

GQ

OUR 26TH ANNUAL
**MEN
OF
THE
YEAR**
ISSUE

FEATURING
**ATHLETE
OF THE YEAR**

GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

PLUS
LIL NAS X
**TOM
HOLLAND**

**THE 2021
GQ FASHION
AWARDS**

AND
**MARK
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CHIN**

MOTY 2021



For our cover story on Giannis Antetokounmpo, our Athlete of the Year, see page 98.

Shirt, \$450, by **Ralph Lauren**. Shorts, \$2,250, by **Loewe**. Tank top, \$42 for pack of three, by **Calvin Klein Underwear**.
Sunglasses, \$420, by **Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello**. Watch, \$6,550, by **TAG Heuer**. Necklace, his own.

MOTY2021 →

ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

ONLY ONLY GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

His fairy-tale rise made him a sensation. But now, after turning the once-dismal Bucks into champions, he's becoming something more like a legend. Inside the whirlwind next chapter for the NBA's most dazzling global star—who's deciding what he intends to conquer next.

BY ZACH BARON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARNAUD PYVKA

STYLED BY MOBOLAJI DAWODU

Giannis Antetokounmpo photographed on the Mediterranean Sea, at Costa Navarino, Greece.





NOT LONG AGO, Giannis Antetokounmpo watched his partner, Mariah Riddlesprigger, give birth to their second son, Maverick, and when he saw Maverick he immediately burst into tears. This happened with Antetokounmpo's first son, Liam Charles, too—that Giannis wept. “But I thought maybe it was because he was my first one,” he told me. He doesn't think of himself as someone who cries, he said; he's survived too much deprivation, too many provocations, to be reduced to tears by just anything.

We were in the living room of his red brick house in the Milwaukee suburbs, hiding out from the August sun. Mariah was napping in the other room. Liam, big now and curly haired, was wandering around saying hi to everything that moved. Mav was in Giannis's lap. Giannis was trying to explain just what these boys did to him when they arrived.

Giannis and Mariah named Liam in part after Antetokounmpo's father, Charles, who passed in 2017, and so Giannis thought that might have been part of it, too, at the time—that maybe he was crying out of delayed grief. Ever since his dad died, he'd felt an emptiness he didn't know how to fill, he said. Then all of a sudden here was this new being with his father's name. I lost somebody that I loved, Giannis thought, and now I've got somebody back that I love a lot. But his mother told him: Let the memory of your father be the memory of your father. “You cannot fill that void,” Giannis realized. He still thinks about Charles every day. When his team, the Milwaukee Bucks, won the NBA Finals in July, one of the first things Giannis did after the buzzer sounded was find a quiet place in a very loud arena to sit and talk to his father: “‘Man, we've come a long way. I wish you were here to see this. Please watch me.' You know?” But Liam, Giannis decided, would be his own person, not a replacement for the father Giannis lost.

Then Giannis was in the delivery room again this past summer, marveling at what Mariah had to endure. “Seeing what the body has to go through in order to bring this beautiful, sweet thing into the world, it's insane,” he said. Giannis is one of five boys; looking at Mariah, he thought of his mother, who gave birth to her first son in Nigeria and then to four more after she'd emigrated to Greece, doing so without most of the painkillers or other comforts Milwaukee hospitals use to help mothers ease children into the world. In Greece, they were undocumented, citizens of no nation. No one helped them. “Six months before I came to the NBA, I was selling stuff in the street,” Giannis told me. “My mom was in the market. I used to go help her. People don't know about this, but I did it.” Epidurals? Extended hospital stays? Postpartum doulas?

“She definitely didn't have access to any of it,” Giannis said. “I'm like, ‘Mom, you went through this for all five of us?’”

And then Mav emerged, and to his genuine surprise, Giannis started sobbing again.

BY NOW, MUCH OF his story is known. How he was discovered as a gangly kid running around an Athens playground; how he didn't touch a basketball until he was 13. How he had yet to become even the best player on his second-division Greek team when he was drafted in 2013 by the Milwaukee Bucks, who picked him at 15. Who was this guy? Would he be any good? Well, this is what happened next: Most Improved Player (2017), Defensive Player of the Year (2020), two MVP awards (2019, 2020), and an NBA championship this past July. A journey unfathomable in its sheer improbability, its storybook ending, an ending that may in fact be just the beginning of something even more grand and unlikely. He is already back out there, defending his title. Got handed his championship ring and went right out and scored 32 points in 31 minutes against the Brooklyn Nets in the first game of the season.

Some players seem haloed in greatness from the moment we lay eyes on them. They don't always attain it, but you see it with athletes like LeBron James or Kevin Durant within seconds: They are playing a different, easier game; they are competing more against history, against gravity, against spectral forces in the dark, than they are against the regular guys around them. Guys who are talented but not great. I'd argue that Giannis was one of these guys, first: a curio, an intriguing combination of traits and potential, but no more than that. He was regarded, in his early NBA days, as capable, not destined. “He looked like a guy who was going to be a project,” his longtime teammate Khris Middleton said. Giannis will tell you himself: “What I am today, nobody saw it. You know why nobody saw it? Because I didn't see it. Ask my mom. No. ‘I thought you would be an NBA player and have a better life. Not what you are today.’”

What is he today? Something remarkable. Singular. One of one. All summer I'd be walking around, and flashes of the Finals, in which the Bucks beat the Phoenix Suns 4-2, would come back to me, unbidden. These moments are lore now. Giannis's block on Deandre Ayton at the end of Game 4, a feat of athleticism so impossible and otherworldly that it's even *more* confusing in slow motion, how he did it. Even to Giannis himself: “I look at the block—How the fuck did I do this shit?” This is a player who had fallen to the floor two weeks earlier in Game 4 of the Eastern Conference finals with a left-knee injury so gruesome that he told me his knee looked like an elbow afterward. “My leg was the opposite way,” Giannis said. “To this day, I feel the effect, the traumatic stress. I still feel it, and I think I'm going to feel it until I die.”

Somehow he played in all six games of the Finals anyway. And when he jumped to block Ayton's shot, that was the leg he jumped off. How the fuck is that possible? He was in one place and suddenly he was in a completely different place in about a millisecond.

In the shower, after the next game, he started cramping; his lips turned purple; his hands got white. “I'm naked, I only have my towel,” lying on the trainer's table, he remembered. “I ask, ‘Can you give me that trash can?’ Throw up five times.” They gave him an IV—he was so dehydrated it took them 45 minutes to find the vein.

- ←← PREVIOUS PAGE sweater \$900 **Etro**
- hat \$425 **Worth & Worth**
- watch \$9,100 **Omega**
- bracelet \$17,700 **Shay Jewelry**
- shirt \$450 **Ralph Lauren**
- tank top \$42 for pack of three **Calvin Klein Underwear**
- shorts \$2,250 **Loewe**
- sunglasses \$420 **Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello**
- watch \$6,550 **TAG Heuer**
- pendant necklace (throughout), his own





Then he went back to the hotel and got a second one. This happened again after Game 6, he said: that he needed an IV. In that game, he scored 50 points, even while there were possessions in the fourth quarter where it looked like he could barely walk up the floor. Went 17 of 19 from the free-throw line when all series he could barely make one of two. As pure an exercise of concentration and will as you could ever, or will ever, watch. Greatness achieved.

SO: HOW DOES A now 26, formerly stateless kid from Greece become...this? A champion. One of the two or three best players in the league. Some of it, he said, is just luck, genetics. He is 6 feet 11. He's 242 pounds. He moves so gracefully around his own house, even with the leftover limp from his knee injury in last year's playoffs, that you are forced to reevaluate how poorly you've been getting around all these many years on this earth: *Am I walking...wrong? Is there a better way?* But the NBA is full of men who are tall and acrobatic. The body, sure, whatever, it's impressive, but if you ask him how all this happened, what he'll say is: "I'm going to work as hard as possible. God gave me that gift."

Even the night his father passed. "I went to the gym," Giannis said. "He was there with me."

Stubbornness, persistence, hard work, going to the gym even on the night your father dies—that can get you pretty far. But Giannis, in the past few years, began running up against the limits of hard work, he said. There's a sports psychologist who works with the Bucks, and Giannis talks to him almost every day. They work on coping mechanisms. They work on anxiety. They work on being in the moment. They work on separating the guy who is arguably the best basketball player in the world right now from the guy holding his newborn child trying to knock down the walls between him and his own feelings. One thing the sports psychologist led Giannis to try was: Cry! And not just at the birth of your sons.

"I had to break down the barriers I was talking about and be by myself, cry, and realize, 'I got to fucking help myself,'" Giannis said. "This guy, he's like, 'Sometimes, being persistent and stubborn? Sometimes it fucks you up.'"

He looked down at the sleeping baby he was holding. "You're not going to put the curse words in here, right?"

HE CAN BE like this: a little innocent. Seemingly unsure of himself, despite his absolute certainty pertaining to basketball. "Silly," Khris Middleton told me, affectionately. Superstar athletes have long been conditioned to think of themselves as brands, spokespeople for the million- and billion-dollar businesses they front. This is not Giannis. "I don't want to be the face of the league," he said, adamantly. "I want to play great basketball."

- ←
- shirt \$1,695
Dolce & Gabbana
- pants \$295
Emporio Armani
- sneakers \$85
Nike
- his own watch
Rolex
- bracelet \$22,000
Shay Jewelry
- ↓
- sweater \$375
Emporio Armani
- shorts \$715
Rick Owens
- sunglasses \$625
Dita
- watch, his own
bracelet \$22,000
Shay Jewelry

After that, if I disappear in the night, good. Don't even talk about me, don't even remember me. I don't care."

He called out to Mariah: "Babe, do you want to be the face of the league?"

"No," Mariah said, sleepily.

He loves basketball but is not of basketball. "Let me show you downstairs," he said, suddenly.

He padded down the carpeted stairs in his socks, through his not particularly giant suburban house, which he bought from an old teammate, Mirza Teletović. The door frames were too small for him, and he had to duck under each one. Next door, the ground had been torn up and the foundation laid for a second house for his mother, who currently lives upstairs.

Down in the basement, he has a weight room. Soon he will have a basketball court, too, connected to it. Giannis famously would go to the Bucks practice facility so often, at so many different times of day and night, before and after games, that the team sometimes took action to keep him out so he could rest: "They had this term, 'lockout,' that you cannot go to the gym, because they know I will go to the gym. Now, see what I did?" He gestured toward





the construction outside, toward what would soon be his own facility. “Fuck lockout. Sorry. Oh, my God, I’m cursing. *Eff* lockout. I build a gym right here.”

He also has a slew of framed jerseys down in the basement. Some of the jerseys are hung, proudly, on the wall; others are stacked haphazardly on a pool table or near the bar stocked with alcohol that Giannis doesn’t drink. Many are his, but curiously, he also has dozens of framed jerseys from other NBA players too, leaned up against the wall, or hung, or on the pool table.

He’s got a framed Blake Griffin Pistons jersey. He’s got one from Kevin Durant, and one from Steph Curry. James Harden—“A lot of people think that I have beef with James Harden, which is not true,” he said, because if it were, why would his jersey be here? He continued the tour. “This right here is from Luka Dončić, the wonder boy. Anthony Davis. L.A., you know him. Jokić. I love the game! Oh, this is mine from this year. This is from the MVP I won. The All-Star MVP. Bradley Beal. Damian Lillard. Derrick Rose. I love Derrick Rose. LeBron James, man. Look! Look what he wrote for me.”

Many of the jerseys are signed, some with brief messages, but this particular one, a LeBron Lakers jersey, had a longer note, and Giannis read it out loud: “To Giannis, a.k.a The Greek Freak. Continue to strive for greatness every single day you wake up, brother. Love everything you represent to this game of hoops, and off the court as

- ↑ his own suit
- G. Papadogamvros**
- sweater-vest \$190
- MSGM**
- sunglasses \$625
- Dita**
- his own watch
- Rolex**
-
- sweater \$1,340
- Tom Ford**
- shorts \$120
- Stüssy**
- hat \$75
- OAS**
- sunglasses \$187
- Ray-Ban**
- necklace
- \$16,000
- Tiffany & Co.**
- bracelet \$11,900
- Shay Jewelry**
- his own watch
- Rolex**

well. The limit is not the sky. Go beyond it.” LeBron had signed off with the sketch of a crown.

Giannis beheld the inscription proudly: “That’s big time, you know?”

He is aware, if distantly, that by the hypermasculine competitive codes of the NBA, you are not supposed to venerate your competitors, let alone collect their jerseys, let alone adoringly read what those competitors write on those jerseys to note-taking reporters. But Giannis has never been good at those codes, and at times he has found freedom in defying them. For instance, he said, “People that talk to the sports psychiatrists and stuff like that, they label us ‘soft.’ We’ve seen that in the past, like, ‘Oh, man, I’m having anxiety.’ ‘Man, you’re soft. Go deal with that.’ That’s how it’s labeled. That’s why it’s hard for people to talk to somebody and open up. Even for me, it was extremely tough.”

He’s convinced that all the really good athletes are secretly in some form of therapy. Some not so secretly. They use a word or a phrase and he knows. The other day, Giannis was watching *Naomi Osaka*, the three-part Netflix docuseries, and was struck by the way the tennis star spoke about the challenges that have come with her success. “She wasn’t happy, she wanted to get away from the game and all that stuff, and it’s fucking hard, man,” Giannis said. He was talking about her, but he was talking about himself too. “I started doing it when I was 18. When you’re that young and you’re doing it, people don’t understand the amount of pressure because at

the end of the day, you don’t only have to perform and be the best, you have the big brand that you got to fucking carry on your shoulder. You have your own country, Japan, that you got to carry on your shoulder. Or Greece, in my case. You have all these people that you got to take care of. Sometimes..”

He paused. “I’ve never said this: I don’t want to fuck up.”

That fear of fucking up, of not being able to carry the weight and support the people around him, was what drove him for a long time. He said he was just walking around Milwaukee yesterday, remembering what it looked like to him when he first got here. “You’re 18,” he said. “You have very small experience of life, of being by yourself. I came here, and I was scared. I never felt lonely in my life, and I was scared. I was going back to the hotel at 8:30 p.m. because I was scared. I was by myself.”

Scared of what, I asked him.

“Scared of life! I was fucking 18,” Giannis said. “I was a kid.” Playing a sport that was still new to him with a bunch of grown men. “So, I was already scared of life, now you’re putting me on the basketball court? I’m scared of these dudes, for sure. But you know what I knew? I have no fucking choice. I have no option. I can’t fucking stop. If I stop everything, my family, I can’t help them. I cannot be in a position to help them. So I kept going.”

(continued on page 140)

grooming by
athena skouvakis
for this is not
another agency.
tailoring by
margarita dosoula.
produced by
poplight productions.



(Including Kenneth Bae, an American missionary who publicly thanked Rodman, and Otto Warmbier, a college student.) Dennis also has claimed partial responsibility for the historic 2018 meeting between Kim and former president Trump, whom Dennis befriended as a contestant on *The Celebrity Apprentice*. He has insisted that the meeting between two world leaders may be his greatest legacy. But somehow I don't believe history will look back on the meeting between a tyrant and a would-be tyrant with much fondness.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe Dennis's unrelenting positivity is truly the thing we need to thaw our divisions. Maybe everyone needs to hit the club with Dennis, take a few shots of tequila, and forget the worst of what their lives have been in order to move on.

Except it hasn't actually worked for him.

■ ■ ■

THE RAIN STARTS coming down, and the guests all rush to move inside, where the party continues. Dennis is whisked away to a private booth upstairs, followed by either the luckiest or most enterprising of the models who know there will be more photo opportunities if they're sitting next to him. I respect the hustle. But I already kind of hate clubs, and next to no one is wearing a mask in this COVID hotbed state. Dennis is finishing one cigar and picking up another that someone brought to him, while also enjoying shots of Casamigos, compliments of the owner. He checks in with me constantly to see if I'm having a good time, and I can't say I'm having a bad one, but my COVID anxiety isn't allowing me to let loose.

Then Jay-Z's "I Just Wanna Love U" comes on, and Dennis remembers that I'm from Virginia Beach, where the Neptunes are from. He gestures to me as he's getting everyone hype. It's a jam, and I can't help it; I oblige him by reciting every lyric. Dennis is having fun. He's making sure everyone else is having fun too.

He's at home here and is willing to go all night. He might even hit up a gay club after this, since he still goes three, four times a week. It's when he's alone that the darker thoughts start to creep into his head: thoughts about his own mortality, thoughts about his time left here on Earth.

"After turning 60 years old, it's like, 'Shit. What's left of me? How can I keep my mind in tune with life?' Shit. 'How do I prepare myself to die?' That's the only thing I have left, is to die peacefully," he told me on the balcony.

Is that it? All that's left for Dennis Rodman now is to die peacefully?

"I think I've got a lot more to give to people. I think I got a little more happiness for the youth of the world. But, for me, I think I've been preparing myself to die peacefully. I've been thinking about that a lot lately. It keeps my mind at ease because I know I'm going to do that. I'm not going to self-destruct like I was back then—10, 15 years ago. Hell, no. I got my life in control right now. Everything is going in the right direction." ❖

MYCHAL DENZEL SMITH is the author of the New York Times best seller *Invisible Man*, *Got the Whole World Watching* and *Stakes Is High*, winner of the 2020 *Kirkus Prize for Nonfiction*.



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He went between home and the facility, the facility and home. "He lived in the gym," Giannis's longtime agent Alex Saratsis said. "He would sleep at the gym." Before Giannis met Mariah, that was literally all he did.

"I was on a mission," Giannis said. "That's why, seven years later, I had to fucking talk to somebody. Because I had issues now, you know? But there was no stopping me." For eight years he put his head down and chased greatness. Then he won a championship. Now, he said, he was working on all the things greatness cost him. Peace of mind. Life outside of basketball. A family. That kind of thing.

■ ■ ■

JUST A YEAR AGO, Giannis's contract with the Bucks was slated to end, and he had to decide whether to stay in Milwaukee or leave. We know what happened next, of course. But the way it happened, I think, is instructive, and perhaps suggests something about Giannis and the unique, determined way he sets out to do almost everything in life.

"Everybody was texting me: 'Leave the team,'" he told me—other players, some of whom haven't talked to him since he decided to stay. He understood, he said. "It's human. I will say I want to play with the best players; I wish K.D. was on my team, not against me. I wish LeBron was on my team, not against me. Steph, on my team." And the winters in Milwaukee were cold—"cold as shit," he specified. This would be an opportunity to never see another Milwaukee winter again. To raise his sons in a place where they might see the sun from time to time.

But there was something inside him that just wanted to do it the hard way, he realized. "I chose to stay here even with all the pressure because it's easier to leave. That's the easy thing to do. It's easy to leave."

There is an aversion to easiness with Giannis that can go deep. *Easy* is an epithet when he says it. *Easy*, in Giannis-world, describes almost everything that isn't pain, that isn't suffering, that isn't taking on long odds and trying to beat those odds. He regards the usual perks of being a player in the modern NBA—partying in the better Los Angeles clubs, recording in the better Los Angeles music studios, acting in Hollywood—as, basically, frivolous: "Being in movies? *Easy*. *Space Jam*, all this? *Easy*. *Easy*. I don't want it, though." He is intent on life itself, by which he means the painful stuff of existence, the stuff that neither money nor ability can finesse. Life? "It's hard, life." Or at least, his was. He pointed at his chest: "It molds you to be this guy."

"I think he's never wanted to take an easy way out," Saratsis said. "In every aspect of life. He wants to be challenged."

In the end Giannis decided to stay in Milwaukee because it was difficult. And then, improbably, the Bucks won. "One challenge was to bring a championship here and we did," he told me. "It was very hard, but we did. Very, very hard. I just love challenges. What's the next challenge? The next challenge might not be here." It's not that he doesn't love Milwaukee, he said. But he was always wary of things becoming too easy. "Me and my family chose to stay in this city that we all love and has taken care of us—for now," Giannis said. "In two years, that might change. I'm being totally honest with you. I'm always honest. I love this city. I love this community. I want to help as much as possible."

Did this mean he was thinking about...leaving? I asked his agent.

"I don't think it's, 'I'm thinking about leaving the Bucks,'" Saratsis told me. "But I think he's genuinely like: 'Okay, I have reached the pinnacle. The next challenge is, let's repeat. But what happens if you do repeat? What's the next challenge? What is that next barrier? When you think about it from a basketball perspective, by the age of 26, this kid has accomplished everything,'" Saratsis said. "So sometimes you're going to have to manufacture what those challenges are."

■ ■ ■

ON HIS HOME'S second floor, Giannis keeps a room full of unworn shoes. A literal room, filled to the literal top, in a house with only a normal abundance of rooms. "How many of these shoes do you think I wear?" Giannis asked me, mischievously, and then answered his own question: "I don't wear them." There's every Jordan known to man here, and shoes that Virgil wrote on. "I'm going to sell this shit," he said, with a grin. That's why he's devoted an entire room of his own living space to them. Not to wear them but to keep them as an investment.

Mariah's father makes jokes about Giannis. "You know when the birds go in the morning?" Giannis said, quoting the joke. "'*Cheep, cheep*'—cheap. That's who I am." On airplanes, he used to buy coach tickets and would seek out whoever was sitting in the exit row and ask them to switch: "'You're a Bucks fan?' 'Yes.' 'Want two tickets for the game? When? November?'—I'm a great seller, that's what you don't know. I'm a great seller—'Would you trade my seat with you?'"

I said that if Giannis Antetokounmpo approached me to switch seats on a commercial flight, I'd probably be surprised that he wasn't on a private jet.

"Nobody has money for a private jet, man. Hell no, man."

Not even to Greece?

"Why would you spend \$150,000 to one-way trip there? That's \$300,000. The market makes 6 to 10 percent every year... He's laughing."

(I was laughing.)

"So, you can make, for the rest of your life, with that money you just spent, 24- to 30,000 a year, because that's what the market makes on average. If you take that money and you take it away, that 24- to 30,000 growth every

year goes away—correct? So why would I teach my kids that?"

Giannis drives a 2011 GMC truck he bought not long after he got here, or a Mercedes he bought in 2018, or the G-Wagon he got for free. "I don't put my money in my stuff that loses value," he said. Meals, sure. He and Mariah go out and eat well. "But ain't nobody got time for spending money on clothes and time for... what's it called?"

A stylist?

"Fuck—sorry. *Eff* no. Man, let me tell you one thing. This is me. If you try to spend time on how you're going to look to the tunnel, man, you already took away focus from the game. Now, if you're talking about one thing I enjoy, I love watches."

Why? Because they increase in value. He named a few, and then asked that I not say which ones. He is trying to give less free promo, now that he's a champion: If you want your product to be mentioned by Giannis, from now on you're going to have to pay. As we talked, he'd be deep into some anecdote and then wonder if he was supposed to promote his businesses, the sponsorships he's already acquired, the investments—like the piece of the Milwaukee Brewers he just bought this week—he's already made. Is he supposed to promote his businesses? How does one do that in an interview? He was unsure. He settled for leaning into my recorder, listing his endorsements, then going back to whatever story he was telling.

A mosquito flew by, and he reached out one giant hand and closed his fingers around it.

"I caught that," he said, showing me.

■ ■ ■

AFTER HE WON the NBA Finals, he went to Chick-fil-A with the Larry O'Brien trophy and the Finals MVP trophy and ordered exactly

TOM HOLLAND



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I am that Spider-Man wears a mask, because when he's bouncing around and flying from buildings, that's all CG. In *Uncharted* it's just me in a henley and cargo pants," he says. By the time shooting wrapped, he had developed tendinitis, and hurt all over. "That film absolutely *broke* me."

There are times when, because of Holland's exuberance—or perhaps his naiveté—he takes on more than he should. While filming the last two *Avengers*, he would spend three days on set in Atlanta, then get on a plane to London and do two days on the set

50 nuggets—one for every point he scored in the last game of the series. But he's trying not to tell that story anymore, either, until Chick-fil-A pays up. His teammates went to Vegas the night the Bucks won, but he didn't. "They understand," he told me. His teammates have been around him enough to know that they don't really know him at all, he said. "If you asked them if they really know me: 'No.' I'm about work, and then I dip." Middleton said that it took him five years to feel like he knew Giannis even 50 percent—now, after eight, he figures he's up to 60 or even 90. But Giannis, he said, had matured too. "He's grown and realized he's the franchise player," Middleton said. "So he knows he's got to have some kind of chemistry with his teammates."

A few weeks before we met, Giannis flew to Greece and went to the Acropolis with his brothers and walked around with the trophies. And that was the extent of it. He is already done celebrating, he said. "It's over with. The championship is over with. Over with. Now, I'm working. In order for me to get better, I leave this championship bullshit stuff in the past." He is back to playing basketball this fall. Back on the hard path to the hard thing.

But before he put those memories away entirely, I asked him if he could just give me one or two—were there moments, in retrospect, that had stuck with him? That mattered? He thought about it and agreed to share a few: the IVs he got; the long sleepless nights between Game 5 and Game 6; the first frantic minutes of Game 6, when he kept rushing and getting ahead of himself, instead of being in the moment.

But what he wanted me to remember most, he said, was the end.

After the Bucks had won the game, "What happened?" Giannis asked me. "The team,

everybody gathered around when they realized we won, and immediately Coach came and grabbed me. Go watch the tape. Coach came and grabbed me and I pushed him out of the way. I went to my family. I hugged my mom, I hugged my brothers, I hugged my wife-to-be, I hugged my son, then I sat down and thought about my dad, right?" They were in Milwaukee; the whole arena was going crazy. So were his teammates. But Giannis found a place to sit again, by himself.

Giannis asked that I pay particular attention to what happened next, because to him what happened next illustrates something essential about him. Some of it has to do with his family: how close they are, how much he depends on them. And I don't want to put words in his mouth; it was an image he offered, not an explanation. But without speaking for him, I think some of what he wanted me to understand was about the singular loneliness of the path. What "hard" actually means. In the end, greatness is fundamentally isolating. What you have to do to achieve it separates you from everyone else in a way that is difficult to undo.

The image was this: "Everybody was celebrating," he remembered. "They said, 'Giannis, you got to go up there.' I said, 'No, I'm good.'" They told him he might win the MVP, and if he did, he was going to have to go up and get it. He said fine—if I win, let me know. And then he won, so he got up there and he said a few words. He turned to Middleton, whom he'd been playing with since the very beginning, and said, "Khri, we did it." He held the trophy for a moment. And then he walked away again, to be by himself.

"Go and see the picture," he said. "I'm the captain of the team. Go and see the picture when they lift up the trophy. I'm not there." ❖

ZACH BARON is GQ's senior staff writer.