

**Redbird Love**  
**By: Jessica Ward**

As I walk toward the sold out stadium, I see Southern Illinois University students lining the walkways searching for tickets. Most of my boyfriend's friends are sitting at home because they could not get tickets to this game against Southern's biggest rival. Yet somehow, the girl who doesn't even go to this school, or for that matter like basketball, gets a ticket to the prized game. The lines are massive and the guilt sets in. I feel like a traitor in my maroon saluki gear as I make my way towards the student section.

All of the students are packed like sardines as they demonstrate their pride through rituals of screaming "you suck" after every name announced on the other teams lineup. The blue jerseys keep running through as though this is something that happens all the time. The smell of popcorn is overwhelming as we take our seat. And as if no one has ever noticed, I am definitely not tall... actually all five feet of me is only one inch away from being able to apply and receive a handicap sticker for being so short, and this height deficiency can sometimes be a problem, like in places such as stadiums. And just my luck, we sit behind the woman with hair like Marge Simpson. The game is

getting ready to start and I can't even see the court. I lean over to Mike to do a quick complaint on the seating arrangement and all I get is an exaggerated shoulder shrug. Oh well I don't really care that much anyway.

Southern grabs the ball within the first three seconds and shoots a three pointer which puts them in the immediate lead that they hold for the entire first half but I say nothing. My friends and boyfriend are yelling and jumping and freaking out and I have no idea what to do. I cross my arms and have this feeling that every student in the dog pound knew that I didn't belong. I tried to be inconspicuous, I tried to blend in, but as of right now I feel like the sore thumb.

I am barely paying attention to anything except my low comfort level and the entire sea of maroon screams "BLAH BLAH PLAY" while throwing their arms forward and it startles me as the confusion streams through my eyes, what the hell did they just say?! I turn to my boyfriend and ask the same question that just streaked across my mind, he looks at me annoyed and with a sarcastic tone keys me in to the way things work at Southern. "We said 'three point play' Jes pay attention this is getting good." Which, alright I understand they just made a lay-up and got the two foul points, but then why don't they yell that every

time that someone makes a three pointer? Meh, whatever, my mind is wandering and I have already asked too many questions apparently. On with the game.

After a few more minutes, I finally tune into the excitement that is circulating the room. The maroon overpowers the blue by what feels to be a million to one and the score is sticking close, I begin to feel a twitch of anticipation with each point. The game is amazing. I can't help but want to cheer, and why not? It's not like I have ISU plastered to my forehead? Or for that matter, it's not even being partially traitor-like?! They are in our conference, and they beat us, so why not let go of my inhibitions and support a good team that just happens to be Mike's. Oh but I can't cheer, that's like blasphemy, I am a Redbird, Redbird pride! Long live the REGGIE!!! But I have been to more Southern Saluki basketball games than my own home court, actually now that I think about it, I have never even been in our stadium. Oh wait that is because I don't even really like basketball, and every ISU game I have gone to, we have lost. It's like I am bad luck or something. So hell with it, it's a good game! Why not cheer!? Saluki's are winning, and the Redbird's are already out of the running, this pains me to say, but I am having a lot of fun! To hell with it! GO SALUKI'S!!

I lean over towards Mike again, and in my most persuasive voice beg him to switch me spots. "You are taller and I am practically a midget... isn't there any way that you would switch with me I really want to see what is happening!" After a few moments of whining Mike silently starts to move over and does this all without taking his eyes off of the court and finally I am able to peek through the space that is between the beehive like do and her husband that is almost as tall as her hair. I begin to allow the school spirit to envelope me into the scene. The hoodie I am wearing all of a sudden feels ten degrees hotter as I see the other team even the score.

Out of nowhere I hear the whistle for halftime. I am refusing to sink back into my melancholic state by getting in all the game talk that is happening down our isle. The halftime games are going on right now, and honestly I could care less, I would rather discuss that statistics of the other team and how likely or not the Saluki's can win... or should I say the likelihood of *us* winning. The time is seeping by slowly can't the game just start already. I can see the anticipation on every students face around me, what is going to happen next. What seems like ten hours later, the game is starting back up.

The entire second half of the game has been a back and forth battle, the tension is to the max on all the faces in the cramped stadium. One minute we are leading, the next the blue team is and I can feel my gut tying itself in a knot. All of a sudden there are only five minutes left until the culmination of the match and all I know is that the Saluki's better freaking win, because quite honestly, I don't feel like dealing with a grumpy boyfriend tonight and that is just what he will be if they don't pull through. Plus now I am invested! The screaming is intense, especially because every fan in there will swear to the statement that the refs are fucking us up! I can feel the school spirit, it is sticking to me like the sweat that is obvious on every person's forehead. I am having fun! I feel like I have a million dollars riding on this one game, and there is one minute left. The score has since been tied and right now all I know is that the Saluki's better pull ahead! I can't even contain my excitement. Please let Southern win, please let Southern win. The last 30 seconds of the game are Disney movie worthy. The game is still tied and the other team fouls us right after making a two pointer. Number 3, Jamal Tatum, is up, he is my new favorite, he has really cool hair, and he makes both points! The score is 72-68 with no time left! The other

team throws a hail mary and misses! And yes, thank god, the Saluki's win! We high five each other while screaming, Mike finally turns and actually looks at me for the first time in the last two hours and hugs me like he hasn't seen me in two weeks. "Ah what a game," he yells directly in my ear and I don't even notice that my ear drum just about exploded. We pack up our gear and head out to the quad with the thousands of other people making their way in the same direction. The smiles are permanently fixed on our faces.

We basically skip home.

After our victory walk back to the house that was filled with recaps, we find a very solemn group of roommates. As I open the door we are immediately bombarded with questions about the game. Apparently just to stick it to them more, the previous game on the television network ran over, so his friends missed the first 20 minutes of the game which were some of the most action packed moments. I sit on the corner of the couch to relive the action of the game once more. As Mike is giving the play by play, I am nodding enthusiastically and every few minutes I add "Hell yeah that was so cool!" All the while we are all while finishing each others sentences and feeling as though we had played and won the games ourselves. Thank God I let

down my guard because that was some serious crazy  
basketball action. And speaking of, I have officially  
changed my mind, basketball is totally awesome!

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