Richard Goodman

Homage to Cazzie Russell

This is not a story about watching a great basketball player. This is a story about beauty.

In 1963, when I was a freshman at the University of Michigan, the school hadn’t had a good basketball team in years. And never a great one. Not that anyone even knew that. The last time Michigan had won a Big Ten title in basketball had been in 1948. When you said “basketball” in conjunction with “Michigan,” in 1963, you said it with derision, as you would when speaking about a third world airline. The mockery was particularly caustic since the football teams were always so mighty. The Michigan basketball team consistently finished near the bottom of the Big Ten, if not precisely at the bottom. No one went to the games.

The present basketball stadium, the one you see on television if you follow college basketball and watch Michigan play, didn’t exist in 1963. Instead, we had a ratty, ill-lit gymnasium with the kind of pullout bleacher seats you find in a high school. It didn’t matter much, since they were usually empty. One of the coaches at the time put it this way, “The basketball spirit in this school is so low, you can go to a game and get a seat five minutes before game time.” If you tried that at a football game—not that you could, since seats were assigned—you’d be run out of the stadium on a rail. When he was asked about how to increase attendance, the coach said, “We’ve even thought of asking the pigeons.”

I don’t remember why I went to that first basketball game. Probably because someone told me that the team was actually good that year. The basketball team? I asked. The main reason they were good, this friend went on to say, was a guy from Chicago, a guy from a school called Carver High, a guy named Cazzie Russell. Cazzie? What a funny name. Short for . . . what? Out of curiosity, I went. I remember I sat in the first or second row. I wasn’t expecting much, but it was better than studying. I could always leave.

Onto the floor he walked. Cazzie Russell. He was tall—six feet five and one half inches tall. He was broad-shouldered, lanky and muscular.
His hands were large, anyone could see that right away. His aspect had a sweetness to it—he had a wonderful smile, but he wasn't a huge smile on the court. He had sculpted, Mayan features, classical, and his skin was the color of peat. He discarded his warm-up suit, took a basketball, and was all business. And passion. He wore number 33. I watched him shoot his practice shots from distances I felt were unreasonable, perhaps illegal. All that's changed now, but back then... back then. Sometimes we're lucky enough to see something marvelous before its time.

He played guard. It's quite common now, even in college basketball, to have a guard that tall. But not then. He was magnificently tall at that position. I couldn't ever look at him without thinking that. Michigan's other guard, Bob Cantrell, was small, 5'8". He looked fairly ridiculous next to Cazzie. I remember two more names: Oliver Darden, who played forward, was 6'7". And Bill Buntin, a lumbering, often overweight, often-brilliant center, who was around 6'10". I don't have a mental picture of the other forward who played thirty-five years ago. Gone.

As soon as Cazzie took the ball, I knew in that way we know all things that will change our lives, I was seeing something wonderful. Just the way he held the ball when he dribbled was a revelation. He cradled the ball as if it were something precious. He exquisitely enveloped the ball with his palm; it seemed as if the ball, for a millisecond, refused to leave; it looked, at the apex of the bounce, as if it wanted to remain in Cazzie's palm, his embrace was so tender. With each dribble—what a lackluster word for what Cazzie did—you felt envy of the basketball, because it was being caressed and urged with such affection.

Cazzie didn't move like Michael Jordan. He didn't start and stop with such shocking suddenness as Michael. He was fluid. It was as if you could follow his game with a continuous, winding line, like Picasso drawing in air, with no interruptions. He was liquid. Even within the chaos of nine other big bodies, he was uninterrupted grace. Cazzie shot the ball, of course. That was what we all waited for—the slow giant leap into the air; the ball cradled by those two magnificent hands; the barely discernible release. And, at the apex of his jump, the ball again seemed to hesitate, unwilling to forsake the warmth, the understanding of Cazzie's hands. But leave those hands it did. It sailed toward the net, in an arc as doubless and instinctual as a hawk's snare, and we all knew, halfway there, that there would be the gentlest, rarest shiver of net as the ball whistled through, and nothing more.

He was beautiful. What he did was beautiful. Not simply accomplished or skillful or graceful. Beautiful. I had never seen anyone play basketball like that. I had never seen anyone do anything like that. That a young black man from Chicago, from the inner city, could do these things was new to me. So you can see how sheltered I was. Back then, well, the white world and the black world just didn't mix that often. Not to mention—yes, to mention!—I had gone to an exclusive (ha!) boarding school for five years. We had a few black students, but their parents were wealthy, and we had no sense of what was really out there. I was ignorant of so many things. In that ill-fit place, I saw firsthand that I didn't have to open a book to find beauty. I saw that I didn't really understand the scope of beauty. It was there, on the basketball court.

You may know who he is, Cazzie Russell. You may know he played thirteen years in the NBA, including some wonderful years as a sixth man with the New York Knicks when they were champions. You may even know he's a basketball coach now, at Savannah College of Art and Design. If you do, can you forget all that for an instant? Can you put yourself inside a freshman's head (remember, you'll get your identity back) who knew very little about basketball and who had never heard of Cazzie Russell and who, as Rod Serling might have said, "would, on what seemed a rather ordinary Saturday afternoon in early December in the quaint college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, find himself in a world he never dreamed existed."

Oh, all of us shouted and screamed! The place, once more of a monastery than a stadium, rocked and rolled with communal exuberance. I came back. Again and again. I came back to confirm what I had seen. I came back to see a god. I was inebriated, smiling, short breathed. This was living! Nobody had told me. Certainly nobody at my uptight, white, ersatz-British boarding school. No, they hadn't told me that gorgeousness was waiting out there for me. They hadn't told me that a man on a basketball court would uplift my heart and soul! They hadn't told me this was what college would be like!

Yes, I came back. I came back like the spiritual alcoholic I was, dying for more, dying to see Cazzie Russell play again—and score. God, he scored! Twenty-five, thirty, forty points a game! He may have been incredibly graceful, but he was also highly intense. He always wanted the ball, had to have it. He would implore with his hands and face when he didn't have it. But most of all, he wanted his team to win. You saw it, you felt the crisis of his urgency. In later games, I saw him near to tears when his team couldn't rise to the occasion. He exorted, and he demanded. His teammates tried to respond, and, more often than not, they did. When they couldn't, Cazzie's face became a twisted agony, like a
child's who has been told he has to stay at home the day of the circus. No one received sterner criticism than he did from himself, though. When Cazzie made a mistake, he rebuked himself publicly and severely. It was hard to watch.

Michigan didn't win the National Championship any of the years Cazzie played. His second playing year, I think, Michigan went to the finals. I was somewhere where I couldn't watch it on television. I think on the road. But I could picture Cazzie, his huge heart nearly breaking, exhorting, trying, working his miracles—then in tears, the game ending, seeing that Michigan would lose. No, they didn't win the NCAA Championship, but they did win the Big Ten title, something they hadn't done in fifteen years. And they beat some wonderful teams. What a ride we all had! A ride on the broad big shoulders of Cazzie Russell. What a soft, flawless shooter! To this day—even after the mighty Chris Webber—he still holds the career scoring average at Michigan, 27.1 points.

The other players! Oliver Darden was a laconic forward who always did his job, rebounded well, and on occasions was brilliant as a comet. Bill Buntin, the center, was a star in his own right. Without Buntin—Cazzie or no Cazzie—Michigan would never have done so well. He was big, strong and fearless. His aspect was so dreadful at times that, like the Mikado, you were afraid to look at him directly. We loved Buntin, too, and he did wonderful things. There were times when he didn't play his best, and our hearts sank when that happened, because we knew so well how amazing he could be and how important his full measure was to the team.

Yes, the team was wonderful, but I came again and again to see Cazzie Russell. I went every chance I got. To see grace, personified. Not just basketball grace—Renaissance grace, Homer grace, bird-soaring grace. I may have been a clunky college student, but I was bright enough to realize I was in the presence of perfection. Maybe I couldn't express it—I didn't have the emotional vocabulary or the confidence yet—but inside me I knew. Deep within me I knew Cazzie was truth and beauty. Years later, I was watching a Woody Allen film, and it all came back to me. In the film, (I forget which one), Allen is married to a pretentious woman who works in academia. They go to a party given by her friends, and Allen disappears. His wife finds him in a room watching the New York Knicks play on TV. He's rapt with the game. Could Cazzie have been playing that day? Possibly.

"Why do you watch that?" his wife asks derisively. "It's just a basket-

Or maybe they do.