

TIP OFFS

A Novel

By Stuart Nachbar

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The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

Abraham Lincoln
Gettysburg Address
November 19, 1863

Bunker Hill speaks for New England but Gettysburg speaks for the whole North. Aye, and for the South, for are we not her sons there also?

Chicago Tribune
News Coverage of Lincoln at Gettysburg
November, 1863

THE FIRST QUARTER

A Horse's Ass

Jay Siler was a banker, but not the kind who lent you money. Back in the days when credit flowed like rolling water, he built the fastest growing branch network in the country.

Jay's employer, Baltimore-based Harborside Bancorporation, aka America's Bank, wanted a branch in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, aka America's Town. But all Jay got was complaints from pointy-headed bureaucrats in borough hall. The frustrations from his latest meeting clouded his concentration as he walked through the borough hall parking lot to his car.

But as Jay opened the Mini Cooper's rear hatch he heard a woman shout from behind, "Yo, mistah, look out!" Before he could discover where the shout came from, something smacked against his butt cheeks, soiling his \$2,000 suit.

"Hey mistah, look, under your ride," the female voice called.

Jay bent to one knee and found a basketball lodged underneath the rear bumper. He picked it up and admired it as if he recognized an old friend that he had not seen in months.

"Please mistah, give it here." The girl came closer. She was teenaged, black, coffee-skinned, six-foot or six-one, her dark ebony hair pulled back into a simple braid. She wore red practice sweats with five gold stars down the pant legs. Gold letters spelled GETTYSBURG across her chest.

"Where are you playing?" Jay asked. He twirled the ball with his fingers and dribbled it.

Gritting her teeth at every bounce, she pointed to a basketball court adjacent to the parking lot where another girl, a tall white blonde, was standing, hands on hips, away from the basket. Jay could not see an expression on her face-she was too far away-but he imagined she was just as impatient as her friend to resume play.

Jay gripped the seams of the ball, eyed the net – best guess is that it was 35 feet away – and fired. He had never made that shot on a bet, but these girls didn't know. So what if he missed, they'd get a laugh at his expense. They'd have their ball back, too. No harm, no foul. But Jay's shot hit the sweet square on the backboard, and it swished through the net without touching the rim.

The black girl's brown eyes popped. "Ooooooh nice! You a ringer or somethin'?"

"Nope, just Jay," Jay had no reason to say anything more. He did not expect to see her or her friend again.

"You got game, Doctor Jay, Gimme five." The girl raised her palm, expecting Jay to slap it- that was a rule of the court- and he did. "I'm Bonita, she's Stefani. "You know

H-O-R-S-E? I shoot, you match. Stefani matches too. You miss, you get an 'h', then an 'o' until you're the horse's ass."

Jay snarled as they walked towards the court where Stefani was still waiting. "Yeah, I get it. You ready?"

Determined not to be first to get to 'e,' Jay picked easy spots to warm up for the more difficult challenges Bonita was likely to issue. After Jay and the girls hit a high-percentage shot, Bonita said. "Awww c'mon, Dr. Jay, a little kid can hit that. Try a real shot. Like this." Bonita dribbled the ball and walked over to the top of the key, the circle encompassing the foul line. She dribbled the ball faster, set her feet and jumped, the ball left her right hand for the backboard. The ball dropped through the net as smoothly as it could have dropped from the heavens.

Jay couldn't match Bonita's fluid moves, or her feathery touch, so he became the first to fold.

"Ooooooh, you the horse's ass," Bonita's words rolled cheerfully. Stefani had a shit-eating grin on her face. But Bonita did not let her off the hook. There was still a challenge to be won. "C'mon girl, show me what you got. I'll whup you like I whupped him. Or will your daddy come to rescue you, as usual?"

Stefani checked her watch. It was ten to five. "Nope, we got fifteen minutes. Plenty of time to send you down to defeat, again"

"Ooooooh, don't you wish." She dribbled the ball and looked at Jay, now leaning against the basket. "Get her. She's beaten me twice since she moved here, so now she thinks she's the superstar. I'm gonna whup her, Dr. Jay, just like I whupped you."

Jay folded his arms and smiled, but he said nothing, as Stefani popped another jumper from 15 feet.

"That's all you got left?" Bonita ragged I can make that on one leg" Bonita fired the ball from between half-court and the free-throw line, too far to try for three in a real game, unless the shot was a "hail Mary" at the buzzer. Then Stefani stepped to the imaginary line where Bonita had hit the trey and matched her shot again. Jay's jaw dropped as the ball sailed through the rim.

As Stefani hit the shot, a man walked over from the borough hall entrance and joined the trio of hoop dreamers. He was white, five-ten, with sandy hair groomed in a military buzz cut shaved on the sides and flat on top. He wore a blue sports jacket, khakis and a blue and gold striped tie.

Typical government-worker clothes, thought Jay. Does he work in borough hall?

"Hi Stef, I've got a little work to finish before we go home," the man said. "Hi Bonita," he added, waving politely.

"Hey, Mistah J, I'm just showin' Stefani a few tricks," Bonita spoke teen casual but Stefani's father didn't seem to mind.

But he studied Jay, probably wondering what he was doing dressed in half a business suit, with soiled pants, on a basketball court.

Jay stretched out his arms and showed his hands, palms facing the government man, as if to say: I swear Mr. J., nothing happened. We were just shooting baskets.

“Oh, we took him for ten bucks,” Bonita said, and winked.

But unaware of the inside joke, the government man cast a serious look at Jay. “Make sure you pay up, all right?” he requested. Jay nodded and Mr. J. headed back to the borough hall.

Jay took two tens from his wallet, one for Bonita and one for Stefani, and dropped them on the court. Bonita snatched the bills and put them into her sweats pocket.

“Hey,” Jay said, “one’s for her. Both of you beat me fair and square.”

“Just holdin’ onto my money,” Bonita laughed and flashed another celebrity smile. She waved her arms in Stefani’s face and positioned herself between Stefani and the basket.

Stefani shot Bonita a dirty look and bounced the basketball between Bonita’s legs. She circled her adversary, caught her own pass, and drove to the basket, effortlessly dropping the ball into the unguarded net.

“Ooooooh, you gettin’ between my legs!” Bonita said in false astonishment. Stefani just smiled another shit-eating smile and hit another basket.

Stefani’s father returned to gather the two Gettysburg hoopsters. He cordially bid Jay good-night, while the girls shook his hand and thanked him for a good game.

“See ‘ya round, Doctor Jay,” said Bonita. “Next time it’s two out of three. But I’ll need only two to whup your ass.” Bonita winked and flashed the celebrity smile again.

Jay leaned against the basket pole as the trio walked away and got into a grey-green Ford Crown Victoria, the only Crown Vic in the borough hall parking lot that was not black and white, probably a throw-in when the borough bought a new fleet of police cars. It was too plain to appear front and center in a dealer’s showroom.