

Bombardment

by

Joseph Bruchac

“READY?”

Coach Fasulo held the three volleyballs cupped in his big hands like a juggler about to begin his act. But that was not what was going to happen. Far from it. And right now those volleyballs were not just volleyballs. They were ammunition.

“SET?”

A hundred pairs of eyes watched intently from the two ends of the gym. Some were fearful, some eager as wolves waiting for the first rabbit to show itself, some uncertain of

whether they were predator or prey. I was pretty sure of what I was, though. My role was as set in my own mind as it was in the minds of all the other boys who were invariably a head taller than I. I was fresh meat.

I hadn't joined those who managed to manufacture some lame excuse so they could sit it out on the bleachers below the five-high, arched, screen-protected windows on the north side of the old Saratoga High School on Lake Avenue.

I gotta cold.

Turned my ankle.

I don't feel so good, Coach.

I broke my fingernail.

My own imagination was more fertile than that. I'd memorized from my grandmother's unabridged dictionary at least one major disease or debilitating condition for every letter of the alphabet from "arthritis" to "zoophobia." But I never took the easy way out—even though I knew I'd be an easy out whenever I caught the eye of one of the big boys on the other side who knew a soft target when he saw one. Even

though I'd had three pairs of glasses broken, had suffered two bloody noses, and had the wind knocked out of me a dozen times over the last year, I needed to be out there. A part of me felt like a lemming following its fellows over the cliff into the Arctic Ocean, but I couldn't resist.

When noon recess came and we were given the option to go to the gym, I always trotted so fast down the hall on my little doomed feet that I was often the first to step out on the wooden floor where combat would soon ensue.

"GO!"

Coach Fasulo tossed the balls up and back-pedaled for the safety of the sidelines as the bravest or most foolhardy players on each side leapt forward to grab those dangerous globes that glistened like three spinning full moons.

Red, a lanky, long-armed kid who was also a baseball pitcher, caught one of the white spheres one-handed and hurled it at our side.

WHOMP!

Red's shot nailed a chunky kid. I didn't know his name, but he'd had the misfortune of stepping in front of me just

then. He was hit so hard that he fell to his knees holding his stomach and then crawled to the bleachers.

I should have sympathized with him, but I was too exultant. That ball had been meant for me. Bombardment had begun, and, for once, I wasn't the first man out.

KA-THOMP! WHAP! THUNK!

The three balls that hit in rapid succession, taking my feet out from under me, spinning me around, and bloodying my lower lip made it painfully clear that I was, however, the second.

Bombardment. The way it was played and the rules of the game could not have been simpler. Imagine a typical school gym. Take a group of kids—ten, twenty, a hundred—and divide them into two equal sides. The line in the middle of the court splits the two territories. Step over that line, and you're a goner, banished to the bleachers with other early failures of survival of the fittest.

The laws of nature had nothing on Bombardment when it came to the pitilessness of the three ways you were eliminated from play.

Step over the line. Out.

Get hit clean (not on the bounce) by a ball from the other side. Out.

Throw the ball and have it caught by your victim. Out.

It didn't matter how much I loved that game—I was always the last one chosen. I was different from the other kids. (I know now that every kid is different from all the other kids. Even the kids whom I'd thought "had it made in the shade" had their own hard rows to hoe—as Grampa Jesse used to put it. But I didn't understand that back then.)

I was different because I was being raised by my grandparents. All of the other kids I went to school with lived with their parents. Their dads went to work eight hours a day from nine to five. Their moms stayed home and took care of their families. My grandparents, who ran a little general store, were always home. My grandmother, the head of our family, was an intellectual who'd graduated from Albany Law School and passed the bar, but never practiced. My dark-skinned grandfather had left school in fourth grade, jumping out the window when they called

him a dirty Indian one too many times. My grandparents had met while Grampa was working as a hired man for Grama's father. Their marriage had been, to put it lightly, a scandal.

None of that was as important to me. Our home in rural Greenfield was miles away from Saratoga. I read my grandmother's books, helped out at the store, and spent the rest of my free time in the woods. In town, kids got together to play games and learn how to get along.

I didn't know how to pass or catch or block or dribble or swing or tackle. Instead of the names, numbers, and stats of sports heroes, I knew the plots of great books and could recite long poems by heart. Big deal.

Other personal details seemed inexorably destined to bar me forever from organized sports. One—already mentioned but worth repeating—was that I was knee-high to a gopher. Kids joked about my being so small they had to look twice to see me. The next was the big mouth I'd developed as a way of compensating for my dearth of physical visibility. I collected my share of bruises from bigger kids who became irked when

I made such observations as "Your excessive reliance on brute force borders on psychosis."

The biggest obstacle, though, was not me. It was Grama.

Grampa had never played sports himself. By the age of nine, he'd been working in the woods with the men. He'd tried to toss a ball with me, but his age was such that all I had to do was throw one a little too high and it would go sailing by him like he was made of wood. Much as I loved him, a wall was better at pitch-and-catch than Grampa. If it had just been up to him, he'd have gladly let me stay after school to play sports.

Grama, though, ruled the roost. In her grim determination to shield me from harm, she was more protective than a mother bird. She wouldn't even let me ride the bus. She drove me in, watching like a hawk until I was safely inside the door. At the end of each school day, I'd find her waiting, eagle-eyed and ten minutes early, in her old blue Plymouth.

Even worse, she'd made a point of cautioning Coach Fasulo about my fragility. "Keep a special eye on my boy, Sonny, during gym."

She'd spoken to *all* of my teachers—and to the parents of any kid she'd learned had laid a hand on me. Did I mention that my grandmother was also a member of the school board?

"That Marion Bowman," I once overheard my homeroom teacher say, "is a force of nature."

I understood what Mrs. Hall meant. If the National Weather Service had observed my grandmother acting in my defense, it would have named every hurricane after her.

To Coach Fasulo's credit, even though he nodded—seemingly in agreement with Grama's dictates, he never kept me from attempting (and usually failing) any of the really dangerous things we did in gym class, from the climb up the long rope to the ceiling fifty feet above (I managed a pitiful eight feet in ascent) to bouncing off the springboard into a flawed front flip that ended with me on my back, gasping like a beached bass. Even something as simple as a forward roll was beyond my bungling ability, concluding not on my feet, but with my face planted in the canvas mat that smelled like five generations of dirty sweat socks. But I kept trying.

How easy it is to close my eyes and see Coach Fasulo and remember the totally uncondescending way he treated the undergrown, inept, and suicidally eager kid I was then. Did he realize that whenever he walked down the hall with those three volleyballs in his hands and saw me waiting outside the gym and said, "Ready to go, Bruchac?" that those few words were as much of an inspiration to me as Prince Hal's speech to the battleworn English troops on St. Crispin's Day?

Bombardment, with its simple, violent, semi-controlled chaos, was my only release. Fortunately, Grama never heard of it. As far as she knew, I spent my lunch hour carefully chewing every bite fifty times while memorizing Shakespeare.

I don't know how many times I played Bombardment. However many, it wasn't nearly enough. If I could have rewritten the myth of Sisyphus, the man condemned by the Greek gods to forever push a stone up a hill, to give that story a happy ending, I would have had him eternally in the midst of a game of Bombardment. And not just any game—but the one that I remember more than any other.

Until the lunch hour, it had been a school day like most others. Ditto for the menu. Stacks of stale bread, globs of tuna surprise, little cups of fruit cocktail, and luminous blocks of unsweetened green Jell-O. I wolfed down what was plopped on my plastic plate and then legged it for the gym.

I wasn't the first one there. A dozen kids were already gathered around Coach Fasulo, and more were arriving in a steady stream. Football was the most popular spectator sport after school, but our mid-day mayhem attracted almost as enthusiastic a crowd. That day, it looked as if we were going to break a record. There was no real reason for it. It wasn't raining outside, and there was no major rivalry to watch, where sides were set ahead of time. It was all random—it just happened.

And it just happened that, for the first time, when Coach Fasulo reached out to put his hands on the shoulders of the two guys who would choose up sides, one of them was me.

I was so stunned that I didn't react in surprise. I didn't really react at all. I'm sure I looked as if being chosen as a

captain happened to me every day. I nodded with a strange out-of-body assurance at Gene, one of the best athletes in the school, who was the other captain.

"Odds or evens?" Coach Fasulo asked, holding his right hand behind his back.

"Odds," I said, which surprised everyone who knew me. It wasn't just that I'd spoken first with such absolute confidence, but that I'd limited myself to a single syllable.

Coach Fasulo held out the formerly hidden hand. His index finger pointed at me. I'd won first choice.

I looked around the gym, tempted to pick the smallest first and strike a blow for every underdog. But I wasn't *that* stupid.

"Red," I said. And even though I was the one doing the picking, it earned me a smile from Red that every kid just can't help showing when he's first chosen.

"Okay!" Red said, stepping to my side of the line.

Gene shook his head. I'd taken his first choice. But he countered with Larry, who could throw a basketball through the hoop from mid-court.

My second pick was Verne, the one kid in the gym smaller than I was. Red stared at me as Verne bounced to join us.

"How come?" Red whispered.

"Little kids are harder to hit," I said. I'd never thought of that before.

"Cool," Red said. "But let's take Frapper next if Gene doesn't grab him." All of a sudden Red and I were co-strategists.

I nodded sagely. "Right." And we got Frapper.

Big, small, athletic, inept, my picks went back and forth. Red seconded every one of them. In no time at all, we had our sides. Coach Fasulo stood at mid-court and then . . .

"GO!"

There's a phenomenon in sports called being "in the zone," like when a quarterback throws for 400 yards and five touchdowns in one game or a golfer birdies on every hole. For the first time in my life, I experienced that feeling. When the three spheres floated into the air, I didn't sprint to the back of the gym. I raced forward with Red by my side and ended up with two of them in my arms while Red held the third.

Everyone on the other team was back-pedaling! I flipped one of the balls to Frapper, who'd come up to complete our triumvirate.

"On three?" Red whispered to me.

"One," I yelled, "two, three!" And then we threw as one.

WHOMP!

BAP!

THUD!

Three outs!

It was a great start for me—and a lucky one. I knew that and contented myself for a while retrieving the balls that bounced off the back wall, feeding them to our front line.

Balls whomped and careened off heads and legs, and then everything started happening faster. I don't remember it all, just flashes like stills pulled from a film.

Hurdling over a ball that whizzed at my ankles and falling back against the padded wall.

Leaping up to latch onto a lob and putting Phil out.

Doing a perfect forward roll to elude a deadly rain of three Bombardment balls aimed right at me.

I do remember, with absolute clarity, the last few minutes of that game. There was a pause in the action, just a split-second, but it was long enough for me to look around and take it all in. The bleachers were packed with players—far more spectators than there'd been at the start. Word had gotten around that a really HOT game was underway.

Only seven players remained on the floor. The three on my team were Red, Verne (who really *had* proved to be hard to hit), and—most unbelievably—me! I'd never even made the final ten before.

Frappier, whose throw had just been caught, was sitting on the front bleacher. He was yelling something my astonished ears could not believe.

"Jumping Joe! Go, Jumping Joe!"

I looked at each of the remaining combatants. The only Joe still standing was me.

I didn't have time to mull that over. The other side held all three of the balls.

"Move back!" Red shouted. "Spread way out!"

Verne wedged himself sideways into the corner. Red

leaned against the back wall. And I just . . . stood there, only twenty feet back from the line.

Gene aimed and fired at my head.

Its impact would have broken not only my glasses, but probably my nose, too. But half a second before it hit, I hopped to the side, felt a breeze brush my face, and heard Coach Fasulo yell, "You're out!"

Who, *me*?

From the other team, Gene shook his head and stalked for the bleachers. I risked a quick glance. Red had caught the ball.

"Jum-pin' Joe!" Frappier yelled again.

The next two shots from the other side found the corner where Verne had sought sanctuary. He was out, but as he ran to the stands, he raised both hands and got a cheer from the crowd.

"You get 'em, Joe," he said as he passed.

And there we stood—Red and I—the last two on our side. Butch Cassidy and a pint-sized Sundance Kid. The Lone Ranger and a tiny Tonto.

Bombardment

Two seconds later Red's shot was caught, and I was nailed in the gut by two balls hurled so hard that one of them bounced off me, through the door of the gym, and down the hall all the way to the principal's office. We were out.

Red pulled me to my feet.

"Great game," he said. The bell that was ringing wasn't just in my head. Everyone was streaming out of the gym.

"Jumpin' Joe, you'll get 'em next time," Frapper said as he passed and punched me hard in the bicep. It was the first time anyone had ever punched me because they *liked* me. Even though it hurt when I flexed that arm, I kept flexing my arm for the rest of the day.

It would be another two years before I'd experience a spurt that would grow me like corn stalk through concrete and help me become a tackle on the football team, a varsity heavyweight wrestler, and a track-team shot-putter. But my growing really started that day, in spirit and self-confidence, if not in body. All because of a game of Bombardment.

Joseph Bruchac



Yes, I was a teenage nerd. I was physically underdeveloped, socially hopeless, and intellectually obnoxious. At the time this photo was taken, the same period during which my story takes place, I was six inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter than I would be by my senior year in high school. In fact, two seconds after my sister snapped this photo, I fell over backwards—overbalanced by the weight of that snowball, which obligingly landed on my face.