

Red

I'm getting court time. Coach is playing me because I've been working hard in practice, not because I'm good. I'm just above average height, a little husky, I pass well and I'm a scrapper. I have a weird kind of primitive sky-hook Coach calls the Bond Bomb that's almost effective for its element of surprise. I can shoot some, especially when not moving, preferably with no one on the court, in silence. It's 1983. I'm 12 years old, asthmatic and playing full court basketball. It's a brisk Saturday morning in winter on the concrete courts of Madison Meadows, my junior high school in Phoenix, Arizona.

The coach is Mr. Kaplan, a hulking native New Yorker who un-ironically wears tracksuits and lots of gold chains to practice. Sometimes we practice in his driveway. I can see my breath as he makes me take free-throw after free-throw. Why is there fog? He was a no-joke lounge singer turned promoter made good, and his wife is a sweet, very Jewish interior decorator who sometimes gives my dad jobs for his electrical contracting company.

Coach pushes me because his kid has been on our baseball team before, and my dad is the coach. His son Jason is good at baseball but I'm better, just as I'm okay at Basketball but Jason is a star. They are both great coaches. These are good, uncomplicated memories.

I'm a power forward, guarding Jay Telborg, a baby-stork albino of a boy. He's got half a foot on me, all arms and knobby legs, and can shoot: his older brother is a high school basketball star and a smidge has rubbed off. Jay is wobbly and translucent like a gecko, but he's giving it his all, his cheeks flushing like he's wearing blush.

Jay and I are good friends despite my rough edges, but today on the court we are enemies. In my mind, and the minds of the Telborg and Bond families on the cold metal bleachers, there is a head-to-head war in the third quarter, a mano a mano battle. I can see the families: the blonde, thin Telborg's wearing matching green cable-knit sweaters and my brunette brood, dad in a gray windbreaker, mom in a red and white winter coat and

mitten, my little sister curled up on my mother's arm like a teddy bear. My sister is holding onto her in part as a ballast. Along with making left hand turns, watching sporting events involving her children is something she finds nerve wracking.

On the court shots are blocked, passes are stolen, Jay and I fall down tangled, diving for the ball. Grown man noises escape from our peach-fuzz faces. I even remember a tip off, though I think that's wishful.

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Sometime in this year I am taken by Jay's well mannered, well-off family on several notable excursions, including a vacation to Greer, a tiny forested hamlet in Northeastern Arizona. We reach the town by private plane, my first time in an airplane. When we arrive at their cabin, which is much larger than my parent's house, I proceed to show my gratitude and class by using M-80's to blow up the fish in the nearby creek. Somehow the Telborg's don't discover this on the trip, I guess because miraculously Jay's older brother Andy doesn't rat me out.

They are fiercely religious and we listen to evangelical sermons they brought with them on cassette. We stare at a fancy boombox propped up on the hearth near the burning fireplace, as if a tiny version of the preacher were inside the speakers, as if we understood better by staring intently at the stereo. This is a kind of penance for the family missing Sunday services on this vacation. It freaks me out; I cheat glances at the fire.

Jay's mother, the original stork, a slight, fair, gentle Southern woman with an unflattering, unintentionally severe bowl-cut, tells me they were so poor growing up the kids rolled cigarettes out of toilet paper.

Another time they take me to Andy's high school basketball game. I don't know at the time but Jay's brother plays for the same high school I will later attend, the school where this game is played, the same school my father attended. I do something bold to celebrate attending my first high school event by wearing parachute pants and a dangly earring. This is to show the high school kids I'm hip. In this same year I wear the parachute pants on the slopes during a Youth Group Ski-Trip.



Back on the cold courts of Madison Meadows, Jay and I try to reconcile the disparity between our desire to win and our ability to control out bodies.

There are a few strong impressions of this game and of these families but most of my career as a junior high power forward shimmers and fractals into myth. It's also likely this remembered game is a composite, a stand in, a representation, a lie that tells the truth.

Someone must have been hurt that day because I play most of the game, which is good and bad. I love the action and although I'm in good shape, I have asthma and can't run for long without overheating and turning tomato red. Doesn't mean I'm in trouble, just what happens. I have a shitty inhaler and it works for a while, but soon I start braying like a donkey. At some point later in the scrappy, clash of the awkward junior high Titans I am dripping sweat, cartoon-devil red and utterly invested in the combat.

Sometime in the fierce all or nothing match I hear an unmistakable, frantic, high-pitched voice scream out: "Coach! Coach Kaplan! You've got to take him out! He's DANGEROUSLY HOT!" I see my mother standing in the bleachers, pleading with all her sideways love. All well-balanced eyes on her in silence as I shade a different red.