

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

Straight in Your Face

What do you say about a girl born under a basketball star, with black silk hair and a killer J from Three County? A girl-woman prowling the earth with vengeful elbows, a smile of sweet scorn, and the bigmouth name of—Omaha Jones?!

The Sunday morning game was high holy tradition among the males of the neighborhood. At Hale School Courts, Sunday meant shaking your sorry self out of bed to slam and jam those Saturday night cobwebs away, Jack. The school was named for some hero of history whose dying words stood chiseled high in the brick wall: I ONLY REGRET THAT I HAVE BUT ONE LIFE TO LOSE FOR MY COUNTRY. But the men who came to run on Sunday mornings didn't know history. What they knew was *ball*. Ball dished out the stories they spent all week telling in clubs and bars around town. Ball raised up princes and threw down kings. It cultivated legends—like Junior Hutchins, who once stole Isaiah blind in Chicago, or Weird Warren, who took his bride to New Orleans and didn't tell her till they were outside the arena that they were spending their honeymoon at the Final Four!

The Sunday Run, said Lawyer Len, was an *institution*. Week upon week, it was janitors and security guards, assemblers and welders, handers-out and sweepers-up and just-barely-hanging-in-theres, all filling the air with insults and loud skidding laughter. It was monster black boys who crash-jammed, and sly white boys who went *chip chip chip!* from way outside. It was the Old Ones on the sideline, sipping noontime Colt 45s in brown bags and sizing up the current generation.

And above all, it was a female-free zone.

Every so often a car would pull up to the fence, and some woman would roll down the window and start hollering. *You, you Bubba—you best not forget to pick up that package I told you about today!* To the men, such a situation was ugly in the extreme; it had “wife” stamped all over it. Did Michael's wife show up at Chicago Arena at showtime, calling him over like a bellhop? Did Michael even *have* a wife? Maybe he did, but she kept herself out of the man's way. Stayed at home feeding his babies and polishing things. Every member of the Sunday Run agreed 100 percent on this point. Whatever else might divide them, they were men, and all it took was one hollering woman to realign them in perfect order, like metal filings on a magnet

And that's why, when Big Bubba went and did what he did, the others called him hero.

Deep down, the men knew Big Bubba was no prize human. They laughed at the way he stuffed his flabby 240 into Lycra tights, like an elephant in a tutu; they hated his bellowing backtalk on every call. Nevertheless, Bubba suffered under a domestic dictatorship, just like the rest of them, and so they could not but sing his praises when they arrived one bright Sunday morning to find him standing at the school wall with a ladder, a can of white spray paint, and a face full of mischief. They looked up and read:

I ONLY REGRET **wife**
THAT I HAVE BUT ONE ~~LIFE~~
TO LOSE FOR MY COUNTRY

There they stood, the vanguard of the Sunday Run: Lawyer Len, Radar Reeves, Face Williams; Twirpo, Bird and the other white boys; T (for Trouble) LeMott and the rest. Bubba's creed made their world complete. It was their flag and their anthem. And so, every week they gathered there to lace up, laughing and trading complaints about their wives. If one of those wives dared to show her face on the premises, they pointed to the wall and hooted at her until she left. *Hey, baby, don't go away mad*, they shouted, *just go away!* In this fashion they danced and sang the whole summer long, safe beneath their wall, loving the land they ruled.

All the while, however, Omaha Jones was out there, rumbling like a fault line beneath the earth's smooth surface.

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There are people in life who arrive from oblivion and proceed in mystery, and such a one was Omaha Jones. Some say the girl was conceived on the night when young Magic beat Larry out in Salt Lake. Some maintain she was a human experiment, injected with kangaroo hormones by an Army scientist in Fort Detrick, Maryland. But all agree on this: At high noon on a Sunday several Julys back, a gawky-boned girl wearing a knee brace and a wise smile strolled out from beneath the copper beech trees by the school and onto the court, where she stood looking with slow unblinking eyes.

Yo, girl, watch out! Somebody get that fool girl off the court! The action ground to a halt.

Lawyer Len prided himself on community relations. "Listen, little sister," he said, advancing with a gentle-uncle smile. "This is a dangerous situation here. You gotta step back."

He laid his hand on the strange girl's shoulder, but she ducked out. "I want to play," she said in a soft throaty voice.

The men studied the raggedy shirt with the lone word, OMAHA, on it. They studied the knee brace, a real Bernard King special, a bigfangled thing like you get when you blow your cruciate ligament to shreds. They wondered where such an individual might have wandered in from.

"You get back behind that fence and stay there like I told you!" said Lawyer Len. But the girl stood calm as a cat.

Face Williams considered himself an authority on children and their attitudes. "I see I'm gonna hafta carry you off," he said, walking tall toward the girl. Two seconds later he was jumping back, hand clamped to his neck. "She bit me!" he cried. "That little kid went and *bit* me!"

The intruder girl walked to the center of the court. The ball was sitting there, and she scooped it up. With her other hand she raised a long finger. "Him," she pointed. "I want to play him."

The finger aimed straight at Big Bubba.

Never in the history of the Sunday Run had a female had the audacity to step onto the sacred court, much less throw down a direct challenge. "Look," huffed Bubba, full of scorn, "we don't rim with no girls. This ain't no Brownie troop!" But looking round, he caught smirks on every face. "OK," he shrugged, shaking his head. "If that's what you all want." He turned to the girl. "So what exactly are we playing here? Horse?"

"Pig!" she said, flipping him the ball.

Staring down chuckles, Big Bubba took it and strutted his majestic way into the frontcourt. "Bank shot!" he barked—and tossed up a line drive that banged the board and came off the rim hard and flat.

"Ah, the Bubba brick!" observed Radar Reeves.

The girl chased down the basketball. They watched her walk to the very same spot Big Bubba had shot from; they watched her step into the man's very footprints. "Bank shot *and* swish," she announced in her smooth cooing voice. She bent at the knee, flexing that big brace of hers with a squiggly little creaking sound, and shot.

The ball went up, kissed the backboard at the perfect angle, and fell through the net with a clean *thwip!*

The men stared. They'd never seen anything like it before. *Yo, Bubba, they whooped, you lookin' mighty quiet, brother! You best not be throwin' up those bricks now!*

Big Bubba scowled and shot. The ball got a loud piece of iron.

"That's P!" said Omaha Jones.

On the sideline, the Old Ones shook their heads. *Somethin' weird with that girl!* they said, as she sank a jumper from the top of the key. *She simple or somethin'!*

"P-I!" sang the girl, as Bubba missed.

There was another thing, too. The girl's shoes bristled with straps, zips, air cushions, Velcro grips, and every other kind of high-tech doodad. "Check out those boats," Twirpo whispered to Bird. "We're talking size eleven at least! You ever see feet like that on a female?"

Soon the girl was setting Bubba up with a bomb from the comer. "That's P-I-G," she singsanged when Bubba's shot clunked against the side of the backboard. "You're a pig, you're a pig, all the pork

and twice as big!”

Big Bubba seethed. The rest crowded round, gaping like visitors at the zoo.

“Say, where you come from, sister?” asked T LeMott. “You from Kansas or somethin’?” He nodded at her jersey.

The strange girl rolled her eyes. “Omaha’s my *name*. Omaha Jones! And it’s in Nebraska, not Kansas. Didn’t you ever go to *school*?”

The men grumbled and groused. Sure, they went to school, and yes, they knew Nebraska. The Cornhusker State. Big old chunk of farms and cornfields. Capital at Big-O Omaha.

“For your information,” the girl corrected, “the capital of Nebraska is Lincoln.”

They looked at Lawyer Len, and he nodded. Then he raised a finger. “All right then, Miss Omaha Jones,” he said. “If you’re so smart, tell me this—what’s the capital of Florida?”

“That’s easy—Tallahassee!” the girl shot back. “Now *you* tell *me*: What’s the capital of Louisiana, the capital of Ohio, and the capital of Kentucky?!”

The men consulted on it. One thing was certain—Cleveland was a trap. They weren’t going to fall for something so obvious as that, no sir, not them. They broke huddle, and Lawyer Len announced the call: New Orleans, Cincinnati, and Louisville.

Omaha Jones flashed a smile of perfect white teeth. “Wrong, wrong and wro-ong! It’s Baton Rouge, Columbus, and Frankfort!”

East to west, the court buzzed with the sound of outraged males. “Yo, girl!” Face Williams waved for quiet. “Did I hear you say Frankfurt? That’s not even America, girl! That’s *Germany*!”

The men high-fived right and left. Face Williams knew Germany, all right! He had *been* there, in the *flesh*, in the U.S. Army, for *three whole years*! Williams grinned. “They speak German in Kentucky last time you were there, little Miss Sprecken-Z-Doitsch?”

Omaha Jones released a sigh of weary patience. Yes, she explained, of *course* Frankfurt was in Germany—and in Kentucky, too, and in Indiana, New York, and Michigan. “And do you know why? It’s called im-mi-gra-tion!” She doled out the word in easy syllables. “See, when folks im-mi-gra-ted from Europe, they brought their bags, their kids, *and* their names. That’s why there are four Romes, six Genevas, and eight Parises in the U.S.A., and that’s why Albany—which, for your information, is the capital of New York, not New York City like you all think!—is also in California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming, as well as in England itself *and* in a play by William Shakespeare about a king who gets too proud, acts mean to his daughter, and goes crazy and dies!”

The men stood like statues. Never in their lives had they had such an ocean of fact poured over them. Omaha Jones jerked her thumb toward the Hale School. “Maybe if you all had spent more time *in* that building and not just writing trash *on* it, maybe you wouldn’t be so IG-norant!”

From the rear of the group arose an animal snarl. It was Big Bubba. Something seemed to have broken deep inside him. “Come on!” he bellowed, pushing forward. “Let’s go one on one here, girl, you and me, let’s try a little *contact*. I said let’s get PERSONAL!” Eyes glazed, mouth jabbering a stream of vile nonsense, he launched his 240 pounds across the court, and it took five men to hold him back, all yelling and pulling at him. *Calm yourself, Bubba, or we gonna have to get you sedated!*

Finally they got him down on the ground and held him there, his rage dissolving into helpless whimpers.

“Yo,” someone said. “Where’s that crazy girl at?”

They looked around. But the girl with the knee brace was gone, vanished into thin air.

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Word spread fast. By Monday every female in the neighborhood knew about Omaha Jones; by Tuesday a nasty little attitude was going round. *I hear you all got taken down by a girl!* they teased. *Guess you ain’t so big and bold after all!* Face Williams came home to a counter full of groceries, four screaming kids, and a note that said WENT DANCING. Twirpo was dishing out a routine state of the union to his wife when she hauled off and punched him—a fistful of sharp knuckles right to his arm. T

LeMott got home from work to find his wife standing with the laundry basket, draping his favorite purple shorts over a lampshade, *Just giving 'em back to you the way you leave 'em for me!* she announced with a crazy smile.

On Wednesday, Lawyer Len called an emergency meeting at the Snakepit Cafe. Over pitchers of Miller they discussed the situation. Something strange had gotten into their women. Some sort of uprising was afoot

“I’m telling ya, it’s that Omaha chick,” Bird said. “It’s like she infected them or something.” Face Williams agreed. “We never shoulda let that vampire girl on the court,” he said, turning to Lawyer Len. “That was rule one, man. No females on the court, *period!*”

They drank their beer; they examined the predicament from this angle and that; and gradually the evil outlines came clear. It was a conspiracy, a cunning female plot. Hadn’t their women always hated the Sunday morning run? Yes, they had! So, they’d put their wily heads together and hired some freak from a Cheryl Miller basketball circus, some girl ringer, to come to the court and plant the poison seed of dissension among them.

“It’s just like the Garden of Eden!” Lawyer Len pointed out. “Think about it. In basketball you got your Boston Garden, you got your Madison Square Garden... Sunday morning, that’s our paradise, see what I’m saying? That’s why they sent us this little girl—to play the serpent!”

“You mean this *so-called* little girl,” said T LeMott. “If you ask me, this Omaha could be some kind of—you know, some kind of female impersonator. Some midget point guard from Tennessee or somewhere.”

Face Williams nodded. “Muggsy Bogues with a wig or something.”

“Hey, maybe they didn’t send her.” Twirpo frowned. “Maybe she was...you know, supernatural or something. I mean, maybe she came because of what Bubba wrote on the wall, and that’s why she nailed him first.”

They stared at him. *Yo, Twirpo, you're in the Twilight Zone, baby! You gotta float back on down to earth!* But a shiver went round the table at the mere mention of Bubba. Since his breakdown the Sunday before, he hadn’t shown his face in the neighborhood.

“The man’s plain gone,” said T LeMott. “He evaporated.”

“I heard his lady got him running round the house with a apron,” Face Williams said. “Saying ‘Sweetie, can I this?’ and ‘Sweetie, can I that?’ ”

Bird shook his head. “I’d rather be dead. Take me out and shoot me.”

“I hear you,” said T LeMott, nodding.

Radar Reeves had been quiet the whole time. The only unmarried man among them, he’d been sitting there drinking his beer and fixing them all with a look of extreme disgust. “Y’all should try listening to yourself sometime,” he said now. “Talking serpents and supernatural monsters and whatnot! Look, *I* know what monster Twirpo’s scared of. It’s the monster in his bed every night! The one called ‘Honey.’ Same monster you *all* scared of!”

He brought his plastic mug down on the table with a firm *thwack!*, then filled it from the pitcher. “Now listen up! If Bubba be running round with a apron, that’s his problem. The rest of you gotta stand tall! This Sunday we gonna run like any other Sunday—”

Bird interrupted. “But what if this Omaha chick—”

Radar cut him off. “Look, if that little girl comes back, you let me take care of it, OK? Ain’t no little girl gonna beat me in any game!” He stood. “And now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I got me a nice, big, *empty* bed to get home to.” With a single manly pull, he drained his beer, then swaggered across the room and out the door.

In the light of such bold words, the men felt sheepish and small. “That Radar, he’s one class act,” said T LeMott, after a few moments of shamed silence had passed. “Got his head on straight, you know?”

“Absolutely,” nodded Lawyer Len. “The man’s got a value system.”

They sat reflecting on it. When brothers from other neighborhoods came to run, who stepped up and showed the Hale Courts ethic? Radar. When every other man got hooked with women, with kids, who resisted the chains? Radar. He’d entertained more ladies in his time than Wilt Chamberlain, but

none of them had been able to trip him up or tie him down. The man had stayed pure.

For half an hour they traded tales of Radar's greatness: his courage and feats of leaping, the monster jams, the shattered backboards. No, Radar Reeves was no ordinary Sunday morning ballplayer, they agreed: He was a natural-born leader, a hero and warrior, a man among men.

A king.

Around midnight they emptied the last pitcher of Miller and spilled out into the street, laughing in the warm July air. A cat on the sidewalk saw them and fled in terror.

"Gentlemen," pronounced Lawyer Len, "for a while this week we were losing our direction, but now we found it again."

"Solidarity," said Face Williams. "That's the main thing."

"Yeah," said Bird. "And you wanna know what I regret? I only regret..."

He left it hanging, and they finished it off in one loud united voice: "That I have but one *wife* to lose for my country!"

Over and over they shouted it out, until lights started coming on in houses all around. "Hey!" a woman's voice hollered. "You all crazy down there, or what?"

The men swapped high fives. Their world was back in order.

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Some recall that the Second Sunday was preceded by omens. A flock of birds flying in a perfect V. A cloud moving across the sun and back, like a giant veil. For the men it began with a surprise. Normally, save for the Old Ones watching from their perch of honor by the fence, the Sunday Run performed in solitude. But today no sooner were they laced up and running than people started pulling in. People on foot, people on bikes and in cars, all arriving with what looked like a clear intent to spectate. It was a crowd, and the men played to it, painting an extra dab of jazz on their crossover dribble, tossing an extra bone into their trash talk. All those years watching Michael and Earvin and Larry had given them a burning thirst for life on the sweet side of the applause.

"Check it out!" laughed T LeMott. "We're center stage! Prime time!"

But something was wrong. They were pushing the right buttons, but the tune wouldn't play. The men found it hard to concentrate on their no-look passes with folks courtside telling jokes and munching Doritos. It made them feel like a warm-up act

Face Williams took Lawyer Len aside. "What they waiting on?"

Bird trotted over. "Hey, you guys notice anything about this crowd? Gender-wise, I mean?"

It was true: Looking round, they found themselves adrift in a sea of females. There were women in shorts and halter tops, in stretch pants and big floppy beach sandals, schoolgirls in culottes, grandmotherly ladies with shiny blue hair. And last but not least, a whole mess of their own wives, hunkered down in folding chairs courtside.

Lawyer Len led a delegation over. "You all go on home!" they yelled through the mesh. "Who told you to come down here anyway?"

"It's a free country!" their wives yelled back.

"Yo, Sandra!" Face Williams shouted. "We are trying to *focus* here! Now did you come to watch or did you come to complain?"

"Oh, we came to watch all right," said his wife, with the same maddening smile he'd been seeing on her face all week long.

They came away from the fence, shaking their heads. As they stood at halfcourt, figuring what to do next, a peculiar hush swept the schoolyard. A bird cawed. A twig snapped. A church clock in town chimed noon.

With a shiver Lawyer Len turned.

The girl with the knee brace was standing by the beech trees.

The first time, Omaha Jones had slipped onto the court unobserved, but this time she came like a superstar. She greeted the wives in their front-row chairs, she strolled to the blacktop and stood glorying before her adorers. *O-ma-ha!* they chanted at her, *O-ma-ha! O-ma-ha!*

Radar Reeves stepped forward, his grin dripping sarcasm. “OK, little sister. So what’s it gonna be this week? Pig? Turtle? Snake? Tell you what—you name your animal, and I’ll cook it up real nice for you.”

“No animal,” said Omaha Jones. “Let’s play one on one.”

Radar Reeves squinted. Say what? Had he correctly heard what he thought he just heard?

“One on one,” she repeated. “Eleven straight. You start.”

At halfcourt the men laughed themselves silly. A game of Pig against fat Bubba was one thing, but one on one? Against *Radar*? That wasn’t basketball; that was child abuse!

For a moment Radar Reeves hesitated. The whole situation ran counter to his sense of dignity. But three hundred women were cackling out loud challenges, the girl herself stood serving him an impertinent grin; and so with a glance and a shrug skyward, as if to say *Lord, far be it from me!*, he took the ball and sauntered to the top of the key.

The crowd pressed forward on all sides. *Watch out now, ladies!* the men called. *F-16 taking off! High altitude time!*

The girl stepped in, serene behind her Little-Miss-Know-It-All smile. Like a panther Radar crouched, holding the ball out behind him in one hand and waving it around, Julius Erving-style. “Load up those Patriot missiles!” he shouted for all to hear. Mouth hanging open, tongue wickedly curled, he leaned left, he teased right—and then with his patented lightning first step he was gone, rocketing through the key and upward on the short hop to the rim.

But the ball didn’t go with him.

It happened too fast for the eye to see; Radar himself was halfway to the stratosphere before he realized it. As he floated back to earth empty-handed, Omaha Jones stood at the foul line, holding the basketball. “Forget something?” she said sweetly—then dribbled once and shot.

1-0.

Now it was Omaha Jones’ turn to show her stuff. She faked a jumper, then wheeled, drove, and twirled out a scoop shot that rose beneath Radar’s arm, ticked high off the board and went in. *What’s the matter, Mister F-16?* the women jeered. Radar Reeves hitched up his shorts, digging down in his stance like a crab. The next time Omaha Jones faked and spun, he leaned his weight in with a little push that sent the girl’s shot wide. Tearing down the bound, he raced out and sank a quick jumper. 2-1.

“Well it ain’t pretty,” muttered Face Williams, “but at least we on the scoreboard.”

By now the crowd had swollen to a rowdy three hundred. A few men shouted for Radar Reeves, but women had the numbers, and sassed back ten times louder.

*Who’s the greatest girl of all?
Catch a man and eat him raw!
Who be laying down the law?
Omaha! Omaha!*

“What is *that*?” said Twirpo, looking nervously across to where his wife stood with raised fist, glaring at him like a madwoman.

“This is getting weird,” said Bird.

The score stood 6-5 for Omaha Jones when Lawyer Len called time-out. Taking Radar’s arm, he steered him aside. “You gotta step it up a notch, man!” he said. “Now there’s no ref out there, you hear what I’m saying? It’s law of the jungle. Use it or lose it!”

Radar Reeves retook the court with a face of grim business. “Use your height!” the men cried. “Take her to the hole!” But every time he tried, Radar found himself stripped clean. It was uncanny, how fast the girl’s thieving hands worked. Said the Old Ones, *that little girl could steal the time right off your watch!* Omaha drilled a jumper, she looped a fadeaway high over Radar’s outstretched hand. 9-7. The King of Hale Courts stood two buckets from oblivion.

Radar paused in the paint, his Adam’s apple sliding up and down. Here he was, the King of Hale Courts, six foot three inches of goateed American power-forward, and he was losing—*losing!*—to a

chipmunk-cheeked, five-foot-four-inch girl in a knee brace. Sweat poured off him like a fountain as Omaha Jones dribbled the ball low and slow into the frontcourt. *Law of the jungle!* he muttered, clenching his fists. And as Omaha flashed by, headed for the baseline, he snaked his foot just a little ways out. Down in a tumble she went, knee brace clinking on the blacktop. The ball squirted free, and Radar pounced on it

Foul! yelled the women in a howl of outrage.

Contact sport, the men retorted. *Can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen!*

Now Radar hunched with the ball at the three-point line. Turning his back to the basket, he began butting into the key like a dinosaur, pushing the girl away with each jolting step. *That's RIGHT!* the men roared. *Take it HOME!* But it wasn't good enough. For a fatal second Radar left the ball unprotected, and in that tiny piece of time, Omaha Jones' skinny arm flicked in and batted it away. Picking it up on the run, she wheeled and made for the hoop. Radar stormed right behind, an oath on his lips, his long arm hung over her like a crane. But just when it seemed there was nowhere for her to go, Omaha Jones floated sideways beneath the board, coming out the other side to send a reverse, no-look twister back over her shoulder. The ball grazed Radar's anguished fingers, crawled up the rim, teetered, teetered some more—then plopped through.

10-7. One more basket and Radar Reeves would be history.

"Y'all see that crap?" he shouted. "I'm out here playing basketball, and she be throwing up this dime-store, Hail Mary garbage, and it goes *in!*"

His words spoke to the men in the crowd like a lit match speaks to gasoline. *Go on home with that rinky-dink junk ball!* they heckled Omaha Jones. *Go watch Love Connection or something! This here's a MAN's game!*

"That's right!" Radar screamed. Bug-eyed on adrenaline, he looked like someone with a world-class glandular problem. "And let me tell you one thing more, girl! You may go around me, you may go beneath me, you may go behind me, but you'll NEVER, EVER go OVER me! I'm playing a man's game here! I'm playing honest *ball!*"

Omaha Jones turned her round face to the fence. "We know all about your honest man's game!" she called out, pointing at males in the crowd. "Now, if your wives had a quarter for every time you played honest with them, would they have enough for two phone calls or maybe just one?"

That's right, sister! the women yelled. *You tell it!* They faced their husbands down. Voices screeched, elbows flashed, the crowd heaved and swayed. Hale Courts looked like one big domestic disturbance.

Omaha Jones returned to the business at hand. "All right," she said, checking the ball with Radar Reeves. "Now *this* is for your man's game!"

No one present at Hale Courts that day will soon forget what came next. Crouching, Omaha Jones dribbled once, twice; and then, with the tiniest toss of her wrist, she flipped the ball straight up over Radar's left shoulder. From fifteen feet out it shot up in a line, hit the board, and came ricocheting back in a rising arc, high over the key. Radar jumped to haul it in, his greedy eyes already fixed on the spot in the corner he planned to head to for a quick catch-up J.

But Omaha Jones jumped, too—jumped like no girl has ever been seen to jump before or since. Three hundred pairs of eyes watched in wonder as she launched herself off the ground, leaping up, then up some more, then *way* up, exploding higher and higher still, as if she had rockets in those oversized shoes. In mid-air Radar turned to find the girl's left elbow ramming his neck and her right hand flying to the ball. Cupping it under control, she swept it back behind her ear, cocked it, waved it; and then, in a coast-to-coast rainbow arc, Omaha Jones brought the basketball home—slammed it, jammed it, stuffed it, hammered it, crash-mashed it, airmailed it, a high-voltage thunder dunk that rattled the iron and left the whole post and backboard swaying like an office building in an LA. quake.

"Ball game!" she crowed, hanging from the rim.

The men stood with hands clamped to their disbelieving heads. Radar Reeves fell dazed on the blacktop. *You! You! You! You!* the women shouted. *Over you, and through you, and straight in your FACE, Mister Hero-man!*

They mobbed the court then, their cheers bursting like rain from heaven. Amid the chaos, Lawyer

Len stood a little to one side, trying to keep his eye fixed on the girl. But she was short, and slim as well; and by the time the court cleared, Omaha Jones had pulled her disappearing act once more.

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She never returned. For a while, a fever of expectation surrounded Hale Courts; but with time people stopped waiting, and the Miracle passed bit by bit into legend. To this day, however, when certain women in the neighborhood raise thumb and forefinger in a warning O, their men talk a little softer, turning the volume down on their trashy jokes and acting civilized for a change.

As for the Sunday Run, Big Bubba's writing has long since disappeared from the school's brick wall, and nowadays a whole new cast of young talent gathers every Sunday to prance in the sunshine and fill the air with the junk of their dreams. Most of these younger ones don't know about the Miracle, and wouldn't care if they did. But as someone from the neighborhood once said, humility is just another word for having lived a little longer; and every now and then when the game hits a patch of slamjam bad-mouthing, the young roosters clucking their *In your FACE, sucka!* as if nothing exists in the world save their own fierce selves, Len and Radar and the other Old Ones by the fence raise an eyebrow and squint toward the beech trees, as if any second that crazy girl might part the curtain and amble out once again, ready to eat a man or two for lunch.