**Once Upon a Life**

**Ben Markovits**

I grew up in Texas, playing basketball in the backyard. My father built a court at the bottom of the garden, out of sight of the house. An enormous billboard, advertising José Cuervo or Corona beer, loomed over the wall. You could smell the odours from the kitchen of an Indian restaurant drifting down. But everything else suggested the riot of nature: grasses growing through stones, bamboo encroaching on concrete, trees entangling themselves in the telephone wires.

Every day after school, regardless of the weather, I spent an hour or two on that court; then five or six more over the course of the weekend. Sometimes I played against my brother or father. Sometimes a few friends came around and we played two-on-two or three-on-three. But mostly I shot by myself. One of the odd things about basketball is that it's a game, like writing, that you can get good at in solitude.

The summer I turned 21, with one year of university left, it finally sank in that I would need to find a job. I had never had a job before. I was getting through university more or less the way I got through high school – playing basketball in my spare time and writing. I knew nothing about publishing and had never met anyone who made a living as a writer. I was sure that I didn't want to become a lawyer or go to grad school or teach. Then one day I saw a magazine article about professional basketball in Berlin.

My mother is German, and we were spending a few weeks in her childhood home, where the garden slopes down to a shore of the Baltic. I have a German passport and had lived in Berlin for two years, where I played basketball for my high school team. We won the city championship – this was not a big deal in Berlin. I had no idea how good the professionals were. My first practical step towards finding a job involved picking my way through the bushes that separated my grandparents' land from the house next door and asking our neighbours if I could shoot hoops at the basket they'd nailed to a tree by a patch of lawn. The sea glittered between the leaves below me. I adjusted my shots for the wind.
When I got back to university in the US, I joined some of the varsity players for what's called the Captain's Practices in September. We met at 5.30am. Dawn came up as I walked to the gym, and I thought, with sleepless intensity: I am beginning my life. The rest of the year I jogged and lifted weights. There were steam tunnels under the college dorm rooms, and squash courts running off them. Someone had put a backboard in one of these courts, and I could go down regardless of the time of night and work on my jump shot in the heat of the pipes.

A friend of mine filmed me playing by myself in the college gym, shooting jump shots and dunking, and I sent this video out to dozens of German agents and club managers. One of these agents gave me a contract. I graduated at the beginning of June and the morning after graduation flew to Hamburg, where I stayed with an uncle. A few days later I found myself wandering around the loud unfamiliar city, dusty with summer, looking for the basketball court where I was supposed to have my first job interview.

I got lost. I remember this vividly – throwing my sports bag over a locked gate in an urban park and climbing after it; asking a security guard where the gym was. A week earlier I had been wearing a mortarboard on the college green and listening to speeches about the future that was mine to shape. Something had clearly happened to me, but whatever it was didn't look much like a step towards adulthood.

The season was over, but a few of the players had stuck around; they joined in a light practice to test out the new prospects. After 10 minutes, I realised I was out of shape. I also realised that, if I wasn't any better than most of the guys on the team, I wasn't much worse. For 10 years I had been playing basketball in my own imagination, by myself, on my father's court. For the first time I had a sense of how good I was, of where I belonged – in the second division of a mediocre European league.

After practice, the coach and a few of the players gathered in a kind of conference room and discussed the season ahead. Someone brought out beers, and most of the guys lit cigarettes. In summer they could let themselves go. For most of them, basketball was a part-time job, a way of wasting time with the boys and making a little money on the side. A way of putting off the rest of their lives. They could spend their 20s drinking and partying and playing themselves into shape, and whatever would happen afterwards, in their 30s, they could worry about when they turned 30.

I spent the next two months going up and down the country looking for basketball work. Staying in cheap hotels – sometimes I shared a bed with the other prospects. Carrying my few belongings in a gym bag: a spare pair of high-tops, a few changes of clothes. Once, against a team of travelling Americans, I scored 30-odd points, hitting from all over the court.

"You got a sweet shot," one of them said to me. He had a phrase for what we were doing, and lumped me together with the other Americans who come to Europe to play basketball. "Making a little chump change," he called it.

Afterwards the coach sent me to the finance guy, who talked grandly about the kind of money I could expect. Thirty, forty, fifty thousand marks a year. "We just need to see if we have the cash," he said. But a few days later I played badly against a first division club in Gelsenkirchen and never heard from them again. Some undersized high school kid challenged me to one-on-one at the end of practice and took me apart. So this is how good I am, I thought, for the hundredth time that summer. Eventually I landed a job for a small second-division club outside Munich. They promised me 1,800 marks a month and somewhere to live.

I moved in at the end of August, and what followed was the unhappiest year of my life – in spite of the fact that the job was easy enough. I worked four hours a day. We practised from 10 to 12 in the morning and from 8 to 10 at night. The rest of the time we could do what we liked. In fact, this was an awful schedule, which many of the players resented. The morning session meant we had to get up around seven so we could keep down breakfast; and the evening session meant we got home around 10.30pm, sweating through our showers and too wired to sleep. Most of the eight hours in between we spent working up an appetite to eat, eating, and trying to rest. Our days had two holes in them, towards which everything drained.

When the season started in the middle of September, our coach dropped the morning session, which made a real difference. I borrowed English books from the local library (they had a shelf of paperback Graham Greenes) and bought a bicycle and rode around the modest and well-farmed Bavarian hills. I set up my apartment – my first grown-up flat. But the shape of my life hadn't really changed. I spent the mornings and afternoons getting ready for the two-hour burst of energy in the evenings. I was intensely lonely.

This would not have mattered, if I liked playing basketball every day. But my heart sank on the walk to work – I was a long way from the backyards of childhood. In the locker room I changed into nylon shorts and shirt, both still slick from the day before, and prepared to face my teammates. How many shots would I make? Miss? Would I get beaten to the ball, to the line, to the rebound? It isn't hard to play well in games. What's hard is playing well in practice, where everyone knows you and everything has to be proved again and again. Competitive people are tiring; I spent my life with them.

The star of our team was a thirtysomething black American who was making a final push to move his way up the European leagues. Coming out of college, he had done time in the CBA, a sort of American first division, and had even made it into training camp for a few NBA teams. But he had wasted the back half of his 20s in small-town Scandinavia. For most of his working life he had lived alone, several plane flights from home.

His answer to the problem of intense loneliness was to develop a private religion – during the long afternoons between practice and practice. He refused to give a name to it, but it was basically a form of Christianity grounded in his own idiosyncratic reading of the Bible. On road trips I watched him scribbling on a pad at the back of the bus. I asked him what he was writing. Notes, he said. Notes about what? And he showed me – about the numbers of Hittite soldiers and Hebrews. About the outcomes of their battles. He read the Bible like other people read the sports pages, for winners and losers, for statistics.

Even on him the pressure of assessment had taken its toll. He could bully us on court as much as he liked, but he was too smart not to realise what this made him. Off the court, he liked to argue with me. We spent hours discussing subjects like religion, race relations and the categorical imperative. He believed uncompromisingly in telling the truth.

One of these conversations has stayed with me. I asked him: "What would you do if somebody came by your house with an axe in his hand, wanting to know where your son was so he could kill him? Would you tell him if your son was in his room?"

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "Where I come from that mother-fucker would kill him no matter what I said."

There were players on our team he was embarrassed to be seen with; they showed how far he had fallen. For example, a fat lumbering MBA student from Berlin whom we all called Big Country. Big Country was 6ft 9in, with stooped ogreish shoulders and hanging arms, and couldn't jump over his shoe laces. Once, tired of being teased, he threw an elbow at the American in the middle of scrimmage. It caught me instead, just under the eye. His elbow broke my cheekbone. The lights went out in my face, and for the rest of the season (and several months after it), I lost all sensation in a triangle of skin that included my upper lip.

That injury more or less summed up my first year after college – numbness, and then a slow return of feeling. The best thing to come out of it was a long letter I wrote home from training camp in Pezinok, Slovakia. I wrote about the empty stores; the playing fields with broken bottles in them where we ran sprints; the tall, grey prefabricated council blocks, bright with washing lines; the happy crowds that emerged into the night after the American missed two free throws at the end of the game and the home team won. My first real taste of the world.

I quit after a season; one taste was enough. The only other thing I wanted to do for a living was write, so I sent a version of that letter from Pezinok to various agents, editors and producers. A woman from the BBC answered it and showed me around the rabbit warren of studios on Portland Place. She recorded a sample of my reading and talked about making a short programme, but nothing came of it. A young editor at Random House invited me to her office and asked me to write a memoir of my experiences playing professional basketball. Nothing came of that either. It took me another eight years to publish my first novel.

Three novels later I chose to tackle the subject again. I turned it into fiction – I had worked out the vein of autobiography with constant redrafting. Nothing that had happened to me seemed very real any more. But I wanted to give the novel the feel of memoir, of awkwardly shaped experience. Then last summer, on a visit to my parents in Texas, I came across the video my friend had made of me shooting alone in a gym. I put it in the VCR and turned on the television. Years and layers of retelling were instantly stripped away and there I was again: 22 years old, unmarried, childless, about to graduate and move to Europe.

My hair is longer and thicker, and I'm wearing a T-shirt scissored off at the sleeves to show my biceps: a workout shirt. Looking into the camera, I introduce myself in German, the German of a cheap blue movie: "I hope to show you something that pleases you." Afterwards, turning to one end of the court, I lean a little the wrong way. The video itself is only five or six minutes long. It was important to shoot it in two or three takes – anyone could splice together a sequence of made baskets. The shots that rimmed out 15 years ago rimmed out again. Halfway through, the scene shifts from a side court to the varsity arena, which is better lit, and I begin dunking.

I have now watched the video often enough that the young man in it seems only distantly related to me. Still, I can't help looking at him with envy. There's a flaw in his shooting motion it took him five years to work out – this is only one of the problems he will face in the next decade and a half. But he's got 10 pounds of muscle on me and can run faster and jump higher than I will ever be able to again. And I can't help thinking, if I played him now, he'd whip me.