

# M A T C H

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

**I**T WAS A GOOD SUMMER for tennis, hot and clear. I was newly divorced and working at home and had my mornings free. My partner was a radiologist from St. David's on the second shift. We played two sets a day, three if we could take the heat.

Afternoons I cranked up the headphones and sat down at the drawing table. I had discovered heavy metal. The louder the better—it kept my mind on my work instead of my marriage. This week work was one of those new fruit-juice-and-fizzy-water drinks called Tropical Blizzards. I started sketching a layout with a sweating tennis player. Right arm straight overhead, wrist cocked, body lunging forward. Face knotted in concentration. I worked on the face until I could see the heat in it. Brutal heat, murderous heat.

Suddenly it was my father's face.

I saw him clutch his chest and go down. My hand started to shake and the pencil lead snapped off.

**I**DIDN'T SLEEP MUCH that night. In the morning I called my parents in Houston and my father answered.

"It's me," I said.

"Me who?"

"It's the goddamn Easter bunny, who do you think it is?"

"My only begotten son. Big deal." From his tone of voice I was supposed to figure he was kidding.

"I'm driving up for a meeting on Saturday. Thought I'd stay through the weekend if that's okay."

"I don't care. Talk to your mother." The phone clunked on the table. Distantly I heard him say, "It's your son."

"Hi darling," my mother said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Just thought I'd come up for the weekend."

"Of course. Your room's made up and ready."

I was thirty-six. I hadn't lived with my parents in nineteen years. "I'll be in Friday afternoon. I don't know what time, so don't panic if I'm not there for dinner, okay?"

"Yes, dear," my mother said.

**D**INNER AT MY PARENTS' HOUSE was five PM sharp, in time for the evening news. I walked in as my mother set the TV tray in front of my father. Leftover pot roast, potatoes and gravy, canned green beans boiled for hours with hunks of bacon fat. I had a gray canvas bag in my left hand, with the handle of my racket sticking out.

My mother hugged me and said, "So, you're just going to let your hair grow now, is that it?" She was short, with a small pot belly and short hair dyed

an odd sandy color. I got my gray hair from her. I already had more of it than my father did at sixty-eight.

“Nice to see you too, Mom.”

My father squinted at me from his recliner. He wore a napkin tucked in over his shirt when he ate. He would have been six foot one, half an inch taller than me, if he ever stood up straight. He seemed to be devolving into some prototypical Texan ancestor, with long sideburns and hair combed straight back off his forehead. It made his nose seem to reach out toward his chin.

“Can you believe this crap? Thirty-two stations and not a goddamn thing worth watching.”

“Great to see you too,” I said.

“There’s the same shitty stations you get without cable. Then there’s three stations of niggers shouting at each other. Two stations of messkins. Two movie channels showing the same three movies over and over again. Rock and roll and country western on the rest. If it wasn’t for sports I don’t know why anybody would bother.”

“Try some crack,” I said. “That’s how the rest of us manage.”

He looked at the bag. My left hand clenched reflexively. “What’s that? You’re not trying to play tennis again, are you?”

“I’ve got a client here who plays.”

“I wouldn’t think it was good business to look like a jerk in front of somebody wants to give you money.”

“Maybe I’ve been practicing.”

“There’s not enough practice in the world.” He took a dainty bit of meat, then held the remote control out at arm’s length. He switched through the channels, giving them no more than a couple of seconds each. His entire attention was on the screen.

“Is that all you brought?” my mother said, finally noticing the bag.

“I’m just staying the weekend.”

“Could you two keep it down to a dull roar?” my father said. “I’m trying to watch a program here.”

I MAY NOT have given much of a presentation the next morning, but I was hell on the tennis court. My client took me out to River Oaks and I slaughtered him 6-1, 6-0. As a career move, it was not exactly brilliant. I didn’t care. I kept hearing my father say there wasn’t enough practice in the world.

I came back to my parents’ house drenched in sweat and flushed from the sun. “How’d it go?” my mother asked, meaning the presentation, of course.

I pretended to misunderstand. “Okay. My serve’s a little off and I can’t seem to get enough power out of my backhand.”

“You’re probably not swinging through,” my father said, not looking up from the TV. “You always did chop your backhand.”

My father had his first heart attack the summer after my junior year in high school. He was playing tennis with one of his students in 100-degree heat. My father won the first and third sets, and then he lit up a Roi-Tan cigarillo and sucked in a big lungful of smoke. He said he felt something then, like a hunger pain, so he went home and had a banana and a glass of milk. Finally he went to bed and my mother called the doctor. I remember him lying there, white and

shaking. Scared, I guess. Another half hour, the doctor said, and he would have died. I used to think about that a lot.

I looked at my father and said, "Maybe I need a lesson."

"Maybe you do."

My mother said to him, "You can't go on a tennis court. It would kill you."

"Says who?"

"Says Dr. Clarendon."

"It's not going to kill me to go out and look at his backhand."

My mother turned to me. The look said don't let him do this. If you let him do this I'll never forgive you.

I thought about the time I ran away from home. It was the year after his heart attack. My mother promised we'd get counseling, talked me into coming back. The counselor turned out to be Dr. Clarendon. Mom took my father's side, and lied to protect him. Funny how things like that can still jerk your emotions around, even after twenty years.

I looked at my father. "Great," I said. "We'll go out tomorrow morning."

I LAY AWAKE past midnight in the tiny twin bed. Finally I told myself I wouldn't go through with it. I'd let the old man coach me a little and we'd come home. It bought me a few hours' sleep.

My father looked ten years younger Sunday morning. He wore his plain white tennis shorts and T-shirt to the breakfast table. Only queers, of course, wore all those bright colored outfits. He leaned forward and slurped loudly at his Shredded Wheat. "You're not dressed yet," he said.

"My stuff is in the wash." I'd brought blue shorts and a red T-shirt, just to stimulate his blood pressure.

"I thought we were playing this *morning*." My father had been compulsively early all his life. If I said nine o'clock, he was impatient and angry by eight-thirty.

"Let your breakfast settle," I said. I couldn't eat. I choked down some orange juice and felt it eat through my stomach lining.

I kept him waiting until ten. The temperature was already in the 80s and the air was like wet cotton. I drove us out to the courts we'd used when I was at Rice. They had fabric nets and a good composite surface, green inside the baselines and brick red outside. Pine trees grew right up to the fence and dropped their needles on the backcourt. I could smell pine sap baking in the heat.

I got a bucket of tennis balls out of the trunk. "Haven't you got anything but those goddamn green balls?" My father was headed for the far court, working his arm in a circle. He had an ancient Jack Kramer wood racket, still in the press.

I carried the bucket to the other baseline. "They don't make white balls anymore. They haven't for ten years. You might as well forget about it."

"TV made them do that. You can't see a green ball as well as a white one." He threw the racket press aside, slashed the air with the racket. "You've got no depth perception on it. All it does is show up better on a TV screen."

“The players like them better. The human eye sees green better than any other color. Scientific fact.”

“Bullshit. Don’t tell me about science. What do you know about science?”

My father was a structural engineer. He worked on survey teams all through high school in the 30s. He laid the course for I-35 all the way from Dilley, where his mother grew up, to the Mexican border. He joined the corps to get free tuition at A & M’s engineering school, and when the beatings and hazing got too bad he convinced a maiden aunt to send him to UCLA. He was a self-made man, the son of dirt-poor Texas farmers, and he’d fought his way up to a tenured professorship at Rice University. He tended to not let anyone forget it.

I rubbed sunscreen on my arms and legs, then put sweatbands on my head and wrists. My father wolf-whistled. “Hey, bathing beauty. Any time you want to play some tennis.”

I took two balls out of the bucket. I shoved one in my left pocket and squinted across the court. I was so pissed off I could feel it like something sharp stuck in my throat. I served at my father as hard as I could.

He stepped out of the way and said, “You still serve like a girl. Get that toss higher.”

I REMEMBERED PLAYING CANASTA with my father as a child, his smearing the cards together on the table because I was beating him, the cards bending and tearing, me starting to cry in helpless rage.

I tried to serve like a precision robot, hating myself because I didn’t just walk away. My father crouched inside his baseline, leaning theatrically from side to side, swatting my serves long or into the net, not trying for the ones that were out of reach. After every serve he would point out what I did wrong, over and over, in a bored voice.

The bucket was empty. I started to gather up the balls. My father could have helped, but instead he watched, smiling sarcastically. I was painfully aware of my ass sticking out as I bent over. We traded sides and I picked up the rest of the balls. I stood on the baseline with the bucket next to my feet.

We’d played doubles with his students here, every playable Sunday, no matter how tired or hung over I was. I’d learned to pray for rain. My father had recovered from the heart attack and promised my mother he wouldn’t overdo. I remembered the way he gloated over every point we won, and rode home in brooding silence if we lost.

“Waiting for something?” my father asked.

I bounced the ball with my left hand. It was the same motion as the toss, except the opposite direction. The idea was to focus on it. I couldn’t focus. All I could hear was my heart, beating like crazy. I want it, I thought. I want it now.

“How about a game?” I said.

“Don’t make me laugh. I can still kick your ass, on or off the court.”

Twenty years ago, just out of the hospital, he’d said the same thing. He hadn’t even made it into the house yet. He stood wobbling in the driveway, weak, gray-skinned, barely able to walk, threatening to kick my ass. Just the memory of it made my breath come fast.

“Prove it, old man.”

I'd never said anything like it before, not to anybody. I felt the racket shiver in my hand.

“Serve ‘em up,” my father said. The look in his eyes was final. I'd done something that couldn't be undone. I felt like I was on a deserted stretch of interstate with the pedal all the way to the floor.

I picked out three balls and carried the bucket to the side of the court. I rolled one ball back to the chain link fence, put one in my left hand pocket. I leaned forward, bouncing the third in front of me.

I tossed the ball for the serve. My hand shook and the ball curved back over my head. I swung at it anyway and hit it into the net.

My father took one step closer.

I tried to get my breathing to even out. I couldn't get my breath at all. I took the second ball out of my pocket and bounced it, thinking, relax, relax. I pressed the ball into the racket head as I started my backswing. It felt all wrong. The toss was too low and I hit into the net again.

Double fault. My father straightened up and walked over to the ad court. I went to the net and picked the balls up, slapping the second with the racket so I could snag it out of the air. It got away from me. I chased after it, feeling my father's eyes on me the whole time.

“Love fifteen,” I said. I pictured the serve in my mind and took a practice swing. I tossed the ball and hit it long.

“Back,” my father said.

I was a little kid again, ugly, clumsy, with patches on my jeans and silver caps on my front teeth. I hated that little kid with everything I had. I got out the second ball and made a perfect, unselfconscious swing. The ball hit inside the line on my father's backhand. He jumped at it, took a stiff swing, and knocked it into the fence behind me.

I collected the balls and moved to the deuce court. “Fifteen all,” I said. The first serve went in and my father hit it sharply down the backhand line. I got to and hit it crosscourt, thinking, run, you bastard, run. He stretched to make it, his shoes squealing as he turned. The ball floated back to me like a wounded bird. I hit it deep to his forehand. He chased it and didn't get there in time.

The knot in my guts loosened and the piney air tasted sweet and cool. I aced the next point and on the next my father hit into the net. It was my game. We changed sides and I put the balls on my father's outstretched racket.

The sun started to bear down. There were only a couple of dry places on my father's shirt, high on his chest. “Think you can serve?” I asked. The doctors took a lump out of his lung five years ago and he still complained about the pain in his shoulder muscles.

“Good enough for you,” he said.

He took a few practices. His backswing had a hitch in it and he couldn't get any height or power. The few balls that got over had no pace. My father saw where the serves hit and got a look in his eyes that I'd only seen once before. It was after his second heart attack, when they brought him into the ICU. He had an oxygen tube up one nostril and a catheter coming out from under the sheet. My mother said, “Well, dear, you're just going to have to take it a little easier.” My father looked like a dying shark, hanging from the scales, eyes bitter and black and empty.

“Listen,” I said. “We don’t need to do this.” It hurt me to look at him. All I could think of was my mother, what she would say. “C’mon. Let’s go home, get something to drink.”

“No. You’ve got this coming to you.” He served, and I saw him wince from the pain. The ball came in soft and I moved up on it automatically, driving it hard and deep to his backhand. He ran for it, missed, and went down on all fours.

I started for him. He got up into a crouch and froze me with a look. “Get away,” he said. He picked up the ball and got ready to serve again. “Love fifteen,” he said.

**H**E LASTED FIVE GAMES, and lost every one. I gave up trying to stop it. He was clearly exhausted, could hardly chase the ball. But he would not quit.

He started the sixth game with a junk serve, the ball flipped head-high and cut with exaggerated spin. I couldn’t do anything with it. I hit it into the net, and the one after it into the fence. The third I couldn’t even reach.

I moved up to the service line. “Forty love,” my father said. “Set point.”

I stared at him. Was he crazy? If he took this point he would win his first game of the day. If *I’d* been ahead forty love, *then* it would have been set point, set point for *me*. Did he not even know the difference?

He started to toss the ball. It dropped at his feet and rolled away. Then the racket came out of his hand and clattered on the court. His face was the color of wet cement. He put his hands on his hips and stood there, looking down, fighting for breath.

“Dad?” I said. But I already knew what had happened. Here it is, I thought. You did it. You killed him. Just like you always wanted. I took two steps toward him.

“Get away,” my father said. He picked up the racket. I could hear his scratchy breathing all the way across the court. “Get away, goddamn you.” He picked up a ball and hit it into the empty court before I could get to him. “Game,” he said. “Set, match, and tournament.”

He staggered to the fence and started to put the brace on his racket.

“Dad! Dad, goddammit!”

He looked at me. “What?”

“You’re having a heart attack. Will you get in the goddamn car? I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“Shit. Heart attack. What do you know about heart attacks?” He picked up the bucket and waited by the trunk until I unlocked it for him. He put the bucket and the rackets inside and slammed it closed. I watched him walk around the car and open his door and get in. He could barely move his feet, barely shut the door.

I got in and said, “I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“You’re taking me home. If you even start toward the hospital I’ll open this door and get out, no matter how fast you’re going. You hear me?”

He was sitting up straight, calm, one arm stuck out the window, the other on the back of the seat. Except for the fact that there was no color in his face he looked completely normal.

I knew what I'd seen. His heart had gone into fibrillation and he'd choked it down and ridden it out.

I drove him home.

When we got there he went straight to the bedroom. I heard the shower start up.

"Is he all right?" my mother asked.

"No. I think he had a heart attack."

My mother squeezed her mouth into a hard, straight line. "You couldn't stop him."

"No. This isn't...I didn't want this to happen."

"If he dies—he dies. I guess." It was the kind of thing she always said, to convince herself she didn't care.

I went to my room and packed my bag. When I came out my father was sitting in front of the TV, shouting at my mother. "I'm not going to the fucking hospital. Now go away and leave me alone."

My mother walked me out to the car. She was crying. I put my arms around her. I wished I could cry too. I wished it was that simple. "I'll call you," I said, and got in the car.

**I**T WAS A THREE-HOUR DRIVE to Austin. After a while I couldn't think about my father anymore and then I was thinking about my ex-wife. Counseling hadn't been able to save the marriage. We found ways to blame each other for everything—bounced checks, bad sex, spoiled food in the refrigerator.

When I was in grade school my smart mouth was my only defense. I was no good at sports and worthless in a fight, but I could hurt people with words. I never learned to stop. Even when the thing that had saved me in grade school began to kill my marriage.

I thought of the strength it would take to fight off a heart attack. It was the same kind of strength it took to pull yourself off a shit-poor Texas farm and become a professor at a major university, with two cars and a big house and a cabinet full of French wines. A strength that didn't know when to stop.

**T**HE FIRST THING I saw when I got home was the sketch of the tennis player. His face was intent, unforgiving. I tore it up and threw it away.

When I got out of the shower the pain was still there, knotted up in my stomach. I taped a sheet of clean, white Bristol board to the drafting table. I looked at it for a long time, trying to see what was inside it, waiting for me. After a while I started to draw.

It was a young woman in a sundress, someone I'd never seen before. She walked barefoot down a beach. She was thirsty. She licked her lips. She saw something in the distance and smiled. Maybe it was a bottle of my client's fruit drink. Seagulls drifted overhead, riding the updraft in the hot afternoon.