

Stargirl

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The change began around Thanksgiving. By December first, Stargirl Caraway had become the most popular person in school.

How did it happen?

Was it the cheerleading?

The last football game of the season was her first as a cheerleader. The grandstand was packed: students, parents, alumni. Never had so many people come to a football game to see a cheerleader. She did all the regular cheers and routines. And more. In fact, she never stopped cheering. While the other girls were taking breaks, she went on jumping and yelling. She roamed. Areas that had always been ignored—the far ends of the grandstand, the spectators behind the goalposts, the snack bar parents—found themselves with their own arm-pumping cheerleader.

She ran straight across the fifty-yard line and joined the other team's cheerleaders. We laughed as they stood there with their mouths open. She cheered in front of the players' bench and was shooed away by a coach. At halftime she played her ukulele with the band.

In the second half she got acrobatic. She did cartwheels and backflips. At one point the game was stopped and three zebra-shirted officials ran toward one end zone. She had shinnied up a goalpost, tightrope-walked out to the middle of the crossbar, and was now standing there with her arms raised in a touchdown sign. She was commanded down, to a standing ovation and flashing cameras.

As we filed out afterward, no one mentioned how boring the game itself had been. No one cared that the Electrons had lost again. In his column next day, the sports editor of the Mica Times referred to her as "the best athlete on the field."

We couldn't wait for basketball season.

Was it a Hillari Kimble backlash?

Several days after the birthday song, I heard a shout down the hallway: "Don't!" I ran. A crowd was gathered at the top of a stairwell. They were all staring at something. I pushed my way through. Hillari Kimble was standing at the upper landing, grinning. She was holding Cinnamon the rat, dangling by its tail over the railing, nothing but space between it and the first floor. Stargirl was on the steps below, looking up.

The scene froze. The bell for the next class rang. Nobody moved. Stargirl said nothing, merely looked. The eight toes of Cinnamon's front paws splayed apart. Its tiny unblinking eyes were bulging, black as cloves. Again a voice rang out: "Don't, Hillari!" Suddenly Hillari dropped it. Someone screamed, but the rat fell only to the floor at Hillari's feet. She sent Stargirl a final sneer and left.

Was it Dori Dilson? Dori Dilson was a brown-haired ninth-grader who wrote poems in a looseleaf notebook half as big as herself and whose name nobody knew until the day she sat down at Stargirl's table for lunch. Next day the table was full. No longer did Stargirl eat lunch-or walk the hallways or do anything else at school-alone.

Was it us?

Did we change? Why didn't Hillari Kimble drop the rat to its death? Did she see something in our eyes?

Whatever the reason, by the time we returned from Thanksgiving break, it was clear that the change had occurred. Suddenly Stargirl was not dangerous, and we rushed to embrace her. Calls of "Stargirl!" flew down the hallways. We couldn't say her name often enough. It tickled us to mention her name to strangers and watch the expressions on their faces.

Girls liked her. Boys liked her. And-most remarkable-the attention came from all kinds of kids: shy mice and princesses, jocks and eggheads.

We honored her by imitation. A chorus of ukuleles strummed in the lunchroom. Flowers appeared on classroom desks. One day it rained and a dozen girls ran outside to dance. The pet shop at the Mica Mall ran out of rats.

The best chance for us to express our admiration came in the first week of December. We were gathered in the auditorium for the annual oratorical contest. Sponsored by the Arizona League of Women Voters, the event was open to any high school student who cared to show his or her stuff as a public speaker. The microphone was yours for seven minutes. Talk about anything you like. The winner would move on to the district competition.

Usually only four or five students entered the contest at MAHS. That year there were thirteen, including Stargirl. You didn't have to be a judge to see that she was far and away the best. She gave an animated speech-a performance, really-titled "Elf Owl, Call Me by My First Name." Her gray-brown homesteader's dress was the color of her subject. I couldn't see her freckles from the audience, but I imagined them dancing on her nose as she flicked her head this way and that. When she finished, we stomped on the floor and whistled and shouted for more. While the judges went through the charade of conferring, a film was shown. It was a brief documentary about the previous year's state finals. It featured the winner, a boy from Yuma. The most riveting moments of the film came not during the contest, but during its aftermath. When the boy arrived back at Yuma High, the whole school mobbed him in the parking lot: banners, cheerleaders, band music, confetti, streamers. Pumping his arms in the air, the returning hero rode their shoulders into school.

The film ended, the lights went on, and the judges proclaimed Stargirl the winner. She would now go on to the district competition in Red Rock, they said. The state finals would be held in Phoenix in April. Again and again we whooped and whistled.

Such was the acclamation we gave her in those last weeks of the year. But we also gave something to ourselves.

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In the Sonoran Desert there are ponds. You could be standing in the middle of one and not know it, because the ponds are usually dry. Nor would you know that inches below your feet, frogs are sleeping, their heartbeats down to once or twice per minute. They lie dormant and waiting, these mud frogs, for without water their lives are incomplete, they are not fully themselves. For many months they sleep like this within the earth. And then the rain comes. And a hundred pairs of eyes

pop out of the mud, and at night a hundred voices call across the moonlit water. It was wonderful to see, wonderful to be in the middle of: we mud frogs awakening all around. We were awash in tiny attentions. Small gestures, words, empathies thought to be extinct came to life. For years the strangers among us had passed sullenly in the hallways; now we looked, we nodded, we smiled. If someone got an A, others celebrated, too. If someone sprained an ankle, others felt the pain. We discovered the color of each other's eyes.

It was a rebellion she led, a rebellion for rather than against. For ourselves. For the dormant mud frogs we had been for so long. Kids whose voices had never been heard before spoke up in class. "Letters to the Editor" filled a whole page of the school newspaper's December edition. More than a hundred students tried out for the Spring Revue. One kid started a camera club. Another wore Hush Puppies instead of sneakers. A plain, timid girl painted her toenails kelly green. A boy showed up with purple hair.

None of this was publicly acknowledged. There were no PA announcements, no TV coverage, no headlines in the Mica Times:

MAHS STUDENTS ASTIR  
INDIVIDUALITY ERUPTS

But it was there; it was happening. I was used to peering through the lens, to framing the picture, and I could see it. I could feel it in myself. I felt lighter, unshackled, as if something I had been carrying had fallen away. But I didn't know what to do about it. There was no direction to my liberation. I had no urge to color my hair or trash my sneakers. So I just enjoyed the feeling and watched the once amorphous student body separate itself into hundreds of individuals.

The pronoun "we" itself seemed to crack and drift apart in pieces.

Ironically, as we discovered and distinguished ourselves, a new collective came into being—a vitality, a presence, a spirit that had not been there before. It echoed from the rafters in the gym: "GO, ELECTRONS!" It sparkled in the water fountains. At the holiday assembly, the words of the alma mater had wings.

"It's a miracle!" I gushed to Archie one day.

He stood on the edge of his back porch. He did not turn. He pulled the pipe slowly from between his lips. He spoke as if to Se&#241;or Saguaro or to the blazing mountains beyond.

"Best hope it's not," he said. "The trouble with miracles is, they don't last long."

And the trouble with bad times is, you can't sleep through them.

It was a golden age, those few weeks in December and January. How could I know that when the end came, I would be in the middle of it? 10

All my resistance to putting Stargirl on Hot Seat vanished. "Okay," I said to Kevin, "let's do it. Schedule her." He started off. I grabbed his arm. "Wait—ask her first." He laughed. "Right. Like she's gonna say no."

No one had ever said no to the Hot Seat. Any reluctance to answering personal or embarrassing questions always yielded to the lure of appearing on TV. If anyone could resist that lure, I figured it would be Stargirl. That day after school, Kevin came at me thumbs-up and grinning: "It's a go! She said yes!"

First I was surprised. This didn't fit my impression of her. I didn't know that this was an early glimpse of something I was soon to see much more of: behind the

dazzling talents and differentness, she was far more normal than I had realized. Then I was elated. We yipped. We high-fived. We saw visions of our most popular show ever.

This was mid-January. We set a date of February thirteenth, the day before Valentine's. We wanted a full month for buildup. With my resistance now gone, I jumped in with both feet. We planned a promo campaign. We got art students to do posters. We jotted down questions for Kevin to ask in case the jury ran out-fat chance of that happening. We didn't have to post the usual jury notice: dozens of kids volunteered.

And then things changed again.

In the courtyard of our school stood a five-foot sheet of plywood in the shape of a roadrunner. It was a bulletin board, strictly for student use, always taped and tacked with messages and announcements. One day we found the following computer printout taped to the plywood roadrunner: "I pledge allegiance to United Turtles of America and to the fruit bats of Borneo, one planet in the Milky Way, incredible, with justice and black bean burritos for all."

Handwritten across the bottom were the words: "This is how she says the Pledge of Allegiance."

No one had to tell us who "she" was. Apparently, she was overheard in homeroom as we said the Pledge each morning.

As far as I knew, we were not a particularly patriotic bunch. I didn't hear people saying they were offended. Some thought it was funny. Some giggled and nodded knowingly, as if to say, There she goes again. On the following mornings, more than one kid was heard reciting the new "pledge."

Within days a new story wildfired through the student body. A senior girl, Anna Grisdale, lost her grandfather after a long illness. The funeral took place on a Saturday morning. For a while everything seemed routine: the crowd of people at the church, the line of cars with their headlights on, the smaller group clustered around the grave for the final farewell. After the brief graveside service, the funeral director handed everyone a long-stemmed flower. Upon leaving, each mourner laid his or her flower over the casket. This was when Anna Grisdale first noticed Stargirl.

Through her own tears Anna could see that Stargirl was crying also. She wondered if Stargirl had been at the church as well. Even more, she wondered why Stargirl was there at all. Could she have been friends with her grandfather without Anna's knowing it? Anna's mother asked her who the unfamiliar girl was. Afterward, the mourners were invited to Anna's house for lunch. About thirty came. There was a buffet of cold cuts and salads and cookies. Stargirl was there, chatting with members of the family but not eating or drinking anything.

Suddenly Anna heard her mother's voice. It was no louder than the others, but it was different: "What are you doing here?"

Sudden stillness. Everyone staring. They were in front of the picture window.

Anna had never seen her mother so angry. Mrs. Grisdale had been very close to her father. They had built an addition to their house so he could live with them.

She glared down at Stargirl. "Answer me."

Stargirl gave no reply. "You didn't even know him, did you?"

Still Stargirl said nothing.

"Did you?"

And then Anna's mother was flinging open the front door and pointing, as if banishing her to the desert. "Leave my house."

Stargirl left.

Danny Pike was nine years old. He loved to ride the bicycle he had gotten for his birthday. One day after school he lost control and plowed into a mailbox. He broke his leg, but that wasn't the worst of it. A blood clot developed. He was airlifted to Children's Hospital in Phoenix, where he was operated on. For a while it was touch and go, but within a week he was on his way back home.

All this was reported in the Mica Times. As was the celebration when Danny arrived at his home on Pierson Lane. The five-column photo in the Times showed Danny on his father's shoulders, surrounded by a mob of neighbors. In the foreground was a new bike, and a big sign that read:

WELCOME HOME, DANNY

It wasn't until days later that the front-page photo appeared on the plywood roadrunner. We gathered around to see something we hadn't noticed before. An arrow from a thick red felt-tip marker pointed at one of the tiny faces crowded into the frame. It was the face of a girl, beaming as if Danny Pike were her little brother back from the dead. It was Stargirl.

And then there was the bike.

The various members of the Pike family-parents, grandparents, et al.- each thought someone else had bought Danny the new bicycle. Several days went by before they discovered to their great surprise that none of them had.

So where did the bike come from? High-schoolers who heard the story and saw the picture had a pretty good idea. Apparently the Pikes did not. The bike became the focus of a family squabble. Mr. Pike was mad because nobody he asked would admit to buying the bike-and probably because he hadn't done it himself. Mrs. Pike was mad because no way, not for at least one year, would she allow Danny back on wheels.

One night the new, still-unridden bike wound up at the Pikes' front curb with the trash cans. By the time the trash collector came the next day, it was gone. Danny got a BB gun instead.

The Pledge of Allegiance, the Grisdale funeral, the Danny Pike affair- these things were noted, but they had no immediate impact on Stargirl's popularity at school. Not so with cheerleading and the boys' basketball season.

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During the first quarter of each home game, Stargirl went over to the visitors' section and gave them a cheer. She began with an exaggerated ball-bouncing motion:

Dribble, Dribble!

Sis Boom Bibble!

We don't bite!

We don't nibble!

We just say-

(sweeping wave)

"Howwww-dee, friends!"

(two thumbs pointing to her chest)

"We're the Electrons!"

(points to them) "Who-are-YYYYYYYOU?"

(turns head to side, cups ear)

A couple of visiting cheerleaders, maybe a fan or two would call back: "Wildcats!" or "Cougars!" or whatever, but most of them just gaped at her as if to say, Who is this? Some of her fellow cheerleaders were amused, some were mortified.

At that point the only crime Stargirl could have been accused of would be corniness. But she didn't stop there. She cheered whenever the ball went in the basket, regardless of which team shot it. It was the strangest sight: the other team scores, the MAHS crowd sits glumly on their hands while Stargirl, alone, pops up cheering.

At first the other cheerleaders tried to suppress her; it was like trying to calm down a puppy. When they gave her the pleated skirt, they made a cheerleader they never imagined. She did not limit herself to basketball games. She cheered anyone, anything, anytime. She cheered the big things-honors, election winners-but she gave most of her attention to little things.

You never knew when it would happen. Maybe you were a little ninth- grade nobody named Eddie. As you're walking down the hall you see a candy wrapper on the floor. You pick it up and throw it in the nearest trash can-and suddenly there she is in front of you, pumping her arms, her honey hair and freckles flying, swallowing you whole with those enormous eyes, belting out a cheer she's making up on the spot, something about Eddie, Eddie and the trash can teaming up to wipe out litter. A mob is gathering, clapping hands in rhythm, more eyes on you than all the previous days of your life combined. You feel foolish, exposed, stupid. You want to follow the candy wrapper into the trash can. It's the most painful thing that's ever happened to you. Your brain keeps squirting out a single thought: I'm going to die...I'm going to die...

And so, when she finally finishes and her freckles settle back onto the bridge of her nose, why don't you? Why don't you just die?

Because they're clapping for you, that's why, and whoever heard of dying while they're clapping for you? And they're smiling at you. People who never even saw you before are smiling at you and slapping your back and pumping your hand, and suddenly it seems like the whole world is calling your name, and you're feeling so good you pretty much just float on home from school. And when you go to bed that night, the last thing you see before you zonk out are those eyes, and the last thing on your face is a smile.

Or maybe you showed up at school with really unusual earrings. Or you aced a test. Or broke your arm. Or got your braces off. Or maybe you weren't even a person. Maybe you were a charcoal drawing on the wall done by an art whiz. Or a really neat-looking bug out by the bike rack.

We wagged our heads and agreed what a goofy girl this was, maybe even officially crazy, but we walked away smiling and maybe not saying but all thinking the same thing: it felt good to get credit.

And if this had been any other year, things might have just gone on and on like

that. But this was the year something unbelievable was happening on the basketball court. This was the year the team was winning. Only winning. And that changed everything.

Early in the season no one noticed. Except for girls' tennis, we had never had good teams in anything. We expected to lose. We were comfortable with losing. In fact, most of us were oblivious to it, since we didn't even attend the games. The year before, the basketball Electrons had won only five of twenty- six games. This year, they won their fifth game before Christmas. By early January they had won the tenth, and people began to notice that there was still a zero in the loss column.

"UNDEFEATED!" blared a sign on the plywood roadrunner. Some said we were winning by accident. Some said the other teams were simply more rotten than we were. Some thought the sign was a joke. One thing was certain: attendance went up. By the start of February the winning streak had reached sixteen, and there wasn't an empty seat in the gym.

But something even more interesting was happening. Suddenly we were no longer comfortable with losing. In fact, we forgot how to lose. The transformation was stunning in its speed. There was no apprenticeship period, no learning curve. No one had to teach us how to be winners. One day we were bored, indifferent, satisfied losers; the next we were rabid fanatics, stomping in the grandstand, painting our faces green and white, doing the wave as if we had been perfecting it for years.

We fell in love with our team. When we spoke of it, we used the word "we" instead of "they." The leading scorer, Brent Ardsley, seemed to have a golden glow about him as he moved through the school. And the more we loved our team, the more we hated the opposition. We used to envy them. We even applauded them to spite our own hapless teams. Now we detested the opposition and everything about them. We hated their uniforms. We hated their coaches and their fans. We hated them because they were trying to spoil our perfect season. We resented every point scored against us. And how dare they celebrate!

We began to boo. It was our first experience as booers, but you'd have thought we were veterans. We booed the other team, we booed the other coach, we booed the other fans, the referees-whatever threatened our perfect season, we booed it.

We even booed the scoreboard. We hated games that went down to the wire. We hated suspense. We loved games that were decided in the first five minutes. We wanted more than victories, we wanted massacres. The only score we would have been totally happy with would have been 100 to 0.

And right there in the middle of it all, in the midst of this perfect season mania, was Stargirl, popping up whenever the ball went through the net, no matter which team scored, cheering everything and everybody. It was sometime in January when calls started flying from the stands: "Siddown!" Then came the boos. She didn't seem to notice.

She did not seem to notice.

Of all the unusual features of Stargirl, this struck me as the most remarkable.

Bad things did not stick to her. Correction: her bad things did not stick to her. Our bad things stuck very much to her. If we were hurt, if we were unhappy or otherwise victimized by life, she seemed to know about it, and to care, as soon as we did. But bad things falling on her-unkind words, nasty stares, foot blisters-she seemed unaware of. I never saw her look in a mirror, never heard her complain. All of her feelings, all of her attentions flowed outward. She had no ego.

The nineteenth game of the basketball season was played at Red Rock. In previous years cheerleaders had outnumbered Mica fans at away games. Not now. The convoy rolling across the desert that evening stretched for a couple of miles. By the time we were seated, there was barely room for the home-team fans.

It was the worst slaughter of the year. Red Rock was helpless. By the start of the fourth quarter we were ahead, 78 to 29. The coach put in the subs. We booed. We smelled a hundred points. We wanted blood. The coach put the starters back in. As we howled and thundered in the stands, Stargirl got up and walked from the gym. Those of us who noticed assumed she was going to the rest room. I kept glancing toward the exit. She never returned. With five seconds left in the game, the Electrons scored the hundredth point. We went nuts.

Stargirl had been outside the whole time, chatting with the bus driver. The other cheerleaders asked her why she left. She said she felt sorry for the Red Rock players. She felt her cheering was only making the massacre worse. Such games were no fun, she said. Your job isn't to have fun, they told her, your job is to cheer for Mica High no matter what. She just stared at them.

The team and the cheerleaders rode the same bus. When the players came out from the locker room, the cheerleaders told them what had happened. They devised a trick. They told Stargirl that someone had forgotten something in the gym, and would she please go get it. With Stargirl gone, they told the bus driver everyone was aboard, and the bus made the two-hour return trip without her.

A Red Rock custodian drove her home that night. Next day in school, the cheerleaders told her it was all a big misunderstanding and acted as if they were sorry. She believed them.

The next day was February thirteenth. The Hot Seat.