

The background of the cover is a photograph of a traditional Chinese street scene. The street is lined with multi-story buildings featuring intricate wooden carvings and tiled roofs with upturned eaves. Red lanterns are strung across the street. In the foreground, several people are walking away from the camera, including a man in a grey jacket and a woman in a yellow coat. The overall atmosphere is that of a bustling, historic urban environment.

A Viking Saga

a 2005 Scars Publications

Michael Ceraolo

chapbook

He was a grown-up street kid,
speaking the language of the streets,
speaking with the accent of the street he grew up on,
and
he loved the game



Loved the game

Loved it so much
that he was a volunteer assistant coach for a college
at the same time he was coaching a high school team,
hoping

hoping

hoping

for a shot at the big time

And

when that shot at the big time
finally came his way,
he was ready

More than ready,
even though
the shot could only loosely be called the big time

Because

he had come to another urban school
that had no reputation,
that had no facilities,
that had little hope of either

But

what they did have,
now,
was him,
and
his sense of the game,
and
that was more than enough,

for

the hungry street kid could smell the hunger in others,
others who had been unjustly overlooked
(including one player whose talent
the coach memorably described as
“finding a Picasso in the attic”),
others who had been dismissed as ‘tweeners’
(meaning they had the skills for a particular position
but not the height generally required for the position),

and

others who had been accepted into the big time,

but
for whatever reason had not worked out there,
and
had come home for a second chance
The coach and his team were ready

And
he coached the team in his style,
the style that was the man,
the in-your-face full-court game
He substituted like a maestro,
and

motivated masterfully,
and
his team spent the entire season
attacking the other team
and
the status quo

The status quo,
being the status quo,
won't play you at your place;
you must go on the road,
and

be suitably grateful for that crumb,
the nice payday you receive
in return for the expected ass-whipping
There were two such entries
on the team's resume that season,

though
neither time did the coach's team
receive quite the expected whopping



There was also a close loss
on the road against their bitter conference rival
The coach's team
 had defeated
 all other
 opponents
by a considerable margin

 Now
 (and then too)
the status quo will decide
whether or not they will invite you to their party,
 and
they always have all sorts of seemingly good reasons
to justify their exclusions,
 from
all sorts of computer mumbo-jumbo
stacked in favor of the status quo,
 to
the always-effective
"Because I said so"

 But
the coach and his team had too good a record to be excluded,
even with everything stacked against them,
 and
the status quo,
 grudgingly,
extended an invitation to the party,
deciding
 when,
 where,
 and

to whom
the coach's team would be sacrificed

And
the man to whom the coach's team was to be sacrificed
couldn't stand in starker contrast:

he
hadn't had to scrap,
he had gotten a head-coaching job
a year or two out of college;

he
had reached the pinnacle of the profession,
having already won two titles;

he
gave a thin,
very thin,
sometimes microscopic veneer of respectability
to the morass of corruption and hypocrisy
that was (and is) college basketball;

moreover,
he
was a boorish bully,
whose sycophants
in the media
excused his behavior

as if he were
actually doing something important

And
on a frigid Friday afternoon in March,
the kind that gives rise to the March Madness moniker,
the street kid and his team

spit in the face of the status quo,
a peculiarly poetic gesture
given the status quo's representative

And

then two days later they did it again

And

the status quo grew alarmed

And then

five days after that the street kid's team
went against one of the greatest players of all-time
and the rest of his teammates,
the status quo's latest clean-cut representatives

And

the street kid's team played their hearts out,

and

only two calls late in the game
that went against his team,
calls that were inexplicable
to anyone honest and with sight,
prevented the street kid and his team from advancing
The future looked bright,
with most of the players returning

The rise to the big time had been swift

Too swift for some members of the status quo,
especially for those who had been mired in mediocrity
for far longer than the street kid had taken
to take his team to the big time

And so

the status quo hit back

You see,
the street kid had bent a few rules
on the road to the big time
(never mind that the rule book
is longer and more complex than the tax code),

and

outsiders aren't allowed to bend the rules
(Of course,
once you're accepted into the status quo
you can fold, spindle, and mutilate the rules
to your heart's (and program's) content)

And so

the status quo convened a star chamber
to sit in judgement of the street kid

And

the rules of the game were such that,
if you didn't confess your guilt,
if you didn't help your inquisitors
to establish your guilt,
if you insisted on a fair hearing
with guarantees of due process,

then

that meant you were guilty

And

the star chamber so said about the street kid

And

the street kid and his team
were forever barred from the big time
(A fellow rebel coach remarked at the time
that the status quo was so mad at one of its members

that they severely punished the outsider street kid)

And

soon after that professional disappointment,

from which

he tried to, but couldn't, recover,
came a personal downward spiral
into the hell of substance abuse

And

finally the loss of his dream
(again without due process)



Postscript: A Tale of Two Coaches

The boorish bully finally had one embarrassment too many
even for his abject apologists,

and

he was given a timeout for a year

But

he came back,

and

his sycophants in the media
again sang their suck-up songs,

and

a movie was even made about him

And

like the whore that he was,
he sold himself to anyone and everyone,
looking for all the world like an auto racer

The street kid was exiled
to the Siberia of the hoop world,

allowed

to think about his one-time dream

Though

seeming to have conquered his demons,
he remained in exile

But

he still loved the game

for Kevin Mackey

A Viking Saga Michael Ceraolo

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