Name: _____ Date: _____

Side Out

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1573 words

My brother and I had not been on opposite sides of a net since I was six years old and bit him, and I would like it noted that he started it. Dario is fifteen. I am thirteen, and shorter, and funnier. On the sand we have always been the same player in two bodies, one tall and one quick. Then in July, our coach, Henrik, put a hand on each of our shoulders. "You are too used to each other," he said. "Next month, at the regional tournament, you are going to play with other people."

In volleyball there is a thing called a side-out. It is what happens when the team that is serving loses a rally, and the serve changes hands. It sounds like a polite thing, a little shuffle, but it never feels polite. In my family it had always meant that someone was about to lose an argument. Dario said nothing for two long days. Then he told Henrik that he did not mind, in the flat voice he uses when he minds more than anything, and he went outside and hit four hundred balls against the garage door.

Henrik's reasons were reasonable, and therefore annoying. Dario and I had been playing beside each other for years, he said, and each of us played the other's mistakes. I always knew where Dario would send the ball. He always knew where I would be. We had stopped learning anything new. So Henrik paired my brother with a girl named Tallulah Irwin, who was sixteen and hit like a cannon. He paired me with Bo, a lanky boy with a very calm face and a vocabulary of eleven words. It was a sensible plan, and we were both absolutely furious.

It was our grandmother who made the deal. Vovó Celina played for her country thirty years ago, back when beach volleyball had only just reached the Olympics, and she has never once raised her voice at either of us. She does not need to. She asks a question, in a mild and interested way, and then she waits, and the waiting is what does it. "You may beat each other with my full blessing," she said, standing at the kitchen counter in her sandals. "But you will ride to the tournament in one car. My car. The whole way."

So on Friday evening, we loaded the old green station wagon with two duffel bags, a cooler of fruit, and three generations of sulking. Vovó drove, with both hands on the wheel. Dario got the front, because he is older and will not stop reminding anyone of it. I got the back seat. He was thinking, I could tell, about his shoulders. He rolled them, pretending not to care, every four minutes.

We drove for three hours down the coast, with the smell of the sea rising into the car like a rumor. Nobody mentioned the tournament. At a fish shack outside Gull Point, Vovó bought us each a bowl of soup and sat across from us without saying anything while we ate it. At last, when the soup was gone, she said, in the same mild voice, "What do you each want?" Dario

said that he wanted to win. I said that I wanted to win. She nodded as though we had said something clever, and she paid the bill.

Gull Point Beach is a mile of white sand with a hundred nets on it, and at eight in the morning the sand is already hot enough to bake bread. Between matches you sit in the shade of the lifeguard tower with your feet in a bucket. The game is two against two on a court sixteen meters long and eight wide, with no substitutes and nowhere to hide. Tallulah sat on the far side of the tower with Dario. I could see them from our bench. She was drawing something in the sand with a stick.

You switch ends every seven points, because the sun and the wind would otherwise decide the match for you. At the net, the blocker hides one hand behind his back and signals his partner. One finger means he will block the line. Two means the angle. A fist means no block at all. Bo and I played our first match at nine, against two boys who served like catapults. For six points, we lost every rally. Bo said, "Ow," which was one of his eleven words.

Then I started to dig, to hurl my body at the ball without dignity. I discovered something remarkable: when you are small and fast and desperate, the other team's best shot is a gift, delivered to your chest. We won twenty-one to seventeen. Bo said, "Good," which was his second word of the day, and a personal best. On the next court, Dario was winning easily, and when he saw me watching, he pretended that he hadn't.

By four o'clock we were both through to Sunday, and I sat in the shade with my feet in a bucket, watching my brother play a match I could not stop analyzing. He had a trick, a tiny roll of the right shoulder just before he turned at the net, and I had known about it since I was nine, because it meant he was going to hit cross-court. He was good, and I hated how good he was.

Then, halfway through the second set, I saw him put one hand behind his back and show three fingers. It was our signal, invented in Vovó's backyard with a plastic ball and a hose for a net. I had thought nobody knew it but the two of us. It meant do what you want, I've got you. He had taught it to Tallulah, and I do not know why that felt like losing a tooth, but it did.

The semifinal was at eleven o'clock on Court Four, and the draw, which is a cruel and random thing, had put us on opposite sides of the net. The court was crowded to the rope with parents and cousins and every kid who had heard that the Ferreira brothers were playing each other. Vovó sat in the shade of an umbrella, in her enormous straw hat. She did not take sides, and I could see that the effort was costing her. "Same car," she said, as we walked past. "Tonight."

It is hard to describe what it is like to serve at your brother. I tossed the ball, and my hand knew exactly where it would go. We took the first set, twenty-one to eighteen. Every time he rolled his shoulder, I leaned the right way, and Dario looked at me across the net with an expression I had never seen. It was respect, which is the very worst kind.

In the break, he sat on the cooler with a towel over his head, and Tallulah crouched beside him, talking quickly. When he took the towel off, his face was perfectly calm. In the second set, Dario did not roll his shoulder once. I watched for the three fingers, and they never came. It was like running down a staircase in the dark, and we lost that set twenty-one to fourteen, and the third one fifteen to eleven, with the wind in our faces.

At the net afterward, we shook hands through the rope. Bo said, "Good game," which brought him up to seven. Tallulah said, "You are really annoying to play against," which I took as the finest compliment anybody has ever paid me. Dario said nothing at all, which in our family is a speech. Then he stood in front of me, sunburned and out of breath. "You read me four times," he said. "Five," I said. "I counted."

"I never read you once," he said. "I knew where you were going, and then I didn't, and I hate it." I told him I had seen the three fingers and thought he had given our signal away. He looked at the sand. "I didn't give it away," he said. "I just didn't have anybody else's." We stood there arguing about who had invented it until Vovó's shadow fell across the sand and we both shut up at once.

Dario and Tallulah lost the final by two points to a pair of nineteen-year-olds who had apparently been born in a swimming pool. Dario was gracious about it, sunburned the color of a tomato. At six o'clock, we loaded the station wagon, and there was sand in everything. Vovó started the engine and asked what we had seen. Dario looked out of the window and said nothing. I said I had seen a great deal of sand. Then he rolled one shoulder against the seat, only tired, giving nothing away, and Vovó turned up the radio.

After the first hour, Dario fell asleep with his head against the glass. I stayed awake and watched the long dark road unrolling under the headlights. A little after nine, his hand came up behind the headrest, without his turning, or waking, as far as I could tell, and he held it there in the dark, where Vovó could not see it. Three fingers. Then I put my hand up behind my own seat and showed him three right back, and Vovó, who has eyes in the back of her head, kept her own on the road.

Questions

1. What was Vovó Celina's one rule?

A. The brothers could not play against each other
B. The brothers had to ride in the same car
C. The brothers had to share a partner

2. Why did Coach Henrik split the brothers?

A. They were each too used to the other's game to keep learning
B. They had both lost a match
C. Their grandmother asked him to

3. What did Dario's shoulder roll tell Luca?

A. Dario was hurt
B. Dario was about to hit cross-court
C. Dario was about to serve

4. Why did seeing three fingers at the net upset Luca?

A. He thought the old family signal had been shared with someone else
B. He did not know what it meant
C. It was against the rules

5. In the story, analyzing a match means

A. winning it
B. studying it closely
C. forgetting it

6. What does the three-finger signal in the car suggest?

A. The brothers would not speak again
B. Dario wanted the front seat
C. The brothers were on the same side again

Words to know

blocker: net defender
signal: secret sign
rally: one point's play
gracious: kind in defeat
analyzing: studying closely

Answer key: Side Out

1. B. The brothers had to ride in the same car
2. A. They were each too used to the other's game to keep learning
3. B. Dario was about to hit cross-court
4. A. He thought the old family signal had been shared with someone else
5. B. studying it closely
6. C. The brothers were on the same side again