

Michael Graff / March 14, 2013

THE LAST SHOT

EARL BADU HIT ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS SHOTS IN MARYLAND BASKETBALL HISTORY. TEN YEARS LATER, HE JUMPED OFF A BRIDGE.

You know the wish can't come true, but people say it all the time to hide their own fears, so you'll open with it, too: You wish he could just be happy. It would be easier that way. You could just hang curtains around everything else—the past, the future, the end—and you could look down through a tunnel at him and say, *Freeze. Stay right there.* And he'd remain locked in this memory, the little guy with the big heart playing in the final minute of the final game of a storied arena.

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Of course, it can't stay this way. But let's entertain the idea for a moment.

It's March 3, 2002. The final night at Cole Field House. The building is loud tonight. The University of Maryland's basketball team has played here for 47 years, but Cole means more than that. In the 1960s, this was where five black men from Texas Western beat five white men from Kentucky. In the 1970s, this was where a coach named Lefty came out of the tunnel before each game to "Hail to the Chief." But this is also a place for the ordinary man. Your uncles have long told you stories of sneaking in late at night to play one-on-one in the dark.

After tonight, though, a new building will open, one with better locks. After tonight, every piece of the floor will be divided up and sold to fans for between \$50 and \$200. That doesn't interest you. You don't want a piece of wood; you just want this to end the right way.

So you start recording mental notes. Who wins the last tipoff? Who scores the first basket? Who hacks the last foul? And, of course, who scores the last point? Little things like this seem important now. You tell yourself you'll remember the names forever.

Maryland is beating Virginia pretty soundly, so this is all fun for you. Tonight is also Senior Night, and the seniors on this 2002 team have won more games than any other class before it in school history. You don't know it yet, but they'll win a national championship in a few weeks.

This will be the team nobody forgets.

The score is 103-87. Two minutes left. The coach prepares to pull his stars. Juan Dixon, Lonny Baxter, names like that. People who've scored thousands of points.

THE PERFECT PERSON, THE STORYBOOK ENDING, WOULD BE HIM.





Photo Credit: Getty Images

You think you know them. You're watching from home. You were raised on Terrapins basketball, and you've followed this group for four years. They're your age, about 22 at the time, and they're winning. On the television broadcast, the announcers have already started wondering whose name will be tied to the final basket. They talk like they have a secret wish. But you share it with them, and so does everybody else in the state. The perfect person, the storybook ending, would be him.

He's listed at 6 feet tall. But he's actually only 5'9, something you'll learn later while reading his autopsy report.

He was the last man on the bench all season. He was the last man on the bench the previous season. He

was the last man on the bench the year before that. In his career, he's played 31 minutes. He's scored two points. But he stayed. On a team with future NBA draft picks, he's the one who's ordinary.

So as coach Gary Williams begins to pull the starters, he does what you want him to do.

He points to Earl Badu.

Badu points to his chest and nods, as if to say, "Me?" Then he hops up. He pulls off his warmup jacket and snaps off his warmup pants. He jogs to the scorer's table. He checks his waist to make sure his shirt's tucked. He squats. The buzzer sounds. He enters.

The building jumps. Fans hold up signs with Badu's name on them. Kenny Smith, the color commentator, gives Badu an on-air standing ovation. "That's what college basketball is all about," Smith says.

"THAT'S WHAT COLLEGE BASKETBALL IS ALL ABOUT."

He records an assist in his first 30 seconds on the floor. "From Earl Baduuuu," the public address announcer says.

It could stop here, and you'd be happy. But there's still time left. Soon, he takes another pass. He dribbles to the top of the key. He gives it away. This time, his teammates won't let him off. They pull the ball back out and pass it to him again. *Take it, Earl*, they seem to be telling him.

He dribbles to his right first. Then he crosses over to his left. *He's going to be a lawyer one day*, they all say. He stutter-steps backward and jerks his shoulders, faking a fadeaway. *He's going to make more money than anybody on his team*. The defender falls toward him, and Badu goes to the basket. *And then he's going to be a politician*. He springs through two defenders in the paint. Then he releases the ball from his fingertips. It bounces off the square, and falls through the hoop. These are the third and fourth points of his four-year career.

The announcers cheer openly. The fans hug people they've never met. His teammates dance on the sideline. Badu sprints the other way to play defense. The clock has 45.3 seconds remaining. In the half-century this building has played host to sporting events, this might be Cole Field House's loudest moment.

Every time you watch it, you want it to stop here.

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Ten years, six months, and 24 days later, Earl Badu took a kitchen knife into the upstairs bathroom at his parents' house, turned on the water to make it sound like he was showering, and cut a slash in his throat.

Then he reconsidered. He called downstairs. "Mom! Mom!"

His parents ran up the stairs of their split-level house just outside of Baltimore and opened the door. They saw blood on the sink and floor. Their son saw them and panicked. The father tried to take the knife away, but the son struggled back and won. The scuffle continued downstairs and into the living room. The father called 911. Badu dropped at least two bloody knives in the house, but grabbed three clean ones. He shoved his hand into his mother's purse, snatched a set of car keys, and ran out the door.

His parents followed him into the front yard. A neighbor was on his back porch. It was just before 9 a.m. The neighbor saw Earl Badu telling his parents to stay back, using knives to keep them at a distance.

Earl opened the door of a dark gray Dodge Caliber parked in the driveway. He backed out, put the car in drive, and sped away.

**THE OFFICER ALERTED DISPATCH OF A
SUICIDAL DRIVER ON THE STREETS OF
BALTIMORE.**

When an officer arrived, the neighbor yelled, “Go help them!” Earl’s parents ran out the front door screaming for help. The officer ordered Mr. Badu to drop the knives in his hand. The father tossed the knives in the yard and tried to speak. All that came out was a yell. The officer asked Mr. Badu to calm down. Soon, the father was able to say it: His son had tried to kill himself, he’d left their house driving a Dodge Caliber, and he’d gone that way.

The officer alerted dispatch of a suicidal driver on the streets of Baltimore.

Minutes later, a call came in from the dispatch at Precinct 9 in eastern Baltimore County. A man driving a Dodge Caliber had been involved in multiple small hit-and-runs in the area near the Baltimore beltway. The driver was now standing on the edge of a bridge at the interchange of Interstates 95 and 695.

Minutes later, another call from dispatch: When police arrived at the scene, the man jumped.

It was 9 a.m. on Sept. 27, 2012. Earl Badu was 33 years old.

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Why?

If this were years from now, you might know more. But it hasn’t even been six months. His parents have told you that they’re trying to move on. His former teammates have told you they want to respect the wishes of the family.

But the question won’t leave you. You want to know why. You want to know because you want to know something else, something far more unanswerable: Could this be someone you love? Could this be your brother or father or friend? Could it be you?

You’ve spent three months trying to figure out why Earl Badu stood on that bridge in September and jumped into a pile of rocks 50 feet below—a fall that, we might remind you, didn’t lead to immediate death. Instead, he lay there for several minutes, still alive despite shattered bones and a bleeding skull.

YOU’RE FAR MORE LIKELY TO TAKE YOUR OWN LIFE THAN TO HAVE SOMEONE ELSE TAKE IT FROM YOU.

Why wasn’t he wearing a suit and tie that morning and arguing cases in a courtroom like everybody said he’d be? Why wasn’t he making a six-figure salary and raising sons to be resilient and determined young men like he was? Why wasn’t he like you left him that night in Cole Field House? What would bring a

person here? Each question reveals more about you than it does him.

Here's what you know about suicide: The people closest to the victims are the ones who shut down the most. Few other causes of death push the ones left behind so inward—searching for those answers, weighing confused emotions like sadness and shame and guilt, and measuring the distance between their own sense of self-worth and that of the deceased.

Suicide, you learn, is the 10th-leading cause of death in this country. What does that mean? Well, for all the talk of murder rates and mass killings, you're far more likely to take your own life than to have someone else take it from you.

You've had family and friends die this way. Everybody you know seems to know somebody who's committed suicide. But still it's a conversation that eludes you. So you wonder why.

In Badu's case, the reason seems to be money, or at least the value he placed on money as an appraisal of what's important. But it's far more complicated than that, if you have the courage to look deeper. He was in debt to a big Maryland booster, a chiropractor named Alan Cornfield. But it's even more complicated than that. Because even if debt is the most obvious answer, a deeper reason must exist. Lots of people have money issues; not all of them commit suicide.

“NOW THEY'RE JUST TRYING TO MOVE ON WITHOUT EARL.”

Badu's best friend at Maryland, Juan Dixon, says that out of respect for the family, he doesn't want to talk. More than a dozen other people from Badu's life either tell you the same thing or decline to respond altogether. One of former coach Gary Williams's closest staff members doesn't return emails or calls. Even the former equipment manager, John Bowie, who knew everybody who walked through Maryland's basketball program in the late-1990s, tells you he didn't know Badu that well. He even says he doesn't remember the last game at Cole Field House, which seems odd, because everybody remembers that game.

On Jan. 7, a man calls your cell phone. He says he's the Badu family's private attorney. He says that while they appreciate you caring about their son and his story, they just can't speak. “Earl was a beloved figure in the family, very respected by everyone,” says Lawrence Williams, the attorney. “They've come together as a family, said their peace with each other, and now they're just trying to move on without Earl.”

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“You can be the next Earl Badu,” coach Scottie Bowden told his players for years. “If Earl can do it, you

can do it.”

Bowden is a middle school principal at an alternative school in Baltimore, and he was also one of the founders of an AAU basketball program, the Baltimore Select. Badu played for the Select in the mid-1990s. He was one of Bowden’s favorite players.





Photo Credit: Getty Images

HE WAS DRIVEN IN WAYS THAT OTHER KIDS WEREN'T.

Bowden used Badu's story to motivate players—he was the little guy who made it because of sheer determination. Athletes are sponges for stories like that.

Badu grew up the son of immigrant parents. His mother and father moved to the United States from Ghana in the early-1970s. He was born in Baltimore on Feb. 22, 1979, the middle of three children. He has an older brother and younger sister. He was an American kid, his coaches say. When he was in school or on the court, he never showed any outward displays of his Ghanaian heritage.

But he was driven in ways that other kids weren't.

He played for three years at Overlea High School in Baltimore County. After his junior year, he asked Bowden to use his connections to facilitate a transfer from Overlea to St. Frances Academy. St. Frances had grown into one of the most respected private-school basketball programs in the state.

Bowden set up the transfer, and in 1997, Badu was a senior guard on the St. Frances team that won the Baltimore Catholic League title. In the championship game that year, they defeated Calvert Hall, whose star was Juan Dixon.

Several coaches from smaller Division I schools and D-II and D-III programs showed interest in Badu. One was former Coppin State assistant Eric Skeeters, who's now at the University of South Florida. Badu was good enough to play for Coppin State, Skeeters says. "But he wanted to play at the highest level possible," he remembers. "His mind was made up."

Maryland's basketball team was becoming one of the top programs in the country in 1997. Under Williams, the Terps shed years of trouble following the sudden drug-related death of Len Bias in 1986 and NCAA probation in the early-1990s. They were in the middle of an 11-year run of tournament appearances. They were playing good basketball in Cole Field House again. Badu initially believed he wanted to be an engineer. Maryland was a good fit for that, too. So without a scholarship, he enrolled. It didn't matter to him that smaller colleges were offering him free rides.

“It took a strong young man to say, ‘No, I’m going to turn down these scholarships and go to Maryland,’” Bowden says. “Maryland was a powerhouse then. You had to be something to play there.”

Badu walked on in 1998 and practiced every day with the team. His coaches praised him for the way he pushed the first team. With him there, Maryland kept getting better.

In 2001, Badu's junior year, Maryland went to its first Final Four. In the national semifinal against Duke, the Terps ran out to a 22-point lead in the first half.

But in the second half, something terrible unfolded: Duke came back. That 22-point lead dwindled, then vanished. Then it became a deficit.

And, ultimately, it spiraled into a shocking loss.

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You hand a man with a gray mustache a slip of paper with the files you want—341678V and 120717C. It's a Monday, and the Montgomery County Circuit Courthouse building is busy. The mustached man returns with a stack of files that helps fill some of the 10-year gap in Badu's life. They reveal a young man who's far different from the one you crystallized that night on the basketball floor.

INSTEAD, HE SEARCHED FOR WAYS TO MAKE BIG MONEY FAST.

Remember law school? The court documents show that Badu might have enrolled in the University of Maryland's law school in 2004-05. But even if he did, he certainly never finished his degree. Instead, he searched for ways to make big money fast.

Alan Cornfield befriended him in his senior year of college. Cornfield, a chiropractor, is a member of the Rossborough Society, a special status given to people who give between a quarter-million and half-million dollars to Maryland in their lifetimes.

Cornfield graduated from Maryland in 1983, but much of his free time and money still goes there. He has an office on University Avenue. He has season tickets and sits close to the floor. He also has a basketball court in his backyard painted like the real Maryland basketball floor, his attorney, Lewis Silber, tells you in an initial conversation.

“He’s Mr. Maryland,” Silber says.

Badu became Cornfield’s friend, so close that Cornfield sometimes hired him to babysit his daughters. In December 2006, Badu approached Cornfield with a business proposal—he wanted to invest some of Cornfield’s money in a wireless company called Clearwire Corporation, which was about to go public.

SO IN 2010, MR. MARYLAND FILED A \$300,000 CIVIL LAWSUIT AGAINST EARL BADU.



Photo Credit: Getty Images

Cornfield hesitated. He told Badu that he needed the money to send his kids to college. Badu assured Cornfield he’d see a good return on the investment.

A few weeks later, Cornfield gave Badu \$300,000.

Badu explained that Cornfield wouldn't see the money again for six months because of a hold on the investment. But again he guaranteed its return. Clearwire finally went public in May. In late 2007, though, the company's stock fell, and Cornfield wanted out. Badu agreed. He told Cornfield he would fly to California to retrieve the investment. Badu made the trip, but never returned any money to Cornfield.

Cornfield says in the documents that he learned later that Badu never invested the money. It's unclear where it went.

So in 2010, Mr. Maryland filed a \$300,000 civil lawsuit against Earl Badu.

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What must it have been like, you wonder, for him to watch his friends leave school and get rich?

The month after he graduated in 2002, Badu saw three of his teammates drafted among the first 44 picks in the NBA draft. They all signed three-year deals. Chris Wilcox's was worth more than \$6 million, Juan Dixon's was more than \$3 million, and Lonny Baxter's was for more than \$1 million. They'd all be millionaires before they were 25.

That's a critical age. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people from 25 to 34. Financial stress is cited as a reason in 14 percent of all suicides, and job problems are cited in an additional 15 percent. That means that nearly a third of all suicides have something to do with money or work, and it's especially worse among young professionals.

Paul Bowden sees this every day. He's the associate athletic director for compliance at George Mason University. He's also Scottie Bowden's brother and Badu's former AAU coach. He's counseled young athletes throughout his career, and their focus on money becomes more pronounced with each class.

"It's tough for young people to find their happiness," Paul Bowden says. "These young people think money will make them happy. Well, no, it doesn't. But money's all they think about."

In the years after he graduated, Badu met with an administrator in the law school at American University, but he never applied. He worked as a paralegal at one point. And he might have briefly gone to Maryland for law school.

HE BECAME A MYSTERY TO MANY OF THE PEOPLE WHO ONCE KNEW HIM BEST.

Otherwise, he became a mystery to many of the people who once knew him best. In fact, some of his closest high school friends didn't even know about his funeral.

Scottie Bowden last saw Badu two or three years ago. Badu smiled and told him about the success he was enjoying.

“I would've thought Earl was a millionaire, the way he talked,” Bowden says. “Those types of short, quick conversations led me to believe he was alright. I didn't have to second-guess it or question it. *He was Earl Badu.*”

Everything wasn't alright.

Badu was living in his own apartment in Bethesda, Md., when Cornfield sued him in December 2010. For nearly three weeks, Badu avoided being served his summons. A private process server went to his apartment at least seven times. Sometimes the server heard a television or a radio in the apartment, but nobody answered the door. Once, the server asked the front desk clerk to call the apartment. A man answered and said Badu wasn't there. Fifteen minutes later, Badu called down to see if the server was gone.

In later documents, Cornfield claims that Badu continuously “thumbed his nose” at the court. He also describes one inexplicable moment during a hearing that seems to contradict everything about the Earl Badu everybody loved: In the middle of a court of law, Badu answered a call on his cell phone and carried on a conversation. When the judge asked him to put the phone down, he held up one finger and said, “One minute.”

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You need an expert now.

John Silva remembers playing pickup basketball in Cole Field House. He was a doctoral student at Maryland in the 1970s.



Photo Credit: Getty Images

He's now one of the leading sport psychologists in the country. He was a founder of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, and he's worked with several high-profile athletes in his career.

Silva tells you that the main reason for most suicides is that people want to end pain. Many actually begin to find suicide attractive, and they fixate on it as a way to stop hurting themselves and others.

But universally, Silva says, those people give signals first.

“People send messages that are often ignored,” Silva says. “Those messages are messages asking for help.”

Which raises the question: Did Badu ever give a signal to anyone?

“PEOPLE SEND MESSAGES THAT ARE OFTEN IGNORED. THOSE MESSAGES ARE MESSAGES ASKING FOR HELP.”

Which really is this question: Have you ever gotten a signal from someone?

Silva didn't know Badu. But he's seen how athletes suffer psychological breakdowns after they're finished playing sports. He's seen how depression can coincide with the loss of fame or even just a job. He's seen the pressures of money on athletes. And he's seen how deeply people fear embarrassment, particularly with loved ones, and how that makes it hard for them to share troubles with even the closest family members.

Coming off the bench in that final game, Silva says, was likely a moment of honor for Badu. Being the last man on the bench for a national championship team is not embarrassing. But falling into financial trouble absolutely is.

"He had a lot of successful people around him," Silva says.

Then the expert catches himself. He didn't know Badu, he reminds you. But there had to be more reasons, he says. What you see is usually just the surface-level problem. And it's likely that these thoughts had been present for a long time, possibly even back to Badu's days at Maryland.

Regardless, Badu's decision was not made on a whim that morning.

"Human behavior is very complicated," Silva says. "What you see on the outside isn't necessarily what's happening inside. He walked on at Maryland, was doing well in school, but that only gives us a glimpse. ... Some of these flaws may have been there; they were just difficult to see.

"Or, he just did a good job of managing people's impression of him."

Badu did, in fact, masterfully control how people thought about him.

Duane Simpkins, a former guard at Maryland who played there before Badu's time, tells you that he didn't know Badu well, but when he did see him, "It was always like, 'Nothing's wrong.'"

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For a few days, you believe you have a break in the story. Dr. Cornfield will talk to you. Lewis Silber, Cornfield's attorney, tells you in mid-January that he believes his client will be willing to have an interview at his house. You even start looking up train tickets to Washington.

But on Jan. 21, an email comes in from Silber. The tone changes. Silber's email says that Cornfield can't meet for an interview because he's "very saddened and wants to put it behind him."

Silber then stops returning your emails himself, except for one last one.

THE TRIAL LASTED ONE DAY, AND HE GOT WALLOPED. THE JUDGE ORDERED HIM TO PAY \$150,000.

“As he is my client,” Silber writes in a February email, “I must respect and abide by his decision.”

That’s what attorneys do for clients: They represent them.

On Dec. 19, 2011, Badu appeared in court facing a massive civil lawsuit, and he didn’t even bring an attorney with him.

The trial lasted one day, and he got walloped. The judge ordered him to pay Cornfield \$150,000.

He had just 16 months to do it, and five scheduled payment dates. If he missed on any of those payments, the judgment would change and he would be required to pay the full amount—\$300,000.

On Feb. 6, 2012, Badu wrote Cornfield the first check for \$20,000. Cornfield took the check, a SunTrust check numbered 99, to his bank four different times. Each time, he heard the same response: No money in the account.

Now, not only did Badu’s financial obligation double, but passing a bad check sent him to criminal court. Now the former Terrapin was involved in a case named, of all things, the State of Maryland v. Earl Badu.

The trial date was set for Sept. 17, 2012. Badu appeared in court that day and pleaded guilty to the bad check. Four days later, he returned to the courtroom one last time to receive his sentence. He was placed on three years’ probation and ordered to pay back the \$20,000.

Six days later, he was dead.

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Photo Credit: Google Maps

The point where Interstates 95 and 695 meet in Baltimore County is not really a point. It's more of a complicated bunch of concrete that curves and spins, covering a few square miles from ramp to ramp to ramp. It's a big intersection.

At its midpoint, the long ramp that carries cars onto I-95 South sits directly above the beltway and below another ramp. It is a suspended strip of pavement in between other strips of pavement. It's four miles from here to Badu's parents' house.

Badu grew up in a community like any other suburban community, just down the street from an elementary school, with neighbors close enough on either side that he could've strung cans together to talk to the girl next door. Front stoops are decorated with Baltimore Ravens flags, and during the workday most of the driveways are empty.

The Badus' house looks like a home. Two cars in the driveway and flowerbeds all around.

It's from this spot that Earl Badu sped off driving the Dodge Caliber. Within a few hundred yards, he came to a four-way stop—another place where the neighborhood could have held him in its grasp—and he turned left and kept going.

By the time he turned again onto a four-lane boulevard, there was no going home. He went past the Middle River Recreation and Parks, past the East Side Church of Christ, past Worthington Steel. Bike lanes start to appear here.

He merged onto Highway 40 West. A Harley-Davidson store was on the left. The speed limit turned to 50, but traffic always makes it slower. There's an Ashley Furniture and a Toys "R" Us. The stoplights here are long, two minutes or more. Badu would have had time to sit and consider what he was doing. But he also may have just run the lights. You don't know.

THIS WOULD BE WHERE THE PAIN WOULD END.

Badu then saw two green signs for 695, the Baltimore Beltway. He pulled onto the ramp, headed west, and sideswiped a green F-350 being driven by 40-year-old Rodney Welsh. Badu bounced off and into the grass on the right side of the ramp. He swerved back left and sideswiped a gold Honda Accord being driven by 69-year-old Janet Stout. He regained control and kept going. Stout followed him. Welsh followed Stout.

He saw a sign for I-95. He could choose to go in one of two directions—south toward Baltimore or north toward New York. At the last possible moment, he swerved and chose the Baltimore ramp.

The ramp rises high into the sky. It's only one lane, but the structural area is as wide as two. Cars slingshot around this bend and down toward the main interstate.

But rather than continue down the ramp, Badu pulled over at the top. This would be where the pain would end. He eased off the gas. He veered to the left, pulling over the yellow line. His tires would have crunched on the litter that gathers here.

He stopped next to a concrete wall. Stout pulled in behind him. Welsh pulled behind her.

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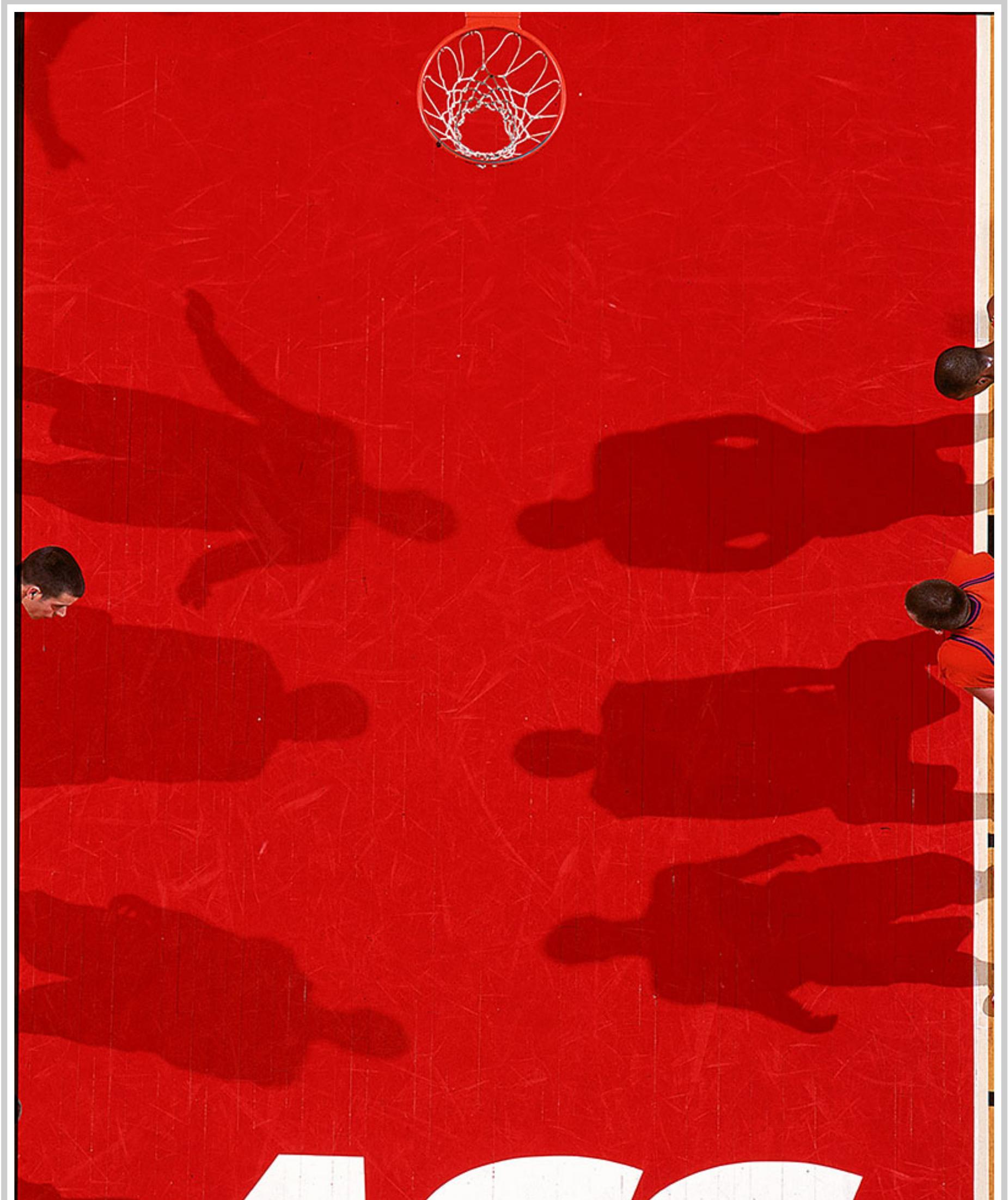




Photo Credit: Getty Images

“GOOD! LAYUP by Badu, Earl.”

That’s how it reads in the play-by-play, and that’s how it will always read.

On Virginia’s next possession, he grabs a rebound. He now has an assist and a rebound and two points in the final game at Cole Field House. He takes off sprinting the other way.

Then a Virginia player pokes the ball from him. Turnover.

“Fill the stats up, Earl,” says Smith, the announcer. “Get a turnover. Get everything.”

Virginia’s Jason Clark makes a layup with 32 seconds left.

That’s fine, you think. Badu can still be the last one. At the very least, he’ll be the last Maryland player to score a basket here. Time runs off. Now, six seconds remain. The Terps have the ball, and they’re set to inbound. The score is 109-92. If they just dribble out the final seconds, the story still ends like you want it to end, frozen right here.

But of course it can’t stay this way.

The ball is inbounded to a freshman named Andre Collins, a young guard from the tiny town of Crisfield, Md., an old fishing village on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. He’s unknown. But he dribbles down the floor. The Virginia defense barely interferes. A few players are already walking off. Collins launches an off-balanced shot. And with 0.5 seconds left, the ball goes through the hoop, a 3-point prayer by Collins, making it 112-92, the final score of the last game in Cole Field House.

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Ten years, six months, and 24 days later, Badu emerged from the Dodge Caliber shirtless and bleeding

and wielding three knives. He had \$300,000 worth of debt and three years' probation ahead of him.

YOU THINK YOU KNOW THE REAL ENDING. BUT YOU DON'T YET.

By now, you know all of that. And you think you know the real ending. But you don't yet. Not until you talk to them, the people from outside the curtains.

Janet Stout is a grandmother of four. Rodney Welsh is a father of three. Both were born in Baltimore. Both grew up in Baltimore. Both still live in Baltimore. They didn't know each other until a suicidal driver on the streets of Baltimore connected them.

Welsh owns his own electrical contracting business. He has a wife of 12 years and a family he adores. That morning, he drove his 3-year-old daughter to the babysitter's house in his F-350. He dropped her off just before 9 a.m., and drove off to work. He was about to merge onto the Baltimore Beltway when a dark-gray blur slammed into him on the right side. His head jolted forward. He looked up and saw a Dodge Caliber bounce to the right and into the grass. He saw it lose control for a second, then swerve back left and toward the road.

Then he watched it smash into the right side of a gold Honda Accord.

Stout is retired from the phone company. She has two grown sons. She'd like to see them more, but they're always busy with their work. She has desires and goals, too, just of a different kind. That morning, she was on her way to help a friend clean a house. It's just a part-time job, once a week, and it pays \$50 each cleaning. She takes that money every week and puts it into a savings account. Every few months, she pulls it out so she can take a short trip to a convention for her favorite hobby.

Stout doesn't give money to the University of Maryland. She'd didn't know Badu. But here's what she does know: matchcovers. She's collected them since she was an 11-year-old girl. She goes to conventions every few months, buying and trading them for less than a dollar apiece, trying to build her portfolio. She now has 40,000 different matchcovers. Her goal is 1 million.

So that's what they were doing that morning: Welsh was on his way to work to support his family. Stout was on her way to clean a house to make \$50 and save it for matchcovers.

And out of nowhere a man who was \$300,000 in debt sideswiped them. They took off and followed him. When he made a sudden, last-second move to the exit ramp, they made a sudden, last-second move, too. They never left him.

They pulled up behind him at the top of the ramp. Stout first. Then Welsh. They watched Badu jump out of his car. He terrified Stout. She remembers his teeth, gritting at her.

“He was just crazy,” she says. “He must’ve been on drugs.”

He wasn’t. The state medical examiner’s autopsy report showed no trace of drugs or alcohol in his system.

Stout can’t believe this fact. Since that day, she’s believed he was high. She crystallized him that way, the same way a judge might do if he only knew Badu as the defendant with the cell phone, the same way an AAU coach might do if he only knew Badu as the little guy with the big heart, the same way you did that night he was in Cole Field House.

Your perceptions, you realize, say more about you than him. Badu spent his life filling roles in other people’s lives—little guy, smart guy, big-hearted guy, tough guy—and in the process he lost enough of himself that he wound up standing here, staring at the one ending that was completely within his control.

Welsh knew immediately what Badu intended to do. So he jumped out of his truck and tried to stop it from happening. He ran toward Badu and reached for his arm. Badu swung around and growled, “Get away from me.” His voice sounded like stones. “It sounded possessed,” Welsh says. Badu’s hands gripped the knives hard, two in the left hand and one in the right. Welsh saw the blades and said something to himself, something about the things he values: “You got kids at home.”

So Welsh backed off. He called 911. Badu jumped over one small barrier and ran into the corner of the ramp. Here, he was surrounded by four walls—two waist-high walls that faced the road, and two four-foot barrier walls that met in the corner and separated him from the ground.

**IN THE LAST MINUTES OF HIS LIFE, BADU
PACED BACK AND FORTH IN A CONCRETE BOX,
LOOKING FOR ANSWERS.**



Photo Credit: Google Maps

He jumped on top of the barrier wall and walked for a few seconds. He looked down. In front of him was air. Behind him was highway. Below him were rocks, a drainage ditch 50 feet down. He hopped back down on the highway side. In the last minutes of his life, Badu paced back and forth in a concrete box, looking for answers. Then he put the knives on the barrier and propped himself up on the wall. He sat there, dangling his legs over the edge.

“You have a family,” Welsh shouted at him while cars buzzed by. “This isn’t worth it.”

Both onlookers remember that. They also remember Badu shooting a response back in another deep, disturbing growl. But they remember two different responses. Stout says Badu’s reply was, *What for?* Welsh insists it was, *Yes it is.*

You'll never know what Badu's last words were.

Before the end, though, he swung his legs back over on the safe side of the wall and started walking toward his car. But as he grabbed for the door handle, he looked to his right. He saw police cars coming around the bend in the ramp.

He stopped, turned, and sprinted the other way. He put his hands on the concrete wall. He sprang from his legs, and momentum carried his body into the air. He released from his fingertips. His feet went down first. Then he raised his arms above his head and opened his hands, and they disappeared behind the wall.

Officers collected evidence—three knives and a suicide note. Inside the Caliber, they found 12 money orders, totaling \$10,210.

Stout leaned over the wall and looked down. She saw Badu's body resting flat on his stomach and bleeding. A female officer told her to back away: "You shouldn't be looking at that."

Then Stout remembered something: She was supposed to be at work. She borrowed Welsh's cell phone and called her friend. Stout never misses work. But that day, after she'd seen enough, she got back into her car and followed the ramp south onto the interstate. She drove a few miles before reaching the nearest exit. She pulled off the highway, made two lefts, and turned around to head home. That day, she tells you, \$50 just didn't seem like such a big deal.

Welsh still remembers Badu's hands falling. He can't forget the way they disappeared. He drives past the spot every day on his way to work. He thinks about his kids and family. He prays about Badu in church. He sees Badu in dreams. He feels sad. He feels guilty. He wishes.

"I wish I could say I'm sorry to the family," he says. "I wanted to save him, but I couldn't."

—

Four months after he jumped, you decide to drive the route to the ramp.

You want to see the house, just once, and you want to take the same sad path. Maybe that will give you answers, you tell yourself. But it only raises more questions: If his parents are in the yard, you wonder, what will you do? Will you wave? Then you wish things that can't come true: They've already said they can't talk about it, but what if they see you and raise a hand and invite you in? What if they just tell you why this happened? Wouldn't that be easy?

You promise yourself you'll drive by just once. It's a flawed theory.

The Badus' house looks like a home. Two cars in the driveway and flowerbeds all around. Trimmed bushes. Drawn shades. Parked cars. The Dodge Caliber.

For more Maryland basketball, visit our Terps blog

Testudo Times



You shouldn't be here, you decide. Leave. But the flaw is this: You can't drive by the home just one time. Once you're in the neighborhood, the way out, the way to move on, is to turn around and face it again.

You stop at the top of a hill and head back, through the tunnel of houses and Ravens flags. You approach the home and look once more, noticing something you hadn't seen the first time.

A basketball goal leans over the driveway. The white, plastic backboard has been stained by the weather, and the rim is bent straight down.

You can hear the ball bouncing. And the shoes. Sneakers don't squeak on concrete; they skid. You see him here as a young boy, hanging his head whenever he flings an airball over the fence. You see the goal, for some reason, being lower for him when he was young, then rising as he grows older. You see him counting down the clock and making last-second shots over and over again, and tossing his arms in the air to celebrate.

Then you keep driving. You leave the neighborhood, merge onto the highway, and take the ramp to the top. Stop here. Step out. Lean over the wall and look down. See the two bloodstains on the rocks below. Feel the ramp shake when a truck passes. Feel your knees go weak. Feel your palms go wet. Feel your hands tremble against the concrete.

Then you back away. ★



The Gyms of Holmes County



Higher and Higher



Buffalo and Wide Right, 25 years later

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Graff, a Maryland native, is a writer in Greensboro, North Carolina. His work appears regularly in *Our State* magazine and the *Greensboro News & Record*. He was the author of "Man and Bull," published on SB Nation Longform in October. A full bio and more stories can be found on his website, www.michaelngraft.com. And he's on twitter @michaelngraft.

