

“Where were you on April 23rd, 2012?” Most people couldn’t tell you. But, to a certain New Jerseyan, this was an important question—even if they couldn’t answer it themselves. It was on that date that the New Jersey Nets played their final game, leaving the Garden State a phantom limb of a National Basketball Association organization.

Tom Martucci was in his freshman dorm room with his roommate and childhood friend Zach that night. They watched the game together on Zach’s 24” tv that hooked up to Rutgers University’s cable setup. The Nets were hosting the Philadelphia 76ers in what would be the last professional basketball game played in New Jersey.

“Thank you, New Jersey,” Nets owner Mikhail Prokhorov said, coming out to a mix of cheers and boos. It was the pregame. Tom and Zach were sitting in their respective bean bag chairs. They kept the door open, allowing coeds to come and go as they pleased.

“What does this all mean?” Zach asked. The less intellectual of the two of them, Zach always sought Tom’s wisdom on the interdimensional.

“What do you mean?”

“When the New Jersey Nets are gone, where do they go? And I’m not talking about the Brooklyn Nets. I’m talking about the New Jersey Nets.”

Tom pondered this for a second, wanting to make sure he was well-spoken. This answer could be twofold. He could answer Zach and help himself come to terms with this eschatological inevitability.

“Zach, have you ever heard of the Hartford Whalers?” Tom asked.

Zach looked at Tom's *Clerks* poster on the wall above his bed, as if the credits on the bottom cachēd the answer.

"Can I guess?" Zach asked.

"Sure."

"That's the University of Hartford. And, you know, they're the Whalers?"

Tom could sense someone approaching their doorway to walk past it—as coeds did. Better yet, it was Bruce, likely returning from a bathroom voyage.

"Bruce," Tom said. The call didn't reach Bruce's conscious until he had passed the doorway. He made a u-turn and emerged into the doorway, arms on either side.

"What's up, guys?" Bruce was a sports fanatic, a follower of the MLB, NFL, NHL, NBA, Serie A, the UFC, college football, men's and women's college basketball, men's and women's golf, and men's and women's tennis. Come Summer Olympics, he could talk your ear off about rowing. If anyone could answer this trivia question, it would be him. "You guys watching the last New Jersey Nets game?" he asked.

"You bet," Zach said.

"So you're finally gonna join the big leagues and be Knicks fans after tonight, right? I got some extra Carmelo Anthony headbands in my sock drawer."

"Bruce, do you know who the Hartford Whalers were?" Tom asked.

"The Hartford Wailers," Bruce said. "I'd say they were Bob Marley's backing band, but Bob lived in Delaware in the U.S, not Connecticut."

"Thank you, Bruce. You're excused." Bruce up and left. If he was interested in what the answer was, he didn't act like it. "The Hartford Whalers were an NHL

team,” Tom told Zach. “They relocated in 1997. They are now known as the Carolina Hurricanes.”

Zach let this wash over him.

“I knew Carolina was a newer team,” Zach said, “but I guess I never looked into their origins.” Zach glanced at the screen; Tom followed. The teams were announcing their lineups. Half the Nets’ active roster were either injured or healthy scratches. The Rock was rocking though, true to its name.

“From what I’ve read—on Wikipedia—the Whalers were getting all-time low ticket sales come the ‘95-’96 season,” Tom said. “But when talks of relocating percolated to the general public, a horde of nutmeggers started the ‘Save the Whale’ campaign to keep the Whalers in the Constitution State.”

“You know a lot about Connecticut colloquialisms.”

“It’s a preppier New Jersey; I’d be a fool if I don’t move there in my late twenties. Anyway, obviously the whale was not saved, but ticket sales went through the roof throughout this campaign. It was like, when hockey was safe in Connecticut, no one bothered showing up, but, as soon as that was threatened, people came in droves.”

“That’s so metaphorical,” Zach said, trying to keep up with Tom. “It’s only when something becomes threatened or something’s gone that people start to care about it.” The national anthem was being sung. “So are the Devils next?”

Now Tom let this posit wash over him. Maybe it was denial, but he never notioned the idea of the Devils following the Nets out of Jersey.

“No way,” Tom said. “New Jersey loves their Devils. Do you remember that YES Network commercial? ‘Welcome to YES Network: home to the 27-time World Series champion New York Yankees and the 2-time East Conference Champion New Jersey Nets.’”

Zach guffawed. Zach was not only drawn to Tom’s intellectualism. Tom was also wickedly funny. Zach didn’t even need to respond in the affirmative for Tom to get his answer.

“When the Nets didn’t get that NBA Final win in ‘03, it was the beginning of the end,” Tom said. “But the Devils aren’t going to leave New Jersey. How could they?”

The Nets were down 53 to 43 at the end of the first half, not a blowout by any stretch, but, by the actual product of their play, it appeared that they were not going to secure a 23rd win in the 2011-2012 campaign. Late in the second quarter, Tom and Zach opted to go to Narnia to smoke pot once halftime commenced.

Narnia was a patch of forestry behind the Zach and Tom’s Busch Campus dorm building. The name preceded their arrival in September 2011, but Tom and Zach usually resorted specifically to Tatoonie, a spot named by them. This was a half-pipe of rubbly dirt that blocked the view of anyone taking an evening on the walking path behind them. In front of them was the aforementioned forestry that obfuscated the view of any potential collegiate voyeurs in Allen Hall.

Tom and Zach smoked out of Tom's bowl, as they had the majority of the school year. After months of taking hits with their cold hands, chafed by the dexteral demands of Tom's white Bic, the warm May evening was a treat.

"I feel conflicted about the Nets leaving," Zach said. "Sure, I'd like to think I'm tying myself to a tree and discouraging deforestation, but, it's like, did we watch tonight's game because we wanted to see some late-regular season New Jersey Nets, or are we watching it because it's the last Nets game in New Jersey? I mean, look at us now. We're probably not going to be back until the middle of the third quarter at the earliest. We aren't even interested in their swan song."

"I know what you mean. On one hand, the end of the New Jersey Nets means the closing of one chapter in my life. When I'm 32, would I really have that same passion and commitment to the team that I do now? Even now, you know, I'm in college. There are more fruitful pursuits for me than this team.

"On the other hand though, just because I'm not a kid doesn't mean I should have to say goodbye to this team. Sports should be like church. It has the same rules. It starts at the same time—every time. It's reliable. It'll always be there for me. Just because I won't watch the Nets all the time or go to their games doesn't mean I don't appreciate that they're still there. Now, I can't even do that."

"Nothing lasts forever," Zach said. And that was the end of that conversation. Tom looked up at the stars. The lack of light pollution combined with Tom's marijuana-enhanced sense made for the night sky to overload him.

"You know what makes these stars beautiful?" Tom asked. "It's because they died thousands of years ago. The absence of light just hasn't caught up to us yet."

“No, they’re still alive,” Zach said. “Stars live for billions of years. The chances that any of these stars have died in the past thousand or so years are low.”

“Oh.”