

The Game

Lydia and Dan, brother and sister, play tennis once, if not twice, every week. In their mid-forties, both give lip-service to friendly play. In her heart, though, Lydia knows at some point his three years on her will be a detriment. Lydia can wait for this pleasure, if she must, until he is eighty three and she, only eighty.

Lydia holds the service ball, a titanium Pennsylvania number two as Dan insists they are the only ones to buy, securely in her left hand, racket lightly gripped in the other. She tosses the ball perfectly and it drifts in the sweet spot—bright yellow and brand spanking new. Simultaneously, Lydia's red racket travels through its own arc and is at this moment hanging down behind her head. In one fluid, lovely movement, Lydia rocks her weight forward and brings the racket up, wrist loose and ready to whip, and this is when racket and strings meet and send Pennsylvania shooting forward right into the farthest backhand corner of the service box on Dan's side of the court. In seconds she is facing the net, eyes never having left the ball, waiting. As planned Pennsylvania lands on paint, less traction, and jets up from the court surface: lightening on the horizon. By the time Dan begins his swing that will return the ball to her side of the court, Lydia calculates its trajectory and her feet propel her there, steps tight and balanced. She could cross court the ball back, but her peripheral vision picks up Dan's prediction of this move and she sends the ball straight down the forehand line. *I am so bad.*

Her brother, huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf, throws his weight back onto his right leg, in a desperate attempt to change his course. “Dickwad,” he doesn't quite yell, as the ball shoots past him.

Lydia relishes his anger, a hidden pleasure she has indulged in since leaving the womb, as she walks toward the honeysuckle covered fence where a ball hides, one of the yellow triplets.

The Southern California sun beats down and Lydia wishes she'd worn her cap with the larger bill, but likes the way the new 'super lites', along with the 'engineered' socks, hug her feet. It's like playing barefoot.

Her favorite student wants to try running barefoot. He writes good stories, man stories with man characters who climb mountains with names like Damara Granites in places like Namibia, and he writes Lydia emails. The last started off with concern about some assignment and then ended with these three sentences: *Hopefully this doesn't sound weird, but I'm looking into buying new running/training shoes and I saw that you wear Nike Frees. I've been curious about bare-foot running but have been a little tentative to try it. How are they?* Lydia wears Nike Frees because she, until the email, thought them totally innocuous, not likely give offense or to arouse strong feelings or hostility in anyone, so that this boy/man took note of her footwear did, at first, *sound weird*. She grew to realize he was a pup in the woods.

Once again, Pennsylvania finds the sweet spot, once again, Lydia rocks her weight forward, once again the ball jets off the paint and sends Dan scrambling across the court. Dan's concentration must be back on the game as he hits his mark and cross-courts Lydia, a shot that almost costs her a point, but she wings a return. Pennsylvania lands in the forecourt and Dan is all over it, clearly having put his wife-fight away. Top spin sends Pennsylvania deep.

The tight shoes do their duty; Lydia, like some exotic goat, leaps swiftly backwards and sideways in one fluid motion. She lobs it high, not too high, not high enough to force Dan's eyes into the blinding sun, but high enough to make him run like a devil to get to Pennsylvania, to work his already oxygen starved muscles to the enth degree.

“Ass-face,” Dan shouts as he slices the ball

Pennsylvania lands and the spin Dan put on it ends the forward flight and pops it straight up. Lydia, knowing full well her brother's game, is on it like white on rice, her racquet slipping between

Pennsylvania and the green paint, cracking the ball back over the net. Her brother (wife-fight now clearly at bay) plays a deep lob that Lydia knows she can't get to.

Lydia, losing lead, lets out a howl, then buckles it up and pin points her energy back on the game. She can't win. Competition wakes up, jolts through her and suddenly takes over. A mean friend, it embraces and Lydia fights as her arms pull it close, horrified yet compelled by lusty desire

By the time *wanting* hits her brain, the sliver of green paint between the toe of her left shoe and the white service line glares up into her blue eyes. Each skeletal muscle, taut and trained, waits, and Lydia relishes, delights in the momentary awareness of the total harmony between everything sensory that is her, that right now there is no difference between person-Lydia and a lion stalking an antelope. No thought bubbles to the surface as Pennsylvania begins its flight, landing deep, and Lydia's two handed backhand should have closed the point but Dan, like a gazelle himself, digs in and whacks back with a swinging volley that leaves Lydia with no prep time, no allowance to restructure strategy. A puny return gives it away, Dan steals the point, he steals the game.

Lydia—her ambitious spirit goosed into high gear—has not an intention in the world to give up this match. The eucalypts, a Rosea variety, blooms beside the court and Lydia takes heart in the flower. It ameliorates the taste of bile at the back of her throat.

The sound of Pennsylvania bouncing brings Lydia back to the moment and she looks across the net to see Dan, impatient, at the service line, poised and ready to begin the next game. After licking her right palm she grabs the rough grip; the bond sticks tight. She knows Dan's smelling victory and it pisses her off. Wanting to beat brother Dan, to truly compete against the family's *son* poses a no-win, a confusion that must be dodged. The mantra that contradicts every instinct will soon begin: *I will not win, I will not win.*

Knees bent, racquet at belly height, balanced perfectly, she bounces from foot to foot, and then Lydia settles, a vicious defiance rising, eyes lasered on Pennsylvania as the brilliant yellow ball flies

through the air.