

BIRDIE / *Mark Wisniewski*

FIRST DAY OF PRACTICE my senior year, I walk out of the locker room and see what looks like a sixth-grade white dude whooshing in a jumper from way past the free throw line.

"Who's the punk with the freshies?" I yell across the gym to Shannette.

Shannette and I are buds 'cause we the only two seniors on varsity who don't play—and the only two who'll admit we like to fool around with dudes.

"Transfer," she say. She hit the bottom of the rim with a lay-up. "From California."

"What he doing shooting with the freshies?" I ask. "Managing?"

Shannette put a ball on her hip, squeak her Air Jordans my way and stick her mouth so close to my ear it almost tickle. "SHE," she whisper. "She on the freshy team. Name is Birdie."

A shot HOOSH in on the freshies' side of the gym, and there's this little Birdie, standing thirty feet out, waving a perfect follow-through at the glass backboard.

"She won't do that again," I say, and someone pass Birdie one of them cheap, worn-down rubber balls, and she hits. I pretend I'm not watching and she hits again, this time from a foot past the three-point line. I look at Shannette and she don't say anything. She don't have to. Because lots of girls can shoot, but they mostly have SETTERS, not jumpers, and this Birdie's jumper be like an NBA ESPN highlight, with the elbow under the ball, and the release at the top of the jump, and that perfect backspin you wish you could watch in slow motion.

Two weeks into our regular season, Boys' Varsity starts coming to practice early to watch us scrimmage the freshies. Birdie be rainbowing home twenty-foot jumpers and Boys' Varsity be jumping and hollering like German shepherds under a ham bone hanging from monkey bars. All of us on Girls' Varsity be busting butt on defense and making three-quarter-court bounce passes connect clean on full-speed fast breaks, but Boys' Varsity never cheer for any of that—they just sit there eyeing Birdie, waiting for her to sting in another jay. I gotta admit I was jealous: because I knew Boys' Varsity liked Birdie because she played hoop and looked most like they did. She walked pigeon-toed like them, and had

her brown hair cut short like Danny Ainge. The hair on her legs needed shaving more than she bothered with it, you could see the muscles in her little forearms move when she dribbled, and her chest be flat as a back alley.

Which most of Girls' Varsity wasn't. Most of Girls' Varsity had big breasts bouncing everywhere, slowing us down, getting in the way of our shots—at least that be my excuse.

Birdie never made excuses herself. In fact, she hardly even TALKED. When she did it surprised you, sounding low and hoarse and soft. I never heard her say anything until after the practice Shannette's ankle busted and Coach moved Birdie up to Varsity. We played Yates the next day and Coach put in Birdie and HOOSH-HOOSH-HOOSH-HOOSH—she drain four nothing-but-net jumpers in a row. We win by thirty and after the buzzer to end the game, when we in line doing soft high-fives with the Yates players, their little Mexican point-guard tell Birdie she look like Michael J. Fox:

"Fuck you," Birdie say.

Coach, who the only dude coach in the conference, hear Birdie say this but just laugh. Then he stay up in the Yates Athletic Director's office talking to the Yates coach, who the prettiest lady coach in our conference. We go down to the visitors' locker room and Yolanda, our backup center, tell us Coach be trying to talk his way into a date up there. She tell us she's sure he'll be in that AD office for at least a half hour, and that she herself's gonna show us how to have fun. She grab some towels and cover the drains on the shower room floor, then turn on all the showers full blast. She yell, "ANYONE COME IN HERE I'LL SPANK THEY ASS," and stand by the shower room entrance till the steam get thick. When all we can see of her is two bug-bitten feet swooshing water three inches deep over the tile, she step out of the steam and lather up her walking-stick-skinny bones with this itty bitty piece of Dial soap, and say, "Watch this." She disappear between two rows of lockers for a few seconds, then ZOOM out from between them and dive onto the water, sliding arms-first across the shower room floor, laughing her ass off like she had ass to spare.

We all whoop it up and give high and low fives, and then we all be sprinting and sliding—and screaming and laughing so hard we can't breathe. Rita, who start at center, be sliding ass-first cause she worried her big old pancake nipples might burn against the tile; she leave a big WAKE behind her, like she a BOAT or

something. Watching her slide cracks me up so much I don't care that she makes out with girls and I'm sitting there spread-eagle naked, and all of a sudden this locker slams real hard, which usually means COACH.

Everyone stop where they are, as if we all froze in that steam, then start cranking the water cooler and acting like we just in there showering, trying to laugh without making any noise, trying to just breathe, hoping Coach won't know we were horseplaying and make us run windsprints the next practice.

We don't hear Coach's voice, or ANYTHING from the locker room doorway, and then the steam get thin and there, standing near the shower room doorway, is BIRDIE, the big white towel she always brought from home wrapped tight around her little white body.

"Good game, Bird," Rita say from the steam. Rita be showering across from me, water running off her lips, chest heaving, eyes staring at Birdie. I look back at Birdie, but Birdie be gone—and then Yolanda start an ass-stinging towel fight.

Two games later, Birdie start at off-guard, and she nail in ten jumpers easy as blinking. We be playing Willowridge that game and there ain't one white face in the crowd except Birdie's squeeze, who was one of them ratty-looking computer nerds; I first thought he was Birdie's twin brother. Birdie DID have a twin but he live in California with Birdie's divorced mom—at least that's what Shannette heard from Yolanda.

Birdie's man DID kind of look like Birdie, though, and WAS a nerd. He never even held her hand at school, just watched her play hoop and gave her rides home in his daddy's new Chevy 4X4. Anyway Birdie rained in 28 against Willowridge, and after that game our whole team be standing around the Coke machine waiting for Coach to come out of the Willowridge AD office, hoping he would tell us practice would be late the next morning, and Karita—who didn't start because Birdie did, and who, according to Shannette, DEFINITELY like to make out with girls—say to Birdie, "Your nerd boyfriend any good at the dirty deed?"

Everyone there get quiet. Birdie cross her arms, then open her little mouth and say, "Is there any reason you can't find out for yourself?"

Karita just STAND there, like she just heard her granddaddy got hit by a truck and died, and the rest of the team laugh this loud, nervous laugh. I slap Birdie's back like me and her are old buds, 'cause I'm glad she ain't stupid about how Karita like girls, and

'cause she, little Birdie, just helped us win Conference.

We won District two weeks later, easy—and then Regionals a week after that. Birdie averaged twenty-eight in those games, but then of course, like every year, came State.

In Texas, girls play State in Austin, in the Auditorium where the UT Men play the Southwest Conference and Clarissa Davis and some other Women Olympics players used to play hoop. My freshy, sophomore and junior years, we got to go there the night before and stay in the Austin Holiday Inn, but this time the district had run out of money, so we had to climb into this nasty old yellow school bus at SIX IN THE MORNING GAME DAY, and ride all the way there without stopping. Two hours after all that sitting, we be out there, under the too-bright TV lights, feeling raggedy as the wet chickens Mr. Sherman hatched in Biology, all of us quiet except for the squeak of our Nikes on that sweet, refinished floor. I missed my first four layups, nervous as shit 'cause even though it's still the semi-finals, we about to play #1 Duncanville. We, according to what Shannette's mom saw in the paper the night before, are ranked #3. Earlier that day #2 Odessa lost the other semi-final game to some Pee Wee San Antonio team 'cause Odessa's 38-point-a-game forward had mono, so our game coming up pretty much WAS the championship; whoever won would just show up the next day and walk out holding those big gold trophies over they heads.

After I miss my four layups, I can't hardly breathe; I had to pee real bad and was sweating like a horse for no reason. Birdie, though, look cool. She wasn't even warming up; she just stand at half court like she on some empty playground, looking at Duncanville like they weren't called DUNKville, which everyone called them because their center could actually do it. She be black but must be from some other country 'cause she at least six-seven and have a BIG OLD BUTT—she probably never saw a theater movie without having to sit in the aisle.

The horn to start the game sounded like a siren only it stayed on forever—when the state tournament dude flipped it off I felt deaf. Except I could hear the crowd talking. I couldn't see any faces but could feel them all around me; I almost fainted as I sat on the bench. And I wasn't even supposed to PLAY. Fact was, as much as I like to play hoop, I was glad I was sitting. Just win one more, I kept thinking; I wanted to say that to the starters but I knew it would make them nervous. I almost said it to Shannette but didn't because she was in her own other world: on the bench

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next to me with her ankle just out of its cast—her mom called the Coach two nights earlier and threatened to call the principal if Shannette couldn't sit on the bench after being on the team three years and breaking her ankle.

Of COURSE the game was tight. Straight through—you hoped for that ten point lead but it just wouldn't happen. If we scored, Dunkville scored. If they missed, so did we. No more than a three point lead for anyone all the way to the fourth quarter, when everybody be so tired from playing defense it come to Miss BIG BUTT against Birdie. BIG BUTT step in the lane, they lob the ball to her, she turn around and lay it in. Birdie use a double screen, we bounce it to her, she stroke up a jumper that rain home. Lob to BIG BUTT: two. Screen for Birdie: TWO. Back and forth like that—they up one, we up one. The crowd be capacity but the seats all be empty 'cause everyone standing and twirling letter jackets and screaming like they lungs coming out of they nostrils. When there's fifty-seven seconds left I'm watching the clock through my fingers, thinking PLEASE God let us have the ball last, hoping we can set one more double screen for Birdie before she foul out with her fifth. Then it's down to eighteen seconds and we up 42-41 and Dunkville's point guard is dribbling. She lob it in to Big Butt. TWO. The Dunkville crowd scream so loud I dig my nails into my face to make sure I'm still there. Birdie dribble up court and run into this Dunkville forward, who fall down and bounce up and run past our bench yelling "I FELT IT! I FELT IT!" at this skinny little homeboy-looking ref.

Homeboy ref lower his ear toward this Dunkville forward's yapping-away mouth, then blow his whistle and walk his tiny ass to the scorer's table.

"FELT WHAT?" Shannette yell, right in my ear.

"SHUT UP!" I yell back—I'm trying to hear Homeboy, who's yelling something to someone behind the scorer at the table.

"THAT WASN'T NO FOUL!" Shannette say. She got her hands on her head and I realize mine are set to choke my own throat. Coach gets up and walks to the table; the Dunkville coach runs out there and stands behind Coach. Homeboy blow his whistle and call an official time-out, Birdie standing out on that sweet floor, sweating from her upper lip, all of us subs keeping our butts on the bench to avoid a technical foul, stretching our necks to hear what Homeboy is saying to Coach—which we can't. Then Dunkville's coach, this white dude with a head shaped like a peanut, start talking to the old bald ref in the jump circle, and all

these tournament dudes wearing three-piece suits walk onto the court, ruining it with their black-soled street shoes. The horn go on; the horn go off; the old bald ref wave at Coach and move his head just a little, like he's telling Coach, "Come over here."

And Coach go. He give the Dunkville coach a dirty look and the crowd boo and the old bald ref grab Coach's elbow and start shouting in Coach's ear, pointing at Birdie.

Coach shout back so hard his neck veins get fat, and I say "THEY FOULING HER OUT" without looking at anyone.

"FOR WHAT?" Shannette say.

Coach stomp back to our bench and the old bald ref follow yelling, "DID SHE HAVE IT IN CALIFORNIA OR IN TEXAS?"

"HAVE WHAT?" Shannette yell—and I cover her mouth with my hand to prevent a tech.

"SHE HAD IT IN CALIFORNIA," coach yell at the ref.

"THE RULES SAY SHE HAS TO HAVE IT IN TEXAS," the ref tell him. "IF SHE HASN'T HAD IT IN TEXAS, SHE CAN'T PLAY." He walk toward the scorer's table and Coach follow, arguing and yanking at his own hair. SPIT be spraying out of his mouth and the crowd on both sides boo louder. Pepsi cups start flying and some hit the court, and after the court's glistening from ice the announcer come on and say, "ANYONE WHO GET CAUGHT THROWING ANYTHING WILL GET ARRESTED." Then MORE cups fly down, and then pennies, and then dimes and quarters, too. Both refs' mouths be flapping in Coach's ear, and then Coach throw up his hands and walk toward me and Shannette shaking his head. Shannette start standing and I yank her ass down; the lights feel hotter and a cup of something orange just misses Yolanda. Then a big old APPLE core hit the old bald ref on the shoe, which he pretend he don't see—but the crowd laugh anyway. Coach is standing ten feet from our bench, staring at Shannette. He use his finger to call Birdie over to the top of the three point circle, and Birdie walk over, pigeon-toed, sweating but cool. Coach put his arm around her and start talking in her ear, both he and her serious and blinking, the crowd chanting BYE-BYE-BIRDIE, BYE-BYE BIRDIE, Birdie listening to Coach with her eyes on our hoop and her hands on her hips, the little muscles in her wrists squeezing tight-loose-tight-loose, her mouth getting smaller and smaller like it might shrink right off her face.

The Coach stop talking, and just look at her. She stand there shifting her weight from one foot to the other, staring at the hoop, eyes glistening like the ice melting on the floor around her,

little mouth not going anywhere but not saying anything either, 5,000 people screaming like she's some kind of little white Michael Jackson.

Then she nod. She keep looking at the hoop but she nod, just once. Coach lift his head and eyeball the whole bench. His eyes run back and forth until they stop on mine; he lift his finger and move it to call me out there. I point at the out-of-bounds line we can't cross unless we report in to a ref. Coach look at the bald ref and the bald ref give me the nod. I walk out there thinking GIRL, this is your CHANCE. Coach watch me walk as if he suddenly my daddy; Birdie be staring at our rim, only kind of mean now, eyes not sparkling, just watching that orange hoop like it's the only thing there.

Then the old bald ref grab Birdie's elbow, and Coach grab mine, and the old bald ref lead us all past the scorer's table with that peanut-head Dunkville coach following. We all pass the Dunkville bench and the extra folding chairs; I think WHERE ARE WE GOING? and then we're out from under the lights. I glance up once and see all those faces clearly, multiplied by two makes 10,000 eyes watching us walk toward one of them little lit red signs that says EXIT. We go under the sign and down this ramp, and then we're in this hallway that's quiet and empty except for popcorn spilling out of a popcorn maker like it's sitting on a pack of lit firecrackers.

The old bald ref open a door and we all follow him in; it's a locker room with ref shirts and clothes hanging in three lockers.

Coach close the door behind me and say, "This is absolutely ridiculous."

The bald ref say, "It's our only recourse if she wants to finish the game. This is the fourth report we've had of suspicion." He lead Birdie to this all-dressed-up white lady by the sinks, and Birdie stop there, and we all stop and stand behind her.

The white lady put her hand on Birdie's shoulder and say, "I'm Dr. Connelly. I think it's important that we all relax."

Birdie look over her shoulder at Coach. "Here?" she say.

"Only if you want to," Coach say.

"I don't want to," Birdie say.

"Then the game's under protest," the old bald ref say.

"What's going on?" I say.

"We need you here to watch this," the old bald ref say.

"Watch what?" I say.

Then Birdie yank down her shorts. She stand there looking in

the mirror, wearing nothing but her jersey and white panties. Coach and the Dunkville coach and the old bald ref take a few steps away, and pace back and forth facing the far wall. Birdie's eyes look bored and pissed at the same time, but then her chin crinkle like she might cry, and she all at once yank down her panties.

"Birdie?" I say, and the lady doctor crouch down beside her.

"I'm sorry, Birdie," the lady doctor say, with her voice a lot higher than before. "But I can't quite see because of the shadow." She clear her throat. "Can you open," she say, "your legs?"

Birdie cross her arms loosely and half-open her legs. There's hardly any hair between them, and there's not any female love lips, but there's not any guy stuff either. There's just this THING, this pink thing shaped like a clit but almost as long as my finger—I once saw something a little like it in the freak chapter of Shannette's mom's medical book. This thing scare me at first but then it make me feel sorry, because I can't imagine it ever doing anything wrong, can't imagine it ever even touching anyone anywhere, because it just sort of hang there, making me wonder, kind of shy-looking—like Birdie.



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