Pegleg
By Chris Abkarians

A few quick **Bops** followed my feet to the left, around a much smaller defender. A sudden pivot to the right, a quick first step, and an open shot.

**Clunk, clunk, bop.**

The ball clanked off the rim and bopped into a Shirt’s hands. 9 points to 9. The game went to 11. If they scored here, it was just about over. “Protect the 3!” I shouted to my teammates. We play “win by two” and if they make a three, then they win 11-9.

“Everybody man up!” yelled a 40-something teammate who had mistaken added weight by virtue of his slowing metabolism for the kind of mass that would qualify him to play Center (he shouldn’t have opted for Skins).

A skilled Shirt dribbled quickly up the court. **Bop-bop-b-b-b-bop!** I kept pace, shuffling backward, doing all I could to keep him in front of me.

I looked around and the rest of my team had all but given up. There were 3 Skins on the wrong end of the court. **Ugh, uughh, uuugh** panted my Center as he heaved his way back on defense.

I heard the sound of feet shuffling and suddenly a Shirt, the one I was guarding, dashed for the basket. I chased him down with ever-quicker **thuds** beneath each step in my blue and white Kobe Zoom IVs. They truly were as light as advertised and I could feel my momentum building toward the Shirt’s assault.

I was right behind him. I was closing in with longer strides, and I was ready to leap at the first sign he was about to take his shot. Another Shirt was watching from the right corner and began a dash toward the paint.

A cacophony of **bops, thuds, grrs, and ughhs** swallowed everything around me. Shirt 1 glided in and laid the ball off the backboard with a crisp **thunk**.

I had just enough time to swat the ball away before it reached the rim and inevitably went **woosh** through the net (contrary to popular belief, it does not swish).
I bent my knees, outstretched my left hand, and jumped with every ounce of strength left in my legs. I was so close. I was almost there.

But Shirt 2 wasn’t willing to let me swipe the shot. A rough shove from behind sent me sailing through the air, far past the intended target.

My hyper extended right leg smashed into the hard wood floor with a loud **THUD**. The last sound I recall was a painful, shrieking **CRACK**. I tried to stand up, but, **ARGHH**, I collapsed.

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It has been three months since I last laced up my Kobe Zoom IV sneakers, and I am about to board a plane to study abroad in London. The estimated flight time is about twelve hours, but based on previous experiences with British Airways, let’s just say that if I were a betting man, I’d take the “over”.

Every step I take draws another stare. The faces reflect a collage of pity and bemusement as I attempt to drag two suitcases, a carry-on, and a backpack—the entirety of my possessions for the next 3 months—all while playing a balancing act on one leg. I **clank** my way to the check-in counter, not even remotely entertaining the notion of waiting in line—no one stops me.

Using the counter as leverage to balance myself, I withdraw my passport. “Would you like someone to help you to the gate?” asks the courteous attendant. I stubbornly insist that it won’t be a problem (it will be), and continue checking in. To my pleasant surprise, she upgrades my seat to first class. Whether out of pity, compassion, or sheer dumb luck, I really don’t care. Things are starting to get better (and 12+ hours of free drinks will only help).

Twelve hours later, I get off the 747, slightly tipsy, though my clumsiness is masked by my general lack of coordination. I **clank** my way towards the customs line, splitting my focus between filling the declaration forms—with pen and paper fumbled between opposite hands—while attempting to maintain my balance. I look up to see an astonishingly long crowd ahead and ask an attendant if this is the line.
“It’s a queue.” she deadpans (my first lesson in British-English). But, she soon notices my two trusty aids and offers to escort me to the front of the queue. “Next,” mumbles a border agent in monotone. After peppering me with “queries” about my purpose for travel, he asks where I will be staying. “Oh S***”, I thought to myself, “I totally forgot to return the housing paperwork”! I calmly explain that I’ll be staying at university provided dorms (or so I hope) and the agent, visibly pitying my state of affairs, let’s me through. Sweet. I’m here.

Where to next?

The housing application for University College London was due last June…it’s September. I gather my bags, all the while clanking clumsily through Heathrow. I finally make my way to a payphone and call the University housing department begging and pleading for a place to stay. The man on the end of the line apologizes, claiming there is nothing he can do, and I hear him call me a “blithering fool” before the line fully disconnects. I certainly feel like a fool—a fool with nowhere to go.

I take a cab to the housing department, hoping against all odds that I’ll talk my way into a place to live. I spent the past thirty minutes in the car plotting my strategy to maximize their sympathy so I slowly and loudly CLANK my way through the front door, heaving as if I can go no further. I ask the same questions I had on the phone just an hour earlier, but lo-and-behold, there are rooms reserved for handicap students, evidently such as myself. Score—I have a place to live!

One more cab ride and I clank my way through the front doors of Schafer House at about 4 pm. I happily trade my credit card and payment application for a set of keys and a room
assignment—BG1:1 (Block B, Ground floor, Section 1, Room 1). As I consult a rudimentary map on the wall to find my room, I hear someone repeatedly shouting “pegleg!” from the common room. Out rushes an amiable, if inebriated, young fresher who introduces himself as Jack. My name, he has decided in a state of humorous (if not stereotypically British) intoxication, will be Pegleg, or Peggy if I prefer it. I don’t—please don’t let that stick as a name.

BG1:1 is a short walk, or an intermediate clank, from the entrance. I make my way through the front door of the suite-style set-up and crash from exhaustion and jetlag on a barren bed in my “cozy” (read tiny) room. Knock, knock, KNOCK. I stumble out of bed to find my four exuberant flatmates, led by Jack, gathered at the door rushing to introduce themselves. “Get up you tramp [lazy bum]—there’s a fit [attractive] girl across the hall who wants to have dinner with us!” explains Jack. Minutes later I clank to the kitchen to eat with all ten occupants of BG1 and BG2.

Dinner is spent fielding inexhaustible questions as to exactly why I’m clanking about. As the night—and a series of British drinking games—progresses, I push the envelope to test my storytelling abilities and gauge how convincingly I can articulate absurd explanations for my current predicament. My stories range from relatively mundane motorcycle accidents and sports injuries to exciting tales of skydiving mishaps and brazen shark attacks. By the end of the night, Pegleg is a hit and the cross-hall Sunday dinner tradition is born. Schafer house feels much more like Schafer home.

The legend of Pegleg, based on my ridiculous dinner jests, grows during “fresher’s week”, UCL’s equivalent of the raucous distortion of reality which Dukies call “O[rientation]-week”. The next twelve nights (yup it’s a long week) consist of university-sponsored clubbing events, pub-crawls, and foam parties—and Pegleg is at all of them. At first I thought my immobility would render my desire to socialize null and void. But my resilience, perseverance, and any other
euphemism you could use to describe my general stubbornness allow me to consistently surprise my peers.

Six more BG1/BG2 dinners pass by and Pegleg remains resilient. I spend the entire time using my condition to my utmost advantage. Bouncers at clubs insist that I bypass long queues. Bartenders spot my upraised steel supporter and rush over to take an order. Cab drivers ignore others who have waited in front of me. Professors excuse my tardiness and encourage me to work from home whenever possible. I take advantage of every benefit handed to me, but I realize that I can begin to walk on my own—eventually this must come to an end.

Halfway through the term, I take a trip to the London Eye, a large ferris wheel, with Jack and the “fit” girl from BG2. I softly and swiftly clank my way down the steps of the Warren Street station tube stop, hardly placing any weight on my support but mentally glued to it. We sit down for a long subway ride, and I put my supporters up against another seat. Roughly forty minutes later, we get up and walk out the tube station when I suddenly realize that Jack and fit girl are staring at me bewildered. “Aren’t you forgetting something Peggy?” asks Jack. It takes a moment to connect, but I realize that I’ve shed my support and I’m walking on my own again for the first time in six months.

We walked together, somewhat slowly as I adjusted to my newfound independence, towards the queue for the London Eye. This time, there would be no jumping the queue, no sympathy from the attendants, and no special attention paid to the peg-legged American exchange student. This time, I waited, just like everyone else. And I thought about all the people around me—whether they had any idea how monumental the simple obligation to wait in line could ever feel.

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It’s been roughly a year since I left London to come back home—and though I speak of home as a physical construct, my concept of it is far more enduring than wooden beams or steel pillars. In this home, I have a wall of items
representing those memories that I hold most dear. There’s a Kobe Bryant number eight jersey reminding me of my first time at a basketball game with my dad. Beside it, there’s the iconic Barack Obama “Progress” t-shirt designed by Shepard Fairey, reminding me of the first time I voted. And underneath a collage of photos of friends and family and of every place I’ve ever lived there is a single crutch.

That crutch reminds me about a time when I had a choice, between being angry at the world for condemning me to six months of incessant clanks or trying to make the most of what I had been given. And it reminds that if I try hard enough, I can turn any situation into a cherished memory.

Without crutches, I may not have gotten past that border agent and into London. Without crutches, I would never have convinced the housing department to let me live in Schafer House. I would not have been assigned to room BG1:1, would have never met Jack and my flatmates, and would never have taken part in Sunday dinners.

Without crutches, I wouldn’t have this photo of my newfound friends—forever my family abroad—hanging in the middle of my wall.
Acknowledgments: I’d like to thank Perry, Emily, and Grace—as always—for their constructive feedback throughout the evolution of this piece. This essay was my X1 and has undergone multiple revisions, so I thank them for helping me get it from start to finish. I’d also like to thank Professor Harris for all of his input throughout this process and for encouraging me to try presenting the content of the story in different formats. Finally, I’d like to thank the nameless Shirt 2, without whom I would not have broken my leg and had such a memorable experience abroad.