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On Play

By *E. Wyatt Jones*

When I was a kid and my primary pastime was going outside to play with the neighborhood kids, I knew every house that had children in it on the street all the way until the end of the road. I knew what car their parents drove – so I could ask them to come outside and play when they got home – I knew how old they were within a year or two, and I knew what they liked to play when they did come outside. Often, there were others already outside waiting for me and my brother when we got home from school. They would yell from whoever's parents' yard or driveway that had been taken over for the afternoon to my dad's red pickup truck as we passed by and I or my brother would yell, inches behind my dad's seat – where he was concentrating on the road for a rogue ball or child from between cars – that we would be out in a minute.

We were excited every day to go out. So much so we would have to be told not to just drop our bags inside and turn around; we were supposed to take our school clothes off first and change into our ripped, stained, too small clothes bought only six months before.

When I was very young there were dozens of us in the neighborhood. Some were farther down the street than others, so I didn't know them as well. I lived at the end of the road; a cul-de-sac that felt more insulated than other parts of the same road that only stretched a half mile. I knew everyone in that small, sheltered place. Jennifer, three houses down, lived with her grandparents and was a year older than me. Samuel across the street shared my last name and was four years older. My next-door neighbor Jordan went to my same elementary school and was four years older than me as well. He was held back a grade. The list goes on: Matthew, Levanda, Chaliya, Aaron. They all were there a part of that small place that I knew intimately and remains intact today, though only in my mind.

If the ground was dry, we would play football. There was a yard just across the street and down one house that was continuous from one house to the next. That was our field. Me, my brother, Jordan, Samuel, Jennifer, and Aaron made up the teams most days. With their age advantage, Jordan and Samuel were always on one team, and the rest on the other. Opposing driveways were endzones. Jordan and Samuel would strategize on their end, drawing plays on the ball to represent the field. Us younger ones would always have the same strategy: run towards Jordan and grab his legs, and then, when he could only move in dragging steps, one of us would jump into his torso in an attempt to topple him. Our rudimentary understanding of physics yielded results when we could get the first grapple in before he had the ball. After that, he was gone. Without the distraction of receiving the perfect spiral throw that Samuel managed to pitch across the yard every single time, he took off. He spun around the younger kids, a foot or more shorter than him. He could virtually sail over our heads with a jump if he tried, and this is not to mention that with any modicum of momentum he could plow over any one of us. To us, he was a legend. He was Shockey, Jordan, and Bolt.

When I was ten, I found out Jordan was moving. His dad was military, an air force mechanic, and he was being stationed to a base in Germany. At that point, I really didn't know what this meant except for the fact that Germany was another country, and he was not going to be around anymore. A few weeks after that, interspersed with after-school football games, I said goodbye to him, my mom gave his family some cookies as a parting gift, and then he left. I remember crying for a while after I went inside that evening.

When I was eleven, Samuel started high school. He still came out every once in a while, to play basketball in his driveway at a hoop that was as old as he was, paint flaking off of the pole and backboard. We would naturally be outside already – riding an amalgam of bikes and scooters and skateboards up and down the same quarter mile of asphalt – and would flock over to him to play. Though it wasn't playing any more. We would 'hang out.' The younger kids would throw the basketball with excessive force that would either have it career over the backboard into the adjacent yard or smash into the backboard sending it flying in the opposite

direction where we would watch it suspended for a brief moment directly in the line of the sun, the ball an eclipsing moon of our creation. Samuel would patiently get it from wherever it landed, shoot for himself a few times, and then go back inside. This was new to us as it was still daylight most of the time. When we asked why he had to leave, he always said that dinner was ready.

His gradual disappearance left a handful of us outside consistently. We still enjoyed playing whatever it is we decided to do that day, but it was different. It was just the young ones now, left to our own devices. In seventh grade, I was twelve, and I remember seeing no one outside on the way home in the back of the truck. It was sunny outside though, so I went out and went to Jennifer's door. I knocked and she answered after a moment. I asked her if she wanted to come outside.

"Not today, I just want to watch TV."

Disappointed but understanding, I left and walked to Aaron's house the next door down. He was playing a video game that he got the previous day. Matthew, two doors down and across the street, was getting ready to go to tryouts for JV baseball.

I nodded, said that I'd see him later, and walked back to my house and sat on the doorstep for a little while. I decided I would get my bike out to occupy myself for the time being. I hopped on and circled the cul-de-sac a few times before I started down the street. I wasn't supposed to go past the stop sign a little down the way without letting someone know, but I just wanted to take a quick peek around the bend in the road. I stopped just where the road started to straighten again and looked down the yards and sidewalks on either side. Five or six houses down, I saw a group of kids I didn't recognize; they all were a handful of years younger than me. I didn't go try to talk to them.

I rode back into the driveway of my house – seeing that no one changed their mind – and put my bike up in the shed like I had done hundreds of times before. Today it was still bright outside. The sun hadn't passed the tops of the trees yet, and the streetlight weren't even close to turning on. Their flickering amber glow meant we had to go inside when I was younger than I was then. There were no gnats in the air, buzzing in a cloud around my mouth, nose, and eyes causing me to sputter and swat while the others laughed. The knees of my pants were clean and dry, free from dirt and the dampness of crushed grass after a good tackle. I couldn't feel sweat beginning to dry on me like a film that made my nightly shower even more transformative. I walked into the house and peered through the front window once more, just to make sure, before turning to go upstairs.

Driving through my old stomping grounds on my way home to visit my parents always leaves me marveling at what has changed and how fast. I like to ask about it when I get there. Usually, they would inform me a new shop replaced a vacant building, a road was widened, something mundane. During one of my visits home, however, I was told that a kid – now a grown woman – I used to play with down the street was pregnant with her first child. At the time I was nineteen and she, around twenty-three. Not far removed from when we were children ourselves, I had thought while still being entirely unaware of what the future would hold.

My former playmate's child has been born now. I don't know its name. We haven't talked in many years. I wonder if she stayed in town after her baby was born. I wonder if that child might someday visit their grandparents and toddle or run out into the same yard I did decades ago. If they would play with the same football, though now more worn and decayed than it ever was in my time, with seams burst and only half holding air after being entombed in whatever corner of the garage it might have found itself. I wonder constantly what my own kids might play should they ever come to be; if they will ever find themselves staring up into the sun, blinded and searching for a ball to come sailing into their arms. I wonder if they will make and outgrow their own friends in the same way their dad did, forming their own ironclad memories of the past to carry with them as they go.