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A Tennis Story

St. Bonaventure University
1,304 words

"You girls are despicable!" Sarah's mother screamed, pointing a shaking finger inches away from us. "Especially you, Jill, you're supposed to be her friend!" Her face was bright red and I could see her bottom lip trembling. Her husband and the coach standing beside her were looking from Jill to me and then back to Jill. Their heads bobbed back and forth like a tennis ball. Jill was standing in the doorway, halfway out of the claustrophobic bubble that had become so cramped I had stopped breathing. From the corner of my eye I could see heads turning towards us on all four courts, and the screaming children on court one had gone quiet. I started shaking.

Sarah stood on the farthest possible court, staring at us — whether or not in disbelief, I couldn't tell. Jill and I had purposely been ignoring her for the last three practices, yes, and had made it clear that she wasn't welcome, but did we really deserve this?

"I'm sick of this bullshit!" Sarah's mother yelled, trembling. She took a step towards Jill, and my heart stopped. Her husband reached out and grabbed her from behind, and she tried to struggle from his grip.

"Let's go, Kathryn," a wide-eyed Jill said to me and I ran towards the door, towards oxygen. "Close the door, close the door!" she cried. My shaking hands tried to close it, but the stupid metal door was stuck. My stomach dropped when I saw Sarah's mother trying to shrug out of her husband's grasp. On a surge of adrenaline, I pushed the door as hard as I could and it closed, and Jill and I sprinted away as fast as we could, past the coaches on the indoor courts who looked at us as we flew by, past the restaurant, and out the front door. We sprinted into the parking lot and ran until we reached the fence and then collapsed onto the pavement, panting under the late afternoon sun.

I remembered what Connor, my coach from last year, had said to me repeatedly: *You have to be a bitch in tennis, Kathryn, or the other players will eat you alive.*

Well I hope you're happy, Connor, because I'm a bitch now, and look where it's gotten me. I thought. And if this is part of tennis, then I don't want to play anymore.

"I can't believe that just happened," I said to Jill, still panting.

"We shouldn't have done that," she replied.

"Run away?"

"No, done that to Sarah."

I went silent. I had already felt bad for what we did, but Jill's comment made me feel ten times worse.

Mostly because I knew how it felt.

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When Jill and I found out that our coach, who was privately coaching Sarah at the time, was moving Sarah up into our high-performance group, our parents flipped out. Jill's mom and my dad called the coach, complaining about favoritism, talent and skill difference and the usual political tennis excuses, but he refused to move her back down. So Jill, who went to school and usually ate lunch with Sarah, started ignoring her. And when she advised me to do the same, I followed suit and at her first practice with us we didn't talk to her and made her feel completely out of place. When three practices went by like this, the coach told us that if we had any complaints about anyone being here we should tell him, and that he wouldn't tell anyone. Jill said we should talk to him ourselves, and we did.

"Who do you think you are to say that? Are you a coach? Do you know her skill level?" The coach told us he wasn't changing anything around. "Don't complain about a person being here until you've done something worthwhile yourselves," he said. In the end, Jill decided to accept the situation and move on, and I, afraid to disagree with anything Jill did, agreed with her.

But then the coach told Sarah's parents what we had said and what we had been doing.

The fourth practice came around and Sarah wouldn't talk to us. And when the end of practice rolled by, her parents came into the bubble as Jill and I were leaving, and the coach asked us if we were working out, but before we could answer Sarah's mother was yelling at us, and then we were running, then collapsing breathlessly.

"No, Jill, we shouldn't have done that. Bad idea," I said. *And I shouldn't have followed along*, I thought.

To be honest with you, Kathryn, I don't think you're cut out to play college tennis. Connor had told me. When I asked him why, he said, Because you're too nice. Tennis is hard and most of the time it's not even about technique. The minute you think a girl's better than you, whether it's because she's prettier, taller, smarter, stronger, or has nicer strokes, you'll lose the match. You need to be mean sometimes, and not let anyone step on you, because once that happens, you will lose.

I knew from experience he was right. I was shy, and most of the time I'd let the other players step on me. I started playing tennis when I was fourteen, and I started taking private lessons with Connor every day for two hours. When I finally was good enough to play in the high-performance academy, the other players already had their own cliques and I didn't fit in. Since I was too shy to make friends, no one talked to me and I hated going to the academy.

It was a hot summer morning the day I played Jill at a local tournament. We trained together in the academy but had never talked before. But that day, I almost beat Jill. And the day after that, Jill called me and asked to hang out. Without even knowing it, I had just been accepted into the academy.

Jill and I sat in silence on the pavement for a few more minutes. I stared at a stone on the ground, disbelieving that I had just repeated a cycle that I had had to endure the year before.

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I can't do this again, I thought. Even if it means losing my friends in the academy and losing every match for the rest of my career, I can't do this again.

"They're probably gone by now," I said, and stood up. The sun was setting and we stood in the club's long shadow.

"Yeah, we should go."

Jill and I weren't as close after that, but luckily, my confidence wasn't affected. In fact, I started improving a lot more and started winning rather than "almost beating" players I looked up to. And eventually, I accepted a scholarship to a division-one university and moved on with my life, leaving behind the drama at the academy and moving into the politics of college tennis.

But at least I learned that I don't have to be a bitch to win. I just have to forget about everything when I'm playing and focus on what I want. Tennis is about putting a ball in a court, and if you remember that, then the rest doesn't matter. Once I learned this I went into college tennis ready for anything, and I've been able to win matches from this lesson.

And so even now, after I've finished my first complicated but rewarding year of college tennis, I know that no matter how stressful and confusing the team, the coaches, or the other players can be, I just have to remember the day when two terrified girls collapsed in the late afternoon sun, and the day I learned that there's more to tennis than being a bitch.

Sorry, Connor. I guess you weren't right about everything.