

Fatuma

08/12/25

Creative Writing

*A SPARK OF JOY*

Seventeen-year-old Leum shuffled onto the cracked city basketball court, the evening air cool against his skin. The orange glow of streetlights flickered as he dribbled, each bounce echoing in the empty lot. Just months ago, his mother's laughter filled the apartment, and his dad cheered from the sidelines. But after his mom died in a plane crash and his dad went missing in that same plane crash, Leum was left alone, an orphan in a foster home that smelled like bleach and old soup.

School felt distant, his grades slipped, and on the court, his shots missed more than landed. He worked at a grocery store before class, the scent of fresh bread clinging to him as he hurried to practice. Each morning, he wakes up early to finish his homework on the rough-wooden kitchen countertop, surrounded by the hum of other younger foster kids getting ready. After school he stocked shelves and swept floors, then rushed to basketball practice, hoping to feel close to his parents again.

One chilly afternoon, as Leum struggled through drills, he realized he needed help. His game wasn't improving, and loneliness weighed heavy on his shoulders. Swallowing his pride, he approached Coach Ramirez, who listened and offered extra training sessions. Still, doubt crept in. What if he'd never be good enough? What if my parents would never see me succeed? The questions haunted him, making his hands tremble during games.

Then, just before the state finals, panic struck. Leum realized he forgot something important. His lucky wristband, a gift from his dad, was missing. He stared at his bare wrist, pale

where the band had shielded it from the sun. His stomach twisted tight as a knot. For a moment the world seemed to tilt. The shouts of teammates fading away, and the late sunlight suddenly felt harsh, glaring in his eyes.

Panic-stricken, Leum reversed his steps across the field. The grass was damp and scratchy beneath his fingers as he searched, he started breathing quickly and heavily. Each time he glanced at his empty wrist, a wave of loneliness washed over him, as heavy as a soaked rain coat. He heard his father's words echoing in his mind, but without his wrist band, they felt far away, like a voice calling from across the wide dark sea.

The wrist band was one of Leum's most treasured possessions. A simple band of blue and white threads, worn soft from years of use. His father had given it to him before leaving for a long overseas assignment, promising they'd play together again when he returned. "Whenever you wear this," his dad had said, tying it gently around Leum's wrist, "remember I'm proud of you, no matter where I am."

Since then, the wristband became Leum's silent source of strength. He wore it through every practice and game, feeling his father's encouragement in each knot and fray. It became his silent companion through tough practices, lonely evenings, and games where he felt the weight of expectation pressing down.

Just as the sun began to set, painting the sky gold and lavender, something caught his eyes near the edge of the field. There, tangled in the roots of an old oak tree, was a flash of blue and white. Leum's heart leapt. He dropped to his knees, hands trembling as he reached out. The wristband was damp and cool, but when he pressed it between his palms, relief bloomed inside him, warm and bright, like sunlight breaking through the clouds. He slipped his band back onto

his wrist, feeling the familiar softness against his skin. The ache in his chest eased for the first time in what seemed like a decade, and in its place bloomed a spark of joy.