

The value of love

By Anthony M. Anderson

We value the trophies we win in life, even when they are made of stone. Ones that are hard fought-for become precious when they are actually worthless.

I bounce a ball off the plasterboard in the kitchen and watch its predictable path. It bounces again on the tiled floor of my run-down flat. My baby son catches it. Even at this early age, he has a keen eye. What might my other life have been if the ball had bounced differently for me? Thinking about it is a torture I submit myself to daily.

The blurry, black and white TV pictures of the state broadcaster start the torture again. The fuzzy images beamed from London start me thinking of that day years ago and the life that could have been.

The Czechoslovak anthem played as Dita and I stood to attention either side of the netted border. We looked to each other and exchanged a barely perceivable smile. To others we appeared serious but we knew each other so well we spoke with just our eyes. Some might have thought this ESP but we could read each other's slightest gesture. We had our own non-verbal language, she and I. It was a language forged out of adversity, the world and the system against the two of us. So I thought. We had been friends since our first day at gymnasium and now in the academy also. We had learned to rely on each other as only sisters could, for that is what I considered her. I never thought anything would come between us.

In the Laconia academy, Prague, we learned new skills. Chosen for our abilities at an early age by the Communist party, here those skills were sharpened. We were taught how to focus our natural aggression and agility to devastating effect. We were both at the pinnacle of our talent that summer. We were ready to go out into the world to do our duty for our nation and Communism. Only one of us

would be allowed to go and so now we were to do battle for the first time, against each other.

That moment, while the music played, is frozen in my memory. It's like a tape recorder with the pause button pressed down. It's always in my mind. If I could rewind and play it over, could things have been different? Perhaps if I had thrown the game, let my friend win, we might still be in each other's lives.

The music stopped, the coin tossed and we retreated to our base lines to commence warm-up.

“Jana Horáková won the toss and has elected to serve,” came the announcement.

Dita served the prescribed number of warm-up balls, then I did the same. After a few minutes, the umpire called time and I served a gentle first ball to my friend. She returned it with unexpected ferocity and I missed it. Using our understanding of each other, I tried to read her. For the first time ever she was closed-off and unreachable. That was the moment I realised it was for real this was no practice.

I did what any Czech tennis player was trained to do, stepped-up my game and became stoic; as closed-off as her. The next four points of the game passed quickly. I was the better player and proved it. It was something I always knew. The next two sets are a blur in my memory. My muscles replayed what the academy taught me with annihilating efficiency.

“Love, forty!” the announcer called over the Tannoy. It was my first match point. The only one I would need.

A cool breeze rolled in from Moravia over the dusty grey shale of the tennis courts. I awaited what became her final serve. Marek, my trainer taught me to disassociate at key moments in the game. This helped me not to over-think each point. It allowed my muscles to

react instinctively. This was a useful trick in everyday life too. I watched the trees sway in the distance. Time seemed to stretch. Match point was far away, like the trees and fluttering flag. My skirt billowed like a sail in the wind and my bare legs felt the chill. It was as if the change in the wind was trying to talk to me, warn me. Her shot came and I returned it with my wooden racquet easily. My winning shot flew down the line past Dita and the crowd exploded over me like a breaking wave.

Dita didn't look at me; she was defeated and shamed. There was a flicker of emotion in her eyes for a moment, a tear, and then it was gone. That moment of emotion radiated across the ash and my heart grew heavy. The current of excited people engulfed me. I tried to catch her gaze across the net, to let her know we were okay but we were not. It was as if I had killed her in combat. Each time I searched her face she turned away. She wanted to win more than I let myself know. I tried to get to her but the crowd of people now surrounding me made it impossible. Before I could do anything to stop it, the human tide washed her away, out of my life forever.

There was no more time allowed to think of her.

The carnival-like atmosphere bubbled over with people shaking my hand, kissing and congratulating me.

"Do well in America!" one said. "Show them how Czech girls win!" said another, "remind the defectors what they've betrayed!"

"You used the dance moves I taught you!" Blanka, my mother said, approaching with the speed of a volley.

"I did?" I said, sure she was wrong.

"Yes, you were graceful, like a ballerina; so beautiful!" She fired her lips at me but I dodged with some skilled footwork and her kiss sailed past me.

“Where’s father?” I asked as her second kiss double-faulted.

“Oh Petr is reading the paper, you know he loves his politics. He’s very proud of you.”

“Is he? Was he watching? What did he say?”

“He said it was a superb win!”

“He did? Can I talk to him, where is he?”

“No dear, don’t disturb him. He took the day off from the factory for this tournament; let him read his paper in peace. I’m sure he’ll find you when he’s ready.”

Marek, my trainer surfaced from the crowd and took me to one side, away from my mother. She tried to stay within earshot.

“Has anyone spoken to you of passports or visas?” he asked in a hushed tone. He looked uncomfortable as he spoke and checked over his shoulder several times. He adjusted our distance from my mother’s ever-present ear.

“No one has said anything,” I told him. “Doesn’t the academy sort this out?”

“No, no it’s all done at a higher level, it has to be okayed first. I hope they don’t leave it to the last minute. We need to leave as soon as we can.” He spotted my mother moving in and spoke louder as he guided me further away again. “...So we can get plenty of practice on American courts before the grand slam.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, sensing his concern.

“I saw two men watching you play, they’re probably STB.”

The STB were like the police but they handled internal security issues. There were always strange men hanging around these events, I never knew who they were. They were always smartly dressed and seemed official. They would watch everything silently, occasionally speaking to people in the crowd. They would check papers or scrutinise academy personnel. They were always treated with cautious respect.

“Perhaps you should go and speak to them?” I said, “ask them about the visas?”

“No, no... That would be foolish, you never do that! That wouldn’t be a good idea at all. We don’t want to appear too eager to leave the country. They are still nervous after Martina defected. They are checking everyone carefully now. They have been asking my friends strange questions about me.”

“What did you think of my game?” I said changing the subject, not wanting to talk about politics anymore; it scared me. “How do you think I played?”

“You were very good. You took command like I showed you.”

“I could feel you watching,” I told him. “I put extra top-spin on the ball for that last point, like you taught me. Did you see?”

“Yes, I did. You did it well!”

It always gave me a nice feeling when Marek was pleased with me. He was twenty two years older than I but it didn’t matter, he made me feel special. I found myself constantly seeking his approval as a young girl does. My mother was aware of this and seldom took her eyes off us.

“Jana, I’m going to see if the Rektor knows anything about our travel documents,” Marek said.

“Can you come to the locker room after,” I said smiling, “I need some post-match tuition.”

He smiled back, nodded, then dived into the crowd and vanished.

“I don’t trust that man!” mother said, closing the distance.

“Marek is a good trainer,” I told her, “he’s taught me a lot, more than anyone ever!”

Her eyes dipped. There was an unusual expression on her face but couldn’t read it. Mother knew nothing about tennis. She considered herself an expert sportswoman but she was only ever a dancer. Because she once trained in ballet, she felt she could tell me how to play tennis. It was a relief when the academy assigned Marek to coach me. I don’t know what the Rektor had said to her but she quietly backed away and let Marek get on with it. It was unusual for mother to drop anything that easily.

Eager to get back to the lockers I’d forgotten the formality of the trophy award ceremony. It was basic. There was the national anthem once more, saluting the flag and so on. It took no more than a few moments. They let me hold the trophy for a short while before it was taken away again and put back in the cabinet. It wasn’t worth anything but was kept under lock and key like a precious diamond. It was little more than a small piece of polished granite, mounted on a wooden stand. The silver plate had the former winners etched into it in tiny writing. I ran my fingers over the surface of it. It resembled a heart, a cold stone heart.

It was a long wait for Marek in the locker room. He arrived after my shower, I was only half dressed.

“The Rektor said he would make a phone call,” he told me.

I was pleased to see him, “I thought you weren’t coming.”

“It was complicated, the extra visa was proving difficult.”

“Extra visa?”

“Yes, they’ll be someone else travelling with us.”

“Who?”

“It’s a friend. They need to go to America too, they’ll be on the same flight as us that’s all, you won’t even need to see them. They will travel at the back of the plane.”

“I don’t understand, is he a tennis player too?”

“It’s a she and no. They just need to leave the country that’s all. I told them she is your ‘physio.’ Don’t worry about it; what’s important is that we’ll be able to start a new life.”

“Is it your wife? Is that who is coming?”

“No, no, of course not! Don’t be silly,” he said staring into my eyes and holding me. Marek kissed me and all worries vanished as they always did with his touch. The rough palms of his hands scratched my back. It sent a shiver through my whole body and I forgot everything.

We had been making love since the day after my fifteenth birthday. The age of consent in our country is fifteen so this was not wrong; it was completely legal. We had been getting closer all year as I trained. He would pay me the most wonderful compliments and bring me little gifts. No one had ever paid so much attention to me before. Then that day just after my birthday it happened, he kissed

me and we made love in the locker rooms. I was mature for my age, the regular tennis exercise does this to a girl. He told me how beautiful I was and that made me feel special. His wife no longer loved him so it was okay. He wanted us to be together, so did I. The love enhanced my game, made me more womanly. My tennis became better because of it. When playing a match from then on, I played for us. Destroying my opponents with ease, making each shot a graceful leap for the ball. It became an erotic dance just for him, no one else knew, except Dita. She guessed we were in a relationship. We would talk about it in detail after dark in our dorm. We always shared everything.

Marek didn't make love to me this time, he just cruelly teased me with his fingers then told me to get dressed. He looked worried but wouldn't share his concern. I thought he was worried about our life together in America; I was not. My tennis was good enough to beat the world's best players. In America we would be rich. The prize money was an amazing \$3,500 if a player only got through to the quarterfinal. I was good enough to do that at least. If they won the tournament then it was \$30,000, a fortune but I would need to beat Martina first. This was something the authorities wanted me for, to humiliate her. It was why they had chosen me after all, they made it *their* mission. It was not *my* mission though, for I was about to become a defector too. The politics made me tremble so tried not to think of it. I loved my country, but loved Marek more. At the time I would have done anything for love.

"What are you doing in here?" It was Petr, my father, he had decided to come after all. "My daughter is dressing, leave!" he said to Marek.

"We were discussing the match Pan Horák," said Marek.

"You can do that when she's dressed, now go!"

Marek rushed away.

“Father, he is my trainer. He is allowed.”

“He is not allowed with you undressed. Your mother and I will ask the Rektor for a less familiar trainer.”

“No, father I am seventeen, it’s my decision. Changing trainers now would be disaster, I’m about to go to America. I need Marek!” It was unusual for me to speak this way to my father. My strong words seemed to surprise him and for a moment, I thought I had won.

“We shall see,” he said with his typical, stone-like resolve as he did everything. He was a simple man and loyal communist. He was not one of the Czechs who resisted the left; he read Marx and believed. “I want you to be honest with me,” he said finally, “are you doing things with him?”

He served an ace.

“No!” I lied. It was hard for me to be sure at the time if he believed me. His bushy brows grew closer together as he peered into my soul. My face grew hot.

“Alright,” he said after a moment.

“Do you love me father?” Never before had I asked anything of an emotional nature of him. He was not the sort of man to talk of such things.

“What *is* love?” he said and walked out of the locker room.

I was not sure if it was a question or a statement. There was no answer I could think of in that moment anyway.

Things became strange after the tournament, the atmosphere tense. It all happened very quickly like a change in the weather, as a storm

grew. My best friend Dita moved out of our dorm to new quarters and I spent the night alone. No one said why. Our room was so empty without her.

The next morning I received a knock at the door.

“You are to stay in your room until further notice.” It was the dorm nurse.

“Why? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Just do as you are told,” she instructed, closed my door and marched down the hallway. Her steel capped shoes clicked along the concrete of the second floor. She never knocked at any other doors. I began to shake.

There was much activity on the campus. Looking out the window I could see people searching the locker rooms and checking sports bags. There were strange cars parked at awkward angles all over. Two men walked purposefully to the roadside with a man between them. It was Marek, he was distressed. Another man hailed a black car and it sped towards them. I ran from my room along the hall and down the concrete stair well. By the time I got outside the men had pushed Marek into the back of the car.

“What’s happening? Where are you taking him?” I cried.

“Go back to your room girl and stay there as you were told! This is official business!” the man said.

“Marek!” I called but the man grabbed me and pulled me back into the building as the car moved away. Marek never looked at me as the car left.

The man dragged me back to my room.

“What’s going on? Tell me!” I demanded, his fingers holding my elbow tightly, nails digging into my skin.

He pressed his face to mine and peered into me coldly, his eyes devoid of humanity like a lion. “Your travel documents,” he said, “they’re not coming. They’re never coming.”

His words silenced me and my mouth became dry. He had to be STB.

I was not allowed to train, no practice, nothing. This worried me. To stay at the top of the game, one must always train. This went on for seven days. During this time no one spoke to me. The sense of loneliness and fear engulfed me. I missed Marek but missed Dita even more. It felt like everyone knew what was going on except me but no one would say. My hands trembled constantly. I didn’t know if it was fear or my body objecting to lack of practice. My mother only visited me once at Laconia that week. She, the usually talkative woman said little. I did not bring up the subject at all, I was afraid of where the conversation would lead. Despite my age, it was as if I were a naughty little girl.

Eventually they called me to the Rektor’s office. He was not alone; there were two STB men present and my father.

“I’m sorry Jana,” the Rektor said, “you are expelled from the academy. You must return all your equipment.”

“What?! No, I can’t be, please! I want to compete in America for our country,” I told them.

“That is not to be now unfortunately. We have awarded Dita the prize by default. She will now take your place at the event in America.”

“No, but I beat her fairly, I played my best tennis.”

“Jana, it is not your fault we know that. Marek Poláček has been using you for his own means. He has been using you to obtain an exit visa for himself and his wife.”

“No! That’s not true,” I said, but somehow knew it was.

“Unfortunately it is so. We cannot allow another situation to happen like last year. Your loyalty is in question now. We need a loyal competitor to carry our flag to America and win for our nation.”

Tears formed in my eyes and my throat started to swell. It was impossible to swallow. I could not think of anything to say to defend myself, my mouth wouldn’t work.

An STB man stepped forward and looked to my father before speaking. My father blinked and nodded.

“Young lady, you are hereby ordered with the authority of our nation not to play tennis again. If you so much as pick up a tennis racquet we will arrest you, be it in a public park, club or private court. We will be watching you and will know about it. Do you understand?”

“Please no!” I sobbed, “tennis is everything, it’s my life!”

“You are very lucky that you are not to be arrested. Your father did the right thing and came to us and for that reason we are being very lenient with you. Poláček’s plan was treason, he’s been punished for that. You were involved too but you are young and stupid, for that, we will make an allowance. However, this act is not without its punishment. Therefore, if you play again you will be considered a threat to our nation. You will not be warned again.”

Father had been listening in the locker room that day; he had heard everything. He must have seen Marek touching me and went straight

to the STB. He took my arm and pulled me back to my dorm room where he packed my things as I sobbed on the bunk.

“I did it because I love our country Jana. One day you will understand this,” he said. “We do these things for the greater good. On Monday you will start work at the shoe factory where I can keep watch on you. You have been very lucky. Your mother begged me to do everything to help you. She loves you very much.”

I never heard from Marek again, if he lived, I never knew of it.

I don't know if the STB had the power to do as they said, or how long they watched me for but obeyed and never played again. Tennis was the most important thing in my life and left behind, emptiness. To fall from the stars to nothingness is more than the heart can bear. I stay away from parks with my son in case it reminds me of what is lost. Over the years, I have lost myself too and become a housewife. My legs and arms are weak. There's a mad woman that accuses me in the mirror. She stares at me with wild eyes but I don't know her. The world doesn't either.

As I watch Dita play at Wimbledon on the grainy TV pictures, my pain is intensified. Time has not eased it. If it were not for Anton, my son, I don't know what I would have done. He has brought me some small measure of love but it's one-sided. His father and I met and married at the shoe factory. He is a good man and as far as I know, loves me. But what is love? My father's words repeat in my head as they have done ever since he spoke them. There is love of one's country, the party, family, a lover. Maybe it's what I felt for Dita, or Marek, or perhaps love is a trophy I have yet to win, like my father's stone heart? Some say 'love is everything' but *I* think, as in tennis, love is nothing.