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Will Jawando

My Seven Black Fathers: A Young Activist's Memoir of Race, Family, and the Mentors Who Made Him Whole

Kalfani and I met on the school basketball court in fifth grade. It was the late eighties, early nineties, the “golden age of basketball,” a time when Black players dominated the sport and pop culture. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s skyhook¹, executed with unprecedented coordination and precision, would help him become the NBA’s² all-time leading scorer. Hakeem Olajuwon’s dream shake³ made him almost impossible to defend against. Shaq⁴, the all-star center and the face of Toys for Tots⁵, starred in his own video game.

And then there was the iconic image called “Jumpman” of Michael Jordan⁶ soaring through the air from the free throw line, one arm outstretched toward the hoop, the other palm spread at his side as if to squelch gravity. More than a logo, “Jumpman” remains a symbol of potential, excellence, and the dream of being not only the best but also the greatest.

A segregated institution until the 1950s, the NBA cultivated the status of Black men as global role models and icons for all Americans. But for Black boys, Black athletes have always felt like they belonged to us. Once, our heroes practiced jump shots in dusty schoolyards just like we did. This fact meant the possibility existed for us to play in front of millions of fans, just like them, if we gave it everything we had.

The confidence that the famous ballers exuded I craved from the time I was in fifth grade. Above all, I sought a sense of belonging. For a biracial Black boy raised by a white mother who had split from my Nigerian father, basketball became my entry point to an authentic Black identity. In my neighborhood of Long Branch, a mostly Black, brown, and immigrant working-class community in Silver Spring, Maryland, right outside DC⁷, basketball defined Black boyhood. You proved yourself on the asphalt court, and at my school, the gatekeeper of that court was Kalfani.

As a nine-year-old, I remember first peering at Kalfani playing through a chain-link fence. Brown-skinned, keen-featured, and long-limbed, Kalfani was a natural-born leader. For weeks I watched from afar as each

¹ *Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's skyhook*: (b. 1947) former basketball player. The skyhook is his signature shot.

² National Basketball Association, professional league in America

³ *Hakeem Olajuwon's dream shake*: (b. 1963) former basketball player. The dream shake is his signature move.

⁴ *Shaquille O'Neal*: (b. 1972) former basketball player

⁵ *Toys for Tots*: American charity program

⁶ *Michael Jordan*: (b. 1963) former basketball player

⁷ Washington DC

boy made his way to the three-point line and had his shot at becoming “captain.” Kalfani was usually the first to make a basket, with a perfectly formed jump shot that flew high in the air and more often than not hit the net only. Kalfani judiciously picked the teams, matching each player with a worthy competitor. He also called all the fouls and outs, and the other boys, across grade levels, looked to him for guidance.

Watching my classmates gathered on the court to serve up braggadocios, dreams, and layups⁸, I thought their goals of besting Reggie Miller’s⁹ three-point percentage¹⁰ or getting drafted to the NBA seemed totally reachable. In my eyes, they were capable of magic, while I, incapable of handling rejection, never dared ask if I could play. Then, one day, Kalfani shouted, “We short a man!” With only nine players, the five-on-five game would become four-on-four and one boy would have to sit out. The boys were already arguing who would take the bench.

“Hey, you!” Kalfani waved in my direction. “You wanna play?”

I glanced around. He was talking to me, the quintessential onlooker. After taking a deep breath, I jogged to the court, little bursts of nausea rising with each footfall. I even stumbled, but the boys were too busy getting hyped up for the game to notice. This was a little like being invited to dance when you have no idea where to place your feet. But things began to roll. The opposing offense loosened his shoulders, called “Check!” and threw to his defender. The defender passed back; the game began. Almost immediately I was winded and struggled to keep up. But after a few minutes something in my body clicked on while something in my mind clicked off. I stopped thinking about how I played and started to play.

Kalfani launched a chest pass to me, and I staggered backward a bit, but somehow I managed to hang on to the ball. While the other boys chuckled, Kalfani flashed over to the hoop with his right arm raised high in the air, screaming, “I’m open! I’m open!” Breathless but wired, I passed him the ball, he drove in for a layup, and just like that, I had my first ever assist.

After that day, Kalfani took me under his wing. It never occurred to me back then to ask him, “Why me?” and unfortunately, I would never get that chance. We would meet up before the other boys got to the court and take turns shooting or rebounding for each other. He made shooting the ball from the three-point line look effortless. I would put everything into trying to get the ball in the net, throwing it up with both hands, only for the ball to ricochet off the basket, rattling the entire post.

“Just keep shooting,” he’d say before passing me the ball again. And again. And again. “You just gotta practice.”

Kalfani and I didn’t only play ball together. We met at the corner of Wayne Avenue and Fenton Street in downtown Silver Spring to walk to school together in the mornings. Kalfani would often walk with me the few blocks to my parents’ office when school let out, and we hung out at each other’s homes on the weekends.

Kalfani’s building reminded me of where I lived with my mother after my parents divorced. The lock on the lobby door was busted. The scent of urine hung in the vestibule where supermarket circulars were scattered on the floor. A fluorescent light bulb flickered and buzzed in the permanently out-of-service elevator. Sometimes there were older boys on the stairs smoking weed and talking smack¹¹. Kalfani nodded

⁸ a type of basketball shot

⁹ *Reggie Miller*: (b. 1965) former basketball player

¹⁰ *three-point percentage*: a basketball player statistic

¹¹ *talking smack*: teasing and insulting each other

60 at them, gave and received pounds¹². No one extended their hand to me, and I didn't test the waters by offering my own. These boys had known one another all their lives. I had known Kalfani for only a few months back then.

65 One of the boys who grew up in the building was a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old kid named Shay, who wore two-carat studs in each ear. Whenever he saw Kalfani, he'd say, "Look hard, y'all! That boy there" – he'd point – "he's gonna make it to the NBA! Y'all can say you knew him when he was getting his game on, and you punk-asses were standing around here high as shit!"

Some of the boys' faces would harden with jealousy, while others, maybe because they were high, appeared giddy, others blank. I tried not to meet anyone's eyes because a glance can easily be mistaken for a stare, which pinpoints where 99 percent of beefing starts in the hood. But I agreed with Shay. Kalfani would make it to the top. And he would take his mother with him. No question there.

70 A Caribbean immigrant, Kalfani's mother, Mrs. Hogg, had at least two jobs: one cleaning houses across town in Bethesda¹³ and another subbing for in-home nursing aides. I rarely saw her, even when I spent the night, but her love of her kids was palpable and filled their home. There were always foil-covered plates of home-cooked food left for dinner, notes about doing homework, and brief phone calls to check in on Kalfani when we arrived home.

75 In time, I began to absorb Kalfani into my own being. I mimicked his confident stride. I hyped myself to "Ruff It Off," a go-go¹⁴ song by the Junkyard Band¹⁵, which he'd introduced me to, before every game. With his encouragement, I approached a really cute girl at our school, and she didn't tell me to get lost. Eventually, most of the kids at school forgot about my white mother, whose appearance when she dropped me off would awkwardly put my biraciality on display. I was a young kid, struggling with the loss of my
80 Nigerian heritage and my name, with my parents' divorce and my father's departure, and in its place, I found the belonging and acceptance that Kalfani's friendship and basketball granted me. Even the Rec Specs¹⁶ I wore after repeatedly breaking my glasses drew only occasional disses.

Late one afternoon, Kalfani walked me out of his apartment, and in the hallway, lingering on one of the landings, we encountered some of the older boys, including Shay. "Yo, there's my man," Shay said.

85 "Hey!" Kalfani gave and received the standard round of pounds and fist bumps as we headed down the stairs.

"Yo," Shay called after me, his voice deeper than I had ever heard it before. I kept walking.

"Yo," he said a second time. He wasn't addressing me; he was commanding me. I stopped on the stairs and pivoted toward him. Punk¹⁷ status awaited me if I didn't.

90 Shay's diamond studs gleamed as he squinted like a marksman, raising his thumb above his fist and stretching out his index finger in the shape of a gun. He aimed at the dead center of my pounding chest. My hands were down at my sides, but I felt them shake. I wanted to bolt but didn't dare move. I had to be able

¹² fist bumps

¹³ fashionable area north of Washington DC

¹⁴ music genre

¹⁵ *Junkyard Band*: American band from the 1980s

¹⁶ *Rec Specs*: protective sports glasses

¹⁷ loser

to look Kalfani in the eye again, so I had to hold steady. Shay broke into a wild laugh as he dropped his hand to his side. The other boys thought it was funny too.

95 “I’m just fucking with you,” Shay said.

“William,” Kalfani half pleaded, his feelings cut like a deck of cards¹⁸. I was Kalfani’s brother but so were these boys, and at that moment, they outnumbered me.

100 “Later,” I said, facing down the stairs, mindful of the shadows at my rear and those that surrounded Kalfani, Shay, and the rest of the boys: gun violence, incarceration, premature death. What I would come to see years later is how that stairwell moment’s awful eeriness foreshadowed Kalfani’s tragic fate.

105 Things changed between Kalfani and me freshman year when my mother enrolled me in DC’s prestigious St. John’s College High School on scholarship, and we moved from urban Long Branch to the middle-class suburb of Beltsville, located in Prince George’s County. For many Black boys, the transition from middle school to high school invites the lure of the hustle and street rituals that can beget violence. While I started playing high school basketball in a sheltered, racially integrated setting, Kalfani got to know the fundamentals of street life. Our daily basketball games became monthly hangouts, and eventually we saw each other just once or twice a year. Until we didn’t see each other, period.

Still, I got the call.

110 “Kalfani is dead,” Derrick, our mutual classmate and teammate on the basketball team at St. Michael’s, said. “He got shot.”

115 Kalfani wasn’t the first or last person I knew who was lost to gun violence, but he was certainly the closest. I can recall his funeral only in nightmare-like fragments. Though I’ve long witnessed the impact of ubiquitous gun violence on the lives of young Black men, I came to recognize the depth of my own trauma and posttraumatic stress only when digging into my memory for this book. I was forced to confront how little I’ve been able to bear thinking about the murders of my childhood friends.

The pain of their senseless deaths gives rise to a primal rage that, even now, I find difficult to manage. Why are Black boys worth so little when our potential is so enormous? Why do our society and culture tolerate the sight of our bodies left to bleed out on the street? Why do we, as Black boys and men, tacitly accept that for some of us killing each other simply seems like a brutal requisite for a doomed life?

120 I remember Kalfani was wearing a black suit and his hands were crossed at his waist. Mrs. Hogg sat in the pew, slumped over, looking off into the distance, devastated. I remember kneeling on the bench at the casket and praying for his soul and his mother. Struggling with difficult childhood memories has awakened me to how compassion for others can be traced back to the puncture wounds grief leaves in every one of us.

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¹⁸ *cut like a deck of cards*: split in two