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Rose Whitmore

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ROSE WHITMORE

The Coach's Daughter

SOME OF US PLAYED with ribbons in our hair because we liked the way they fluttered, because we were still girls, playing a girl sport. Some of us wore them ironically, though we couldn't have said that at the time. Watch me, the ribbons said. And we were watched, mostly by men. In the Bay Area, in the '90s, a barometer was rising. A pressure we couldn't see, but could feel. A hunger in our coaches as they stalked the sidelines. This was '91, '92, '93. Silicon Valley was earning its name. Men must have smelled it—a pheromone in the air. A potential. A becoming. And somehow, we were their ticket, a proxy for something they needed. So, when they pitted us one on one, two on two, we dribbled and obeyed. We worked in the hot sun, the smell of wet grass on our skin, in our clothes, the sweet stink of rot on our shin guards, in our cleats.

We watched the Dutch masters: men, of course. We watched VHS tapes in crowded rooms between sessions, the afternoon ticking by with men in too-short orange shorts and the English with their lanky limbs. There were no videos of the South Americans. They were playing, and winning, but we weren't watching because we were told what to watch, and from that, understood something about how to be: pliant, disciplined, orderly. Like the Dutch. They shielded us from clips of Maradona with his hair and his women and his cocaine. There were no women yet to watch, and, in lieu of Pele, the coaches inserted themselves. Chastain was in a weight room. Foudy at Stanford. Hamm shooting at the goal by herself. They were working, quietly. Cursing under their breath. Could we hear them? Could we smell their sweat?

This was our golden age of American Youth Soccer: orange slices at halftime, Capri Suns after, the cover of fog lifting by the 10:00 AM game. Dewed grass that would give way to the heat of the weekend. We played on teams we named ourselves: The Mean Green Machine, the Vicious Violets, the Turquoise Tornadoes. We were aliteratively fierce and loved the way our satin Adidas shorts shimmered in the sun.

* * *

I know the years by the coaches I had and the positions they assigned me; a mute timeline, punctuated by men who met us after work at IBM or Apple with cones and mesh nets full of balls. We were eight, nine. They picked those among us who would be the stars—the forwards, the strikers—and in that front line, they usually placed their own daughters.

I remember one halftime as we ate obligatory oranges in Palo Alto under a grove of eucalyptus. The sidelines were dotted with our siblings and parents in chairs or on blankets. It was just a Saturday. We didn't know that the stakes were quietly rising. Steve Jobs had begun screaming at an intern down the road. We were always being watched, always being shaped and reshaped to exceed the standards because, of course, they set the standards, and their dissatisfaction was rising.

A few minutes before halftime I threw a sweet fake and dribbled around an opponent close to the sideline. The parents, who were slung in chairs, hooted and clapped.

"Nice fake," said my best friend, Somer. She was easy-natured, affable. Even though we weren't allowed to sit on the balls, she always did, knees tucked on either side like small sphinx. She was the coach's daughter.

"You should have passed it to Somer," her father said, silencing the ring of girls around him. "She was open."

I said nothing.

"You're showing off," he said. "It gets us nowhere when you show off."

Dan, the man angry at me, the coach, was a close family friend. I knew him by his easy puns, the wisp of his silver hair, the fraternity paddles that hung silent and foreboding in his study. I spent every day after school with Somer. We still played dress-up together in our backyards. Wordless, I looked to my own father, standing off, far away from all the other parents, for protection, for an explanation: *What is this burning in my chest?*

The heat was swelling, the eucalyptus redolent. I looked to Somer and apologized. She shrugged, a smile of orange rind in her mouth.

When we were nine and ten, Alan became the coach. He was less cutting than Dan, but he still threw things, invisible things; his fists shook in the air.

Dan and Alan were just names in a long line of men who understood that, despite their shortcomings, in us they could sink something unnameable and dark. Freed

from that burden, they could rise. They threw clipboards and whistles yanked from their necks. And when that did not work, they benched us. Julia, the coach's daughter, cried all the time for the way Alan screamed at her. When she sobbed, big brown eyes full of tears, she'd look at us for help, which made us feel worse because her tears weren't from pain—they were from a truth, yet to be named, something we all felt, something we were just beginning to understand.

No one wanted to be the coach's daughter.

We were all invited to Julia's birthday party. Will Alan be there, we asked, understanding the hesitation in our voices—a new feeling, understanding what it was like to loathe an adult, a man, a list of men.

Julia's mother met us at the door with her half-apologetic smile, her sympathetic brow. She had beautiful hair, a style from the '70s, with long feathers turning to curl, jet-black and full of volume at the top. Julia's ever-suffering mother. We arrived with tight smiles. If we were there, would he let us play the way we wanted? Would our hands and feet be careful enough? Would we break something? He worked in the garage while we ate cake and sang. We retreated to Julia's room. I remember an ornate dollhouse, soccer trophies, a ruffled bedspread. Her room said: This is what I am; this is what little girls are like; I am not just the coach's daughter. We nodded inwardly and smiled but were sad to be invited into her world, to recognize the last traces imagination and lightness clinging to the room, something fragile in the air. A pretending. A grasping. In our nascent pity, perhaps we sensed the end of something for all of us. But we certainly understood something about her relationship with her father, a truth that had been laid bare on the field; a betrayal that would never be forgiven, not really, because none of us would ever forget the way it made us feel.

And when we left, we exhaled deeply because even though Alan had not been there, we knew he was watching.

There were the dads we all knew were too unstable to coach. The ones who screamed from the sidelines with sharp words; words that made their kids mean. Words that made their kids hate them. Made us hate them. George. We all heard about the talk everyone needed to have with George.

I feel lucky my father knew to never make me the coach's daughter.

* * *

We hit middle school and took the ribbons out of our hair. This was '95, '96, '97. We graduated to competitive teams. We entered a realm where their eyes told us our worth. Starter, substitute, bench. Of course, these were still the early days: a teacher could afford to buy a house. A cold sweat of technological companies just beginning to slick the palms. The first round of dot-coms, those preunicorns with their power, their potential riches.

After my showboat incident at the age of eight, I was moved back, from forward to midfield, where I learned to be a distributor, where I learned to see beyond the goal, to the wide berth of the pitch before me. I developed vision, they said. I was a playmaker. I could see how the game unfolded.

We played in the California Youth League. We got bigger. We stopped naming ourselves. We learned about discipline. Priorities. Ten, eleven, twelve. You can't go to that birthday party; you have a game. If the game is rained out, you have practice. If you miss practice, you can't start. Slowly, they pulled us under. We lived on the temperate coast of California. A place where you could play soccer all year round. So, we did. We went to places in the Valley like Lodi and Visalia. Hot towns with dusty foothills and wide, long fields. Sacramento, Davis, Morgan Hill. Fields upon fields. Still wet from morning, scalding by afternoon.

They yelled, but we no longer cried. We got angry, but we never said it. Somewhere along the line we started to roll our eyes. Someone talked back. She was benched.

We played on club teams, travel teams, elite teams. We knew Chastain was out there. We knew about Akers and her hair and her heading. We knew about UNC, Santa Clara, Stanford. We knew about their stadiums, their scholarships, and so we traveled: L.A. and Huntington Beach and San Diego for Surf Cup, the college scouts in the stands, men with tight sunglasses wrapped around their heads, men with tan lines and chewing gum, their eyes hidden behind reflections of us. Some of us put ribbons back in our hair.

Before games, we circled up, knelt in prayer, and asked one more man to watch over us.

* * *

Once, one of us called Coach by his name. We were sixteen. We might have been asking him something. We were probably ingratiating ourselves to him. Maybe one of us was making a joke. It did not matter.

“What did you call me?” he said, his head swiveling over us, eyes wide.

We froze.

He pointed to the far end of the field.

“Go!” he said. “Run until I say stop.”

We dropped the water bottles cradled to our chests and took off.

Here, we had time to think about distances, evaluations, numbers. Our life. Our lot. Our future. We weighed our forgiveness for the girl, whichever of us mistakenly called him by his name. We did not blame her. We thought about punishment. The point of it. Maybe we thought about his name, his life. His boss at IBM called him Frank, and by the time he got to us in the hours of his day, he was ready to be more than Frank: he was ready to be a master. Regardless of what we thought, with each lap he loomed larger and our hatred weighed more. We couldn’t think about adulthood or social contracts because we were just girls, and, in the presence of girls, he had to remain other, above.

Did we talk about the punishment? About him? Did we go home, exhausted, and tell our parents? Probably not, but it lived in us, this thing. I spent hours on that field in practice and I can’t remember one drill, one pass, one goal. Nothing. I can see the fences that lined the field. I distinctly remember the ice cream shop I’d go after practice. I can even see Coach’s balding head. Two hours a week, twice a week for years, and all I remember are the suicides stretching out before the name of Frank.

That’s not totally true. I can still see Jackie pulling her ponytail tight, and muttering under her breath, “Fuck you, Frank.”

In ’97 and ’98 we suffered long winters: El Niño and floods and waterlogged fields (because they were real fields back then, not turf). We realized that they could tell us how to run a defense, they could tell us how to attack the weak left defender. They could scream. They could command. But they couldn’t step foot on the pitch and do it for us.

I understand now that when I see footage of Mia Hamm, Cindy Parlow, Aly Wagner, I see sharp and bright talent. Athleticism that was exceeding. Exceptional.

It's possible they meandered through a gauntlet of the right coaches. But I know better. They survived them. Each woman made herself. We made ourselves.

I remember winning, in theory. I know we won, but I couldn't tell you the score, or even the opponent. I remember no games, but I remember parking lots, their images stamped with anxiety. I remember 1999, the U.S. winning the first Women's World Cup. It was our turf, our backyard. The dot-com boom was thunderous, our land rich and rising. In both soccer and silicon, we were self-fashioned, ahead of the pack, poised to dominate the rest of the world.

I can hear the crowd of the Rose Bowl erupt at the final whistle, see the Chinese players crumple in sadness. And I can still see Brandi ripping off her shirt in victory for the world to see her veins, her muscles, her joy. She thought nothing of it because men all over the world did it. Her act was a hot pulse that piped angry through all of us. Here, I thought, is a woman who does what she wants.

Do you think she could call her coach by his name?

This isn't to say that there aren't good men and good coaches. Wilma, my first female coach, never raised her voice because she didn't have to. She knew we were listening. She listened to us.

In 1999 my father died and within days I was expected to come back to high school practice. I should have walked away then. I should have said this then. But I returned, angrier than I'd ever been because I only knew their version of who I was; I was the midfielder with vision. No matter that my father taught at my high school, no matter that it was January and we had no games for weeks. No matter that my coach, Mr. Kelley, was my father's coworker. No matter that this was simply high school soccer. I returned because I was who they made.

Every story of a female athlete is really a fight for control of her body. Control over her game. The pitch or field or platform. These are sacred places. Or at least they should be—places of autonomy; places where we decide what we need, who we are, and what we do.

There were some of us who caught the eye of scouts. The recruits. The ones who shyly answered when asked about the schools on the table. They started counting.

Stats, days, practices, calories. They shrank in the light. They could not take off their shirt. They were being watched. Once, we ran into Olivia at Jack in the Box, her eyes hungry in the fluorescent light.

Are you excited about Cal? we said.

Totally, she said. I'm also really high. She was the scholarship player. She was the full ride. She was so hungry, we could see it, because she'd internalized it. The gaze, the control. She ate no cheeseburger, no fries. Instead, she downed wine coolers in the parking lot, floating away toward a goal, toward the stars.

I run into Mr. Kelley, Alan, Dan at the grocery store. I'm bigger; they're smaller. They'll say remember when you headed that ball in the quarter final? That time you scored with a minute to go? When we won on penalty kicks? They ask me with their mouths, but their eyes are asking if I remember when we won, when we *were*?

I don't.

I look at them to see if they are ashamed, standing in front of me, trying to relive a glory that was not their glory because they scored no goals, distributed no passes. I wonder if they've realized that they've stopped being masters and become men.

But they aren't, and they haven't.

And I realize they watch us in their memories, too. We were more than just a family friend, a neighbor. We were all the coach's daughter.

The seeds of our youth have taken root. United States Women's Soccer is now synonymous with the unbeatable, the indefatigable. Look at us: Wambach, Rapinoe, Morgan. Champions. World Champions. Over and over and over we win. World Cups and gold medals. We've become our own gods and they want to watch us, but they don't want to pay us. Not as much as the men. They want us to keep our shirts on. Be straight. Keep our ponytails long. Because we'll never truly be gods in their eyes. We'll always be the girls we were, vicious little violets with ribbons in our hair, waiting to be plucked.