

Tennis Player
2,634 words

He was a tennis player, alright.

He was a damn good player, he could hold his own against anyone in the Valley, any man, woman, or child, as they say. Anyone in Jacksonville, Fort Lauderdale—from Naples all the way to Miami, for that matter.

He didn't much like tennis.

Not at all.

The Tennis Player was returning Dewey's serve. Deuce side, ace side, deuce side, ace side. His brother was older and no good at tennis, not compared to the Tennis Player at least. Maybe to everyone else he looked like a million bucks, he looked like goddamn Jimmy Connors, but not to the Tennis Player.

He returned each serve somewhere unreachable, far beyond Dewey's comprehension. He knew Dewey wouldn't like that, so there wasn't much surprise when he leapt over the net like a horse and socked the Tennis Player in the ribs.

He heard a crack.

He fell to the ground and mistook the red clay for his own blood.

"You're as dumb as a cow," Dewey said.

When the Tennis Player got home, his rabbits were out the pen.

He found the first hidden under the house.

Phil the Cat got the other.

Bo-Bo's intestines lay in a trail outside the front door, and the Tennis Player found the rest of the body slain on his pillow, Phil the Cat licking a paw in the corner of the room in the way cats do.

The Tennis Player wanted to cry, but wouldn't let himself.

Grandma dragged the hose around the house and tried to jet blood out the welcome mat, but she ended up tossing the thing in the trash along with Bo-Bo's guts and the rest of it.

Dewey started digging a hole out in the backyard while the Tennis Player cradled Bo-Bo's corpse and pressed frozen peaches against his ribs.

"I didn't account for Phil the Cat," Dewey said, a wad of chewing tobacco fitted between his cheek and molars. A dollop of spit slid from mouth to grave when he spoke.

"One day I'll spit into your grave," the Tennis Player said.

"I can make it right. Let me make it right."

"An eye for an eye is the only way I see fit."

Phil the Cat stretched out his hind legs on top the tree stump. Dewey went inside and came back out with his rifle.

"This is wicked stuff," he said and pointed the barrel into the cat's face. "Sorry, Phil."
Cat brain scattered across the sky like constellations.

...

The Dad used to coach the high school boy's squad.

He made kids sweat, cry, and puke. He made them run suicides all day.

At home he made baked potatoes with every meal.

While the Mom cooked up dinner, the Dad got to poking holes in his potato with a fork and wrapping it with foil. He sat at the head of the table with his fork and knife pointed toward the Heavens and waited for his potato to get just right in the oven.

Everyone hated the smell of the sour cream and chives he dolloped along the potato's belly.

"Listen, you shits, give me this one joy in life. Please, this one joy," he'd say, while everyone grimaced over his plate.

The Dad had a bullet wound in his thigh from Korea and couldn't do much tennis playing anymore.

He couldn't have sex with the Mom because he couldn't get his dick hard near her.

He spent a few nights in jail for biting a Jap's ear off in the frozen food isle of Winn-Dixie. The Mom referred to him as Mr. Tyson for a while after that and stopped letting him lick on her tits to try and get him hard.

"What's there to groan at? It's just a fucking potato," the Dad would say over the dinner table.

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Grandma was as healthy as an ox.

"Where will you be buried?" the Tennis Player asked her once when they were out back with the fire pit roaring and the stars so big you could almost bump your head on them.

"I don't think I'll ever pass," she said with real confidence.

"And when you get too bored with life?"

"Are you ever bored?" Grandma stoked the fire and chewed on a clove of cinnamon.

The Tennis Player thought for a moment. "Sure. Most days. "

"When I'm bored everyday like you, I'll burry myself where I please," Grandma said.

The Tennis Player lay flat, his side against the fire. He wanted to be buried under the dirt right then and there.

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Dewey collected underpants from girls he'd been with at school.

He had stopped going to tennis practice and made this his hobby instead.

He organized the panties by color in various shoe boxes hidden under his bed.

They were organized by color and then saturation.

He was a lover of women. Women seemed to love him back.

"I let them choke me," he told the Tennis Player.

He listened to Dewey while stringing his Wilson racket with a fresh set of gut strings.

Dewey took off his belt and made a loop. "They use my belt like this, and squeeze until my face turns red. But I always cum before I see stars."

The Tennis Player didn't want to picture any of this, but he went on with it for the sake of going on with it. "Do you make them cum, too?"

"Sure." He paused, shrugged. "Sometimes." Dewey put his belt back on, but didn't buckle it. "You can't always, though."

The Tennis Player squeezed the strings together with his fingers, then bounced the head against his palm until he was satisfied with the resistance.

When the Tennis Player turned sixteen, Dewey decided it was time for him to get his nut.

He called two whores in from the city. Dewey got the ride of his life.

In his bedroom, the Tennis Player sat fully clothed on top his bed. The whore admired all his tennis trophies scattered across the dresser.

“You a fag?” the whore asked, more sympathetically than the Tennis Player thought those words could be said.

He shrugged.

“Got a lot of gold men staring at you all the time.” The whore picked up a trophy—first place at the Valley Town Tournament—and removed her pants.

She spread her legs and The Tennis Player could see everything.

She spit on the trophy and stuck it up inside her.

The Tennis Player looked at the bit of gold visible between her pubes. He didn’t want her to think he didn’t appreciate all her effort. He never looked directly at her, just the bit of gold, until she finished up and left.

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Grandma was bitter.

She was unhappy because she hated her son who had plenty of joys in life.

Having sex with boys on the tennis team was his favorite joy. The whole town found out when the janitor walked in on him.

“I was just going in to bleach down the shower tiles,” Mr. Pickney later told Channel Five news.

Grandma wanted the Dad dead. She smiled when the Mom shot through his chest before cops even showed up to the house. The Dad’s blood burst onto the TV screen, his wound open and deep like a rabbit hole. The Tennis Player bent down, putting a knee on the Dad’s groin,

while Dewey took the gun away from the Mom. She was shaking and he was shushing her and shushing her. He tried to sit her down and get her to watch TV, but every channel was a woman screaming or a man shooting.

The Tennis Player dug his hands into the Dad's chest and went looking for treasure.

He pulled out his father's heart.

"What should I do with this?" he said, looking up at Grandma. Somehow he was the last to find out about the tennis boys.

"Boil it up until it grays."

When the Mom was taken to prison, Grandma only had two more in the house to keep her from peace and quiet.

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The Tennis Player visited the Mom in the coop as often as he could.

She had turned herself into a song bird.

The Tennis Player brought his MP3 player and shoved his headphones against the receiver so she could sing along to Willie Nelson on the other side of the glass. As soon as she heard Willie, she flapped around the pen. She was bonkers, she was flying all around with panic like she was stuck in a chimney with a fire stoked bellow her ass.

The Tennis Player tried to calm her. *Shhh shhh* he said into the receiver.

She sat back down and stared at him through the glass, head tilted to one side.

The Tennis Player took out a magazine and pressed it up against the glass. The Mom smiled at the page to page picture of her son loading up a serve.

"Look how you've grown so tall and strong."

She was herself again for a moment.

“They said I can give you the magazine. There’s a whole feature on me. Do you want it?”

“Of course, baby. Leave it here. And don’t go, baby. Don’t ever go.”

Five minutes later, the guards pushed the Tennis Player out. The Mom went back to singing Willie—even without the MP3 player—and flapped her wings to the songs in her head.

A few months later she hanged herself in her cell. Even then, the guards couldn’t get her to stop singing. They beat on her ribs, but her mouth kept on.

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The Tennis Player kept the Dad’s heart in a mason jar hidden in his tennis bag.

Sometimes he took it out to see if it was still pulsing. He held it the same way in his palms every time. It always left violet stains in the lines on his hands.

He could never tell if what he were feeling was the heart’s pulse or his own beating through his wrists. He stood and listened. He still couldn’t be sure. He brought it to Jackson, who lived under the pier.

“Here, feel this.” The Tennis Player handed over the heart.

Jackson held the heart for a minute. “He’s calling for you,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

Jackson scratched his beard and left it stained with a patch of blood. The Tennis Player decided not to say anything.

“Could just be my stomach talking. Got any food?”

“Listen bum, this is important.”

“Okay, okay. Follow me,” Jackson said calmly.

Jackson walked into the ocean with the heart above his head. The Tennis Player stood at the edge of the shore. Waves crashed, bigger and bigger.

Bigger and bigger, waves crashed against Jackson; gulls dove headfirst into the sea, clouds split open and the earth stopped breathing.

Jackson drowned while the boy waited for the heart to drift back to shore.

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The day Dewey turned twenty-one he packed his bags and left home.

Sitting in a girlfriend's Oldsmobile, Dewey lit a cigarette and held onto the Tennis Player's hand through the window.

"Where you gonna go?" the Tennis Player asked, his eyes on the woodpeckers woodpecking.

"Off to die in Hollywood," Dewey said. "Look for me on the screens and so-and-so."

The Tennis Player didn't recognize the girlfriend sitting next to Dewey. She had a black eye so big her giant sunglasses couldn't hide it.

"My old man is a heartless son of a bitch," she said.

"I understand," the Tennis Player said.

"Watch your feet so we don't run them over."

Dewey hadn't taken much from his room, left all his rackets behind and even his guitar lay untuned across the bed. Dewey never clipped the strings when he put on a new set, so the Tennis Player took to it with a wire cutter.

He tuned the instrument while he was at it.

He strummed a few cords.

He sat in Dewey's room for a moment, his brother's guitar on his lap, and slowly realized Dewey had never been good at anything.

Almost a year to the day, a doctor called the house from Los Angeles.

It was late at night when the Tennis Player got the call. He was already in his underwear ready for bed. He had started to grow a line of hair which ran straight down to his balls and he often scratched around his belly button when nobody was around.

The room was dark and the floor was cold under the Tennis Player's feet when he picked up the phone: Dewey didn't get his wish to become a star.

He was found dead along Hollywood Boulevard, amongst a bedspread of cardboard and McDonalds paper cups.

"His cell count was less than nothing," the Doctor said.

When the the Tennis Player hung up and walked into the living room, he was surprised to see Grandma lying across the sofa. It was late at night, and he wasn't sure when she walked in.

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The Tennis Player stuck around for years until Grandma passed.

She gave way watching *Duck Dynasty*—gave one big sigh—and said, "You're right about this boredom thing." Then she turned pale yellow and was dead.

Everyone came home that night—the Dad, the Mom, and Dewey—to help the Tennis Player bury her body.

"She never did tell me where she'd like to be buried," the Tennis Player said.

Everyone shrugged.

“The yard’ll have to do,” the Dad said.

Everyone grabbed a limb and shuffled awkwardly out the back door with Grandma limp in their arms.

“Still hitting?” Dewey asked, his face ugly and a pale green. The Tennis Player almost couldn’t be sure it was him.

“Nah, I gave it up,” the Tennis Player said.

“That’s a shame, you were damn good,” the Dad said.

As soon as they got outside, the Mom started singing *Hallelujah* with all the other birds. Her voice was beautifully beautiful.

The family dug a big hole next to where Bo-Bo was buried. They tried to be gentle, but the body was awkward, so they ended up chucking her into the grave and coughed as dirt spit back up.

“Alright, y’alls turn now,” the Tennis Player said, wiping his hands clean.

The three looked down into the earth. “Can we enjoy a last beer?” the Dad said.

“You’ve had enough time.”

“It sure is a deep hole,” Dewey said.

“Let’s all make ourselves comfortable,” the Mom said. Everyone was surprised to hear her speak.

The three got in, one atop the other, and the Tennis Player plopped dirt onto their lifeless corpses.

“Wait a second, you still got my heart? I’d like it back if you do,” the Dad said.

“Nah, I sold it with all my rackets, my whites, my bags; all the old things.”

“Oh. Alright,” the Dad said. The Tennis Player could tell he was disappointed, but soon his face was under the dirt.

“Still want to spit on my grave?” Dewey asked, his face jutting out the dirt like an emerald.

“Nah,” the Tennis Player said.

“Goodnight, my boys,” the Mom said.

Inside, the Tennis Player took the heart out its mason jar.

He had lied of course.

After all these years he still couldn't figure out if it had its pulse and he wasn't about to quit searching now. He had a few more good years himself.

He held the heart and took out his Wilson racket. He had lied about that, too. He still hit every now and then.

He balanced the heart on the face of his racket, letting violet blood drip past the strings, down to the rug.

He bounced the heart against his strings, up and down, up and down, until it was too dark to see.