

Dear Mr Nadal

I have finally gathered the courage to write this letter. Although I'm not entirely sure if these incessant heart palpitations that are driving me absolutely mad have anything to do with what people call courage, it does feel better to relate to them that way. They started when I first had the idea to reach out and haven't stopped ever since. Yesterday I was so desperate that I spoke to my chest. Yes, I spoke to my chest because I didn't know what else to do. I said to it, "Listen! Calm down, I'll give it a try." It worked. My heart slowed down, ever so mildly, sending me a conspicuous sign of truce. I realized that I had no alternative but to follow through with my promise. I hope that this, the eighth draft of my letter, manages to touch your own heart. A heart which I once thought was kind, and probably in great shape.

My name is Frank, but you can call me whatever you like: Albert, green dwarf, goat cheese; I really don't care. Who would have thought that a modest, middle-aged teacher like me would someday be addressing the greatest tennis player in history? I understand that under normal circumstances a man of your importance would have no business with such a bland character as myself. However, I can assure you that these are not normal circumstances.

Let's get straight to the point, as I'm intending to be brief. Last Sunday morning I was watching the news and enjoying my weekend treat: two slices of toast with butter and mint jelly. Mint jelly is something that my wife finds appalling, especially when on toast and consumed early in the morning. Personally, I think it tastes like fresh-cut grass and 18th-century cedar cabinets. Not that I've ever eaten either of those, but I do have a wonderful imagination Mr Nadal; it's like a wild platypus with a life of its own. Whenever I

have mint jelly on toast, which is every Saturday and Sunday morning, she stares at me as if I was having a Vodka tonic for breakfast. Every Saturday and Sunday.

In any case, I was watching the annoying reporter from Channel 5, the one who looks like a wet cat, read the news. I would think that very few people watch TV on Sundays mornings, and that's why they put her on. She's not the greatest complement to mint jelly toast, I can tell you that much. Luckily, none of the kids were up that morning. I can't even imagine what would have happened if any of them had heard what she was about to announce. I can tell you that no world event has ever disturbed me as much as what she said then: not 9/11, not Katrina, not Darfur, not even Michael Jackson's death. As the words came out of her mouth, tremors rippled inside the bones of my legs. Then they played the video of the press conference you gave, and a sense of dread spread through my body like muriatic acid. Actually, I can feel it again right now. I stared down at my breakfast, trying to take it all in, wishing to dissolve into the emerald spread and get consumed by someone who can appreciate the taste of such a delicacy.

It's funny how life works Mr Nadal. Me, a complete stranger, a grey dot in an ocean of grey dots, am suddenly bound to you by the most bizarre of ribbons. You, with your juvenile face, still dimpled and plump. You, shielding behind that newspress podium. You, facing that dark ocean of reporters in suits, who received the news with a vomit of questions and flashes. They were so cruel to you and you were so cruel to me. Not that you could know, but now you can, and for that I'm grateful. When I mentioned my intentions to write this letter to my wife, she called me a "twat" and a "musty nitwit". I must praise her for her talent in the art of moronic insults.

My wife's name is Daisy, although she doesn't look like one at all. Ironically, she knows this poem called "Daisy" that is about a beautiful girl. She can recite it by heart and will do so almost daily. Her cheeks get flushed and her thick unibrow rises and falls like a fat caterpillar, in waves of emotion. You have to stare at her and smile; if you don't, she'll raise her pitch to an unbearable squeak and won't stop until you do what she wants. She has trained all of us like dogs using that method. But it's actually a great poem Mr Nadal; maybe you would like it.

Daisy and I got married because one thing led to another. Her parents were friends with mine, you see, and we were both very docile kids. Also, my acne medicine kept me in a state of lethargy most of the time. We were so young, that Daisy insisted on bringing her stuffed animal collection to our new house. She carefully arranged them over the bed that my grandmother gave us as a wedding present. It had been her own newlywed bed, unused for more than forty years. The mattress had a depression like a crater, which would make us keep rolling into each other at night. I was going through the last of my teen years when the first consequence of our union —and perhaps of the crater— came about. We named her Sophie. The years that followed are all a bit of a blur in my memory but, somehow, three more of those "consequences" arrived quickly, like paint pellets popping out of a gun. I'm not an unintelligent man Mr Nadal, but, before Sophie, Daisy used to think that babies were left at the porch by a grizzly bear. I suppose that the chemicals that were clouding my mind combined with the hormonal rave in my underpants didn't allow me to realize quickly enough that we were multiplying like Gremlins, and that I had to be the one to put a stop to it. Eight years after Sophie, the sixth and last addition to our collection arrived: Fabian. I was absolutely miserable on the day of his birth, but only because the Yankees had lost against the Red Sox. Come to think of it, I should have taken it as a bad omen.

We welcomed Fabian with all the enthusiasm that our twenty-seven years of life, and seven years of sleep deprivation, allowed us. Even during his first days at home we could see that there was something unusual in Fabian; something a little out of place that we couldn't quite define. But one day, some months later, our suspicions were confirmed. It was dinner time, a complicated time of day in our household. Daisy had a fixation with green baby food, you see. So all our kids went straight from breastmilk, to two years of a strict diet made only of peas, broccoli, spinach, brussel sprouts, kale, green apples, etc. There is no logical explanation to this rule of hers, she'd just shrug and say "green is healthy". This makes absolutely no sense to me, as mint jelly is also green and not particularly healthy. Our kitchen used to often look like a reptilian crime scene, at the time. It was always plastered in goops which would vary in tonality, from pine, to moss, to olive, and other hues defined by specific combinations of gastric juices. That particular day, Fabian was sitting at one end of the table, strapped to his high chair like a mad baby. I understand that all babies get strapped to chairs at that age, but most of them don't look like Fabian did. He was loosely clenching his spoon with his teeth; pea soup dripped from his lower lip. But then and there, at exactly the same time, Daisy and I saw with absolute clarity where the epicenter of the abnormality was localized: his eyes. His pupils had turned gunmetal grey, the color of rotten fish. His gaze was neutral in an unnatural way, as the lifeless stare of a generic park statue. We gawked in absolute silence until anxiously wails ripped through the stillness, like an emergency alarm urging us to run, to abandon the ship as fast as possible. But, of course, we didn't do that. We comforted some of the other kids, who were sobbing uncontrollably, unaware of what was disturbing them. On that day I felt that Fabian was somehow dead. Not superficially; he was definitely there, awake, sitting upright, staring and clenching the spoon with his teeth. He seemed to be dead on the inside, like a bonsai, perhaps. I've always felt that those atrociously tiny trees are pretending to be alive, but are really not.

At some point I started calling his name: once, twice, three times, but he didn't respond. As I stood up to get closer, he snapped out of it, and went back to eating like he had just dozed off. But his eyes didn't return to their normal color, the silver pupils stared out, reminding us of what was really going on even when things seemed normal. The episodes started happening more and more frequently, and for longer periods of time. He also started having very intense mood swings: going from calm and quiet to maniacal in a matter of seconds. He'd walk around the house terrorizing his siblings and looking for things to vandalize, and then suddenly drifting off into the mysterious world of statues.

Something inside of me wanted to believe that this was just a phase, that he would suddenly overcome all of these weird behaviors and we'd all pretend that it had never happened. I kept staring into his eyes, expecting to see a change in color, in substance, a sign of life peeking from a corner, hanging from an eyelash. I would fantasize of how one day we'd look back onto these episodes and have a good laugh. We'd share stories of the time when he spit all his food out like a fountain, or when he tried to bite little Charlie's toe off, or when he used to wake us up at three in the morning speaking in mysterious dialects.

I beg you to be patient, I'll get to the point that concerns you shortly. When Fabian turned three, he was finally diagnosed with a rare syndrome. It was sad and, at the same time, a breath of fresh air. We finally had a label, a word that grouped everything that scared us together under one solid, sinister roof. For months we happily hung on to it, like a lifebuoy, feeling like the diagnosis was the cure. But the novelty quickly wore out and we started seeking information and cures. But it was a chronic condition that doctors knew very little about it. "It may or may not improve." "It may or may not have a specific cause." "It may or may not exist." Too much information can be worse than no information; the more opinions we sought, the more discouraged we got.

For this reason I won't bore you with symptoms, causes, or even with its name. It all turned out to be perfectly useless and inconsequential. Ironically, what did end up making a difference, at least for me, was my own explanation of Fabian's condition. You see, people quickly started asking about him and his condition, but I quickly learned that they only wanted two things: gossip material or to be polite. After a minute of listening to the story, they'd start getting bored or feeling uncomfortable. So I decided to craft the perfect thing to say: unexpected, sensational, quirky one-liners to give them a somewhat accurate idea of the situation and satisfy their short-span morbid curiosity at the same time. "Fabian has a condition that forces him to disconnect from his body to the point where, sometimes, he can't even recognise it anymore. Like if you suddenly woke up inside a chicken's body, but still had your brain." It certainly doesn't make people feel more at ease, but it does get their attention. I tend to vary the animal in the example. I get the best reactions when I use bear or horse; zebra and giraffe get mixed results, and chicken causes awkward giggles.

One fine day Fabian started talking like a cartoon robot. He came into the living room while we were playing Monopoly and recited the names of all the avenues on the board like a little clunky machine. "Me-di-ter-ra-nean. Avenue. Bal-tic. Avenue. O-rien-tal. Avenue..." We all exchanged tense looks for a couple of seconds—without interrupting him, of course. That would have ended with a flipped board and a confetti rain of Monopoly money, at best. The truth is that nothing could surprise us too much anymore; we were well trained to accept all sorts of unimaginable things. It took him forever for him to finish his street monologue. We all sat there patiently; the robotic audience to a robotic child.

At this point we had a board of specialists and therapists as consultants; but it was a tarot reader who Daisy went to see behind my back who suggested that we remove specific items

from his diet to see if we could find a link. As precarious as I thought the decision to go see a healer was, I decided to follow the instructions; at that point I would have listened to a hippopotamus on opium. I began to remove foods one at a time: tomatoes, nuts, dairy, honey, cereals, apples, oranges, chicken, spices, salt, mint jelly, oils, fish. I became a mad scientist, always busy in my kitchen-lab, taking notes and making diet logs. Daisy would watch me from the door with her unibrow raised—half impressed, half contemptful. After months of dietary trial and error, I gave up.

We were being sucked into a vortex, and Fabian was the eye of the storm. He kept exploring his edges as the rest of the family members became pencil sketches of their former colorful selves. We didn't ever talk about any of this; everyone wore their pain like an invisible coat of arms. There were no tears, complaints or screams—which was good—as we had our fair dose of those already. I saw my kids as a peaceful army, reluctantly fighting one of their own: silent warriors protecting themselves in the trenches of the dining room, enduring attacks in the solitude of bunk beds and holding guard in the family room. Those were meaningful moments when I shined with pride for my troop, but was simultaneously consumed by a sinking feeling at the pit of my stomach. I haven't told anyone what I'm about to tell you, Mr Nadal. But while everyone else was enduring Fabian's attacks, I would escape. I would venture out to Easter Island and lounge at the beach, sipping on watery Blue Curacao cocktails. Sometimes I'd go to the alps and communicate with the goats in a language of claps and whistles. These mental trips saved my life, but also threw me into a spiral of depression and shame, as I became a witness to my relentless cowardice.

Nothing changed too much over the years until the Green Sunday came along. I'm still not sure why I call it that, maybe it's because of what people say about green being the color of hope; or maybe it's just because of mint jelly, and the pleasure it gives me to even think

about it. Maybe it's because I secretly long for the days of baby food, when we were joyfully oblivious of this mess that has unfolded. Ignorance can be a magnificent blessing, Mr Nadal. Ironically, people ignore this until some unfortunate event makes them long for a time when they knew less; that's when it hits you, like a pebble thrown at your eyeball with a slingshot. I know because I've recently experienced both.

The Green Sunday was a hopeful day. It did start with a small episode over breakfast that included a fork stuck in a leg and vomit, nothing out of the ordinary. After all the blood and half-digested food had been cleaned up, most of us settled in front of the TV. It was eleven in the morning and I was feeling ready to go back to bed, as I often do. I think that, deep down, it's a yearning for time to pass quickly and get me to the end of my life. I was changing the channels slowly to give everyone time to assess the content. Getting four children and two adults to pick something to watch together would be a nightmare in most homes, but it is incredibly easy in ours. Fabian has forced the kids to grow up fast by using up all of their childish-behavior credits. They had to renounce their rights to tantruming, scribbling on walls and being scared of monsters before their time was up.

He would, of course, never join us for group activities, especially if they involved listening quietly, so he wasn't sitting with us in front of the TV that day. But he was there alright, watching us from a corner. He was playing a little toy xylophone softly, banging intently on the rainbow keys without looking at them. The macabre melody sounded like the opening score of a horror movie. Not the average improvised racket a kid would usually produce, but something chillingly harmonious. Little by little we all grew eerily silent, grips tightened, throats cleared and sighs were released. Then, in the midst of this bubbling tension, I changed the channel and found you. That was your introduction to our family, as the honorary member that would change our history forever, or so we thought.

I had never seen your face before. I found it to be very serious, but symmetrical and pleasant too. You had a neon-pink sleeveless shirt that contrasted against, what I would call, a designer tan. I thought your top was offensively tacky, but it quickly grew on me. Now, when I think about it, it reminds me of Miami and cheerful elevator music. You were playing against Roger Federer and lost. But that's not so relevant to this story, so I won't go into it. You were four minutes into the second set. For some strange reason, I didn't immediately change the channel, although we've never watched tennis before. But, after a little while, the girls began protesting, and right before I would've taken you off the screen, the miracle eventuated. In one fast motion, Fabian dropped the wooden sticks and came straight towards us. We all held our breaths. Charlie rolled into a little ball in terror, as he saw his brother approach him, but Fabian wasn't up to any of his usual antics. He simply plopped down between his siblings and leaned against one of his sister's bony legs, acting as if this was all very normal. The five kids all flinched a little at first but, once he settled in, we all froze in place, becoming a peculiar still life. Fabian was in a trance, staring at the screen the whole time. All that could be heard was the popping sound of the ball, the shuffling of your feet, and a raging crowd that would sporadically erupt into cheers. At times I would wonder if they were cheering for us.

Suddenly Fabian broke the deafening silence with hoots and claps, as you scored a point. "He did it! I knew he could!", he screamed at us excitedly. We were far too puzzled to reply, staring back with disorbited eyes. His statement made no sense at all. How could he have "known you could"? He had just started watching a tennis match for the first time in his life, he didn't understand the sport and had never seen you before. The best things that happened that day, Mr Nadal, is that his robot voice was gone. It was replaced by the sweet,

innocent voice of an eight year old; one that I had forgotten or, perhaps, never heard. I dare say that it was the happiest day of my entire life.

After the Green Sunday everything changed. There was a sense of joy and excitement in the air. Fabian inexplicably remained in the state he acquired that day. Like a ball-spitting machine, he'd throw tennis remarks in reply to any question. "How are you Fabian?", "I'll be better when the game starts." "Do you want me to put ham in your sandwich?" "I want Rafael to win the game." But we didn't mind this at all, as shrieking, hair-pulling, egg-throwing, crayon-eating and other violent acts diminished by about eighty percent. We all became tennis experts very quickly. Watching games regularly was mandatory, like a dose of vitamins for the anemic. Daisy and Charlie favored Novak Djokovic, the girls liked Serena Williams, Fabian and I would only root for you. Whenever you were on the court his eyes would scintillate with excitement, and mine would too.

I would have loved to have you over one day, Mr Nadal. Daisy would have made her famous tuna pie and we would have discussed world events and tennis. It would have been a joyful occasion. You would have brought a fine wine from France that we've never heard of. I would have bought my favorite dark chocolate nougat, you would have taken only a little piece, smiling apologetically and explaining how you need to watch your diet. But none of this will ever happen now, I can't welcome you into my home anymore. Five days, three hours and twenty minutes ago, our relationship changed—the moment you walked into that press room with the silly podium, looking foolish and very serious. That jacket didn't suit you, by the way. Your head looked too small and, honestly, it just made everything more awkward. Then you said that *it's time to let the racket rest*. That means that I will take some time off from the tennis world". You had to explain what you meant. How stupid is that? I bet some idiot intern wrote the whole thing and you didn't like it. For God's sake, why are you

leaving your career behind? You are a child! Are you tired? Has the life of the rich and famous withered you down? Maybe you are just a lazy person. Maybe you got caught on the wrong side of the court. Maybe you were born to watch your own life as a spectator instead of a player.

I keep fantasizing about what will happen when we give Fabian the news. Whenever I do, I start hearing that melody he played on his xylophone during Green Sunday. His eyes will sink back into their sockets, like terrified tadpoles. He'll stare blankly at the wall for days, maybe weeks. He'll try to climb into his old high chair and demand green baby food, and then spit it out like a fountain. He'll claw his ears and stick his bloody hands on the walls. The robot voice will creep in. He'll wake me up in the middle of the night and whisper insane prayers in my ear. I can see it going downhill from there. I have visions of the girls waking up to bald scalps, hair pooling around their pillows. I see the cat crucified in the living room, mint jelly dripping from his open mouth. I hear ambulances arriving at the door, as the whole house burns, flames sticking out the windows like the tongues of the devil. I'm kneeling at the top of the stairs, body covered in fork stabs, blood dripping down the wooden stairs. The smell of burnt skin hits me, has he set my children on fire?

Now, Mr Nadal, you understand what's at stake. This is a petition in the name of sanity. Don't leave tennis behind, and don't leave us behind. It doesn't seem like too much to ask. I know it sounds like a polite plea but, after giving it a lot of thought, I've realized that I simply can't let this happen. I've made up my mind. Since then I've felt this unshakable force growing within me, the kind that can fuel the most extreme of actions. It's a new part of myself, it's very much alive, peeking through my eyes. In fact, some days I look in the mirror and I feel that they've slightly changed color, to a gunmetal grey.

It will take a week for Fabian to start wondering why your next game hasn't been announced, and that's how long you have to revert this mess. If by next Sunday a match isn't scheduled, I'll have to give Fabian the news of your fatal accident. I mean, it'll be all over the news at some point. Perhaps I'll just wait till that happens and simply turn on the TV to let him find out for himself. I've given this a lot of thought. Surely he'll be sad. But an unexpected death is far less devastating than a premeditated abandonment, at least that's how I look at it.

Yours,

Frank Warden