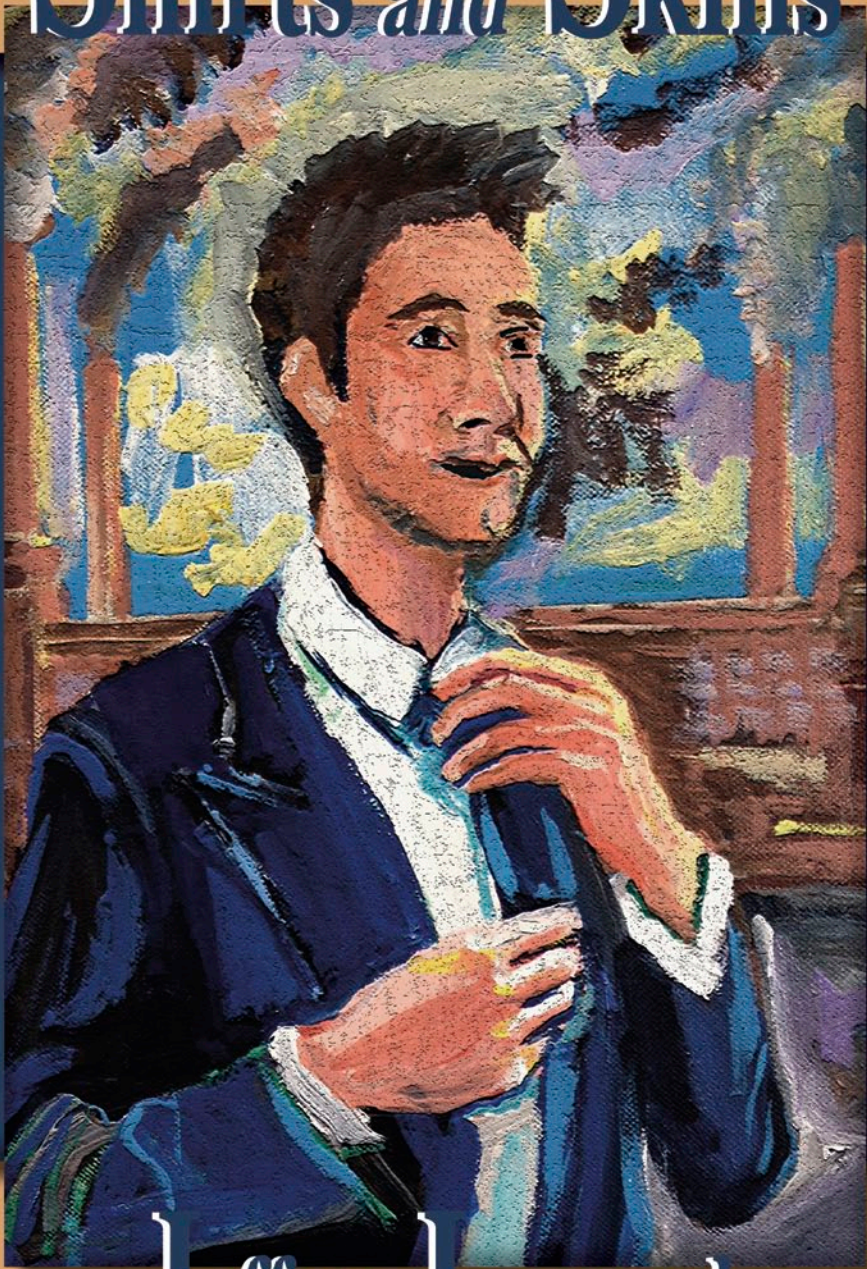


Shirts *and* Skins



Jeffrey Luscombe

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Following their teacher, the line of boys walked swiftly down the hall of Hamilton's Laura Secord Public School before entering, two by two, into the school gymnasium. Being last in, Mr. Tanner yelled "Shut the door behind you, Moore!" and Josh swung the big wooden door closed with a slam, wondering why, once they entered the gym, they were suddenly only called by their last names. The gym was freezing, like always, and the volleyball net that had been up for the last few weeks was gone. To the side by the windows sat a pile of yellow and blue plastic hockey sticks.

"Floor hockey," said Mr. Tanner, pushing his chest out and placing his fists on his hips like the Jolly Green Giant in a tracksuit.

Most of the boys cheered, but Josh held his arms closer to his chest. "Ho ho ho," he said softly. And then looking at the clock on the wall, "Fifty-four minutes left."

Mr. Tanner quickly divided the class in two with half, including Josh and Matt, on one side along the windows and the other half forming a

line in front of the climbing bars. How come they never let us climb on those things, Josh wondered. That would be better than floor hockey.

"Wakey wakey, Moore," Mr. Tanner yelled. "I'm trying to explain the rules so stop staring off into space and pay attention. You're holding up the game."

Twenty boys stared angrily at him.

"Like it matters," Josh mumbled. He put his hands behind his back and leaned against the gym wall.

"Ten minute shifts!" Mr. Tanner shouted. "Five men on each team. That's four players and one goalie. The rest of you stand off to the side on the white line until I blow the whistle. Then the next five go on the court. I don't care who's in goal. Choose for yourselves."

Josh closed his eyes and began praying. "Please

please please."

Mr. Tanner stretched out his hairy arm towards Josh's side of the gym.

"Skins," Mr. Tanner said.

"Fuck," Josh said, softly but still out loud. "He did that on purpose."

A few minutes later Josh stood shirtless at the end of the line and watched the red second hand sweep around the face of the clock. The boys were so keen they had pushed their way to the front of the line. Josh smiled. Luckily there were eleven boys on his side so he would miss the first two shifts.

Mr. Tanner dropped the puck in the middle of the gym floor to start the first shift. The sound of plastic slapping against wood filled the gymnasium.

"What a bunch of jerks," Josh said. He wished he could trigger an asthma attack before his turn.

After ten minutes, Mr. Tanner blew the whistle signaling ten boys to move off the court and ten more to move on. Now in the front of the line, five eager boys stood to Josh's left deciding which

unlucky one would have to sit out the next shift.

"Fine," Paul Boyarin finally said. "At least I don't have to play with him." Paul pointed at Josh and walked away from the others fuming.

The whistle blew. "Offside," Mr. Tanner yelled.

Josh looked out over the gym floor and tried to remember the rules of the game. *What the hell is "offside"?*

Biting his thumbnail, Josh noticed Matt running around the floor. One of Matt's shoelaces had come undone. He's gonna trip if he's not careful, Josh thought. Matt's body and arms were thin and very white, his chest caved in slightly at the breastbone. He looked like a puppy chasing a ball, always lagging a little bit behind the rest of the boys, a mane of light-brown hair flying behind him.

Someone scooped the puck with their hockey

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stick and lofted it up to the ceiling where it hit the steel cage around one of the lights. Following the puck with his eyes, Matt looked up. His mouth was wide open and his long hair reached halfway down his naked back as he watched the puck fall to the floor. In profile, Matt's overbite was—*almost sweet.*

The whistle blew and Matt walked off the floor. The last boy off, Matt handed his blue plastic hockey stick to Josh.

"Thanks," Josh muttered.

Matt smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Fascinated by Matt's overbite, Josh tried to imagine it in profile again. Matt seemed more vague than dumb. Always alone, he would walk away from the school at the end of the day towards wherever it was he lived, shoulders slumped over, his long hair draping down from under a black wool toque, not noticing, or not caring, that he had a splash of dried bird shit on the back of his brown jacket.

On the floor, Josh never came close to the puck, only once half-heartedly reaching out his blue plastic hockey stick to where the puck had swished by a few seconds earlier. The rest of the boys played around him, yelling whenever he stumbled in their way. "Move it, fat-ass," someone spat at him.

Josh tried to run as little as possible, so his soft stomach would not jiggle over the waist of his brown *Husky* corduroy jeans while along the gym wall, Matt paced alone, away from the line of other boys, as if guarding his ratty old yellow shirt lying in a ball against the wall. The whistle blew again and Josh walked to the sidelines, handing his hockey stick to another boy like it was made of lead. Paul Boyarin snatched the stick and ran onto the floor.

"You're welcome," Josh said quietly, his face to the wall.

Ignoring the shouts and hollers echoing off the glossy white cinderblock walls, Josh hid his flabby chest and inverted nipples beneath folded arms

and inched toward Matt.

"Are we winning?" Josh asked.

"Don't know." Matt's low voice sounded as if his nose was stuffed up. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Josh.

Claude Donner stood waiting to get back on the floor for his shift. He looked at Matt and Josh and shook his head. "They don't know who's winning!" he said to the boy beside him who then rolled his eyes and turned back to the game.

Josh moved his eyes over Matt's hair. He wondered if it was as soft as it looked.

"I want a whistle like Mr. Tanner's got." Matt said. "I'd rather be the whistle blower guy than play."

"I don't like playing either," Josh said. "Do you think we'll have time to play another shift?"

Matt looked at the clock and squinted. A confused look appeared on his face as he tried to add and subtract to figure out how much time remained. Josh looked softly into Matt's light blue eyes while Matt studied the clock.

"I hope not," Matt finally said.

"Running too much hurts my leg and then I start to limp. I had an operation on it when I was a baby." Matt spoke slowly. Not much slower than normal, but like someone putting their finger down gently on a record album.

Standing by Matt, Josh was overcome with wanting something that he could not put into words. Still Josh knew whatever it was it had something to do with Matt. Maybe he just wanted to have long hair like Matt, or have a body like him so everyone would see Josh's muscles move and twist just below his skin, just like how Matt's back and shoulders looked when he reached for the puck. That was not it, though it was part of it. And the harder Josh tried to name this thing, this warm soft and sweet thing, the more it seemed to come apart—like a knitted scarf, unraveling from a single pulled piece of yarn.

With only a few minutes left before they would

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head back to their classroom, Mr. Tanner blew the whistle and the final shift began.

Josh reluctantly accepted a plastic hockey stick once more from one of the boys leaving the floor and, dragging his feet, walked onto the court. When Mr. Tanner dropped the puck in the blue circle, Matt took off chasing it with the other boys, a small goofy chuckle in his throat every time he neared it. Josh didn't run much. He checked the clock and waited for the whistle. Along the wall of the gym, the other boys punched their arms back into their shirts. Josh was looking toward his shirt and sweater folded neatly against the gym wall when Matt, slightly limping, ran past and accidentally brushed his naked shoulder against Josh's his side. For a second, Josh stood without moving, while the boys ran around him. Energized with a strange spark of vigor, Josh began running, following Matt as Matt followed the puck. Claude Donner shot the puck behind the net and the rest of the boys rushed toward it. Matt and Josh arrived last. As the boys dug their plastic sticks at the puck, Josh quickly gently touched the back of Matt's soft damp hair and then slid his hand down the skin of Matt's thin back to the waist of Matt's blue jeans.

The whistle blew.

Matt and the other boys moved toward the blue circle for Mr. Tanner to drop the puck once more. Matt had not seemed to notice Josh's hand tenderly caress him. Giddy, Josh gasped for air and ran toward Matt. He stopped. Mr. Tanner was looking directly into Josh's face. His eyes were squinted, his eyebrows met in a frown, and his broad chest heaved. For a moment Josh thought Mr. Tanner would hit him. Suddenly Josh understood what his teacher's hateful penetrating eyes had seen in him. Blood rushed from Josh's head and stars began to burst from the caged lights over his head in the corner of his eyes. Breathless, his asthmatic lungs closed tightly. Trembling and wheezing, tears blurred Josh's vision.

Mr. Tanner shook his head and rubbed his right hand over his moustache as if holding the words that he wanted to say in his mouth. Without waiting for Josh to get into position he blew the whistle. Josh wheezed and moved slowly around the gym, dragging his plastic hockey stick. He tried to stay as far away from Matt and Mr. Tanner as he could. At any moment, Mr. Tanner would blow the whistle.

"No," Josh whispered to himself. *It can't be true.*

Near the middle of the floor, Matt ran past Josh, chuckling as he followed the others. Josh turned and ran for the group of boys. Near the net, he reached Matt and, diving, Josh's round heavy body hit Matt in the back with a loud thump, pushing Matt face first into the hard gymnasium floor with a nauseating crack.

Matt's teeth smashed against the floor. The broken and sharp remnants of his front teeth, now jagged like an animal's, ripped through his bottom lip leaving a large bloody gash. Dazed, Matt lifted himself up on his elbows and screamed. Blood bubbled and oozed from his mouth and nose onto a white line on the floor. Mr. Tanner ran to Matt, examined his mouth and then yelled for one boy to grab Matt's coat and another boy to fetch paper towels. Mr. Tanner had Matt hold a fist-full of paper towels over his mouth while he quickly put Matt's yellow shirt with the brown stripes on him and did up the buttons. Blood dripped from the soaked paper towels onto his shirt as Mr. Tanner threw Matt's brown coat with the bird shit still on the back over Matt's shoulders.

"We're going to the hospital," he said. Then, picking Matt up in his arms, he rushed toward the door. As they passed Josh near the blue bulls-eye, Josh saw Matt's torn swollen lips and cracked teeth and turned away. His stomach roiled. And as he stood shirtless, looking up at the clock unable to move, Josh's lungs finally opened, and he breathed normally again.

Jeffrey Luscombe was born in Hamilton, Ontario Canada. He holds a BA and MA in English from the University of Toronto. He attended The Humber College School for Writers where he was mentored by writers Nino Ricci and Lauren B. Davis. He has had fiction published in *Chelsea Station*, *Zeugma Literary Journal*, and *filling Station Magazine*. In 2010 he was shortlisted for the Prism International Fiction Prize. He was a contributor to the anthology *Truth or Dare* (Slash Books Inc. 2011). He lives in Toronto with his husband Sean. *Shirts and Skins* is his first novel.

