

This one is for the “Black Mamba”

For Kobe Bryant – 1978 to 2020

By

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1.

quiet as it's kept, Kobe, you were a once in a lifetime shake
& bake round ball phenom way back in high school,
you could do anything with a basketball in your hands,
so fierce you were, driven to the point where many loved,
hated you in almost equal measure, but that was small stuff,
none of it fazed you, Kobe, because you never cared what others
thought of you, you already knew who you were, and
where you were going, like the lyrics in U2's song, “Lights of Home,”
when Bono sings “Hey, now, do you know my name . . . Hey, now
do you know where I'm going? . . . I can see the lights
in front of me,” and you saw “the lights in front of” you, Kobe,
and you knew exactly where you were going and how and
what you had to do each & every moment of your life to get there,

when you planted your spirit, feet firmly down on the court,
so focused you were on being the very best out there, Kobe
nothing else mattered but playing the game hard to win,
to do whatever possible to outshine all others who stood there
in front of you, was your hold card, your go-to position

from jump, to take no prisoners, so intense, relentlessly fierce

Kobe, you were totally locked in, even way back then, when you were in high school, you bit all opponents in their jugular veins, flicked off all foes like they were bothersome flies or mosquitos, gnats buzzing around in your space, annoying you – even spectators could tell this by the exasperated, concentrated death stare screwed into your intensely, focused face whenever anyone got close – so you beat them down, you know, like stomping worrisome roaches trying to escape your size thirteen basketball tennis shoes encasing your feet and you left their corpses mangled there on the floor

2.

but now in order to go forward with this poem eye have to turn back the clock, Kobe, spin the clock's hands back towards Italy, when you were different though a curious kind of cat, a probing, questioning, innocent young boy growing into yourself, before you quickly became the deadly basketball hitman, an assassin-in-waiting, intensity deep down inside your ruthless self, then the baby tree limbs sprouted up in height – living with your father, Joe “Jellybean” Bryant, a 6 feet 9 inch basketball star himself, balling overseas for AMG Sebastiani, the Italian pro team based in Rieti,

Italy – reached out, stretching to feel the sun and rain
nourishing your baby limbs suddenly grown into branches
sprouting into your new, deadly self, now you begin
to know yourself better – no toady now – Kobe,
you learn to speak Italian, obsessed with the game –
European style – study it like a mad scientist watching
your father and others – six years later, in 1990, when
you were 12 years old, started playing for a youth team,
also in Reggio Emilia, then in 1991, when you were 13,
your father moved back to the United States
to Lower Marion, Pennsylvania, the place of your birth –
a suburb outside of Philadelphia, where soon – rapidly –
you grew into your insanely competitive self,

your dominating game in high school escalated when
you started incorporating things you picked up from pros
like the wizard, Earl “The Pearl” Monroe, a friend of your father’s,
who taught you a few basketball tricks – sleight of hand moves,
slick fakes, wicked crossover dribbles, innovative,
cold-blooded jazz solo licks, quick, black cunning Philadelphia
playground moves, deceptive trick-nology, infused with deep,
slick, breathtaking wah-wah Jimi Hendrix guitar blues
flourishes you began loading all this up into your hoodoo,
Houdini mack, and rap, hip hop linguistic game phrasing
your evolving, magical, switcheroo, shape-shifting spin
around screens and pick and roll blow past game, then you stole

some old changes laid down from the “Big O” – Oscar Robertson’s –
deft pump and fake, then shoot off the dribble with a quick
Jerry West release, then slide off another screen and drain a jump shot,
you took Elgin Baylor’s footwork and uploaded it into your Dr. J-like arsenal
though you couldn’t quite lock down Michael Jordan’s fade away
jumper that caused many round ball player’s deep blues back in the day –
though that too would come your way after you mastered it later

over time, with a whole lot of practice – you soon became
a bigger version of Allen Iverson’s wicked stop, then go,
hesitation moves, with all “The Answer’s” slick deceptions, you
locked that too into your game, leading Lower Marion to a 1996
Pennsylvania State championship and became a high school
All-American superstar, averaging 30.8 points per game

3.

from jump street you had this deep need to play against
the best who happened to land there in front of you,
because you always saw yourself apart from the rest, always the best
that’s just how you were wired, who you were, totally deadly, so
you turned down Duke, Kobe, after they offered a full ride,
because you saw them as less than what your ambition needed,
so instead, supremely confident as you were – bad ass, cocky even –
you took your game with its God-given otherworldly talent
to the pros, where you became the youngest ever

to compete up there against those bad ass “big boys,”
in that elite group of ego-driven ballers, Kobe, like you, but
some toadies too – though not as gifted, cocky as you

4.

your single-minded, steely desire to conquer whoever was there
in front of you with a basketball in their hands, was a challenge
for you, caused you to fiercely catapult your body quickly up in the air
as if it were a rocket lifting off into space, to zoom up, throw down
thunderous, rim slamming dunks, body twisting, mind-blowing layups
with either hand, now you scored almost at will, drop, draining 30 foot,
rainbowing or clotheslining game-winning jump shots,
defenders waving hands futilely in your face, hanging on your arms,
you stare them all down, killing them with your lethal game, Kobe,
earning you the nickname “Black Mamba,” because your scoring binges
were so deadly, on the spot, so true to your attitude, character,
the way you played the game out there on the court you were there
to destroy anyone you played against, to kill all comers,
you were, your gangly limbs, legs gyrating, long arms waving
ever-which-away – a gigantic black widow
spider about to attack a helpless prey in its web, futilely
trying to find a way to escape your furious fight to the death
onslaught, because as soon as they came out there
on the court they were your mortal enemies, Kobe,
so you quickly turned into a lethal, venous mamba snake,

attacked all comers as if there were never a tomorrow
housed the same character as the venomous bite of that legendary Black
African serpent, so you sneered at those you defeated, laughed
in their faces, savaged their spirits, ripped their hearts from their chests,
left gaping bleeding holes in their confidence, Kobe

not enough for you because then you stepped back, figuratively
threw their beating hearts down on the floor,
then stomped them as you kept on steppin,' thrusting your middle finger
like a dagger up into the air as if you were stabbing that enemy to death
the invisible one you always kept deep in your mind

5.

then, in 1996 the Charlotte Hornets drafted you straight
from Lower Marion High with the 13th pick and traded you
to the Los Angeles Lakers for Vlade Divac – a huge mistake for Charlotte,
one of the biggest in pro basketball history but a great gift for the Lakers –
now, out in LA, you find yourself living in the fast lane
in the “City of Lights,” find yourself with all the “tinsel town” denizens,
Hollywood movie stars, and you fast becoming the brightest bona fide
superstar in that glittering city of fast cars and even faster lives

you take the young Black pop singing star, Brandy, to your 1998 prom,
then in August, 1999, you meet Vanessa Laine, a knock down beautiful,
17-year-old Mexican-American model, dancer and cheerleader – you are

21 years old now and a rising megastar in the NBA – and Vanessa knocks you completely off your feet – and you marry her in April 2001, causing an earthquake split between you and your parents, which grows wider & wider into a chasm over the years – but your basketball career and exploits only explode as your skills grow into championships and the rest, as they say, will go down in basketball history though there are rough patches along the way, like in your first game, coming off the bench you didn't score one point after taking one single shot in the six minutes they gave you, but in your second season, in 1998, things turn around when you are selected to play in the NBA All-Star game, where you score 17 points, then Shaquille O'Neal joins you and together, in 2000 you win your first of three straight NBA championships, but in 2003 in Vail, Colorado, recuperating from knee surgery, a young white woman accuses you of rape, which you deny and in fall 2004 the civil suit is dropped, in 2005 you settle with your accuser out of court, around this time, you begin calling yourself “the Black Mamba” after the assassin in the movie “Kill Bill”

Kobe, you always lived your life dangerously close to the edge, always took chances in the way you played the game of life, the way you played the game of basketball was no different, because in both you were always in the attack mode – even in practice with teammates, you never took your foot off the gas pedal, you hit them with elbows because you were always about winning, you once called yourself “a little psychopath . . . a scary type”

because you were always about dominating, just like “MJ”

in all you will win five rings, two without “Big Shaq”
who was traded to the Miami Heat in 2004, now you are crowned
“The King of LA,” with your last title being in 2010 with a rematch
seven-game win over your archrival Boston Celtics, you collect
your second straight finals MVP award, cementing your legend
as one of the very best to ever play the game of basketball,
but that wasn’t the end because in 2012 you would lead Team
USA to the gold medal – your second – with a win over Spain

6.

Kobe, you Xeroxed your game after Michael Jordan
your childhood idol, though you evolved your own warrior game
as an assassin, created your own brutal, take-no-prisoner style,
because in your mind you were no copycat
like Miles Davis in the end wasn’t Dizzy Gillespie, though
the “Prince of Darkness” borrowed some of dizzy’s licks
altered a few solos played by the slanted-up trumpet king
wearing a tam on his head, cocked ace deuce,
hailing from South Carolina – Miles was from East Saint Louis,
Illinois, when he played hard bebop uptown Harlem
with “Bird” jammin’ at Minton’s on 118th Street, like Miles, you
quickly became your own spirit force pursuing perfection, you
won five NBA championship rings, (but fell short of the sixth

won by your mentor, “Air Jordan,” whose game and attitude you xeroxed as if it were the poem you read every night before you went to sleep), you won a scoring title, appeared in your 18th straight All-Star game, scored 81 points in a single game, second only to Wilt’s 100 point game – he was also from Philadelphia – and eye will always remember that photo image of you, snapped by Andrew D. Bernstein – flying, both legs and feet tucked up under the purple, white and gold Laker uniform, your arms straight out, both hands cupping the ball, in front of your coiled body, head turned to the right, eyes on the rim, mouth open, before you tomahawk a slam-dunk that must have shaken the rim, left the packed crowd screaming at The Great Western Forum in awe, now that move reminds me of your friend Michael Jackson’s moon walk or a Jimi Hendrix or John Coltrane solo, breathtaking, and in April 2016, after tearing your Achilles in 2013, and tearing your rotator cuff making a two-handed dunk in 2015, you announced that the next season would be your last and it was, but in your last game in April 2018 at the Staples Center, you dropped 60 points, taking 50 shots – like the ball hog you were – to get there – but no one cared because it was your last game, Kobe, and everyone loved you, hated to see you go then you retired as the first player to ever play 20 years wearing the same team’s jersey, then you dropped the microphone on the floor, saying those now memorable words, “Mamba out!” a big smile spread over your face as thunderous applause washed you in complete adoration, it was an unforgettable night for a forever star, and now all that is left is to compare you and your friend

Lebron James (“Bron-Bron,” also called “King James”) as to who is the best after “MJ,” though that too is being hotly disputed now amongst many white critics, though as some Black playground fans say everyday – “What do those white boys know about this?!”

7.

when you retired from the game, the Lakers hung both your numbers – 24 and 8 – from the rafters at Staples Center, but you never looked back – didn’t let no grass grow under your feet – went down another path, started writing books for children and one of them became a short film, winning you a golden statue Academy Award in 2018, you stopped going to Laker home games until your daughter, Gianna – “Gigi” – became a basketball player who wanted to go so she could watch, learn from the best, so you, like a father took her and all the LA Staple Center fans were happy again to embrace you

8.

and so, it was a very terrible way for you to go to the other side, terrible to fall from the sky through wet gray day fog in January, in Calabasas, California, in 2020, right above the Steeplechase community, at 9:45 AM, where you, Kobe Bryant, your 13-year old daughter, Gianna, on your way to a tournament featuring Gianna’s team named Mambas lost your lives with seven others in a mangled Sikorsky S-76B helicopter

with the wreckage strewn over a rocky area the size of a football field,
on a hillside buttressing a small scruffy mountain they found you
after the flames with your long arms wrapped around Gigi
trying to protect her from the impact of the unmovable mountain

what were you thinking, Kobe, as the helicopter kept circling,
seeming to wander around up there in all those blinding,
billowing clouds so thick the pilot didn't know which way was up
or down, were you talking basketball with Gigi, the other six passengers?
you once told someone you wanted to be immortal, now, today
you have ascended to the spiritual realm, Kobe, not only as a legendary
basketball icon – one of the greatest ever – but also as a human being
you had learned the gift of sharing with others, growing into a spiritual
father, on the road to developing even greater things, you changed,

at the end of your life, you became a better, softer person,
who smiled easier, didn't seem so competitive, because – though
we will never know this, it is only my speculation – your death,
Gigi's and the seven others, was truly a great loss for legions
all over the world who will scream your name as long as the game,
basketball, is played and eye can hear this chant swelling up and down
from crowds in arenas as long as hoops are played

“Kobe, Kobe, Kobe Bryant, Black Mamba” making a house call again!

“Kobe, Kobe, Kobe Bryant, here, making a house call again and again!”