By Lydia Horne

DIVORCE COURT

Some couples play tennis together. Not all of them survive.

I DISPLAY MY 2007 Junior Girls Tennis trophy next to my boyfriend's 2023 Pulitzer. While I played one match to win the title, Ben spent many sleepless nights breaking national news that resulted in the resignation of a Los Angeles city council member. I'm proud of him and all that—in fact, I don't even point out that my award is bigger than his. "Let him have this one," I tell myself. But admittedly, I don't think I could stand his professional success without knowing I am better at tennis.

We started playing a few months into our relationship. Ben learned as a kid at summer camp but was rusty. It was cute. "Keep your eye on the ball," I'd yell as I stood at the net, gently feeding him forehands. He avoided the pitfalls many beginner men make: namely, pouring everything into a backbreaking serve. Instead, he watched instructional videos and tested different grips. He developed a strong volley game and figured out his footwork. He asked his barber to give him "The Tsitsipas."

Soon enough, Ben was a formidable opponent. I was glad: We could share another hobby, in addition to playing cribbage and drinking martinis. But my winning was no longer a guarantee. I smiled warily when he told friends the score of our match; did they notice he was getting more games off me? Tennis was supposed to be my thing. He was more popular than I, he had more clout at work. Without tennis, what did I have?

So I began cheating: fudging the score, challenging line calls. Not enough to meaningfully change the outcome of the match but enough to piss Ben off. As he became hip to my ways, I upped the ante: I insisted my second serve was in. I demanded to replay the point. I jabbed middle fingers in the air and smacked my racquet on the ground. "Loving you is difficult," Ben would whimper as we switched sides. As if I cared about love.

Photograph by Tom Parker

SW19, 2025.

When the going got very tough, I'd break out my pièce de résistance: lying down on the court and refusing to play.

If we never finished the set, I reasoned, then I'd never lose.

●●●

In June 1940, as France fell under Nazi occupation, two newlyweds were on their honeymoon in Bermuda. Katharine and Phil Graham, the future publishers of *The Washington Post*, spent their vacation bicycling, swimming, and playing tennis.

They'd known each other for only a year and were nervously settling into the reality of married life (at the time, Phil referred to Katharine as "She-who-is-wife"). Joining other couples on the court for doubles, the Grahams playfully poked at each other: "Well, they say he has a fine mind," Katharine joked after Phil missed an easy shot. His response carried more sting: "And they say her family spent millions on her game."

Katharine, the daughter of Eugene Meyer, owner of *The Washington Post* and former chairman of the Federal Reserve, learned tennis as a young girl on the Meyers' farm in Westchester County. Her new husband had taken up the sport more recently—one of the few leisure activities Phil willingly adopted from his in-laws.

Before the Mount Kisco wedding, Phil approached with a quasi-prenup: "He would never take anything from my father and we would live on what he made," she recalled. Though Katharine agreed, the arrangement did little to mollify Phil's insecurities regarding the Meyers' wealth—and, eventually, the promise dissolved. In 1946, Eugene named Phil the publisher of *The Washington Post*, effectively handing his son-in-law an ascendant newspaper.

Meanwhile, Katharine stayed the course, raising their children and securing relationships with prominent journalists and politicians. But her most significant work was invisible to many: soothing her husband, now understood to have suffered from bipolar disorder, who was prone to extreme bouts of depression and mania. Much of Katharine's writing, including her 1998 memoir *Personal History*, reveals a painful dissonance between Phil's noble intentions and the realities of his behaviors. "His powerful talents could be used in such an idealistic but confusing and irrational way," Katharine wrote. Playing tennis, for instance, could begin pleasurably but quickly unravel into something else. "[Phil] in time grew better, always compensating for any inadequacies on the court with his wit, which began lovingly but often ended up with a sharp upsetting edge."

Phil's behavior grew increasingly erratic, though he remained publisher. Katharine and *Post* executives, those who knew of Phil's illness, trailed from behind, smoothing his edges. In 1963, after several months in a psychiatric hospital, Phil committed suicide. Katharine became de facto publisher, championing the newspaper through the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal.

She continued playing tennis, showing the same steel on the court that she did in the office. During the Reagan administration, she became doubles partners with then Secretary of State George Shultz, who would end press conferences early in order to be on time for their matches.

By the summer of 2000, Katharine, then 83, was confined to a wheelchair. Still, she would visit the courts, watching her neighbor Mike Wallace, a longtime *60 Minutes* reporter, play with friends. "She listened to our line calls with a certain skepticism," Wallace recalled.

Graham, at last, called the shots.

●●●

My parents hashed out their divorce not in court but on one. They'd drive my dad's 2003 gray Jeep Cherokee to our Washington, D.C., tennis club, where the members were mostly cranky politico retirees. Seymour Hersh was a regular; my friends and I would mimic his grunt in the locker room.

Athletic and fit, my mom ran half marathons (and one full). Though she had played tennis all her life, she lacked a certain killer instinct. She played long rallies from the baseline, the point usually ending when she hit her one-handed backhand into the net.

The court was a second space where my parents could tease about divorce—and then, eventually, plan theirs.

My dad was small and fast. He started playing in his 20s in Vermont, where he attended college and ran a ski shop. Dad had a mean crosscourt forehand and a steady serve. Though he never took a lesson, he got better with time.

My parents weren't terribly well matched. My dad always won, but it didn't much matter. Playing together gave them a chance to work on their game. Usually my mom would complain about her serve (she tossed the ball too high). My dad would try out a Western grip and test his slice. After two sets, they'd sit together on a little wood bench, talking as they drank water out of cone-shaped paper cups.

These conversations were long; it felt like they were gone for hours. And they'd continue after the tennis was over, parked outside our house—my mom's passenger door open, one leg in the car and the other on the curb. I'd peek out from the window and see my dad gripping the wheel, my mom rubbing her chin with her long fingers. They both had little white splotches of sunscreen on their faces and arms.

I don't remember much about how I felt during that time, but I do remember how that moment smelled. It was fall in D.C. Overripe ginkgo berries squished on the sidewalk. Hot, stale air that accumulated in my top-floor bedroom. Plastic-wrapped back-to-school clothes from Mini Boden. Decaying birds in our backyard that died after repeatedly flying into our living-room window, mistaking the reflection of the sky for open air. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Three years earlier, playing tennis meant something else. It meant exercise, socializing—fun. A writer, my mom had a regular humor column, "Just Enough Rope," in *The Northwest Current*, a weekly D.C. newspaper. In a 2007 story, she described her cheeky competition with my dad: "We have a little bet going, which is that if I ever actually do take a set (just a game here or there does not count), I will either get a thousand cases of champagne or I will leave him, whichever seems more appealing to me at the time."

The court was a second space where my parents could tease about divorce—and then, eventually, plan theirs. But it was also where they could project a future together: "We'll be there," my mom wrote about playing tennis with my dad into their late 70s. "He'll be destroying me and I'll be happily double-faulting while I fantasize about champagne. Our legs will be encased in braces. A younger couple will politely toss back all the balls we hit into the middle of their game."

●●●

We all played together four years ago. Ben and I then lived in Los Angeles, and my parents were visiting. After lunch in Santa Monica, we headed to the court. It was a hot day, in the 90s. A heat wave in May. A month before the mayoral primaries. On the walk over, Ben was rolling calls for a story about candidate Karen Bass.

My parents had been divorced for almost a decade. They spoke on the phone about once a month and occasionally met for meals when work trips landed them in the same city. My dad was playing tennis more than ever. He'd left D.C. and moved to New Jersey, where he promptly joined a tennis club that became the epicenter of his social world. He played doubles mostly, with a rotating crew of older men, many of whom had played Division I tennis at Princeton. They were all about two inches shorter than they were in 1978.

Mom hardly played anymore. She complained that she had no one to play with—which was partially true. But she kept up with tennis, watching the majors and dragging me to the court whenever we were together. Mom's life had changed, too: Her career took off after the divorce. She fell in love with a sweet man—a real New Englander—who liked to take her on long tromps through the woods behind his house.

The tennis that day in California was short on account of the weather. We played mixed doubles in every combination: Ben and me against my parents. Girls versus boys. I liked watching my parents giggle and jab at each other. My mom gave my dad an incredulous look after she double-faulted. "You're tossing the ball too high," he said.

Before we left, my mom pulled something out of her bag: my 2007 Junior Girls trophy. She'd carried it on the plane. The thing was absurd: a plastic gold figure of a woman leaning back, tossing an invisible ball before a serve. She stood on top of a gold trophy cup connected to a piece of marble and mounted on a thick square of dark wood, flanked by two gold eagles.

Holding the trophy, I posed for a photo near the net, stuffing several tennis balls down my sports bra to make it appear as though I had a bosom. (I learned this move in elementary school.) Looking down over my miraculous double Ds, I looked at the plaque, remembering 2007, the year it had been presented to me. Everything had changed since then. Growing up, giving up, moving on, starting over. But we were still on the court. ●