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# King David

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By: Jaime Levy Pessin

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In grammar school, David Drucker had been an absolute star. He was a compact powerhouse in the JCC basketball league—limited though he was by his height, he compensated with quick feet and aggressive defense, chirping at the sons of suit salesmen and dermatologists until they lost focus and missed what should've been easy jumpers. But eventually we could see that David's relative athletic aptitude in synagogue gyms wouldn't cut it at a higher level of play. When the youth Maccabiah games came to Fort Lauderdale the summer before he started eighth grade, David found himself vastly outmatched by Jews with guttural accents and wiry muscles, toughened from kibbutz life or Eastern European hardship. These kids weren't noshing on low-fat Snackwells cookies and watching *Saved by the Bell* reruns after school while their parents graded midterms. They were out milking cows, or training for military service, or fighting off whoever had replaced the Cossacks in the post-Soviet bloc.

In high school, the gods who bestowed his peers with growth spurts gave David the developmental equivalent of a lump of coal. He maxed out at five-foot-five, barely as tall as his older sister, Joanna, and well below his dad's respectable five-ten. We figured his great-uncle Jack, a jocular man who wore lifts in his shoes and a toupee on his head, was the source of his genetic misfortune.

Realizing he couldn't earn a spot even on the JV basketball squad, David applied to be an athletic trainer for the school's highly regarded baseball team. It was a way to stay close to the action without a constant reminder of what he now acknowledged as his inadequacy on the court. It was also a way to stay close to the popular crowd. He had watched his politically conscious sister harangue her classmates until she achieved social exile - and the praise of their parents, who admired her committed idealism. But

David felt anxious on days when he had to carry his cafeteria tray past more than two tables before finding a friendly place to sit; he knew Joanna's path wasn't for him. He traded his fast feet for a quick wit, a knack for memorizing sports stats and a closely-held grudge about the fact that his classmates called him "Little David"—a nickname that distinguished him from "Big David" DiPasquale, the six-foot-four half-Cuban, half-Italian pitcher, a D-1 prospect whose broad shoulders rose above the swarm of headbands and ponytails buzzing around him between classes.

David Drucker knew it was the way of the world: Status adhered to the kids wearing letterman jackets and driving shiny Beemers into the school parking lot, not the one rolling up in his mom's burgundy Saturn with a trunk full of Gatorade to hydrate the real athletes. Still, it rankled. Did he have to share a first name *and* last initial with Big David? He came across the word "emasculatation" during his SAT prep course, and the definition resonated deep in his adolescent soul. At any rate, he supposed he should be grateful to get invitations to the jocks' parties—even if they announced his arrival by yelling "Little D is here!"

When he got to Florida State, he came close to shaking off the moniker, in part by joining a Jewish fraternity where, though the brotherhood contained many Davids, he was hardly the most diminutive. He regained some of his JCC swagger in the frat's quarterly three-on-three tournaments, where he ranked among the more athletic of the bunch. But he knew his social cachet lay in penetrating the outer circumference of inner circles. His grades, his looks, his sense of humor: all perfectly adequate, decent enough to get by, but nothing outstanding. So he leaned into his access to the campus's alpha class—the sports gods, like David DiPasquale, who remembered their shrimpy buddy from the high school locker room. Indeed, it was worth

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suffering the indignity of “What’s up, Little D?” if it meant that Big David and his gang would grant him and his frat brothers entry to the coolest parties with the hottest girls and the best booze.

Mandy Singer wasn’t necessarily the hottest girl, but something about the confidence with which she answered their communications professor’s questions got David going. Mandy had shiny, blown-out chestnut hair that she twisted mindlessly around her middle finger while she took notes, and it didn’t hurt that she was 5’3” in heels. Next to her, David felt like a skyscraper. He started bringing his laptop to the coffee shop Mandy favored for her afternoon pick-me-up, inviting her to huddle up over their homework. Their meet-ups became regular - regular enough, at least, for David to take note of Mandy’s usual order and have an iced caramel latte (light whip) ready to hand over upon her arrival. No bother at all, he insisted—he was getting a frap anyway. Mandy mentioned that she was going to a Young Democrats meeting one Wednesday night; David tagged along with an enthusiasm fueled by the lavender smell of Mandy’s shampoo, sure, but also from knowing his parents would plotz if he ever brought home a proper leftist. (Was he really thinking about bringing a girl home? Well, that was new.) And when his frat hosted a basketball mixer with Mandy’s sorority, David finagled a spot on her team. He was thrilled when his flashy three-pointers resulted in her calling him “King David.” Now *that* was a nickname.

After weeks of laying the groundwork, David finally asked Mandy out, inviting her to one of the athlete’s shindigs at an off-campus apartment. Muscular guys in sweatpants took turns doing keg stands, showing off for the girls in shimmery shirts holding Solo cups filled with some Everclear-based concoction. A towering figure stood at the center of the room, regaling a ring of riveted listeners with an over-the-top story about team bus shenanigans.

“Is that David DiPasquale?” Mandy whispered in David’s ear.

“Yeah, do you want me to introduce you? I’ve known him for years.” This was exactly what David had hoped would happen: He’d bask in the glow of his campus-famous friends, showing Mandy that he, too, was a big man—King David in life, if not in stature.

David took Mandy by her perfumed wrist and nudged his way to the center of the circle. Big D offered a friendly hello to David and a more-than-friendly smile to Mandy, whose low-cut top, tight black jeans and chunky-heeled sandals accentuated her curvy

figure. Big D went back to entertaining his subjects, and Little D went to fetch a drink for his date.

As far as Little D was concerned, the night was going well. Wowed by David’s social network, Mandy squished next to him on the couch, tipsily making fun of their comms professor’s thick Boston accent and speculating about whether their two TAs were banging. Three beers in, David’s bladder got the best of him, and he excused himself to use the bathroom. During the ten minute wait for the toilet, he prepared to make his move. An artful arm around the shoulder, a finger brushing her hair off her face. He sniffed his pits. He was ready.

He stopped for two more beers on his way back to the couch, but Mandy wasn’t there. As he turned to scope out the room—maybe she had to pee, too—he spotted David DiPasquale hoisting a petite girl over his shoulder, picking her up as easily as his baseball bat. She shrieked with flirtatious laughter, chestnut hair hanging down Big D’s immense back, chunky heels kicking as he carried her off to someone’s bedroom.

David left the party alone. When Mandy asked him why she no longer saw him at their coffee shop, he gave her some cockamamie story about a jealous new girlfriend who didn’t want him hanging out with other women.

After graduation, the scrappiness that served him on the basketball court—and the feigned confidence that he had honed and polished into a glassy shell - propelled Little David into a career selling the hottest product in Miami: real estate. The subprime mortgage bust? Ancient history. Now, the waterfront skyline teemed with shining cranes. Large-scale banners hung off scaffolding, sleek images of Gaggenau appliances and Equinox-branded gyms. The suburbs, once populated by quirky ranches set back on landscaped half-acres, birthed a surge of spec houses pushed right up to the edges of their lot lines, old growth shrubbery razed to make way for stainless outdoor kitchens and steaming hot tubs that cascaded into lagoon-like saltwater pools.

David’s colleagues were a polished bunch, as glossy as their flyers, keratinized Venezuelan women in stilettos, gay men with gelled manes wearing narrow-fitted suits. David’s hair, on the other hand, started to sprout and recede in all the wrong places: What he lost from the top of his head seemed to reemerge in a tuft below his collarbone. For his first couple years out of college, David sold starter homes in Kendall, where teachers and hairdressers and cops—or, for that matter, Joanna and her husband, now both underpaid public defenders

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and the pride of the professorial Drucker parents—could put down 10 percent and score a 1000-square-foot bungalow with a fenced-in yard.

“When are you going to re-sod this mess?” David surveyed the landscaping at Joanna and Brian’s new house, dried-out grass crinkling under his loafers.

“Too wasteful,” Joanna said. “Succulents use much less water.”

As luck would have it, David’s parents’ friends began to downsize their million-dollar homes just as his frat brothers hit some crucial rungs on their own career ladders. (Not his own parents, of course. The Druckers wanted to be carried from their outdated split-level feet first—no matter that they could have sold that primo Pinecrest lot for many multiples of what they paid in the early 1980s.) David became known as a broker who could cut a deal, guaranteeing the next generation of Jewish kids their rightful places in the top-ranked public school districts, *l’dor vador* and all that.

But he knew he was only nipping at the edges of the vast wealth glittering on the surface of Biscayne Bay. His buddies - married, run-of-the-mill professionals—were merely grasping at Miami’s high life. Sure, they had mortgages in the right neighborhoods, leases on luxury cars, designer sunglasses, well-toned wives—but, having seen their financials, David understood that these markers were red herrings, that his clients were stretching to meet their monthlies. And mazel tov to Joanna and Brian, living their modest save-the-world life of beat-up Subarus and righteous causes and a new baby—yes, how wonderful!—announced at the family’s weekly Sunday night dinner at China Garden II. David stared at a gurgling tank full of fluorescent fish zipping in and out of their plastic castle as his parents peppered Brian about his latest down-on-their-luck clients and cooed over Joanna’s supposedly glowing skin.

He imagined what it would feel like if his parents took the same interest in his new listing in the Mangrove Isles subdivision:

“Oh, David! What a gorgeous home!” His mom would put on her bifocals so she could properly see the listing on the printout that he pulled from his messenger bag.

“Mom, it’s a total reno,” he’d tell her demurely.

“Yeah, but it’s smart to get your foot in the door,” his dad would beam. “It’s not easy to get into those fancy

developments, but once you’re in, word spreads.”

Ha. More likely he’d have that conversation with the tropical fish than his parents.

These were the kinds of things David Drucker contemplated during halftime at a Monday night Heat game as he gazed down at the silky cold-shoulder blouses and contrast-cuffed button-downs occupying the arena’s court-side seats. Not that Mikey Cohen’s seats were bad: lower level, center court, a gift from one of Mikey’s clients, some real estate developer returning to his hometown after a stratospheric win in New York. But David didn’t want to rely on his friend’s wealthy business connections to score decent seats—he wanted to be the one with season tickets to bestow upon his own hangers-on.

David took a sip of his Corona and settled in to hear Mikey tell him the latest bullshit about his wife - she had a habit of hiding her Saks purchases, and the resultant credit card bills, in the trunk of her Audi - when he saw a familiar face striding up from the floor seats against a backdrop of dancers shaking in their hot pants and sporting skin tones no paler than spray-on bronze and no darker than indeterminate-origin russet. The man was a little pudgier in the middle—you know how former athletes can get a little saggy—but he stood out in the arena just as he had in the high school hallways.

“How do you like these seats, bro?” David DiPasquale approached Mikey with a handshake-hug combo. “You having a good time?”

Fluttering with enthusiastic gratitude, Mikey turned to introduce his friend to his big-shot client. Big D did a double-take. David Drucker braced himself. “Hold up! Is that Little D? What’s up buddy?”

David Drucker offered his fist for a bump; Big D bypassed the gesture and tousled Little D’s hair, his two-toned Rolex flashing in the stadium lights. “Man, I haven’t seen you since, like, graduation.”

David Drucker seethed. Just three years ago, he and Big D had spent a rowdy weekend together at Tommy Colón’s bachelor party; we all had seen the Facebook photos of Big D giving Little D noogies in front of every iconic casino in Vegas.

“Mikey, how do you know Little D?”

“Great guy, right? Drucker sold me my house a couple years ago.” Beneath the sound of the quacking air horn,

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under the hoots of fans jostling for t-shirt cannon swag, Drucker, usually a schmoozer, felt stuck in an odd stillness. “Drucker, this is the client I was telling you about, the one building those sick condos down on the beach.”

David DiPasquale was looking for a broker who could sell the shit out of his condos. David Drucker was looking to catapult himself out of the stucco suburbs and into the high-rises where Russian oligarchs could rest their rubles. So, that’s how the two Davids found themselves sipping creamy cafecitos at a hole-in-the-wall near DiPasquale’s office on a Tuesday morning as they discussed marketing strategy for the smaller apartments in El Lujo, tiny kitchens but views like you wouldn’t believe. Or ordering chicken parms at the gas station-turned-power lunch spot as Little David shared his thoughts on how to stage different model units to appeal to different clientele: If Little D knew anything about beachfront real estate, it was that the Brazilians and the Russians had vastly different aesthetics.

Big David dragged Little David all over the city, day and night, out-driving him on the golf course with the six-figure membership fee, out-lifting him at the elite performance fitness center where Dolphins and Marlins spent their off-seasons, outdancing him at clubs where the signature DiPasquale hip shake could reel in a school of surgically-enhanced women with pouts like groupers - all while Little D researched and drafted and pitched and picked up the eye-popping tabs, and all without sealing the goddamn deal.

So by the time the two Davids met each other in the final game of the Hoopz4Kidz Foundation tournament, David Drucker had just about had it. Mikey Cohen hadn’t realized the one-sided rivalry he was inflaming when he cajoled his real estate broker and his biggest client into participating in his accounting firm’s annual one-on-one fundraiser, three feel-good hours on a Sunday morning before we migrated to the mall or the Little League field or the good Publix to prepare for the coming week.

David Drucker walked onto the court with Air Jordan Retros on his feet and a chip on his shoulder. The Jordans were new—white with emerald-and-grape flame accents—but not quite flashy enough to distract us from the coarse thicket of belly hair revealed by the gaping armholes in his too-big, tournament-issued jersey. The chip on his shoulder? Well, the poor guy had been toting that around since high school.

Little David won the coin toss, and took the

opportunity to dribble under Big D’s outspread arms, easily ducking past his left side before depositing an effortless layup. The two exchanged a friendly chuckle, all fun and games here, but as Little David took the ball back into play, those of us in the first row of bleachers could see him discreetly pump his fist, close his eyes, and mutter to himself: “Let’s go!”

We marveled as the first few points went in Little David’s favor. Maybe we shouldn’t have been surprised—the kid had been good, we remembered now—but the sight of these two particular men facing off, with such different builds? It didn’t inspire much confidence. So the supporters of the Hoops4Kidz Foundation—not to mention the entire Drucker family, always taking the opportunity to show their support for the community—felt a special beat of energy each time one of Little D’s shots made it past Big D’s sweeping wingspan.

Now, anyone standing close enough to Big David would’ve been able to smell his hangover. The Casamigas tequila shots he’d sucked down the previous night harshed his breath and evaporated out of his pores as his sneakers—also Jordans, the shiny black Gammas with the turquoise silhouette—squeaked sharply on the court’s waxed floors. Muddled and slow and headache, and—after breezing through the first three games against elderly accountants with white socks pulled up past their calves—not really expecting a fight, Big D just couldn’t stop Little D from going on a five-zero run.

Little David, for his part, felt his confidence rise. He bobbed on his toes, regaining some of the bluster that he felt back in his days as king of the JCC league. *Who’s Little David now?* he thought as he bumped Big David’s rib cage, the kind of body check that could have left a mark if the body doing the checking had been, well, bigger.

But soon, Big David, blessed with his natural athleticism and plenty of practice at shaking off the Sunday morning groggies, found his rhythm. Little David’s low-to-the-ground dribble no longer flummoxed him. Instead, Big David bent at the knees, swatted the ball out of Little David’s hands, and popped it up to get a point on the board. A few more like that, and Little D had squandered his lead.

“FUUUUCCCCCK!” Little David’s shout echoed through the gym, drawing nasty looks from the moms working concessions. Little David lifted his tank to wipe the sweat off his forehead, revealing in full the scraggly fur coating his torso.

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Back and forth the game went, Little David grunting and diving and schvitzing through his shirt, fighting for every basket, Big David growing increasingly frustrated by his inability to finish off the little dude once and for all. The score hit ten-ten; the game was to eleven.

Little David took possession of the ball, slowly bouncing it to the top of the key. As a kid, he had chalked a collegiate-standard three-point line just over twenty-two feet from the backboard overhanging his parents' driveway. Once the dishes were cleared, and his parents and sister settled in to watch the nightly news, David laced up his sneakers to lob shot after shot after shot until the neighbors complained about the constant thump-thump of ball hitting pavement, the clang of ball hitting rim. No one but David ever heard the ball floating through the sticky dampness left behind by late afternoon thunderstorms before falling gently through the mesh net with a satisfying swoosh.

Tuning out the cheers and chatter coming from Mikey and the volunteering moms, his parents and his sister (she really was glowing, the pregnancy suited her), Little David squared his shoulders, distributed his center of gravity and pointed his toes toward the basket—automatic habit formed during years of twilight drills.

For a while now, he had lived as David Drucker, not Little D. And David Drucker was doing . . . well, he was doing okay. He had friends. He went out. He dated. He had that listing in Mangrove Estates. Maybe another would turn up. He wasn't a loser; he just wasn't quite a winner.

He looked at Big D, crouched in a wide squat, the two men eye to eye. David DiPasquale—that guy was a winner. He didn't sit around and wait for a lucky break: He created, he built—and he made sure he won. He always won.

David Drucker wanted to win.

Little David could see the invisible dotted line arcing over Big D's head, connecting basketball to net. He softened his knees and loosened his elbows—a gesture practiced thousands of times, except for the tiniest pivot in his toes, the slightest change in alignment, and, for those of us watching him closely enough, a determined expression that softened into acceptance, barely apparent, but indisputably there.

We didn't hear the swoosh. There wasn't one. Little D's ball bonked right off the rim and into Big D's hands. With the smirk of someone receiving his due, Big D

dribbled to the three-point line, spun in his Jordans, and with a flick, took the win.

The two Davids shook hands, snapped some photos, listened to the speeches thanking the players and spectators for their commitment to the cause. And on Monday morning, Little David Drucker signed on to be the exclusive broker for El Lujo luxury condos.

As Mikey predicted, Little D did sell the shit out of those condos, even used his mega-commissions to buy one for himself: a classic bachelor pad, blacks and grays, shiny surfaces, a massive TV. His father briefly noted his approval of the tower's rooftop solar panels until Joanna chimed in with concerns about the building's light pollution policies during sea turtle nesting season. The Druckers immediately agreed that David absolutely must close his automatic shades at night so the television glow wouldn't confuse the babies navigating to the ocean by moonlight.

Little David nodded along from his balcony. On either side of El Lujo's private beach, he watched people schlepping in from public parking lots, seeking out spots for their blankets, umbrellas squeezed awkwardly under armpits, baskets of sand toys dangling uncomfortably off forearms, coolers dragging through blazing sand. No such hassle awaited Little David. As soon as his family left, he changed into swim trunks—an address on Collins Avenue, he learned, made it easy for women to overlook some belly hair—and rode the elevator down 19 stories to his Lujo-branded lounge chair, pastel blue umbrella matching the tight polo shirts of the building's attentive staff.

So, in the end, no one's crying for David Drucker. The real estate rubberneckers among us who stopped by El Lujo's open houses found it strange that Little D kept a photo from the Hoopz4Kidz tournament framed on the wall in the sales office, an enlarged image of Big David holding a cheap plastic trophy overhead with his elbow slung around Little David's neck. Why, we wondered, would he memorialize such a dispiriting day? But those of us who really looked, who let our eyes stray from Big David's dimpled grin, who followed the slope of his arm down to Little David's sweaty face, could see that though Little D's smile seemed humiliated enough, his eyes glittered with something that looked like victory.

