

Free Shots

Based on: The Crossover by Kwame Alexander

Thirteen year old Josh Bell stands at the top of his driveway dribbling his basketball. It is a refreshing summer night, and the neighborhood is quiet. All you hear is the ball hitting cracked cement. Bounce. Bounce. Bounce.

He is outside for hours every summer night, but this year is a little different. His twin brother, Jordan, is not beside him shooting, and his dad is not below the hoop rebounding. It's just Josh, the ball, and the hoop. Ever since his dad's tragic death from a massive heart attack, Jordan lost his phenomenal shooting ability and doesn't play much basketball anymore. But Josh does. He comes in every night drenched in sweat. Basketball has always been important to him, but now it is a part of him. It helps him get his mind off of things and to not dwell on his dad not being here with him anymore. Josh is a basketball prodigy; he can do about anything. Even dunk!

The only thing he needs to work on is free throws. Every night Josh's dad would have him shoot free throws until he was able to make fifteen in a row – even if it took him all night. Josh still does it every night even though his dad isn't here rebounding for him. Josh has made fourteen in a row and is now on his fifteenth. He steps behind the free throw line and goes through his routine. He blocks out the thought of the summer league championship game tomorrow and all worry. He imagines his dad telling him, “Come on Josh! They are free throws – the only free shots you'll get in the game. Make 'em 'til you can't miss!” Josh laughs to himself knowing that is exactly what Dad would say. The ball is released from his hands, and Josh feels the dreads on his back bounce up and down. Clank. More free throws. “Maybe I should just go to bed,” he thinks, “so I can burn down the net tomorrow.” Then the voice of his dad bounces throughout his head, “They are *free throws!*” Josh laughs to himself again and heads back to the free throw line.

The next morning Josh wakes up hyped for the game but also a little nervous. As he arrives at the gym, he goes right to the free throw line and starts shooting. With five minutes left in warm-ups, the team jogs to the locker room to go over the game plan. Josh walks back out onto the court. The game is about to start. The ball goes up and is tipped to one of Josh's teammates. Josh sprints down the court ready for the alley-hoop. SLAM! It's like Josh sprouted wings and flew through the sky! “It's gonna be a good game,” Josh thinks.

Josh's team is up by fifteen at half, but the opposing team comes back hungry as lions in the second half. The opponents are up by one with five seconds remaining. Josh finds the ball in his hands. He's bolting down the court. He puts up a shot and misses. But there's a whistle. A foul is called! Josh blocks out all the noise and shuffles to the free throw line. He takes a deep breath and pictures himself in his driveway with his dad. *Swish*. The first one goes down. Josh only hears his heart beating and his dad's voice calling out to him, “They're free throws. The only free shots in the game.” But this time Josh doesn't imagine it, he believes it. . . . *Swish*.