

# The Tennis Ball

by

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Young Kang clung to the high meshed wire fence surrounding the tennis court with both hands, his whole being rapt and absorbed in the way that the two "foreign devils" inside were hitting the ball backwards and forwards across the net. His eight-year-old mind was convinced that there was a secret behind that earnest, foreign ritual, for he could not conceive of grown-ups devoting their time in the middle of the day to hitting a ball.

Hitting a ball in that repetitive way might be a Western method of increasing martial skills, he thought, like running with lead shoes or jabbing one's fingers into pails of hot sand. It was the fascination of the mystery that brought him time and time again across the East Bridge, from the smelly bustle and the promiscuous delapidation of his tenement home in Canton, to the shaded walks and the elegant aspects of the British and French Concessions on Shameen. On each visit he would first search for an occupied court and, on finding one, he would stand and watch, sometimes for hours, in the expectation that the secret would reveal itself.

Walking around Shameen was the only diversion that provided a dash of colour and novelty to Young Kang's otherwise drab existence. In a world that was better ordered a youngster his age would be in school. But because his mother was only a domestic, working for a less than prosperous family, she could ill afford him formal education. His lot in life was therefore to help his mother with household chores. The proper discharge of those duties was important in securing the acquiescence of his mother's employer to his living in the third floor tenement apartment where his mother worked and to partaking in such food as

was left over after the employer's family had finished their meals.

Young Kang, with his alert eyes and impish face, knew there was a world full of excitement and adventure lying somewhere just beyond his reach. He knew it from tales he had heard from roadside story tellers and from snatches of conversation among adults he had picked up from time to time. He had heard references to strange customs and fabulous riches in faraway lands, of armies on the move, and of great fleets on missions of conquest. All he had to do was to find a way to enter that world of power and affairs.

He knew with a sort of unexplainable certainty that foreigners belonged to that world. They were credited with a mysterious kind of power that common folks were afraid of. He had heard tales of how their power enabled them to descend upon alien peoples and seize their land and their possessions. Their very presence on Shameen, their ability to make China do their bidding, was proof of their power.

As he watched the two tall and sweaty "foreign devils" darting after the ball, he wondered if their antics held the key to their power. He reasoned that if foreigners were prepared to devote so much effort to an activity, if they went so far as to fence in and consecrate special plots of land for its furtherance, then there must certainly be a value and purpose to it. It therefore behoved him to discover their secret and seize it for himself.

He had already distilled from his observations a mental catalogue of mannerisms and movements commonly employed by practitioners of that strange ritual. He hope eventually to discover what latent power each type of stroke was designed to develop, the relevance of the white lines painted on the cool emerald of the lawn and the importance and interrelationship of each of the elements in that vigorous activity. He only had to persevere and the secret must one day reveal itself.

While Young Kang was so thinking, one of the foreigners let out a shout and made a desperate lunge to hit an awkward ball. His stroke sent the ball

sailing high over the wire fence. It hit the foliage of a tree standing just outside the court and then fell to the ground close to where Young Kang stood. It bounced a few times before dribbling to rest in a shallow gutter about twenty paces away. By then the foreigners were walking towards where the ball had fallen.

Young Kang saw their cold blue eyes upon him and felt intimidated by their swinging racquets and their hairy limbs. His small hands fell involuntarily away from the wire fence and he took a couple of steps backwards. He was fearful they would blame him for the uncharacteristic behaviour of the ball. When the foreigners reached the other side of the fence, one of them said something to him which he could not understand. He felt his heart pounding madly but a reckless pride made him compress his mouth and stand his ground. Then the other man made some signs to indicate that he wanted him to pick up the ball and to throw it back over the fence. They were by then both smiling at him.

Their demeanour reassured Young Kang and he ran to retrieve the ball. As he picked it up he noted it was unlike any other ball he had ever handled. It felt excitingly warm and taut and furry in his hand, as if it possessed a vitality of its own.

Suddenly, the thought that the ball might hold the key to the secret of the foreigners exploded like a girandole of fireworks upon his consciousness. The next instant he found himself running with the ball, as fast as his thin legs could carry him, along the quiet walks of the Concessions, across the East Bridge into Chinese territory again, past the sweating coolies working the boats and junks along the river, through the anarchy of carts, rickshaws, bicycles, hawkers and pedestrians choking the streets, and up the three flights of crepitant stairs to the tenement apartment where he lived.

He collapsed onto the dingy landing, flushed and panting, but supremely happy over his daring acquisition. He made no attempt to enter his home at once, however, because he wanted time to regain his composure. He

knew if his mother caught him panting and glistening with sweat, and holding a strange ball to boot, she would surely question him endlessly in that tired and plaintive voice of hers. In the end, through the sheer persistence, she would drag the truth out of him and he would then have to surrender the ball, and with it, possibly all hope of discovering the secret of the foreigners.

He therefore decided to reveal his possession of the ball casually, as if it were a matter of little moment. So he bided his time on the landing to regain his breath, taking the opportunity to examine in private the ball's rough texture and its meandering seam. It was only when he felt ready to face his mother that he tugged at the bell rope.

After a while Young Kang's mother, Pearl, answered the door. She was in her late twenties but she was already unseasonably old and haggard. It was as if all the meanness and drudgery of life in the tenement had become personified in her stooped and pathetic figure and in her woebegone face. Her only redeeming feature was her magnificent head of hair, black with a kind of lacquered lustre, which she wore combed back and plaited into a long, fat queue. The black hair cord binding the end of the queue signified, according to the custom of her native district, that she was bereft of husband or parents.

"You have returned very quickly. Did you not go to Shameen today?" Pearl asked, as she closed the door after Young Kang.

"Yes, I did," Young Kang replied. "But it was very hot. So I decided to come back early."

"What are you holding in your hand?"

Young Kang held up the ball for his mother to examine. "It's just a ball. I found it in a gutter."

"Are you sure it belongs to no one? It looks like one of those balls used by the foreign barbarians."

"It was just lying in a gutter."

"All the same, it ought to belong to someone. You ought to be sure

that no one wants it any more before taking it. The foreign barbarians are not like us. They will make a big fuss over every little thing and may report to the authorities even if a pea is misplaced. You should be careful about what you pick up from the streets in Shameen."

The enormity of his deed came home to Young Kang with his mother's remarks. The foreigners might indeed have already lodged a complaint against him and the police might be out searching for him at that very moment. The thought sent a shiver through him. He would henceforth have to stay away from Shameen, he thought. There might be traps lying in wait. But if he stayed clear of Shameen, how could he continue to study the ritual of the foreigners? He cursed himself for failing to reckon with so obvious a consequence before giving way to his impulse.

"You had better wash your hands and help me to prepare dinner," Pearl said.

"Yes," Young Kang replied, congratulating himself that his possession of the ball had been accepted with so little ado. He put the ball away in the cardboard box under the staircase where he kept his few worldly possessions before doing his mother's bidding.

That night, lying on his bedding next to his mother, Young Kang pondered his predicament. He had the foreigners' ball, it was true, but the way he had acquired it ruled out any return to Shameen for the foreseeable future. How then was he to observe the foreigners and discover the secret to their power?

He wished he had a father to advise him. He had no recollection of a father. According to his mother, his father had died before he was born. That was the only morsel of information he possessed about his antecedents. Now and then he would attempt to question his mother on such matters as the branch of the Kang clan he belonged to, where his native village was, what his father had done for a living and what his grandfather had done before that.

But his mother's replies would always be vague and equivocal.

Sometimes they even appeared so inconsistent and contradictory that he would suspect her of fabrication. But for the most part he forgave her those vaguenesses because he knew she was illiterate and ignorant. He resigned himself to living without a clear knowledge of his family history. Apart from being poor and fatherless, it seemed he was destined to struggle with all the major problems of life on his own, he thought, as he fell asleep.

During the days and weeks that followed, the tennis ball provided Young Kang with a new focal point in his life, replacing the excursions to Shameen. He gave over his spare time to experimenting with the ball. He rubbed it, squeezed it, bounced it, tossed it. He fashioned a crude racquet from a piece of board and practised hitting the ball like the foreigners. He pulled off bits of its fur and swallowed them in the way that true believers would swallow rubbings of dirt from the body of a holy beggar to prove their faith. He carried it with him wherever he went, wished upon it and clutched it in his sleep. He dreamt of unlocking its secret and acquiring the power of the foreigners.

For a time he felt a new strength and prowess developing in him. His daily chores seemed less wearing and he seemed to be able to bounce up the flights of stairs to the apartment with greater ease. But at other times doubts would arise as to whether he had made any progress at all.

Gradually, as the summer faded into autumn, it became increasingly obvious that the ball had failed to do great things for him. He racked his brains to discover the reason and it occurred to him that there was just a possibility that the secret might be contained within the ball itself, in the form of a charm or a talisman or some hidden instructions.

So one day, when his mother had gone to market, he stole into the kitchen and used the sharp kitchen chopper to slice open the ball. But to his dismay he did not find what he was looking for. All he found was an emptiness which gave off a peculiar, slightly acrid smell.

He felt dizzy with helplessness and disappointment. He could not

understand how things could have turned out as they had. In desperation he rushed off with the severed ball to an old roadside story teller from whom he had heard many tales of the heroes of the Water Margin and of the exploits of the Monkey King. He was the only grown-up he knew who might be knowledgeable about what he wanted to discover.

"Please tell me, old uncle, whether I have been tricked," he pleaded, displaying the two halves of the ball in his tiny hands. "I bought this ball from a stranger who told me that it contained the secret to the power of the foreigners. But when I cut it open there was nothing inside."

"You have indeed been cheated, my little friend," the story teller said. "This is just a ball foreigners use to play a game called tennis. Foreigners are like children. They are forever playing strange games. There is one called cricket, another called rugby, and so on. Tennis is just another one of them. There is nothing special about the ball. I hope you did not pay too much for it."

When Young Kang heard what the story teller said tears welled up in his eyes. All that he had gone through had been for nothing. His dreams of power and adventure laid in ruins. He saw ahead of him only endless eternities of left over scraps and household chores. He could not help the tears rolling slowly down his cheeks because something young and magical had suddenly vanished out of his life.

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**The Tennis Ball** has appeared in **Discovery** magazine in Hong Kong and has been broadcast by the **British Broadcasting Corporation Radio 4** in Britain, **Belgium Radio** in Belgium and **Eire-Radio** in Ireland.