

Close Competition

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“No. Fucking. Way.”

Sammy looked at the arcade cabinet’s screen with his mouth hanging open. All around, he could hear digitized shooting, buttons clicking, and arcade patrons chattering and laughing. The words “HIGH SCORE” blinked in white block letters, following a blinking white line to begin typing his name. Goosebumps rippled all over his arms like tiny gnomes popping up from the ground to see his score.

“Dude, there’s no way.” His best friend, Anthony, stood behind him, his sweaty fingers gripping the side of the machine. “I hate you. I actually hate you.”

Sammy smiled dumbly in disbelief, then started typing out his gamer name. A little boy wearing thick glasses and holding a bucket of tokens came by and stared in awe as Sammy’s lanky fingers documented history:

B-L-T-S-A-M-M-Y

“I think this game is rigged,” Anthony said, inspecting the cords in the back of the machine like that somehow would confirm his jealous statement. “I played like six times, and I couldn’t get past level two.”

“Tough shit,” Sammy said proudly, pressing the white “enter” button that had been likely pressed thousands of times, but never by BLTSammy for his high score in *Galaga*. “I can feel power coursing through my veins as we speak.” He flexed his bendy-straw arms.

Anthony was irked, but he tried to play it off with a dry chuckle and a staged scratching of his coarse brown hair that was always unkempt. Not only had he been losing his tokens faster than he had eaten his nachos when they got to the arcade, but he was the one who had given Sammy the name BLTSammy in elementary school as an insult. Now he felt the name was being misused.

He rolled up the sleeves of the black zippered jacket he always wore when they went out. The fabric was beginning to pill up in some areas, and the hoodie strings were frayed from nervous and socially oblivious chewings. He stepped awkwardly to the side to start playing *Donkey Kong* on the machine to Sammy’s right. The screen was like a geometry worksheet of pink and turquoise: He had never played *Donkey Kong* before, but he didn’t want to look like an idiot in front of Sammy, who had come to watch him play. Under the watch of Sammy’s hovering eyes, Anthony’s hands became the epicenter of his perspiration, making the joystick slick and the buttons shiny.

“GAME OVER” read the screen in white 8-bit letters, but all Anthony saw was, “LOSER.”

Sammy snorted lightly, like a bull blowing out a birthday candle with its nostrils. The two of them had been friends since elementary school, instantly bonding over their love for video games, board games, and basketball. But Sammy had always had a bit of a pretentious air to him, with his silky, long dark hair and fast metabolism. “I could eat like 30 pizzas, and I wouldn’t gain a pound,” he would always say to their friends from Peter J.

Martin Middle School. Especially around his best bud Anthony, who would eat a dollop too much of ice cream and suddenly his stomach would soften into marshmallow.

Now in the eighth grade, whenever they went out, Sammy wore these colorful polo shirts like he expected to run into the paparazzi. High school was less than a year away, and part of Anthony felt like his friend was leaving him behind as he sailed forward on some fast-track evolution. Anthony was still adjusting to his final middle school year.

“That was just the warm-up round,” Anthony said, ignoring Sammy’s bright orange shirt in his periphery as he crammed two more tokens from a tattered jacket pocket into the slot. “Round two, round two.”

After about ten seconds, Anthony timed Mario’s jump poorly and sent the little Italian to his first death by a pixelated barrel. Flustered, he prepared for his second of three lives.

“Dude, do you even know how to play?” Sammy scoffed. He reached over his friend’s arm to grab the joystick. “Let me show you how to—”

“Oh, sure, fuck me!” Anthony said with an exaggerated push-off from the machine. “Not like I’m playing with my money or anything.”

His orange traffic cone of a friend backed away and put his hands up defensively. With no one controlling the game, Anthony watched as a barrel trampled over Mario and his blank expression. One life left. He suddenly became hot under his jacket as he placed his hands on the machine for another shot.

“See, if you just let me do it, you would’ve still had another life,” Sammy said, his arms crossed now. “I don’t know why you have to be such a baby about it.”

“Holy shit,” Anthony said under his breath, incredulous that Sammy was still talking as he dodged the eighth barrel in a row. “I swear to God, shut up. I’m so close to winning back Princess Peach.”

“No, you’re not, bro. *Donkey Kong* is just gonna drag her ass up another flight of stairs when you get to him.”

“I’ll drag *your* ass up another—” The dumbest little barrel made contact with Mario’s dumb little shoes before Anthony hit the jump button. He stared at “GAME OVER” with unblinking eyes and, hearing Sammy’s bored sigh, he left to use the bathroom. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sammy plug his tokens into the *Donkey Kong* machine and use a napkin to wipe Anthony’s sweat off the joystick.

When he left the bathroom, Anthony’s mom called him to say she was almost there to pick the two boys up. The friends walked outside of the arcade, facing the parking lot, which was full of cars on that Friday night. It was ten p.m., and they were tired, so when the cheerful woman in her silver Honda Odyssey drove into view in front of the arcade, neither of them said anything. Anthony had lots to say about Sammy, but his friend, who looked like a carrot in the backseat of his mom’s car, hadn’t technically done anything wrong. So, he bottled up the frustration and jingled the leftover tokens in his pockets.

“You boys are awfully quiet,” Anthony’s mom said with a side-eye to her sulking son. “How was the arcade?”

As lampposts and trees blurred past the window, Anthony said, “It was fine.” He rubbed his thumb over the tokens in his pocket, wishing he could’ve had an extra half hour after his curfew to get a decent score in *Donkey Kong*. An image popped into Anthony’s

head: He had a crown on his head while “HIGH SCORE” flashed on the *Donkey Kong* screen, and he looked back at Sammy, smirking.

“And how about for you, Sam?” Anthony’s mom probed. She definitely could read the car, but she was choosing to ignore the silent cues. “What did you guys play?”

“I actually beat the high score in *Galaga*,” Sammy said. “It was pretty crazy!”

“Whoa, that’s pretty impressive, Sam! Congrats.”

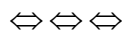
“Thanks, Mrs. Cardoza.”

The seven-minute car ride felt as long as watching Sammy’s *Galaga* streak. They finally turned into Sammy’s neighborhood, and after the two friends gave a dry, “See you tomorrow,” Anthony felt a puff of relief in his chest. It wasn’t that his fashionista friend was his aggressor or anything; Anthony sometimes just felt lesser when he was around.

“You alright, Ant?” his mom cooed after she parked the car in their driveway. “You’re quieter than usual.”

Tension resurfaced in Anthony’s head like a taut clothesline running from temple to temple. The urge to be somewhere, anywhere else, almost erupted into a rude response, but he controlled himself.

“I’m just tired, Mom.”



Besides a muggy exhaustion that clouded the middle school boy’s head, Anthony had woken up Saturday morning with a clear head. It was typical for Sammy to raid his

thoughts when they encountered anything slightly competitive together. But that was the thing he loved about male friendships: No matter how frustrated the two got with each other, they always moved on the next day. Cork it and throw it away, Anthony always thought about their little spats.

He uncovered himself from his solid-blue bedsheets, which were brand new and a mature step up from the galaxy-and-stars-themed sheets he had slept in for years before. Yawning, he slinked out of bed and into the kitchen. No one seemed to be around: His mom, dad, and sister, Carmen, were all absent, but he was expecting to see at least one of them, especially because Carmen was home from school for the weekend. *Is this what it feels like to be hungover after a party?* Anthony wondered.

It was close to ten a.m., and Anthony usually never slept in that late. He was supposed to meet up with Sammy at eleven to play basketball. His parents were probably out running errands and Carmen was probably doing something aesthetically pleasing with her friends at a park. So, he poured himself a bowl of Captain Crunch with milk, turned on the TV to watch cartoons, and enjoyed a moment to himself on the couch. He suddenly felt like he was twenty-two like his sister, living in his own apartment.

Halfway through his cereal, he heard the front door unlock, and he spun his around to see which one of his family members would break the post-apocalyptic silence. Carmen walked in, holding a white plastic takeout bag from a breakfast place called Elijah's, which had really good waffles. She locked the door and walked toward her younger brother in the family room.

"Hi," Anthony said, his knees propped up on the couch. He was still wearing his *Legend of Zelda* pajamas.

“Hey,” Carmen said, placing the leftover food on their dinner table. She was on the taller side for a girl, maybe five-six, with long brown hair that was thick like Anthony’s but styled and smooth. Her outfit, which was always nice, was a gray cable-knit cardigan and white jeans with a pair of black Converse. For some reason, everything that made Carmen cool didn’t irritate Anthony like it did with Sammy. Instead, he looked to her as an end goal for himself, like a major achievement in a video game.

“You went to Elijah’s?” Anthony said, shifting on the couch to get a better view of her leftovers. “Did you bring home anything for me?”

“I did,” she said, starting to untie the bag handles. “I went earlier with Sophie. She says

‘hi’ by the way. Here, I know you’ll like these. They’re new on the menu.”

“Tell Sophie I say ‘hi’ back,” he said, getting up like a curious bear cub from the couch. He peered into the bag. “Whoa, what the fuck are those?”

Carmen smacked his shoulder.

“Sorry. What the heck are those?”

“They’re chocolate-dipped churros. You’ve never had?”

Despite half a bowl of Captain Crunch sitting heavily in his stomach, Anthony started to salivate. There were three pretty big churros lying on wax paper in the bag, and their deliciously rich and warm aroma splashed his nose. They were crispy and golden, sparkled with sugar, and were half-cloaked in hardened milk chocolate. Worst of all, they were probably incredibly high in calories, fat, and sugar. Thoughts of Sammy and his thin, veiny arms populated Anthony’s mind like an overwhelming collage. Suddenly his appetite shut down. He backed away from the churros.

“Eh,” he said. “They don’t look that good. But thanks for bringing me them. Mom or Dad will eat them.”

Carmen cocked her head to the side with a bemused smile and looked at her brother.

“Dude, what? You love this type of shit.”

Anthony mimicked his sister and punched her in the shoulder. She sucked air sharply in through her teeth and clutched her shoulder.

“First of all, ow. Second, I’m an adult, I can say whatever I want. Just keep the cursing for when you and Sammy play video games because you’re gonna slip in front of Mom or Dad.”

“I know, I know.”

Semi ignoring the regular lecture from his sister, Anthony grabbed his now-soggy bowl of cereal to wash out, trudging to the kitchen sink. Carmen had tied the bag back up, but he could still smell the churros. She sat down at a chair facing the kitchen, pulling her hair out from the back of her cardigan.

“Seriously, Ant, what the hell? Last time I was here I brought you donuts, and you ate like three the same day. And they were kind of stale.”

He shrugged as he sprayed water absent-mindedly into the cereal bowl. Now his fickle stomach growled, but he ignored it. Besides, he didn’t want to get a cramp on the basketball court. If that happened again, Sammy would probably get annoyed, and then Anthony would get annoyed.

Noticing the signs of her overtly distressed younger brother with communication problems, Carmen asked Anthony what was wrong.

“I’m your sister, you can talk to me about anything.”

He shrugged again, leaving the bowl rinsed but unwashed in the sink and drying his hands. The thoughts of Sammy and the words to describe them swished around in his head like the particles in a snow globe. He wanted to tell her, but something held him back, like if he told her, he’d be exposing a more vulnerable layer of himself to her. It didn’t matter that she was his sister. Nobody but his inner voice would understand.

“I’m fine, Carmen!” It came out defensively.

She shook her head and said, “Oh, that’s how I know you’re not okay. Ant, just tell me. It’ll make you feel better. I saw Mom this morning, and she told me you seemed off last night, too.”

“Ugh.” Anthony trudged back to the couch and lay face down in a pillow. When he spoke, it was muffled, but Carmen could still understand him. “Sammy is so annoying. Everything he does, he acts like he’s better than me. He thinks he’s so cool with his polo shirts and his watch and hair gel. We went to the arcade yesterday and he wouldn’t shut the fuck—I mean, heck up about winning the high score in *Galaga*. Which was BS, there weren’t even that many high scores, anyway. I’m just pissed off, Carmen.”

There was a period of about five seconds of silence. Anthony’s nose and lips stayed smushed against the pillow in darkness as he waited for his sister to answer.

“I thought you and Sammy were best friends.”

“We are. But he’s different now. Or he’s the same but worse.”

He heard Carmen shift in her chair, like this was going to be a long talk. He held his breath and wondered if this was what therapy was like. Just lying in the opposite direction on a couch.

"I get that. That happened with me and Sophie in high school."

Her brother looked up from his pillow, which had a smudge of saliva from his lips pressed against it.

"Really?" he said.

"Mm hm. Sophie and I were friends all of freshman and sophomore year of high school, and then she got a boyfriend over the summer and thought she was the shit. And I, being the lonely single bitch that I still am, started feeling really bad about myself. I hated the way I looked, the way I dressed, the way I talked to boys.

"We stayed best friends the whole fall semester of junior year, but I would always hate hanging out with her. I would tell Mom that everything was fine, too, but in reality, I was losing my mind because the only person I hung out with would only talk about her boyfriend." She mocked Sophie here: "Angel and I are going to the movies tomorrow night. Angel's parents are doctors, so we get to stay in a hotel by the beach the whole weekend. Did you know that Angel's Grandma is from Peru? I love Angel so much, it's our four-month anniversary today."

Anthony was staring attentively at his sister, who seemed to have transported herself back to her high school years, reliving the emotion. He was trying to see how this related to his dilemma with Sammy.

"But Sammy doesn't have a girlfriend," he said. "He's just a prick."

"What did I say about the cursing?"

"That's cursing? Sorry."

Carmen sighed. “Sammy doesn’t need to be in a relationship to be a self-centered jerk. Sophie was always a little self-absorbed—it just came out more when she started dating Angel. And I was too insecure to handle it properly. At least at first.

“One thing I learned—and this was from lots of talks with Mom, which I think you should have with her, too—is that bottling up your emotions isn’t the way around a problem. It actually makes more problems for you, Ant.”

The middle school boy, who was now resting on his knees on the couch, now looked significantly younger. Corking and throwing away his emotions had always worked out for him. Or at least he thought. He stared blankly at the wall past his sister. A vision of Sammy ignoring Anthony in the halls at school on Monday invaded his mind like red Kool-Aid in water.

“You still with me, little bro?” Carmen said.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. So, how do you... not bottle up your emotions?” The words came out like they pained or disgusted him. For this question, his sister got up to join him on the couch, grabbing a blanket before she sat down.

“I know it sounds scary, dude, but you gotta just talk to him, friend to friend. Tell him you feel like he’s being a little arrogant, or that he’s been different this year. Have a heart to heart.”

“Like that cereal Mom buys for her cholesterol?”

She chuckled and closed her eyes.

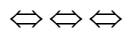
“I’m serious. Today, when you go to play basketball with Sammy, just bring it up casually. You’d be surprised how easy it is once you get over that first little hump. It’s like

when you play a new video game. All the controls and rules are weird and new at first, but after a while, it's second nature. You get me yet?"

Anthony didn't answer, but he did. Instead, he looked behind him to check the clock on the stove.

"I have to go 'cause I'm supposed to meet him in like thirty minutes. Thank you, Carmen."

"I hope you two losers figure it out!" She smiled and crashed on the couch, changing the channel to a movie Anthony definitely wasn't old enough to watch.



The sun collided into the sides of Anthony's eyes like the glare of some enormous alien invader ship ejecting fire as he walked with his basketball and drawstring bag to the court. It was hot. There might have been steam rising from his pores, burning holes through his shirt. To make matters worse, a dull anxiety rested in his stomach, as if he were in line to ride a rollercoaster that someone had died on twenty years before. He still wasn't sure how or when to bring up his grievance to Sammy. His legs moved robotically and slow.

When he finally arrived at the court, he could see Sammy through the chain-link gate already shooting his own basketball. He was wearing a gray dry-fit t-shirt, sweat already darkening the crew-cut neck; red basketball shorts that fell past his knees; and a pair of new black and red Jordans. The court was like a field of hardened lava: fine to step on with shoes but probably not safe enough to touch with skin. Sammy waved to him when

Anthony stepped through the gate. *God damn it.* Anthony thought. *He's being nice.* But then again, he didn't know if it would be any easier to talk to Sammy if he were being a jerk. Clouds moved in overhead, dampening the sun. Now it was just the anxiety that Anthony had to deal with.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Sammy said, and he dribbled the ball up to Anthony before spinning away toward the basket. "I've been waiting like ten minutes."

"Chill. I was grabbing some breakfast before I left."

Sammy dashed and dribbled to the right for a layup and said, "Hope you don't cramp up."

The words felt like the final pumps of air right before a basketball pops. Anthony set his ball down—which was a bit more ragged than Sammy's—and his drawstring bag, with his phone, house key, and water bottle inside, by the metal bleacher bench by the hoop. He placed a hand on the metal to feel if it had cooled down at all. Hardly.

"Fuck you, man," Anthony said, but the phrase wasn't uncommon or jarring for the two twelve-year-olds. "That was one time." He met him at the hoop and gestured for Sammy to pass the ball.

"One time is all it takes, Crampa." He shot a three-pointer and swished it. "Bro, I am on *fire* today. I've made, like, a hundred three-pointers since I got here. I'm like Steph Curry if Link taught him how to shoot."

Anthony snagged the rebound.

"I don't even know what the hell you're talking about."

He dribbled the ball once before Sammy juttet in: "It's make-it-take-it, bro, pass the ball."

“Bro, you’ve had the ball the entire time, and you never said make-it-take-it.”

He dribbled the ball some more around the half-court but not as gracefully or skillfully as Sammy had.

“Pass me the fucking ball, Ant, you’re gonna fuck up my streak!”

At this point, he assumed defense on Anthony, aggressively clawing between his friend’s arms to retrieve possession of the ball. It had become a game of one-on-one. Anthony jerked his body to the left to try and fake Sammy out, but the lanky kid was still on him like a mosquito.

“You’re so fucking annoying, just give me the ball, it’s mine!” Sammy whined.

“If you want it so bad, steal it from me,” Anthony said, panting. Immediately after he said this, he stepped just outside the three-point line, jumped not two inches off the ground to shoot the ball, and grazed the bottom of the net. Airball. He dropped his arms from the shooting position and cursed. Sammy was already grabbing the rebound.

“You’re so ass, bro,” Sammy said, and dribbled the ball up the court from the baseline. “I bet you couldn’t even steal the ball from me one on one. Check it up.”

“You couldn’t steal it from me either, pussy.”

With contempt, Sammy bounce passed the ball to Anthony, whose back was to the hoop. He pushed it back with a spiteful thrust, not even catching it first. Anthony’s skin was so hot from Sammy’s comments that he felt like his blood would evaporate. He was already breathing hard, and his neck and forehead were glazed in sweat. They would play each other, one on one. To Anthony, this game felt something like a fight between gladiators, and he wanted to be the one to come out with his life.

With a lithe start to the game, Sammy dribbled to the left, leading Anthony with all his momentum before switching to the right. It was the same move that Anthony did, but better. Anthony fell for the juke and began chasing his opponent, putting his left arm in the to try and block the layup. The ball clunked against the backboard and fell through the net. Anthony felt his stomach drop with the ball.

“One-zero,” Sammy declared. “Make-it-take-it.”

They set up again silently. Middle-school boys don’t congratulate their opponents. They checked the ball at the half-court line, and Sammy again dribbled to the left. This time, Anthony was ready for the fake, following and clinging onto Sammy like he was holding him back from a fight. Sammy stopped dribbling near the elbow, and Anthony, whose sweaty belly and torso were pressed against Sammy’s arm, tried to snatch the ball.

“Get the fuck off of me, man,” Sammy said through clenched teeth.

The two boys were now locked, connected by just the ball as each boy had both hands around it. Anthony tugged the ball downward while Sammy mustered his force upward. Several moments of struggle and grunting went on without a referee to blow a whistle. Suddenly, Sammy overcame Anthony’s strength, thrashing the ball upward. The potential energy within the ball targeted its revenge on Anthony’s nose, sending his head flying back and his hands to his face. He cried in pain.

“What the fuck!” he yelled, blood running down his hands and onto his shirt.

Sammy, who had taken the injury as an opportunity for a shot, swished the ball into the hoop and finally looked over at his hurt friend. Anthony was now sitting on the court, the concrete burning his thighs and buttocks. He didn’t care. The temperature matched the anger within him already.

“My bad, bro. Are you okay?” He looked at Anthony like he was a zoo animal, like he was afraid of something.

“No, I think you broke my fucking nose.” He raised his shirt over his nose and held it there like a bandage. He felt aware of his bare stomach hung out, glistening and pudgy.

“You fouled me. What was I supposed to do?”

The mental basketball within Anthony exploded with that final pump of air.

“You think you’re fucking better than me.” The words left Anthony’s tongue sizzling. He expected Sammy to have a retort, but he looked stunned, so he kept going. “You always have, but now that we’re in eighth grade, it’s worse. You changed your clothes, you flirt with all the girls, you got the high score in a stupid video game, you make some baskets, and you always rub that shit in my face. You’re so arrogant sometimes. I feel like I can’t fucking win around you!”

The final sentence staggered through his throat and brought tears to Anthony’s eyes, but he quickly wiped them away with his bloodied shirt. Inadequacy, jealousy, and frustration from more than three years welled up within Anthony. He didn’t care if he was being selfish, or stupid, or weak; all he knew was that when Sammy was around, he hated himself. The veins on his temples swelled, and he looked down to the ground to avoid Sammy’s stare above him.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything before?” Sammy’s voice sounded smaller, more sympathetic than Anthony had ever heard.

“Because!” Anthony’s voiced faltered. “I didn’t want to sound like a bitch, or an asshole.” He paused for a few seconds and sucked air through his teeth. “We never just talk about video games anymore or make jokes. I feel like we’re always going against each

other. And I'm always left behind. I feel like once we get to high school, you're gonna stop talking to me because I'm not good enough."

Looking up, he saw Sammy with his arms behind his neck, his head in the air. Anthony was trembling. Saying everything that had been on his mind for years all at once was not as easy as Carmen made it sound.

"You're not a bitch," Sammy started, "you just gotta stop being so dramatic all the time. It's not arrogance, it's confidence."

Anthony didn't feel completely relieved, but the anger drained out of his veins. Sammy reached out an arm to help his messy friend off the ground. Anthony accepted the arm and stood up, his shirt ruined but his nose mostly dry.

"I guess I could be less sensitive."

"And I won't rub shit in your face as much."

Anthony smirked.

"Truce?" Sammy said, with his hand open and outstretched.

"Yeah." And they joined hands, Anthony's nose blood sealing making them unofficial blood brothers.

"I'm sorry I broke your nose. You almost got the ball from me!" The words were empty, but Anthony appreciated them anyway.

"It's okay. Want to get the fuck out of here and play *Super Smash* at my house?"

Sammy jogged over to the bleacher bench and grabbed Anthony's belongings for him.

"Yeah, let's do it."

