

Broken Dreams



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Broken dreams

Author : Fred Roggen

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KvK: **17242319**

contact@eigenboekuitgeven.com

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The Sad Saga of Tommy Gaines

The story of a Georgia basketball legend who lost his dreams to drug addiction, and his quest for redemption

I'm standing in the dark in downtown Atlanta, waiting for a man who carries his clothes in a polka dot suitcase and his teeth in his sweatpants pocket. He said he would be here, at Five Points Plaza, at 6:30 a.m. In the seven months that I've known him, though, Tommy Gaines has said a lot of things. He said he first dunked when he was 11, that he first smoked crack when he was 20. He said he used to be an All American. He said he'd never use drugs again. Most of the things he's said are at least partially true. Others are not true at all. They are stories exaggerated, memories eroded, or explanations of a reality that he never fully grasped. They are vows — to himself and to those who love him — now broken.

But he'll be here. He promised. The sun has not yet risen, but the drunks who passed the night on park benches are stumbling to nearby flophouses to sleep away the morning. Construction workers emerge from McDonald's clutching coffee. And there, just across Peachtree Street, I spot Tommy. He is still striking, 6-foot-6 when he stands up straight, gray at the temples and in his mustache. But in the month since he disappeared, Tommy appears to have aged five years. His clothes hang as if on a coat rack. His belly has vanished; his eyes have gone red. He shakes my hand and nods, as if willing his next words to be true.

"I'm ready," he says.

He turns down Peachtree and starts walking.

The first time I met Tommy, his clothes were stored underneath a bed and his dentures were still in his mouth. We were sitting in the lobby of the homeless shelter where he lived. For hours, he talked through his impoverished childhood in Bainbridge, Georgia, and the small-town stardom that basketball gave him as a teenager. He talked his way from the old bicycle wheel that

he'd nailed to a pine tree as his first hoop, to the night he'd dunked on an entire high school team's starting five, to the scholarship offers, the All America honors, and the grown women who wanted to seduce the teenage boy destined for the NBA.

Tommy would come off down screens to catch and release unblockable jumpers from as far out as 30 feet. If his man stuck with him, he would power dribble once to get all the way from the perimeter to the rim.

Much of this could be verified. The *Chicago Sun-Times* had named him the no. 29 player in the nation, 13 spots behind Christian Laettner and three spots ahead of Robert Horry, who'd been his roommate, Horry would later confirm, at basketball camps. (The *Chicago Tribune* had ranked Gaines 25th.) Tommy was a lanky volume shooter and an athletic marvel, a late-'80s J.R. Smith in the rural Deep South. Newspaper archives reported numbers that seemed preposterous: 28 points and 14 rebounds per game as a senior, 41 points against future Heisman winner and Knicks point guard Charlie Ward, dozens of scholarship offers, a 42-inch vertical leap.

On the court, Tommy was, as someone would tell me months later, after he'd gone missing, "a bad, bad boy." He would come off down screens to catch and release unblockable jumpers from as far out as 30 feet. If his man stuck with him — and rarely did his man stick with him — he would power dribble once to get all the way from the perimeter to the rim. He didn't much care for defense, but that was fine, because whatever Tommy gave up, he earned back on the other end. He couldn't handle the ball, but that was OK too. With that release and those hops, he could subsist on nothing but jumpers and lobs.

Sitting there in the homeless shelter, Tommy talked me through all of that. He wasn't boastful, just matter-of-fact, and he spoke with a quiet gravity, as if every sentence carried a secret. After a couple of hours, though, we both knew where the story needed to go. "I guess I should tell you how I picked up my little

addiction,” he said. After all, there was a reason we were sitting here in this shelter and not in some suburban home bought with NBA retirement savings, or even in an apartment paid for by earnings from a 9-to-5 job. The same search for Tommy’s basketball exploits also turned up stories about prison sentences and drugs.

Sure, I said. Go ahead. “It was 1992,” he said. “I was right here in Atlanta, right downtown. I had a tryout for the Hawks. There was another guy at the tryout named Chris Washburn.” That name sounded familiar. Washburn was one of the most famous draft busts in NBA history. He’d been chosen one pick after Len Bias, and on the night Bias died of a cocaine overdose in Maryland, Washburn had been up in the Bronx, getting high on the exact same drug. After less than two seasons in the league, he’d flamed out, another promising career lost to addiction.

Tommy continued: “After the tryout was over, I went and got in the shower, and Chris Washburn is in there, and he’s in there right in the shower smoking a pipe, a pipe of crack cocaine. I finish my shower, and he says, ‘Here, try this.’ So I try it and I don’t like it. Then he says, ‘Try it again.’ That time I liked it.”

Tommy paused. It sounded preposterous — yes, Washburn was an addict, but smoking in the post-practice shower? Tommy nodded slowly, eyebrows strained as if reaching into his skull to pull the memory back out. He didn’t look like a man in search of the right lie. This was his addiction’s origin story — the one he told to friends, to me, and even, it seemed, to himself. “I went with Chris Washburn, and we got a room at the Hyatt, right downtown. All the way up on the top floor. And we put the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on, and we locked up in that room, and we stayed up there all night smoking. I was hooked. I was scared, though, real scared. I didn’t like it, but I *did* like it. I don’t know how to explain.

“And then that next morning, he got in the shower. As soon as he got in the shower, I got out of there. I jumped up, and I got all my things, and I ran out of that room. I got in my car and I started driving as fast as I could, all the way back to Bainbridge. I got

down to about Macon, driving down I-75, and I came around a turn going fast, and I flew off the road and hit a guard rail. My car went straight into a ditch. But I didn't have a scratch. And I just got out of that car, and I just started running. I was just running down the interstate. I thought I was gonna run all the way home. Then finally I got tired and stuck my thumb out.

"Even back in Bainbridge, though," he said, summing up 22 years in two sentences, "I still wanted more. I ended up right back on them drugs."

Later that morning, in an assembly hall at an elite private school in northwest Atlanta, for the first of many times, I watched Tommy cry. He was sitting on a stool in the front of the room, hiding his eyes from the children who looked back from the bleachers. He'd just told them how happy his life had once been, how he was loved by his parents and siblings, and how he'd been famous for what he could do with a basketball. About how he'd delighted in the game but had chosen another path. How that path was — and here he paused, looked down, and began to tremble as the tears fell — "that path was drugs."

The students clapped and cheered to support him. "But this is my turnaround," he said. "And I wouldn't change turning my life around for nothing."

After the speech, we headed to the gym. No class was in session, so Bill McGahan, founder of the homeless shelter where Tommy lived, found a basketball and began feeding Tommy as he floated around the perimeter, shooting jumpers. He moved to his right, catching and shooting until he reached the baseline, and then he slid back to his left. He missed more than he made, but his release was high, quick, smooth. Though 45 years old, potbellied, and carrying years of drug abuse on his body, Tommy still looked like a ballplayer.

I had known him only a few hours, but already I liked Tommy. He was curious — fascinated by the most mundane details of others' lives. He was humble — understated in recounting his

past glory and fully aware of the damage he'd done to himself. More than anything else, though, he was delighted by his own sobriety. He'd been clean four and a half years, and he was still exhilarated by the simple acts of meeting strangers and shooting jumpers.

McGahan liked Tommy, too, and now he grinned as he watched him shoot. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he asked. Whether he heard McGahan or not, Tommy didn't respond. He just caught and shot, caught and shot, until he'd sweated through his shirt and the bell rang for the next class to start. Tommy walked the ball over to McGahan, who put it back in storage, and we walked to the door. On the way out of the gym, Tommy turned to me: "I'm still pretty good, right?" There was no boastful glint in his eye or bravado in his voice. His face was imprinted with the same searching expression he'd had all morning. He had wanted to know if I thought his stories were entertaining, if his athletic résumé was impressive, if his commitment to sobriety was strong. And now he wanted to know — did I think he was good at basketball?