

# 'TIS BETTER TO BE SEEN

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The car pulls into the curb near the start of Wendywood Lane. "I'll drop you here Kate. Have a good game." With the slam of the car door and a yell of "Thank you Mrs Thompson," I hurtle off down the street. *Why am I always running late?*

Earlier that morning dad told me he was heading into town early to collect a few things and would then drive straight to my game. "I'll be there after I've picked up the trees from the nursery," were my father's final words as he drove off.

*Cool, no worries. I'll ride my bike in, meet him at the game and then get a lift home.* This thought was followed by the stomach-sickening feeling of going out to the garage and seeing the rubber tread of my bike tyre as flat as a pancake underneath the rim of the wheel. *A flattie on my usually reliable HMX 1000. Damn.* Luckily Mrs Thompson hadn't left for work.

Mrs Thompson speeds off and my attention turns to my destination. The sound of my Adidas sprigs scratching and clawing at the concrete as I sprint down Wendywood Lane towards the school draws attention and interested looks, not to mention amusement, from the early morning gardeners and people shuffling out to collect the paper. With lungs nearly bursting and my breath heaving painfully in my chest, the picket fences and hydrangeas blur beside me as I eventually round the corner to the back of the school fields. I scan the horizon for my school colours. I can just make out the yellow and blue strip of my hockey team as they gather together by the dug outs. Parents are starting to gather on the sideline and joust for the position closest to the coach. I search along the line for a glimpse of my father. *Not there yet. I know that he'll be there soon.*

"Sorry I'm late Mr Richards, my bike had a flat tyre and I had to ask my neighbour for a ride on her way to work." Tall and towering, wearing three-stripe tracksuit pants and a big warm overcoat, Mr Richard's daunting figure overlooks a huddle of excited and twitching potential Tina Bells and Mandy Smiths. He turns towards me. As I look into his mirror aviator sunglasses, a gangly, blond, wide-eyed girl, her cheeks flushed from running, her warm breath visible in the cold morning air stares back at me. I hesitantly smile up at him.

"Glad you could make it Kate. Today is going to be a big one."

"Yes, I know, even my Dad is coming," I declare.

Although my rushed and panicked morning is not the best start to the day, I find it easy to fall into the usual pre-game routine. As I run the warm up route along the top of the field, I catch up with my friend Shelley.

"Heya Shells, how's it going?"

"Good. Hey, did you see Mr Antonadis?"

Scanning the adults on the sideline, I look towards the left hand side of the dug out. Sure enough, there he is, in his usual spot, wearing his cool red trainers, a school sports jacket and carrying an umbrella. Although we should be used to it because he is there every week, it's still an unusual sight – so very different from the starched shirt, blue blazer and tie that he wears at school. He is one of the 'cool' teachers from school who turn up to our games and cheer really loud.

"Choice." I smile. *I knew he would be there. On Thursday he had even asked me what time we were playing.*

As we run along the field, Shelley asks, "Isn't that your Dad's truck?"

I look over towards the Rugby Club. Sure enough, the dark green Toyota is parked outside in the near-empty car park.

"Probably. He said he was coming to watch today. He knows it's our big game," I reply casually, trying to conceal my excitement.

The whistle blows and Nerroly our captain, hits the ball off, back down the field. I sprint up the sideline in hope of receiving a strong pass aimed through to the forwards. However, my move has been detected and straight away Kaikohe School's strongest defender covers my view and the ball deflects off her stick and shoots straight past me.

*Oh well. Maybe next time.* As the ball rushes over the sideline, I trot over to get it, scanning as I move. *No, still no sign of him. But that's OK. He will only have missed the first few minutes.* As I look over to Mr A, he gives me the two thumbs up.

"Let's go Keri High!" he yells from the sideline. Shelley and I turn to each other and grin. *Mr A is so cool!*

This yell starts an avalanche of calls as parents begin cheering in full force for either their daughter or the school. One dad swings an old fashioned wooden clacker, another hoots on a duck caller. The familiar sounds ring in my ears. Those two dads are there every week. I check the sideline one more time for my father and then hit the ball as hard as I can across the field.

Five minutes of play turn into 10, then 15 and, before I know it, the whistle blows for half time. Mrs Henderson, Shelley's mum, bustles over with a New World bag filled with cut up orange quarters. She does this every week and has to grip the plastic handles tightly as hungry hands plunge into the bag. The shining pearls around her neck are skewed, caught on a button sticking out from her jacket. A little flustered, but wearing matching clothes and lipstick, she grins at us all and gushes praise to the players.

We all gather around Mr Richards, puffing our warm breath into the cool air and watching the steam rise off our bodies. It makes us look like we're smouldering and we giggle as we suck on our orange pieces. Parents sidle over, putting jackets over the shoulders of their daughters, handing drink bottles to outstretched hands and retying pigtails. Mr Richards begins to talk, words tumbling out with a rushed urgency. They spin and float in the air, my ears not listening. I am trying to position myself so that I can see the sideline. I push my hair out of my eyes and search to see if my dad has arrived. He's not there. I start to shiver, and lick my chapped lips.

*Perhaps I've missed him. Maybe he's standing behind someone talking about a job.* I search hungrily for a glimpse of his big shape. *What was he wearing?* I try hard to remember – khaki pants and his brown Rodd and Gunn jacket with elbow patches. *Maybe he's late because he got a puncture.* But I then remember his truck parked at the Rugby Club and start to go through another 'maybe' list: *maybe they needed him to help with something; maybe he got stuck talking to friends.*

"Kate, come on, we have to line up!" Shelley's urgent voice interrupts my list of maybes. I give my cold arms a rub and gather my hair in a clip, quickly tucking the loose bits behind my ears.

Tossing my orange skin in the bag with a distracted "Thanks Mrs Henderson," I jog off to line up with my team. As I look over to the sideline, parents busily refill drink bottles and fold their daughters' jackets: they've

probably been doing that for years. In fact, I know they have. I watch them each week. Mr Antonadis catches my eye and smiles encouragingly, giving me another thumbs up. This time, it doesn't have the same effect. I shape my face into what could be a smile, but it is really a grimace masked by my mouth-guard. A small sigh escapes, which I disguise as a breath of preparation for the second half of the game.

"Let's go Keri High!" and the whistle blows. Ten minutes into the game and we're camped out in the opposition's circle. Suddenly the ball is loose and Kaikohe head off down the field with what could end up being a run-away goal. As I turn and run, a blur of movement catches my eyes: khaki and brown. *My dad! My dad! He's walking across the field towards our game! I bet he can see me from there too.* I run, legs pumping as fast as they can. Determined to show my dad how well I can play, I make one tackle, then another, then another. I surprise myself with this energy and lunge towards the ball with a new passion and determination. And then I hear it.

"GIVE THE BAAAALL TO KATE!" My dad's voice booms out, loud and penetrating across the field.

"C'MON REF. THAT'S A FOOT IN THERE!"

My friend Shelley passes the ball up to one of our forwards who misses it and it gets picked up by a speedy Kaikohe defender.

"SUB, SUB, COACH, GET HER OFF, THAT'S TWICE SHE'S MISSED THE PLAY!" I hear the voice again. This time as I glance over I see the lips of my father's mouth move and hear the loud, ugly, words escaping.

"FASTER. YOU'RE TOO SLOW. NO WONDER YOU'RE AT THE BACK FATTY!"

This can't be right. He wouldn't do that, not here. My face starts to feel like it is on fire, pulsing bright red.

Parents crane their necks down the sideline to see who's calling out. Unaware of the scene, my father continues to call and shout, not noticing that the more he does, the less others do, until it's just him. His caustic calls boom and echo across the domain, occasionally drowned out by the referee's whistle and the cheering from the junior boys' rugby game that has just started on the adjacent field.

A lump painfully wedges itself in my throat. Tears well up in my eyes and my face is burning hot. *Am I hurt? I know I cry when I get hurt. No. No bumps or bruises. Am I frightened? No, because on the field I'm brave. This is my place to be powerful. Then what's causing these tears?*

*Is this what happens when you're really embarrassed? I'd often heard the expression about wanting the ground to swallow you up. Could the field turn into a sea of green and swamp me, sucking me down into the soil to join the worms? Or maybe I feel like this when I'm exceptionally let down.* I was so excited to hear that my dad was coming to watch my game today. All season I'd been asking him to come along and this is the first time he'd actually turned up and *now* look what he's done!

When the final whistle blows, there is no sign of my father, although I can still see his truck parked outside the Rugby Clubrooms. Our team completes three jubilant cheers, celebrating our win; it's a good result for the final game. I quickly gather my stick and gear bag from the sideline and walk back through the track leading to Wendywood Lane. My sprigs slide across the surface of the tree roots and my eyes are busy searching for a smooth place to plant my feet. I feel the heat

in my face subside but before I get very far, I feel a hand on my shoulder and spin around.

"Oh, hi Mr Antoniadis," I mumble, studying the mud on my boots as if it was the most interesting thing in the world.

"Good game Kate."

"You think?" I look up. "Pity my dad couldn't make it," I add hurriedly, "He had to go to the Nursery."

"Ahhh. Right. Do you think he'll be able to make it to the next one?" Mr Antoniadis asks, his eyes searching for mine.

"Nah, he's really busy with work and stuff," I reply in a quiet voice. Tears well up in my eyes. I try to stare through them to make them go away but as soon as I blink they begin to fall, stinging my sweat-covered face.

"You know Kate, it may seem right now like that was the worst thing in the world that could happen, but it probably isn't. Just remember, it's important to play for yourself. It doesn't matter who is able to watch your games," he says softly.

"What do you mean?" I ask as I tilt my head sideways to look at him. *It matters to me. I always seem to be the one whose dad never shows up to watch, and eventually when he does, well...* I try to shake off the terrible memory and the sick, sad feelings deep down in the pit of my stomach.

"I see you looking for your dad," he says. "Play for the good feelings that you get being with your team, your friends. There are heaps of people who are proud of you. *I'm* proud of you. You need to remember to also be proud of yourself."

I look up and try to stare through the tears in my eyes, his face swimming before me.

"You are?" I sniff and wipe my face on my arm.

"Yeah, sure I am," Mr Antoniadis replies. "You turn up, you give your best, and you're always a hard-working team member. You look after yourself and others in your team they tell me, and you know how to treat people; remember that. And remember to play for yourself. Having your dad there or not shouldn't matter. Play for yourself and know that you can be happy with that. It's something that you can control."

"Thanks Mr Antoniadis," I mumble as I again wipe my face on my now damp tracksuit sleeve. I watch him turn and walk back through to the playing field. He is quickly waved over by Mrs Henderson and his deep-bellied laugh harmonizes with her high-pitched giggle as they share a joke. I crouch down, remove my Adidas boots and my blue and yellow hooped socks and walk barefoot down Wendywood Lane, dragging my hockey stick along the concrete pavement, home to Waipapa Road.

Skipping across the turf from the team changing room across the field, Tania dances around me. "My parents are driving up today to watch. They left Wairarapa at 6 this morning."

I acknowledge her excitement with a small smile, re-adjust my stick bag on my shoulder and assess the dew on the newly groomed turf.

It is 15 years later and I'm playing for Waikato against Auckland in the National Hockey League. As I warm up, my mind drifts. I practice the penalty corner drag out in my head. I go through my body position for trapping. A whistle interrupts my thoughts and I'm summonsed over to the half-way line to

do the toss by an officious-looking woman in an umpire's skirt at least two sizes too small.

Winning the toss, I look around and choose to defend the goal that doesn't face the sun. As I do this my gaze shifts to a lone figure standing away from the rest of the crowd at the end of the turf. My heart skips a beat. *Khaki and brown? Is that my dad? No. Too short.*

Then I realize that I am always scanning, always searching. Perhaps I hope that one day he will turn up. But part of me is relieved because I know he never will.

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