

**"It Used to Be That People Went to Church to See Miracles. Now They Go to the Movies"**

"Lolita," from the film *"Quiet Days in Hollywood"*

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There is a certain smoothness of film that real life seems to miss. The well-turned phrase, the timed to the second moment of high drama, the incandescent smolder of a caught glance from someone else. When the moment is predetermined and well-practiced, the effects are clear. It is too bad, that in actual reality, we do not get rehearsal time. The lighting, blocking, and special effects of real life do not get second chances. It is one take and out. There are no dialogue retakes, or makeup reapplications. Life is an uncut documentary, with no editing or reshoots.

I thought about these aspects of "cinéma vérité" as I talked over my eldest son's physical progress on the tennis court and his emotional maturity off of it with his coach. He had been playing in the development program since he was eight. "He was upset when he first got here, so I had him shoot some baskets till he cooled down," the coach said. He added, "He was pretty angry with you for buying the racket for him that you did." The backstory is that for his fifteenth birthday, I had promised my son a new tennis racquet. We made what I thought to be a good choice, having conferred with the salesperson over what he thought was ( in my words) "your best racquet at your best price." The model chosen was normally \$150, but had been reduced somewhat due to overstocking. A metal and graphite bond, it was a higher grade Prince model than the one I had been using for the last year. My son, however, had focused on a higher end \$300 all graphite model, similar to one that his best friend owned. This same best friend whose talent level (even with the higher priced model) was less accomplished than my son's.

The coach had agreed with my purchase wisdom, as he thought it was a perfectly functional model for his needs. I envisioned my own deceased father's hypothetical response to my request for a racquet in my youth even at thirty dollars. The guffawing laughter of his thoughts at my absurdity for even daring to suggest such an idea was all I could picture. Back in "the day," he was not focused on "games," he was far too focused on providing for his family. Thirty dollars went a long way towards accomplishing that.

I had come to the game late, in the latter part of my high school years. Buoyed by Arthur Ashe's Wimbledon victory over Jimmy Connors, my best friend, my older brother, and I had taken to the game like ducks to water. What seems tragic, in retrospect, was the realization that we had grown up across the street from the local high school with a set of four tennis courts not more than one hundred yards from us, which in the heart of '60s era Detroit, had gone largely unused. A formerly Jewish neighborhood, every spring the nets would go up across the courts, our preferred usage of them as boundaries for the innumerable games of "four square" that we played (a type of

foursome game of handball), or as foul lines for our hybrid game of baseball called colloquially enough, "Over the Fence." The (then Herculean) task was to hit a ball over the fence from seventy five yards away to record a home run. Hitting the fence on the fly was a triple, one bounce a double, and a muffed fly ball, grounder or line drive over the pitcher's head was dutifully recorded as a single. Althea Gibson's persona as a former leading lady of tennis was unknown to us, and Ashe, as the "Sidney Poiter" of the tennis world had not yet arrived. Thus, we had no conscious heroes of the game to mark our way, no "method actors" to imitate. There was no "Lee Strasberg" tennis studio to mentor us. Back in that day at least in large part, the brothers (and sisters) just were not playing the game. On my way to teach a class at Sacred Heart Seminary, I recently took my son back to the courts of my youth, strewn about lay the broken glass of an indeterminate number of beer, wine, and liquor bottles. The nets have long since been replaced by actual chain link fencing to deter thieves.

I have now played the game for almost forty years, and have wished for more than a few retakes of my life both on and off the court. Over the years, I have become a decent enough coach, the focus being my service to the school as a coach is one of ministry and relationship. My son has a chance to be a very good player, having earned his letter as a freshman at the varsity level in his high school. Yet, I temper his ego, with a healthy dose of hubris, to remember that the game is played for the most part between his ears, and less so on the court. What he does not realize is that as my winning streak against him grows ever longer by the years, my intentions of "going easy" on him lessen with every match. I know the day is coming when I will no longer be able to beat him.

One day my son will realize that in tennis, as in life or acting, it is "the penitent man" that not only "passes" but eventually wins the prize or role that really matters. Talking to his coach, I was reminded by my father's advice to me when as a boy I wanted some new sneakers, Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars, that at the time cost an unheard of (at least by my father), twenty-five dollars. He indicated to me that "Ronnie, it's not the cost of the shoes that matter. It's the size of the man who fills them." I told his coach, that my advice to my son mirrors something my father once said to me: "It's not the cost of the racquet, but the grip of the man that holds it." His coach smiled, and asked me if he could borrow that bit of advice for some of his players. I smiled at him, nodded my agreement, and walked out of the tennis club into the damp night, with my arm around my son's shoulder, feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit around my own shoulder. "Cut!" "Print!" "Next scene!"