

## **Kareem's the One with the Glasses, Right?**

There really was no other way to deal with the situation than to look the tall naked black man directly in the eye. He wanted a hot dog. I couldn't just ignore him.

In a situation like that, the best option is to go with direct, locked-on, no-way-is-my-gaze-wandering-here-Sir eye contact. Even so, for a preternaturally shy 17-year-old who still had trouble with any public encounter that involved anything other than pretending to be somewhere else, this was going to be a challenge.

Add to this the fact that I'd had very little actual contact with any black people in my mostly sheltered lifetime, nor -- due to the fact that I always chose the no-shower option after gym class -- with naked people in general, my discomfort was as urgent as it was complex.

"Mustard?" I asked.

He reached into the long fur coat hanging in his wooden stall and pulled out a handful of bills. I tried not to glance down at the money, keeping my eyes focused on his, even though his hardly seemed aware that I existed.

He may well have been famous. I didn't know. Among my many professional liabilities was the fact that I was, and probably remain, the only employee in the history of the National Basketball League who didn't actually know anything about basketball, nor about basketball players nor the sport's emergent cultural importance nor any of the basic rules or techniques of the game. I was a Cleveland Cavaliers ballboy who possessed no intrinsic loyalty to the home team and who, most nights, was more interested in the contents of the Gatorade bucket than the presence of Larry Bird or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in the visitors' locker room. I identified Abdul-Jabbar as "the guy with the goggles" and Bird as "the guy who really should reconsider that mustache." I did have a certain fascination for Cornbread Maxwell, but only because he had

a cool name and seemed like a nice person. But then, the same could be said of my English teacher, Sister Noel. It had nothing to do with his talent or fame. Those things were lost on me.

Some guys would give you exactly what it cost to go buy them a hot dog, and some would give you a random handful of crumpled bills and tell you to keep the change. This was usually how I reckoned which ones were famous and which ones were not. In this case, I wasn't aware of how much I had been handed, because to have looked down at the cash would have been to risk seeing more than my teenage inadequate self could bear, so I quickly closed my fingers over the money and turned to leave.

"Hey, kid -- how much did I give you?"

I looked into my hand and answered sideways toward the floor.

"Five."

"Get me two."

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Under any circumstance, I suppose, being a ballboy for an NBA team is an unusual first job. I wasn't aware of that then, inasmuch as no teenager is aware of the unusualness of his life until other people start to point it out to him, a bittersweet gift that, so far, had not been granted to me. It was a job. I was paid fifteen dollars and two complimentary tickets per game. Because the tickets often went unused, I didn't consider them part of my compensation package. I did, however, value the half-used rolls of athletic tape I often scrounged from the trainer's room floor. With better adhesion than masking tape, it was useful for hanging posters on my bedroom wall. Even on the most humid summer days, James Dean and the Police stayed put.

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The main focus of my work was to touch nothing.

This seemed the only prudent approach to a working life in a room full of physically superior men who were naked about 40 percent of the time, whose own sense of their body was at once primitive and evolved, the floor around them littered with the ubiquity of their constantly changing shells, from street clothes to ankle wraps to uniforms to sweats to showers to towels to ice packs to street clothes again: sweat-soaked socks and sodden jock straps, unraveled bandages and spent towels, satiny uniforms stewing in the funk of blood, snot, pasty perspiration and mid-shelf cologne.

There was another kid who seemed positively charged by this atmosphere, who walked through the locker room gathering great handfuls of “socks and jocks,” a term he used as though he was the maitre d’ and it was the house specialty. He had a habit of tapping players’ bottoms with all the cheerful encouragement of a father teaching his son to ride a bike and calling them either by their known nicknames or the impromptu handles that came to him on the wings of some locker room Muse: *Bingo! A.C.! Footsie! Sweets!*

I had learned to keep my fingernails on the long side so that when I did have to pick up anything dropped on the floor, I could use them as a set of tweezers, keeping to a minimum the contact between my own skin’s surface area and that of another man’s intimate apparel.

Look -- I’ll just come right out and say it: I once witnessed a 7-foot center trying to pop the pimples on his back, a physically difficult task even for a gifted professional athlete. My perspective on the entire matter of my employment was cast.