

Spec script for podcast, “Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls.”

This is Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls.

Once upon a time there was a shy girl who only wanted to win. She worked hard to learn from her mistakes, and realized how important it was to be herself and support the rights of others. Her name was Naomi Osaka.

Naomi was born in Osaka, Japan. She had an older sister named Mari. Her mother was Japanese, and her father was Haitian. Naomi’s parents met and fell in love in Hokkaido, Japan, where her mother, Tamaki, attended high school. Naomi’s father, Leonard, was visiting from the United States, where he attended college. Unfortunately, Tamaki and Leonard had to keep their relationship a secret. Early in the history of Japan, there was a law that said a Japanese woman could only marry a Japanese man. The idea behind the law was that it would keep the country of Japan as purely Japanese as possible. But it didn’t account for people falling in love--love doesn’t see people as Japanese or American or Black or white. Love is blind. But Tamaki had grown up in a town named Nemuro, where people still mostly lived by that outdated law. It wasn’t until Tamaki moved to Hokkaido that her worldview expanded to include the possibility of falling in love with a man who wasn’t Japanese. And so she and Leonard fell in love. But her parents, Naomi’s grandma and grandpa, would not approve of their relationship. So they kept it a secret for years. Only when Tamaki’s father sat her down to discuss an arranged marriage did she tell him that she was in love with a Haitian man. When Tamaki and Leonard told Tamaki’s parents they were in love, her father accused her of tarnishing the family name. Tamaki and Leonard moved to Osaka, another city in Japan, to escape from the judgement of her parents and start a family of their own.

Naomi and her older sister lived in Osaka until Naomi was three years old. But even living in another city, away from Naomi’s grandparents didn’t prevent them from facing discrimination and hardship. According to the Japanese Family Registration law, Naomi and Mari would not be considered Japanese unless they took their mother’s last name, Osaka. And even then, because their father was Haitian, they were known as “hafu,” or “half” Japanese. Some Japanese people had their own ideas about how hafu should speak or act, and if they acted differently from what was expected, they were looked down upon.

One day, Leonard was watching television, when he came across footage of the Williams’ sisters playing doubles tennis at the 1999 French Open. Venus and Serena Williams were competing together in a doubles tournament, which meant that they played together on one side of the court against another pair of players. Even though they were just teenagers playing against some of the best tennis players in the world, Venus and Serena played with confidence and composure. They worked together as a team to win all of their matches and take the Grand Slam title. Naomi’s father was in awe of the sisters, and even though he didn’t know anything about tennis, he decided he would follow the training plan laid out by the Williams’ sister’s father, who coached

them as little girls. Leonard was determined to teach Naomi and Mari to play tennis so that they could one day be champions like Venus and Serena Williams.

When Naomi was three, their family moved to Valley Stream, New York, to live with her father's parents. In New York the family had access to a gym and public tennis courts. That's when Naomi and Mari began their training in earnest. Leonard read all the tennis books he could find, and watched training DVDs. He had Naomi and Mari hit thousands of tennis balls as they learned to play. Naomi didn't really like hitting the tennis balls, but she really wanted to beat her older sister. Even though Mari won match after match, Naomi would always say, "I'm going to beat you tomorrow."

After five years in New York, Naomi's family moved to Florida, where they trained all day and were homeschooled at night. While their father coached them, their mother spent her days working hard to make money for the family. Sometimes she would even wake up at 4 am to go to work, to make sure they could afford to send Naomi and Mari to tennis tournaments.

When Naomi was 11, her mother decided it was time to travel to Japan, to introduce the girls to their grandparents. It had been almost 15 years since Tamaki had seen them, and they had never met Naomi and Mari. Naomi's Japanese grandparents were happy to finally meet their granddaughters, but they were not happy that the girls were being homeschooled so that they could learn tennis. They thought that tennis was just a game, and that the girls should focus on their studies.

Naomi and Mari were citizens of Japan and the US. They spoke Japanese, English, and even some Creole that they learned from the time that they lived with their Haitian grandparents in New York. So it made sense that Naomi never really felt American. When they began to compete professionally, Leonard decided that Naomi and Mari would play for Japan instead of the US. Even though their family faced discrimination in Japan, they still thought of it as home. It made sense to Naomi--she thought that she might be able to make a difference, to show the people of Japan that someone who was hafu could make their own path. Naomi didn't feel like a combination of Japanese American and Haitian, she just felt like herself, and that was how she was going to play tennis.

Naomi became a professional tennis player when she was 15 years old. She had grown tall and strong, and she worked her way up the rankings, starting at 406 in the world. She won stunning upsets against players ranked much higher than her, and after two years, she was ranked 144!

Still, Naomi struggled. She faced injuries, and sometimes she got so frustrated that it made it hard for her to play her best. She went through long periods where she had trouble concentrating on her game, but she worked through it and took the time to remember how much she loved playing tennis. Just like playing against Mari, she couldn't always win, but she could do her best and enjoy the game. With hard work and

determination, she even beat her hero, Serena Williams in the Miami Open. She wanted to impress Serena by playing well, and she did. But she was so terrified to talk to her that in the locker room she wore headphones and pretended she couldn't hear. But nothing would compare to her second win over Serena in the 2018 US Open. As they played in the final, Serena racked up three code violations and got angry with an umpire. When Naomi won, the crowd booed, because they thought the umpire was unfair. Serena was mad, and refused to shake the umpire's hand at the end of the game. Naomi apologized for winning--even she was rooting for her hero, Serena. She had won the US Open and was now ranked number four in the world. Naomi was living her dream, but it was bittersweet.

Naomi had no time to dwell on her success or question her determination. There was a new goal on the horizon: the 2020 Olympics were going to be held in Tokyo, Japan. Naomi held dual citizenship in Japan and the US, but Japanese law said that when she turned 22 years old she had to decide--did she want to be a Japanese citizen, or did she want to keep her US citizenship? She decided that she would keep her Japanese citizenship, and she would represent her country in the 2020 Olympics. She couldn't wait to take part in her first Olympics in Tokyo as a representative of Japan! All of her hard work would lead to this crowning moment, when she hoped she would take home gold and further prove herself as more than just hafu.

In early 2020, disaster struck. The world suddenly faced a global pandemic, with countries shutting down large gatherings and telling people to stay at home, and wear masks when they left the house. Covid-19 put Naomi's dream of competing in the 2020 Olympic in Tokyo in peril. Naomi was desperate to compete--she was ready, physically and mentally. This was her moment. Naomi was devastated when, in March, the Olympics were postponed to 2021.

For the first time in her life, Naomi had free time on her hands. As the tennis season approached, there was no guarantee that the world would be ready for large gatherings, and if crowds couldn't attend, what would a tennis tournament look like? But even as Naomi found some time for herself, the world kept turning, and the United States faced an even greater challenge to the safety and liberty of its people than Covid-19.

On May 25th, a man named George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers, who choked him until he was unconscious. George Floyd was black, and he was just one in a long line of black men and women who had been mistreated by police in cities across the United States. This time was different. This time, people in cities all around the US took to the streets, holding protests against the killing of Black Americans and rallying for the Black Lives Matter movement. Naomi had to act. She joined protests in Minneapolis, and used her platform as a famous athlete to speak out against police brutality. She felt like she had been waiting for this moment, and now was the time to come forward and speak out for people who didn't have a voice. Not everyone was happy about Naomi's activism. Some people thought that she should just keep quiet and play tennis, but she knew there were more important things, things that she could bring to light. She had found her voice.

The US Open was going to be held in August without spectators, and with special considerations for Covid-19 in place. All throughout the summer, the protests continued, as did the murder of Black Americans by the police. Naomi cancelled a match when a man named Jacob Blake was shot by police in Wisconsin, which prompted a pause in the entire tournament. At the US Open, before and after every game Naomi wore a new mask, marked with the name of one of the people who had been killed: Breonna Taylor. Elijah McClain. Ahmaud Arbery. Trayvon Martin. George Floyd. Philando Castile. Tamir Rice. Her desire to make people face the truth of living in the US as a black person inspired her to play harder and gave her energy on the court. She won her second US Open title in an empty stadium, while the world watched from afar.

The Tokyo Olympics were rescheduled to 2021, and Naomi still can't wait to play for her country. She continues to grow as a tennis player and as a Black Asian woman who is committed to lending her voice to the cause of equality and the end of racism in the US and around the world.