

John McEnroe Visits the 15th Street Diner

by Sean Lovelace

One was 264 in the world, the other 118 and from South Korea, and both had been around a bit, north to south, east to west, tourney-to-tourney, indoor to clay to grass, well traveled, especially for seventeen year olds. And yet both sat in wonder, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in a spongy booth, staring at their menus. The menus were red and white and plastic and had a crinkly feel and a large uneven script like a fence made of tree branches and with sections divided into STARTERS and SUPPER and PLATTERS and FAMILY STYLE and then the food, the words—grits and hominy and chicken fried chicken and Vidalia and succotash and cornbread and Moon Pie and something about not only eating a *green* tomato, you know, but frying it...

“What’s a hushpuppy?” 264 asked 118, who knew three words of English.

118 said, “No.”

The waitress, a woman built like a bale of hay, including a sprout of black-rooted yellowish hair, hesitated.

“It’s what you eat with catfish,” she explained. “Now ya’ll want tea?”

264 thought it was much too hot outside for tea—too hot for anything, though he wished he were playing tennis, but 118 said, “Yes.”

The tea arrived and it was cold, with ice.

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Alabama in July. The ATP Sunshine Cup. One hundred and three degrees, ninety-seven percent humidity: like playing tennis underwater, only the water is boiling.

264 nimbly sidesteps, letting the ball skip wide by a quarter inch.

Out!

His opponent, a Swedish veteran, age 33, rank 49, stares after the ball, at the line, into the linesman's eyes, at 264, and then shakes his head, snatching a towel from a ball boy and wiping cascades of sweat from his arms.

I belong, 264 whispers, already at the service line.

With the towel 49 wipes the racket, while the crowd grumbles and sighs and tugs at their clothing and fans themselves with their programs. 264 hops in place, trying to retain kinetic, his body leached of sweat, high on adrenaline fumes—he has an anxious urge to spit, but you don't spit on a tennis court. Finally, 49 walks onto the court, bouncing on his heels, stoic and angular, awaiting the serve.

Serve, return, backhand, lob, smash...

The umpire leans into her microphone: "Game, set, match, McEnroe."

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The customers were loud in a Sunday afternoon kind of way, laughing and chattering, spoons clacking, babies screaming, children crawling onto booths and under, pushing trucks and cars and tractors and Barbie dolls across the floor, and their parents, large, stout women with bright puffy blouses and rhinestone pins and tall Sunday hats with plastic flowers and ribbons, lanky men in thin, starchy shirts and ties with lumpy knots—big, strong, unselfconscious human beings—women who knew physical labor, men who started their beards in junior high and were good with their hands, who could repair their own plumbing and pickup trucks and barbed wire fences, and then the elderly, tables full, carefully chewing, egret-like women with grimaces and squints, sun-mottled skeletal men with egg-shaped heads, curls of silvery hair, dusty farm caps squashed atop: EUTAW FEED AND FERTILIZER, NOTHING RUNS LIKE A DEERE, HALL'S GOAT ROAST FAMILY REUNION.

The waitress shouldered her way to the table and smiled but you could see it wasn't really a smile.

"What's this meat and three?" 264 asked her.

"Just that. A meat and three veggies."

264 looked at 118. "We burn a lot of calories. Maybe we should order the meat and four?"

The waitress snorted and stood there, hip-handed. "Why not family style?"

"Yes," 118 said, while eyeing a wall calendar, a cow driving a milk truck.

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264 waits at the net for 49 to shake his hand, a long minute, sweat trickling, vapor shimmering off the court. And he waits . . . It is 264's second professional tournament and something kicks around inside his chest as he watches the umpire's face, longing for some official word, a gesture, for an ending and release.

"The ball was out," 49 says, his voice terse, a tone of finality, like a jury foreman reading a verdict. He points his racket to the evidence, an exact spot. "I have the mark right here."

264 stands there, twisting his racket in his hand, fitting it to his grip, squeezing, then twisting again. Something rises up, surging and roiling, a need to shout, or vomit, he doesn't know, but he feels it's wrong, it must be wrong, to want to scream until your head explodes into red confetti. So he swallows it down. He watches the umpire descend from the chair, walk to the spot, lean over, 49 guiding with his racket. She has her glasses on a black cord and makes a show of removing and replacing them, crouching, eventually kneeling.

She stands. "Game, set, match, McEnroe."

264 waits, his bones feeling light.

"No." 49 clutches the umpire's elbow. "The ball was out."

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Family Style. They studied the table, not the table—they couldn't actually see the table. On its surface were red plastic baskets with wax paper, one of cornbread, one of buttermilk biscuits, one of rolls. In between the baskets were two white oval platters, a mound of catfish and hushpuppies, another of ground steak and onion rings, both crispy and brown. Alongside the platters were eight white bowls holding black-eyed peas, cole slaw, macaroni

and cheese, green beans, cinnamon apples, creamed corn, fried okra, and sweet potato casserole. There was a bowl of brown gravy, a bowl of white. There were stacks of paper napkins and two glass shakers for salt and pepper and a large round one for sugar. And there were condiments—pats of butter, a small bowl of tartar sauce, a bottle of catsup, and two of Tabasco sauce. On the edge of the table sat a smaller plate stacked high with four Moon Pies, one vanilla, one chocolate, two banana.

The waitress brought over refills of iced tea. Neither took the sweating glasses from her hand.

“You cannot be serious,” 264 said to her.

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Come on, 264 thinks, his shoulders knotted, head throbbing, the seconds dripping away, but 49 does not *come on*, does not move at all—he stands, the tip of his racket welded to the court. The crowd—growing impatient in the sun—shifts and hisses their disapproval.

“Get off the court,” 264 hears a voice, and thinks, *Exactly, asshole, get off the court*, but the voice is advising him.

A rustling, a commotion off court, and a head referee appears, a tall man wearing a black suit of all things. He paces onto the court, past the umpire's chair without a glance, and over to 49. He listens intently and follows 49's racket, squatting down with him, like two men discussing a map.

Standing, brushing imaginary dust off his trousers, the referee says, “If this is the mark, the mark is out. Deuce.”

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264 gave the waitress a look, the one he reserves for broken strings on his tennis racket, a mix of bewilderment and betrayal.

“Why would you?” he said, his voice rising, surging away, a kick-spinning serve. “Why-would-you-allow-it?”

He took the glasses; he took them from her pudgy, swollen, glazed pink hands. He stared at her; he held the glasses up high; he let them go. He felt the crash and slosh and cries and silence coming,

silence settling and glaring, and him clearing the table, one mighty shove with his hypertrophied service arm (the left), the clattering rush of shattering and splitting, the looks—hatred from the waitress, the diners, 118's confusion—and they were gone, outside, walking in the hot slap of the sun, kicked out, yes, but walking on two feet, walking free across the parking lot—he felt all of this before it happened.

“I'm not a loser!” 264 shouted, leaping to slap-rattle a YIELD sign.

“No,” 118 said.

“It was taken from me!”

“Yes.”

As 118 looked on, 264 stopped and tugged a banana Moon Pie from his shorts pocket. He ripped open the cellophane with his teeth, took a bite, chewed angrily, and spit the yellowish glob on the pavement. The remainder, he flung—a wobbling Frisbee—into the door of a Krispie Kreme delivery truck.

118 nudged a pebble on the ground with his shoe. 264 reached across and squeezed his shoulders, hard.

“I mean it, man! When I feel something I should act—instinct! I walk off that court, I'm playing right now. I'm still in the tournament. I'm still a winner, right now! That's it. You have to *know* how you feel, don't fight it. Action! I need to be a player of action! A man of action! Am I right? Tell me, seriously, am I?”

118 stepped back. He cocked his head as if detecting a whisper, and in fact a siren sounded in the distance—a mile, half mile, a block away. He squinted into the sun, into 264's crackling eyes, reached for the door handle of the rented Chevy, and said, “Maybe.”

