

CREAM PUFF



by Linnea Due

Okay, I stepped aside. Wait a minute—*step* is too big a word. My big toe shifted a half inch to the left. Maybe my heel. I couldn't believe Coach Brandt could even notice, but she did, and she's been screaming at me ever since. *Wuss. Cream puff. Scared of your own shadow.* Things that make you laugh in real life or get up in someone's face just to show you can. In basketball, when the coach says those things, you're dead meat. The other kids stopped looking at me. I could smell the shame. ¶

That huge girl was caroming¹ down the court like a three-foot-wide brick wall on Rollerblades. Who wouldn't slide south? Only that's exactly what you can't do. You have to stand in there, take the hit. Dad's told me, over and over. "I'm small, Jen," he points out, and at six feet, he is, for basketball anyway. "These big guys'd come and bust me up. I had bruises up and down my arms, on my chest . . . even my neck! But you gotta take the hits if you're gonna play."

He was mad 'cause I'd told him I'd had it with basketball. When I used to play with the little kids, we didn't bust each other up on purpose. Then I got into the city league when I was eight and learned how real kids play. Rough. They muscle you out of the way and they stomp on your foot and they jab you with their elbows. Mom wanted me to quit the first day. I might have if I'd thought of it first. Every time I

Practice the Skills

1 Key Reading Skill

Analyzing Jen says that she is "dead meat" and that she could "smell the shame." From these descriptions, you can tell that she's having an internal conflict, or troubling feelings.

1. **Caroming** is hitting and bouncing off like a ball. The big girl was pushing off the other players on her way down the court.

wanted to quit **afterward**, what came up in my head was a picture of Mom saying, “I told you so,” or Dad with a really disappointed look on his face. **2** Four years after that first day at city league, I still don’t like getting hit.

When the coach ran out of stuff to call me, I slunk off the court and sat on the bench. Nobody came near me; nobody wanted to catch what I had. I could see everybody on the floor tighten up and start popping each other good—it looked like the WWF² out

there. Still, if you had to choose between getting smashed in the nose and having Coach Brandt call you a cream puff, what would you pick? There’s no shame in a broken nose.

Keisha swung down next to me. “Whatcha scared of her for?” she asked. “She’s just a big slow white girl.” Then she giggled. “You’re a big *fast* white girl, and that gives you the edge.” **3**

Keisha was one of my roommates back in the dorm at San Francisco State. All of us had been chosen by our schools or city leagues to come to Bay Eagles coach Katherine Brandt’s weeklong basketball camp. It was a huge honor, and now I was worried that Sharon Demming should have been picked instead of me. I felt like a pretend Rising Young Star, not a real one. And I sure didn’t like how that slow white girl—her name tag read JINX—kept catching my eye just so I wouldn’t miss her sneering at me. She reminded me of my uncle Robert, who can always find something mean to say about anybody.



Analyzing the Photo What does the photo add to your understanding of the relationship between Jen and her coach?

Practice the Skills

2 English Language Coach

Word Analysis The word **afterward** has two parts: the base word *after* and the suffix *-ward*, which means “in the direction of.” Other words that have this suffix are *toward*, *forward*, and *backward*.

3 Key Literary Element

Characterization From what Keisha says, you can tell two of her character traits. She is supportive of her friends, and she has a sense of humor.

2. The **WWF** is the World Wrestling Federation.

By the time we got back to the dorm, my roommates had teased me so much, I felt better. Evelyn told me that Coach Brandt had a reputation for being really hard on people. I said I figured every coach has that reputation, but Evelyn said no, that her coach in Long Beach was really sweet and gave everybody candy. Keisha said she'd never heard of coaches giving out candy and was her coach a dirty old man? Evelyn laughed for a whole minute, and then Keisha turned to me and said, "That girl was *big*! I woulda got out of her way, too."

But that night, when the others were asleep, I started worrying again. What if it turned out I was a fraidy-cat? What if being scared was something I couldn't make go away? I love basketball. I love it more than eating and TV and video games and even swimming, which is what I love second best. I'm already five-seven, and like Keisha says, I'm fast and I can jump, too. I've got a chart on my wall at home that lists the top teams—the Tennessee Lady Vols, LSU, UConn, the Georgia Bulldogs, and closer to home, Stanford and Cal. The chart measures my height, so I can look at it and see I've gained two inches this year alone. I think about how everything's coming together: my desire, my body, my ability. I can't be afraid! **4**

To get to sleep, I pictured myself shooting baskets, keeping my wrist loose and letting the ball trail off my fingers like I'm caressing a baby. I run it through my head so often, I can make it happen for real—it's called visualizing. That doesn't mean I don't practice 24/7. I spend so much time shooting baskets that Mr. Ashton next door asked Mom to put up a sound wall. He was joking, I think. **5**

The next day, Jinx was waiting near the basket, a slight smile on her face. Even though we're the same height, she outweighs me by twenty pounds, and it was easy for her to muscle me aside. Keisha looked worried. "Stick it to her, Suburban. Make her back off." I tried to stay in front of her when she drove for the basket, but I was concentrating so much on sticking to my spot that I forgot to defend. Coach Brandt was on me in a heartbeat. "You're not in the game, Jennifer," she warned. "If you didn't come to play, you might as well get on the bus back to Sacramento." I could feel my face turning red and my eyes going black, which they always do when I'm mad.

Practice the Skills

4 Key Reading Skill

Analyzing State the internal conflict that is bothering Jen. Think about these things:

- She doesn't want to disappoint her father.
- She doesn't like being hit.
- She says she loves basketball more than anything.
- She says she thought that everything was "coming together" for her.

5 Key Literary Element

Characterization Jen practices "24/7." What does this tell you about her personality?

But a minute later I was back to chewing on my bottom lip. What *could* I do about Jinx? She was standing by the bench with a couple of other girls, and the three of them kept glancing over at me and rolling their eyes. Keisha stayed right on my shoulder, but I didn't want her fighting my fights. What would Dad do? He wouldn't let some big old player get up over his head every other minute, no matter how short he was. No answer came. Trying to figure out what my dad would do made me more nervous 'cause I didn't know, and that was even worse than not being able to handle Jinx in the first place. 6

All that practice, I kept trying to show her up, but instead everything I did played into her hands. If I stood still, she went up over me. When she pump-faked, I jumped, and then she shot as I was coming down. Every mistake made me more upset, and the more upset I got, the more mistakes I made.

Practice the Skills

6 Key Reading Skill

Analyzing Jen's internal conflict is getting more complicated. Why does thinking about her dad make her even more nervous?



Analyzing the Photo What aspect of Jennifer's experience at basketball camp might this photo illustrate?

“She’s rattled you,” Evelyn said. She was the pretty one in our little group—her mother was Filipino and her dad African American. “Forget Keisha and her gang banging. Just play your own game.”

But that was the problem—I didn’t have one. I felt blank, like a window that opened onto nothing.

As we were leaving that afternoon, Coach Brandt called me over. “There will always be bullies, Jennifer,” she said **quietly**. “At some point you’ll have to learn to deal with them.” **7**

As she walked away, my eyes went black again, and this time I couldn’t stop myself. “Wait a second,” I called to her, knowing I was stepping over the line and not caring. “You have to say more than that. You’re the coach!”

She turned back with a laugh. “You want me to motivate you? Okay, here’s the best advice I can give: Motivate yourself or get out. This game is too demanding to depend on a coach or your parents or your teammates to keep you in. You’ve got the ability to go all the way—and that’s not something I say to many kids. But you need more than ability to make it. You even need more than wanting it so badly you can taste it.” She could see the surprise cross my face, and she nodded as if it confirmed something she already knew. She took a deep breath and said, “You need *drive* to make it work. You can have the best engine on the face of this planet, and if you don’t have a starter,³ you’ll never go an inch. That’s what drive is, and it’s what you’re missing, Jennifer. I hope you find it.” **8**

That night I called my mother. “What’s wrong?” she asked. She could always tell when I had a problem. I said, “I keep thinking about Dad. He never gave up, and he was so small.”

She waited for me to go on, and when I didn’t, I could hear her sigh. “Jen, I know you won’t believe this, but basketball isn’t very important to your father. It never was.”

“But that can’t be true,” I sputtered. “All he ever does is talk about it.” I started to say more, but what was the point in arguing when I knew she was wrong? After a moment, she sighed again and asked me if I’d worn holes in any more socks and was my hair still in my eyes. Thanks, Mom.

Practice the Skills

7 English Language Coach

Word Analysis What is the suffix that makes the word **quietly** an adverb instead of an adjective?

8 Key Literary Skill

Characterization Coach Brandt has been giving Jen a hard time all week. Do you think what the coach says here shows more of the same or a different attitude toward Jen? Explain.

3. The **starter** is the part of a car engine that turns it on.

But when I went back to the room, Evelyn started talking about how her dad always goes to the playground with her, and I suddenly felt like somebody had dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on my head. Dad was too busy to come to my games, much less play in the driveway with me. The couple of times I'd gotten him to play, I was surprised at how bad he was. He blustered about how he'd lost his edge and did a lot of shoving and jumping around, but now that I was looking close, I could see how maybe that edge had never been sharp. **9**

I didn't want to get out of bed the next morning. Here I was, at the statewide camp, finding out I'm a cream puff and my dad all talk and no help at all, and this girl Jinx was going to make me look even worse than I did yesterday, 'cause yesterday I had Dad to help and today I didn't. When I pulled the pillow over my head, Keisha told me she was going to jump on me, so I had to get up or risk broken ribs on top of a broken heart. How could my dad have pretended like that to me?

While I warmed up, I pictured my dad scrimmaging⁴ with the starters season after season, knowing he wouldn't get into the games. I knew the other guys liked him, 'cause they'd call when they came through Sacramento, and Dad would have them over to the house. Maybe what Dad really missed was being on a team. **10**

4. **Scrimmaging** is playing practice games.



Analyzing the Photo Jennifer's coach tells her that she needs *drive* in order to succeed. How does the girl in this photo exhibit that quality?

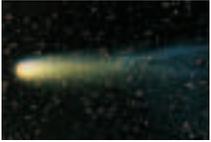
Practice the Skills

9 Reading Skill Review

Monitoring Comprehension Jen realizes something important about her dad here. Do you "get" what it is? Make sure by putting it in your own words.

10 Key Literary Element

Characterization What character trait does Jen's thinking in this paragraph reveal about her? Think about how angry she was with her father and how she feels about him now.



Visual Vocabulary
A *comet* is a bright heavenly body made mostly of ice and dust. It develops a cloudy tail when it orbits near the sun.

When Jinx came pounding down the court at me during the drills, I stood in there and took hit after hit. I felt so bad, I didn't care if I got hurt. But here's the terrible part: all my blocking didn't stop her making the shots. Oh, a couple of times I tipped away the ball, but I could tell I wasn't playing good, and I just didn't know what else to do. My Rising Young Star was blinking out like a dying comet. **11**

By the time Coach Brandt called lunch, I was so low, I could have crawled across the floor. Why was I even here? For Mom? She'd wanted me to quit the first day. For Dad? Mom was right; he really didn't care about basketball. He talked it all the time 'cause he wanted to connect with me, and he knew there was no better way to do that than talk basketball. Besides, now that I was seeing the awful truth, I realized that Dad couldn't have helped me much anyway—we were very different players. I was tall and he was short, I was fast and cagey, and he was more like a battering ram.⁵ I didn't have anybody's footsteps to walk in, except maybe my own. And that's when it really hit me—basketball was *my* game, not Dad's, not Mom's, not even Keisha's or Evelyn's. When Evelyn told me to play my own game, she meant to burrow deep under the surface of what basketball looked like and find out where *I* lived. **12**

After lunch, when Jinx **swaggered** back onto the court for scrimmages, I was ready for her. On the first possession, when she came **barreling** toward me, I sidestepped her easily and snagged the ball as she came past. I could see Keisha's eyes widen—would Coach Brandt yell at me 'cause I'd moved aside? But she didn't say a word—she stood near the bench, her eyes narrowed in concentration. In the next five minutes, I trailed two shots over Jinx's shoulder, and the coach made a note on her clipboard. Why challenge Jinx head-to-head? She

5. In the Middle Ages, a **battering ram** was a big, heavy log used to break down the gates of a castle.

Practice the Skills

11 Key Reading Skill

Analyzing Jen repeats the phrase "Rising Young Star." What part of her internal conflict does this represent?

12 Key Reading Skill

Analyzing What do you learn from the way Jen finally resolves her internal conflict?

Vocabulary

- swaggered** (SWAG urd) *v.* walked boldly or showed off
- barreling** (BAIR ul ing) *v.* running headlong



Analyzing the Photo Going up for a rebound, these four girls compete for the win. What did Jennifer learn at basketball camp about competition? What does this photo show about competition?

was heavier and slower, and that made her easy to beat. She tried to run right over me a few times, and I avoided her like a matador⁶ teases a bull. I could see the worry lines start in her forehead, and I felt sorry for her. A big smile was building on Evelyn’s face, and Keisha had begun to laugh. **13**

The third time I forced a turnover, Keisha shouted, “Go-o-o, Cream Puff!” I could tell the name was going to stick, and it has, even after me and Evelyn and Keisha came back this year for our second camp. The kids that go to the camp all know each other, and word travels fast.

I still don’t like getting hit. Nobody does—it’s just part of the game. But I love being called Cream Puff. It reminds me of that summer I figured out who was missing from the court: me. ○

6. In bullfighting, the *matador*, or bullfighter, teases the bull by making it chase after his cape.

Practice the Skills

13 BIG Question

Jen has found a way to stay true to herself. What is it? Write your answer on the “Cream Puff” page of Foldable 5. Your response will help you complete the Unit Challenge later.