



New Kid

by Dori Hillestad Butler

Kayla hated being the new kid. She hated being stared at. The boy who sat across from her had been staring at her since she sat down.

Kayla was about to tell him to take a picture, it lasts longer, when suddenly he said, “Nice shirt.”

Kayla glanced at her AAU Junior Olympics shirt.

“I’ve got one just like it at home,” the boy said.

“You were at the Junior Olympics?” Kayla asked. What were the odds of her running into another Junior Olympics competitor at her new school?

“Yup. Basketball,” he said proudly. “What’s your sport?”

“Table tennis,” Kayla replied.

“Oh.” He rolled his eyes.

Kayla had seen that reaction before. She crossed her arms. “I suppose you think table tennis isn’t a *real* sport,” she said.

“Well, you have to admit table tennis just isn’t as physical as basketball.” Kayla cringed¹ when he said table tennis. “It’s a rec room game,” he went on. “Like pool. Or checkers.”

“Maybe you and I should play a match sometime,” she said.

¹ **cringed**: made a face or flinched

He smiled as though this was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "You're challenging *me*?" he asked. He turned to the boy who sat behind him.

That boy raised his eyebrows as if Kayla were foolish to challenge the other boy to *anything*.

Kayla ignored him. "Are you up to a challenge?" she asked the first boy.

"Name the time and place," he said.

"My house. After school today," Kayla said.

"You got it," he said.

Later Kayla found out the boy's name was Michael Savitch. She also found out Michael didn't just play basketball. He played practically everything.

"Do you really think you can beat him?" asked a girl named Holly.

"Maybe," Kayla said.

"Could we watch?" asked Holly's friend Mindy.

"Sure," Kayla said.

Holly and Mindy invited Kayla to eat lunch with them. They introduced her to Jessica. Jessica introduced her to Paula. Paula introduced her to Sara. And each time, Kayla was introduced as "the girl who's going to beat Michael Savitch at table tennis."

"Wow!" Each girl looked at Kayla with admiration.

Was Michael really *that* good? Kayla wondered. What if she made a fool of herself? What if Michael actually beat her? Would Holly, Mindy, Jessica, Paula, and Sara still want to be her friends?

Kayla's mom looked surprised when Kayla came home with nine people that day. "We're going to play some table tennis," Kayla said.

Kayla grabbed a bag of apples from the fridge and headed down to the basement. The other kids clattered down the stairs behind her.

"We'll have to move some boxes," Kayla said. "We're not quite moved in yet."

"No problem," Michael said. He and the boys picked up the boxes at one end of the table and set them around the corner. Kayla and the girls moved the boxes from the other end of the table.

The boys stopped when they had cleared a six-foot area behind the table. "You need to clear all the way to the wall," Kayla said.

"What for?" one of the boys asked. "Are we here for table tennis or cheap labor?"

"*Table tennis*," Kayla said through gritted teeth. "And I need lots of room to play."

"OOOOO," said the boys. But they grudgingly moved the rest of the boxes. Kayla crawled under the table and opened the box labeled table tennis supplies.

When everything was set up, Michael asked, "Could we warm up a little?"

"Sure," Kayla said.

The girls lined up along one side of the table. The boys lined up along the other. The only sound in the room was the *plink plunk* of the ball as it bounced from court to court.

If Michael had any tricks, he didn't show them during their easy volleys. Kayla didn't show hers either.



“You ready to play?” Kayla asked.

Michael nodded. He won the serve, and the game began. Michael wasn’t bad. But Kayla was better.

Michael’s main problem was not knowing when to go for the kill shot. He also got confused when Kayla gave him a loop shot.

Kayla had Michael running all over his court. The kids who were watching the game had to move away from the table so they wouldn’t get plowed over. Kayla won the first game 21 to 7. The girls cheered and the boys groaned.

“That’s O.K.,” Michael panted. His damp hair was plastered to his forehead. “I’m warmed up now.”

Sure you are, Kayla thought to herself. She hadn’t even shown him her sidespin yet.

The second game was over even faster than the first. Kayla won that one 21 to 5. The girls jumped up and down, clapping. “She won!” Holly cried. “She beat Michael Savitch!” Mindy yelled.

Kayla bounced the ball on the table a few times and looked over at Michael. “Still think table tennis isn’t a physical game?” she asked.

Michael wiped his face with the bottom of his shirt. He didn’t say anything.

“Should we try another nonphysical game?” Kayla asked. “Maybe eightball?”

Michael eyed the pool table wearily. “Give me a few days to practice up first,” he said.

Kayla smiled. She’d made her point. Good thing, too. She was awful at pool.

“New Kid” by Dori Hillestad Butler. Used with permission of the author.