

## Celebrity Dreams (III)

I first saw him in '89. My employer at the time bought a block of tickets for every home game, and one day—I'm not sure why, maybe it was destiny—I decided to go. He scored 81 points; a big game, even for him. And it was a revelation for me. I'd seen him on TV, but it wasn't until I saw him play in person that I understood.

First, there's the physical thing. He's beautiful. I know the usual thing is to talk about how he has the perfect athlete's body, and to focus on his biceps, abs, and calf muscles—which have perfect definition, by the way: you can see exactly where each of them attaches to its ankle. But I notice the small things, the elements most people overlook, like his ears. You can look at his face and never notice them—which is the way it should be—but when you see him in profile, you can't help but think, "Those are incredible looking ears." They're the perfect size, neither too big nor too small. And they work well, too; he has the aural equivalent of 20/10 vision.

Also overlooked are his hands. They are unbelievably wide, with long, slender fingers. He doesn't hold the ball, he wraps his hand around it. I probably don't need to point out that he has an incredible grip. And if you pay close attention, you'll see that his nails are expertly manicured.

He has movie star good looks, and it's hard to select any one thing about his face, but if I had to choose I'd say that his mouth is his best feature. His teeth are straight and white, the kind of teeth you find in the child of a dentist—which he is. And his smile really is infectious. Watch the crowd sometime: when he smiles, they smile, too.

Not that all he does is smile. In fact, he may have the most expressive mouth that ever lived. My favorite is when he's concentrating and he touches his upper lip with his tongue; you can just imagine the salty taste of his sweat. And then there's the frown. It's rare, but when it happens you feel the disappointment, like you personally let him down.

He's in excellent shape, of course. Body fat, anaerobic capacity, at-rest pulse—he's in the top one percent of all professional athletes on any test you can think of, and that's why it was such a shock when he started wearing a knee brace. I thought it was a joke, or maybe an intentional handicap mandated by the league in an attempt to make the game a little more competitive for the other players. If that was the plan, it failed. He scored 62 points on the first night he wore it.

I should probably mention his skin color. I never used to notice skin color. I mean, I'd see blacks, and brown people, and whites, but I never really looked at a person's color. His skin is a shade of black that looks completely natural, not exotic. It's like a blend of all the other colors.

His mental abilities are just as amazing. Like all great athletes he can lose himself completely in the moment, but he takes it to another level. He can

immerse himself, but he's still able to hold something back; that's how he always knows what's coming. It's like there's a part of him up in the stands, watching the game and letting his partner down on the court know what's going on.

It's impossible to explain to someone who isn't a basketball fan just how much better than everyone else he is. I remember when I started understanding this myself. It was another overwhelming game; he was controlling the tempo, making every shot, and it was clearly up to him whether he'd hit 70. Then I noticed...something. At first I thought it might be a pattern in the way he played, but over the next few months I realized it was something bigger. It didn't come all at once, but I finally figured it out: the hand he dribbles with, the foot he leads off with, the way he pulls his shorts up—they're words in a language.

This is when my sense of awe began, when I broke the code and understood that, not only does he dominate every game like no one ever will again, he's delivering a monologue every time he steps onto the court.

Sometimes he talks about his day, how his golf game went, that sort of thing. On other evenings he's more focused, and he spends those nights offering a commentary on the game in progress, pointing out little details you might otherwise miss, and explaining what to look for on the next fast break. And I remember when he was having trouble with his wife: for months he talked about how much he missed her, and the things he regretted, and the things he wished he could change.

I stopped watching the game long ago. I go to see him now. I've got a season ticket for a seat three rows behind the bench.

And he knows I'm listening. Sometimes, when he's walking back to the bench, he'll nod to me. I feel like we're becoming friends. It's a real honor, this chance to get to know someone I admire so much. He's successful at everything he does, and everywhere he goes people recognize him. He's almost like a god, and we should all be grateful for the chance to see him play. I know I am.

I want to be like Mike.