

# The Consumption of Frogs

“If you gotta eat a frog, do it first thing in the morning.”

My eyes dart before I have a chance to regain control over them. Mr. Pendleton stands before me, with one finger raised. His son, Kyle, has taken a break to go slurp water from the drinking fountain bolted to the brick school building in the distance. His mouth is directly on the...thing where the water comes out. Spigot? Mr. Pendleton has chosen this moment to administer sage advice. Not to Kyle, but to me.

Quick self-assessment. My posture? Passable. A casual lean to the right, on the foot I favor because I was born with a crooked spine. Not Quasimodo-crooked, just enough so my right shoes always wear out faster than my left. My mother always admonishes me to *Walk straight, dammit* while examining the holes in my right shoes, usually worn through where my pinkie toe ends and the rest of my foot begins. I try to *Walk straight, dammit* for maybe a half a day after these admonishments, but I always feel it makes me look like a chicken shaking its tail feathers. And it hurts. So I bring her back the same shoes a few weeks later, with bigger holes this time, and go through the whole painful charade again. *Why can't you just walk straight?* And I actually feel bad, as if I'm some kind of weakling because I cannot force the muscles in my back to contract just right and make my spine straight as an arrow. Like Tommy Spaulding. Great spine on Tommy Spaulding.

I have this weird thing about noticing people's posture.

Mr. Pendleton stands before me, the August sun radiating off his white, freckled skin. He is starting to pink up, and I know once he gets inside his house he'll regret not wearing sunblock today.

Pink outside is bright red inside. His finger remains upraised, and he's looking at the treetops, not talking, as if receiving celestial guidance.

I clutch my tennis racket to my chest. The second racket my mother has bought me this summer. The first was unable to withstand the bashing I had administered upon it when the ball it had struck had sailed a few inches past the baseline on the opposite side, and Kyle had raised a finger. Just like his dad is doing now. The raised finger is the sign tennis players make to indicate the ball is out. To me, it's another sign I have failed. Just like I knew I would, today and back when I had my old racket, when Kyle had been chosen to be my playing partner. Kyle and I had engaged in another marathon match, with Kyle firing baseline shots and me retrieving them, swatting them weakly back over the net. Kyle would rush the net and I'd lob his smashes back over, sending him retreating to the baseline again, where he'd once again assail the fuzzy yellow ball with form I did not possess. Just like last time, all the other kids in the summer rec league had finished their matches and scrambled while we were still early in the third set. All I can do when facing Kyle is play on my heels, tapping the ball back to his side, until either he or I err. And, ultimately, it's always me who errs. I'll hit a shot with too much backspin and watch it with a wince, knowing it'll be close, and I'll think maybe it'll catch the line. But inevitably on the last point Kyle always extends his finger and rage overcomes me and I swing the convenient club at the end of my hand into the unforgiving, cracked surface of the only occupied tennis court next to the parking lot of Bayberry Consolidated High School. Today I let up a bit before the racket smashed the ground. When it did, I immediately brought the frame into focus and I frantically examined it for fractures, and a sigh rose up through my dissipating rage. Nothing can stop my anger like the thought of my mother finding out I broke something. Again.

Mr. Pendleton stands before me, and now it's a little awkward because he hasn't moved in a

few seconds. His gaze remains transfixed over my right shoulder. Now he tilts his head backward, slightly. Kyle continues his sexual assault of the drinking fountain in the distance. I may be a shitty tennis player, but I do have stamina. I catch myself before the thought makes me smile.

I don't want Mr. Pendleton to interpret any hint of a smile as a show of cockiness, or as a sign I'm being aloof. This would play out different, I know, if the other kids were still standing around. Then I'd have to adopt a roll of the eyes and an expression of *whatever* that kids are so good at when adults give advice. Especially pasty white shop teachers-turned-tennis instructors in the summer. Mr. Pendleton probably makes a few hundred bucks to pair us off and make us play while he sits on the bleachers with a paperback. But I don't mind. Truth is, my heart is pounding and I am thinking of the time a monarch butterfly landed on my outstretched finger to take a rest. It slowly moved its wings up and down and I didn't dare breathe because I knew a single puff would send it flying. But it flew off anyway.

Self-examination of my facial expression. I widen my eyes just enough to show interest, not so much to appear like I skin animals for fun. I decide to settle upon a curl of the right corner of my mouth. Then I narrow my eyes a touch and pinch my face and lean my head. Mild interest is what I'm going for here.

Almost no one talks to me like this. My mother considers me a nuisance she has to feed. My father, last I saw him, punched me in the jaw. I'd never been punched before, and I stood there in shock as my mother shouted at him to get the fuck out of the house and never come back. I never went down, though. I was ten years old and was still on my feet after taking a shot from a steel worker. It's only now beginning to dawn on me he probably pulled the punch. Like I did today, when the racket had been his fist and the painted concrete had been my face. Even when fully enraged, you can still hold up. Some base instinct can intervene and stop the worst from happening. I am learning this now. Like I've learned

I'd rather take a punch on the jaw from a steel worker, full force, than endure a week of silent treatment from my mother. Which would surely occur if I brought home another busted racket.

Mr. Pendleton stands before me, and now his head has craned back far enough to look like a Pez dispenser, though his eyes remain fixed upon the same spot. He sneezes into the ground between us.

"Excuse me."

*Sure. Bless you. Gesundheit.*

Perfectly acceptable things to say in this moment, but my not-quite-smirking mouth refuses to open. I nod instead. Slightly. I am hoping he hasn't lost his train of thought. Something about the consumption of frogs. My thumb rubs the top of my racket frame. It's rough from my abusive scrapes and bashes. I don't know why I get so angry. I figure this racket only has a few more hits in it before it breaks apart in my hand like the last one. Kyle's pointing finger. Out. You lose. Again. Kyle trotting to the net in Reeboks so white they glow. Tennis probably ranks fourth in sports Kyle excels at. He'd be all-state if tennis season didn't conflict with baseball season. Kyle stands there, gripping the net and casually leaning, waiting to shake my hand. His triumphant smile hovers over the upright collar of his perfectly white tennis shirt. And I stand there on the baseline unable to move. Tennis is the only thing I'm remotely good at. I stare at the racket, now shaking in my hand. Through its strings, my untied knock-off Pro Keds with a gaping hole on the right side of the right shoe. Mangled, dirty shoes. I can smell them from up here, they're in dire need of powder. My faded gray tee shirt is black with sweat on the chest, and beads roll off my long hair, through the racket strings, and splash onto the surface between my disgusting shoes. Everything has a red hue to it. I raise the racket with both hands, clenched teeth and streaming eyes.

Mr. Pendleton stands before me. Sniffing now. He raises his finger again and my heart flutters. The butterfly remains. He doesn't know right now he's my father.

“As I was saying, James,”—my name is Jimmy but being called James makes me feel special—“the best time to eat a frog is first thing in the morning.”

It makes about as much sense as the first time he said it. He finally looks me in the eye. Go time. My leaning pose, my curled mouth, my racket pinned to my chest under my crossed arms. All designed to affect the perfect look of casual-yet-interested. Mr. Pendleton's eyes return to the parking lot behind me, but he keeps his finger upraised. Good sign. I half-expected a brush-off and a *You know what, forget it* and a shout over the shoulder to the slurping Kyle to get in the convertible and let's go. Perhaps to McDonald's or Rax or wherever rich people eat after tennis practice.

I take pieces of information or advice that grown men give me and file them away. Well, not the advice, so much, but the moments. During these times, they don't know, but they're my dad. My own never came back after he punched me seven years ago on June the thirteenth at 11:27 pm. I know this because that's what the microwave said, and that's all I saw as my mother swatted at his defensive arms and hands as she chased him past the opening to the living room where he opened the coffee mug I got him last Christmas, past the dining room table on which we played Battleship one time when he was drunk enough to be happy and not drunk enough yet to start swinging, and into the kitchen where the blue light of the microwave clock ticked to 11:28. I was going to try to make cookies for their anniversary in July. My mom probably wouldn't have let me use the oven, but I had this fantasy that I would present them with chocolate chip cookies in the shape of hearts. Sixteen little cookies, each with a different red-frosted letter spelling out HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, and they'd eat them and make funny words with the letters that remained. It was 11:31 when she had successfully ushered him out the

kitchen door that leads to the garage. My mother stormed past me and into their—her own now—bedroom, and stomped back with an armful of his clothes, which she chucked out the garage door while screaming at him to eat shit and die and never, ever come back. She returned to me after locking the door and engaging the deadbolt and after we both listened to the overhead garage door shut tight behind the squealing tires of his Nissan 300ZX. To this day I find the fact he pressed the garage door button in his hasty retreat a single source of fascination—perhaps one last attempt at protecting his broken family. It hurt when she gripped my face in her hand, but she was too angry to be gentle. She turned me roughly to the side and assessed the damage and told me *I'm gonna have to change the locks in the morning.*

Mr. Pendleton stands before me. Kyle has finally lifted his head. The water rolling off his chin makes me imagine a grizzly raising its head after having unsuccessfully face-chased a salmon into the depths of a river. I realize I have only a few more moments of fatherly advice. I never know how much I crave it until it happens. How much I miss it when it goes away.

“And if you have to eat two frogs,” Mr. Pendleton says, with another glance at me, “eat the big one first.”

Mr. Pendleton nods at me and I nod back, keeping the same interested look plastered to my face. The breeze that tosses his thinning hair chills me through my saturated tee shirt. I pretend to understand what the hell he’s talking about, but it doesn’t really matter. Kyle’s gleaming white tennis clothes approach from behind, and the moment is nearly over.

“Take me with you to McDonald’s or Rax or wherever it is rich people go to eat after tennis practice.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue. Just say it. I picture the three of us sitting next to the plastic statue

of Grimace the purple shake monster and I'm taking small bites from a Big Mac as Mr. Pendleton dispenses more sagacity from his Phrase-Of-The-Day desk calendar. Kyle eats ravenously, not listening to a word his father has to say because he's lucky. He can hear this any time he wants.

Kyle wipes his face and burps and says, "Can I drive, dad?"

Mr. Pendleton does not hesitate in turning on his heels.

"Why not? Just don't tell your mother."

Mr. Pendleton tosses the keys to his son and they climb into the spotless white convertible and Kyle fires up the engine. Kyle yells over his shoulder "See you next week, Jimmy" and they're off. Mr. Pendleton drums his fingers on the outside of the door frame and doesn't look back as they drive away.

I'm all alone.

I stand, crookedly, next to the bleachers. One foot on the asphalt of the parking lot and the other elevated on the grass. I like to stand that way because it makes my back feel better. I raise the tennis racket to my eyes again and make sure no cracks have appeared in the frame since I last looked. The wind plays at the leaves above me, and I stare at the strings. A crisscrossed hindrance to the world on the other side. Re-gripping the racket in my hand, I shatter it against the curb.