

# The Crossover Book

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by  
Kwame Alexander

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By

**Kwame Alexander**



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*For Big Al and Barbara,  
also known as Mom and Dad*

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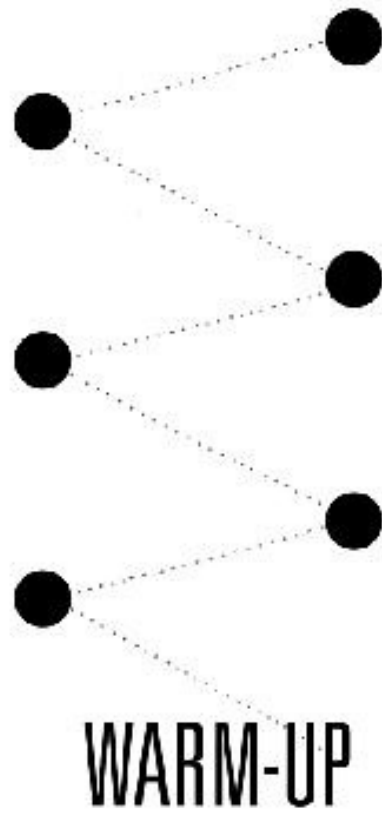
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## Dribbling

At the top of the key, I'm

MOVING & GROOVING,

POPPing and *ROCKING*—

Why you BUMPING?

Why you LOCKING?

Man, take this THUMPING.

Be careful though,

'cause now I'm CRUNKing

*Criss*CROSSING

## FLOSSING

flipping

and my dipping will leave you

S

L

I

P

P

I

N

G on the floor, while I

SWOOP in

to the *finish* with a *fierce finger* roll . . .

Straight in the hole:

Swooooooooooooosh.

## Josh Bell

is my name.  
But *Filthy McNasty* is my claim to fame.  
Folks call me that  
'cause my game's acclaimed,  
so downright dirty, it'll put you to shame.  
My hair is long, my height's tall.  
See, I'm the next Kevin Durant,  
LeBron, and Chris Paul.

*Remember the greats,*  
my dad likes to gloat:  
*I balled with Magic and the Goat.*  
But tricks are for kids, I reply.  
Don't need your pets  
my game's so  
fly.

Mom says,  
*Your dad's old school,*  
*like an ol' Chevette.*  
*You're fresh and new,*  
*like a red Corvette.*  
*Your game so sweet, it's a crêpes suzette.*  
*Each time you play*  
*it's ALLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL net.*

If anyone else called me  
*fresh and sweet,*  
I'd burn mad as a flame.  
But I know she's only talking about my game.  
See, when I play ball,  
I'm on fire.  
When I shoot,  
I inspire.  
The hoop's for sale,  
and I'm the buyer.

## How I Got My Nickname

I'm not that big on jazz music, but Dad is.  
One day we were listening to a CD  
of a musician named Horace Silver, and Dad says,

*Josh, this cat is the real deal.  
Listen to that piano, fast and free,  
Just like you and JB on the court.*

It's okay, I guess, Dad.  
*Okay? DID YOU SAY OKAY?  
Boy, you better recognize*

*greatness when you hear it.  
Horace Silver is one of the hippest.  
If you shoot half as good as he jams—*

Dad, no one says "hippest" anymore.  
*Well, they ought to, 'cause this cat  
is so hip, when he sits down he's still standing,* he says.

Real funny, Dad.  
*You know what, Josh?  
What, Dad?*

*I'm dedicating this next song to you.  
What's the next song?  
Only the best song,  
the funkiest song  
on Silver's Paris Blues album:  
"FILTHY  
McNASTY."*

## At first

I didn't like  
the name  
because so many kids  
made fun of me  
on the school bus,  
at lunch, in the bathroom.  
Even Mom had jokes.

*It fits you perfectly, Josh, she said:  
You never clean your closet, and  
that bed of yours is always filled  
with cookie crumbs and candy wrappers.  
It's just plain nasty, son.*

But, as I got older  
and started getting game,  
the name took on a new meaning.  
And even though I wasn't into  
all that jazz,  
every time I'd score,  
rebound,  
or steal a ball,  
Dad would jump up  
smiling and screamin',  
*That's my boy out there.  
Keep it funky, Filthy!*

And that made me feel  
real good  
about my nickname.

# Filthy McNasty

is a MYTHical MANchild  
Of rather *dubious distinction*  
Always AGITATING

COMBINATING

and ELEVATING his game

He dribbles

fakes

then takes

the ROCK to the

glass, fast, and on BLAST

But watch out when he shoots  
or you'll get SCHOOLEd

FOOLEd

UNCOOLEd

'Cause when FILTHY gets hot  
He has a SLAMMERIFIC SHOT

It's

Dunkalicious CLASSY

Supersonic SASSY

and D

O

W

N right

in your face

mcNASTY

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## Jordan Bell

My twin brother is a baller.  
The only thing he loves  
more than basketball  
is betting. If it's ninety degrees  
outside and the sky is cloudless,  
he will bet you  
that it's going to rain.  
It's annoying  
and sometimes  
funny.

Jordan insists that everyone  
call him *JB*. His favorite player is  
Michael Jordan, but he  
doesn't want people to think  
he's sweating him.  
Even though he is.

*Evidence:* He has one pair  
of Air Jordan sneakers  
for every month  
of the year  
including Air Jordan 1 Low  
Barack Obama Limited Editions,  
which he never wears.  
Plus he has MJ sheets, pillowcases,  
slippers, socks, underwear, notebooks,  
pencils, cups, hats, wristbands,  
and sunglasses.

With the fifty dollars he won from a bet  
he and Dad made over whether  
the Krispy Kreme Hot sign was on (it wasn't)  
he purchased  
a Michael Jordan toothbrush  
("Only used once!") on eBay.  
He's right, he's not sweating him.  
**HE'S STALKING HIM.**

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## **On the way to the game**

I'm banished to the back  
seat with JB,  
who only stops  
playing with my locks  
when I slap him  
across his bald head  
with my jockstrap.

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## Five Reasons I Have Locks

5. Some of my favorite rappers have them:  
Lil Wayne, 2 Chainz, and Wale.

4. They make me feel  
like a king.

3. No one else  
on the team has them, and

2. it helps people know  
that I am me and not JB.

But  
mostly because

1. ever since I watched  
the clip of Dad  
posterizing  
that seven-foot Croatian center  
on ESPN's *Best Dunks Ever*;  
soaring through the air—his  
long twisted hair like wings  
carrying him  
high above  
the rim—I knew  
one day  
I'd need  
my own wings  
to fly.

## Mom tells Dad

that he has to sit  
in the top row  
of the bleachers  
during the game.

*You're too confrontational, she says.*

*Filthy, don't forget to  
follow through  
on your jump shot,  
Dad tells me.*

JB tells Mom,  
*We're almost in high school,  
so no hugs before the game, please.*

Dad says, *You boys  
ought to treasure your mother's love.  
My mom was like gold to me.*

*Yeah, but your mom  
didn't come to ALL  
of your games, JB says.*

And she wasn't the assistant school principal either,  
I add.

## Conversation

Dad, do you miss playing basketball? I ask.  
*Like jazz misses Dizzy*, he says.

Huh?  
*Like hip-hop misses Tupac, Filthy*, he says.

Oh! But you're still young,  
you could probably still play, right?

*My playing days are over, son.*  
*My job now is to take care of this family.*

Don't you get bored sitting  
around the house all day?

You could get a job or something.  
*Filthy, what's all this talk about a job?*

*You don't think your ol' man knows*  
*how to handle his business?*

*Boy, I saved my basketball money—*  
*this family is fine. Yeah, I miss*

*basketball A LOT, and*  
*I do have some feelers out there*

*about coaching. But honestly,*  
*right now I'm fine coaching this house*

*and keeping up with you and your brother.*  
*Now go get JB so we won't be late*

*to the game and Coach benches you.*  
Why don't you ever wear your championship ring?

*Is this Jeopardy or something? What's with the questions?*  
*Yeah, I wear it, when I want to floss.* Dad smiles.

Can I wear it to school once?  
*Can you bounce a ball on the roof, off a tree, in the hoop?*

Uh . . . no.  
*Then, I guess you're not Da Man. Only Da Man wears Da Ring.*

Aw, come on, Dad.  
*Tell you what: You bring home the trophy this year, and we'll see.*

Thanks, Dad. You know, if you get bored  
you could always write a book, like Vondie's mom did.

She wrote one about spaceships.  
*A book? What would you have me write about?*

Maybe a book of those rules  
you give me and JB

before each of our games.  
*"I'm Da Man" by Chuck Bell, Dad laughs.*

That's lame, Dad, I say.  
*Who you calling lame? Dad says, headlocking me.*

Dad, tell me again why they called you Da Man?  
*Filthy, back in the day, I was the boss, never lost,*

*I had the sickest double cross, and I kissed  
so many pretty ladies, they called me Lip-Gloss.*

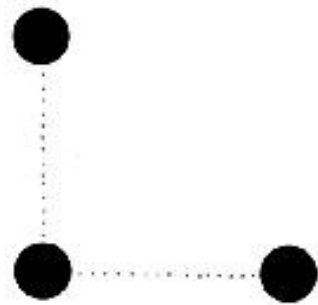
*Oh, really? Mom says, sneaking up on us  
like she always seems to do.*

Yeah, you *Da Man*, Dad, I laugh,  
then throw my gym bag in the trunk.

# **Basketball Rule #1**

In this game of life  
your family is the court  
and the ball is your heart.  
No matter how good you are,  
no matter how down you get,  
always leave  
your heart  
on the court.

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**FIRST QUARTER**

## **JB and I**

are almost thirteen. Twins. Two basketball goals at opposite ends of the court. Identical. It's easy to tell us apart though. I'm

an inch taller, with dreads to my neck. He gets his head shaved once a month. I want to go to Duke, he flaunts Carolina Blue. If we didn't love each other,

we'd HATE each other. He's a shooting guard. I play forward. JB's the second most phenomenal baller on our team.

He has the better jumper, but I'm the better slasher. And much faster. We both pass well. Especially to each other.

To get ready for the season, I went to three summer camps. JB only went to one. Said he didn't want to miss Bible school.

What does he think, I'm stupid? Ever since Kim Bazemore kissed him in Sunday school, he's been acting all religious,

thinking less and less about basketball, and more and more about GIRLS.

## At the End of Warm-Ups, My Brother Tries to Dunk

Not even close, JB.  
What's the matter?  
The hoop too high for you? I snicker  
but it's not funny to him,  
especially when I take off from center court,  
my hair like wings,  
each lock lifting me higher and HIGHER

like a 747 **ZOOM ZOOM!**

I throw down so hard,  
the fiberglass trembles.  
*BOO YAH*, Dad screams  
from the top row.  
I'm the only kid  
on the team  
who can do that.

The gym is a loud, crowded circus.  
My stomach is a roller coaster.  
My head, a carousel.  
The air, heavy with the smell  
of sweat, popcorn,  
and the sweet perfume  
of mothers watching sons.

Our mom, a.k.a. Dr. Bell, a.k.a. The Assistant Principal,  
is talking to some of the teachers  
on the other side of the gym.  
I'm feeling better already.  
Coach calls us in,  
does his Phil Jackson impersonation.  
*Love ignites the spirit, brings teams together*, he says.  
JB and I glance at each other,  
ready to bust out laughing,  
but Vondie, our best friend,  
beats us to it.  
The whistle goes off.  
Players gather at center circle,



dap each other,  
pound each other.  
Referee tosses the jump ball.  
Game on.

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# The Sportscaster

JB likes to taunt and  
trash talk  
during games  
like Dad  
used to do  
when he played.

When I walk onto  
the court  
I prefer silence  
so I can  
Watch  
React  
Surprise.

I talk too,  
but mostly  
to myself,  
like sometimes  
when I do  
my own  
play-by-play  
in my head.

## Josh's Play-by-Play

It's game three for the two-and-oh Wildcats.  
Number seventeen, Vondie Little, grabs it.  
Nothing *little* about that kid.  
The Wildcats have it,  
first play of the game.  
The hopes are high tonight at  
Reggie Lewis Junior High.  
We destroyed Hoover Middle  
last week, thirty-two to four,  
and we won't stop,  
can't stop,  
till we claim the championship trophy.  
Vondie overhead passes me.  
I fling a quick chest pass to my twin brother, JB,  
number twenty-three, a.k.a. the Jumper.  
I've seen him launch it from thirty feet before,  
ALL NET.  
That boy is special, and it doesn't hurt  
that Chuck "Da Man" Bell is his father.  
And mine, too.  
JB bounces the ball back to me.  
JB's a shooter, but I'm sneaky  
and silky as a snake—  
and you thought my hair was long.  
I'm six feet, all legs.  
OH, WOW—DID YOU SEE THAT NASTY CROSSOVER?  
Now you see why they call me Filthy.  
Folks, I hope you got your tickets,  
because I'm about to put on a show.

## **cross·o·ver**

[KRAWS-OH-VER] *noun*

A simple basketball move  
in which a player dribbles  
the ball quickly  
from one hand  
to the other.

As in: When done right,  
a *crossover* can break  
an opponent's ankles.

As in: Deron Williams's *crossover*  
is nice, but Allen Iverson's *crossover*  
was so deadly, he could've set up  
his own podiatry practice.

As in: Dad taught me  
how to give a soft cross first  
to see if your opponent falls  
for it,  
then hit 'em  
with the hard *crossover*.

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## The Show

A *quick* shoulder **SHAKE**,  
a *slick* eye **FAKE**—  
Number 28 is            way past late.  
He's reading me like a  
**BOOK**

but I **turn the page**  
and watch him look,  
which can only mean I got him  
**SHOOK**.

His feet are the bank  
and I'm the *crook*.

**Breaking, Braking,**

taking him to the left—

now he's **took**.

Number 14 joins in . . .

Now he's on the        H  
                              O  
                              O  
                              K

I got **TWO** in my kitchen  
and I'm fixing to **COOK**.

*Preppin' my meal, ready for glass . . .*

Nobody's expecting Filthy to p a s s

I see Vondie under the hoop

so I serve him up my

Alley-**oop**.

## The Bet, Part One

We're down by seven  
at halftime.

Trouble owns our faces  
but Coach isn't worried.

Says we haven't found our rhythm yet.

Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere

Vondie starts dancing the Snake,  
only he looks like a seal.

Then Coach blasts his favorite dance music,  
and before you know it

we're all doing the Cha-Cha Slide:

*To the left, take it back now, y'all.*

*One hop this time, right foot, let's stomp.*

JB high-fives me, with a familiar look.

You want to bet, don't you? I ask.

Yep, he says,

then touches

my hair.

# Ode to My Hair

If my hair were a tree  
I'd climb it.

I'd kneel down beneath  
and enshrine it.

I'd treat it like gold  
and then mine it.

Each day before school  
I unwind it.

And right before games  
I entwine it.

These locks on my head,  
I designed it.

And one last thing if  
you don't mind it:

That bet you just made?  
I DECLINE IT.

## The Bet, Part Two

IF. I. LOSE.  
THE. BET.  
YOU. WANT. TO.  
WHAT?

*If the score gets tied, he says, and  
if it comes down to the last shot, he says, and  
if I get the ball, he says, and  
if I don't miss, he says,  
I get to cut off  
your hair.*

Sure, I say, as serious  
as a heart attack.  
You can cut my locks off,  
but if I win the bet  
you have to walk around  
with no pants on  
and no underwear  
tomorrow  
in school  
during lunch.

Vondie  
and the rest  
of the fellas  
laugh like hyenas.

Not to be outdone,  
JB revises the bet:  
Okay, he says.  
*How about if you lose  
I cut one lock  
and if you win  
I will moon  
that nerdy group  
of sixth-graders  
that sit*



*near our table  
at lunch?*

*Even though I used to be one of those nerdy sixth-graders,  
even though I love my hair the way Dad loves Krispy Kreme,  
even though I don't want us to lose the game,  
odds are this is one of JB's legendary bets I'll win,  
because  
that's a lot of ifs.*

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## The game is tied

when JB's soft jumper sails

*tick*

through the air.

*tock*

The crowd stills,

*tick*

mouths drop,

*tock*

and when his last-second shot

*tick*

hits net,

*tock*

the clock stops.

The gym explodes.

Its hard bleachers

empty

and my head

aches.

## **In the locker room**

after the game,  
JB cackles like a crow.  
He walks up to me  
grinning,  
holds his hand out  
so I can see  
the red scissors from Coach's desk  
smiling at me, their  
steel blades sharp  
and ready.

I love this game  
like the winter loves snow  
even though I spent  
the final quarter  
in foul trouble  
on the bench.  
JB was on fire  
and we won  
and I lost  
the bet.

## Cut

*Time to pay up, Filthy*, JB says,  
laughing  
and waving  
the scissors  
in the air  
like a flag.  
My teammates gather around  
to salute.  
*FILTHY, FILTHY, FILTHY*, they chant.

He opens the scissors,  
grabs my hair  
to slash a strand.

I don't hear  
my golden lock  
hit the floor,  
but I do hear  
the sound  
of calamity  
when Vondie  
hollers,  
*OH, SNAP!*

# ca·lam·i·ty

[KUH-LAM-IH-TEE] *noun*

An unexpected,  
undesirable event;  
often physically injurious.

As in: If JB hadn't been acting  
so silly and  
playing around,  
he would have cut  
one lock  
instead of five  
from my head  
and avoided  
this *calamity*.

As in: The HUGE bald patch  
on the side  
of my head  
is a dreadful  
*calamity*.

As in: After the game  
Mom almost has a fit  
When she sees my hair,  
*What a calamity*, she says,  
shaking her head  
and telling Dad to take me  
to the barber shop  
on Saturday  
to have the rest  
cut off.

## Mom doesn't like us eating out

but once a month she lets  
one of us choose a restaurant  
and even though she won't let him touch  
half the things on the buffet,  
it's Dad's turn  
and he chooses Chinese.  
I know what he really wants  
is Pollard's Chicken and BBQ,  
but Mom has banned  
us from that place.

In the Golden Dragon,  
Mom is still frowning  
at JB for messing up my hair.  
*But, Mom, it was an accident,* he says.  
*Accident or not, you owe  
your brother an apology,* she tells him.

*I'm sorry for cutting your filthy hair, Filthy,* JB laughs.  
Not so funny now, is it? I say, my knuckles  
digging into his scalp  
till Dad saves him from the noogie  
with one of his lame jokes:

*Why can't you play sports in the jungle?* he asks.  
Mom repeats the question because  
Dad won't continue until someone does.  
*Because of the cheetahs,* he snaps back,  
so amused, he almost falls out of his chair,  
which causes all of us to laugh, and  
get past my hair issue  
for now.

I fill my plate with egg rolls and dumplings.  
JB asks Dad how we did.  
*Y'all did okay, Dad says, but, JB, why did you  
let that kid post you up? And, Filthy,  
what was up with that lazy crossover?*

*When I was playing, we never . . .*

And while Dad is telling us another story  
for the hundredth time, Mom removes the salt  
from the table and JB goes to the buffet.

He brings back three packages  
of duck sauce and a cup of wonton soup  
and hands them all to me.

Dad pauses, and Mom looks at JB.

*That was random,* she says.

*What, isn't that what you wanted, Filthy?* JB asks.

And even though I never opened my mouth,

I say, Thanks,

because

it is.

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# Missing

I am not  
a mathematician—  
 $a + b$  seldom  
equals  $c$ .  
Pluses and minuses,  
we get along  
but we are not close.  
I am no Pythagoras.

And so each time  
I count the locks  
of hair  
beneath my pillow  
I end up with thirty-seven  
plus one tear,  
which never  
adds up.

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## The inside of Mom and Dad's bedroom closet

is off-limits,  
so every time JB asks me  
to go in there to look  
through Dad's stuff, I say no.  
But today when I ask Mom  
for a box to put my dreadlocks in,  
she tells me to take  
one of her Sunday hat boxes  
from the top shelf  
of her closet.

Next to her purple hat box is  
Dad's small silver safety box  
with the key in the lock  
and practically begging me  
to open it,  
so I do, when, unexpectedly:  
*What are you doing, Filthy?*  
Standing in the doorway  
is JB with a look that says BUSTED!  
*Filthy, you still giving me the silent treatment?*

...

*I really am sorry about your hair, man.*  
*I owe you, Filthy, so I'm gonna cut*  
*the grass for the rest of the year and*  
*pick up the leaves . . . and I'll wash the cars*  
*and I'll even wash your hair.*  
Oh, you got jokes, huh? I say, then grab him  
and give him another noogie.

*So, what are you doing in here, Filthy?*

Nothing, Mom said I could use her hat box.  
*That doesn't look like a hat box, Filthy.*  
*Let me see that,* he says.

And just like that  
we're rummaging through

a box filled with newspaper clippings  
about Chuck “Da Man” Bell  
and torn ticket stubs  
and old flyers  
and . . .

*WHOA! There it is, Filthy*, JB says.  
And even though we’ve seen Dad  
wear it many times, actually holding  
his glossy championship ring  
in our hands  
is more than magical.  
Let’s try it on, I whisper.  
But JB is a step ahead, already sliding  
it on each of his fingers  
until he finds one it fits.  
What else is in there, JB? I ask,  
hoping he will realize it’s my turn  
to wear Dad’s championship ring.

*There’s a bunch of articles about  
Dad’s triple-doubles, three-point records,  
and the time he made fifty free throws  
in a row at the Olympic finals*, he says,  
finally handing me the ring,  
and an Italian article  
about Dad’s *bellissimo* crossover  
and his million-dollar multiyear contract  
with the European league.

We already know all this stuff, JB.  
Anything new, or secret-type stuff? I ask.  
And then JB pulls out a manila envelope.  
I grab it, glance at the PRIVATE  
stamped on the front.  
In the moment  
that I decide to put it back,  
JB snatches it.  
*Let’s do this*, he says.  
I resist, ready to take  
the purple hat box  
and jet,

but I guess the mystery  
is just too much.

We open it. There are two letters.

The first letter reads:

*Chuck Bell, the Los Angeles Lakers would like to  
invite you to our free-agent tryouts.*

We open the other. It starts:

*Your decision not to have surgery  
means that realistically,  
with patella tendonitis,  
you may not be able to play*

*again.*

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# pa·tel·la ten·di·ni·tis

[PUH-TEL-UH TEN-DUH-NAHY-TIS] *noun*

The condition  
that arises when the muscle  
that connects the kneecap  
to the shin bone  
becomes irritated  
due to overuse,  
especially from jumping activities.

As in: On the top shelf  
of Mom and Dad's closet  
in a silver safety box  
JB and I discovered  
that my dad has jumper's knee,  
a.k.a. *patella tendonitis*.

As in: As a rookie,  
my dad led his team  
to the Euroleague championship,  
but thanks to *patella tendonitis*,  
he went from a superstar  
with a million-dollar fadeaway jumper  
to a star  
whose career  
had faded away.

As in: I wonder why my dad  
never had surgery  
on his *patella tendonitis*.

## Sundays After Church

When the prayers end  
and the doors open  
the Bells hit center stage  
and the curtain opens up on  
the afternoon pick-up game  
in the gym  
at the county recreation center.  
The cast is full of regulars  
and rookies  
with cartoon names like  
FlapJack,  
Scoobs,  
and Cookie.  
The hip-hop soundtrack blasts.  
The bass booms.  
The crowd looms.  
There's music and mocking,  
teasing nonstop, but  
when the play begins  
all the talk ceases.  
Dad shovel-passes the ball to me.  
I behind-the-back pass to JB,  
who sinks a twenty-foot three.  
See, this is how we act  
Sundays after church.

## **Basketball Rule #2**

(Random text from Dad)

Hustle dig  
Grind push  
Run fast  
Change pivot  
Chase pull  
Aim shoot  
Work smart  
Live smarter  
Play hard  
Practice harder

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## Girls

I walk into the lunchroom with JB.  
Heads turn.  
I'm not bald like JB,  
but my hair's close enough  
so that people sprinting past us  
do double-takes.  
Finally, after we sit at our table,  
the questions come:  
*Why'd you cut your hair, Filthy?*  
*How can we tell who's who?*  
JB answers, *I'm the cool one*  
*who makes free throws,*  
and I holler,  
I'M THE ONE WHO CAN DUNK.  
We both get laughs.  
Some girl who we've never seen before,  
in tight jeans and pink Reeboks,  
comes up to the table.  
JB's eyes are ocean wide,  
his mouth swimming on the floor,  
his clownish grin, embarrassing.  
So when she says,  
*Is it true that twins*  
*know what each other are thinking?*  
I tell her  
you don't have to be his *twin*  
to know  
what *he's* thinking.

## While Vondie and JB

debate whether the new girl  
is a knockout or just beautiful,  
a hottie or a cutie,  
a lay-up or a dunk,  
I finish my vocabulary homework—  
and my brother's vocabulary homework,  
which I don't mind  
since English is my favorite subject  
and he did the dishes for me last week.  
But it's hard to concentrate  
in the lunchroom  
with the girls' step team  
practicing in one corner,  
a rap group performing in the other,  
and Vondie and JB  
waxing poetic  
about love and basketball.  
So when they ask,  
*What do you think, Filthy?*  
I tell 'em,  
She's pulchritudinous.



# pul·chri·tu·di·nous

[PALL-KRE-TOO-DEN-NUS] *adjective*

Having great physical  
beauty and appeal.

As in: Every guy  
in the lunchroom  
is trying to flirt  
with the new girl  
because she's so *pulchritudinous*.

As in: I've never had a girlfriend,  
but if I did, you better believe  
she'd be *pulchritudinous*.

As in: Wait a minute—  
why is the *pulchritudinous* new girl  
now talking  
to my brother?

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## Practice

Coach reads to us from

*The Art of War:*

*A winning strategy is  
not about planning, he says.*

*It's about quick responses  
to changing conditions.*

Then he has us do  
footwork drills  
followed by  
forty wind sprints  
from the baseline  
to half court.

*The winner doesn't  
have to practice today, Coach says,*  
and Vondie blasts off

like *Apollo 17*,

his long legs

giving him an edge,

but I'm the quickest guy

on the team,

so on the last lap

I run hard,

take the lead by a foot,

and even though I don't plan it,

I let him win

and get ready to practice

harder.

## Walking Home

Hey, JB, you think we can win  
the county championship this year?

*I don't know, man.*

Hey, JB, why do you think  
Dad never had  
knee surgery?

*Man, I don't know.*

Hey, JB, why can't Dad eat—

*Look, Filthy, we'll win  
if you stop missing free throws.*

*Nobody likes doctors.*

*And Dad can't eat foods with too much salt  
because Mom told him he can't.*

*Any more questions?*

Yeah, one more.

You want to play  
to twenty-one  
when we get home?

*Sure. You got ten dollars?* he asks.

## Man to Man

In the driveway, I'm

SHAKING AND BAKING.

You don't want none of this, I say.

I'm about to TAKE IT TO THE HOLE.

Keep your eye on the ball.

I'd hate to see you

F

A

L

L

You shoulda gone with your GIRLFRIEND  
to the mall.

*Just play ball*, JB shouts.

Okay, but WATCH OUT, my BROTHER,  
TARHEEL LOVER.

I'm about to go UNDER  
COVER.

*Then bring it*, he says.

And I do, all the way to the top.

So SM<sup>OOOOOOOO</sup>TH, I make him  
drop.

So *nasty*, the floor should be mopped.

But before I can shoot,

Mom makes us stop:

**Josh, come clean your room!**

## After dinner

Dad takes us  
to the Rec  
to practice  
shooting free throws  
with one hand  
while he stands  
two feet in front  
of us,  
waving frantically  
in our faces.  
*It will teach you focus, he reminds us.*

Three players  
from the local college  
recognize Dad  
and ask him  
for autographs  
“for our parents.”  
Dad chuckles  
along with them.  
JB ignores them.  
I challenge them:

It won't be so funny  
when we shut  
you amateurs down,  
will it? I say.  
*OHHHH, this young boy got hops  
like his ol' man?* the tallest one says.  
*Talk is cheap, Dad says. If y'all want to run,  
let's do this. First one to eleven.*  
The tall one asks Dad if he needs crutches,  
then checks the ball to me,  
and the game begins,  
right after JB screams:

*Loser pays twenty bucks!*

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## After we win

I see the pink  
Reeboks–wearing girl  
shooting baskets  
on the other court.  
She plays ball, too?  
JB walks over to her  
and I can tell  
he likes her  
because when she goes in  
for a lay-up,  
he doesn't slap  
the ball silly  
like he tries  
to do with me.  
He just stands there  
*looking* silly,  
smiling  
on the other court  
at the pink  
Reeboks–wearing girl.

## **Dad Takes Us to Krispy Kreme and Tells Us His Favorite Story (Again)**

*Didn't Mom say no more doughnuts? JB asks Dad.  
What your mother doesn't know  
won't hurt her, he answers, biting  
into his third chocolate glazed cruller.  
Good shooting today. We beat  
those boys like they stole something, he adds.  
Why didn't we take their money, Dad? I ask.  
They were kids, Filthy, just like y'all.  
The look on their faces  
after we beat them  
eleven to nothing  
was enough for me.*

*Remember  
when you were two  
and I taught you the game?  
You had a bottle in one hand  
and a ball in the other,  
and your mom thought I was crazy.  
I WAS crazy.  
Crazy in love.  
With my twin boys.*

*Once, when you were three,  
I took you to the park  
to shoot free throws.  
The guy who worked there said,  
"This basket is ten feet tall.  
For older kids. Kids like yours  
might as well shoot  
at the sun." And then he laughed.  
And I asked him if a deaf person  
could write music. And he said,  
"Huh?" then  
took out his wrench and told me,  
"I'm gonna lower the goal for y'all."*



We remember, Dad.  
And then you told us Beethoven  
was a famous musician who was deaf,  
and how many times do we have to hear  
the same—

And

Dad interrupts me:

*Interrupt me again and I'll start all over.*

*Like I was saying,*

*I handed both of you a ball.*

*Stood you between the foul line*

*and the rim. Told you to shoot.*

*You did. And it was musical. Like*

*the opening of Beethoven's Fifth.*

*Da da da duhhhhhhhhh. Da da da duuuuuuuuuuh.*

*Your shots whistled. Like a train*

*pulling into the station. I expected*

*you to make it. And you did.*

*The guy was in shock.*

*He looked at me*

*like*

*he'd missed*

*the train.*

## **Basketball Rule #3**

Never let anyone  
lower your goals.  
Others' expectations  
of you are determined  
by their limitations  
of life.  
The sky is your limit, sons.  
Always shoot  
for the sun  
and you *will* shine.

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## Josh's Play-by-Play

The Red Rockets,  
defending county champions,  
are in the house tonight.  
They brought their whole school.  
This place is oozing crimson.  
They're beating us  
twenty-nine to twenty-eight  
with less than a minute to go.  
I'm at the free-throw line.  
All I have to do  
is make both shots  
to take the lead.  
The first is up, UP, and—  
CLANK!—it hits the rim.  
The second looks . . . real . . . goo . . .  
MISSED AGAIN!  
But  
Vondie grabs the rebound,  
a fresh twenty-four on the shot clock.  
Number thirty-three on the Rockets  
strips the ball from Vondie.  
This game is like Ping-Pong,  
with all the back-and-forth.  
He races downcourt  
for an easy lay—  
OHHHHHHH!  
*Houston, we have a problem!*  
I catch him  
and slap  
the ball on the glass.  
Ever seen anything like this from a seventh-grader?  
Didn't think so!  
Me and JB are stars in the making.  
The Rockets full-court-press me.  
But I get it across the line just in time.  
Ten seconds left.  
I pass the ball to JB.  
They double-team him in a hurry—don't want to give

him an easy three.  
Five seconds left.  
JB lobs the ball,  
I rise like a Learjet—  
seventh-graders aren't supposed to dunk.  
But guess what?  
I snatch the ball out of the air and  
SLAM!  
YAM! IN YOUR MUG!  
Who's *Da Man*?  
Let's look at that again.  
Oh, I forgot, this is junior high.  
No instant replay until college.  
Well, with game like this  
that's where me and JB  
are headed.

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## The new girl

comes up to me  
after the game,  
her smile ocean wide  
my mouth wide shut.  
*Nice dunk*, she says.  
Thanks.  
*Y'all coming to the gym  
over the Thanksgiving break?*  
Probably!  
*Cool. By the way, why'd you cut your locks?*  
*They were kind of cute.*  
Standing right behind me, Vondie giggles.  
*Kind of cute*, he mocks.

Then JB walks up.

*Hey, JB, great game.*  
*I brought you some iced tea*, she says.  
*Is it sweet?* he asks.  
And just like that  
JB and the new girl  
are sipping sweet tea  
together.

# **I Missed Three Free Throws Tonight**

Each night  
after dinner  
Dad makes us  
shoot  
free throws  
until we make ten  
in a row.

Tonight he says  
I have to make  
fifteen.

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## **Basketball Rule #4**

If you miss  
enough of life's  
free throws  
you will pay  
in the end.

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## Having a mother

is good when she rescues you  
from free-throw attempt number thirty-six,  
your arms as heavy as sea anchors.  
But it can be bad  
when your mother  
is a principal at your school.  
Bad in so many ways.  
It's always *education*  
*this* and *education that*.

After a double-overtime  
basketball game I only want  
three things: food, bath, sleep.  
The last thing I want is EDUCATION!  
But, each night,  
Mom makes us read.  
Don't know how he does it, but  
JB listens to his iPod  
at the same time,  
so he doesn't hear me  
when I ask him  
is Miss Sweet Tea his girlfriend.  
He claims he's listening to French classical,  
that it helps him concentrate.  
Yeah, right! Sounds more like  
Jay-Z and Kanye  
in Paris.  
Which is why when Mom and Dad start arguing,  
he doesn't hear them, either.



## Mom shouts

*Get a checkup. Hypertension is genetic.*  
I'm fine, stop high-posting me, baby, Dad whispers.

*Don't play me, Charles—this isn't a basketball game.*  
I don't need a doctor, I'm fine.

*Your father didn't "need" a doctor either.*  
He was alive when he went into the hospital.

*So now you're afraid of hospitals?*  
Nobody's afraid. I'm fine. It's not that serious.

*Fainting is a joke, is it?*  
I saw you, baby, and I got a little excited. Come kiss me.

*Don't do that . . .*  
Baby, it's nothing. I just got a little dizzy.

*You love me?*  
Like summer loves short nights.

*Get a checkup, then.*  
Only cure I need is you.

*I'm serious about this, Chuck.*  
Only doctor I need is Dr. Crystal Bell. Now come here . . .

And then there is silence, so I put the pillow over my head  
because when they stop talking,

I know what that means.  
Uggghh!

# hy·per·ten·sion

[HI-PER-TEN-SHUHN] *noun*

A disease  
otherwise known as  
high blood pressure.

As in: Mom doesn't want Dad  
eating salt, because too much of it  
increases the volume  
of blood,  
which can cause *hypertension*.

As in: *Hypertension*  
can affect all types of people,  
but you have a higher risk  
if someone in your family  
has had the disease.

As in: I think  
my grandfather  
died of *hypertension*?

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## To fall asleep

I count  
and recount  
the thirty-seven strands  
of my past  
in the box  
beneath my bed.

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# Why We Only Ate Salad for Thanksgiving

Because every year  
Grandma makes  
a big delicious dinner  
but this year  
two days before  
Thanksgiving  
she fell off  
her front stoop  
on the way  
to buy groceries  
so Uncle Bob  
my mom's younger brother  
    (who smokes cigars  
    and thinks he's a chef  
    because he watches  
    Food TV)  
decided he would  
prepare a feast  
for the whole family  
which consisted of  
macaroni with no cheese  
concrete-hard cornbread  
and a greenish-looking ham  
that prompted Mom  
to ask if he had any eggs  
to go along with it  
which made grandma laugh so hard  
she fell again, this time  
right out of her wheelchair.

## How Do You Spell Trouble?

During the vocabulary test  
JB passes me a folded note  
to give to  
Miss Sweet Tea,  
who sits at the desk  
in front of me  
and who looks  
pretty tight  
in her pink denim capris  
and matching sneaks.

Someone cracks a window.  
A cold breeze whistles.  
Her hair dances to its own song.  
In this moment I forget  
about the test  
and the note  
until JB hits me in the head with his No. 2.

Somewhere between  
*camaraderie* and *imbecile*  
I tap her beige bare shoulder  
with the note.  
At that exact moment  
the teacher's head creeps  
up from his desk, his eyes directly on me.

I'm a fly caught in a web.  
What do I do?  
Hand over the note, embarrass JB;  
or hide the note, take the heat.  
I look at my brother,  
his forehead a factory of sweat.  
Miss Sweet Tea smiles,  
gorgeous pink lips and all.

I know what I have to do.

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## Bad News

I sit in Mom's office  
for an hour,  
reading  
brochures and pamphlets  
about the Air Force and the Marines.

She's in and out  
handling principal stuff:  
a parent protesting her daughter's F;  
a pranked substitute teacher crying;  
a broken window.

After an hour  
she finally sits  
in the chair next to me  
and says, *The good news is,  
I'm not going to suspend you.*

*The bad news, Josh,  
is that  
neither Duke nor any other college  
accepts cheaters. Since I can't  
seem to make a decent man out of you  
perhaps the Air Force or Marines can.*

I want to tell her I wasn't cheating,  
that this is all JB and Miss Sweet Tea's fault,  
that this will never happen again,  
that Duke is the only thing that matters,  
but a water pipe bursts in the girls' bathroom.

So I tell her I'm sorry,  
it won't happen again,  
then head off to my next class.

## Gym class

is supposed to be about balls:  
volleyballs, basketballs, softballs,  
soccer balls—sometimes sit-ups  
and always sweat.

But today Mr. Lane tells  
us not to dress out.  
He's standing in front of the class,  
a dummy laid out on the floor,

plastic, faceless, torso cut in half.  
I'm not paying attention  
to anything he's saying  
or to the dummy

because  
I'm watching Jordan pass notes  
to Miss Sweet Tea. And I  
wonder what's in the notes.

*Josh, why don't you come up  
and assist me.*  
What? Huh?  
The class snickers,

and before I know it  
I'm tilting the dummy's head back,  
pinching his nose,  
blowing in his mouth,

and pumping his chest  
thirty times.  
All the while  
thinking that if life is really fair

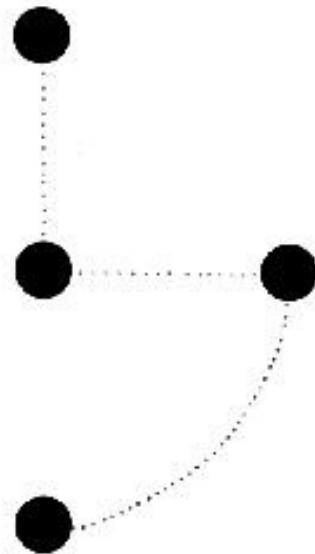
one day I'll be the one  
writing notes to some sweet girl  
and JB will have to squash his lips



on some dummy's sweaty mouth.

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# SECOND QUARTER



## Conversation

Hey, JB,  
I played a pickup game  
at the Rec today.  
At first, the older guys laughed  
and wouldn't let me in  
unless I could hit from half-court . . .

Of course, I did. All net.

I wait for JB to say something,  
but he just smiles,  
his eyes all moony.

I showed them guys  
how the Bells ball.  
I scored fourteen points.  
They told me I should  
try out for junior varsity next year  
'cause I got hops . . .

JB, are you listening?

JB nods, his fingers tapping away  
on the computer, chatting  
probably with  
Miss Sweet Tea.

I told the big guys about you, too.  
They said we could come back and  
run with them anytime.  
What do you think about that?

HELLO—Earth to JB?

Even though I know he hears me,  
the only thing JB is listening to  
is the sound of his heart  
bouncing

on the court  
of love.

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## Conversation

Dad, this girl is making  
Jordan act weird.  
He's here, but he's not.  
He's always smiling.  
His eyes get all spacey  
whenever she's around,  
and sometimes when she's not.  
He wears your cologne.  
He's always  
texting her.  
He even wore loafers to school.  
Dad, you gotta do something.

Dad does *something*.  
He laughs.

*Filthy, talking to your brother  
right now  
would be like pushing water uphill  
with a rake, son.*

This isn't funny, Dad.  
Say something  
to him. Please.

*Filthy, if some girl  
done locked up JB,  
he's going to jail.  
Now let's go get some doughnuts.*

## **Basketball Rule #5**

When  
you stop  
playing  
your game  
you've already  
lost.

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## Showoff

UP by sixteen  
with *six seconds*  
showing, JB smiles,  
then STRUTS  
side

steps

stutters

Spins, and

S

I

N

K

S

a sick SLICK SLIDING

swEEEEEEEEET

SEVEN-foot shot.

What a showoff.

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## Out of Control

*Are you kidding me?  
Come on. Ref, open your eyes.  
Ray Charles could have seen  
that kid walked.  
CALL THE TRAVELING VIOLATION!  
You guys are TERRIBLE!*

Mom wasn't  
at the game  
tonight,  
which meant  
that all night  
Dad was free  
to yell  
at the officials,  
which he did.

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## Mom calls me into the kitchen

after we get home from beating  
St. Francis. Normally she wants  
me to sample the macaroni and cheese  
to make sure it's cheesy enough,  
or the oven-baked fried chicken  
to make sure it's not greasy and  
stuff, but today on the table  
is some gross-looking  
orange creamy dip with brown specks in it.  
A tray of pita-bread triangles is beside it.  
Maybe Mom is having one of  
her book club meetings.  
*Sit down*, she says. I sit as far  
away from the dip as possible.  
Maybe the chicken is in the oven.  
*Where is your brother?* she asks.  
Probably on the phone with that *girl*.  
She hands me a pita.  
No thanks, I say, then stand up  
to leave, but she gives me a look  
that tells me she's not finished  
with me. Maybe the mac is in the oven.  
*We've talked to you two about  
your grandfather*, she says.  
*He was a good man. I'm sorry you never got to meet him, Josh.*  
Me too, he looked cool in his uniforms.  
*That man was way past cool.*  
Dad said he used to curse  
a lot and talk about the war.  
Mom's laugh is short, then she's serious again.  
*I know we told  
you Grandpop died after a fall, but  
the truth is he fell because he had a stroke.  
He had a heart disease. Too  
many years of bad eating and not taking  
care of himself and so—*  
What does this have  
to do with anything? I ask,

even though I think I already know.  
*Well, our family has a history  
of heart problems, she says,  
so we're going to start eating better.  
Especially Dad. And we're going to  
start tonight with  
some hummus and  
pita bread.*

FOR MY VICTORY DINNER?

*Josh, we're going to try to lay off the fried foods  
and Golden Dragon. And when your dad  
takes you to the recreation center,  
no Pollard's or Krispy Kreme afterward, understand?  
And I understand more than she thinks I do.  
But is hummus really the answer?*

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## 35-18

is the final score  
of game six.  
A local reporter  
asks JB and I  
how we got so good.  
Dad screams from behind us,  
*They learned from Da Man!*  
The crowd of parents and students  
behind us laughs.

On the way home  
Dad asks if we should stop  
at Pollard's.  
I tell him I'm not hungry,  
plus I have a lot of homework,  
even though  
I skipped lunch today  
and finished my homework  
during halftime.

## Too Good

Lately, I've been feeling  
like everything in my life  
is going right:

I beat JB in *Madden*.

Our team is undefeated.

I scored an A+ on the vocabulary test.

Plus, Mom's away at a conference,  
which means

so is the Assistant Principal.

I am a little worried, though,  
because, as Coach likes to say,  
you can get used to  
things going well,  
but you're never prepared  
for something  
going wrong.

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## I'm on Free Throw Number Twenty-Seven

We take turns,  
switching every time we miss.  
JB has hit forty-one,

the last twelve in a row.  
*Filthy, keep up, man, keep up,* he says.  
Dad laughs loud, and says,

*Filthy, your brother is putting on  
a free-throw clinic. You better—*  
And suddenly he bowls over,

a look of horror on his face,  
and starts coughing  
while clutching his chest,

only no sound comes. I freeze.  
JB runs over to him.  
*Dad, you okay?* he asks.

I still can't move. There is a stream  
of sweat on Dad's face. Maybe  
he's overheating, I say.

His mouth is curled up  
like a little tunnel. JB grabs  
the water hose, turns the

faucet on full blast, and sprays  
Dad. Some of it goes in Dad's mouth.  
Then I hear the sound

of coughing, and Dad is no longer leaning  
against the car, now he's moving  
toward the hose, and laughing.

So is JB.  
Then Dad grabs the hose

and sprays both of us.

Now I'm laughing too,  
but only  
on the outside.

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## He probably

*just got something stuck  
in his throat,  
JB says  
when I ask him  
if he thought  
Dad was sick  
and shouldn't we  
tell Mom  
what happened.*

So, when the phone rings,  
it's ironic  
that after saying hello,  
he throws the phone to me,  
because, even though  
his lips are moving,  
JB is speechless,  
like he's got something stuck  
in his  
throat.

## **i·ron·ic**

[AY-RON-IK] *adjective*

Having a curious or humorous unexpected sequence of events marked by coincidence.

As in: The fact that Vondie hates astronomy and his mom works for NASA is *ironic*.

As in: It's not *ironic* that Grandpop died in a hospital and Dad doesn't like doctors.

As in: Isn't it *ironic* that showoff JB, with all his swagger, is too shy to talk to Miss Sweet Tea, so he gives me the phone?

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## **This Is Alexis—May I Please Speak to Jordan?**

Identical twins  
are no different  
from everyone else,  
except we look and  
sometimes sound  
exactly alike.

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## Phone Conversation (I Sub for JB)

*Was that your brother?*

Yep, that was Josh. I'm JB.

*I know who you are, silly—I called you.*

Uh, right. You have any siblings, Alexis?

*Two sisters. I'm the youngest.*

And the prettiest.

*You haven't seen them.*

I don't need to.

*That's sweet.*

Sweet as pomegranate.

*Okay, that was random.*

That's me.

*Jordan, can I ask you something?*

Yep.

*Did you get my text?*

Uh, yeah.

*So, what's your answer?*

Uh, my answer. I don't know.

*Stop being silly, Jordan.*

I'm not.

*Then tell me your answer. Are y'all rich?*

I don't know.

*Didn't your dad play in the NBA?*

No, he played in Italy.

*But still, he made a lot of money, right?*

It's not like we're opulent.

*Who says “opulent”?*

I do.

*You never use big words like that at school . . .*

I have a reputation to uphold.

*Is he cool?*

Who?

*Your dad.*

Very.

*So, when are you gonna introduce me?*

Introduce you?

*To your parents.*

I’m waiting for the right moment.

*Which is when?*

Uh—

*So, am I your girlfriend or not?*

Uh, can you hold on for a second?

*Sure, she says.*

*Cover the mouthpiece, JB mouths to me.*

I do, then whisper to him:

She wants to know are you her boyfriend.

And when are you gonna introduce her

to Mom and Dad. What should I tell her, JB?

*Tell her yeah, I guess, I mean, I don’t know.*

*I gotta pee, JB says, running*

out of the room, leaving me still in his shoes.

Okay, I’m back, Alexis.

*So, what’s the verdict, Jordan?*

Do you want to be my girlfriend?  
*Are you asking me to be your girl?*

Uh, I think so.  
*You think so? Well, I have to go now.*

Yes.  
*Yes, what?*

I like you. A lot.  
*I like you, too . . . Precious.*

So, now I'm Precious?  
*Everyone calls you JB.*

Then I guess it's official.  
*Text me later.*

Good night, Miss Sweet—  
*What did you call me?*

Uh, good night, my sweetness.  
*Good night, Precious.*

JB comes running out of the bathroom.  
*What'd she say, Josh? Come on, tell me.*

She said she likes me a lot, I tell him.  
*You mean she likes me a lot? he asks.*

Yeah . . .  
that's what I meant.

## JB and I

eat lunch  
together  
every day,  
taking bites  
of Mom's  
tuna salad  
on wheat  
between arguments:  
Who's the better dunker,  
Blake or LeBron?  
Which is superior,  
Nike  
or Converse?  
Only today  
I wait  
at our table  
in the back  
for twenty-five minutes,  
texting Vondie  
    (home sick),  
eating a fruit cup  
    (alone),  
before I see  
JB strut  
into the cafeteria  
with Miss Sweet Tea  
holding his  
*precious* hand.

## Boy walks into a room

with a girl.

They come over.

He says, *Hey, Filthy McNasty*

like he's said forever,

but it sounds different

this time,

and when he snickers,

she does too,

like it's some inside joke,

and my nickname,

some dirty

punch

line.

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## At practice

Coach says we need to work  
on our mental game.

If we *think*  
we can beat Independence Junior High—  
the defending champions,  
the number one seed,  
the only other undefeated team—  
then we *will*.

But instead of drills  
and sprints,  
we sit on our butts,  
make weird sounds—

*Ohmmmmmmmm Ohmmmmmmmm—*  
and meditate.

Suddenly I get this vision  
of JB in a hospital.  
I quickly open my eyes,  
turn around,  
and see him looking dead  
at me like he's just seen  
a ghost.

## Second-Person

After practice, you walk home alone.  
This feels strange to you, because  
as long as you can remember  
there has always been a second person.  
On today's long, hot mile,  
you bounce your basketball,  
but your mind  
is on something else.  
Not whether you will make the playoffs.  
Not homework.  
Not even what's for dinner.  
You wonder what JB  
and his pink Reebok-wearing girlfriend are doing.  
You do not want to go to the library.  
But you go.  
Because your report on *The Giver* is due  
tomorrow.  
And JB has your copy.  
But he's with her.  
Not here with you.  
Which is unfair.  
Because he doesn't argue  
with you about who's the greatest,  
Michael Jordan or Bill Russell,  
like he used to.  
Because JB will not eat lunch  
with you tomorrow  
or the next day,  
or next week.  
Because you are walking home  
by yourself  
and your brother owns the world.



## Third Wheel

You walk into the library,  
glance over at the music section.  
You look through the magazines.  
You even sit at a desk and pretend to study.  
You ask the librarian where you can find *The Giver*.  
She says something odd:  
*Did you find your friend?*  
Then she points upstairs.  
On the second floor,  
you pass by the computers.  
Kids checking their Facebook.  
More kids in line waiting  
to check their Facebook.  
In the Biography section  
you see an old man  
reading *The Tipping Point*.  
You walk down the last aisle,  
Teen Fiction,  
and come to the reason you're here.  
You remove the book  
from the shelf.  
And there,  
behind the last row of books,  
you find  
the "friend"  
the librarian was talking about.  
Only she's not your friend  
and she's kissing  
your brother.

# tip·ping point

[TIH-PING POYNT] *noun*

The point  
when an object shifts  
from one position  
into a new,  
entirely different one.

As in: My dad says the *tipping point*  
of our country's economy  
was housing gamblers  
and greedy bankers.

As in: If we get one C  
on our report cards,  
I'm afraid  
Mom will reach  
her *tipping point*  
and that will be the end  
of basketball.

As in: Today at the library,  
I went upstairs,  
walked down an aisle,  
pulled *The Giver*  
off the shelf,  
and found  
my *tipping point*.

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## The main reason I can't sleep

is not because  
of the game tomorrow tonight,  
is not because  
the stubble on my head feels  
like bugs are break dancing on it,  
is not even because I'm worried about Dad.

The main reason  
I can't sleep tonight  
is because  
Jordan is on the phone  
with Miss Sweet Tea  
and between the giggling  
and the breathing  
he tells her  
how much she's  
the apple of  
his eye  
and that he wants  
to peel her  
and get under her skin  
and give me a break.  
I'm still hungry  
and right about now  
I wish I had  
an apple  
of my own.

# Surprised

I have it all planned out.  
When we walk to the game  
I will talk to JB  
man to man  
about how he's spending  
way more time with Alexis  
than with me  
and Dad.

Except when I hear  
the horn,  
I look outside  
my window and it's raining  
and JB is jumping  
into a car  
with Miss Sweet Tea and her dad,  
ruining my plan.

# Conversation

In the car  
I ask Dad

if going to the doctor  
will kill him.

He tells me  
he doesn't trust doctors,

that my grandfather did  
and look where it got him:

six feet under  
at forty-five.

But Mom says your dad  
was really sick, I tell him,

and Dad just rolls his eyes,  
so I try something different.

I tell him  
that just because your teammate

gets fouled on a lay-up  
doesn't mean you shouldn't

ever drive to the lane again.  
He looks at me and

laughs so loud,  
we almost don't hear

the flashing blues  
behind us.

## Game Time: 6:00 p.m.

At 5:28 p.m.

a cop  
pulls us over  
because Dad has  
a broken  
taillight.

At 5:30

the officer approaches  
our car  
and asks Dad  
for his driver's license  
and registration.

At 5:32

the team leaves  
the locker room and  
pregame warm-ups  
begin  
without me.

At 5:34

Dad explains  
to the officer  
that his license  
is in his wallet,  
which is in his jacket  
at home.

At 5:37

Dad says, *Look, sir,  
my name is Chuck Bell,  
and I'm just trying  
to get my boy  
to his basketball game.*

At 5:47

while Coach leads

the Wildcats  
in team prayer,  
I pray Dad  
won't get arrested.

At 5:48  
the cop smiles  
after verifying  
Dad's identity  
on Google, and says,  
*You "Da Man"!*

At 5:50  
Dad autographs  
a Krispy Kreme napkin  
for the officer  
and gets a warning  
for his broken taillight.

At 6:01  
we arrive at the game  
but on my sprint  
into the gym  
I slip and fall  
in the mud.

## **This is my second year**

playing  
for the Reggie Lewis Wildcats  
and I've started every game  
until tonight,  
when Coach tells me  
to go get cleaned up  
then find a seat  
on the bench.

When I try to tell him  
it wasn't my fault,  
he doesn't want to hear  
about sirens and broken taillights.  
*Josh, better an hour too soon  
than a minute too late,* he says,  
turning his attention back  
to JB and the guys  
on the court,

all of whom are pointing  
and laughing  
at me.



## **Basketball Rule #6**

A great team  
has a good scorer  
with a teammate  
who's on point  
and ready  
to assist.

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## Josh's Play-by-Play

At the beginning  
of the second half  
we're up twenty-three to twelve.  
I enter the game  
for the first time.  
I'm just happy  
to be back on the floor.  
When my brother and I  
are on the court together  
this team is  
unstoppable,  
unfadeable.  
And, yes,  
undefeated.  
JB brings the ball up the court.  
Passes the ball to Vondie.  
He shoots it back to JB.  
I call for the ball.  
JB finds me in the corner.  
I know y'all think  
it's time for the pick-and-roll,  
but I got something else in mind.  
I get the ball on the left side.  
JB is setting the pick.  
Here it comes—  
I roll to his right.  
The double-team is on me,  
leaving JB free.  
He's got his hands in the air,  
looking for the dish  
from me.  
Dad likes to say,  
*When Jordan Bell is open  
you can take his three to the bank,  
cash it in, 'cause it's all money.*  
Tonight, I'm going for broke.  
I see JB's still wide open.  
McDonald's drive-thru open.

But I got my own plans.  
The double-team is still on me  
like feathers on a bird.  
Ever seen an eagle soar?  
So high, so fly.  
Me and my wings are—  
and that's when I remember:  
MY. WINGS. ARE. GONE.  
Coach Hawkins is out of his seat.  
Dad is on his feet, screaming.  
JB's screaming.  
The crowd's screaming,  
*FILTHY, PASS THE BALL!*  
The shot clock is at 5.  
I dribble out of the double-team.  
4  
Everything comes to a head.  
3  
I see Jordan.  
2  
You want it that bad? HERE YA GO!  
1 . . .

## Before

Today, I walk into the gym  
covered in more dirt than a chimney.  
When JB screams *FILTHY'S McNasty*,  
the whole team laughs. Even Coach.

Then I get benched for the entire first half. For being late.  
Today, I watch as we take a big lead,  
and JB makes four threes in a row.  
I hear the crowd cheer for JB, especially Dad and Mom.

Then I see JB wink at Miss Sweet Tea  
after he hits a stupid free throw.  
Today, I finally get into the game  
at the start of the second half.

JB sets a wicked pick for me  
just like Coach showed us in practice,  
And I get double-teamed on the roll  
just like we expect.

Today, I watch JB get open and wave for me to pass.  
Instead I dribble, trying to get out of the trap,  
and watch as Coach and Dad scream  
for me to pass.

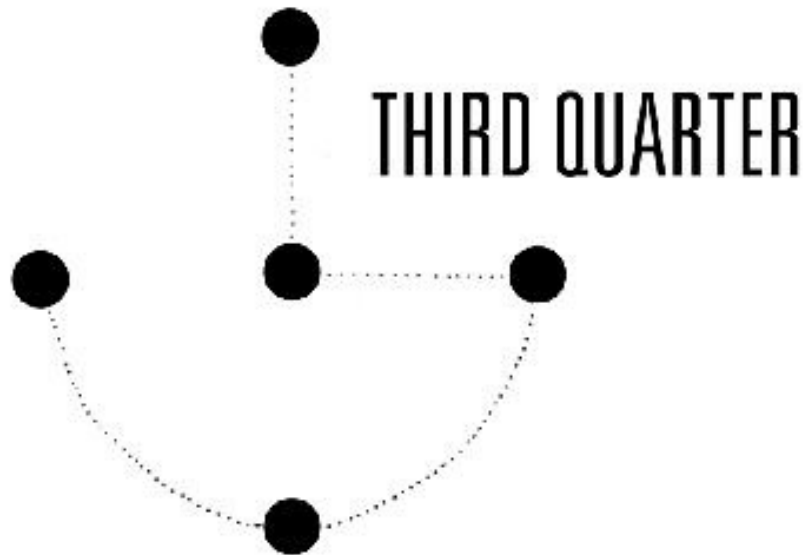
Today, I plan on passing the ball to JB,  
but when I hear him say “**FILTHY**,  
give me the ball,” I dribble  
over to my brother

and fire a pass  
so hard,  
it levels him,  
the blood

from his nose  
still shooting

long after the shot-  
clock buzzer goes off.

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## **After**

On the short ride home  
from the hospital

there is no jazz music  
or hoop talk,  
only brutal silence,

the unspoken words  
volcanic and weighty.  
Dad and Mom,  
solemn and wounded.

JB, bandaged and hurt,  
leans against his back-seat window  
and with less than two feet  
between us  
I feel miles away

from all of them.

## Suspension

*Sit down, Mom says.*  
Feels like we're in her office.

*Can I make you a sandwich?*  
But we're in the kitchen.

*You want a tall glass of orange soda?*  
Mom doesn't ever let us drink soda.

*Eat up, because this may be your last meal.*  
Here it comes . . .

*Boys with no self-control become men behind bars.*  
. . .

*Have you lost your mind, son?*  
No.

*Did your father and I raise you to be churlish?*  
No.

*So, what's been wrong with you these past few weeks?*  
. . .

*Put that sandwich down and answer me.*  
I guess I've been just—

*You've been just what? DERANGED?*  
Uh—

*DON'T "UH" ME! Talk like you have some sense.*  
I didn't mean to hurt him.

*You could have permanently injured your brother.*  
I know. I'm sorry, Mom.

*You're sorry for what?*  
. . .



*I'm confused, Josh. Make me understand. When did you become a thug?*  
I don't know. I just was a little ang—

*Are you going to get "angry" every time JB has a girlfriend?*  
It wasn't just that.

*Then what was it? I'm waiting.*  
I don't know.

*Okay, well, since you don't know, here's what I know—*  
I just got a little upset.

*Not good enough. Your behavior was unacceptable.*  
I said I'm sorry.

*Indeed you did. But you need to tell your brother, not me.*  
I will.

*There are always consequences, Josh.*  
Here it comes: Dishes for a week, no phone, or, worse, no Sundays at the Rec.

*Josh, you and JB are growing up.*  
I know.

*You're twins, not the same person.*  
But that doesn't mean he has to stop loving me.

*Your brother will always love you, Josh.*  
I guess.

*Boys with no discipline end up in prison.*  
Yeah, I heard you the first time.

*Don't you get smart with me and end up in more trouble.*  
Why are you always trying to scare me?

*We're done. Your dad is waiting for you.*  
Okay, but what are the consequences?

*You're suspended.*  
From school?

*From the team.*

...

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# chur·lish

[CHUHR-LISH] *adjective*

Having a bad temper, and  
being difficult to work with.

As in: I wanted a pair  
of Stephon Marbury's sneakers  
(Starburys),  
but Dad called him  
a selfish millionaire  
with a bad attitude,  
and why would I want  
to be associated  
with such a *churlish*  
choke artist.

As in: I don't understand  
how I went  
from annoyed  
to grumpy  
to downright  
*churlish*.

As in: How do you apologize  
to your twin brother  
for being *churlish*—  
for almost  
breaking  
his nose?

## **This week, I**

get my report card.  
Make the honor roll.

Watch the team win  
game nine.

Volunteer  
at the library.

Eat lunch alone  
five times.

Avoid  
Miss Sweet Tea.

Walk home  
by myself.

Clean the garage  
during practice.

Try to atone  
day and night.

Sit beside JB at dinner.  
He moves.

Tell him a joke.  
He doesn't even smile.

Do his chores.  
He pays no attention.

Say I'm sorry  
but he won't listen.

## **Basketball Rule #7**

Rebounding  
is the art  
of anticipating,  
of always being prepared  
to grab it.

But you can't  
drop the ball.

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## The Nosebleed Section

Our seats are in the clouds,  
and every time Dad thinks  
the ref makes a bad call,  
he rains.

All Mom does is pop up  
like an umbrella,  
then Dad sits  
back down.

JB's got nineteen points,  
six rebounds,  
and three assists.  
He's on fire,  
blazing from  
baseline to baseline.  
Dad screams,  
*Somebody needs to call  
the fire department,  
'cause JB is burning up  
this place.*

The other team calls a time-out.  
Dad, JB still won't speak to me, I say.  
*Right now JB can't  
see you, son, Dad says.  
You just have to let the smoke  
clear, and then he'll be okay.  
For now, why don't you  
write him a letter?*  
Good idea, I think.  
But what should I say? I ask him.  
By then,  
Dad is on his feet  
with the rest of the gym  
as JB steals the ball  
and takes off  
like a wildfire.

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## Fast Break

He's a  
*Backcourt Baller*  
On the b r e a k,

a RUNNING GUNNING

SHOOTING STAR

FLYING F A S T.

JB's FIXING for the GLASS—

BOUNCE BOUNCE ball beside him

NOW he's GETTING

FLYER and FLYER,

CLIMBing sky.

He nods his head  
and pumps a FAKE,

Explodes the lane.

CRISS ball CROSS ball CRISS  
and takes the break

K

A

B

O

O

M

Above the rim,

A THUNDEROUS almost DUNK.

That elbow just sent JB

K

E

R

P



L  
U  
N  
K

to the floor.  
FOUL.

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# Storm

Like a strong wind, Dad  
rises from the clouds, strikes

down the stairs, swift and  
sharp and mad as

lightning. *Flagrant foul, ref!*  
he yells to everyone in the

gym. Now he's hail and blizzard.  
His face, cold and hard as ice.

His hands pulsing through  
the air. His mouth, loud as thunder.

*He tackled JB—  
this ain't football,*

Dad roars in the face  
of the ref, while JB

and his attacker do  
the eye dance. I want to

join in, offer my squall,  
but Mom shoots me a look

that says, *Stay out of the rain,  
son.* So, I just watch

as she and Coach chase  
Dad's tornado. I watch

as she wraps her arms  
around Dad's waist. I watch

as she slowly brings him back  
to wind and cloud. I watch

Mom take a tissue from  
her purse to wipe her tears,

and the sudden onset of  
blood from Dad's nose.

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## The next morning

at breakfast  
Mom tells Dad,  
*Call Dr. Youngblood today*                      *or else.*

The name's ironic, I think.

*I'm sorry for losing  
my cool,*  
Dad tells us.

JB asks Mom  
can he go to the mall  
after practice today?

There's a new video game  
we can check out,  
I say to JB.

He hasn't spoken to me in five days.

*Your brother has apologized  
profusely for his mistake,*  
Mom says to JB.

*Tell him that I saw the look  
in his eyes, and it wasn't a mistake,*  
JB replies.

# pro·fuse·ly

[PRUH-FYOOS-LEE] *adverb*

Pouring forth  
in great quantity.

As in: JB gets all nervous and  
sweats *profusely*  
every time  
Miss Sweet Tea walks  
into a room.

As in: The team has thanked  
JB *profusely*  
for leading us  
into  
the playoffs.

As in: Mom said  
Dad's blood pressure  
was so high  
during the game that when  
he went into a rage  
it caused  
his nose  
to start bleeding  
*profusely*.

## Article #1 in the *Daily News* (December 14)

The Reggie Lewis Wildcats  
capped off their remarkable season  
with a fiery win against  
Olive Branch Junior High.  
Playing without suspended phenom  
Josh Bell didn't seem to faze  
Coach Hawkins' undefeated 'Cats.  
After a brief melee caused by a hard foul,  
Josh's twin, Jordan, led the team,  
like GW crossing the Delaware,  
to victory, and to their  
second straight playoff appearance.  
With a first-round bye,  
they begin their quest  
for the county trophy  
next week  
against the Independence Red Rockets,  
the defending champions,  
while playing without  
Josh "Filthy McNasty" Bell  
the *Daily News's*  
Most Valuable Player.

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## Mostly everyone

in class applauds,  
congratulating me  
on being selected  
as the Junior High MVP  
by the *Daily News*.

Everyone except  
Miss Sweet Tea:

*YOU'RE MEAN, JOSH!*  
*And I don't know why*  
*they gave you that award*  
*after what you did to Jordan.*  
*JERK!*

JB looks at me.  
I wait for him to say *something, anything*  
in defense of his only brother.  
But his eyes, empty as fired cannons,  
shoot way past me.

Sometimes it's the things that aren't said  
that kill you.

## Final Jeopardy

The only sounds,  
teeth munching melon and strawberry  
from Mom's fruit cocktail dessert

and Alex Trebek's annoying voice:  
*This fourteen-time NBA all-star  
also played minor-league baseball*

*for the Birmingham Barons.*  
Even Mom knows the answer.  
Hey, Dad, the playoffs start in two days

and the team needs me, I say.  
Plus my grades were good.  
JB rolls his eyes and says to Alex

what we all know: Who is "Michael Jeffrey Jordan"?  
*Josh, this isn't about your grades, Mom says.*  
*How you behave going forward is what matters to us.*

*I loooove Christmas.*  
*Can't wait for your mother's*  
*maple turkey, Dad says, trying*  
to break the tension. Nobody responds,  
so he continues:  
*Y'all know what the mama turkey*

*said to her naughty son?*  
*If your papa could see you now,*  
*he'd turn over in his gravy!*

None of us laughs.  
Then all of us laugh.  
*Chuck, you are a silly man, Mom says.*

*Jordan, we want to meet your new friend, she adds.*  
*Yeah, invite her to dinner, Dad agrees.*  
*Filthy and I*



want to get to know the girl who stole JB.

Stop that, Chuck! Mom says, hitting Dad on the arm.  
What is “I’ll think about it”? JB replies,  
kissing Mom, dapping Dad, and not once

looking  
at  
me.

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## Dear Jordan

without u  
the goal  
seems  
broken,  
like puzzle pieces  
i can no longer fit.  
help me heal,  
slash with me  
like two stars  
like two brothers  
together.

i am empty,  
with no net.  
my life was  
shattered,  
on the court.  
can you  
run with me,  
like we used to?  
stealing sun,  
burning up.

*PS. I'm sorry.*

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## I don't know

if he read  
my letter,  
but this morning  
on the bus  
to school  
when I said,  
*Vondie, your head  
is so big,  
you don't have a forehead,  
you have a five-head,*  
I could feel  
JB laughing  
a little.

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## No Pizza and Fries

The spinach  
and tofu  
salad  
Mom packed  
for my lunch  
today is cruel,  
but not as cruel  
as the evil look  
Miss Sweet Tea  
shoots me  
from across  
the cafeteria.

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## Even Vondie

has a girlfriend now.  
She wants to be a doctor one day.

She's a candy striper  
and a cheerleader  
and a talker

with skinny legs  
and a butt  
as big  
as Vermont,

which according to her  
has the best tomatoes,

which she claims  
come in all colors,  
even purple,

which she tells me  
is her favorite color,  
which I already know  
because of her hair.

This is still better  
than having  
no girlfriend at all.

Which is what I have  
now.

## Uh-oh

While I'm on the phone  
with Vondie  
talking about  
my chances of playing  
in another game  
this season,  
I hear panting  
coming from Mom  
and Dad's room,  
but we don't own  
a dog.

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## I run into Dad's room

to see what all the noise is  
and find him kneeling  
on the floor, rubbing a towel

in the rug. It reeks of vomit.  
You threw up, Dad? I ask.  
*Must have been something I ate.*

He sits up on the bed, holds  
his chest like he's pledging  
allegiance. Only there's no flag.

*Y'all ready to eat?* he mutters.  
You okay, Dad? I ask.  
He nods and shows me

a letter he's reading.  
Dad, was that you coughing?  
*I've got great news, Filthy.*

What is it? I ask.  
*I got a coaching offer at a nearby  
college starting next month.*

A job? What about the house?  
What about Mom? What about me  
and JB? Who's gonna shoot

free throws with us every night? I ask.  
*Filthy, you and JB are getting older,  
more mature—you'll manage,* he says.

*And, what's with the switch? First  
you want me to get a job, now  
you don't? What's up, Filthy?*

Dad, Mom thinks you should  
take it easy, for your health, right?

I mean, didn't you make a million dollars

playing basketball? You don't  
really need to work.

*Filthy, what I need is to get back*

*on the court. That's what your dad NEEDS!*

I prefer to be called Josh, Dad.

Not Filthy.

*Oh, really, Filthy?* he laughs.

I'm serious, Dad—please don't call me  
*that name anymore.*

You gonna take the job, Dad?

*Son, I miss "swish."*

*I miss the smell of orange leather.*

*I miss eatin' up cats*

*who think they can run with Da Man.*

*The court is my kitchen.*

*Son, I miss being the top chef.*

*So, yeah, I'm gonna take it . . .*

*if your mother lets me.*

Well, I will talk to her about  
this job thing, since it means  
so much to you. But, you know

she's really worried about you, Dad.

*Filth—I mean Josh, okay, you talk  
to her,* he laughs.

And maybe, in return, Dad, you can talk  
to her about letting me back on the team  
for the playoffs.

I feel like

I'm letting my teammates down.

*You let your family down too, Josh,* he replies,



still holding his chest.  
So what should I do, Dad? I ask.  
*Well, right now you should*

*go set the dinner table*, Mom says,  
standing at the door  
watching Dad with eyes

full of panic.

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## Behind Closed Doors

*We decided no more basketball, Chuck, Mom yells.  
Baby, it's not ball, it's coaching, Dad tells her.*

*It's still stress. You don't need to be on the court.  
The doctor said it's fine, baby.*

*What doctor? When did you go to the doctor?  
I go a couple times a week. Dr. WebMD.*

*Are you serious! This is not some joke, Charles.*

...

*Going online is not going to save your life.  
Truth is, I've had enough of this talk about me being sick.*

*So have I. I'm scheduling an appointment for you.  
Fine!*

*I shouldn't be so worried about your heart—it's your head that's crazy.  
Crazy for you, lil' mama.*

*Stop that. I said stop. It's time for dinner, Chuck . . . oooh.  
Who's Da Man?*

*And then there is silence, so I go set the dinner table,  
because when they stop talking,*

*I know what that means.  
Uggghh!*

## The girl who stole my brother

is her new name.  
She's no longer sweet.  
Bitter is her taste.  
Even worse,  
she asks for seconds  
of vegetable lasagna,  
which makes Mom smile  
'cause JB and I can't get with  
this whole better-eating thing  
and we never ask for seconds  
until tonight, when JB,  
still grinning and cheesing  
for some invisible camera  
that Miss Bitter (Sweet) Tea holds,  
asks for more salad,  
which makes Dad laugh  
and prompts Mom  
to ask,  
*How did you two meet?*

Surprisingly, JB is a motor mouth,  
giving us all the details about  
that first time in the cafeteria:  
*She came into the lunchroom.  
It was her first day at our school,  
and we just started talking about  
all kinds of stuff, and she said she played  
basketball at her last school, and then  
Vondie was like, "JB, she's hot," and  
I was like, "Yeah, she is kinda  
pulchritudinous."*  
And for the first time  
in fifteen days, JB looks  
at me for a split second,  
and I almost see  
the hint of a  
smile.

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## Things I Learn at Dinner

She went to Nike Hoops Camp for Girls.

Her favorite player is Skylar Diggins.

She can name each of the 2010 NBA Champion Lakers.

Her dad went to college with Shaquille O'Neal.

She knows how to do a crossover.

Her AAU team won a championship.

She's got game.

Her parents are divorced.

She's going to visit her mom next week for Christmas break.

She lives with her dad.

She shoots hoop at the Rec to relax.

Her mom doesn't want her playing basketball.

Her dad's coming to our game tomorrow to see JB play.

She's sorry I won't be playing.

Her smile is as sweet as Mom's carrot cake.

She smells like sugarplum.

She has a sister in college.

HER SISTER GOES TO DUKE.

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## Dishes

When the last plate is scrubbed,  
the leftovers put up,  
and the floor swept clean,  
Mom comes into the kitchen.  
When is Dad's doctor appointment? I ask.  
*Josh, you know I don't like  
you eavesdropping.*  
I get it from you, Mom, I say.  
And she laughs, 'cause she knows  
I'm not saying nothing but the truth.  
*It's next week.*  
School's out next week.  
Maybe I can go  
with you  
to the doctor?  
*Maybe, she says.*

I put the broom down,  
wrap my arms around her,  
and tell her thank you.  
For loving us, and Dad, and  
letting us play basketball,  
and being the best mother  
in the world.  
*Keep this up, she says, and  
you'll be back on the court  
in no time.*

Does that mean  
I can play in tomorrow's  
playoff game? I ask.  
*Don't press your luck, son.*  
*It's going to take more than a hug.*  
*Now help me dry these dishes.*

## Coach's Talk Before the Game

Tonight  
I decide to sit  
on the bench  
with the team  
during the game  
instead of the bleachers  
with Dad  
and Mom, who's sitting  
next to him  
just in case  
he decides to  
act churlish  
again.

Coach says:  
*We've won  
ten games  
in a row.  
The difference between  
a winning streak  
and a losing streak  
is one game.  
Now, Josh is not with us  
again, so somebody's  
gonna have to step up  
in the low post.*

I sit back down  
on the bench  
and watch JB lead our Wildcats  
to the court.  
When the game finally starts,  
I glance up at Dad and Mom,  
but they're not there.  
When I look back  
at the court,  
JB is staring at me  
like we've both just seen

another ghost.

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## Josh's Play-by-Play

The team's in trouble.  
If they don't find an answer soon  
our championship dreams are over.  
Down by three, they're playing  
like kittens, not Wildcats.  
With less than a minute to go  
Vondie brings the ball up the court.  
Will he go inside for a quick two  
or get the ball to JB  
for the three-ball?  
He passes the ball to number twenty-nine  
on the right wing  
and tries to dribble out,  
but the defense is suffocating.  
They're on him like  
black on midnight.  
He shoots it over to JB,  
who looks up at the clock.  
He's gonna let it get as close  
as possible.  
They've gotta miss me right now.  
Vondie comes over, sets a high pick.  
JB's open, he's gonna take the three.  
It's up.  
That's a good-looking ball there.  
But not good enough.  
It clangs off the rim.  
The buzzer  
rings  
and the Wildcats  
lose  
the first half.

## Text Messages from Mom, Part One

7:04

Dad wasn't feeling well, so we went outside for some air. Back soon.

7:17

I think we're heading home. At halftime, let your brother know.

7:45

Home now. Dad wants to know the score. How is Jordan doing? You okay?

7:47

Y'all hang in there. The second half will be better. Hi to Alexis. Get

7:47

a ride with Coach or Vondie. Yes, Dad's okay. I think. See you soon.

7:48

I shouldn't have said "I think." He's fine, just tired. He says don't come home

7:48

if you lose. LOL.

## The Second Half

Vondie strips the ball  
at center court,  
shoots a short pass  
to JB, who  
*skips*

          downtown  
*zips*  
          around,  
then double dips  
it in the bowl.

### SWOOSH

Man, that was cold.  
We're up by two.  
These cats are BALLING.  
JB is on fire,  
taking the score  
higher and higher,  
and the team  
and Coach  
and Alexis  
and me . . .  
we're his choir.  
WILDCATS! WILDCATS!  
My brother is  
Superman tonight,  
Sliding  
and Gliding  
into rare air,  
lighting up the sky  
and the scoreboard.  
Saving the world  
and our chance  
at a championship.

## Tomorrow Is the Last Day of School Before Christmas Vacation

Tonight, I'm studying.  
Usually I help JB  
prepare for his tests,  
but since the incident  
he's been studying alone,  
which has me a little scared  
because tomorrow is also the big  
vocabulary standards test.  
(But don't say that word  
around Mom. She thinks  
that "standards" are a lousy idea).

So, after the game  
I go home and pull out  
my study sheet with all  
the words  
we've been studying  
and my clues  
to remember them.  
Like *heirloom*.  
As in: Dad treats his championship ring  
like some kind of family *heirloom*  
that we can't wear  
until one of us becomes *Da Man*.

I put eight pages of words  
on JB's pillow  
while he's brushing  
his teeth,  
then turn off my light  
and go to sleep.  
When he climbs into bed,  
I hear the sound of ruffling paper.  
Then his night-light comes on  
and I don't hear anything else  
except

*Thanks.*

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## Coach comes over

to my table  
during lunch,  
sits down  
with a bag  
from McDonald's,  
hands me a fry  
and Vondie a fry,  
bites into his  
McRib sandwich,  
and says:  
*Look, Josh,  
you and your brother need  
to squash this beef.  
If my two stars  
aren't aligned,  
there's no way  
the universe is kind to us.*

*Huh? Vondie says.*

*My brother and I  
got into a bad fight  
when we were in high school,  
and we've been estranged  
ever since.  
You want that?*

I shake my head.

*Then fix it, Filthy.  
Fix it fast.  
We don't need any distractions  
on this journey.  
And while you're working  
on that, give your mom  
something special this holiday.  
She says you've served  
your sentence well*

*and that she'll consider  
letting you back  
on the team  
if we make it  
to the championship game.  
Merry Christmas, Josh.*

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## es·tranged

[IH-STREYNJD] *adjective*

The interruption of a bond,  
when one person becomes  
a stranger  
to someone  
who was close:  
a relative, friend,  
or loved one.

As in: Alexis's mom and dad  
are *estranged*.

As in: When I threw the ball  
at JB,  
I think I was *estranged*  
from myself,  
if that's possible.

As in: Even though JB and I  
are *estranged*,  
Dad's making us play  
together  
in a three-on-three tournament  
on the Rec playground  
tomorrow.

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## School's Out

Mom has to work late,  
so Dad picks us up.  
Even though JB's  
still not talking to me  
Dad's cracking jokes  
and we're both laughing  
like it's the good ol' times.

*What are we getting for Christmas, Dad?* JB asks.

What we always get. Books, I reply,  
and we both laugh  
just like the good ol' times.

*Boys, your talent will help you win games, Dad says,  
but your intelligence, that will help you win at life.*

Who said that? I ask.

*I said it, didn't you hear me?*

*Michael Jordan said it,* JB says,  
still looking at Dad.

*Look, boys, you've both done good  
in school this year, and  
your mom and I appreciate that.*

*So you choose a gift, and I'll get it.*

You mean no books? I ask. Yes!

*Nope. You're still getting the books, player.*

*Santa's just letting you pick something extra.*

At the stoplight,

JB and I look out

the window

at the exact moment

we pass by the mall

and I know exactly

what JB wants.

Dad, can we stop

at that sneaker store

in the mall?

*Yeah, Dad, can we?* JB echoes.

And the word we

never sounded

sweeter.

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## The Phone Rings

Mom's decorating the tree,  
Dad's outside shooting free throws,  
warming up for the tournament.

Hello, I answer.

*Hi, Josh,* she replies.

*May I please speak  
with Precious?*

He's, uh, busy right now,  
I tell her.

*Well, just tell him*

*I will see him at the Rec,*

she says, and now

I understand

why JB's

taking his second shower

this morning

when he barely takes ONE

most school mornings.

## **Basketball Rule #8**

Sometimes  
you have to  
lean back  
a little  
and  
fade away  
to get  
the best  
shot.

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## When we get to the court

I challenge Dad  
to a quick game  
of one-on-one  
before the tournament  
so we can both warm up.  
He laughs and says, *Check*,  
then gives me the ball,  
but it hits me in the chest  
because I'm busy looking over  
at the swings where Jordan and  
Miss Sweet Tea are talking  
and holding hands.  
*Pay attention, Filthy—I mean Josh.*  
*I'm about to CLEAN you up, boy*, Dad says.  
I pump fake him then sugar shake him  
for an easy two. I hear applause.  
Kids are coming over to watch.  
On the next play I switch it up  
and launch a three from downtown.  
It rolls round and round and IN.  
The benches are filling up.  
Even Jordan and Alexis are now watching.  
Five-oh is the score,  
third play of the game.  
I try my crossover, but  
Dad steals the ball  
like a thief in the night,  
camps out at the top for a minute.  
What you doing, old man? I say.  
*Don't worry 'bout me, son.*  
*I'm contemplatin',*  
*preparing to shut down*  
*all your playa hatin'*, Dad says.  
*Son, I ever tell you*  
*about this cat named*  
*Willie I played with in Italy?*  
And before I can answer  
he unleashes a

killer crossover,  
leaving me wishing for a cushion.  
The kids are off the benches.  
On their feet hollerin',  
*Ohhhhhhhhh, Whoop Whoop!*  
*Meet the Press, Josh Bell*, Dad laughs,  
on his way to the hoop.  
But then—

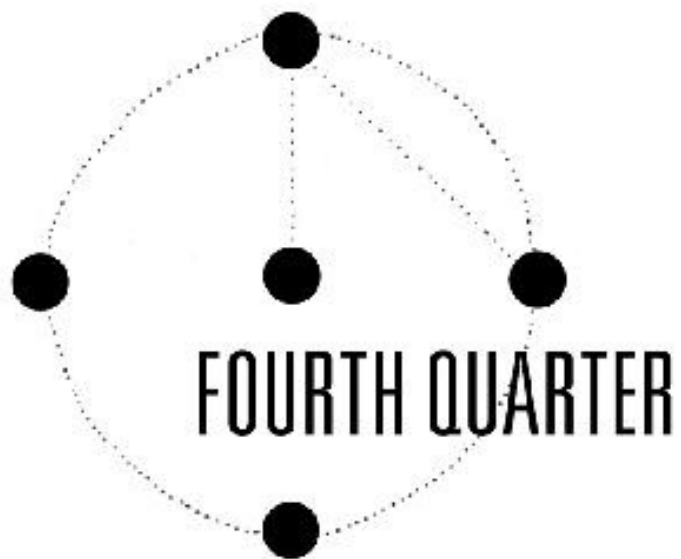
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## **At Noon, in the Gym, with Dad**

People watching  
Players boasting  
Me scoring  
Dad snoring  
Crowd growing  
We balling  
Me pumping  
Dad jumping  
Me faking  
Nasty shot  
Nasty moves  
Five-zero  
My lead  
Next play  
Dribble bounce  
Dribble steal  
Dad laughs  
Palms ball  
You okay?  
Dad winks  
Watch this  
He dips  
Sweat drips  
Left y'all  
Right y'all  
I fall  
Crowd wild  
Dad drives  
Steps strides  
Runs fast  
Hoop bound  
Stutter steps  
Lets loose  
Screams loud  
Stands still  
Breath short  
More sweat  
Grabs chest

Eyes roll  
Ball drops  
Dad drops  
I scream  
“Help, please”  
Sweet Tea  
Dials cell  
Jordan runs  
Brings water  
Splashes face  
Dad nothing  
Out cold  
I remember  
Gym class  
Tilt pinch  
Blow pump  
Blow pump  
Still nothing  
Blow pump  
Sirens blast  
Pulse gone  
Eyes shut.





## The doctor pats Jordan and me on the back and says

*Your dad should be fine. If you're lucky, you boys will be fishing with him in no time.*

We don't fish, I tell him.  
Mom shoots me a mean look.

*Mrs. Bell, the myocardial infarction has caused some complications. Your husband's stable, but he is in a coma.*

In between sobs, JB barely gets his question out:  
*Will my dad be home for Christmas?*

He looks at us and says: *Try talking to him, maybe he can hear you, which could help him come back.*

Well, MAYBE we're not in a talking mood, I say.  
*Joshua Bell, be respectful!* Mom tells me.

I shouldn't even be here.  
I should be putting on my uniform, stretching,

getting ready to play in the county semifinals.  
But instead, I'm sitting in a smelly room

in St. Luke's Hospital,  
listening to Mom sing "Kumbaya,"

watching Jordan hold Dad's hand,  
wondering why I have

to push water uphill  
with a rake

to talk to someone  
who isn't even listening.

To miss the biggest game  
of my life.

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# my·o·car·di·al in·farc·tion

[MY-OH-CAR-DEE-YUHL IN-FARK-SHUN] *noun*

Occurs when blood flow  
to an area of the heart  
is blocked  
for a long enough time  
that part of the heart muscle  
is damaged  
or dies.

As in: JB says that he hates  
basketball because it was  
the one thing that  
Dad loved the most  
besides us  
and it was the one thing  
that caused his  
*myocardial infarction*.

As in: The doctor sees me Googling  
the symptoms—coughing, sweating,  
vomiting, nosebleeds—and he says,  
*You know we can't be sure what causes*  
*a myocardial infarction*. I say, What about  
doughnuts and fried chicken and genetics?  
The doctor looks at my mom,  
then leaves.

As in: Dad's in a coma  
because of a *myocardial infarction*,  
which is the same thing  
my grandfather died of.  
So what does that mean for me  
and JB?

## Okay, Dad

The doctor says  
I should talk to you,  
that maybe you can hear  
and maybe you can't.  
Mom and JB  
have been talking  
your ear off  
all morning.  
So, if you're listening,  
I'd like to know,  
when did you decide to jump  
ship? I thought you were  
*Da Man*.  
And one more thing:  
If we make it  
to the finals,  
I will not miss  
the big game  
for a small  
maybe.

## Mom, since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm so angry

Because Dad tried to dunk.

Because I want to win a championship.

Because I can't win a championship if I'm sitting in this smelly hospital.

Because Dad told you he'd be here forever.

Because I thought forever was like Mars—far away.

Because it turns out forever is like the mall—right around the corner.

Because Jordan doesn't talk basketball anymore.

Because Jordan cut my hair and didn't care.

Because he's always drinking Sweet Tea.

Because sometimes I get thirsty.

Because I don't have anybody to talk to now.

Because I feel empty with no hair.

Because CPR DOESN'T WORK!

Because my crossover should be better.

Because if it was better, then Dad wouldn't have had the ball.

Because if Dad hadn't had the ball, then he wouldn't have tried to dunk.

Because if Dad hadn't tried to dunk, then we wouldn't be here.

Because I don't want to be *here*.

Because the only thing that matters is *swish*.

Because our backboard is splintered.

## Text Messages from Vondie

8:05

Filthy, the game went  
double overtime  
before the last possession.

8:05

Coach called a time-out  
and had us all do a special chant  
on the sideline.

8:06

It was kinda creepy. The  
other team was LOL.  
I guess it worked, 'cause

8:06

we won, 40–39.  
We dedicated the game ball  
to your pop.

8:07

Is he better? You and JB  
coming to practice?  
Filthy, you there?

# On Christmas Eve

Dad finally wakes up. He  
smiles at

Mom, high-fives Jordan,  
then looks right at me

and says,  
*Filthy, I didn't jump ship.*

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## Santa Claus Stops By

We're celebrating  
Christmas  
in Dad's hospital room.  
Flowers and gifts and cheer  
surround him. Relatives from  
five states. Aunts with collards and yams,  
cousins with hoots and hollers,  
and runny noses. Mom's singing,  
Dad's playing spades with his brothers.  
I know the nurses can't wait for visiting hours  
to end. I can't either. Uncle Bob's turkey  
tastes like cardboard  
and his lemon pound cake looks like Jell-O, but  
Hospital Santa has everyone singing and  
all this joy is spoiling my mood. I can't  
remember the last time I smiled. Happy is  
a huge river right now and I've forgotten  
how to swim. After two hours, Mom  
tells everyone it's time for Dad to  
get some rest. I hug fourteen people, which is  
like drowning. When they leave, Dad  
calls Jordan and me over to the bed.

*Do y'all remember  
when you were seven and JB  
wanted to swing but all the swings were  
filled, and Filthy pushed the little redhead  
kid out of the swing so JB could take it?  
Well, it wasn't the right behavior, but  
the intention was righteous.  
You were there for each other.  
I want you both  
to always be there  
for each other.*

Jordan starts crying.  
Mom holds him,  
and takes him outside

for a walk.  
Me and Dad stare  
at each other  
for ten minutes  
without saying a word.  
I tell him,  
I don't have anything to say.

*Filthy, silence doesn't mean  
we have run out of things to say,  
only that we are trying  
not to say them.  
So, let's do this.  
I'll ask you a question,  
then you ask me a question,  
and we'll just keep asking until  
we can both get some answers.  
Okay?*

Sure, I say,  
but you go first.

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## Questions

*Have you been practicing your free throws?*

Why didn't you go to the doctor when Mom asked you?

*When is the game?*

Why didn't you ever take us fishing?

*Does your brother still have a girlfriend?*

Are you going to die?

*Do you really want to know?*

Why couldn't I save you?

*Don't you see that you did?*

Do you remember I kept pumping and breathing?

*Aren't I alive?*

...?

*Did y'all arrest Uncle Bob's turkey? It was just criminal what he did to that bird, wasn't it?*

You think this is funny?

*How's your brother?*

Is our family falling apart?

*You still think I should write a book?*

What does that have to do with anything?

*What if I call it "Basketball Rules"?*

Are you going to die?

*Do you know I love you, son?*

Don't you know the big game's tomorrow?

*Is it true Mom is letting you play?*

You think I shouldn't play?

*What do you think, Filthy?*

What about Jordan?

*Does he want to play?*

Don't you know he won't as long as you're in here?

*Don't you know I know that?*

So, why don't you come home?

*Can't you see I can't?*

Why not?

*Don't you know it's complicated, Filthy?*

Why can't you call me by my real name?

*Josh, do you know what a heart attack is?*

Don't you remember I was there?

*Don't you see I need to be here so they can fix the damage that's been done to my heart?*

Who's gonna fix the damage that's been done to mine?

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## Tanka for Language Arts Class

This Christmas was not  
Merry, and I have not found  
joy in the new year  
with Dad in the hospital  
for nineteen days and counting.

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## **I don't think I'll ever get used to**

walking home from school                      alone

playing Madden                                      alone

listening to Lil Wayne                              alone

going to the library                                 alone

shooting free throws                               alone

watching ESPN                                      alone

eating doughnuts                                   alone

saying my prayers                                  alone

Now that Jordan's in love

and Dad's living in a hospital

## **Basketball Rule #9**

When the game is on  
the line,  
don't fear.  
Grab the ball.  
Take it  
to the hoop.

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## As we're about to leave for the final game

the phone rings.  
Mom shrieks.  
I think the worst.  
I ask JB if he heard *that*.  
He's on his bunk  
listening to his iPod.  
Mom rushes past our room,  
out of breath.  
JB jumps down  
from his bunk.  
What's wrong, Mom? I ask.

She says:  
*Dad. Had. Another. Attack.*  
*Now. Don't. Worry.*  
*I'm. Going. Hospital.*  
*See. You. Two. At. Game.*

*Vroooooommmmmmm.*  
Her car starts.  
JB, what should we do? I ask.

He's no longer listening to music,  
but his tears are loud enough  
to dance to.  
He laces his sneakers,  
runs out of our room.  
The garage door opens.  
I hear FLOP FLOP FLOP  
from the straws  
on the spokes  
of his bicycle wheels  
as he follows Mom  
to the hospital.

I hear the clock: TICK TOCK TICK TOCK.  
I hear Dad: *You should play in the game, son.*  
A horn blows.



I hear SLAM SLAM SLAM  
as I shut the door  
of Vondie's dad's car.  
I hear SCREECH SCREECH SCREECH  
as we pull away  
from the curb  
on our way  
to the county championship game.

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## During warm-ups

I miss four lay-ups in  
a row, and Coach Hawkins says,  
*Josh, you sure you're able*

*to play? It's more than okay if you  
need to go to the hospital with your fam—*  
Coach, my dad is going to be fine,

I say. Plus he wants me to play.  
*Son, you telling me you're okay?*  
Can a deaf person write

music? I ask Coach.  
He raises his eyebrows,  
shakes his head, and

tells me to go sit  
on the bench. I excuse myself  
to the locker room

to check my cell phone,  
and there are texts  
from Mom.

## Text Messages from Mom, Part Two

5:47

Dad's having complications.  
But he's gonna  
be fine and says  
he loves you.  
Good luck tonight. Dad's

5:47

gonna be fine. Jordan says  
he still doesn't feel like  
playing, but I made him

5:48

go to the game to show  
support. Look for him and  
don't get lazy on your

5:48

crossover.

## For Dad

My free throw flirts with the rim and  
loops, twirls, for a million years,

then drops, and for once, we're up, 49–48,  
five dancers on stage, leaping, jumping

so high, so fly,  
eleven seconds from sky

A hard drive, a fast break, their best player  
slices the thick air toward the goal.

His pull-up jumper  
floats through the net,

then everything goes slow motion:  
the ball, the player . . .

Coach calls time-out  
with only five seconds to go.

I wish the ref could stop  
the clock of my life.

Just one more game.  
I think my father is dying,

and now I am out of bounds  
when I see a familiar face

behind our bench. My brother,  
Jordan Bell, head buried

in Sweet Tea, his eyes  
welling with horror.

Before I know it, the whistle blows,  
the ball in my hand,

the clock running down,  
my tears running faster.

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## The Last Shot

5 . . . A bolt of lightning on my kicks . . .

The court is SIZZLING

My sweat is DRIZZLING

Stop all that *quivering*

Cuz tonight I'm *delivering*

I'm driving down

the lane

SLIDING

4 . . . Dribbling to the middle, gliding like a black eagle.

The crowd is RUMBLING RUSTLING

ROARING

Take it to the hoop.

TAKE IT TO THE HOOP

3 . . . 2 . . . Watch out, 'cuz I'm about to get D I R T Y  
with it

about to pour FILTHY'S sauce all over you.

Ohhhhh, did you see McNASTY cross over you?

Now I'm taking you

Ankle BREAKING you

You're on your knees.

Screamin' PLEASE, BABY, PLEASE

One . . . It's a bird, It's a plane. No, it's up up

upppppppppppp.

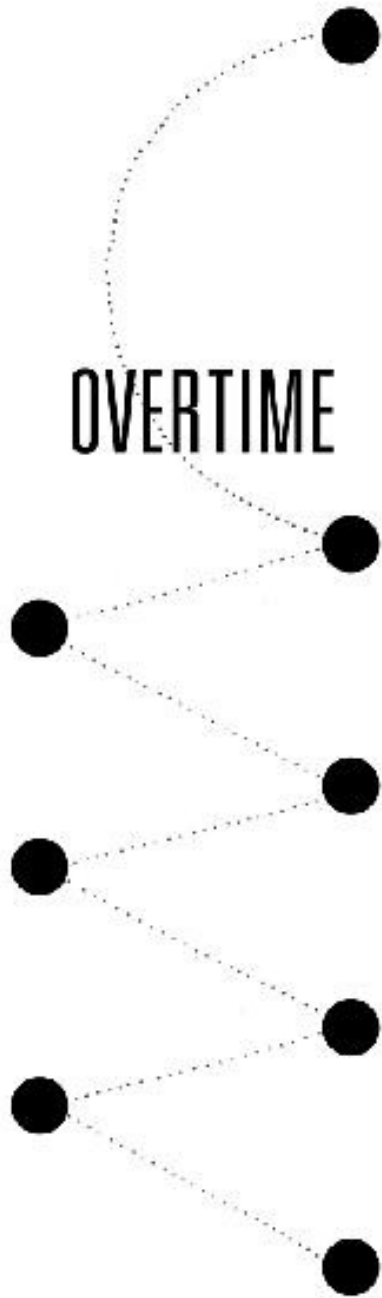
My shot is F L O W I N G, Flying, fLuTtErInG

OHHHHHHHH, the chains are JINGALING

ringaling and SWINGALING

Swish.

Game/over.



## Article #2 in the *Daily News* (January 14)

Professional basketball player  
Charlie (Chuck) “Da Man” Bell  
collapsed in a game  
of one-on-one  
with his son Josh.  
After a complication,  
Bell died at St. Luke’s Hospital  
from a massive heart attack.

According to reports,  
Bell suffered  
from hypertension  
and had three fainting spells  
in the four months  
before his collapse.  
Autopsy results found  
Bell had a large,  
extensively scarred heart.  
Reports have surfaced  
that Bell refused to see a doctor.  
One of his former teammates  
stated, “He wasn’t a big fan of doctors  
and hospitals, that’s for sure.”  
Earlier in his life,  
Bell chose to end his promising basketball career  
rather than have surgery on his knee.

Known for his dazzling crossover,  
Chuck Bell was the captain  
of the Italian team  
that won back-to-back Euroleague championships  
in the late nineties.  
He is survived by his wife,  
Dr. Crystal Stanley-Bell, and  
his twin sons,  
Joshua and Jordan, who  
recently won their first  
county championship.



Bell was thirty-nine.

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## Where Do We Go from Here?

There are no coaches  
at funerals. No practice  
to get ready. No warm-up.  
There is no last-second shot, and  
we all wear its cruel  
midnight uniform, starless  
and unfriendly.

I am unprepared  
for death.  
This is a game  
I cannot play.  
It has no rules,  
no referees.  
You cannot win.

I listen  
to my father's teammates  
tell funny stories  
about love  
and basketball.  
I hear the choir's comfort songs.  
They almost drown out Mom's sobs.

She will not look in the coffin.  
*That is not my husband*, she says.  
Dad is gone,  
like the end of a good song.  
What remains is bone  
and muscle and cold skin.  
I grab Mom's right hand.  
JB grabs her left.  
The preacher says,  
*A great father, son, and  
husband has crossed  
over. Amen.*  
Outside, a long charcoal limo  
pulls up to the curb

to take us  
back.

If only.

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## star·less

[STAHR-LES] *adjective*

With no stars.

As in: If me and JB  
try out for JV  
next year,  
the Reggie Lewis Junior High School Wildcats  
will be *starless*.

As in: Last night  
I felt like I was fading away  
as I watched the *starless*  
Portland Trailblazers  
get stomped by Dad's favorite team,  
the Lakers.

As in: My father  
was the light  
of my world,  
and now that he's gone,  
each night  
is *starless*.

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## **Basketball Rule #10**

A loss is inevitable,  
like snow in winter.  
True champions  
learn  
to dance  
through  
the storm.

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## There are so many friends

neighbors, Dad's teammates,  
and family members  
packed into our living room  
that I have to go outside  
just to breathe. The air  
is filled with laughter,  
John Coltrane,  
Jay-Z, and the smell  
of salmon, plus scents of  
every pie and cake  
imaginable.

Even Mom is smiling.  
*Josh, don't you hear the phone  
ringing?* she says.  
I don't—the sound of  
“A Love Supreme”  
and loud laughter  
drowning it out.  
*Can you get it, please?* she asks me.

I answer it, a salmon sandwich  
crammed in my mouth.  
Hello, Bell residence, I mutter.  
*Hi, this is Alexis.*  
Oh . . . Hey.  
*I'm sorry I couldn't be at the funeral.*  
This is Josh, not JB.  
*I know it's you, Filthy. JB is loud.*  
*Your phone voice always sounds like  
it's the break of dawn,  
like you're just waking up,*  
she says playfully.  
I laugh for the first time in days.  
*I just wanted to call and say how sorry  
I am for your loss. If there is anything my dad or I can do,  
please let us know.*  
Look, Alexis, I'm sorry about—

*It's all good, Filthy. I gotta go, but  
my sister has five tickets  
to see Duke play North Carolina.  
Me, her, JB, and my dad  
are going.*

*You wanna—  
ABSOLUTELY, I say, and THANKS,  
right before Coach Hawkins  
comes my way  
with outstretched arms and  
a bear-size hug, sending the phone  
crashing to the floor.*

*On my way out the door,  
to get some fresh air,  
Mom gives me  
a kiss and a piece of  
sweet potato pie with  
two scoops of vanilla soy  
ice cream.  
Where's your brother? she asks.*

*I haven't seen JB  
since the funeral, but  
if I had to guess, I'd say  
he's going to see Alexis.  
Because, if I had a girlfriend, I'd be  
off with her right about now.  
But I don't,  
so the next best thing  
will have to do.*

## Free Throws

It only takes me  
Four mouthfuls  
to finish the dessert.  
I have to jump to get the ball.  
It is wedged between  
rim and backboard,  
evidence of JB trying  
and failing  
to dunk.  
I tap it out  
and dribble  
to the free-throw line.

Dad once made  
fifty free throws  
IN A ROW.  
The most I ever made  
was nineteen.  
I grip the ball,  
plant my feet on the line,  
and shoot the first one.  
It goes in.  
I look around  
to see if anyone is watching.  
Nope. Not anymore.

The next twelve shots are good.  
I name them each a year  
in my life.  
A year with my father.  
By twenty-seven, I am making them  
with my eyes closed.  
The orange orb has wings  
like there's an angel  
taking it to the hoop.

On the forty-ninth shot,  
I am only slightly aware



that I am moments from fifty.  
The only thing that really matters  
is that out here  
in the driveway  
shooting free throws  
I feel closer to Dad.

*You feel better?* he asks.

Dad? I say.  
I open my eyes,  
and there is my brother.  
I thought you were—

*Yeah, I know,* he says.

I'm good. You? I ask.  
He nods.  
*Good game last week,* he says.  
*That crossover*  
*was wicked.*

Did you see the trophy? I ask.  
He nods again.  
Still protecting his words  
from me.  
Did you talk to Dad before—  
*He told us to stay out of his closet.*  
*Then he told me to give you this.*  
*You earned it, Filthy,* he says,  
sliding the ring on my finger.  
My heart leaps  
into my throat.

Dad's championship ring.  
Between the bouncing  
and sobbing, I whisper, Why?

*I guess you Da Man now, Filthy,* JB says.

And for the first time in my life  
I don't want to be.

*I bet  
the dishes  
you miss number fifty, he says,  
walking away.*

Where's he going?

Hey, I shout.  
We Da Man.  
And when he turns around  
I toss him the ball.

He dribbles  
back to the top of the key,  
fixes his eyes  
on the goal.  
I watch  
the ball  
leave his hands  
like a bird  
up high,  
skating  
the sky,

crossing over  
us.

## **About the Author**

**KWAME ALEXANDER** is an award-winning children's book author and poet. His Book-in-a-Day writing and publishing program for upper elementary, middle, and high school students has created more than 3000 student authors in sixty-five schools across the United States, and in Canada and the Caribbean. He lives with his family in Herndon, Virginia.

WITH A BOLT OF THE COURT  
LIGHTNING ON MY KICKS...  
DRIZZLING STOP ALL THAT QUIVERING CUZ  
SIZZLING MY  
SWEAT IS  
THE COURT IS SIZZLING SWEAT IS  
DRIZZLING STOP ALL THAT QUIVERING CUZ  
DRIZZLING TONIGHT I'M  
DELIVERING.

