

creative  
nonfiction

# The Prince

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I LOOK ACROSS the net at Andrew Benedict, my nemesis. He bounces the ball on the court nine times and gives me a smug little smile. We are both ten. He believes he is superior and tennis is his proof. It is set point, in the finals. His first serve is a rocket and I cannot touch it.

"Six-love," he says, and his parents rise to their feet and cheer like he just won the French Open. Don't they know that he is the villain of our story?

My parents could not be here because they have to work. They always work. I'm not mad, though. I understand: Mom and Dad are divorcing but neither can afford their own home. Dad stays in a condo complex in nearby Encinitas. Half the time I live with him and the other half I stay with mom at our house in Rancho. Life is chaotic.

Anyway, I doubt it matters that they are elsewhere. Andrew will beat me love and love. I've played him ten times and never won a single game, let alone a set. He is ranked third in Southern California for boys under thirteen. He is an assassin on the court. His weapon is the *Prince Titanium*, which retails for three hundred dollars. He has four brand new ones in his bag. He wears all-white Ralph Lauren, with un-scuffed Nikes and a pristine ball cap. This is the club championship, our home tournament. Scoring is best-of-three sets. He has crushed me here four straight years.

Andrew is also my number one bully at Rancho Santa Fe School, north of San Diego. He is a dead-ringer for Draco Malfoy, long before Harry Potter, complete with blonde hair and two big, dumb cronies who follow him everywhere. It is September and I will hear about this loss all year, slipped into everyday torments. He will push me to the ground, call me a "faggot," rub sand in my face, and tell other kids and teachers lies about me. I will be too shy to contradict him. He will call our house phone after hours to harass me.

Home is not much better than school. When Dad gets back from the office, he screams about everything. He is never proud. He has a forever-clenched jaw, penetrating vision, and he swaggers like vengeance. He is six-four and two hundred pounds. He scares other parents. He makes waitresses cry. He calls me "worthless." He says: "I don't like you very much" when we argue, then slams his door and ignores me for two days. He wakes me up in the middle of the night and drags me downstairs when I leave a dirty plate by the sink or get a bad grade. He destroys neighbors' street lamps with sledgehammers, curses his own father, The Judge, and drives like Dillinger. He spends every night with his best friend, Jack Daniels, now that he and mom are split up. He

rants about how the world is wrong and he is right. He is always right, apparently. He is incendiary and I never know what will trigger him. He keeps a loaded .38 special by his bed. He carried it through two tours in Vietnam. I wonder if it keeps away the ghosts of all the men he killed.

Sometimes, when Dad has a girlfriend, he is alright. Trish is the best. She dotes on my sister, Catherine, and me. She makes my father laugh and distracts him. I like her and talk her up. Dad enjoys hiking mountains and playing tennis. These are the best times that he and I share. He beats me easily but teaches me how to take the net and poach and how to get into the other guy's head. He shows me how to run five miles on the beach without stopping and hold my breath for two minutes. Once, he coached my soccer team for a season and he was firmly asked not to return.

I tell him my problem with Andrew. Andrew's father and mine are both attorneys, and his dad is much more successful. They live in a five million dollar house on a hill with a clay court and a lima bean-shaped swimming pool. They have a chef and a maid. We live in a cramped condo ten miles west of town. I wonder if dad wants me to beat Andrew because this is a battle between fathers, too. He trains me with scrambles in the mountains and hours of topspin drills at the club. Sometimes we even have fun. Often, he speaks in vast detail about history. He says that he could be a professor and I believe him. He is writing a book about the 1980s that he will never finish.

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Sometimes he acts like a real father and I forget I was adopted. I forget that I feel like an alien. Then the world does not go his way, somehow, and his temper goes nuclear. I see his satisfaction when he makes people feel small and I hate him more than I hate myself.

I sit in the shade of a pink and purple Bougainvillea bush on the changeover. I squeeze the strings of my badly chipped racquet as Andrew's parents talk to him like their heir apparent. I study the mud on my cargo shorts and the holes in my red sneakers. Suddenly, his mother gives him a kiss and they stand up.

"I think you've got this handled, champ," his father says with a wink. "This guy is nothing," he continues, "and we're headed to a luncheon. See you later."

Andrew looks a little lost as they leave. He turns back to me with smoldering eyes and walks to the baseline. I serve my hardest but he is un-phased. He rifles three winning returns. He breaks me at love and we switch sides again.

He says, "Give up, you coward." He calls me a "pussy." I laugh, but I feel bad. I always do. I internalize everything.

Then, like never before, something inside me hardens. All the pain and shame and bullying in my life comes back to me in disembodied clarity, as if I were viewing someone else's life. I feel angry. I become enraged. I want to smash my racket against Andrew's head. I want to knock out his teeth and turn his outfit a terrible shade of red. He smiles as he sees me boil. This is what he wants. I blink away hot tears. I stare at him for a few long moments. I focus.

"It's just you and me now," I say coldly.

I return to my game: the smooth scrapper. I am the kid who climbed the face of Sawtooth Peak when I was seven. I am the fifth grader who set the school record in the mile run, beating Andrew by fifty seconds. I am my grandfather's disciple. I am Zen. My nerves vanish and I become dangerous.

Andrew serves and I tell myself: "Just get it in." Whatever happens, whatever he says, *get the fucking ball in.*

And I do. I hit moon balls, crazy slices, drop shots, wicked crosscourt spins, and play as steady as an old pro. I run down everything. I become the brick wall at our house on Avenida Alondra. Andrew curses me relentlessly. He calls me names and I wink at him. He hits a blazing serve at break point. I float back a short lob. He runs up to overhead smash it. Hatred twists his face into an inhuman mask. It strikes the tape. I win the game. Now, this is fun! I open a second front: psychological warfare.

"Nice try, buddy. You almost got it," I say.

"Fuck you!" he screams. I chuckle and serve.

I win five games in a row and the set. Andrew is coming apart. He slams down his hat. He pulls at his hair. He throws his racket across the court at me. I dodge it and hand it back to him:

"You dropped this."

He will not look at me, and cracks the racket's silver frame on the cement. He pulls a fresh one out of its plastic wrap, as if he were opening a Coke. He sits in the sideline chair and shakes. I am calm. I sip water and eat the apple quarters that Mom packed for me. I read her note again: "Do your best, Robert. I believe in you. I love you more than *le soleil, la lune, et les étoiles*. Mom." I smile even though she is cheesy.

My thoughts drift to my grandfather, the dad I wish I had. My grandfather tells me that his will and his word got him far in life, and his left hook took him the rest of the way. He says this with twinkling eyes and a wry smile, yet I know he is dead serious. He is a first generation Irish immigrant. He grew up without a penny in Brooklyn in the 1920s and graduated with honors from Harvard Law School. He piloted a merchant marine ship in World War II. He won the Davis Cup in 1962 as Captain, was President of the United States Lawn and Tennis Association, and became a Federal Judge in 1970. In 2000, he will be inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

He is a born storyteller, and always says, "Robert, my boy, did I ever tell you about how my dog Yankee used to run with his nose next to the front tire of my bike everywhere I went?" Or, "Robert, my boy, did I ever tell you about the time I passed the Naval swimming test by running along the bottom of the pool?" I treasure our time together. I visit his house up Coldwater Canyon in Los Angeles and read war and tennis biographies to him. His vision is going and he cannot walk anymore. He will live to ninety-nine. The Judge lives with Sigrid, the woman he had an affair with twenty years ago. He and my dad are strangers. My father hates Sigrid more than any person on earth. The Judge is second.

My grandfather trained me to play the "inner game of tennis." He set up his old green ball machine for me. He gave me side-to-side drills and sprint drills. He points to his temple and says: "Remember, Roberto, master your mind, befriend your fear, be kind, and you can accomplish anything."

Grandfathers and grandsons are natural allies, and I wish I lived with him. However, I have no say in the matter. Right now I channel my inner 'Judge' and play my best.

Andrew and I return to the court for the deciding third set. He is composed and comes out firing. He hits two aces and two un-returnable serves. I have no sarcastic answers. We switch sides and I return to my method. I hit everything in, run down every ball, and play weird and unpredictable tennis. I anticipate his angles. I shrug off mistakes. I hit impossible winners. I stop missing. Andrew falters. His lips pull tight into a frozen smile and his eyes flicker. His face is a storm of anger and disbelief. He slams his racket into the fence over and over. He will not acknowledge me. I continue. The tables flip. I run him side-to-side mercilessly. It is over eighty degrees Fahrenheit. I extend points to tire him more. Sweat stings his eyes and rains down his face. I tell him "almost" and "good try" as sickly sweet as I can. He tries to be perfect. I play smart and loose. I feed him funky chip shots and dinks and my sinister lob, drop-shot combos. The lucky bounces all land my way. Five straight games fall to me in a blur.

I serve at five-one, a game from victory. *Win this point*, I tell myself.

The only moment is now. Andrew looks numb, close to death. I serve. He breathes sharply and fires a missile cross-court. It is out by ten feet. He nets the next two returns. It is triple-match-point. I serve with kick spin to the corner. We rally twenty times. I rush the net. He tries to pass and I slice a sneaky drop shot. He leaps for the ball. It thuds on his frame and rolls off the court.

I win.

I go to the net to shake hands, but Andrew walks to courtside. He calmly slides his racket into his bag. He puts his hat away and walks off the court without a word. I see tears in his eyes. I actually feel bad for him. He cuts through the Eucalyptus tree border of the club and across the fairway of the golf course.

I report the score to Dophie, the head Pro, and she looks at me with surprise and pride. She smiles warmly.

Later, whenever I see Andrew in the halls or on the blacktop at school, he lowers his eyes and avoids me. We never speak again.

Years pass and I learn that Andrew quit tennis forever. I was his final match. Instead of triumphant, I feel conflicted. What if tennis was the best thing in his childhood? What if it was the only time his father was proud? I wonder if he ever realized that blood does not matter. Andrew and I both battled demons that our fathers summoned. His darkness is not his fault, either. All I know is that I forgive him, for my own peace.

Today, Andrew is a minister. Now, I return to school to become a hydro-geologist. I worked for ten years and ten thousand hours with kids through adventure camps, specializing in bully prevention. Along the way, I climbed Colorado's two hundred highest mountains. Perhaps we both became kinder, more self-aware men than our fathers. I hope that one day, as fathers, we will smash the cycle and help our children live their own dreams.

