

The Crossover



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KWAME ALEXANDER

Kwame Alexander was born in Manhattan to a family of artists and writers; his father was a publisher and his mother taught English, while his siblings are models, photographers, and work in the entertainment industry. He studied medicine at Virginia Tech but while in school, he began writing poetry as a hobby. A professor encouraged him to pursue poetry seriously, so Alexander started his own publishing company. He's been publishing poetry since the early 1990s but didn't turn to writing verse novels like *The Crossover* until the late 2000s. He's stated in interviews that his middle-grade verse novels are intended to bridge the gap between Shel Silverstein and Shakespeare, as well as encourage reluctant readers to read. *The Crossover* won the Newbery Medal in 2015 and was also recognized as an Honor book for the Coretta Scott King award. Alexander lives in Reston, Virginia and when he's not writing, he runs programs to introduce children to writing and publishing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is known as the "silent killer:" it can increase a person's risk of heart attack or stroke dramatically, and it can cause permanent and dangerous damage to one's heart before a sufferer even notices symptoms. While it's the leading cause of death among all Americans, rates of high blood pressure are even higher in the African-American community. Among African-Americans, the disease also tends to be more severe and develops earlier in life than it does in others, hence why Dad and his father die at 39 and 45 respectively. Though Josh is more focused on basketball than anything else, the novel also makes several references to the dangers of being black in contemporary America. Josh's fears when Dad is pulled over without a license and Mom's warning to Josh about the dangers of a black man losing his temper allude to the fact that black men in particular are more likely to be unfairly viewed as dangerous or threatening and, in turn, experience police brutality or face incarceration.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kwame Alexander has written several other middle-grade and young adult novels in verse, including *Swing, He Said, She Said*, and *Rebound*, which is a prequel to *The Crossover* that follows Dad's introduction to basketball. As a verse novel intended for young readers, *The Crossover* joins others in the booming genre including Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* and Sharon Creech's *Love That Dog*. Though verse narratives and

epic poems like *The Odyssey* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* have existed for thousands of years, the verse novel is distinctly modern and traces its roots to the early 1800s. One of the most famous early examples is Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which was first published in serial form between 1825 and 1832.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Crossover
- **When Written:** 2009-2014
- **Where Written:** Unknown
- **When Published:** 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel; Verse Novel
- **Setting:** An unnamed town in the U.S.
- **Climax:** Dad dies during the championship game
- **Antagonist:** Hypertension and death; change
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Poetry: It Works! Alexander has said that he became aware of the power of poetry when he used it to successfully woo his wife in college.

Reluctant Readers. In interviews, Alexander has been open about the fact that when he was in middle school, he wasn't at all interested in reading. He rediscovered his love of reading by devouring an autobiography of Muhammad Ali, and this experience provided him with the road map for his novels like *The Crossover*: he hopes that by combining sports with books that are easy and fast to read, he can help convert other young reluctant readers and show them that books can be fun.



PLOT SUMMARY

Josh narrates a play-by-play as he plays in a basketball game. He then introduces himself more fully: his name is Josh Bell, but people call him Filthy McNasty. He's tall, has long hair, and wants to be a basketball star. Josh got his nickname from one of Dad's favorite jazz artists, Horace Silver. When Josh expressed uninterest in Silver's work, Dad dedicated the next song, "Filthy McNasty," to Josh. At first Josh wasn't keen on the name, as others made fun of him for it. However, as he began to excel on the basketball court and as Dad praised him using that name, he started to like it. Josh also has a twin named Jordan who goes by the nickname JB. JB loves betting and Michael Jordan. Josh

loves his **locks** more than anything. They differentiate him from JB, make him feel cool like his favorite rappers, and most importantly, Dad used to have them when he was a professional player. Dad's locks looked like wings. Sometimes, Josh asks Dad if he misses playing basketball and suggests that Dad could play again. Dad, however, insists that he's happy "coaching" the family. When Josh asks about Dad's **championship ring**, Dad tells Josh that when he becomes "Da Man," then he can wear the ring.

Right before a game, JB tries to dunk the ball. Josh laughs and, to show off, dunks. During halftime, JB asks to bet. The terms of his bet have many variables, but if JB wins, he wants to cut off one of Josh's locks. Josh initially declines, but then agrees, believing the bet is too specific for JB to win. His head starts to hurt as he watches every variable fall into place. After the game, the team cheers and chants as JB grabs Coach's scissors and starts to cut. Vondie yells, "OH SNAP," and Josh realizes something is wrong: JB cut five locks. Mom refers to this as a calamity and insists that Josh cut off the rest of his locks. The family goes out for dinner a week later. At the Chinese restaurant, Mom removes the salt from the table while JB grabs Josh duck sauce and wonton soup. Though Josh didn't say anything, JB knew exactly what food what Josh wanted.

Following his haircut, Josh mourns his locks. He eventually asks Mom for a box to put them in and she allows him to go into her and Dad's closet for a hatbox. Josh decides to open Dad's box of basketball memorabilia and JB joins him. The boys try on Dad's championship ring, flip through old articles, and then they find a folder containing two letters. One invites Dad to try out for the Los Angeles Lakers, while the other says that if Dad doesn't agree to surgery for patellar tendinitis, he won't play again. Josh wonders why Dad never got surgery.

At school, kids joke that they won't be able to tell Josh and JB apart now that their hair is similar. A new girl, whom Josh calls Miss Sweet Tea, asks the boys if twins know what each other are thinking. Josh tells her that, given the look on JB's face, a person doesn't need to be a twin to know what he's thinking. JB and Vondie discuss how beautiful Miss Sweet Tea is after she leaves. Josh, who's trying to do his vocabulary homework, refers to her as "pulchritudinous." He also wonders why Miss Sweet Tea is interested in JB. After dinner, Dad takes the boys to the rec center to practice shooting. They play a game with some local college guys who ask Dad for autographs and win the game. Dad takes them to Krispy Kreme after, insists that Mom doesn't have to know, and then tells the boys his favorite story of teaching them to play basketball. He tells them how, at three years old, the boys could shoot free throws like they were naturals.

After the next game, Miss Sweet Tea compliments Josh on his performance and then gives JB some sweet iced tea. Because Josh missed free throws during the game, Dad makes him shoot fifteen in a row when they get home. Mom rescues Josh

from this exercise to read before bed. JB reads while listening to music, so he doesn't hear Mom and Dad's fight in the next room, but Josh does hear. Mom wants Dad to see the doctor for hypertension, but Dad refuses. Josh realizes that this is why Mom watches Dad's salt intake and thinks that his grandfather must've died of hypertension.

The week after Thanksgiving, JB asks Josh to pass Miss Sweet Tea a note for him during a test. The teacher catches Josh in the act and Josh chooses to take the fall for JB. At the office, Mom reprimands Josh and reminds him that he won't get into college if he cheats. Josh doesn't have the opportunity to explain himself. To make matters worse, gym class later is about CPR, not sports. Josh is forced to assist the teacher and jealously watches JB and Miss Sweet Tea pass notes.

Josh tries to talk to JB about basketball, but JB looks like he's barely listening. Josh knows he's too caught up thinking about Miss Sweet Tea. He takes his problem to Dad, but Dad just laughs and suggests that they get donuts. At the game later, Josh starts to refer to JB as a showoff. The team wins and later that evening, Mom calls Josh into the kitchen. She explains that they're going to have pita and hummus for dinner since Dad has hypertension and they need to eat better. Josh understands that this is important, but he feels victimized nonetheless. However, when Dad suggests he, Josh, and JB get barbecue after the next game, Josh lies that he's already eaten dinner. A few days later, Josh and JB are shooting free throws when Dad suddenly bends over. JB sprays him with the hose, which revives him, but Josh is worried. JB refuses to accept there's anything wrong, but Josh thinks he understands why Dad is afraid of hospitals: Dad's dad died there.

Miss Sweet Tea calls and asks for Jordan. Josh tries to give JB the phone, but JB runs away and asks Josh to speak for him. Josh is able to pull off the feat and successfully agrees on JB's behalf to be Miss Sweet Tea's boyfriend. JB is ecstatic. The next day at lunch, JB and Miss Sweet Tea walk up to Josh's table. JB calls Josh "Filthy," but suddenly, it seems like a dirty joke. At practice after school, Josh and JB have a strange experience where it seems like they both see a ghost at the same time, but they don't discuss it. JB hangs out with Miss Sweet Tea after school, so Josh goes to the library alone to do homework. He feels sorry for himself and to make matters worse, he discovers JB and Miss Sweet Tea kissing.

While Dad drives Josh to a basketball game, he gets pulled over. He doesn't have his license, so he and Josh are late to the game. Because Josh is late, Coach makes him sit out the first half. Rather than be a team player, however, Josh tries to act alone. When this doesn't work out, he throws the ball at JB so hard, he nearly breaks JB's nose. When Mom talks to Josh about his behavior later, Josh admits that he's afraid that JB doesn't love him anymore. Mom suspends him from the basketball team, so Josh spends the next week trying to make up for what he did. JB, however, ignores him. Josh watches

games from the top of the bleachers with Mom and Dad and watches Dad yell at the ref. Inexplicably, Dad's nose starts to bleed after he yells. The next day, Mom threatens Dad if he doesn't go to the doctor. Not long after, the local paper names Josh their Most Valuable Player. Though most of Josh's classmates are happy for him, Miss Sweet Tea and JB aren't. JB continues to ignore Josh and finally, Josh writes a letter to his brother, explaining that he feels lost and alone now that they're not speaking. Josh feels even lonelier when Vondie gets a girlfriend too.

While Josh and Vondie are on the phone, Josh hears strange panting in his parents' room. He finds Dad there, cleaning up vomit and holding his chest. Dad brushes off Josh's concerns and shows him an offer of a coaching job. Josh is worried, but Dad insists that he and JB will be fine. During this conversation, Josh also asks Dad to call him "Josh," not "Filthy." Mom notices the look on Dad's face and looks panicked. They fight again and Dad continues to refuse to see the doctor. Soon after, Miss Sweet Tea comes for dinner. Josh decides to call her "the girl who stole my brother." She likes Mom's veggie lasagna and she also has a sister who attends Duke, the college Josh wants to attend. After dinner, Josh asks Mom if he can go with them to Dad's doctor's appointment the following week.

For the next game, Josh sits with the team and suddenly notices that Mom and Dad aren't in the bleachers. He and JB meet each other's eyes and look like they've seen ghosts, but Mom texts Josh assuring him that things are fine. In the final week before the holiday break, Josh offers JB his list of vocabulary words to help him study, and JB thanks him for the help. At lunch the next day, Coach encourages Josh to make up with JB and shares that Mom will allow Josh to play in the championship game. Josh is ecstatic, but unsure how to make up with JB. He's not looking forward to the tournament he's supposed to be playing with Dad and JB, since he and JB are still feuding. However, the day before the tournament, JB starts to acknowledge Josh and laugh with him. Before the tournament, Josh and Dad play a warm-up game. Dad steals the ball from Josh's crossover and then collapses from a heart attack. Josh performs CPR.

The doctor tries to comfort Josh, JB, and Mom as he explains that Dad has a myocardial infarction and is in a coma. He encourages them to talk to Dad, but Josh is angry and doesn't want to talk when it's unclear if Dad can hear him. Josh tells Mom all the reasons he's angry, which include Dad's promise to be here forever, Miss Sweet Tea's existence, and his missing locks. Dad finally wakes up on Christmas Eve. After a Christmas spent in the hospital with relatives, Dad tells his sons that they need to always love and look out for each other. Then, he and Josh speak privately. Dad mostly refuses to answer Josh's questions; he wants to know if Josh is going to play in the championship game.

Just before the championship game, Mom gets the call that

Dad had another heart attack and she leaves for the hospital. JB follows Mom on his bike, while Josh rides to the game with Vondie. In the last seconds of the game, Josh notices JB and Miss Sweet Tea sitting on the bench. JB is crying as Josh makes his final basket, winning the game.

Dad's obituary in the paper offers the highlights of his career and says he died at age 39. Josh feels unmoored at the funeral without any rules or basketball rituals. At home afterwards, Josh takes a phone call from Miss Sweet Tea. She apologizes and invites him to attend a college basketball game with her and JB. Then, Josh heads outside to shoot free throws. Soon, he's making them with his eyes closed. As he gets close to Dad's record of 50 in a row, he thinks he hears Dad's voice. It's actually JB. JB gives Josh Dad's championship ring and says that he must be Da Man now. Josh cries; he doesn't want the ring or the title. He gives the ball to JB to make the fiftieth free throw.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Josh – Josh is the twelve-year-old protagonist of the novel. He's nearly six feet tall and has a twin, JB. Both are skilled basketball players. Though Josh loves JB and being a twin, he also craves individuality. At the beginning of the novel he achieves this by wearing his hair in **locks** and reminding the reader several times that he's the only player on the team who can dunk. His love of English and language shines through in his narration, as he often uses vocabulary words from his English homework and some of the novel's poems read like music. Things begin to go downhill for Josh when he loses a bet to JB and JB accidentally cuts off five of Josh's locks instead of one. With this one identity marker gone, Josh feels unmoored and even more importantly, less forgiving towards JB as JB embarks on a romance with a girl Josh calls Miss Sweet Tea. At the same time, Josh starts to notice that Dad isn't in good health. Josh grows progressively angrier as JB spends more and more time with Miss Sweet Tea, and this culminates in Josh deciding to act alone during a game. However, Josh's attempt is unsuccessful and his pass to JB is so hard and violent, he makes JB's nose bleed. During Josh's weeks of forced solitude after this, he remains angry and unmoored, and he becomes progressively more worried about Dad's health. When Dad finally ends up in the hospital, Josh's anger hits a peak: he believes that Dad is keeping him from playing in the championship game. Though Dad is still in the hospital when the championship game rolls around, Josh chooses to take Dad's permission to play in the game and isn't around when Dad dies. Following Dad's death, JB gives Josh Dad's **championship ring**, which Dad always told the boys they could wear when they became "Da Man," which was his nickname. Though this suggests that Josh becomes "Da Man" after Dad's

death, Josh's discomfort with receiving the ring speaks to his new understanding of Dad as a person who didn't properly care for his health.

Dad – Josh and JB's dad. As a young man, Dad was known as "Da Man" and played professional basketball in Europe. At some point in his career, he received a **championship ring**, which the boys covet in the present. Dad, however, insists that the boys can only have it when they themselves become "Da Man," or follow in his footsteps as basketball stars. To this end, Dad supports his sons in basketball and doles out wisdom to Josh, which Josh then relates to the reader. Dad does his best to make sure the boys understand that their natural aptitude for the sport is something they inherited from him, while also impressing on them the importance of practice and constantly trying to get better. While Josh is looking through his parents' closet for a box for his **locks**, he and JB begin to make discoveries about Dad's medical history that complicate their reading of their dad. They learn that Dad refused to get surgery for patellar tendinitis and therefore, wasn't allowed to play for the Los Angeles Lakers. Josh also discovers that Dad has hypertension, which makes Dad's fainting episodes and bloody noses start to make more sense. Because Dad's dad, Josh and JB's grandfather, died in the hospital of hypertension, however, Dad distrusts doctors. This is why he refused surgery for patellar tendinitis and why, in the present, he refuses to see a doctor until he ends up in the hospital after suffering a major heart attack. After about a week in a coma, Dad wakes up around Christmas. In his last few days, he tries to encourage Josh and JB to abandon their beef and reaffirm their support of each other. He also encourages Josh to keep playing basketball and continue to practice. While Dad is in the hospital, Josh refers to him as the **backboard** of the family, suggesting that Dad is the one who keeps the family in line. Dad dies of another heart attack during Josh's final championship game. He leaves his championship ring to Josh, suggesting that Josh is now "Da Man."

JB – JB is Josh's twin. Like Josh, he's good at basketball, and to differentiate himself from his twin, he wears his hair shaved. He describes himself as the cool one, and he's especially good at free throws. JB begins to mature before Josh does, which causes a number of problems for Josh. His growing maturity means that JB chooses his activities based on whether or not he'll get to hang out with girls, not on whether or not he'll get to hang out with his twin. However, JB continues to play basketball and shines on the court. Especially when the boys play together, they're an unstoppable team. JB often steps into the role of the all-knowing brother; he answers Josh's questions matter-of-factly and doesn't consider anything more than the most obvious answers. Not long before Thanksgiving, the new girl, whom Josh calls Miss Sweet Tea, takes an interest in JB. In her presence, JB becomes goofy and starts to ignore Josh in favor of her. Because Josh's narration doesn't offer any

insight into JB's thoughts, it's unclear if JB understands how he's making his brother feel by spending so much time with Miss Sweet Tea. JB also loves to bet and will bet on anything. One of these bets has disastrous consequences: he accidentally cuts off five of Josh's **locks** instead of the agreed-upon one, thereby depriving Josh of an important identity marker. JB, however, doesn't appear sorry enough for Josh's liking. All of this comes to head when Josh throws a ball at JB and nearly breaks his nose. JB goes on to hold a grudge against Josh for most of the rest of the novel, though he begins to relent not long before Dad's health takes a turn for the worse. Once Dad ends up in the hospital, JB is understandably beside himself and refuses to play basketball until Dad comes home. This means that JB is with Dad when Dad dies instead of playing in the championship game with Josh. After Dad's funeral, the boys begin to make up and JB does as Dad asked by giving Dad's **championship ring** to Josh.

Mom – Josh and JB's mom; she's the assistant principal at their middle school. Mom is a fun, supportive, and loving parent. She encourages the boys to play basketball, gives hard-hitting pep talks when necessary, and supports them in academics. Josh eventually realizes that Mom also does her best to control Dad's diet, as she's aware that the boys' grandfather died of a stroke caused by hypertension and knows that Dad also suffers from the disease. This begins with simply trying to control where her family eats out, but as Dad starts to experience more symptoms that something is wrong, she cuts fried food out of the family's dinner lineup in favor of veggie-heavy offerings. Both Mom and Dad do what they can to encourage Josh and JB in individual pursuits, and Mom in particular tries to impress upon Josh that he and JB are individuals, not the same person. Though she and Dad fight often about his health and his unwillingness to see a doctor, they're still very much in love and, as far as Josh can tell, have sex regularly. Mom does her best to make sure that Josh and JB don't worry too much after Dad is hospitalized for a heart attack, and she doesn't try to stop Josh from playing in the final championship game.

Miss Sweet Tea/Alexis – Miss Sweet Tea is a new girl at Josh and JB's school. She's beautiful and often wears pink Reeboks. All the boys are taken with her, but she's especially interested in JB. At first, Miss Sweet Tea is nice to Josh as well but after Josh throws the ball at JB and nearly breaks his nose, she starts treating him with disdain and disgust. Though Josh remains attracted to her throughout the novel, he refers to her at this point as "the girl who stole my brother" and blames her exclusively for the fact that JB won't forgive him. Josh's narration implies that he thinks of Miss Sweet Tea as more of an object of attraction than a full human in her own right; he doesn't mention her given name, Alexis, until a passage that implies that she's the one speaking her name. This begins to change when Josh learns that Miss Sweet Tea also loves basketball and, most importantly, has a sister who attends

Duke, the college that Josh would like to attend one day. They make up in the end when Josh accepts her invitation to a college basketball game and simultaneously accepts that she's an important part of JB's life.

Vondie – One of Josh and JB's teammates and friends. Like Josh and JB, he's very interested in talking about basketball, though he's not as inclined to practice as much; Josh implies that Vondie tries his best to win at wind sprints so that he doesn't have to practice. As Dad's health begins to decline, Vondie texts Josh to keep him updated on the team's status in the championship games and to ask after Dad.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Grandfather/Dad's Dad – Josh's grandfather died of hypertension when he was 45. This means that Dad has a genetic predisposition for hypertension, as do Josh and JB.

Coach – Josh and JB's coach. He refers to the boys as his stars and when their feud stretches on for weeks, he encourages Josh to make up with JB for the sake of the team.

Uncle Bob – Mom's younger brother. He thinks he's a chef because he watches cooking shows on TV, but his meals are laughably terrible.

Grandma – Josh and JB's grandmother.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



INHERITANCE AND GENETICS

The Crossover follows twelve-year-old Josh Bell, a star basketball player better known by his nickname Filthy McNasty, and his twin and teammate, Jordan ("JB") over what at first appears will be a normal fall and winter basketball season. In addition to their successful middle school careers on the basketball court, the boys enjoy a healthy and happy home life compromised only by the fact that Mom is the assistant principal of their school and has an annoying habit of policing the kind of foods that Dad eats. However, as Josh and JB start to learn more about their family history, specifically Dad's family's struggles with heart disease and his distrust of doctors, Josh is forced to start thinking more critically about what Mom is actually trying to do, and what Dad might be dealing with. In doing so, Josh begins to question what inheritance means, what traits are actually inheritable, and how both he and Dad fit into the story of their family as told by genetics.

When Josh talks about Dad in the beginning chapters of the novel, he talks mostly about the main reasons he admires Dad: as a young man, Dad was a basketball legend, a master at dunking, and played in Europe. Josh's narration also suggests that there was never any chance that he and JB would ever not play basketball and follow in their dad's footsteps. Notably, in a story that Dad tells, he implies that a natural aptitude for the game is something that's hereditary. He makes his sons listen to him talk about how, at three years old, he took them to a neighborhood basketball court to shoot free throws for the first time. A man offered to lower the hoop to accommodate normal three-year-old motor skills, but Dad refused his offer and both boys were able to make a basket with no coaching or assistance. Though Josh and JB tire of hearing this story and imply that Dad is obnoxiously insistent on telling it as often as possible, this story is a purposeful attempt on Dad's part to remind his sons that their talent is something they got from him, thereby casting basketball talent as something that can be inherited like height or eye color. Even more important, however, is that Dad focuses his efforts on pushing this positive story of inheritable traits. While this seems at first to be a perfectly normal case of fatherly pride, it starts to take on a more urgent meaning when Josh and JB discover that not everything they stand to inherit from Dad is positive.

When Josh overhears Mom and Dad fighting about Dad's refusal to go to the doctor for hypertension, Josh makes a shocking realization: hypertension runs in families, and he suspects that his grandfather died of hypertension given that he died in his forties. Given Mom's anger and the fact that she brings it up constantly, this leads Josh to deduce that Dad is also at risk. This starts to make some of Mom's seeming eccentricities make more sense to Josh: she's banned them from the local barbeque joint and removes salt from the table, and she does her best to keep Dad from getting angry and belligerent during the boys' basketball games.

While this leads Josh to humanize Mom more, it also encourages him to think differently about Dad. Dad seemed like a god to Josh prior to his discovery about the family history of hypertension. After this discovery, however, Josh starts to notice his dad's bloody noses, fainting spells, and episodes of vomiting--all of which make Dad look less like a god and more like a very sick man. In other words, Josh's understanding of hypertension and what it's doing to his dad's body starts to become more important than Dad's preferred vision of family history that focuses entirely on basketball.

Tragically for the Bell family, Josh and JB's journey towards humanizing their dad and merging the narratives of basketball and genetics starts and ends quickly: Dad dies not long after Christmas, after suffering several heart attacks. Following his death, Josh chooses to honor Dad and feel close to him by shooting free throws with JB, indicating that the boys are still more comfortable with the version of Dad that Dad himself

presented to the world: that of a basketball legend. However, it's also important to keep in mind that, as Josh and JB get older, it's likely that they'll have to contend with the same health issues--as well as the same basketball fame, given the way that Dad and Coach talk about their potential--as Dad and their grandfather did. With this, the novel offers some hope that, because Josh and JB witnessed firsthand the consequences of not seeking medical attention for the condition, they might have a better opportunity to respect both of those narratives by following in his footsteps on the court, while also proactively managing their health so their careers and their lives aren't cut short like Dad's were.



BROTHERHOOD AND GROWING UP

At one point, Josh tells the reader "identical twins / are no different / from everyone else, / except we look and / sometimes sound / exactly alike." The

novel is peppered with Josh's observations like this that indicate that while he and JB are technically different people, the two of them share a connection that makes it seem at times as though they are almost the same person. While Josh doesn't see a problem with this at first, this does start to become an issue as JB falls in love with Miss Sweet Tea and Josh's jealousy takes over. Given the role that Miss Sweet Tea plays in the boys' lives--she's JB's first foray into the more adult world of romance, and Josh blames her for stealing his brother--it suggests that as the boys grow up, their normal teenage shift in the direction of independence will be complicated by the fact that, as twins, their senses of self are more entwined than they might be otherwise.

While Josh's direct observations about his brother in the first half of the book focus on and celebrate the ways in which they're a team, other observations suggest that Mom and Dad have actually done a lot to encourage their sons to develop individually. Josh's main concern about being a twin is that he doesn't want to be mistaken for JB; to this end, he wears his hair in **locks** while JB keeps his shaved. However, he also notes that over the summer he attended three basketball camps, while JB attended Bible camp instead. Though Josh sees this as a slight--he understands that JB's interest in Bible camp has little to do with the Bible and everything to do with getting to hang out with girls--it's telling that Mom and Dad are willing and able to honor the fact that their sons are very different people by enrolling them in activities that speak to their individual interests. Taken together, these facts suggest that the identity that the boys share is something that's gradually changing as they get older, and that each boy thinks about it differently. While Josh's need for individuality extends only to his desire to not be mistaken for his brother, JB takes this a step further by distancing himself from the things the boys both love in favor of individual pursuits.

When Miss Sweet Tea comes on the scene, it becomes clear to

Josh that she's going to come between him and his brother: JB seems suddenly less interested in basketball, and Josh starts spending long stretches of time alone while JB is with Miss Sweet Tea. For Josh, this is offensive on two levels. It first throws the boys' differing maturity and popularity levels into sharp relief, as Josh feels left out that he's the only one of his friends not dating. Then, and even more hurtful, there is the fact that JB seems to not have time for Josh anymore, thereby forcing a change in their years-long, close relationship. This forced independence proves very difficult for Josh and the pain of feeling abandoned by his brother bleeds over into his ability to effectively play basketball--at one fateful game, Josh passes the ball to JB with such force that JB can't catch it and it hits him in the face.

Following this incident, JB ignores Josh for weeks while Josh continues to grapple with watching his brother grow up and move away from him right before his eyes. Much of Josh's narration after this game focuses on JB and the loneliness that Josh feels. This suggests that Josh is much more concerned with how his brother is growing and changing and how JB's changes affect him. What he misses, however, are all the ways in which he too is growing and changing during this time. Because of his forced isolation, Josh becomes far more introspective and more concerned about Dad, whose rapid decline in health begins about the same time that JB is injured. Though Josh doesn't understand in the moment, the fact that his separation from JB refocuses his attention on someone else offers him a roadmap for how to deal with these changes after Dad's death. When Miss Sweet Tea (whom Josh finally begins to call by her real name, Alexis) invites Josh to accompany her and JB to a college basketball game, he eagerly accepts. He understands that if he wants to spend time with his brother, he needs to accept that JB has other people in his life who are important. With this, the novel ultimately positions Josh and JB's budding independence less in terms of separating from each other, and more in terms of learning to be accepting and welcoming to others aside from the two of them.



SUCCESS, WORK, AND CHOICE

Josh and JB represent a second generation of basketball stardom in their family: as a young man, Dad played basketball in Italy, was a star college player, and was even asked to play for the Los Angeles Lakers. As Josh learns more about his dad's early successes and also experiences his own basketball failures, he begins to think more critically about stardom and how much control a person has to dictate the terms of their success through hard work and practice.

For Josh and JB, their eventual stardom seems assured: Dad makes it clear to them that basketball runs in their veins, while also making sure they understand the value of practice. He makes them practice their free throws every evening and both

parents encourage their sons' goal of playing in college. The combination of telling Josh and JB that their skills on the court are the product of genes and practice suggests that both boys are raised to understand that while they may have natural aptitude, that aptitude does little if they don't work hard to develop it. Josh in particular is dedicated to practice. He tells the reader how, when Coach offers to let the first teammate who finishes wind sprints to sit out of practice, Josh gives up his lead on purpose--he understands that the only way he can effectively follow in Dad's footsteps is to work as hard as he can.

While the way that Josh and JB are raised and spoken to about basketball suggests a simple if-then relationship between work and success, they soon discover information that complicates this reading. One afternoon, when Josh is given permission to look for something in his parents' closet and decides to secretly look in Dad's special box of old basketball memorabilia, he and JB make a shocking revelation: as a young man, Dad was asked to play for the Los Angeles Lakers, but the offer was rescinded when he refused to undergo surgery for patellar tendinitis.

It's important to note that patellar tendinitis, or jumper's knee, is inflammation that develops due to overuse--in other words, it suggests that Dad's hard work on the court actually led him to develop an injury that, in turn, prevented him from being able to continue his rise to stardom. However, it's also worth noting that Dad refused to seek treatment for his jumper's knee.

Though Dad's fear of doctors makes this decision more understandable, it also impresses upon Josh and JB that, when it comes to treatable things like this that might jeopardize their ability to play, they do have the power to fix it. Essentially, just as they can choose to practice daily to hone their natural aptitude, they can also choose to fix problems like this when they arise rather than letting them end their career.

Ultimately, *The Crossover* suggests that the relationship between success and work is a matter of choice: though not everyone is gifted or has the natural aptitude for basketball like Dad, Josh, and JB do, everyone has the choice to work hard--though the rest of the boys' teammates (who, aside from Vondie, Josh doesn't name) aren't spoken of as being stars like JB and Josh are, they're nonetheless valued members of the team. However, by complicating this with Dad's choices regarding his patellar tendinitis, the novel insists that success is about more than choosing to practice. Success instead becomes a reflection of aptitude, practice, and, most importantly, the choice to care for one's health; without health, the other elements hardly matter.



IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

As a novel written in verse, the text of *The Crossover* is able to play with rhythm, visuals, and language in a way that a novel written in prose cannot. Josh's narration makes use of changes in font size, line

breaks, and rhyme to guide the reader through the novel, slowing down or speeding up the action according to how the text is arranged on the page. This speaks to Josh's immersion in music culture--the first several chapters are comprised of conversations between Dad and Josh about jazz, and Josh makes several references to his favorite rappers and hip-hop artists. With this, Josh's narration is able to pull from the music, the art, and the wisdom of others as he uses it to shape his budding adult identity and find a voice that's uniquely his.

One of the first conversations that Josh relates with Dad is one that took place several years ago, when Josh got his nickname Filthy McNasty. Dad made Josh listen to his favorite album by the jazz artist Horace Silver, whom Josh says is "okay, I guess." Dad, aghast and convinced his son needs to learn to appreciate Horace Silver, dedicates the next song, "Filthy McNasty," to Josh, and the name sticks. Josh explains that at first he didn't like his nickname since kids made fun of it. However, as he began to excel in middle school basketball and as Dad praised him using the nickname, he also began to grow into it and, by the start of the novel, he uses the nickname to describe how he plays.

Josh does much the same thing with his hair as he does with his nickname. At the beginning of the novel, Josh wears his hair in **locks**. While he notes that one of the best parts of wearing his hair like this is that people can tell him apart from JB, he spends more time explaining how his locks allow him to connect with both Dad and his favorite rappers who wear locks. Specifically, Josh mentions an old photo of Dad dunking in which it looks like Dad's locks are wings, lifting him towards the hoop. Because of the way that Josh interprets this photo, his hair can be read as an even more successful merger across musical styles and generations than his nickname is. All of this works together to suggest that a person's identity, especially at such a young age, is something that's formed when a young person chooses to emulate certain things around them, both visually and through language or art.

Tragedy strikes early in the novel when, thanks to a bet that Josh never expected to lose, JB earns the right to cut off one of Josh's locks. JB misses, however, and ends up cutting off five, which leads Mom to decide that Josh needs to shave the rest of his locks off to correct his appearance. For Josh, this represents a major loss of identity and coincides with the beginning of his struggles with basketball. Dunking suddenly becomes more difficult without his "wings" and that connection to Dad, while his anger with JB means that he's much less willing to cut his brother slack when JB starts spending more time with Miss Sweet Tea.

At the same time, Josh also begins to ask Dad to call him by his real name, not Filthy McNasty. With this, Josh begins to assert control over the identity he presents to others in the only way he believes he can: by dictating the language that others use to speak about him. Dad's honest attempts to comply with Josh's

request show that Dad understands Josh's need to discover an identity that truly fits, especially in the absence of his locks.

Because the novel ends right after Dad's funeral, when Josh and JB are still consumed by grief, Josh never comes to any solid conclusions regarding his identity, his name, or who he wants to be going forward. However, it's also important to keep in mind that, at twelve years old and with his entire adolescence in front of him, Josh is at the very beginning of his journey. His willingness to make the best of his forced experimentation over the course of the novel, coupled with the exposure he has to role models and music, suggests that he will continue to draw from a variety of sources to create his identity as he moves towards adulthood and independence.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BACKBOARD

When Dad ends up in the hospital, Josh angrily tells Mom that he's upset "because our backboard is splintered." In doing so, he draws a direct connection between the backboard on a basketball hoop--which keeps missed shots from going out of bounds and can be used to bounce the ball off of to make baskets--and to Dad, who performs a similar function in the Bell family. Like a backboard, Dad keeps Josh and JB in line and constantly points them in the direction of success.



THE CHAMPIONSHIP RING

Dad's championship ring lives in a locked box in Mom and Dad's closet. Though none of the characters explicitly explains where exactly Dad's championship ring came from, Dad says simply that he got it because he's "Da Man." This begins to situate the ring as a symbol of Dad himself and as a way for the boys to measure how much like Dad they're becoming, as Dad tells them that they can only wear the ring once they follow in his footsteps and become "Da Man" themselves. However, this all begins to look more sinister as Josh and JB learn about Dad's unwillingness to seek help for his health issues, both in the past with patellar tendinitis and in the present with his hypertension. This shift finalizes when, after Dad's death, JB gives Josh the championship ring on Dad's behalf; Dad implied on his deathbed that Josh is now "Da Man." Josh's grief and lack of pride at this honor indicate that while the ring is still a symbol of Dad, a more holistic look at the man begins to show that "Da Man" was actually extremely flawed--and is, possibly, not the best role model.



LOCKS/WINGS

At the beginning of the novel, Josh wears his hair in locks. He explains that he does this not just to differentiate himself from JB, but also because it makes him feel closer to Dad, whose locks looked like wings in an old photo. Like Dad, Josh is skilled at dunking the ball and he attributes this skill to his "wings," which suggests that locks connect Josh both to Dad and to his success on the court. It's telling, then, that things start to go downhill for Josh personally and for the entire Bell family when he's forced to shave his locks after JB cuts several of them off. Josh's senses of rootlessness, solitude, and failure in the rest of the novel can then be read as the direct result of losing these connections and his childhood sense of identity--which, though it might be a normal part of growing up, also suggests that Josh's identity will have to fundamentally shift as he moves towards adulthood, especially after Dad's death.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Crossover* published in 2014.

Warm-Up Quotes

●● 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!

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

Josh explains how he eventually came to enjoy his nickname, Filthy McNasty. He didn't like it at first, since kids made fun of him for it, but Dad's praise using the name helped him learn to like it. This shows the immense power that Dad has over his sons. He's a powerful role model for

them, and the things that he likes can, with enough repetition and insistence, become the things that his sons like. This also speaks to the ways that Josh is currently working on shaping his identity. As a pre-teen, Josh is pulling from all sorts of sources as he figures out the kind of person he wants to be going forward. In this case, he's pulling from Dad's love of jazz and accepting a nickname that Dad chose rather than coming to his own conclusions, as he'll go on to do as he moves closer towards maturity.

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.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

Josh tells the reader why he has locks, and that the main reason he wears his hair like this is because Dad used to. This shows that for Josh, emulating Dad's style is a way to emulate Dad's other qualities--in this case, his ability to dunk. Josh later shares that he's the only kid on his team who can already dunk, which suggests that his attempts to align himself with Dad are at this point successful. Specifically, Josh's language when he talks about one day needing his own wings shows that he understands that as he gets older, he'll eventually have to merge these pieces of his identity into one cohesive image.

First Quarter Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), JB

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Josh introduces the reader to the ways that he and JB are beginning to separate from each other. It's important to recognize that, though Josh sets the precedent that he and JB are so close as to be almost the same person, it doesn't appear that this is true in practice. The fact that the boys were allowed and encouraged to attend different summer activities suggests that Mom and Dad understand that the boys are different and have different interests, and that they will encourage them to explore those.

Josh's sense of being insulted by JB's behavior, however, indicates that he's not willing to let this change happen without a fight. His identity relies on maintaining a close relationship with both JB and Dad, and JB's newfound interest in girls represents, in Josh's eyes, a move towards independence and a life that doesn't include his brother.

That boy is special, and it doesn't hurt that Chuck "Da Man" Bell is his father. And mine, too.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Dad, JB

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

During one of Josh's play-by-plays, he praises JB's skills on the court and links them specifically to the fact that Dad is who he is. Dad is a famous former basketball player and at a

number of points, he and Josh imply that the boys' natural aptitude for the game is something they inherited from him. In this situation in particular, notice that Josh is quick to note that both he and JB are Dad's sons, thereby reaffirming their connection to each other for the reader. With this, he shows the reader again that he's not yet willing to accept that JB is moving towards independence that might not include Josh.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Mom, JB, Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

While the family is eating at a Chinese restaurant, JB gets Josh food without asking and Mom takes the salt off the table. Though Mom thinks that JB's behavior is strange, Josh and JB don't agree with her; for them, it's proof that because they're twins, they're more connected and in tune with each other than different-age siblings are. Given that this is also taking place not long after JB cut Josh's locks, his choice to do something nice for his brother suggests that the two are beginning to make up.

Mom's removal of the salt, on the other hand, has to do with Dad's hypertension diagnosis. Though Josh's language suggests that this is a normal occurrence, his unwillingness to question it shows that he's still young and isn't yet particularly curious about why things are the way they are.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Every night, Josh mourns the loss of his locks. Josh's desire to count his locks and make them add up in a logical, mathematical way speaks to the way that he currently looks at identity and how it's formed. As far as he's concerned, his identity is made up of building blocks that he borrows from culture and from people around him, and all those elements create a cohesive whole. The fact that Josh doesn't feel as though he adds up without his locks speaks to the degree to which Josh relied on them and specifically, the locks' connection with Dad, to shape how he thought about himself.

●● As in: I wonder why my dad
never had surgery
on his *patellar tendinitis*.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

After Josh and JB discover that Dad wasn't able to play for the Los Angeles Lakers because he refused to get surgery on his patellar tendinitis, Josh is confused as to why Dad made this choice. Patellar tendinitis is an overuse injury, which first suggests that Dad's insistence that the boys practice hard and practice well has limits. It implies that Dad's constant practice actually had negative effects on his body and, eventually, got to the point where Dad was unable to play the game anymore.

However, it's also telling that Dad chose not to have surgery. The fact that it's a choice at all to have surgery or not shows that healthcare is an individual concern, and makes it clear that each person gets to dictate what kind of care they ask for. This also points to the fact that a person needs to take control of their healthcare and seek help for things like this if they want to play.

●● and even though I don't plan it,
I let him win
and get ready to practice
harder.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Coach, Vondie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon, Coach says that the player who finishes wind sprints first doesn't have to participate in practice. Josh loses on purpose so that he can continue to practice. This choice illustrates how wholeheartedly Josh accepts Dad's insistence on practice. Though Josh certainly wants to be the best--his narration throughout the novel fixates on his performance and how good it is relative to others--he shows here that he understands that at times, it's preferable to not be the best. Not winning means in this case that Josh gets more experience, which he knows is important if he wants to go on to win in the future. This shows that Josh understands that he's playing the long game; he needs to think about where he wants to be in a few years and do the work so that he'll be able to get there.

●● 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*?

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Grandfather/Dad's Dad, Dad

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

After Josh overhears Mom and Dad fighting about Dad's refusal to see a doctor about his hypertension, Josh defines the word and explains that the disease can be hereditary. With this, Josh is forced to confront the possibility that Dad hasn't just passed his skill and aptitude for basketball on to his sons; he may have also passed on what can be a deadly disease. The possibility that Josh's grandfather died of hypertension reinforces this danger, as it indicates that Dad's struggle with hypertension is something that he inherited from his dad. The fact that Josh is learning this information for the first time speaks to Dad's distrust of the medical community and his desire to show his sons that they can inherit more than dangerous diseases from him--he wants them to see that they can inherit something positive from him, like a love and a talent for basketball. In this way, basketball becomes an antidote to hypertension and allows Dad to ignore these problems he's having with his body.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Miss Sweet Tea/Alexis, JB

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

During a gym class that focuses on CPR, Josh jealously watches JB and Miss Sweet Tea pass notes. Given Josh's love of school and his desire to learn, it's telling that he's so intent on watching JB and Miss Sweet Tea. This then speaks to the magnitude of his jealousy, as it's keeping him from fully considering the very important information that the teacher is trying to pass on. Further, the fact that JB and Miss Sweet Tea are communicating using notes shows them effectively using Josh's preferred subject, English, to

exclude him. Just as the novel itself reads as a private note between Josh and the reader and allows Josh to keep the reader from knowing JB's thoughts, these actual notes keep Josh from learning about JB and what he's thinking.

Second Quarter Quotes

☝☝ 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.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Mom, Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Mom tells Josh that he shouldn't let Dad take him to Krispy Kreme or Pollard's anymore, Josh lies to Dad about not being hungry. In spite of the anger and victimization that Josh felt when Mom talked to Josh about the need to eat healthier, Josh's choice to lie to Dad shows that he takes Mom's conversation very seriously. In other words, he recognizes that Dad's health isn't good, and that food is one of the best ways for Dad to control his high blood pressure if he's not willing to go to the doctor. With this, Josh begins to mature and shows the reader that he's beginning to think more about the people around him and how he can best help them, not just how those people can help him.

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

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Miss Sweet Tea/Alexis, JB

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

When Miss Sweet Tea calls, JB asks Josh to take the phone and speak to her as though Josh is JB. Josh agrees, and tells the reader that identical twins can be more alike than people give them credit for. This moment allows Josh to feel a moment of camaraderie with JB, as Josh also nurses a secret crush on Miss Sweet Tea. In this situation then, Josh is able to use the fact that they're identical twins to get a taste of what he's missing in terms of romance. However, it's also important to keep in mind that JB's request is very rude to Josh, as he's certainly at least a little aware that Josh has feelings for Miss Sweet Tea. This moment helps the reader to empathize with Josh, as it appears even more as though JB is ignoring and abusing his brother as he moves towards independence and maturity.

☝☝ 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.

Related Characters: JB, Josh (speaker), Miss Sweet Tea/Alexis

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After Josh ends the phone call with Miss Sweet Tea in which he pretended to be JB, he admits that Miss Sweet Tea likes him a lot. The fact that Josh and JB are identical twins and that JB is able to make this conversation work to his advantage allows Josh to cover up this misstep to a degree. For Josh and the reader, however, it's clear that Josh actually meant what he said and does indeed have a crush on Miss Sweet Tea as well. JB's unwillingness or inability to empathize with his brother helps to build Josh's sense of being abandoned and neglected by JB, which later culminates in his violent pass to JB. This speaks to the dangers of not being truthful, especially in emotionally challenging situations like this.

☝ Ever seen an eagle soar?
So high, so fly.
Me and my wings are--
and that's when I remember:
MY. WINGS. ARE. GONE.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

When Josh tries to dunk during a game, he suddenly remembers that his "wings"--his locks-- are gone. Because Josh sees his locks as being his most powerful connection to Dad and to Dad's skill on the basketball court, he feels as though he's unable to perform like he once could. First, this speaks to how much importance JB places on his locks as the core element of his identity. He feels as though he's barely even the same person now that he doesn't have his locks. This also illustrates how Josh links his abilities on the court only to Dad and isn't confident in his own performance. This shows that as Josh continues to grow and develop, one of the most important things he'll need to contend with in terms of identity is coming to an identity that's entirely his. With that, he'll be able to be successful no matter where he is and what he looks like.

Third Quarter Quotes

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

Related Characters: Josh, Mom (speaker), Miss Sweet Tea/Alexis, JB

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Following Josh's violent pass to JB that nearly breaks JB's nose, Mom scolds Josh and reminds him that he and JB are different people. This shows that as much as Josh speaks as though he and JB are, for all intents and purposes, the same person or at least extremely connected, Mom understands that it can be dangerous for Josh to tie his identity so fully to his brother. She understands that the boys won't always

be able to rely so fully on each other, and it's important for Josh to come to terms with who he is as an individual if he wants to successfully mature. Most importantly, Mom also recognizes that Josh's insistence on being so close with JB is what caused his violent outburst, something that she knows will put Josh in danger if that behavior continues. Josh's admission, on the other hand, shows that what he's most concerned about is losing his brother, something that seems likely to happen given JB's involvement with Miss Sweet Tea.

☝ 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.

Related Characters: Dad, Josh (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

During a conversation between Josh and Dad, Josh asks Dad to call him by his real name instead of his nickname, Filthy McNasty. When Dad laughs at this request, it shows that he's not quite ready to accept Josh's bid for an individual, adult identity. The fact that Josh is asking at all though suggests that despite his desire to remain close with his brother, as he did in childhood, he is ready to begin forging his own identity. At this point, the only way Josh can do this is by controlling the language that others use to speak about him, and the easiest way to make that happen is by choosing what name he goes by.

☝ 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*.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Josh explains that he's studying for a vocabulary test and makes up clues to help remember the words. This is his clue for the word "heirloom." The way that Dad positions the championship ring for Josh and JB shows that he's well aware of his role as the boys' primary role model. By offering them this tangible token that will someday indicate that they've become like him, he's able to more effectively encourage them to take after him on the court by dedicating themselves to practice and honing their natural talents for the game. However, as Dad's health begins to deteriorate, becoming "Da Man" begins to look more sinister, given that part of Da Man's identity centers around not seeking treatment for serious medical issues. Here, Josh begins to realize that while becoming Da Man is a noble goal, he'll need to pick and choose which parts of the Da Man mystique he wants to identify with going forward.

●● 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.

Related Characters: JB, Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

When Dad tells Josh and JB that they can choose a Christmas gift as a reward for their good grades in school, Josh asks to go to the sneaker store knowing that sneakers are what JB loves the most. When Josh does this, he shows that he's learning how to connect with JB now that JB is growing and changing. This one part of JB's identity, his love of sneakers, isn't changing, so it's an easy thing for Josh to try to connect over. JB's use of "we" in his response may be something that Josh fixates on just because he feels so

lonely and separated from his brother, but in Josh's interpretation, it means that JB is starting to forgive him. This offers the boys a way forward with each other as they continue to grow and change.

Fourth Quarter Quotes

●● 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?

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Grandfather/Dad's Dad, JB, Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

After Dad ends up in the hospital after a heart attack, Josh begins to realize that because both Dad and Dad's dad suffered from hypertension and Dad's dad died from the disease, he and JB might be at risk. This shows that Josh finally understands that not everything he stands to inherit from Dad is an entirely good thing. While Josh can certainly continue to take pride in his physique and the aptitude for basketball that he inherited from Dad, the possibility that he might also be at risk for a life-threatening disease shows him that Dad's genes aren't unilaterally good. However, though Josh doesn't make the leap yet, he also has the opportunity to make choices that Dad didn't make. If Josh does indeed have hypertension when he's older, he can choose to seek medical attention when problems first arise, rather than after disaster strikes. This suggests that while genes may tell one story of a person's life, the person in question often has a number of choices regarding how they interact with those genes.

●● Because the only thing that matters is *swish*.
Because our backboard is splintered.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), JB, Dad, Mom

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Josh gives Mom a list of all the reasons that he's currently angry. In these entries, his mention of the backboard becomes an allusion to Dad. In basketball, the backboard keeps the ball from going out of bounds, and it's often used by players to make baskets. By likening Dad to the backboard of the family, Josh recognizes that Dad was a guiding force in the family. He kept the boys in line, kept them interested in basketball, and made sure that they didn't stray too far. Because of this, Josh fears what will happen if Dad dies, as that means that Josh and JB will have to figure out how to function without that force in their lives.

Overtime Quotes

☝☝ 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.

Related Characters: Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

After Dad's funeral, Josh goes outside to shoot free throws alone and makes it his goal to meet Dad's record of 50 in a row. This offers hope that even with Dad gone, Josh will still be able to connect with him by playing basketball and remembering how much Dad loved it. Further, the fact that Josh is getting so close to Dad's record suggests that Josh's willingness to work is paying off, as he's following closely in Dad's footsteps as a star player. This sets Josh up to become "Da Man" in the future and give his dad's legacy new life.

☝☝ *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.

Related Characters: JB, Josh (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

After JB interrupts Josh's solo free throw shots, he gives Josh Dad's championship ring and declares him "Da Man." When Josh says he doesn't want it, it indicates that he no longer thinks of the "Da Man" mystique as an entirely and unquestionably good thing. Instead, Dad's heart attacks and death show Josh that even though Dad was an amazing basketball player and an amazing dad, he also made choices that led ultimately to his death. This complicates Josh's initial reading of Dad, "Da Man," and what it means to take on this honor and follow in Dad's footsteps.

It's also telling that, while Dad could've made the choice to pass on the ring to Josh at any time, Josh gets the ring after choosing to play in the championship game rather than sit with Dad while he died. This suggests that Dad prioritized basketball and basketball success even as he was dying. Especially given the somber mood and Josh's tears, it even appears as though Dad may have been punishing JB by making this choice, since JB chose to stay with Dad rather than play in the game.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

WARM-UP

Dribbling. Josh narrates his own play-by-play as he plays basketball. He expertly dribbles the ball to make a basket, taunting both the reader and his opponents as he explains in detail how he evades his opponent, handles the ball, and makes his opponent slip on the gym floor as he victoriously makes the basket.

Josh Bell. Josh introduces himself to the reader as both Josh Bell and as his nickname, Filthy McNasty. He says people call him Filthy McNasty because his skills on the basketball court are such that he can put anyone to shame. He's tall with long hair and sees himself as the next big basketball star. Dad often reminds him that he played basketball with the greats like "Magic" (Earvin Johnson Jr.) and "the Goat" (Earl Manigault), but Josh brushes him off by insisting that he's too good for Dad's "pets." Mom tells Josh that Dad is old school, while Josh is "fresh and new." Josh explains that Mom is the only person who can call him that without embarrassing him, as he knows she's just talking about how good he is.

How I Got My Nickname. Josh says he's not a fan of jazz music, but Dad is. One time, when Dad was making Josh listen to a CD by Horace Silver, Dad insisted that the music was "fast and free" just like Josh and his brother JB are on the court. Josh wasn't impressed by the music, which offended Dad. Dad insisted that Horace Silver is one of the best and then dedicated the next song on the album to Josh. It was called "Filthy McNasty."

At first. Josh explains that he wasn't sold on the nickname at first, because everyone, including Mom, made fun of him. However, as Josh got older and got better at basketball, he started to like it. Whenever Josh scored or did something exceptional on the court, Dad would jump and scream praise for "Filthy." That made Josh feel good about the nickname.

Filthy McNasty. Josh refers to himself as a star player and a "MYTHical MANchild," obsessed with practicing so he can get better. He's fast on the court and can easily fake out other players, but he really shines when he shoots. When he shoots, he can make other players look uncool.

By introducing his story this way, Josh shows the reader what's most important to him: basketball and, notably, the fact that he's very good at it. This also allows him to take control of his narrative and show the reader how he'd like to be thought of.



By shifting his tone to explain more explicitly to the reader who he is, Josh is able to more finely tune how the reader sees him. When he mentions that Dad played with these greats, it suggests that Josh's abilities on the court aren't something new--they're something that, in all likelihood, Dad has taught Josh from a very young age. Josh's sense of self-importance, as well as his treatment of Mom, reinforces his age. He's a young teen, so at exactly the age where he's putting together his own identity while still relying on his parents.



This poem introduces the idea that aside from being surrounded by basketball, Josh's upbringing has also focused on music and appreciating genres created by African-Americans (he'll later mention rap and hip-hop). This indicates that in his narration, Josh is pulling from these music traditions, thereby situating him within a specific cultural history.



The fact that Josh changed his mind because of Dad's continued use of the nickname illustrates how important Dad's guidance is to Josh. This situates Dad as Josh's primary mentor and idol and offers him a road map for how to grow up.



Note that Josh says he's intent on practice. This shows that he's aware that his talent isn't just something he's born with. Instead, he has to work hard to make sure that he can put his natural talent to good use.



Jordan Bell. Josh's twin brother, Jordan, also plays basketball. Jordan's other love is betting, which he does all the time--even if there's no chance of winning. His preferred nickname is JB. He admires Michael Jordan but doesn't want anyone to know. JB does a poor job of hiding his admiration, however: he has twelve pairs of Air Jordan sneakers, as well as Michael Jordan sheets, underwear, cups, and sunglasses. He even used \$50 he won in a bet with Dad to purchase a Michael Jordan toothbrush off of eBay. Josh believes that JB is actually *stalking* Michael Jordan.

On the way to the game. As the family drives to the game, Josh sits in the back with JB. JB plays with Josh's **locks** and only stops when Josh hits him with his jock strap.

Five Reasons I Have Locks. Josh lists the five reasons he has **locks**, in ascending order of importance. First, his favorite rappers, including Lil Wayne and 2 Chainz, have locks. They make Josh feel like a king and he's the only one on the school basketball team who has them. They have the added bonus of helping people realize that he isn't JB. Most importantly, Josh once saw a clip of Dad dunking in Europe, and Dad's locks looked like wings. After seeing that, Josh realized that he needed his own wings so he could fly too.

Mom tells Dad. Mom always makes Dad sit at the very top of the bleachers during Josh and JB's basketball games. She believes that Dad is too confrontational. Dad ignores Mom and coaches Josh on his jump shot, while JB asks Mom to not hug him before the game. Dad tells the boys to treasure Mom's love like he treasured *his* mom's love, but the boys aren't interested. JB insists that Mom comes to all the games, which Dad's mom didn't do, and Josh points out that Dad's mom wasn't the assistant principal at his school like their mom is.

Conversation. Josh asks Dad if he misses playing basketball. Dad answers that he misses it like a genre of music misses its biggest star. When Josh points out that Dad is still young and could play again, Dad assures Josh that his job now is taking care of the family. Josh asks if Dad gets bored and notes that he could get a job. Dad seems a bit offended; he says that he can handle himself and he saved the money he made playing basketball. He admits that he does have his eyes peeled in case a coaching job comes up, but he's happy to be the coach of the household.

Keep in mind that twins are often closer to each other than different-age siblings; this suggests that the boys probably have a very close relationship from the start. However, it's telling that Josh implies that he doesn't share JB's admiration of Michael Jordan. This offers the possibility that the boys don't share everything with each other; they have their own individual likes and desires too.



Again, this behavior reminds the reader of Josh and JB's maturity level: they're young boys still, and still mess with each other for fun.



Josh's reasons show that he's very connected to his cultural history and music culture, as well as to his family. With this, the novel suggests that a person--especially a young person like Josh--crafts their identity by looking at those around them and choosing who to emulate. Josh's mention that the locks also differentiate him from JB shows that as close as they are, Josh does want to be his own person.



Though Josh doesn't question the value or the reasoning of Mom's assessment of Dad's confrontational nature, this does suggest that Dad might not be a role model entirely without fault. Dad's attempt to convince the boys to hug Mom also reinforces both his status as their dad and as a person of an older generation, which creates the sense that Josh and JB are on their own in their development at times.



By referring back to music, Dad again illustrates how Josh's narrative style is rooted in the music he was exposed to as a child. Josh's curiosity about Dad's life and how he feels about his role as a stay-at-home parent suggests that Josh is beginning to grow up and come of age, as he's becoming more aware of and interested in others' internal lives.



Dad asks Josh to fetch JB so they can get to practice, but Josh asks about Dad's **championship ring** instead. When Josh asks if he can wear it, Dad says he can only wear it once he's "Da Man." Josh suggests that Dad write a book, but Dad just laughs. Then, Josh asks Dad to tell him why he's called Da Man. Dad says that, back when he was playing, he never lost, had the best moves, and was popular with the ladies. Mom comes up behind Dad and teases him while Josh laughs.

When Dad insists that Josh can't wear the championship ring until he becomes Da Man, it sets up becoming Da Man as Josh's goal for the novel. At this point, the goal entails basketball success beyond what Josh is already enjoying, which suggests that Josh's understanding of who his dad is is limited to this one arena.



Basketball Rule #1. Josh shares the first rule: in life, one's family is the court and one's heart is the ball. No matter what happens, a person needs to always leave their heart in the court.

Though Josh seldom adds more explanation to these rules, he implies at points that they come from Dad. These rules as a whole then show how Josh uses Dad's wisdom and applies it to his own life.



FIRST QUARTER

JB and I. Josh and JB are identical twins and they're almost thirteen. They're easy to tell apart though; Josh is taller, has **locks** and wants to go to Duke, while JB's head is shaved and he wants to play at the University of North Carolina. Josh says that if they didn't love each other, they'd hate each other. They both play basketball and they each have their own skillset. Josh went to three basketball camps over the summer, while JB only went to one basketball camp and then Bible school. Josh isn't fooled, though--JB is only so religious now because at Bible camp, he gets to hang out with girls.

The fact that Mom and Dad decided to allow Josh and JB to make their own decisions about how to spend their summer suggests that they recognize the importance of letting them grow up to be individuals, rather than focusing on their relationship as twins. However, Josh's judgment of JB's choice to go to Bible school suggests he's not sold on this, as he expresses hurt that he's being left behind.



At the End of Warm-Ups, My Brother Tries to Dunk. JB tries to dunk the ball and fails. Josh laughs, makes fun of JB, and dunks the ball to show off. Dad cheers and Josh explains that he's the only kid on the team who can dunk. The gym is loud and filled with parents watching their children. Mom is talking to teachers as Coach calls the team in. He talks to them about love and Vondie bursts out laughing. Then, the game starts.

Josh's behavior regarding dunking and making fun of JB suggests that he celebrates their differences, but only when they end up being somehow better for him. Again, this follows where he is in his development and suggests that competition is one of the most important things for him at this point.



The Sportscaster. Josh explains that JB likes to tease and trash talk other players during games, which is what Dad used to do. Josh, on the other hand, is silent, as it allows him to react to what's going on better. He talks to himself and sometimes narrates his own play-by-plays in his head.

When Josh doesn't root his habit of narrating to himself in family history, it suggests that he does enjoy his individuality when he's able to deploy it to control how someone else (here, the reader) thinks of him.



Josh's Play-by-Play. As Vondie grabs the ball, the Reggie Lewis Wildcats—Josh's team—are ready to win. They've already won one game and won't stop until they win the championship trophy. Vondie passes the ball to Josh and Josh passes to JB. Josh notes that JB is special, and that JB's dad (Dad) is Chuck "Da Man" Bell. JB passes the ball back to Josh, who performs a skillful crossover.

cross-o-ver. Josh defines a crossover as a basketball move where a player dribbles the ball from one hand to the other. It can throw off an opponent, and basketball greats have used it to great effect. Dad taught Josh to perform a crossover slowly at first, to test one's opponent, and then go for it quickly.

The Show. As Josh narrates, the text grows, shrinks, and moves diagonally across the page. He has the ball and is trying to evade Number 28 on the other team. 28 follows Josh closely, but Josh feints and avoids him. Number 14 joins in and Josh feels like he's a chef in control of his kitchen. He passes to Vondie, who makes a basket.

The Bet, Part One. At halftime, the Wildcats are down by seven. Coach isn't worried; he starts blasting his favorite dance music. Josh, JB, and Vondie join in and dance the Cha-Cha Slide. JB gives Josh a look and Josh asks if he wants to bet. JB touches Josh's hair as he says he does.

Ode to My Hair. Josh loves his hair. He says he'd love to "enshrine" it, treat it like gold, and then he'd mine it. He cares for it meticulously every day, and this is why he declines JB's bet.

The Bet, Part Two. JB's bet is convoluted: if the score is tied and it comes down to the last shot, and if he gets the ball and doesn't miss the basket, he wants to cut off Josh's hair. Josh agrees to the bet but says that if he wins, JB has to walk around without pants during lunch tomorrow. Everyone else laughs, so JB revises the bet. He says that he'd like to cut just one of Josh's **locks**, and if Josh wins, JB will moon the nerdy sixth graders that sit near them at lunch. Josh agrees to the bet, even though he loves his hair and used to be one of the nerdy sixth graders. He believes he'll win because the bet is so specific.

The emphasis that Josh places on reaching the championships again shows that Josh prioritizes basketball success over all else. His mention of Dad shows how seriously he takes Dad's teachings and past as a basketball star; he understands that both things help him in the present.



While a crossover is a basketball move, the move itself also acts as a metaphor for how Josh develops over the course of the novel. As it progresses and he grows, he must cross over towards adulthood, taking Dad's teachings with him.



The style of the text here helps move the action of Josh's story, again showing how Josh has learned how to pull from musical traditions to manipulate how the reader interacts with his story.



Coach's nonchalance about the score suggests that he wants his players to know that there's more to the game than winning. It seems just as important that they know how to loosen up, dance, and enjoy themselves.



Remember that Josh's locks connect him to Dad and give him the power to dunk. Because his hair is such an important part of his identity, it makes sense that he'd decline any bet that might put his hair in danger.



The way that the boys interact with each other and respond to their teammates' laughter and peer pressure indicates that although Josh doesn't name their other teammates aside from Vondie, he feels compelled to accept bets like this to keep up appearances and look cool for his friends. This also implies that Josh might not have as much control over his identity and his choices as he thought; he still has to appease the crowd.



The game is tied. The score is tied and clock ticks as JB makes his free throw. The crowd is silent until the ball goes through, right at the last second. The crowd explodes and Josh's head starts to ache.

Josh's headache speaks to his honesty--he's going to go through with the bet--while JB's successful free throw shows how skilled he is at basketball.



In the locker room. After the game, in the locker room, JB cackles and approaches Josh, holding Coach's red scissors. Josh thinks that he loves this game from the bottom of his heart, even though he was benched all through the first quarter, JB played spectacularly, they won the game, and he lost the bet.

When Josh can recognize and accept his love for the game alongside all the things he doesn't like about it, it again shows that basketball is the most important thing in his life.



Cut. JB laughs and waves the scissors around. The boys' teammates start chanting "Filthy" over and over again as JB grabs Josh's hair. He doesn't hear his **lock** hit the ground, but he knows something is wrong when Vondie shouts, "OH, SNAP!"

Whatever's happened, the fact that it's clearly not good speaks to the dangers of bowing to peer pressure like this and allowing someone else the ability to change one's appearance without full consent.



ca-lam-i-ty. Josh defines a calamity as an unexpected bad event that often results in injuries. As an example, he says that if JB had taken cutting Josh's **lock** seriously, he would've only cut one. Instead, however, JB created a calamity: he cut five locks and now, there's a bald spot on the side of Josh's head. After the game, Mom is very upset to see Josh's hair and calls it a calamity. She tells Dad to take Josh to the barber over the weekend to cut off the rest of his locks.

Notice that Josh never mentions whether or not JB apologizes for what happened. This implies that JB might not realize how huge of a blow this is to Josh and the image Josh has of himself, though it could also point to the possibility that JB doesn't have the language or the emotional maturity to properly apologize.



Mom doesn't like us eating out. Even though Mom doesn't like it when the family eats out, she lets them choose a restaurant once per month. Dad chooses Chinese, even though Mom won't let him eat most of what's on the buffet. Josh knows that he would've chosen Pollard's Chicken and BBQ if Mom hadn't banned them from the restaurant. At dinner, Mom is still upset about Josh's hair and makes JB apologize. JB's apology isn't sincere, so Josh gives him a noogie. Dad breaks the boys up by telling one of his famously bad jokes.

Josh betrays his youth here when he tells the reader about Mom's ban on certain restaurants without wondering why. He'll discover later that it's because of Dad's struggles with high blood pressure, but at this point, Josh and JB are too caught up in themselves and their own trials and tribulations to ask bigger questions about their family.



As Josh fills his plate, JB asks Dad for insight on how they played. Dad says they did okay, but deems Josh's crossover lazy. Mom takes the salt off the table and JB goes to the buffet. He gives three packages of duck sauce and some wonton soup to Josh. Mom thinks this action was random, but JB asks if that's what Josh wanted. Josh thanks JB--even though he never said anything, he actually did want that food.

Taking the salt off the table is one way that Mom can control Dad's diet and make it friendlier to his heart disease. JB's ability to get exactly what Josh wanted speaks to their connection as twins. At this point, it specifically shows that they're still connected and in tune with each other, despite their current fight over Josh's hair.



Missing. Josh admits he's not a mathematician, but he usually does okay with math. However, he keeps counting his **locks** under his pillow. He has 37 locks and one tear, and he thinks they never add up.

The inside of Mom and Dad's bedroom closet. Mom and Dad's closet is off limits. JB often asks Josh to go in there and snoop through Dad's things, but Josh always says no. Today, however, Josh asks Mom for a box for his **locks** and she tells him to take one of her Sunday hatboxes out of the closet. Dad's small secret box sits next to Mom's boxes. Just as Josh opens Dad's box, JB appears in the doorway. He apologizes again for cutting off Josh's locks and promises to make up for it by doing some of Josh's chores for the rest of the year.

JB notices that Josh has Dad's box open, so they rummage through it. They find newspaper clippings and old memorabilia, as well as Dad's **championship ring**. JB slides it onto his finger and ignores Josh, who tries to look like he wants a turn. JB finds more articles about Dad's time in a European league. Then, JB finds a manila envelope with "private" on the front. Josh decides to put it back, but JB opens it. There are two letters inside. The first is from the Los Angeles Lakers inviting Dad to their free-agent tryouts. The second reads that because Dad decided not to have surgery for patella tendinitis, he might not be able to play again.

pa-tel-lar ten-di-ni-tis. Josh defines patellar tendinitis as a condition where the muscle connecting the kneecap to the shin becomes inflamed. It's an overuse injury that often happens when a person jumps a lot. Josh uses it in a sentence and says that in Mom and Dad's closet, he and JB discovered that Dad has patellar tendinitis, which is known as jumper's knee. He offers another sentence: Dad led his team in Europe to the championships, but because of patellar tendinitis, he now has no career. Josh wonders why Dad never had surgery.

Sundays After Church. Every Sunday after church, Josh and his family participate in a pick-up game of basketball at the recreation center. They listen to hip-hop and, once all the teasing dies down, the game begins. Dad passes to Josh, Josh passes to JB, and JB shoots the ball.

Now that Josh's identity has been changed without his consent, he's struggling to come to terms with what this means for who he is. Being without locks also means that he's now visually different from Dad, while their shared hairstyle once marked them as family.



Everything that happens in this poem points to Josh and JB starting to grow up: allowing Josh into her closet shows Mom trusting Josh to behave like an adult, while JB's apology shows that he's becoming more comfortable making things right and behaving maturely. Similarly, when Josh decides to open Dad's box, it represents Josh's curiosity about who exactly Dad is, a curiosity that grows as he starts to come of age.



The way that Josh introduces these letters shows that they're a shock to the boys; this in turn suggests that Josh and JB never suspected that their dad had any medical issues. By introducing this revelation that Dad does have medical issues, and specifically, that those issues kept him from playing basketball, it impresses upon the boys that their success isn't guaranteed. Instead, they'll need to make decisions to care for their health so they can succeed.



Because patellar tendinitis is an overuse injury, it follows that there are times when working and practicing hard aren't actually beneficial--in Dad's case, they led to a career-ending injury. Josh's question of why Dad never had surgery shows him beginning to think more critically about the people around him. Essentially, it shows that he's starting to become more curious about people who had previously been somewhat one-dimensional to him.



By connecting church with basketball, Josh sets up basketball as being an almost religious experience for his family. Similarly, Josh's mention of hip-hop introduces the reader to another place where Josh is exposed to different types of music.



Basketball Rule #2. In a random text, Dad tells Josh to hustle, run quickly, pivot and chase, aim and shoot. He tells Josh to work smart but to live smarter, and to play hard but not forget to practice.

Girls. Josh and JB walk into the lunchroom together. Even though Josh isn't bald, his hair looks enough like JB's that people do double takes. When they sit down, their friends start asking how they'll be able to tell the boys apart. JB offers that he's cool and can make free throws, while Josh yells that he can dunk. A girl they've never seen before (Miss Sweet Tea) walks up to their table. The way JB looks at her is embarrassing. When the girl asks if it's true that twins know what each other are thinking, Josh points out that a person doesn't need to be JB's twin to know what he's thinking about.

While Vondie and JB. Josh does his and JB's vocabulary homework while Vondie and JB debate whether Miss Sweet Tea is hot or cute. Josh doesn't mind doing JB's homework; he loves English and owes JB since JB did the dishes last week. Josh is having a hard time concentrating though, so when Vondie and JB ask Josh's opinion on the new girl, Josh says she's pulchritudinous.

pul-chri-tu-di-nous. Josh defines pulchritudinous as having great beauty and appeal. He says that every guy in the cafeteria is trying to flirt with Miss Sweet Tea because she's pulchritudinous. He says that though he's never had a girlfriend, if he did, she'd also be pulchritudinous. To use it in another sentence, he wonders why pulchritudinous Miss Sweet Tea is talking to JB.

Practice. To start practice, Coach reads to the team from [The Art of War](#). He reads that a winning strategy isn't about planning; instead, it's about responding quickly. He leads them in footwork drills and then wind sprints. During the wind sprints Coach announces that the winner doesn't have to practice. Vondie runs hard, but Josh is faster. He takes the lead but then lets Vondie win so he can practice.

Walking Home. As the boys walk home from practice, Josh peppers JB with questions. He asks if JB thinks they can win the county championship, why Dad never had knee surgery, and why Dad can't have salt. JB responds that he doesn't know until, finally, he bursts out that they'll win if Josh starts making free throws, nobody likes doctors, and Mom told Dad he can't eat foods with salt. Josh asks JB if he wants to play to 21 when they get home, and JB turns it into a bet.

When Dad expands his basketball rules to apply to Josh's life as a whole, he shows that he believes that success on the court is related to Josh's success in other areas of his life.



When Josh and JB's friends ask how they'll tell them apart, it creates the possibility that at least to these outside observers, the boys aren't entirely full individuals to the extent that Josh has shown the reader they are. Miss Sweet Tea's question reinforces this, as it plays into the stereotypes and conceptions of twins in the popular imagination. Josh's reply, on the other hand, reinforces that twins aren't that much different from anyone else.



Josh's choice to use a word that's presumably off of his vocabulary list to describe Miss Sweet Tea shows where he's pulling his language from. By taking it from the school system, Josh shows that in addition to pulling from specific cultural texts, he's also a product of the same environment as all of his friends.



For Josh, it's disconcerting that Miss Sweet Tea seems interested in JB at all. This points to Josh's discomfort both at the fact that he and JB are getting older, and to his recognition that JB is pulling ahead in terms of adolescent milestones.



The choice to let Vondie win shows that Josh understands the power of practice. Similarly, Josh's implication that he was going to win and lost on purpose brings his natural athleticism back to the forefront, suggesting his successes are what they are thanks to the combination of aptitude and practice.



JB's suggestion that Josh is struggling with his free throws again brings up the importance of practice, as it suggests that Josh hasn't practiced this particular skill enough. By answering all Josh's questions with this kind of authority, JB also shows that he's starting to grow up and become more confident in himself and what he knows.



Man to Man. Josh taunts JB as he dribbles. He suggests that JB should've gone to the mall with his girlfriend. Josh finally dribbles all the way to the top of the court, but before he can shoot, Mom yells for Josh to come clean his room.

Josh's taunting and his confidence suggest he's less concerned about his free throws or his subpar skills than JB would like him to be.



After dinner. After dinner, Dad takes Josh and JB to the rec center to practice free throws. While the boys shoot, Dad stands in front of them and gets in their faces so they learn to focus. Three guys from the local college ask Dad for autographs. JB ignores them, but Josh challenges them to a game. The guys jokingly taunt Josh and make fun of Dad's age, but the game begins. JB screams that the loser owes the winner \$20.

The young men's request for autographs continues to bolster Dad's star status for the reader and suggests that he's still a relevant and revered figure in the basketball community. In this sense, even though his playing career is over, his stardom or lack thereof seems more complicated than Josh makes it out to be.



After we win. After the game, Josh notices Miss Sweet Tea shooting baskets at the other court. He wonders if she actually plays. JB goes over to her and Josh can tell he likes her. When Miss Sweet Tea tries to shoot, JB doesn't get in her way. Instead, he stands there and smiles at her. Josh thinks he looks silly.

The curiosity that Josh shows toward Miss Sweet Tea indicates that he's capable of being curious about others, even if they are interested in JB and not in him. This sets an important precedent for Josh's behavior to come.



Dad Takes Us to Krispy Kreme and Tells Us His Favorite Story (Again). Dad bites into his third donut and, when JB asks if it's true that Mom banned donuts, Dad says that Mom will never know. He praises the boys' performance in the game with the college guys and explains that they didn't let the guys pay up because they were just kids.

Dad's insistence that Mom won't find out about the donuts suggests that whatever Mom is trying to do by policing his foods, Dad isn't taking it seriously--and he's encouraging his sons to also not take diet (and, in all likelihood, healthy foods) seriously.



Dad reminisces about how, when Josh and JB were two, he taught them to play. Mom thought he was crazy. Then, when the boys were three, he took them to the park to shoot free throws. A maintenance guy insisted that the basket was too high for three-year-olds. Dad asked the man if a deaf person could write music as the man started to lower the hoop. The boys interrupt and say that Beethoven was deaf, and they've heard this story too many times. Dad threatens that if they interrupt again, he'll start over. Picking up the story again, he says he handed each boy a ball and positioned them to shoot. The boys each made a basket and the maintenance guy was shocked.

When Dad insists that the boys listen to this story that they've clearly heard many times, it comes off as an attempt to make it clear to Josh and JB that their talent on the court is something they inherited and that comes naturally to them. With this, Dad encourages his sons to take pride in what they've inherited from him, something that will become especially important going forward as it becomes clear that the boys might also inherit Dad's health issues.



Basketball Rule #3. The third rule of basketball is to never let someone else lower your goals. Other people expect out of you what they expect out of their own lives. Dad encourages Josh and JB to shoot for the sun.

By encouraging Josh and JB to take charge of setting their own goals, Dad again shows them that their success is a matter of choice: by choosing to work hard and set high goals, they will, by Dad's logic, meet them.



Josh's Play-by-Play. The visiting team brings their entire school to cheer, and they're winning. Josh is at the free-throw line, and he has to make two shots for them to win. He misses both, but Vondie grabs the ball on the second rebound. The ball goes back and forth and Josh feels like he and JB will be stars. With ten seconds left, Josh and JB pass the ball until Josh is able to dunk the ball.

The new girl. After the game, Miss Sweet Tea approaches Josh and compliments him on his dunk. She asks if he'll be at the gym over Thanksgiving break and why he cut his "cute" **locks**. Vondie giggles. As JB walks up, Miss Sweet Tea offers him some sweet iced tea.

I Missed Three Free Throws Tonight. Josh explains that every night after dinner, Dad insists that he and JB shoot free throws until they get ten in a row. Tonight, he asks Josh to make fifteen.

Basketball Rule #4. Josh says that if a person misses enough of life's free throws, they'll pay for it eventually.

Having a mother. Josh is grateful when Mom rescues him from free-throw practice. His arms feel heavy by then, as he's attempted 36 free throws. However, he's not grateful for the fact that Mom is a principal. Rather than just letting the boys go to bed, Mom makes them read. JB listens to his iPod while he reads, so he doesn't hear Josh ask if Miss Sweet Tea is his girlfriend. JB insists he's listening to classical music, but Josh thinks it sounds more like Jay-Z. JB also doesn't hear Mom and Dad arguing.

Mom shouts. Josh listens to his parents fight. Mom wants Dad to see the doctor for hypertension since it's genetic. Dad insists he doesn't need a doctor and brushes off Mom's remark that Dad's dad didn't need a doctor either. Mom asks Dad about his fainting spell, but he asks for a kiss and tells Mom he loves her. Mom says if he loves her, he'll see the doctor. They go silent after this, so Josh pulls a pillow over his head. He knows what's going on and thinks it's gross.

This game acts as more evidence to support how well Josh, JB, and Vondie work together as a team. Even if Josh is struggling with the free throws, because of the relationships he has with his teammates, the team as a whole is still able to be successful.



By approaching Josh and being nice to him, Miss Sweet Tea signals that she comes in peace--her intent isn't necessarily to come between the boys. This shows that the rift to come is Josh and JB's fault, not hers.



Though Dad likely just wants to make sure that Josh understands the value of hard work, by singling him out like this, he risks making Josh feel jealous and inferior.



This rule also comes back to the idea of success being linked to choice: a free throw is a relatively easy way to make points, and so this suggests that a person should take these easy opportunities when they come.



The fact that JB is using music to separate himself from Josh casts this moment as a turning point in Josh's coming of age: here, something that he's spent his life loving and using to create his identity is being used against him. To make matters worse for Josh, JB is separating himself from Josh and ignoring him, which implies that the brothers are beginning to grow apart.



The mention of fainting spells in particular suggests that there's more going with Dad's health than Josh and JB are privy to at this point. This also becomes a moment of coming of age for Josh, as it forces him to be aware of the more adult world of illness and the fact that his parents are mortal humans, not gods.



hy-per-ten-sion. Hypertension is also known as high blood pressure. Josh uses it in a sentence and says that Mom tries to keep Dad from eating salt, as too much salt can cause hypertension. In another sentence, he notes that lots of people can get hypertension, but a person is at a higher risk if someone in their family also has it. Josh thinks his grandfather might've died of hypertension.

To fall asleep. As Josh tries to fall asleep, he counts his **locks** over and over again. He feels like they're "strands of his past."

Why We Only Ate Salad for Thanksgiving. Josh explains that every year, Grandma cooks dinner, but this year, she fell and couldn't cook. Mom's brother, Uncle Bob, fancies himself a chef since he watches Food TV. He decides to cook, but the food is bad: he makes macaroni with no cheese, hard cornbread, and a ham that was green. Mom asks Bob if there are eggs to go with the ham, and Grandma laughs so hard she falls out of her wheelchair.

How Do You Spell Trouble? Josh is busy taking his vocabulary test when JB passes Josh a note to pass along to Miss Sweet Tea, who sits in front. The window is cracked, so Josh watches the wind blow Miss Sweet Tea's hair. He forgets about the test until JB hits him with his pencil. Just as Josh taps Miss Sweet Tea on the shoulder, the teacher notices Josh and the note. Josh wonders whether he should give the teacher the note and embarrass JB, or hide it and take the blame. JB sweats and Miss Sweet Tea smiles. Josh decides to keep the note.

Bad News. Josh sits in Mom's office and reads about the Air Force and the Marines. Mom is busy for an hour dealing with parents, substitute teachers, and broken windows. Finally, she sits next to Josh and says she's not going to suspend him, but Josh won't be able to get into college if he cheats. She suggests he look into the Air Force or the Marines. Josh starts to tell her the truth, but then a pipe bursts in the girls' bathroom. He apologizes and leaves for class.

Gym class. As far as Josh is concerned, gym is supposed to be about balls. Today, however, the teacher leads a course on CPR. Josh doesn't pay any attention to his teacher or the dummy and instead he watches JB and Miss Sweet Tea pass notes. He wonders what's in them, but is interrupted when the teacher invites Josh to assist him. As Josh practices his chest compressions, he thinks that if life is fair, he'll eventually be the one passing notes with a girl while JB practices mouth-to-mouth on a dummy.

Now, everything makes sense to Josh and he understands that Dad is at risk, since Dad's dad presumably died of hypertension. Though Josh doesn't take this a step further, this realization also suggests that Josh and JB are at risk given Dad's current struggle with hypertension.



The locks now symbolize the godlike figure that Dad was to Josh before Josh learned about his hypertension.



Uncle Bob's inability to cook anything truly edible points back to the way that Dad talks about skill and practice. In this case, watching TV isn't enough--if Uncle Bob truly wanted to get good at cooking, he'd need to cook more often than once per year at holidays.



When Josh gets distracted, it shows that he's also attracted to Miss Sweet Tea. However, his choice to keep the note and protect JB shows that deep down, Josh loves his brother and wants him to be happy, even if it's a bit painful at this point. This can also be read as a result of his close twin relationship with JB.



When Josh still doesn't tell Mom the truth, it reinforces just how close he is with JB--he's willing to risk suspension to keep JB's secret safe. When Mom brings up college, it shows that she knows the most effective way to get to Josh is to remind him that his behavior off the court will affect whether or not he can fulfill his dream of playing in college.



It's telling that the gym class where Josh's jealousy begins to take over is one that doesn't include sports. This suggests that Josh relies heavily on basketball--to have an outlet, to connect more deeply with JB, and to have the mentorship relationships he has with Coach and Dad--and in its absence, negative emotions begin to take over.



SECOND QUARTER

Conversation. Josh tries to talk to JB and tell him about playing a pickup game at the rec center earlier. The older guys wouldn't let Josh play until he made a basket from half-court. JB doesn't respond as Josh talks on. Josh says that he scored fourteen points and was told to try out for junior varsity next year, and then asks JB if he's listening. Though JB nods, he continues to type on the computer. Josh figures he's chatting with Miss Sweet Tea. Josh knows that JB hears him, but he thinks that JB is just listening to "his heart bouncing on the court of love."

Conversation. Josh takes his problem to Dad and says that JB is acting weird: he's smiling, he gets spacey when Miss Sweet Tea is around, and he's stealing Dad's cologne and wearing loafers to school. Josh asks Dad to do something, but Dad just laughs. Dad says that talking to JB would be "like pushing water uphill with a rake." Unimpressed, Josh makes one more plea for help, but Dad insists that JB is a lost cause and suggests they get donuts.

Basketball Rule #5. When a player stops playing their game, they've already lost the game.

Showoff. Josh narrates another play-by-play. With six seconds to go, the Wildcats are up sixteen points. JB evades other players to make a shot. Josh calls JB a showoff.

Out of Control. Dad yells at the ref that a kid on the other team was traveling (moving with the ball). Mom isn't at the game, so Dad spends his entire evening yelling at the officials.

Mom calls me into the kitchen. After the game, Mom asks Josh to come into the kitchen. She normally does this to get Josh's opinion on whatever wonderful food she's made, but tonight, there's only a weird dip on the table surrounded by pita chips. Josh wonders if she's having a book club meeting as she asks Josh to sit down. Josh refuses to eat the pita and wonders if there's mac and cheese or fried chicken in the oven.

As JB becomes closer to Miss Sweet Tea, he also begins to move away from Josh. For Josh, this is offensive not just because JB is no longer interested in basketball; it represents a major shift in their sibling relationship. In particular, JB's disinterest in Josh's performance at the game earlier suggests that JB isn't as sold right now on Dad and Josh's idea of success, something that's hard for Josh to wrap his head around.



When Dad demonstrates that he's not concerned about JB's changes, he tries to show Josh that these changes are normal and expected parts of adolescence. In other words, because Dad sees that his boys are growing up, this doesn't come as a shock--while for Josh, who's still very much a kid, this is unacceptable.



This could refer to either Josh or JB: JB isn't playing with Josh the same way, while Josh is becoming more caught up in policing JB and is paying less attention to his own performance.



This change in language (calling JB a showoff) shows that as Josh's attitude sours, his word choice reflects this and reveals his attitude towards his brother.



Yelling at the ref is one way that Dad can continue to feel powerful and successful in a way related to basketball by demonstrating his expertise.



The insights that Josh gives into how his family usually eats shows that their meals of choice aren't ones that are especially friendly to someone with high blood pressure. When Josh wonders if there's something else in the oven, it shows that in every way, he's unwilling to accept change.



Mom fixes Josh with a look when he tries to leave the table and tells him about his grandfather. She says that he died of a stroke and had heart disease. Mom explains that the family has a history of heart problems, so they're going to start eating better. Josh is aghast that they have to start tonight, but Mom asks Josh to not let Dad take him to Pollard's or Krispy Kreme after their rec center outings. Josh understands what she's going for, but isn't convinced hummus is the best way to go about it.

35-18. The score of the Wildcats' first game is 35-18. A reporter from the paper asks JB and Josh how they got so good. Dad takes it upon himself to respond and says they learned from "Da Man." On the way home, Dad suggests they stop at Pollard's. Josh insists he has homework and isn't hungry. In truth, Josh skipped lunch earlier and finished his homework during halftime.

Too Good. Josh thinks that things are going great. He feels like he's winning in lots of places, and to make things even better Mom is away at a conference, which means that the assistant principal is gone as well. Josh is worried though and hears Coach's voice in his head saying that when a person gets used to things going well, they're less prepared when things go wrong.

I'm on Free Throw Number Twenty-Seven. Josh and JB take turns shooting free throws. JB has gotten twelve in a row so far, so Dad laughs and tells Josh to pay attention. Suddenly, a look of horror comes over Dad's face and he leans over. He coughs, but it makes no sound. Josh freezes while JB runs to Dad. When Josh suggests that Dad is overheating, JB grabs the hose and sprays Dad. Dad's coughing starts making noise. He stands, laughs, and grabs the hose to spray his sons. Josh laughs, but he doesn't feel happy.

He probably. When Josh asks JB if he thinks Dad is sick, JB says that Dad probably just got something caught in his throat. Because of this, Josh thinks it's ironic then that JB picks up the phone, says hello, and throws the phone to him. He thinks that JB is speechless, as though there's something caught in his throat.

By letting Josh in on her reasoning, Mom treats Josh like more of an adult and makes him partially responsible for how well the family eats. Josh's displeasure at this indicates again that he's not interested in change like this, especially in light of all the things that are changing now between him and JB.



Josh's lie betrays that even if he's not thrilled about the new meal plan, he shares Mom's concerns and understands the importance of using diet to manage high blood pressure. This is one instance where Josh demonstrates that he is capable of behaving maturely.



Given the reader's view on Josh's life, it's clear that his perspective is somewhat warped to look at things more positively; in reality, he's jealous and Dad's health seems precarious, though it's admirable and mature that he recognizes the dangers of complacency.



Now that Josh has remembered Coach's warning about getting too comfortable to be prepared for bad things, things start to go downhill: though he never explains exactly what's ailing Dad here, it's likely related to his high blood pressure. This tells the reader that Dad is sicker than he's let on thus far, and that the boys don't yet understand this fact.



JB's reasoning suggests that he's not ready to consider the possibility that his dad is ill. This shows that he's maturing at different rates in different areas; while he's moving forward in romance, he's still insisting on childish innocence when it comes to Dad.



i-ron-ic. Ironic means having a strange or funny sequence of events that appear strange or funny because of coincidence. Josh says that it's ironic that Vondie's mom works for NASA, but Vondie hates astronomy. He says it's *not* ironic that his grandfather died in a hospital and now, Dad hates doctors. He also thinks that it's ironic that JB spends all his time showing off, but he's too shy to talk to Miss Sweet Tea.

This Is Alexis--May I Please Speak to Jordan? As Josh accepts the phone, he tells the reader that identical twins are just like everyone else. Sometimes though, they can look and sound just like each other.

Phone Conversation (I Sub for JB). Josh tells Alexis that he's JB and then asks her about her sisters. She says that she's the youngest of three and seems shy when Josh says that she's also the prettiest. Alexis asks if JB got her text and if he has an answer yet. Josh awkwardly says he doesn't know, to which she tells him to stop being silly. Alexis asks about Dad and if the family is rich because he played in the NBA. Josh corrects her that Dad played in Italy and says they're not opulent. When Alexis points out that he never uses big words at school, Josh insists that's to keep up his reputation.

When Alexis asks when JB is going to introduce her to his parents and if she's his girlfriend, Josh covers the mouthpiece and asks JB what he's supposed to say. JB nervously says to say yes and then runs to the bathroom. Josh returns to Alexis's phone call and says that he likes her a lot, so they can be girlfriend and boyfriend. Alexis calls Josh/JB "Precious" and as Josh hangs up, he nearly calls her Miss Sweet Tea. JB runs out of the bathroom and asks what she said. When Josh says that Alexis said that she likes him a lot, JB corrects him that she likes JB a lot.

JB and I. Josh and JB usually eat lunch together every day. They argue about everything from basketball players to what brand of shoes is the best. Today, however, Josh sits alone at the lunch table. Vondie is home sick, so Josh feels very alone when he watches JB saunter into the cafeteria holding Miss Sweet Tea's hand.

Boy walks into a room. JB and Miss Sweet Tea walk over slowly. JB greets Josh by calling him Filthy McNasty, which he does all the time. This time, however, it sounds different. Both JB and Miss Sweet Tea snicker like they have an inside joke and "Filthy McNasty" is the punch line.

Again, Josh's choice to integrate a vocabulary word into his narration shows how seriously he takes school and English class specifically. Then, when he uses *un-ironic* to describe his family's history with high blood pressure, it shows that he's putting the pieces together to be able to truly understand the contours of his family's history.



Note that the first time the reader learns Miss Sweet Tea's name is a time when it's implied that she said it--Josh never names her as she's less important to him as a person.



The fact that Josh taking the phone for JB even works at all speaks to the strength of the relationship the boys have. While this makes it more understandable why Josh feels threatened by Miss Sweet Tea's interest in JB, it's also telling that JB is willing to use his brother to get out of this difficult conversation. This suggests that JB's not taking into account how awkward or difficult this might be for Josh.



The conversation between Josh and JB at the end makes it very clear that Josh is jealous and has a crush on Miss Sweet Tea as well--but in this case, his twin relationship allows him to recover from this misstep without too much trouble. However, this also reminds Josh that right now, he's not the favorite twin, which likely contributes to his growing sense of inadequacy.



Because Josh is a twin, he likely hasn't spent much time alone at all. This forced solitude separates Josh from JB, as well as from his confidence, his friends, and his hope that Miss Sweet Tea might choose him.



Laughing at Josh's nickname is a way for JB and Miss Sweet Tea to demonstrate their loyalty to each other. For Josh, however, it's even more hurtful than it might be otherwise since JB is showing him he's no longer loyal to his brother.



At practice. That afternoon, Coach tells the team that they need to work on their mental game. Essentially, if they think they can win, they will. Rather than running drills, Coach leads the team in meditation. As he meditates, Josh sees a picture of JB in the hospital in his head. He opens his eyes and turns around. JB is looking right at Josh as though he saw a ghost.

Second-Person. Josh walks home alone after practice, which feels strange since he usually walks with JB. He bounces his basketball and wonders what JB and Miss Sweet Tea are doing. Josh goes to the library to work on his report on [The Giver](#), since JB has his copy of the book. He thinks it's unfair that JB is with Miss Sweet Tea instead of with him. He thinks that JB won't eat lunch with him ever again, and that JB is acting like he owns the world.

Third Wheel. Josh walks into the library. He wastes time by looking at music and magazines, and then he pretends to study. When he asks the librarian where he can find [The Giver](#), she asks if he found his friend. Josh thinks it's weird but follows her directions to the second floor. He passes kids waiting in line to check Facebook and sees an old man reading [The Tipping Point](#) in the biography section. Finally, he gets to the Teen Fiction section and finds [The Giver](#). As Josh pulls out the book, he sees Miss Sweet Tea and JB kissing and understands what the librarian was talking about.

tip-ping point. The tipping point is the point at which something shifts into an entirely different position. According to Dad, the tipping point of the U.S. economy was greedy bankers and housing gamblers. Josh is also afraid that Mom will reach her tipping point and ban basketball if he and JB get Cs on their report cards. Josh says that today, at the library, he found his tipping point.

The main reason I can't sleep. Josh can't sleep. Though he's worried about the game tomorrow, concerned about Dad, and hates how his hair feels, he can't sleep mostly because JB is on the phone with Miss Sweet Tea. They giggle and Josh listens to JB tell Miss Sweet Tea that she's the apple of his eye. Josh is exasperated. He tells the reader that he's hungry and wishes he had his own apple.

Surprised. Josh has a plan: he's going to talk to JB about how he's spending all his time with Alexis and ignoring him and Dad. However, Josh's plan is thwarted when he hears a car horn, looks outside, and sees JB jumping into Miss Sweet Tea's dad's car.

The vision of the ghost, and the fact that JB seems to have experienced a similar thing, shows that as difficult as things are for Josh right now, he and JB are still connected in this important brotherly way.



Though Josh's laments are certainly exaggerated, it's important to pay attention to the ways that his forced solitude is making him feel lonely, inadequate, and like he's not being treated fairly. This indicates that Josh relied heavily on JB's companionship, and his identity depended on that partnership to feel whole.



The librarian was referring to having seen JB earlier. When she asks Josh a question intended for JB, it shows again that Josh suffered a major loss in identity when he had to get his locks cut off. The mix-up hurts even more than it might have otherwise since in Josh's eyes, JB is currently on top of the world: he's happy, he has a girlfriend, and he's presumably still doing well on the court.



Again, it's telling that the tipping point for Josh is being mistaken for his happy and partnered brother. This shows that being happy and partnered are things that Josh desperately desires, and that watching JB experience those states is especially galling.



Not having a girlfriend forces Josh to recognize that he's not as mature as JB is, since he's not yet met this milestone. This shows that though Josh says things that suggest he's clinging to childhood, he does actually want to grow up.



Josh's plan is relatively mature, given that he wants to use his words and lay out his case in unemotional terms. However, this also suggests that Josh believes he'll actually be able to change his brother, something that's childishly naïve.



Conversation. While Dad drives Josh to the game, Josh asks if going to the doctor will kill Dad. Dad says he just doesn't trust them. Josh's grandfather trusted doctors and ended up dead at age 45. When Josh points out that, according to Mom, his grandfather was really sick, Dad rolls his eyes. Josh tells Dad that just because a teammate gets fouled, that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep trying to get to the basket. Dad laughs so loudly he almost misses the police lights behind them.

Game Time: 6:00 p.m. Just before 5:30, a police officer pulls Dad over because he has a broken taillight. A minute later, the officer asks Dad for his license and registration. A few minutes after that, the team begins their warm-ups without Josh in preparation for the game. Dad tells the officer that his license is at home in his jacket pocket. Dad finally gives the officer his name and explains that he's driving his son to the basketball game. Josh prays that Dad isn't going to get arrested, knowing that at the exact same moment, Coach is leading the team in a prayer. The cop verifies Dad's identity on Google, asks for an autograph on a Krispy Kreme napkin, and gives Dad a warning. Josh gets to the game at 6:01 but as he's running into the gym, he falls in the mud.

This is my second year. Josh tells the reader that in the two years he's played for the Wildcats, he's started every game. Tonight, however, Coach tells Josh to clean up and then sit on the bench. He doesn't want to listen to Josh's excuses that Dad got pulled over and instead, tells him that being early is always better than being a little bit late. JB and the rest of the team point and laugh at Josh.

Basketball Rule #6. Josh explains that for a team to be truly great, they need both a good scorer and another teammate who's always ready to help out.

Josh's Play-by-Play. By the beginning of the second half, the Wildcats are up, 23-12. Josh is thrilled to get to play, as he knows that when he and JB are both on the court the team is unstoppable. JB, Josh, and Vondie move the ball up the court. JB passes to Josh, who's in the corner. Two players from the other team are in front of Josh. Josh sees that JB is free and thinks of Dad's assessment that if JB is open, he can be trusted to earn points. Josh, however, has his own ideas.

The other two players stick close to Josh. He decides to try to dunk until he realizes his **locks** are gone. Coach, Dad, and the crowd all scream for Josh to pass the ball. JB is still open. Josh dribbles out of the corner and decides that if JB wants the ball that bad, he can have it.

When Josh is able to use what's presumably some of Dad's own basketball wisdom and turn it around on Dad, it shows that Josh is indeed growing up and becoming more mature. It's telling that he's encouraging Dad to go to the doctor, as that suggests that Josh recognizes that caring for one's health is extremely important, and that doctors are an important element in that pursuit.



Josh's fears in this scene allude to the dangers of being black in America. Though this concern isn't something that occupies much of Josh's brain, given what he tells the reader about, this does show that he's aware that as a young black man, he's uniquely disadvantaged and at risk in society. This helps to ground the book in a contemporary setting and also makes some allusions to the other cultural texts Josh is engaging with, such as current civil rights questions and music that deals with police brutality.



The team's behavior only intensifies Josh's feelings of loneliness, as it suggests that like Coach, they're also unwilling to listen empathetically and take Josh's concerns seriously.



This rule drives home the importance of teamwork and trust, as both are necessary for success on the court.



While the beginning of Josh's play-by-play demonstrates that he's still playing as part of the team and celebrates his teammates' strengths, his jealousy starts to come through in the end. By ignoring what he knows about how to use his team and JB specifically to do what's best for the team, Josh shows that what he craves in this moment is solo recognition.



The realization that his locks, which he thinks of as wings, are gone shows that Josh is still struggling with this loss of identity. In this way, it's possible to tie Josh's jealousy to this loss of identity as well.



Before. Josh says that earlier, he walked into the gym covered in mud. JB screamed "FILTHY'S McNasty," and everyone, even Coach, laughed at him. Then, Josh had to sit out for the entire first half, watch JB shine, and listen to the crowd cheer for his brother. He saw JB wink at Miss Sweet Tea after a free throw. Finally, during the second half, things started to go according to plan: JB set Josh up for success but rather than pass, Josh tried to work alone. He then decided to pass to JB. Josh's pass was so fast and strong, it knocked JB over and made his nose bleed.

For Josh, having to hear the crowd cheer for JB was likely even more insulting because even though JB is spending so much of his time with Miss Sweet Tea, he still manages to be a star. This suggests that JB may have more natural aptitude than Josh does, but he's somewhat less inclined to practice and hone his skills.



THIRD QUARTER

After. As the Bell family drives home from the hospital, the car is silent. Mom and Dad are serious, while JB leans his bandaged face against the window. Even though Josh is only two feet away from any of his family members, he feels miles away.

Now that Josh's actions have hurt someone, his sense of loneliness gets even worse. This suggests that the loneliness was easier to deal with when Josh wasn't the one enforcing it.



Suspension. Mom tells Josh to sit down, asks if he'd like a sandwich, and offers him orange soda. Josh thinks all of this is weird and knows that the talking-to is coming. Mom says that this might be Josh's last meal and reminds him that boys without self-control end up in jail. She asks why Josh has been acting so "churlish" and rude the past few weeks. Josh struggles to answer and says he's sorry and didn't mean to hurt JB. Mom asks when Josh became a thug and if he's going to get angry whenever JB has a girlfriend. Josh insists he just got a little upset.

Mom's reminder that behavior like this could land Josh in jail one day again points to the state of race relations in the US--as a black man, Josh is more likely than a white peer to end up in jail for a crime. The fact that Josh was driven to (unintentional) violence at all speaks to the intensity of his feelings, which are made even more intense by the fact that Josh is entering puberty and starting to grow up.



Mom insists that's not acceptable and reminds Josh that he'll need to apologize to JB. Then, she says that there will be consequences and reminds Josh that as he and JB grow up, they're twins, not the same person. Josh says that that doesn't mean that JB has to stop loving him, but Mom isn't impressed. Reminding Josh that JB will always love him and that he could end up in prison if this continues, she tells Josh that he's suspended from the basketball team.

Like Dad, Mom is able to take the long view and believe that this is a temporary phase in her sons' lives. For Josh, however, his world is being turned upside down with Dad's poor health and JB's interest in Miss Sweet Tea, both of which leave Josh feeling alone, so this feels especially fraught for him.



chur-lish. To be churlish means to have a bad temper and to be difficult to work with. Once, when Josh wanted a pair of Stephon Marbury sneakers, Dad insisted that Marbury had a bad attitude and said that Josh didn't want to be associated with someone so churlish. Similarly, Josh doesn't understand how his behavior became so churlish. He also wonders how to apologize to JB for being churlish and almost breaking his nose.

Though Josh is once again able to use his vocabulary words to make his life make more sense, he also indicates that his ability to effectively communicate is waning. Because he's relying on physical communication and violence to express himself, he's less successful and therefore, more upset.



This week, I. Josh gets his report card, makes the honor roll, watches the Wildcats play and win a basketball game. He volunteers at the library, eats alone, and avoids Miss Sweet Tea. During practice, he cleans the garage and does his best to make up for what he did. At dinner Josh sits next to JB, but JB doesn't smile at Josh's jokes. JB doesn't seem to notice when Josh does JB's chores, and he seems to not listen when Josh apologizes.

Basketball Rule #7. Rebounding means being able to anticipate and always being ready to grab the ball. However, in a rebound, it's important that a person doesn't *drop* the ball.

The Nosebleed Section. Josh sits with Mom and Dad in the top row of the bleachers. He thinks that they're in the clouds and that Dad "rains" when the ref is wrong. Mom acts like an umbrella and shuts Dad down. Down on the court, JB is leading the team to victory. During a time-out, Josh tells Dad that JB won't talk to him. Dad suggests that Josh needs to be patient, let things settle down, and maybe write JB a letter in the meantime. When Josh asks Dad what he should say, Dad doesn't answer. He's cheering with the rest of the crowd as JB steals the ball.

Fast Break. JB moves the ball up the court. Josh can tell he's aiming for a basket when JB tries to fake out the opposing team. As JB tries to dunk the ball, an opponent's elbow hits JB and sends him flying to the floor. It's clearly a foul.

Storm. Dad races down the stairs to yell at the ref that what happened to JB was a foul. Josh watches JB and his opponent eye each other and wants to go help Dad, but Mom shoots Josh a piercing look and he stays put. Mom and Coach try to calm Dad down and finally, Mom leads Dad up the stairs again. She takes out a tissue as Dad's nose suddenly starts bleeding.

The next morning. At breakfast the next day, Mom tells Dad to call the doctor or else. Dad apologizes to his family for losing his cool as JB asks if he can go to the mall after practice. Josh points out that they can check out a new video game, but JB doesn't respond. He hasn't spoken to Josh in five days now. Mom tells JB that Josh has apologized "profusely" for his mistake, but JB insists that it wasn't a mistake.

Though Josh offers no insight into JB's thought process, it's worth considering that Josh's violent pass likely came as a surprise and was therefore even more hurtful than it might have been. With this reading, it's easier to see that both boys are currently nursing hurt feelings and likely don't want to be fighting, but don't know how to bridge the gap.



This implies that Josh dropped the proverbial ball when he passed to JB. This also offers hope that, if Josh can catch the ball next time, he might be able to make things better.



Again, Dad's desire to yell at the ref speaks to a desire to feel relevant and useful on the court, even though his playing days are over. His suggestion to write JB a letter again speaks to the power of words and communication. Though Josh never says so outright, this moment also suggests that he may have inherited or learned his love of English from Dad as well.



By staying engaged with the team during his suspension, Josh is able to show them that he still cares for them and wants to support them. This offers some hope that his eventual return will be accepted by all.



Again, Josh's desire to help and be a part of the game in some way speaks to his sense of loyalty to Dad and to the rest of the team, especially JB. Dad's bloody nose is another red flag that his health isn't as good as it should be.



When Dad shifts the conversation to make it about losing his cool rather than his poor health, it shows that he's still trying to ignore his hypertension and wants to keep it a secret from his sons. This sets an example that his health isn't important, which puts Josh and JB at risk.



pro-fuse-ly. Profusely means to pour forth in great quantity. JB, for example, gets nervous and sweats profusely when Miss Sweet Tea is around. The team has also thanked JB profusely for leading them to the playoffs. Mom also said that Dad's blood pressure during the game was so high, his anger at the ref caused his nose to bleed profusely.

Article #1 in the Daily News (December 14). The newspaper reads that the Wildcats won the game against Olive Branch Junior High, and that the team seemed unhurt by Josh's absence. JB instead led the team to victory. The team will start to fight for the county trophy next week, though they'll do so without Josh "Filthy McNasty" Bell. The paper names Josh their Most Valuable Player (MVP).

Mostly everyone. Most of Josh's classmates congratulate him on being selected the MVP by the *Daily News*. Miss Sweet Tea, however, yells at Josh that he's mean and doesn't deserve the distinction, especially after what he did to JB. Josh and JB look at each other after Miss Sweet Tea says this, and Josh waits for JB to defend him. JB, however, says nothing, and Josh thinks that the silence will kill him.

Final Jeopardy. The Bell family eats fruit and watches *Jeopardy*. One of the questions is about basketball. Josh interrupts and reminds his parents that the playoffs are in two days, his grades were good, and the team needs him. JB answers the *Jeopardy* question as he rolls his eyes. Mom points out that she cares about Josh's behavior, not his grades as Dad tries to change the subject by talking about Mom's much-awaited Christmas dinner. He tells a bad joke and after a moment of silence, everyone laughs. Mom and Dad ask JB to bring Miss Sweet Tea to dinner so they can get to know her. JB responds to Mom and Dad, but never even looks at Josh.

Dear Jordan. In a letter to JB, written in two columns that can be read together or separately, Josh says that without his brother, he's empty. His life seems broken now, and he feels as though he doesn't fit anywhere. He asks Jordan to help him and hang out with him again. His postscript reads that he's sorry.

I don't know. Josh isn't sure if JB read his letter, but he does notice that when he teases Vondie on the school bus, JB laughs a little.

Josh's choice to apply this word to three very different areas of his life brings all of what he's currently worried about--JB, basketball, and Dad--together, illustrating again how language allows Josh to effectively construct his identity and his life.



Being named the MVP even though he's currently suspended speaks to how good a player Josh is. In particular, it begins to align him with Dad, who is still highly regarded even though he's also not playing.



JB's choice to side with Miss Sweet Tea is an overt way to show Josh that he's still angry and not willing to make up. The silence Josh refers to is also a metaphor for JB himself, which turns it around to mean that Josh feels he'll die without his brother too.



Mom and Dad's choice to turn the conversation to JB and his relationship with Miss Sweet Tea shows again that they understand his new relationship is a normal part of his coming of age. This is also an attempt to make Josh understand this, since Josh's narration implies that he doesn't see JB's relationship as something normal or expected.



Josh's letter offers the reader multiple ways to read it, though each way offers the same main point: Josh's loneliness is killing him, and he misses his brother.



Showing this tiny bit of positive regard suggests that JB is now willing to listen to Josh and rebuild their relationship.



No Pizza and Fries. Josh thinks that Mom is cruel for packing him a spinach and tofu salad. However, the salad isn't as cruel as the look he receives from Miss Sweet Tea.

Even Vondie. Vondie has a girlfriend now too. She wants to be a doctor but for now, she's a candy striper and a cheerleader. She thinks that Vermont has the best tomatoes and says that purple is her favorite color. Josh already knew this; her hair is purple. Still, Josh reasons that even having Vondie's girlfriend would be better than not having a girlfriend. Josh still doesn't have a girlfriend.

Uh-oh. One afternoon, while Josh is on the phone with Vondie discussing the chances of Josh playing this season, Josh hears someone panting in his parents' room. He tells the reader that they don't own a dog.

I run into Dad's room. Josh runs to investigate the panting. He finds Dad on the floor cleaning a spot that smells like vomit. Dad explains that he ate something bad and then sits on the bed, holding his chest. Dad tries to change the conversation, but Josh knows there's something wrong. Dad shows Josh a letter offering him a coaching gig at a college. Josh is concerned about what this means for his family--Dad won't be around to play basketball with him and JB if he's working.

Dad assures Josh that he and JB are mature enough to be okay and asks why Josh is suddenly so concerned about him getting a job. Josh points out that Dad doesn't need to work since he made so much money playing as a young man, and Mom thinks he should take it easy. Calling Josh "Filthy," Dad says he needs to get back on the court, and he laughs when Josh asks Dad to call him by his real name. Josh asks if Dad is going to take the job. Dad says he misses the smell of the balls and the experience of beating players who think they're good enough to beat him. He says he'll take it if Mom lets him.

Josh tells Dad that since it means so much to him, he'll ask Mom about the job on Dad's behalf. He does point out that Mom is really worried. Dad corrects himself to say "Josh" instead of "Filthy" and laughs at Josh's concern. Josh asks if Dad will talk to Mom about letting him play in the playoffs, as he feels like he's letting the team down. Dad points out that Josh let his family down too but as Josh asks Dad what he should do, Mom interrupts. She sees Dad holding his chest and sends Josh to set the table, a look of panic on her face.

Though Miss Sweet Tea didn't intend to pull the boys apart, she now feels compelled to do so since her loyalty lies with JB and not at all with Josh.



Josh's assessment that Vondie's girlfriend (who he appears to think little of) is better than being single speaks to Josh's intense desire to join his friends in reaching this milestone. In other words, the loneliness is one thing, but feeling left behind in this regard is even more painful.



Now that Josh understands that Dad is ill, this strange panting raises alarms--which shows that Josh is growing up and becoming more aware of his surroundings.



When Dad holds his chest, it's a signal that he's not okay and he's likely lying to Josh. Excitement--like what Dad might have felt upon receiving this letter--likely raised his blood pressure and made him vomit, which indicates that Dad is even sicker than he's letting on. Symptoms like this suggest that Dad is at high risk for a heart attack or a stroke.



Josh's concern that Dad won't be around to parent him shows again that he's still very much a kid and isn't ready to grow up yet. However, by asking Dad to call him by his real name instead of "Filthy," Josh begins to take control of the kind of person he wants to be going forward by dictating how people talk about him. This illustrates how a person can use language to shape their identity.



The fact that Dad does his best to correct himself and call Josh what he wants to be called shows that Dad is happy to show Josh the same kind of understanding that he showed JB when he asked him to invite Miss Sweet Tea for dinner. He wants the boys to be their own people, and he wants them to know that becoming someone different is okay and expected.



Behind Closed Doors. Mom yells that she and Dad decided that he wouldn't play basketball. She won't listen when he insists it's just coaching and is extremely angry when Dad tries to say he's seen the doctor--in actuality, he just reads WebMD. Mom points out that reading articles isn't going to save Dad's life, but Dad says he's done talking. Mom threatens to make Dad an appointment and insists he's going crazy. When Dad says he's crazy for Mom and they stop talking, Josh knows what's going on.

The girl who stole my brother. Josh decides that he's now going to call Miss Sweet Tea "The girl who stole my brother." Maddeningly, when she comes for dinner, she asks for seconds of Mom's veggie lasagna. To make matters worse, JB even asks for more salad. JB is more than happy to tell Mom how he and Miss Sweet Tea met. He explains that on her first day of school, she approached them, they talked about basketball, and Vondie said she was hot. JB says that he thought she was pulchritudinous. At that, JB looks at Josh and smiles a little. It's the first time he's acknowledged Josh in fifteen days.

Things I Learn at Dinner. Josh learns all sorts of things about Miss Sweet Tea at dinner. She's been to a girls' Nike Hoops camp and can name a bunch of champions. Her dad went to college with Shaquille O'Neal, but her parents are divorced now. She lives with her dad and her mom doesn't like that she plays basketball. Her sister, who is in college, goes to Duke.

Dishes. When Josh is finished cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, Mom comes in. Josh asks when Dad has his appointment with the doctor and when Mom scolds Josh for eavesdropping, he insists he gets it from her. Mom laughs and says that Dad's appointment is next week. Josh asks if, since school is out next week, he could go to the doctor with them. After Mom agrees to think about it, Josh hugs her and thanks her for loving them, letting them play basketball, and being the best mother. Mom tells Josh that if he keeps this up, he'll get to play again soon. She does tell him that a hug isn't enough to get him into the playoff game tomorrow.

Coach's Talk Before the Game. For the playoff game, Josh decides to sit with the team on the bench instead of in the bleachers. Coach tells the team that they've won ten games in a row now, and points out that the only difference between winning and losing streaks is one game. He encourages the rest of the team to step up since Josh isn't playing. Josh watches JB lead the team onto the court. As the game starts, Josh looks up and notices that Mom and Dad aren't in the bleachers. He turns back to the court and meets JB's eyes. He thinks they both look like they've just seen a ghost.

Given that Dad's dad died in the hospital of hypertension, it's understandable that Dad is unwilling to seek help out of fear. However, this also means that Dad then isn't properly managing his condition, which puts him at risk of ending up in the hospital for an emergency. The fact that Josh is listening offers hope that, given what he's seen, he'll take Mom's side and take better care of himself in the future.



When JB asks for seconds of salad, it shows that he recognizes that eating well is a good way to impress girls. Josh's exasperation with JB then suggests that he hasn't made this leap yet, even as he recognizes that diet is a good way to control Dad's high blood pressure. Then, by using Josh's word and sharing a smile with his brother, JB is able to say that he's willing to reopen lines of communication and reconnect with his brother.



The fact that Miss Sweet Tea's sister attends Duke, the college that Josh wants to one day attend, suggests that Josh might actually like Miss Sweet Tea if he were willing to get to know her. This begins to show Josh that if he starts to make amends with her, he might also get JB back.



Josh's concern and desire to go to Dad's doctor's appointment show that he's continuing to grow up and become more interested in other people aside from himself. He also likely recognizes that by hearing what the doctor has to say, he'll be able to better help Mom in encouraging Dad to make healthy choices. In other words, this interest shows that Josh recognizes that the doctor isn't bad, and that unlike Dad he knows he should trust the doctor/



Seeing the proverbial ghost again suggests that things are about to change. With Dad no longer in the bleachers, it suggests that he'll be the one in trouble this time, while JB was the one who suffered last time. As with the last time this happened, sharing this look allows the boys to feel unified and as though they're a team in whatever's to come.



Josh's Play-by-Play. The Wildcats are down by three and not doing well. Vondie brings the ball up the court, but the defense presses close. Vondie passes to JB, who holds onto the ball as long as possible. He shoots but the ball bounces off the rim. The Wildcats lose the first half, and Josh thinks they must miss him.

For Josh, having to sit out and watch his team struggle shows him first how hard they've worked--Vondie and JB are still doing reasonably well--but it also shows Josh what an integral part of the team he was and with this, helps reaffirm his desire to get back on the court.



Text Messages from Mom, Part One. Around 7 pm, Mom texts Josh to say that she and Dad went out for some fresh air since Dad wasn't feeling well. A few minutes later, she says that they're going to go home. At 7:45, she asks about the score and how JB is doing, and then assures Josh that the second half will be better. She tells Josh to get a ride home with either Coach or Vondie, to say hi to Miss Sweet Tea (whom she calls by her real name, Alexis), and that she thinks Dad's okay. Mom amends this and says Dad is fine. Dad asked her to tell Josh that the boys shouldn't come home if they lose.

Mom's amendment in particular betrays that this is likely more serious than she's letting on. In this way, she tries to distract Josh by talking about anything else to keep him from worrying about Dad. Dad's message does much the same thing, though it seems much more in character for Dad. This again shows how Dad prioritizes basketball over his health.



The Second Half. Vondie passes to JB, who expertly moves the ball up the court and makes a basket. JB is playing splendidly and Josh feels like he, Coach, and Miss Sweet Tea are JB's "choir." Josh cheers as JB leads the Wildcats to victory and earns them a place in the championship game.

As Josh begins to think of himself as a member of a choir and finds the ability to cheer for JB, he also begins to recognize that the rest of the team is made up of players who are also very good and deserving of recognition.



Tomorrow Is the Last Day of School Before Christmas Vacation. Josh is studying by himself. JB is too, which worries Josh: tomorrow is the big vocabulary standards test. In an aside, he asks the reader to not say the word "standards" around Mom, as she thinks they're silly. After the game, Josh studies all his vocabulary words and the clues he made up to remember them. To remember what heirloom means, Josh says that Dad treats his **championship ring** like a family heirloom, and that Josh and JB can't wear it until one of them becomes "Da Man." While JB is in the bathroom, Josh puts eight pages of vocabulary words on JB's pillow. He listens as JB climbs into bed and quietly says "thanks."

By bringing up Dad's championship ring again, Josh reminds the reader that his goal in life is to one day be good enough to wear the ring. Though Josh still thinks highly of Dad, now that he's aware of Dad's unwillingness to care for his health, it suggests that becoming "Da Man" might not be the entirely positive endeavor that Josh once thought it was. When Josh tells the reader about Mom's dislike of standards and giving JB the vocabulary words, Josh demonstrates his growing maturity and that he cares for others.



Coach comes over. During lunch, Coach sits down at Josh's table with a McDonald's lunch. He gives a fry each to Josh and Vondie and then tells Josh that he and JB need to stop fighting. Coach explains that when he was in high school, he and his brother got into a bad fight. He says they've been estranged ever since and asks Josh if that's what he wants. Josh shakes his head, so Coach tells Josh to fix things fast. He also tells Josh to give Mom something nice for Christmas; she's agreed to let Josh back on the team if they make it to the championship game.

While it's unclear if Coach is also a twin, his advice still shows that he understands the power of the sibling relationship to either move mountains or destroy everything. This suggests that as Josh and JB grow up, part of their coming of age will be having to learn to accept each other as they grow rather than just deciding to grow apart.



es-tranged. Josh defines "estranged" as a time when one person becomes a stranger to someone who they used to be close to, like a friend or a loved one. Josh thinks that Miss Sweet Tea's divorced parents are estranged. He thinks that when he threw the ball at JB, he felt estranged from himself. He also shares that even though he and JB are currently estranged, Dad is going to make them play together in a tournament at the rec center tomorrow.

School's Out. On the last day of school before winter break, Mom works late so Dad picks up Josh and JB. The boys still aren't talking, but they both laugh at Dad's jokes. When JB asks what they're getting for Christmas, Josh points out that they always get books. Again, the boys laugh. Dad reminds them that their talent will help them win games, but intelligence will help them win at life. JB notes that that's a quotation from Michael Jordan. Dad tells the boys that because they've done so well in school, they can choose something extra as a gift for Christmas. JB and Josh look out the window at the mall at the same moment. Josh knows what JB wants, so he asks if they can stop at the sneaker store. JB echoes Josh's request.

The Phone Rings. Josh answers the phone since Mom is decorating the tree and Dad is outside shooting free throws. Miss Sweet Tea asks if she can speak to JB, but Josh explains that he's busy. Josh realizes now why JB is on his second shower and tells the reader that JB usually doesn't even take a single shower.

Basketball Rule #8. Sometimes, a player needs to lean back and fade into the background in order to get the best shot.

When we get to the court. At the rec center, Josh challenges Dad to a warm-up game. Dad agrees and hits Josh in the chest with the ball--Josh was distracted while watching JB and Miss Sweet Tea holding hands. Dad tells "Filthy" to pay attention but corrects himself to say "Josh" instead. Josh focuses and plays well, making a basket as JB and Miss Sweet Tea come to watch. Josh starts his crossover, but Dad steals the ball. Dad taunts Josh before starting his own crossover that Josh can't keep up with. Dad laughs, but stops suddenly.

Dad's decision to make the boys play together speaks to Dad's belief that the boys' shared love of basketball might be enough to help them turn their relationship around. In other words, just as the boys have choices in regards to their basketball success, they also have the choice to make up or continue their feud.



Notice that Josh hasn't said anything about being particularly interested in sneakers himself; that's JB's thing. Because of this, his request to stop at the sneaker store becomes something he does purely to show JB he sees him and cares about him and the things he's interested in. When JB seems willing to laugh and agrees with Josh's request, it suggests that he sees this as the olive branch that it is and is now willing to start to move forward.



The realization that JB is masturbating in the shower again shows Josh that JB is developing much faster than he is, though the lack of judgment in Josh's tone suggests he's becoming more used to the idea of JB changing.



As Josh continues to cast himself as the helper in the family, he begins to see that doing so will actually allow him to be more successful.



Again, Dad's willingness to call Josh by his name shows that Dad respects that both of his sons are growing, changing, and taking control of their identities in perfectly normal ways. When he's able to steal the ball out of Josh's crossover, it speaks to the skills he still has on the court and the progress that Josh still has to make in order to become "Da Man."



At Noon in the Gym, with Dad. People watch Dad and Josh play. Josh does well and is up by five points, but Dad steals the ball. Dad winks and as he starts his crossover, Josh falls. As Dad heads for the hoop, he stumbles. People scream and then stand still. Dad falls, his eyes roll, and Josh screams. Miss Sweet Tea calls 911 while JB brings water and splashes it on Dad's face. Dad doesn't stir. Remembering gym class, Josh performs CPR on Dad as he hears sirens coming.

Dad's heart attack here makes it clear that Mom is right: Dad shouldn't play anymore if he wants to preserve his health. As Josh and JB take over caring for their father, the tables turn and suddenly, they're thrown into adult roles. This indicates that coming of age can happen suddenly and horrifically at times.



FOURTH QUARTER

The doctor pats Jordan and me on the back and says. The doctor tells JB and Josh that Dad will be fine; they'll be fishing again soon. Josh petulantly says they don't fish, which makes Mom give Josh a look. Then, the doctor tells Mom that the myocardial infarction has caused complications and Dad is in a coma. Sobbing, JB asks if Dad will be home for Christmas. The doctor says that if they talk to Dad, it might help him come back. Josh says that they're not in a talking mood, and Mom scolds Josh. All Josh can think is that he shouldn't be here. He should be getting ready to play in the semifinals instead of at the hospital, wondering why he has to "push water uphill with a rake" and talk to someone who isn't listening. He's missing the biggest game of his life.

Josh's anger and petulance shows that he's much more like Dad than the novel has thus far given him credit for: despite his struggles with free throws, Josh still prioritizes basketball over health. JB's emotionality, on the other hand, suggests that he's beginning to shift in the opposite direction. It's especially telling that Josh isn't willing to talk to Dad because Dad might not be listening; this shows that Josh is burnt out on trying to talk to people who won't respond to him, as JB has done for the last several weeks.



my-o-car-di-al in-farc-tion. A myocardial infarction occurs when blood flow to one area of the heart is blocked, which results in that part of the heart muscle suffering damage or dying. JB says that now, he hates basketball because it was the thing that Dad loved the most, and it caused his myocardial infarction. The doctor sees Josh looking up the symptoms, which include sweating, vomiting, and nosebleeds, and points out that they're not sure what causes a myocardial infarction. Josh asks the doctor about doughnuts, fried chicken, and genetics. The doctor leaves without answering. Josh thinks that Dad's in a coma because he had a myocardial infarction. Josh's grandfather died of this. Josh wonders what this means for him and JB.

Josh's snarky response to the doctor's attempts to comfort him show that he's taken Mom's attempts to control Dad's diet to heart. Even if Josh continues to prioritize basketball over receiving necessary medical treatment in the future, this understanding suggests that Josh at the very least understands that he has this one method of protecting himself. When he wonders what this means for him and JB, it shows that Josh also recognizes that he hasn't just inherited basketball aptitude from Dad: he's likely inherited a predisposition to hypertension.



Okay, Dad. Josh decides to talk to Dad, even though he's been told that Dad might not be able to hear him. He asks Dad when he decided to jump ship; he thought Dad was "Da Man." Josh promises that if the team makes it to the finals, he's not going to miss the game for a "small maybe."

The "small maybe" refers to the possibility that Dad can't even hear Josh. Josh's tone here suggests that he's struggling to face the realization that Dad isn't actually a god; he's fallible like anyone else.



Mom, since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm so angry. Josh is angry because Dad tried to dunk and Josh wants to win a championship, but he can't do it in the hospital. He's angry because Dad promised he'd be here forever. Josh thought that forever was far away, but he knows now forever is close. JB doesn't talk about basketball, cut Josh's hair and didn't care, and is always with Miss Sweet Tea. Josh feels empty without his **locks** and thinks that CPR doesn't work. He reasons that if his crossover had been better, Dad wouldn't have gotten the ball and ended up in the hospital. He says that their **backboard** is splintered.

Text Messages from Vondie. After the game, Vondie sends several texts to Josh. He explains that the game went into double overtime. Coach called a time-out and the team did a special chant on the sideline. It was creepy but it worked--the Wildcats won and dedicated the game ball to Dad. He asks if Josh and JB are coming to practice, if Dad's okay, and if Josh is there.

On Christmas Eve. Dad wakes up. He smiles at Mom, gives JB a high five, and then looks Josh in the eye. He says he didn't jump ship.

Santa Claus Stops By. The Bell family celebrates Christmas in Dad's hospital room with relatives from five different states. Mom sings and Dad plays cards with his brothers. Uncle Bob's turkey and pound cake are horrendous, but the Santa at the hospital gets everyone to sing. Josh thinks that all the joy is ruining his mood; he thinks he doesn't remember how to be happy. After two hours, Mom kicks the relatives out and after they leave, Dad calls JB and Josh to the bed.

Dad reminds the boys of how, when they were seven, JB wanted to swing. All the swings were filled, so Josh pushed a kid out of a swing so JB could take it. He says that Josh's behavior was bad, but his intentions were good. He tells the boys he wants them to always be there for each other. JB starts crying, so Mom takes him for a walk. Josh and Dad stare at each other in silence for ten minutes until finally, Josh says he has nothing to say. Dad says that they're both trying not to say the things they want to say. He suggests that they ask each other questions until they get answers. Josh agrees.

Again, the anger that Josh feels has mostly to do with all the ways that his life is changing before his eyes: JB has a girlfriend, Dad suddenly seems unreliable, and he questions his own skills since he blames Dad's heart attack on his ineptitude. By referring to Dad as the backboard, Josh is able to tell Mom how much he relies on Dad to keep the family together and on the right track.



These texts show Josh that even if he feels alone, he has others who are around to look out for him and care for him. This suggests that if Josh were willing to look outside of JB, he'd find more support than he imagined was there.



Dad's insistence that he didn't abandon Josh shows Josh that Dad is still dedicated to being there for his family.



Uncle Bob's food again shows that a person needs to practice in order to get good at something, while Josh's mood speaks to the feeling he has that nothing is right. For him, all this change is happening so fast and he's unable to properly cope with it. This statement can then be expanded to apply to the entire novel, as Josh's primary struggle is to adapt to change and his challenging emotions.



Dad's advice to his sons makes it seem as though he doesn't expect to be around much longer to hold them to what he's telling them, while JB's tears suggests that he picks up on this. By leveling with Josh and suggesting questioning each other, Dad again shows Josh that he respects his growing maturity and understands that he needs to be treated like more of an adult in order to get through these challenges.



Questions. Dad asks if Josh has been practicing his free throws, but Josh responds by asking why Dad didn't go to the doctor. Dad asks when the big game is, and Josh asks why he never took him and JB fishing. Dad asks if JB still has a girlfriend. Josh wants to know if Dad is going to die and why he couldn't save him, reminding Dad that he kept performing CPR. Dad points out that Josh *did* save him; he's alive.

Dad jokes about how horrible Uncle Bob's turkey was, but Josh doesn't think it's funny. Josh asks if the family is falling apart, but Dad puzzlingly replies by asking if he should still write a book. Josh isn't sure how this applies and asks again if Dad's going to die. Dad just tells Josh that he loves him. When Josh points out that the big game is tomorrow, Dad wants to know if he and JB will play. Josh points out that JB won't play as long as Dad is in the hospital and asks Dad to come home. Dad explains that he had a heart attack and he needs to stay in the hospital so they can fix him. He calls Josh "Filthy," and Josh asks who's going to fix *his* heart.

Tanka for Language Arts Class. Josh writes that his Christmas wasn't merry, and he's not happy in the new year either. Dad's still in the hospital and has been for nineteen days.

I don't think I'll ever get used to. Josh thinks he'll never get used to all the things he has to do alone. He walks home from school alone, listens to Lil Wayne and goes to the library alone, shoots free throws and eats donuts alone. He's alone because JB is in love and Dad is in the hospital.

Basketball Rule #9. If the game is close and on the line, a player shouldn't be afraid. Instead, a player should get the ball and "take it to the hoop."

As we're about to leave for the final game. Mom's phone rings and she shrieks. She runs past the boys' room and when JB asks, she explains that Dad had another heart attack. She's going to the hospital and promises to see the boys at the game before getting in her car. Josh asks JB what they should do, but JB just cries. He gets his bike and rides away to follow Mom to the hospital. Josh hears the clock ticking and hears Dad's voice in his head, telling him to play in the game. Josh gets into the car with Vondie and they drive to the championship game.

Notice that while Josh's questions speak to the bigger questions he's trying to answer over the course of the novel (such as health, Dad's role in the family, and Josh's ability to do useful things), Dad's questions fixate on basketball. Even in such poor health, Dad shows his son that basketball is still where his heart is.



By asking if Josh and JB will play in the championship game, Dad implicitly gives Josh permission to decide for himself whether or not to play. In doing so, he treats Josh like an independent adult and tells him that he'll support him in his decisions, whatever they may be. Further, Dad's insistence that he needs to stay in the hospital suggests that he may finally understand the importance of caring for his health, or at least accept that he's no longer capable of refusing help.



Now, Josh experiments with a different style of poetry to express his anger, showing again that he's willing to draw from anything to express himself.



Despite Josh's worry that he'll never get used to this, his lessening anger and the small steps he's made with JB suggest that he is actually starting to adjust to JB's changes.



For Josh, this rule will help him decide to play in the championship game. He knows his team needs him, and he knows Dad would prioritize basketball.



Again, the decisions that Josh and JB make in this moment align Josh with Dad and JB with Mom in fundamental ways: Josh continues to prioritize the game and takes Dad at his word, while JB prioritizes Dad's health and the health of the family. Then, when Josh gets in the car with Vondie, it shows him expanding his support network to include someone other than JB.



During warm-ups. Josh plays poorly during warm-ups. Coach assures Josh that if he wants to be at the hospital with his family, he should go. Josh cuts Coach off, assures him that Dad is going to be okay, and says that Dad wants him to play. He asks if a deaf person can write music. Coach shakes his head and tells Josh to sit down. Instead, Josh goes to the locker room to check his texts from Mom.

Text Messages from Mom, Part Two. Mom texts Josh and says that Dad is having complications, but he'll pull through and sends his love. She sends Josh luck and says that she made JB go to the game to support the team. She reminds Josh to not get lazy on his crossover.

For Dad. Josh's free throw rolls around the rim, but finally goes through the net. The Wildcats are up by one with eleven seconds to go. The other team scores another point and Josh feels as though things start moving in slow motion. Coach calls time-out with five seconds left, and Josh wishes the ref could stop the clock on his life. He wants to play one more game and is afraid that Dad is dying. Suddenly, Josh sees JB and Miss Sweet Tea behind the Wildcats' bench. JB is crying. The whistle blows and Josh has the ball. He starts crying too.

The Last Shot. Josh feels like he has lightning on his shoes as he dribbles the ball down the court. The crowd roars for Josh to "take it to the hoop." Josh performs his crossover, evades the other team, and makes a basket, just as the game ends.

OVERTIME

Article #2 in the Daily News (January 14). The paper writes that Charlie "Da Man" Bell (Dad) collapsed in a basketball game with Josh. He suffered complications and died of a massive heart attack in the hospital. He suffered from hypertension and fainted three times in the months before he collapsed. The autopsy revealed that Dad's heart was large and scarred. Dad refused to see a doctor. As a younger man, Dad chose to end his career as a pro player rather than undergo knee surgery. He was known for his crossover and was the captain of a winning team in Italy. He's survived by his wife (Mom) and his twin sons, Josh and JB. The boys recently won their first county championship. Dad was 39.

By bringing up one of Dad's favorite lines, Josh is able to comfort himself and remind himself that he's capable of playing in the game. When Coach tries to give Josh a choice in whether or not to play, it shows that he recognizes the magnitude of Josh's decision to play.



Though it's unclear if Mom is telling the truth or not, insisting that Dad will pull through allows Josh to focus on the game and follow in Dad's footsteps, just like Dad wants him to do.



The fact that JB comes to the game and is so upset tells Josh that there's no longer a reason for JB to be with Dad--Dad is gone. When Josh starts crying after seeing JB and Miss Sweet Tea, it again shows that even though they haven't made up completely yet, they're still connected to each other and can communicate nonverbally, as Josh's tears suggests he knows Dad died.



When Josh helps the team win with his crossover, it shows him finally living up to Dad's expectations and perfecting Dad's signature move--with Dad gone, Josh has to carry on for him.



This article memorializes Dad as a basketball legend by spending so much time on Dad's career in Italy and mentioning the crossover specifically. However, by mentioning Dad's refusal to see the doctor, the damage his heart suffered, the patellar tendinitis, and the fact that he died at 39, the paper also seeks to impress upon readers the importance of seeking medical attention for conditions like this.



Where Do We Go from Here? Josh thinks that there are no coaches or comforting game rituals at funerals. He feels unprepared for death, since there aren't rules and there's no referee. He listens to Dad's teammates tell funny stories and thinks that the choir's songs almost cover up Mom's sobs. Mom refuses to look in the coffin. Dad is gone "like the end of a good song." JB and Josh each grab one of Mom's hands as the service ends. They step into the limo outside.

star-less. Josh defines "starless" as a state of being without stars. Josh says that if he and JB try out for Junior Varsity next year, the Wildcats will be starless. Last night, Josh watched the "starless" Portland Trailblazers lose to Dad's favorite team, the Lakers. Now that Dad is gone, Josh feels like his world is starless.

Basketball Rule #10. Losing is inevitable, but true champions figure out how to dance through storms.

There are so many friends. Everyone crowds into the Bells' house. Josh steps outside and listens to John Coltrane and Jay-Z coming from inside. Mom smiles and asks Josh to pick up the ringing phone. It's Miss Sweet Tea, whom Josh now calls Alexis. She apologizes for not being at the funeral, which makes Josh confirm that she knows it's him, not JB. Playfully, she says that JB is loud and Josh always sounds quiet on the phone. This makes Josh laugh. Alexis offers condolences as Josh starts to try to apologize. She cuts him off but says that her sister has tickets to see Duke play North Carolina. Before she can even vocalize the entire invitation, Josh accepts. Coach hugs Josh and knocks the phone to the floor.

Josh heads back outside. On his way out, Mom kisses him and gives him a piece of sweet potato pie. She also asks where JB is. Josh says she's probably with Miss Sweet Tea, thinking that if he had a girlfriend, he'd be with her too. However, Josh is single, so he thinks he'll have to make do with the next best thing.

Free Throws. Josh finishes his dessert in four mouthfuls and then fishes the ball from where it's stuck, wedged between the rim and the **backboard**. He knows that this means JB has been trying and failing to dunk. Josh dribbles to the free throw line and thinks that Dad once made 50 free throws in a row. Josh's record is nineteen. Josh makes his first attempt and then looks to see if anyone is watching. Nobody's around.

When Josh tells the reader why funerals and death are so difficult, it again shows that, like Dad, Josh relies heavily on basketball and rituals to guide his entire life. Then, by referring to Dad's death as the end of a song, he's able to pull in his love of music again to underscore that even in this time of grief, Josh is still pulling from all arenas to describe his experiences.



Because Dad was Josh's role model, Josh feels now like he has nobody living to look up to and model his behavior after. This speaks to the success Dad had in focusing his sons on basketball; Josh doesn't consider that Dad also set a poor example in terms of health.



Dad would, in Josh's estimation, want him to figure out how to move on and continue to be successful.



The music choices mirror the musical interests of the entire Bell family, which again explains where Josh is pulling from as he tries to manipulate and form his identity. The fact that Josh refers to Alexis by her name shows that he's now ready to accept her as a fully fledged person in her own right, especially if she's willing to invite him to this basketball game. With this, the novel suggests that Josh has learned that to have JB, he needs to accept the people that JB loves.



To add to the sense that Josh has learned to accept JB's changes, Josh now indicates that he understands why JB is acting the way he is. By choosing to engage with the next best thing, Josh also shows that he's learning to deal with this forced independence.



The place where the ball is stuck thanks to JB points to the fact that right now, JB also feels stuck and lost. Both boys, in other words, will take time to recover from losing their dad and just as JB tried and failed to dunk, they'll try and fail along the way as they begin to heal and move forward.



Josh makes the next twelve shots and thinks of them as the years of his life. Each one represents a year that he had with Dad. By the time Josh gets to free throw number 27, he's making them with his eyes closed. When he gets to number 49, he's barely aware that he's going to get 50; he just feels closer to Dad. Josh hears Dad ask if he feels better and opens his eyes. It's JB, not Dad.

The boys each ask how the other is and then JB compliments Josh on his crossover at the game last week. Josh asks if JB saw the trophy. JB only nods and Josh understands that JB is still being cautious around him. Josh asks if JB had a chance to speak to Dad before he died. JB says that Dad told him to stay out of his closet and to give Josh his **championship ring**. JB slides the ring onto Josh's finger. Sobbing, Josh asks why. JB says that Josh must be "Da Man" now, but Josh thinks that for the first time, he doesn't want the distinction.

As JB starts to walk away, he says that he bets the dishes that Josh misses the next shot. Josh shouts that they're both "Da Man" and tosses JB the ball. JB dribbles back to Josh and shoots. The ball is like a bird as it flies through the sky and crosses over the boys.

Josh's closed eyes imply that even though he can't see his future, he's sure that it'll include basketball. Further, making it to 50 free throws shows that Josh is truly becoming more like Dad, while mistaking JB for Dad himself shows that JB is undergoing the same transformation.



The fact that Josh is no longer excited to be "Da Man" and earn the championship ring shows that he understands the dangers of emulating his father entirely. As wonderful as Dad was, his unwillingness to care for himself was a fatal flaw that Josh understands he shouldn't cultivate in himself. Further, leaving the ring to one son unwittingly continues to drive the boys apart and showcase their differences.



The ball in this scene becomes a symbol for Dad dying and his role going forward; he'll continue to guide his sons towards basketball. Josh's assertion that they're both "Da Man" shows that he's ready now to make up with JB, apologize, and move forward.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "The Crossover." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Feb 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "The Crossover." LitCharts LLC, February 17, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-crossover>.

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MLA

Alexander, Kwame. *The Crossover*. Houghton Mifflin. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Alexander, Kwame. *The Crossover*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 2014.