

### **The Anatomy of a Comeback: Lucky Goes to La-La Land**

Cut, at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, is pure LA. Giant, edgy Polaroid photographs of Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Kate Blanchett, and Christopher Walken adorn the wall. The waiters are too put together not to be aspiring actors. The tables are low slung booths with plenty of black leather and chrome. It's the only restaurant in the world with Aeron chairs. "Paul, I'm sitting with a client even more important than you," Vlad Shulman, the Boston Celtic's legendary Russian masseuse and team oracle, reports on his cell phone. He is sitting with one of the Celtic owners and me. Paul Pierce is sitting across the room with his fiancée Julie, Julie's mom, and his two-month-old baby girl Prianna Lee. It's two hours after the game three NBA finals loss at the Staples Center. Paul looks at his cell in disgust. Even his buddy Vlad is *dissing* him. But then he sees Vlad waving with a big smile on his face. Paul laughs out loud and shakes his head at the practical joke.

"His mind is still going," Vlad says. "He'll figure out what happened tonight and be ready for Thursday. So will Kevin." Vlad, who has been with the team since 1981 and was best friends with Larry Bird, has never seen anyone with as much innate drive as Kevin Garnett. He's the nicest guy you will ever meet off the court, but once he steps onto the hardwood for practice or a game his intensity is inhuman. "Kevin never has two bad games in a row."

In the lobby, Ray Allen arrives back at the hotel after scorching the Lakers in a losing effort. He has on a light brown suit and striped tie. He's carrying a brief case and looks like an investment banker just arriving back from a tense deal negotiation. Across the hall, Danny Ainge sits in the corner staring out the window at the Los Angeles night surrounded by his staff. It's three in the morning Boston time, but he isn't going to sleep anytime soon. Game three should have been a foot on the neck of Kobe and company. The Celtics had built a second half lead only to squander it on a handful of decisive mistakes. Danny knows this one slipped through his fingers and now the Lakers have momentum. In all likelihood the finals are going to be a dogfight, just like Atlanta, Cleveland, and Detroit were.

I got to my seat just as game three began. The whole section rained down boos on me, the owner I was traveling with, and our wives. Maybe the bright green Ralph Lauren pants, white shoes, Ray Allen Jersey, white blazer, and assortment of green beads was taking my loyalty a bit too far in hostile territory. But I didn't expect the attack to be so vicious. An usher with a deformed hand and horrible breath informed me that he was planning on looking the other way when I got my ass kicked.

Unlike the Fleet, the Staples Center was oddly quiet. If it weren't for the A list celebrities like Hugh Hefner and his two girlfriends, it could have been a preseason game rather than the NBA finals. When Ray pumped in his threes, I jumped for joy. But when Eddie took his ill-timed shot with two minutes to go, and missed, and then the Lakers came down and moved the ball out of a trap to a wide open Sasha who made his three, we snuck out of the building to the safety of our limo.

The next morning my three year old played in the hot tub as Brian Scalabrine, the red-haired Celtics reserve, held court with several of the team staff about the upcoming draft. Eventually Scott Pollard made it to the pool to display his impressive tattoo collection. Pat Riley wandered by on his way to the gym and stopped to chat with Scott. By late afternoon, the pool was filled with Celtic staff trying to figure out, if the team managed to win game four, how they might explain to their wives and children back home that they need to stay at poolside for three more days for the potential clincher on Father's Day. Shawn Sullivan (not be confused with Sean Sullivan who also works for the team) sat with Rich Gotham, who was still grinding through the prior night's game. "The optimistic view is that we played horribly and still almost won," the Celtics President told me from his lounge chair.

The team dinner Wednesday was at the Eva Longoria and Todd English joint venture, Beso. The Celtics owners had been told Todd was flying to cook, but apparently he got into a fight with his girlfriend and missed his plane. He arrived at eleven, after everyone had eaten, and kept going outside to make frantic cell phone calls. The Celtics brass showed up, as did the reserve players, and Tom Brady's personal assistant Will McDonough. I tried to pick Jo Jo's brain in line for the bathroom. "Kevin's got to realize he is seven feet tall," he said emphatically. "We can beat this team but we have to get physical."

On Thursday morning, my three year old was back in the hot tub as was Brian. But otherwise the place was deserted for game day. Having heard about the abuse we took in the stands, Wyc told my wife that he would protect us. She joked that it was going to be hard to do from his luxury box. As game time approached, P.J. Brown asked the doorman for a taxi. In the land of stretch limos, he folded his long body into the back of a tiny beat-up green cab. "No limo for me," he said. "I got to get to work. It's all right here," he told the doorman as he pointed to his heart. When the bus left with the rest of the players, Lakers fans swore at them. Our nanny and three year old cheered. Danny looked refreshed and optimistic.

In the limo on the way to Staples, we put on green tattoos. I put a big green cross on the back of my neck. Our seats for both games were just over the tunnel where the players and celebrities made their way to the court. I wanted the rude Lakers fans behind us to have something to stare at. I got my friend, the owner, to join me in wearing green beads. The ladies put on giant green feather boas and shamrock tattoos.

On the concourse inside Staples I got a sharp elbow to the ribs from a three hundred pound Lakers fan looking for a fight. The pain in my side was nothing compared to splitting headache of the first half. We spotted the Lakers twenty points before player introductions. The Celts finally made a little run, threatening to get the lead down to eleven, only to watch a three-pointer at the buzzer make it eighteen again. I had been telling my friends that I was planning to streak across the floor with only my shamrock tattoos showing to give Kobe a talkin' to if the game got out of hand. But I couldn't muster the energy to get arrested after the humiliation of the first half. We took abuse from everyone around us, including the usher with the deformed hand and bad breath, and even talked about leaving but decided the third quarter has always been our strongest period. Besides, our wives were enjoying taking digital movies of Will and Jada Smith at courtside with a telephoto lens.

The rest is history. The Celts went down by twenty again in the third before going on a run for the ages, going up by five with two minutes to go. During the last time out, Jack Nicholson got out his seat to pace the floor. He wandered over to confer with the official score keeper, as if it could not possibly be true that the Celts had a lead. Ray Allen, whose jersey I had not washed from the first playoff game, held the ball with less than a minute to go. He burned time and just begged Sasha to send him to the line. As the shot clock wound down, Ray made the game-three-hero into a goat by turning the corner and delivering the dagger to the heart of La-La land. The Lakers fans who had cheered when Kendrick Perkins had been badly hurt, literally tried to "shush" me. I ignored them and screamed my head off as our guys left the floor.

Wyc held open the door of our limo when we got back to the Wilshire. In the bar, we bought him champagne and toasted the greatest Celtics comeback of all-time. "Those were the six worst quarters in our ownership," Wyc admitted, referring to game three and the first half of game four. "But we knew the Lakers were a house of cards if we could just put pressure on them." Sean and Shawn, along with the rest of the Celtics staff, made their way into the bar to high fives all around. Word came from the locker room that the players had decided to go with unwashed uniforms for game five--headbands, socks, jock straps, everything--to keep the luck of the Irish going.

As Celtics employees took celebratory photographs in front of the huge Polaroid portrait of Jack in the bar, Vlad made his way in from the team bus. "At half-time I knew we were going to win," he told me with dead seriousness. "Paul and Kevin were so angry," he explained. "When they get like that no one is going to stop them. It doesn't matter what the score is."

I gave Vlad a hug as I surveyed the crowd of celebrating Bostonians. I mentioned to one of the owners that I had almost felt bad for the Lakers fans. They were literally crying in the final moments of the game. "No way," he said. "I love the smell of napalm in the morning."