing-to-drink feeling was gone, the feeling of guilt quickly returned. It just didn't feel right to be so rejuvenated while his son lay sick in the next room.

Lynn was already up, most likely in DJ's room so he didn't get out of bed right away. His mind went back to last night's call to Tania's house. As he dialed the number to let her parents know that she was ok, he squared his shoulders. He had made this same call many times over the years. He was still angry but saddened too because this time it felt as if he were readying himself for a blowout. Shawn and Deborah Johnson were the first couple that he and Lynn met in their neighborhood, twenty-one years ago. Actually, he met Shawn in the local AM-PM in the wee hours of the morning after he and Lynn moved in. Lynn and Deborah were both pregnant and craving butter pecan ice cream. Of course there was only one half-gallon container left in the whole store. It was one of the few times in his life that Big Derek's often imposing size proved to be of no use to him. Shawn, a slim five feet, nine inches, grabbed the container just as Big Derek was reaching for it. He looked up to see Big Derek's shoulders set, standing erect to accentuate his full height. Shawn didn't balk or back down. "Sorry, my man but I gotta take this ice cream back to my wife. She's very pregnant and we do *not*

have a doghouse." Big Derek couldn't help but smile. Hell, he knew that feeling all too well. After briefly introducing himself as a new neighbor who lived a few houses away whose wife was also "very pregnant", Big Derek didn't have to say much more to persuade Shawn to split the ice cream. "I'll assume that you guys don't have a dog house either, especially one large enough for you to fit in" Shawn joked. In the short time it took for them to walk back to the Johnson's house they had discussed occupations, due dates, ball teams, pregnancy joys- and woes. Their friendship was set and quickly grew to include their wives and then their children. Big Derek could certainly understand their fear, as Tania described it and even gave that thought some validity himself. There were so many misconceptions about DJ's disease that even he and Lynn had to wade through the fear to find out the truths. Still, he thought of Tania like the daughter he never had and he *thought*

the Johnson's felt the same about DJ. He knew that there was nothing that would keep him and Lynn away from their side if something were to happen to Tania. Maybe he was wrong about them.

When Shawn answered his tone was grim, "Yeah?" Big Derek said "look man, I wanted to let you know that..." His words were cut short by the sound of crying in the background. "Is that Deb?" he asked. Shawn took a deep breath. "We know that Tania is there, Big D. And yeah, that's Deb. We've been um, meaning to stop by, at least call but Deb has been pretty um, on and off lately. Something in the way Shawn spoke sounded oddly familiar to Big Derek. At first he couldn't figure out what it was. As Shawn continued it suddenly hit him. It was weird how someone's voice could be so full of emotion and sound so hollow at the same time. It was the sound of someone overexerted, frustrated and pained. Except for the brief sentences that he exchanged with his wife, he hadn't really heard his own voice in awhile. But Shawn sounded exactly like he felt. Big Derek's shoulders slumped. The fight in him was gone. "Tania is fine, Shawn. We wouldn't knowingly let anything hurt her. You know that right?" "Yeah man, I, I mean we know that. Deb will say that we should come by but before we can get out the door, she breaks down. When she gets herself together again, she and Tania fight about the fact that we haven't been by and then she says that we should stay away to keep from upsetting you guys more than you already are." Big Derek had no idea what was going on their house until now, but he should have known better. Shawn and Deb had always treated DJ like their own and the absence of their physical presence should not have

outweighed what he knew to be true. "I understand, Shawn. Please tell Deb that we are keeping you guys in our prayers. Get some rest, my man."

As he lay listening to voices drift up the stairs he realized that the weight of anger coupled with the weight of worry and despair was crushing. He was relieved to let at least one of them go. Wait, were there more than just Lynn and Tania's voices he was hearing? Yes, at least one of them was male. His heartbeat pounded so loud in his ears that he couldn't make out who it belonged to. He jumped out of bed, naked except for his underwear and rushed into DJ's room. What he saw made his stomach flop so loud that he would swear it was audible. For a moment, he thought he would be sick and all of Lynn's efforts would come propelling from him like so many home fried projectile. After a few seconds he was able to resist the desire to vomit. He stood in the doorway as DJ lay in his bed. Tears of frustration welled up in his eyes. It was getting to be too much to hope. Hope that his son would live despite the doctors saying that there was nothing they could do for him. Hope that it was his son's voice drifting up to him from downstairs inviting him back to happier times, at the same time calming the voice of his worst fears. Who was he kidding? Even if DJ did wake from his coma, he probably wouldn't have the strength to speak in a voice that would carry through the house, let alone the strength to walk down the stairs. Big Derek could feel his own legs grow weak and he thought he would fall. Instead, he leaned hard against the door post. Hope was just too damned heavy. "Babe, is everything ok? I heard you get up and then it sounded as if you were gonna come through the ceiling" Lynn came quickly up the stairs. He wiped his eyes on his bare forearm before turning to her. "Yes babe, everything is fine. DJ is just" he couldn't form his lips to repeat the word fine. "There's been no change." The sun filtered through the window in the rear of the hallway and rested on her face. Though her cheeks were gaunt her eyes softened as she looked at him the way she hadn't in what seemed like forever. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. "I heard voices downstairs..." He didn't have to finish his sentence. She knew what he must have thought and grabbed his hand. "C'mon down for a bit. Tania will come up and sit with Derek". Big Derek smiled. She was the only one that still called him that. "Ok but there's something that I have to do first." He was struck by the notion that they hadn't opened the curtains in DJ's room since he'd been home. He would definitely want the curtains opened and the sunlight streaming in. He was just that kinda kid. Lynn watched him curiously as he went in and pulled the curtains back. He lifted the window just a bit to let the fresh air in. "There you go, son." He said under his breath. She heard him anyway. "Ok, let's go down" he said. "Babe, I think there is something else you need to do first". He followed her gaze down and realized that he didn't have enough clothes on for a visit. He looked back up and they laughed. It was the first time that he heard a laugh in the house in so long that it sounded foreign. But it was welcome. "I'll be down in a minute." He turned away but then quickly turned back and gave his wife a quick kiss. Turning back toward the room, he almost missed the smile that the sun made brilliant across her face. He was glad that he caught it.

Fully dressed, he started down the steps as Tania was coming up. He gave her a hug and then watched as she went in DJ's room. This time she sat in the chair next to his bed. She pulled out an old book and began reading "May 1, 1977. Dear Diary, this boy is driving me nuts..."
Big Derek continued down the stairs.

He walked in the kitchen and discovered the source of the male voice. Shawn was sitting on the stool at the end of the island counter. He got up when he saw Big Derek come in. "I hope we didn't wake you" he said, holding out his right hand. Big Derek reached out with his. Before even he knew what was happening, he pulled Shawn in for a quick hug. "It's cool,

man, it's alright" He and Shawn both knew that he was talking about more than just the waking. "Hey Deb, how're you doing?" Big Derek went around the counter to where Deb was sitting, cutting up onions. Even when she stood, he had to reach way down to hug her. She was always a little thing but now she wasn't much more than a whisper of a woman. Could she have possibly lost that much weight since he'd last seen her? Despite the bags under her eyes she seemed more relaxed and in a much better mood than she was the night before. "I'm," she hesitated "I'm ok. How are you?" He saw such sadness in her eyes that he had to look away. "I'm hanging in there, you know?" She patted his hand, then picked up the cutting board and took it over to where Lynn was standing at the stove. "Lynn tells me that you have been eating her famous home fries so much that they are coming out of your eyes so she's making you pancakes this morning. I'm sorry that Shawn and I haven't been over to help you guys" there was another pause, "eat some of this delicious food." Lynn slipped her arm around Deb's tiny waist and said "You're here now" as Deb dumped fresh cut onions into a frying pan. Big Derek could tell Deb was trying hard to keep herself composed and he wondered if she was going to breakdown. He stood at the ready. After a few moments though, she took a deep breath, dabbed at her eyes with a napkin and said "gosh darned onions". There was a slight but audible sigh of relief from Shawn. The women begin to move around the kitchen in total sync with each other, in a flow that only years of friendship could create. Big Derek and Shawn watched them for a few moments before Shawn, taking a cue from their wives and correctly assuming that Big Derek had no idea, stood and said "So, Jordan scored fifty points for the second play-off game in a row last night. I'm telling you, this kid is gonna be the man." The look on Big Derek's face was of awe but he tried to hide it with a smirk. "fifty points huh? That's all fine and well but I'm gonna tell you like I tell DJ all the time..." The entire kitchen seemed to freeze at the mention of DJ's name. Big Derek could feel the tug in his chest trying to immobilize him but he was determined that he wouldn't let that happen in front of his wife and his friends. He continued "Until he wins a championship and learns to play some defense like Wilt the Stilt..." Shawn laughed. "Oh boy here we go. Blocking shots does not constitute playing real defense. You've gotta see this kid in action. I'm sure they're playing some highlights on T.V. Maybe you'll see what DJ and I see." The two men headed for the living room. Big Derek hadn't seen any of the NBA playoff games. He was grateful for the distraction. And Maybe Tania had the right idea. Maybe he'd share some of what he saw with DJ later.

Big Derek wished DJ could see Michael Jordan in this game. Even though his tongue sticking out of his mouth every time he went to the hole annoyed Big Derek like nothing, he had to admit that the kid had game. I'll definitely have to tell DJ but I'll never admit it to Shawn, he thought and smiled. "Uh huh, I see you over there smiling. Admit it this kid is great" Shawn said as if reading his mind." Before Big Derek could eat a piece of the humble pie being served with every Jordan inspired fast break, the door bell rang." Shawn must have known that they hadn't had any visitors because he looked over at Big Derek with the same question on his face that he could imagine was on his. "I'll get it babe" he said loud enough for Lynn to hear in the kitchen. He pulled back the door to see Nate standing in front of him with his head down. His hands were in his pocket but as soon as he looked up at Big Derek he quickly pulled them out. The young man is learning, Big Derek thought. He remembered telling Nate "Men never walk around with their hands in their pockets. It gives the impression that you have something to hide. As a young black man in America, you have every opportunity for greatness, regardless of what anyone else thinks or says. You have absolutely nothing to hide." He only said this to Nate once and had never seen his hands in his pockets again, until today. It seemed that now Nate simply didn't know what to do with them. He balled them into fists and banged them together like two fighters ready to come out swinging. "Big D, I

uh..” his face was turning bright red. Big Derek wasn’t going to leave him out on a limb. “Lynn and Deb are in the kitchen making food. There’s going to be plenty and I know you can eat.” Nate flashed a bright, grateful smile. “C’mon, Shawn and I are watching the highlights” Big Derek said. “Oh and Tania is upstairs with DJ.” Nate’s entire disposition changed. He stood up to his full height, only four inches shorter than Big Derek (and one inch taller than DJ. Lynn referred to the three of them and Shawn as the “stair-steps). From the expression that took over his face, it was clear that he was definitely in love. As he passed the stair case on the way to the kitchen, he hesitated before ducking under the kitchen doorway. “Hello Momma Harris, Mrs. Johnson.” Big Derek could hear Lynn say “it’s really good to see you Nate. How are your mom and sister?” “They’re fine, Momma Harris.” Nate’s voice became heavy. Big Derek was glad that he couldn’t see him. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been around in awhile.” Lynn stopped him. “It’s ok Nate. Still got an appetite twice your size? Lynn smiled as she added food to another plate. “Yes, ma’am” Nate answered. He sounded as if he wanted to say more but he didn’t. “I’m glad to hear it. Would you take Shawn’s plate into the living room with you and let Big Derek know that his is ready also? “Yes ma’am” Nate answered again. He ducked back out of the kitchen. “Hello Mr. Johnson” Nate said as he handed Shawn a heaping plate of food. Shawn’s was a one word acknowledgement, “Nate”. Nate moved to the chair furthest away from Shawn and sat down. “Big D, Ma says that your plate is ready.” Nate could have easily carried three plates of food into the living room but if Big Derek knew Lynn, he knew that she had Shawn’s delivered purposely. It didn’t take him long to figure what Lynn already knew; somewhere along the line Shawn and Deb realized that Tania had feelings for Nate. Deb and Lynn probably discussed it in the kitchen. Apparently, Shawn wasn’t happy about it. Big Derek joked to lighten the mood “Oh so Shawn gets preferential treatment now? Thanks for the delivery, Nate. No tip for you.” With his head down, Nate smiled into his food.

As he left the room Big Derek thought that he couldn’t really blame Shawn for not being excited about the idea of Nate and Tania. Nate wasn’t a bad kid but from early on, he caught a bad break. DJ came home from school one day when he was in the sixth grade going on and on about this boy who had took on the school bully. “You know how some kids kinda tease me because I’m friends with Tania? Well today, Jack the Jerk is all up in my face but he’s not touching me so I ignore him like you said. Tania is, you know, being Tania and comes over and tells him to leave me alone. He pushed her to the ground.” Immediately Big Derek thought that he’d have to pay a visit to “Jack the Jerk’s” parents if Shawn hadn’t already. “Dad, are you listening?” He tuned back into his son. “I’m telling you, before I got a chance to slug him this new boy Nate came outta nowhere and whacked Jack something terrible! He had a black eye and everything!” It was clear that his son was very impressed with Nate. DJ and Tania started bringing Nate around after the fight. Big Derek was expecting to meet a rambunctious boy, maybe a bit of a bully himself but he was a quiet kid, kind of awkward and really big for his age. He towered over the other sixth graders and most of the eighth graders and was stocky to boot. Big Derek took an immediate liking to him. He was reminded of himself at that age. He could imagine that Nate was teased (behind his back of course), awkward for the simple fact that he was told so many times “you can’t rough house like the other kids, you could hurt them” and was probably afraid to interact with them at all. The difference was that Big Derek had his own father there as he grew, to teach him how to be comfortable with his size where as Nate’s father left him, his mother and his little sister to fend for themselves when Nate was still a boy.

Big Derek and Lynn had only seen Nate’s dad a few times before he left but it was clear that Reginald Evans was Jack the jerk times ten. Most people just ignored it but Lynn was having

none of it. She invited Angela Evans over to their house after they saw her out several times with gobs of make-up on trying to cover up the still obvious bruises inflicted by her husband. "Angela please, if there is anything we can do, just say so. This can't be good for you and the kids" Big Derek overheard Lynn saying between the sounds of his miter saw. The kids were out playing in the backyard and he left the women in the kitchen to work on a project in the basement. He wasn't really trying to eaves drop and was just about to turn the saw back on when he heard Angela say in a loud voice "What you can do is stay out of it!" This is a woman's thing, he reminded himself. Still, he didn't like to hear anyone speak to his wife that way. She was the gentlest soul he had ever known and he couldn't remember the last time she raised her voice. Now he listened purposely. Wanted to make sure he didn't have to go and escort Angela out of their home. Lynn's voice remained kind and compassionate. "You know I would never say a word to anyone". All of the cooking sounds had ceased as Lynn stopped making lunch and turned her full attention to Angela. "I'm sorry Lynn" Angela said "but Reggie takes care of us. He's the only reason we were able to move from the ghetto to a nice neighborhood like this and, well he loves me and the kids regardless of what people think." In a sad voice Lynn said "Sure seems like a painful kind of love, dear heart. I'm not judging. I just need you to know that I am here." That was the last time that Angela came by the house.

Two years later, Nate was in his room listening to the nightmarish sounds of his mother being beaten to the floor. His little sister had run into his room crying with her hands covering her ears. "I was mad that she had to keep hearing that" he told DJ one day. "I figured it was time for me to make sure she didn't have to hear that mess no more." He walked into his parent's bedroom. His mother was huddled in the corner next to an overturned end table, his father standing over her. "Get the hell outta here and mind your business" Reggie turned and yelled at him. He walked over to his father and stood eye to eye with him before rearing back and punching him so hard that he broke his nose. He thought his father was going to kill him but his adrenaline was pumping so hard (though he would say the "nerves in me" instead of adrenaline when telling DJ the story) that he didn't feel scared. Nate ducked faster than he knew he could when his father, in shock and probably slowed in his drunkenness, swung for Nate's chin. Nate came back up with a solid left to the gut and the fight was over. Reggie puked up whatever was in his stomach and slid down the wall behind him. From somewhere far away, Nate could hear Angela screaming at him to stop. He never looked over at her and instead backed up to the opposite wall and stood there watching his father. When Reggie got his wind back he calmly told Angela she should clean up his vomit and began throwing clothes into a duffle bag. She begged him not to leave. "Oh, I'm going. If you didn't want me to leave you should have made your *man*

keep his hands to himself. You know you can't have two men at one time, Angie. He wants to be the man of the house, then so be it." Reggie didn't look over at Nate. "Please Reggie, I need you. He didn't mean it" Angela said and grabbed at his arm. Reggie snatched away from her so hard that she almost fell backward. Only then did Nate move away from the wall. Reggie finally turned to him and said "no need my man. She fell on her own. You think you're better than me?" he laughed. "Yeah right, you'll never be but you got this." Nate just stood there watching as his mother, wiping away her own blood from her lips, followed his father out of the room.

Over the next couple of years, Nate got arrested once and then dropped out of school. Big Derek bailed him out for DJ's sake and told him "When someone says you'll never amount to anything the best thing you can do to prove them wrong is to prove them wrong. My son thinks of you as a brother but he's my responsibility. You have a little sister to think about.

Who's going to protect her? Big Derek didn't mention Angela. Though she was the one who called him when Nate was in lock-up he knew that she blamed Nate for Reggie's leaving. She started drinking heavily not long after he left and Big Derek also knew that Nate blamed himself for that. It was DJ that got Nate playing basketball as a way to blow off steam. DJ taught him the fundamentals and was the first to see the potential that Nate had on the court. DJ introduced Nate to his high school coach. Together they convinced Nate to come back to school. With his size and speed, he was a natural. With hard work and practice he became a force on the court. He and DJ both made it into the university on athletic scholarships. Like DJ, he made quite a name for himself. Unlike DJ, he had a new girlfriend every week. Big Derek didn't think much of it, figured he was just being a guy or maybe making up for the time he spent isolated from his peers. Then again, Big Derek didn't have a daughter, let alone one that Nate was interested in. He could see how Shawn would play *his*

best defense when it came to Tania. In spite of all the setbacks in Nate's life he turned out to be a pretty good kid. Still, in light of DJ's situation and some of the choices Nate had made, Big Derek could understand Shawn's concern.

When he came back into the living room with his food, it was just as quiet as when he left. In the days before DJ was sick and before Shawn knew that Tania had feelings for Nate and vice versa, they would have made such a raucous while watching the game that Lynn would tell them that she'd be the one to call the cops if the neighbors didn't. "So what do you think, Nate?" Big Derek asked. "Do you see Jordan as a future hall of famer too?" Shawn stared straight at the television. "Well" Nate said looking directly at Shawn. "I'm a big man, and like you Big D, I like the big men when they handle their business on the court. Wilt the Stilt, Larry Bird, you know. When people first saw them they didn't expect them to be the great players and uh, the great men that they turned out to be. As for Jordan, yeah, I believe that he has greatness in him. Some say he has a lot to learn but when he does learn how to relax into his natural self and not react to what others think or expect of him, well he has the potential to change the game. Look in his eyes, you'll see. He has the love, the passion for it. That's what it takes." Both Big Derek and Shawn were looking at Nate now. Neither of them had ever heard him speak more than a few sentences at a time and never with so much enthusiasm. "Well, I guess that's that then" Big Derek said as he looked over at Shawn. "Um hmm" was Shawn's response. Of course Nate would have to do much more to prove that he meant what he said about "changing the game", but from the slight smile Big Derek saw as Shawn turned back toward the television, he certainly started off on the good foot.

"Well son, this sure has been a day huh?" The sun had gone down hours ago. Lynn was taking a long bath after being swayed by her husband who had run her bath water, filling the tub with scented bubbles. Shawn, Deb and Tania had left together a few hours before, each with the promise that they would be back at some point in the day tomorrow. Nate was the last to leave after sitting with DJ until he came downstairs, eyes blood shot from crying. He said "I have an early class but I'll be back tomorrow" and was out the door before Big Derek or Lynn could stop him.

Big Derek thought that it would be hard talking to his son this way but once he started he went on for hours. He talked about the happenings in their home over the last twenty-four hours, moved on to his thoughts about the playoffs - thanks to the reanimation of their television set- and everything in between. He talked until his mouth was dry and his lids drooped. When he woke up the next morning he was still in the chair, covered with the blanket from the foot of the bed. "Thank you God for my wife, my son and my hope."

The next few days were filled with a refreshing end to the depressing repetition of the last few weeks. Shawn, Deb, Tania and Nate visited every day, individually and sometimes all at once. It was getting late on one of the evenings that they were all over together. Lynn was upstairs with DJ and the others sat in the living room. They were reminiscing about the times before the kids went to college when Shawn looked over at Tania and Nate. "Speaking of college, you two should really spend more time studying. Finals are coming up, right? Tania and Nate, who were deliberately sitting on different sides of the room, looked at each other in surprise. Tania was the first to speak. "You're right dad, but trust me we study all the time when we're not here or in class. Nate and I both know how important it is for us to do well." Nate concurred, "Yes sir, we do." Deb smiled. Big Derek thought both Lynn and DJ would be happy with this turn of events. He'd tell them both about it later.

A few neighbors even dropped in to say hello and ask about DJ. Though Lynn was spending more and more time with DJ it seemed, she still managed to have a cake or pie, glazed ham, turkey wings or some other delicious dish to offer. With the family over every day, she always prepared more than enough.

Miss Wilma McFadden was over one particular evening, smacking loudly on a piece of ham that Lynn had carved for her in decidedly thin pieces, as Miss McFadden didn't have a single tooth in her mouth. She was a kindly lady, old by count back when DJ was eight years old and first started helping her with small tasks around her house. Each time there was some news in the local paper about his performance in a game, she would tell the story to anyone who would listen about how she met DJ. "I was walking down the street carrying about ten bags of groceries" Big Derek smiled as he rocked back in his chair. The only thing that changed about her story was the number of bags she was carrying. It varied between four and ten. He and Lynn would chalk it up to memory but every other detail remained the same, year after year. "Uh, huh" she continued "and four boys went and ran right by me as if I wasn't walking there. Uh huh, it was the Mitchell boy, the Starks boy, the oldest Burney boy, and Jerry Turner's boy- a rotten one just like his daddy, uh huh. But then came the sweetest lil' ol angel boy, Derek Junior." He'd forgotten that she still called him by his first name too. "He stopped and looked at me and said Miss McFadden, can I help you with your bags? Boy's like a superstar and still, he's been helping me ever since." Big Derek glanced over at Lynn. She seemed unusually fidgety. He figured it might have to do with the fact that this was already the third time tonight that Miss McFadden recounted the story. He was grateful when her nephew, Paul McFadden knocked at the door. "Hey Big D, I'm here to walk Aunt Wil home. Hope she didn't keep you too long." Big Derek noticed that Paul didn't reach out to shake his hand. He wasn't upset. "It was good to see her, Paul. Thanks". When he came back from walking Miss McFadden to the door, Lynn had already gone upstairs. He could hear the soft murmur of her voice as she shared her thoughts with their son. I'll take a quick shower before I go in, he thought. He was exhausted but with no complaint. Things were beginning to feel normal again- at least as much as they could be.

The steamy hot water made him more tired than before and he was ready for sleep. When he walked into DJ's room he knew that something was wrong. He sat in the dark when he talked to DJ at night but Lynn never did. She sat quietly on the edge of DJ's bed, holding his hand. Without warning, Big Derek felt as if a hammer smashed into his chest. He was so used to being in this room in the dark that he could always see DJ's chest rise and fall as he breathed. No matter how slight the motion, he could always see it. His eyes were adjusted to the darkness but now he didn't see it. His knees buckled and the sound that escaped him as he crumbled to the floor was a primal and painful declaration."NO!" His chest heaved and he

couldn't catch his breath. Tears ran down his face in rivers. Lynn was standing over him now and even in the darkness he hid his face from her. Still he cried, "My only son! God please, he's my only son!" Lynn fell to her knees in front him. She reached for him but he pulled away. Her words were a tortured plea, "Derek, he's my only son too." Big Derek brought his hands from his face and looked at his wife. The agony that he felt was reflected on her face. He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her as he stood. They walked over to where their son lay. Big Derek lifted him gently between them. They held him and each other in the middle of the bed and cried.

A year later, Big Derek stood in front of the mirror in their bedroom. The attacks of agony that left him crippled in their wake came less often now. The grief however, was constant and he couldn't imagine that it would ever leave him. Like a scar that he couldn't see, he would bare it. He gave himself just a hint of a smile as he fixed his tie. It was the face of his son that he saw looking back from the mirror. Even the coroner reflected solemnly that there was an ever so slight, peaceful smile on DJ's face when he passed. Big Derek wondered for the millionth time if his son could hear the things that he and the others shared with him in the quiet before he died. His eyes begin to well up with tears but he blinked them away. Not today. He would remember his son always but he would not cry today. They were informed that DJ would in fact receive his dual degree in Exercise Science and Physical Therapy. "If he had continued on the track he was on, he would have graduated at the top of his class. We sincerely hope that you will attend the ceremony and accept the Degrees on his behalf." It was DJ's coach that called with the news six months ago. "Mr. Harris, I know there was some misinformation that was put out there but DJ was a well respected, irreplaceable member of our team, of our family. I asked the Dean if I could give you the news. I wanted to make sure you knew that since I didn't get to tell you at the funeral."

"Babe, we're going to be late" Lynn gently prodded from the doorway. She stood there for a moment and looked at him. She looked as though she might cry but she didn't. She walked into the room, adjusted his previously adjusted tie and said "you are so very handsome. I love you". "I love you too" he said "with all that I am." He held her hand as they walked out of the house. There was an audible gasp from Lynn as they stepped onto the porch. Their friends and neighbors had gathered outside their door. Someone had hung a banner over the porch that read 'Congratulations, Harris Family'. Flowers and balloons made a trail down the steps. "I said I wasn't going to cry" Lynn said, doing just that. Big Derek could barely hear her over the clapping. Me too, he thought. And I won't, not today. He smiled and waved as they got into their car.

They walked over to where Shawn and Deb had saved them seats. "The kids have lined up on the south side of the stage" Shawn said. He shook Big Derek's hand and then looked away. His eyes were red. "Oh wait, I'll be right back!" Big Derek angled himself out of their row, only slightly annoyed that the seats were so close together and hoping that he didn't miss Nate. Tania was further back in the line since they were arranged by last name. He saw her first and stopped. "I have to catch Nate but I wanted to tell you that you look absolutely beautiful and I am so proud. DJ would be too" he added. "Big D, please don't make me cry, you'll ruin my make-up! I've already re-applied twice!" she smiled. "See you after" he said as he made a dash to catch Nate. "Hey" he said a little out of breath. "I have to give you something". Nate looked confused. "Really Big D, you have given me so much already..." Big Derek cut him off, "Listen, I wanted to give you this when I got it but thought today would be more fitting. Earlier in the year, I went to see your MJ play. I went alone, had to see

him for myself. His tone was somber but then he broke into a wide grin. "He's even better in person. We'll have to go see a game sometime soon. Until then he gave me this for you." From his wallet he pulled out a rookie card and an article from a local newspaper, yellowed at the edges. Nate recognized his name through blurred vision. The article, written when he was in high school, detailed his first triple double performance. "Both signed by 'the man' as you and DJ called him." "Wow" Nate cleared his throat. "I don't know what to say". Big Derek shook Nate's hand. "All that you needed to say, you said in the fight to make it here. I'm very proud of you. And I'm grateful for what you were to my son, what you are to my family." Before Nate could say anything more, Big Derek turned and walked back to his seat.

"Was that about the game? Lynn asked as he sat down. "Mostly" he said with a smile. They sat through the ceremony and when Nate's name was called, Lynn reached out and grabbed Big Derek's hand. "Coach and the Dean said that I could say a few words. I'm not that good at speaking in front of people. I'm not that good with words. Actually, there're a lot of things that I know I'm not good at. But if it wasn't for one of my best friends I wouldn't know that I could be good, maybe even great at many other things. I know I'm good at basketball and just yesterday I was recruited by the Philadelphia 76ers." There was a burst of applause and whistles from the crowd. "I also know that if people say that you will never amount to anything, the best way to prove them wrong is to prove them wrong." The audience laughed. "I know that I can be good at so many things if I give myself the opportunity. And I am thankful that I have the opportunity. I also know without a doubt that I will be a good husband if" he paused before continuing "if Tania Johnson will have me." There was a collective gasp before the audience erupted into applause. Lynn and Big Derek looked over at Shawn and Deb who just looked at each other and smiled. As the applause waned, Tania jumped up and said "Yes, I will have you!" That sparked another eruption. When the auditorium was quiet again, Nate was somber. "I know that I wouldn't be half the man that I am today if it weren't for the person who saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself. He even had his family follow suit. I could never take the place of this man, wouldn't dream of trying but Momma and Big Derek Harris, you've still got me. You've definitely got me. And Derek Harris Jr., DJ, you are my man, my brother forever. I love you man." Everyone in the audience was on their feet. Tissues were being pressed into hands mid-clap. Guess Nate was wrong about not being good with words, Big Derek thought as he stood clapping. And he guessed that he was wrong about not crying today.

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