



Playing for the Last Shot

[Robert Francis Peltier](#)

I wait for Mr. Jim Landley to hang up the phone. He's been talking for ten minutes, and all during that time these little chrome balls — the size of marbles — have been clacking back and forth on his desk. Five balls suspended by thin wire from a little stand. When you pull one up and let it hit the other four, the ball at the opposite end swings out and back, hitting the four and making the first ball swing out. Back and forth. It seems to go on forever. I wish I had a drink. But the doctor has told me that I can't drink anymore.

"I don't understand," I said. "I don't drink that much. I'm still a young man."

"You drink too much, and you drink too early in the day, before you have anything in your stomach. And you're not a young man. You're forty-five years old."

Doctor Weingarten looked sad and tired delivering this speech. I was sad and tired, too — not because my liver was in such bad shape, but that I was old enough to have a bad liver.

We talked in his small, fluorescent-lit office. The walls were decorated with pastel watercolor prints and diplomas that gave him the imperative to tell people terrible things about themselves. We discussed further tests and my kidneys and bowel movements and then I left. I wondered what had happened to me, how I'd moved from seventeen or twenty or thirty-three, all respectable ages, all ages at which I knew I had control of myself, could tell my body what to do and my body would respond, to this forty-five, this furtive, stealthy forty-five coming up from behind and stealing my energy and my optimism and my hopes for the rest of my life, because most of the rest of my life has already happened.



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Garage, Nelson NH

I'm a crew foreman at Custom Kitchen Cabinets. My tie separates me from the crew, but it's tucked in below the third button on my short-sleeved shirt, which separates me from management. I wasn't sure where I belonged after I got promoted out of the crew. At first I celebrated, went home and told Jane, and took her out for a big dinner at the Holiday. But then I had to do the job, and all my friends kept saying that I'd changed, that the job had gone to my head. I told them that they were slacking off just because I was in charge and they thought they could get away with it. My boss, Mr. Jim Landley, kept telling me to get more production out of the men, that I wasn't doing a good job, that he'd have to put me down in the crew again. I didn't want that, a step backward. It wasn't just the money, although that's part of it. But going back down, to the crew would be like when a cop goes to jail. He's a real target. That's what I'd be like. A cop in jail. Plus, you get used to the money. Before the promotion, we were living on the edge of bankruptcy. Now we've got a dishwasher and a new TV, and I bought Jane a late model car of her own. Getting put down to crew would push me right over. So I learned to push the men. And after work, they would take over a couple of booths at Ruby's while I sat at the bar by myself. After a couple of weeks, I started going straight home after work. Jane's happy.

Every time I come to see Mr. James B. Landley, he's on the phone. I guess he's a busy guy, very important. He's about thirty years old, with blond hair and a blond moustache and blue eyes. He's not such a bad guy. He's friendly. He calls me Jack. I call him Mr. Landley. I wonder about this as I watch the metal balls swing back and forth. I begin to feel I'm being hypnotized, falling asleep, so I look past them out the smoke-gray-tinted windows at the industrial park our offices sit in the middle of. Why they call it an Industrial Park? There is no manufacturing here, no real industry, but only corporate offices; and it is not a park with swings on chains and sandboxes with toddlers and basketball courts swarming with kids throwing their intense hopes up with a ball and praying that it is, if not a basket, at least not, sweet Jesus, an air ball. Anything but an air ball.

Cool air pours down on me from an overhead duct. Even though it's only seventy degrees outside, the air in this sealed building would become unbearably warm and stale if it were not artificially cooled.

I can tell now from the tone of Mr. Landley's voice that his telephone conversation is ending. I

prepare myself, sit up straight, clear my throat. How did I get to this age I can die at, this age that has seen the tortuous progression of my forty-five years, and yet still Mr. Landley calls me Jack, and I call him Mr. Landley? This time, I decide as he puts down the phone, I'm going to call him Jim.

"Jack," he says, reaching across the desk to shake my hand.

"Mr. Landley," I say as I jump up and clasp his hand in mine. It's sweaty, and I notice the black phone is wet where he's been holding it. "How are you?"

"Jack, I don't have much time, so I won't bullshit you, okay? Here's the deal." Mr. Landley leans forward and lowers his voice. He wants this to be confidential. "We are not in such good shape, Jack. It's a bastard market out there. If we're going to survive, somebody's got to take a hit, Jack, and I'm afraid that the somebodies are us."

He pauses between each sentence, as if weighing, measuring, checking my response. I don't know why he thinks he has to talk so slowly to me.

"What kind of hit, Mr. Landley?" I still taste, though it's now sour, the coffee I had at break time.

"All management is taking a five-percent cut, and all supervisors, including you, are taking a ten-percent hit."

"Ten percent?"

"I know you'll want to help by doing your part, Jack."

"Why is management only taking a five percent? You . . . they make twice as much as I do."

"That's just it, Jack. By changing those percentages, we come out even in real dollars, and everything is fair."

"Well, what about the crew?"

"Union. Can't touch them."

"But I can't afford it." The coffee now is bubbling up; sour milk-taste hits my throat, rising. "I'm not even getting by on what I have."

"None of us like it, Jack, but . . ."

"Twenty-four years."

"A long time," he says, and I know that if I don't accept this pay cut, I'm fired. Twenty-four years has done nothing but aged me to the point where I can't quit and find another job. Twenty-four years has wrapped itself around me like a mummy sheet, and I can't move. Now I know, suddenly, with the clarity of fear, that twenty-four years means nothing to the company. And I know, not quite so suddenly, because it seems I've known all along, what it means to me.

You can help me out with this, Jack. Make it easy on me. Come on, man."

"But twenty-four years! Maybe I don't want to make it easy, Mr. Landley. Maybe this shouldn't be easy." My stomach feels cold. I'm becoming nauseated, but I don't know if it's because of what I'm saying, or if it's because I'm afraid I might stop talking. "Maybe I just don't want to help you."

"You're upset, Jack. Why don't we go to lunch," he says. "We'll talk. I need you on the team, Jack. Come on. I'll put it on my expenses, really blow you to a big one. What do you say? Do me the favor."

His smile is tight and spreads across his face horizontally instead of curving up naturally. At first I think he's afraid that I'll quit. The quick movements of his eyes seem to confirm this. But the thought settles that it's not fear; it's a wish to avoid the inconvenience my leaving would cause him. Twenty-four years does not make me indispensable, but it makes me convenient.

I don't want to go to lunch with him. He'll ask me how Ellen is doing in school, and that will remind me of tuition payments. He'll ask me how Jane likes her job, his way of saying that we need two incomes to survive, and what would *I* be if Jane has a job and *I'm* the cause of our destruction? He'll be solicitous and ask about the house, the car, a hundred things to remind me how much I need this job, and I don't want to run the risk of crumbling, giving in to so much as a smile.

"I don't owe you a favor, Jim," I say, and the word *Jim* tastes like a mint. "I'm going out for a while. I'm going to consider this. I'll let you know." I reach out and stop the clacking chrome balls.

I'm not sure what I'm doing, and I'm a little scared, but I get up and leave. I'll be back, of course. I need the job. Where else can I go? But I *will* take an hour or maybe two.

The air outside is fine and full of oxygen and just the right temperature. But in the car it's too warm.

I head south on Route 5, looking for a park. Maybe I'll sit in the car for a while, take a nap. Maybe get out and lie under a tree. I turn the air-conditioning off and roll down the window, but the noise at sixty miles an hour makes me jumpy. I turn the radio on. I want to hear "Revolution." I want to hear "Positively Fourth Street." I want to hear "The Boxer." But the radio plays Everclear and The Wallflowers and Wagner. I shut it off.

I'm all the way down Route 5, to where Governor Street turns and connects with I-91, so I turn, too. I still haven't found a park, but I know where there's one over the bridge in Hartford. I used to live near it a very long time ago. I negotiate all the turns, the complicated intersections, stop lights, stop signs, yield signs, and I do it with one hand spinning the wheel, turning that old Ford as if it's my dream machine, and I end up at Goodwin Park.

"Goody," I call to it, aloud, like all the kids did when we were all the kids. I pull in off of Maple Avenue, park along the curb, and look at the basketball courts thirty feet away. There are no nets on the rims. That's the first thing I notice. Two courts, four baskets, and none with a net. You can buy a net for a couple of bucks. You can outfit every rim on every court in every park in Hartford for less than the cost of one Jim Landley lunch, and someone would do it, too, if it could be put on an expense account.

When I was a kid, the courts were black. Now they're green, with a three-point arc. Otherwise, they're the same as I remember.

There are nine players, all black and tall and muscular, and they handle the ball as if it is their best friend, someone with whom they have spent a lot of time, someone they like and can talk to, someone whose moves they can anticipate, someone whose sentences they can finish. I admire this and wish I still had such a friend.

These kids are wearing expensive sneakers, made of leather and thick-looking and not even called sneakers anymore. When I was a kid, I had a pair of black canvas jobs that wore out early in the summer but were not replaced until the following summer when my feet had grown too large for them. Growth, not wear, was the only condition for replacement.

It's smooth, watching them make their moves, bounce their passes, take their shots. It's as if I'm watching some new organism more highly evolved than man. It *is* man, of course, but man on a higher plane, man with a higher purpose, unselfish man. It is a team! I haven't thought this way about a team since I was a kid. I know it's romantic, but I feel enormous. All the cynicism of years piled on years rolls out the car door and into the dust at my feet as I get out and walk toward the courts to watch them.

I have my jacket slung over my back, and I try to walk cool, add a little to my stride. It's as if I'm saying, yeah, I played a little when I was younger. I was part of a team. No big deal, of course. I wasn't a star player. Far from it, but I had what they have: the sense of belonging, and not just belonging to the team, but belonging on the courts, belonging under that net.

But conditions have changed. I'm a suit and tie. My wingtips are collecting mud and dust. They'll have to be cleaned when I get home. Why am I in clothes that are appropriate to Jim Landley's office and not to a playground?

The kids stop playing as I sit down on a bench facing the court. It's quiet except for the eerie, echoey sound of a bouncing basketball. People turn from the swings and sandboxes and look at the white suit-and-tie and the black kids checking each other out. Then one of the kids says, "Pass it in, pass it in." And another kid takes the ball out of bounds and throws it to him. The other players go to their defense. They don't want to lose a basket while wasting time looking at me. The kid with the ball is on the shirts team. The skins are a shorter team, and they're missing one man. Skins are losing. Up close now, I can differentiate the action, see the mistakes. It's no longer a flow, but a disjointed rout. The kids are talking to each other, and the language is English, but they're talking so fast and slangy that I can only understand parts of what they say, and those parts more by their body movements than by my processing of what I hear.

One kid is not very good, but he's a tough, mean-looking kid, and his teammates don't complain when he shoots without setting up or when he passes into the hands of an opponent. He's a skin. There are ugly scars on his ribs, and one on his back that runs nearly the length of his spine, but his face is smooth and clear. All of the kids on both teams are sweating on this May afternoon.

I settle into the game, almost to the point of shouting encouragement and advice to the skins, when the action suddenly stops, and the players look off past me. I turn around. Another kid is coming toward us. He's tall and flabby, but not beefy. One of the skins on the court turns to the skin with the

scars

"I told you, man. You didn't believe me, but I told you he'd show up."

"He's all messed up." Scars' voice, low and threatening, rumbles across the court. "Shit!"

I turn around again. The newcomer is looking at the ground, humming. The song he hums is very fast, but his feet are moving slowly. By the time he reaches the court, most of the players are lined up at the water fountain. Only the skin with the scars waits for him.

"Rodney, what the hell?"

"I'm all right, man."

"Yeah, you just fine," Scars says, then looks at me and pulls the new kid over to the other side of the court where I can't hear the rest of the conversation, but can see from the gestures that Rodney is not favored to play in this game. Scars pushes the new kid, and the kid puts his hands out, palms up, gesturing, pleading. Scars pushes him again. The kid shuffles back across the court. He sits down on the bench next to me.

"What's up?" I ask him as he sits down. He looks at me, and I see in his eyes a kind of cloudiness, a film like my dog Pepper who is twelve years old and going blind has, only hers is green and his is gray.

"You got any money?" he asks.

"No."

We sit and watch as the players come back on the court and start the game up again. A tall skin passes to Scars. Scars feints left, then right, then puts the ball down to dribble. A shirt steals it immediately and passes it to a tall shirt waiting down by the other basket. Because the shirts have an extra man, the tall one doesn't have to get back on defense. He vacations under his own basket waiting for the pass and the easy hoop. He lays this one in effortlessly.

"They should put someone back with him," I tell my bench partner.

"You sure you got no money?"

"I'm sure." We watch the game for a little while. Skins are down five baskets by my count, but it could be more.

"They can't put a guy back. They do that, they never get a basket of their own."

Scars goes in under a shirt, starts to come up. The shirt is planted, both feet. Scars knocks him down, goes up with the ball, misses.

"Foul!" Scars yells as he chases the basketball off the court and into the dust.

"Bullshit!" says the shirt, getting up off the court. "I had both feet down, man."

"It's a foul, man. I got two shots." Scars heads for the foul line. The shirt gets in his way, but backs up as he talks, his arms flying out from his side.

"Don't be bullshittin' me, man. I was planted."

"I'll plant your ass," Scars says, backing the shirt outside the arc and turning around, his back to the shirt, ready to take his foul shots.

"I'll tell you what, we'll ask the man," the shirt says, looking in my direction. I feel good. I was hoping they'd ask me. I saw the play.

"The hell with the man! I'm takin' my two shots!"

The shirt pays no attention to Scars' last comment, but runs across the court, trying to get a judgment before Scars takes his shot and makes the whole point irrelevant.



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Garage Still Life

"You was sittin' right here, man. You see that play?"

"I saw it," I say. Scars stops bouncing the ball and turns toward us. I look back at him as I tell the shirt, "You were planted."

"I told you!" The shirt turns around and goes back on the court.

"What is he, some expert? He an NBA ref or something?" Scars asks.

"It don't matter. He seen the play!" Both of them ignore me now. I've given them all the information I have to give. Now they'll just argue between themselves whether it's good information or not.

"I used to play ball," I say. "I used to play pretty well." I want to be involved in this decision.

"Used to don't mean shit!"

"Maybe not," I say, "but I still saw the play, and the kid was planted."

"Why don't you mind your business, man? You see what they doin' to us out here? They got five players. We got four."

"That doesn't mean you should cheat."

"Cheat?" Scars brings his eyebrows together, low on his forehead. I have never seen a fiercer looking, angrier human being. "Playing five on four ain't cheating? What do you know about cheating?"

"I know plenty about cheating. I do it every day. What about this guy?" I point my thumb at Rodney next to me on the bench. "He'd make your five."

"He's all messed up."

"Yeah, I know. I heard you say that. What do you mean? He's on drugs or something?" I have sense through my argument that a crowd is beginning to encircle my bench.

"What are you, a cop?"

"No," I say as I begin to realize how much I miss playing ball. I feel a sudden, breath-taking nostalgia for the game that is no longer mine for the asking. I cannot walk out of my parents' house on a Saturday morning and join a pickup game. I'll never again feel my body respond to the motions I put it through, not yet knowing the limits I can reach, not knowing the limits that will be put upon me.

"He's just messed up, that's all."

"You're a jerk," I say to Rodney.

"What? What the hell?" He leans forward on the bench, and I think he's trying to get up, but more likely he'll fall over.

"It's not so much that you let your team down, and now they have to play with only four guys. But you have a chance to play! You won't always have that chance! You'll want to play some day but you'll be too old or too screwed up or nobody you know will be playing anymore — they'll be doing their jobs. Man, you really piss me off!" The crowd seems to be listening closely to what I'm telling this kid. People from all over the playground have come to see some action, but there isn't any action. They wait. I expect them to just break up, go their separate ways, perhaps mumbling in disgust that they didn't get a better show, but they don't move. I said something not quite challenging, not quite hostile, but something in opposition to what was happening, and now they expect a resolution. That's how their lives go, I think to myself. There is resolution. I'm too used to things drifting away in ambiguity and indecisiveness. They wait.

"Lend me your sneakers," I say to Rodney. I bend over and start untying my shoes.

"What'd you say?"

"Lend me your sneakers."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Shirt says. "This ain't right. You ain't been asked to play."

"I know it. I'm asking to play. I'll be the fifth skin."

"Not on my team," Scars says, turning his back to me and shooting the ball to the hoop. It bounces off the rim.

"You need a guy. I'm volunteering."

"Don't need a guy so bad we got to take you on."

"Here," I say to the kid next to me and hand him a five-dollar bill. He stares at me. I give him another five. "That's all I've got," I say, thinking of my job and the hour or two I'll be docked. He undoes his laces.

Nobody on the court has said anything since Scars missed his shot. They're waiting for me. By some default, I will play. I would like to think there is an inherent fairness in sports, a tolerance, but I know that that's probably not true. They are short a man. I badly want to play, to be part of this team. And although they probably think I'll play poorly, perhaps *because* they think I'll play poorly, they'll allow it. I put on the sneakers, leave my shirt and tie and jacket on the bench, and race to the center of the court. I can hear the birds in the trees in the silence. I can hear the wind. I hear a laugh — low and unsure. Then someone passes the ball in and there is the talk and chatter of the game.

"Pass it! Pass it!"

"Shoot!"

"Box out! Box out!"

"Short! Rebound! Rebound!"

And I have the ball in my hands. It is dirty, and its mottled surface feels organic. I am reminded of something just beyond the reach of my consciousness. Then the ball is knocked out of my hands. I look at one of the shirts as he puts it up and through the circle.

"Don't just stand there when you get the ball!" Scars is in my face.

"Sorry." I want to say more, but there's nothing more to say.

"You take the ball out." He hands me the ball and I step out of bounds and pass it in to him over the waving hands of one of the shirts.

Scars dribbles, pulls up, shoots. As he does, I slide in under the basket, put my back against one of the shirts and move him out of the play. Scars' shot misses. I grab the rebound and whip it back out to him. He takes another shot. This one goes through. He points at me. I laugh. It's only a moment, not even a moment, because we have to get back on defense, but I flush with pride. My side is aching, and I don't know if this is a side stitch like I used to get as a kid when I was winded, or if it's my scarred liver bulging against my ribs. The pain or the shortness of breath or the fear slows me down. I get to the other end of the court too late and miss a rebound. A shirt has me blocked all the way. Then the shirt puts it through the hoop.

Scars doesn't say anything, but shakes his head as he hands me the ball to take out. Again I pass it in. We go up and down the court. I'm not playing well, but at least the shirts can't leave a man under their basket for easy points. Scars yells out a score as he sinks a basket. Play stops for a moment while there is an argument. It is resolved. We decide to say that we're tied up. We're not, really, but it's late afternoon and some of the players want to call it quits, so it doesn't really matter. Next basket. Next score wins the game.

To make it fair, we tip off at center court. Our tallest guy is six inches shorter than theirs. I throw the ball up. Their guy bats it to one of his players. It feels as if a rib is about to puncture through my right side, but it doesn't matter, because this is the last chance. We have to stop them and then score. There is no reason now, at this late stage in the game, to hold myself in reserve, to be conservative. I run to their basket. I put my hands up and plant my feet. The shirt pulls up two feet short of me and shoots over my head. I jump, deflect the ball. I don't even look to see if one of our guys gets it, but run down the court as fast as I can. And in the running, time slows and I can see myself running, and I can hear, distinctly and particularly, every voice of every player behind me. I turn knowing that I am turning to receive Scar's pass, and as I turn and extend my arms over my head and jump, I feel the ball in my palms, as I knew it would be. I twist in mid-air and, using the momentum of the pass and a slight pushing, spinning motion of my right hand and arm, I take my shot. It spins toward the basket. I see each seam. I see the lettering turning away from me. I see the basket and I pray, more quickly than a prayer of words, if not to become the hero, if not to sink this basket, then please, dear, sweet Jesus, don't let this last shot be an air ball.

And You Might Like to Try....

Our Working Lives: Short Stories of People and Work, Ed. Bonnie Jo Campbell and Larry Smith. Ohio, Bottom Dog Press: 2000. Included in the anthology are writers Stuart Dybek, Daniel Chacón, Jim Daniels, Percival Everett, Nancy Zafris, Phillip Sterling, Gary Eller, Kathleen DeGrave, Philip Heldrich, Jeff Vande Zande, Jeanne Bryner, Daniel Coshnear, & R Yañez.

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