

Barrelhouse

## Writing

## The Tragedy of Karl Malone

by Claire Zulkey

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Karl Malone was sad.

He sat in the rental facility where he now was forced to live, and stretched his very long legs out and rested them on a cardboard box. Predictably, it collapsed. There might as well have been a tiny personal cloudburst hovering over his head.

He looked around the room that had become his bedroom, living room and kitchen. This is what became of America's athletic heroes.

And it was all because of a goddamned ring. A stupid ring. People bought rings out of gumball machines, made them out of smoke and look what it had done to his life.

Karl Malone was tired. He had been playing professional basketball for nearly twenty years. His knees hurt. His elbows hurt. He just wanted to relax in the sun, play a little golf, shop at the Big and Tall store. He was a respected and beloved player. But still. He didn't have that ring.

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"Well. Patrick Ewing never won a ring. And he's still doing ok," Karl's wife said, but he knew she didn't mean it. She scrunched up her face when she said his name. And nobody had heard from Ewing in years. He may have gone off to live with Amelia Earhart and the Lindbergh baby in Atlantis or Roanoke somewhere. Sure, people were still talking about Ewing, but it was the way you'd talk about a faded C-list celebrity. "Oh yeah. That guy. Whatever happened to him?"

So Karl Malone went back to work. He had already said his goodbyes to Utah; there was no way he could crawl back there. So he went to la-la land, put on an ugly mustard jersey, took a pay cut, and slogged up and down the court as Jack Nicholson leered at him in derision. The younger players paid a perfunctory older-player respect to him (and he was only 10 years older than them, damn it), but the way they smoked him in scrimmages, it was like they were trying to make a point. Go home, old man.

Karl Malone wanted to.

When they didn't win, the flat champagne thrown away, the front office began refusing to take his calls.

"You could go play in Europe," his wife suggested, but they both knew his time had come. Really come, this time. And that was the last time they spoke. She fled in the night with the children, and he was in some ways relieved.

No one likes to talk about it, but everyone knows what happens to professional athletes who don't win championships. The following years, not only did the public forget about him, they purposefully purged him from their minds. Look at this...this specimen who balled and couldn't even win a title. So pathetic it's disgusting. They didn't retire his jersey, they burned it. Women laughed at him when he approached them in night clubs, and clung to the puny strangers who had danced up to them. Car companies requested that he give back his autos, so shamed were they that he was driving their name brands.

The rest of his hair fell out.

Down to his last million, Karl Malone went to Jacob the Jeweler to ask him to make him his own ring, but Jacob wouldn't even open the door. Karl went to a pawn shop and bought a large men's class ring but as he slipped it on, he felt sickened. The Yugoslav who ran the shop wouldn't even look him in the eye.

Karl Malone threw the ring out on the way home.

He should have kept the damn thing, he thought to himself, sitting in his dark locker. At least then he'd have something to keep him company. But now all he had were his memories, and of what, he wasn't exactly sure.

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