Rain and Basketball

I fell in love with the game of basketball when I was 12 years old. By the age of 13, in the 8th grade, I was playing at every opportunity.

During recess at Russellville Elementary School, in Southeast Portland, we played, rain or shine, on a cement floor under the large open-sided rain shelter that had been built on the playground.

It was a rough and tumble pickup game that was interrupted frequently by arguments, sometimes fistfights, over fouls, insults, and other alleged infractions. Most of us played in our street shoes, which, at the time, were the very popular thick-soled black or brown Brogues, fitted with steel cleats, which made a very cool sound as we clicked down the hallways, but made for very poor traction on the smooth cement basketball floor. I was a few months late getting my pair of Brogues, because my mother and I had to wait for a used pair to appear on the shelves of the local thrift shop.

For several weekends two of my friends and I enjoyed playing basketball in the school gymnasium while everyone else was locked out. We had discovered we could climb in through the transom on one of the side doors. We had wild games running and sliding in our stocking feet and keeping three or four basketballs going at once. It was great fun until Mr. Cooper, the Head Custodian, surprised us one Sunday afternoon. We were called in to see a very angry Principal Relfs the next day. He chastised me particularly harshly. “You should be ashamed. What a terrible example for the Student Body President to set for the younger students.” I guess he knew I felt bad enough because he never told my parents or punished me any further.
Each afternoon when I arrived home from school I took out my own basketball and, rain or shine, practiced my set shots, jump shots, hook shots and lay ups. If I didn’t have homework or dishwashing duty, I played after dinner as well. My dad had helped me to attach a home-made plywood backboard and a store-bought regulation hoop at the prescribed 10 foot mark on the side of one of the big Douglas Fir trees that grew behind the rental house we lived in on 126th Street.

The forest floor that served as my basketball court was smooth and well packed, but it was dirt, and when it rained, the clay dust on the ground was transformed to mud and transferred by the ball to my hands and shirtsleeves. As I dribbled back and forth beneath the big trees, the mud on my palms collected to form a solid layer with cracks at the creases between the joints of my fingers-- like the exoskeleton on the tails of crayfish we caught in the Sandy River or the metal skin gloves of the suits of armor I’d seen at the museum in Portland.

One spring evening after dinner, the rain had lightened to a fine drizzle. I was out working on my high post maneuvers, when the girl from across the street appeared around the corner of the house.

“Hi, Danny.”

“Hi, Glenda.” I dribbled in for another lay-up.

“Is Sharon or Elece home?”

“No, I think Mom took them shopping.” I watched the ball roll around the rim and slip down contentedly through the net.
I continued to drive under the basket, laying the ball up underhanded over the front rim, banking it off the right side of the backboard and—showing off a little—hooking the ball up over my head as I dribbled beneath the basket along the baseline.

Glenda stayed. She leaned comfortably against the house, watching me through the scattered drops of water falling from the edge of the porch awning.

“Do you mind if I watch you play for a while?”

“No, I don’t mind.”

I’d been around Glenda quite a bit, but never alone before. Since we had moved to this house a year ago, she had visited my sisters regularly and I had enjoyed watching her laughing and being silly with them. Sometimes, if they needed a fourth person for Monopoly or Canasta, they even allowed me to join them.

I had noticed, even though she was sixteen, Glenda was kind of naïve about certain things. Sometimes Sharon teased her. Like the time we got a new popup toaster. When Sharon found out Glenda had never seen one, she offered to demonstrate it to her. She handed Glenda a plate and told her to stand on the other side of the kitchen and be ready as soon as she put the bread in the toaster, because the toast would come flying through the air. She said Glenda would have to be very fast because you could never tell how far or how fast the toast would sail. And Mom got really mad if the toast fell on the floor. And besides that, the toast would be pretty hot when it came flying out. Well, she got Glenda so worked up, when the toaster finally popped, Glenda wet her pants with excitement.
She was embarrassed and irritated with Sharon for a few minutes, but after Sharon loaned her some clothes to wear so she wouldn’t have to go home right away, she was okay with it.

I pushed off a beautifully arced one-hand set shot from top-of-the-key range. Swish. Didn’t touch the rim.

“You play very well.”

“Thanks.” I felt especially light on my feet as I went straight up in the air with a baseline jump shot.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

Whoa, time out. My next shot missed the rim entirely. While I retrieved the ball I tried to think of a suave answer—something from the movies or from my friends at school.


“What do you think is prettiest about me?”

Dang, another air ball. This time I took even longer to retrieve the ball, which, fortunately, had bounced into a blackberry bush. Boy, what can I say?

By now I’d given up shooting baskets and come to stand a few feet away from her, holding the ball on one hip and looking her up and down—the way I’d seen Gary Cooper do. I am of course stalling. What can I say? Pretty face and nice blonde medium length hair? To be honest, I had recently become especially interested in girls’ breasts and Glenda’s looked pretty neat in her snug-fitting, pink angora sweater. She had her hands
clasped behind her back and she was rotating her upper body a quarter turn back and forth, waiting for my answer. She seemed kind of shy, and bold at the same time.

“Well, um, your face is pretty. And you have a nice bust line.”

“Bust line.” That’s what I’d heard my sisters call breasts. They usually said, “bustline”, as one word, in a tone of admiration and with a slight nod of their heads.

“Well, thank you, Danny.”

I could see a slight smile lifting the corners of her mouth as she glanced down at herself then back up at me.

“Course, my sisters say a lot of girls at Gresham High wear falsies now.”

Turning toward the basket, I added over my shrugged shoulder, “For all I know, yours aren’t real either.”

Actually, I had first heard about falsies when I overheard my mother tell a story about her good friend, Avis. Avis and she had been friends since they met in Vanport, Oregon--a city built in the early years of World War II to house most of the tens of thousands of workers employed in the Portland shipyards. Mom and Avis had worked together as welders.

Avis was hemming my mother’s dress while Mom stood on a chair. Avis didn’t have a pincushion handy, so she had pushed half a dozen straight pins and a threaded needle through her blouse and bra into one of her falsies. Her work was interrupted by a knock at the front door and when she answered it, the neighborhood produce man, who was delivering some fresh eggs, took one wide-eyed look at her breast, stumbled back from the door, and nearly fainted.
“I don’t wear falsies,” Glenda responded, her chin jutting out and her fists clenched by her sides. After a moment her face softened and she crossed her arms in front, as if to underline the topics under discussion.

Rising to the challenge, I stopped and turned toward her, spinning the ball between my two mud-caked palms.

“I wish I could believe you. You look like you have a really nice figure.”

My mind was off and running. I even thought of a line that the guys in my 8th grade class were using with girls on the playground. “If I told you you had a nice figure, would you hold it against me?” But I rejected this as too diverting from the direction I hoped we were going. Glenda’s voice brought me back.

“I do. I mean, they are real. Why don’t you believe me?”

She stepped forward. I stopped palming the ball.

“Well, maybe if I could look at them, I’d believe you.” What the heck, I might as well go for a full-court press.

I waited. A soft rustle from the tops of the trees settled into the silence between us.

“Well, OK. But I’m leaving my bra on.”

“Oh, OK…”

I couldn’t believe my ears. I couldn’t believe what they were hearing and I couldn’t believe how hot they suddenly felt.

She stepped over next to the garage, away from the reach of the porch light.

“I’ll show you over here. But don’t do anything.”

I couldn’t think of anything I would do, except keep my eyes open.
I certainly had lost my interest in basketball for the moment. I let the ball slide from my hands. It dribbled itself to a stop and rolled to rest somewhere behind me.

I have no idea what expression I had on my face as Glenda pulled her sweater out from her wide white leather belt and gathered it up under her chin, her elbows raised wing-like on either side of her blonde head.

“Well? You see?”

If, as I suspect, my eyes and mouth were both agape, she, at least, didn’t indicate alarm or pity. She waited for my response, which I delayed as long as I could—trying to appear objective and thoughtful.

“Well, I still can’t be absolutely sure. They could be hidden, inside. I’ve heard that they make them really, really life-like now days.”

“Guy, Danny. What does it take to convince you?”

Feigning concerned deliberation, I offered a suggestion. “Well,…If you took off your bra…”

Silence.

My heart was racing. I watched Glenda’s face, expectantly.

Her mouth scrunched up on one side. A hopeful sign. A flicker of reluctant resignation. A sigh. Her hands disappeared behind her back, unfastening the clasp of mystery.

“OK, but you have to look quickly.”

“All right. But it’s so dark. I may not be able to see well enough to be sure.”
It was about three or four minutes later when the headlights from the family Studebaker swung into the driveway. Glenda had to hurry home, she explained to my sisters, to finish her schoolwork. I said it was too late for me to stay out and shoot any more baskets. I didn’t join the girls in the living room to admire their purchases. I retired quickly. In bed I lay smiling up into the darkness, my still-clay-coated fingers laced contentedly across my chest. I didn’t remember until the next evening that I had left my basketball lying out in the back yard in the rain.

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