

## **Donna**

**by Erin Riley**

### **Highly Commended**

Donna. Donna with her orange hair plastered to her head in a tight plait that brushed the base of her neck. Bright green eyes. Freckles decorate her cheeks.

I waited for Donna after each State League Basketball game. Heart rising into my cheeks, colouring them a soft pink. The starting point guard for the Sydney Comets, she weaved through the game, a magician, setting up plays, nailing three pointers like free throws. Her crossover, so quick, only a double-team could silence her.

Wooden bleachers climbed the walls toward the corrugated iron roof of the ancient stadium. Fluorescent lights hung from the rafters, lowered by wobbly wiring. Ads for local plumbers, ice cream and real estate agents lined the walls; interrupted in corners by score boards that flickered into life.

From the top row, looking onto the court, I watched magic unfold. Basketball was like great art. Exquisite.

From my vantage point - aged 12 - sitting next to my dad on our BYO pillows, I watched Donna and had my breath stolen. I watched her slip by the defence and sink jumps shots. I watched her run her opposing point guard so hard into a screen she had to be carried off the court.

I was a prodigious basketballer and an embryonic queer. Alongside my flair for the game, grew dad's own swelling obsession. These games, our weekly education. We pulled apart the intricacies of everything.

I looked forward to Friday nights with anticipation yet unrivalled. No sleepover, no bowling-alley birthday filled my belly with such fire. Nothing came close. My State Basketball zip-up jacket topped off my purposeful outfit. I will be someone someday screamed its crinkly quick dry – offering a layer of confidence. I balanced a KFC box on my knees – half cold potato and gravy on the bench beside me. Can of Pepsi, strategically opened at half time.

Sometimes there was a junior match beforehand. Bigger versions of myself laying out a basketball life I would soon short-live. My over the top basketball obsession matched by gangly bodies in over the top yellow mesh shorts, warm-up shirts emblazoned with flaming basketballs. I was flaming too. Though I didn't know it yet.

Toward the end of the first game, the State League players would stream in. Sports bags heavy with gear riding on hips. All wore crisp white socks with slip on masseur sandals. I scanned the arrivals for Donna.

I'd watch her place her bag on the players' bench, bend down to lace her high-tops. I'd watch her stand and remove six earrings from her left ear, more from her right and place them delicately in the side pocket of the oversized bag. I'd watch her spit onto her palm, lift a sneaker to her hand. Then the other. I'd watch her step onto the freshly re-polished court, spit-soaked soles squeaking her arrival. I'd watch her sink five free-throws during warm up; send the ball like a missile into the post.

The buzzer signalled the transition from aggressive shirt-pulling to sweaty hand-shaking. I waited for Donna to lug her enormous bag to the basement locker room, where on Thursday nights I would sit, sweat-drenched, ignoring the yells of a balding basketball wannabe who had no idea how to coach girls. I'd wait for Donna to emerge from her dank basement chrysalis. She'd glide across the emptying stadium toward friends in her crisp white turtleneck, taught across her breasts. Breasts so beautiful I almost lost my eyes. She wore a gold chain. Black, high-waisted jeans hugged her wide hips. Black leather boots gave her height her sneakers couldn't.

I'd stall our departure; asking dad to explain a play. Holding my bone dry can of Pepsi to my mouth I took pretend sips. Pretend swallows too, if it came to it. Buying time to watch Donna do ordinary things in her tight ribbed turtleneck and her chain and her hair slicked back with gel. I watched her gesture to someone she hadn't seen earlier – surprise illuminating her beautiful freckled face.

I wondered what it would feel like if she smiled at me like that. I wondered about her life away from the ancient stadium. What she ate for breakfast. I thought about her tight white turtleneck. I thought about Donna noticing me.

When it was time to go, I watched Donna leave with her boyfriend Geoff, his left arm cupping her waist, thumb lost in her back pocket.