

Marshall Jon Fisher

On Court

There was one spot the windshield wipers never got. Sitting in the old Datsun on Monday morning, his hands clutching opposite arms of his warmup jacket as he let the engine heat up, Z watched it. The rubber arms swayed back and forth, erasing the moisture that condensed between beats but unable to touch that one half-oval. Every morning it appeared at eye level, blocking his view as he drove to school. It didn't help to wipe it with a paper towel -- the drops simply formed again within seconds -- and new wipers were useless. He had long since resigned himself to the fact that the annoyance was an indelible feature of the car, as intrinsic to it as the rust holes in the hood and the leaky radiator.

Before he put her in gear and pulled out of the swale between sidewalk and street, Z noticed that the wipers were almost but not quite in beat with "Heartache Tonight," the Eagles' latest thumping out of the radio. It reminded him of riding the school bus the year before. The huge wipers had never been quite synchronized, one moving slightly faster than the other. He would watch, starting when they each hit the left side simultaneously, as the slower one lagged behind, throwing them

out of synch, and count how many beats until they became exactly one cycle behind and slapped the left side in harmony again. He'd always enjoyed the bus ride, finding a window seat and vegetating through the ten minutes, last night's dreams still close at hand. He had no responsibility on the bus; he didn't have to talk with anyone, could close his eyes against the glass with his books held tight against his chest and half-dream, feeling the lulling centrifugal pull as the driver took them around corners he didn't care to see, simply let the force shift his weight on the seat as the sun's red glow changed position through his eyelids. Or he could keep his eyes open, just as relaxed, and let the mathematical rhythm of the wipers transfix him.

But the rides had been almost too good. Packed warmly in the seats -- January mornings were cool even in Miami, making this temporary shelter enticing, teasing you into forgetting the heat that would arrive well before lunchtime -- gently rocked by the bouncing of the bus's old shocks over the road's imperfections, the arrival at the school became a dreaded event, lost in the unthinkable future until it happened. Each morning he was reluctant as a fetus, and with no more choice, to step down the thin steps from the dark bus into the bright sunlight of the schoolyard, to English and Phys Ed, to pop quizzes and class participation and forty-five minutes of lunch in the overcrowded cafeteria.

Now Z tried to follow the rhythms of the Datsun's wipers and the Eagles' drums to see if they would fall into resonance again like the bus's wipers, but gave up before he reached the end of his street. He missed the dreamy bus rides, but having Dad's old car for his senior year had several advantages. Driving home from tennis practice and not having to lug his rackets around all day, for example (it just wouldn't do for a senior to be calling Mom for rides home). Also, having to pay attention to driving put him in amore suitable, that is to say awake, state for school. The bus had always left him in a somewhat somnambulistic condition, prompting Mr. Stephenson, last year's first period English teacher, to dub him The Space Cowboy, often heralding his entrance with that song on those occasions when the tardy bell beat him to the door. And he had a particular reason this year for wanting to appear alert, confident, as if he had been awake for hours working out or washing the car -- *together*, in a word -- as he entered first period.

He saw her out of the corner of his eye as he came in, casually looking in front of his long, overstretched legs as they shuffled him towards and then down his assigned row. She sat bent forward, her shoulder-length red hair falling toward the notebook where she rendered this morning's margin doodling, which he would later critique with a decidedly Freudian

emphasis. She looked up as he passed, brushed her hair behind her ear with her left hand, and smiled.

"You're early," she said as the late bell rang.

"Kathykathykathy," he said under his breath as he slid into his desk-chair behind her. "I know," he whispered in the lull before the loudspeaker called them to attention for the pledge of allegiance. "I kept my run down to ten miles today."

"Ha," she turned her head momentarily as they rose with the rest of the class.

Kathy was it. The blue-jeaned, tee-shirted reason he came to school every morning, the reason he studied for English tests even when he knew he didn't have to, just to ensure that his would be the highest score in the class (he knew that wasn't exactly what gorgeous women went for, but hell, you had to go with what you had), the prize he played for every afternoon of the year, knocking dead hairy tennis balls back at his disinterested teammates in the thick unending heat.

She was an actress. *The* actress in the school, inseparable from Barry, *the* actor. How often he had sat in the auditorium on a Friday night, convincing himself in his fantasies that she and Barry were lovers only on the stage, that once the performance was over he would go backstage and reclaim her. But of course Z and Kathy in reality shared only that limited relationship so peculiar to their time and place: the classroom friendship. They whispered in class, laughed at the teacher's absurd assignments, waited out

the endless hours until June, but were together only in that stuffy room, that enclosed world with the maps and the Dickens poster and the flag. Out of class they were friendly when passing in the halls, but not really friends. She ate lunch in the drama room with the thespian crowd, he in the packed cafeteria with Jimmy and maybe another teammate or two. She spent weekend nights when there wasn't a performance with Barry, presumably at artsy movies (he had seen them once at the Grove Cinema) or out dancing, or worse -- don't even think it! -- parked out at Hobie Beach on the Rickenbacker; he went to movies with Jimmy or played basketball at Dade-South if the gym was open, left the auditorium quickly to go home or to Jimmy's while she drove with Barry to the cast party.

The pledge ended and they sat down to listen to the morning announcements over the P.A. Z felt the air-conditioning settling on his skin and wished he hadn't left his warmup jacket in the car. What did they expect you to do, what with the rooms kept so cold and the outdoor hallways like an ambulatory sauna around the perimeter of the building.

He rubbed his bare arms. Just over six hours and he'd be out on the courts, the heat and humidity rolling over every inch of his skin, erasing the memory of this artificial chill. Sitting in class, he felt it wouldn't matter whether he played well in practice today or not. Just to be out there in the heat hitting the hell out of the ball -- whether it ended up in the

court or over the fence -- would be pure pleasure, like stretching out in a hot Jacuzzi.

The announcements were over and Mrs. Williams was talking about *A Farewell to Arms*. He loved the book so far but didn't feel like listening to this woman talk about it. Why doesn't she shut up and let us spend the period reading the damn thing? Then we could finish faster and get on to another book. Could he stand fifty minutes of this? And then five more fifty minutes, not to mention forty-five of bad food in a sweaty cafeteria which never seemed to reap the benefits of the air conditioning. The sun shone through a small window in the door, warming a rectilinear ray that blanketed a section of floor and chairs and just made its way to his left leg, if he stretched it out to the side. He could feel it through his sneakers. Forty-six more minutes.

Then Kathy glanced back at him and he figured he'd be all right. She turned back to the front and bent her right arm back, elbow out and palm up, a folded sheet of loose leaf paper between two fingers. He delicately extracted it and her arm swung back to her side. He unfolded it and read her handwriting -- long, artistic strokes that made him want to slip his fingers between her hair and neck so close in front of him and rub her skin:

Dearest Z,

Is it my imagination or has dear Mrs. W. finally achieved the perfect monotone? A perfectly riveting E-flat, if I'm not mistaken.

Much love,

K

He smiled and took the cap off his pen. He focused his gaze on Mrs. Williams for a few seconds, seemingly transfixed by the wisdom that flowed from her jaws, before putting pen to paper as if to record the insights at whose exposition he had been lucky enough to have been present. He wrote directly beneath Kathy's note:

My Flower,

We can only feel blessed to be a party to such anhistoric moment. We will someday be able to tell our grandchildren (assuming functioning reproductive apparatus in connection with all parties involved) that we were there when a human voice first split concrete.

Always your humble and
willing slave,

Z

He refolded the paper and slipped it between her elbow (her pale naked actress's elbow!) and the part of her desk that

extended back above his right leg. She quietly unfolded it, read, and turned just enough so he could see her smile. Didn't she realize that he could make her smile out of class as well, after a good movie, at the beach, that he could even teach her to hit a backhand?

He felt eyes on the left side of the room and looked over to see Jimmy giving him an exaggerated wink and smile, apparently enjoying the exchange of notes as much as Z.

"James," Mrs. Williams modulated to a slightly lower, accusatory tone, "do you have something you wish to share with us?"

"Uh, no."

"Very well. Then why don't you come back to World War I Italy with the rest of us?" Pleased with her impromptu and smooth transition from lecture to disciplinary repartee and back again, she turned towards the map of pre-war Europe that covered the blackboard.

Thirty-nine, thirty-nine. Christ, how was he going to make it through the entire day when he couldn't even fathom thirty-nine more minutes of English? He could answer any questions she was likely to pose concerning this book without listening to her; why did he have to waste fifty minutes of his life in a silly pretense? And if he did, why did it have to be so cold in here?

Kathy's arm was curved back again, offering the folded paper in palm. He reached for it, lightly touching her wrist with his middle fingernail before sliding it down to extract the note. How debonair could he get? (This was probably the limit, he figured, for a poor sap sitting in a plastic desk-chair listening to someone who should have gone into real estate ramble about Hemingway.) He smiled at his own boldness as he unfolded the paper -- he had touched her, caressed her pale skin like a lover right here in English, and she hadn't protested, squirmed, pulled her arm back. Had she even felt him? Yes, she had to. Even now she was racking her brains for a way to drop Barry without hurting him more than absolutely necessary, so she could be with this suave, tennis-playing, straight-A demon who lets no mere English-class decorum stop him from touching the woman he loves. The straight approach was probably best.

Oh Z My Z My Love:

Deliver me from this hell of boredom. Let us go then, you and I, out the door, across the fields, in the warm sun, where you can caress my wrist again, and my other wrist as well, not to mention sundry other key areas.

Your love,

K

Frederic was injured in Italy. Z unfolded and read:

Dear Willing Slave,

Don't forget Oklahoma this weekend. You are coming, aren't you?

As Ever,

Your Flower

Did she really care? Was she going to act her heart out for him, or was she merely drumming up business? He smoothed out the paper, which was becoming soft with wrinkles, and wrote.

My Lupin,

While I will of course be in attendance at the scene of your glory this weekend, a disturbing thought has occurred to me. Namely that while I go to all your plays, you never come to any tennis matches (of course neither does anyone else, but that shouldn't matter to a renegade such as yourself). Why not come to the big match with Beach on Friday? Warm sun, the comforting pitter-patter of tennis balls, good company (if you bring friends), etc. etc. BYORefreshments I'm afraid.

Always Your Plum,

Z

He sent off the message and waited, but before she could reply the class rustled, clearing off desks and preparing pens. Apparently Mrs. Williams wasn't satisfied that everyone had read the assigned book -- pop quizzes were being passed out.

Z looked at the mimeographed sheet of paper that Kathy passed back to him, this time high over her left shoulder, no need for secrecy. Short questions requiring one-word answers. Was he going to stand for this? What was the point of his answering this quiz? He knew he had read the book, and if she didn't did he really care? The right thing to do was to protest by simply writing his name and nothing more. But of course she wouldn't accept that, wouldn't simply give him his F and be done with it. No, she would have to know why her star pupil had failed a pop quiz, and how could he really explain himself? It wasn't worth the breath -- he quickly filled in the blanks and turned over the paper.

It was going to be a long Monday, months and years before he could get outside on the hot green asphalt rectangles and lose himself. No pop quizzes out there, no pretense of attention, no need to think, no need to talk, nothing required of him but to let his body do what it wanted. No need to think of things to say, like at the dinner table where his parents had been upset with him lately for hurrying through the meal silently, offering nothing to the conversation. How was your day, Zachary? Fine. What did you do? Nothing. You must have done

something. Same stuff, you know. Why don't you talk to us, Zachary? Nothing to say, Mom, I'm sorry if I bore you. You were thinking something just now, what was it? Nothing. Come on, you were thinking about something -- why can't you share it with us? Jesus, isn't a valedictorian and captain of the tennis team enough for you? You want a brilliant dinner conversationalist to boot? Okay Mom, I was thinking about something. I was thinking about how tight Kathy's jeans were today, those black ones she wears when it's cool out, how I'd like to touch them, run my hand up her thigh....

Twenty-one minutes. The air conditioner hummed; he rubbed his arms where the hair stood up.

The heat was like a quilt fresh from the dryer. Draped around him it cushioned his movements, oiled his joints and insulated his skin so he couldn't even feel himself as he bounced from side to side, stretching and bending for the ball. Even the impact of the ball on his gut strings was reduced to a muffled disturbance in the perfect arc of his swing, the sound a distant thud like when you hear a car door slamming far off in the neighborhood. This is what it was like when it went well -- you didn't have to think about what you were doing, your body just found the perfect stride to reach the ball and the perfect weight transfer and swing and it was as if the ball knew it was

in good hands and trusted you and went just where it was supposed to. The sweat felt good on the back of his neck and legs.

Gone were the tired voices of six teachers, lab on light diffraction and calculus homework problems on the backboard, gone was the daily search for seats in the cafeteria, gone were the mad rushes between periods and the cold classrooms. Even Jimmy and Evan across the net were far away as they fed him balls from the bucket in a two-on-one drill, forcing him from sideline to sideline: he was alone.

The red French clay rose in small clouds and settled in his socks as he slid into a backhand passing shot. They had driven from Italy along the coastline in a rented Volkswagen, windows open and Mozart booming from the cassette deck. Now he had reached the finals of this stop on the summer semi-pro circuit and if he won they'd have enough money for several more weeks. Between points he could see her in the corner of the small stadium, her red hair blowing around her sunglasses. Each shot he hit for her, each ball he ran down he sensed her pulling him through the match. And win or lose they would later eat oysters at a café on the water and then walk back to the motel and make love, and afterwards they would lie still with the windows open, the Mediterranean breeze lifting the heat from their bodies.

"That's three goddamn buckets," said Jimmy. "You're gonna wear out the balls for the rest of us."

"Sorry." Miami. High School. "You want to take a turn?"

"I don't know, it's kind of hot for two-on-ones. Why don't we get up some doubts?"

"No, come on, we're playing Beach Friday. No one on this team takes things seriously."

"That's cause we know we're gonna lose, Z. You're the only one who has a chance."

"Where's Coach?" said Z.

"I think he took his car in to be fixed."

"Great."

"He said you're in charge."

Z looked at the other courts and saw the others had stopped playing and were standing by the net talking or hitting balls into the back fence. Aside from the high school team, there was no one on the courts. The sun beat hard from an angle on the green surface, the glare making it seem almost white. Through the fence, where windscreens should have hung, he saw the school across the street. Palm trees hung limp on the front lawn, and the hallways were empty. A lone teacher made his way towards his car, an old dark-brown Toyota that looked forgotten in the vast emptied parking lot. "It's getting late," he said, "I guess we can hang it up for today."

Z picked up the balls along with his friends, but when they drifted out to their cars or walked off towards home he took a bucket back out onto the court and put it down just behind the

baseline. And started hitting serves. The familiar weight of the racket swung back behind his head and then came arcing over, sending the balls across the net where they congregated in various pockets of concentration against the fence. But soon the other side of the net was an ocean away, the hollow knock of the racket and ball pulling him through years and space until he could hear the faint roar of the sea beyond the court and sense her in the bleachers, straw hat shading her face and dark sunglasses protecting green eyes from the European sun.

On Wednesday it rained. The rolling flow of staccato drops outside the classrooms was a soothing background music to the last two periods of the day. You could sense that no one was really listening to the teacher -- everyone's consciousness was filled with a dreamy sense of being *inside*, dry and safe under the fluorescent lighting while outside the door the dark, wild water blew in gusts over the lawn, across the cars and asphalt in the parking lot, against the walls of the school.

In physics, Mr. Frank, a retired Navy pilot who had seen some action in "the big one -- Dubuyuh-Dubuyuh-Two," turned away from the class and scribbled on the blackboard. Restless whispers rose faintly in the room, blending with the sound of the rain and unnoticed by the gray-haired man who squeezed chalk onto the board in shapes and marks that could tell you if you

threw a baseball at a certain angle from a certain height at a certain initial velocity when and where it would hit the ground, a fact not likely to be required on the diamond behind the school -- at least not on a day like today.

They whispered:

"Looks like practice is off."

"Yeah. Even if it stopped now, the courts would never dry in time."

"You want to go to Dadeland or something, look in the record stores?"

"No," said Z. "I'm tired as hell. I'm gonna head straight home and get some sleep. I don't know how much longer I can deal with getting up at six."

"You won't have to. In college you can take all late classes, and sleep till ten or eleven. That's what my brother does."

"Yeah?" It sounded good to Z, who grew more tired as each week went along, until he could reset his body clock by sleeping through weekend mornings. For the past couple hours the rain had been playing with his fatigue, lulling him into a torpid trance so that he didn't even mind that there'd be no tennis today. He remembered a day like this one in elementary school, he couldn't have been more than ten, when he'd gotten caught in the rain walking home. He'd sprinted all the way to his house, Peanuts lunch box banging against his thigh with each step, and when he

finally got there, soaking wet, his mother had toweled him dry, dressed him in dry clothes, and sat with him as he had chocolate chip cookies and milk and watched the drops in the swimming pool through the glass sliding doors. Now he looked forward to going home in the afternoon for a change, drying off and falling into bed, finally submitting to the rain's soporific rapping on the windows.

By the time the final bell rang, however, and the fidgety students crowded into the halls where the electric lights had been on since lunchtime, the rain had stopped. As Z walked through the crowded parking lot the sun appeared through a break in the lightening clouds, spreading white light across wet asphalt and concrete. He passed by his car and walked to the tennis courts beyond the lot. Puddles covered large portions of the courts, defining sections where the surface had settled disproportionately over the years. No longer as tired as he had been in class, he considered getting a squeegee and spreading the water for the sun to dry, but it would probably still be too long before they could play. He walked back to his car and joined the machines clustering like insects by the few exits and squeezing their way out onto the main street.

About a mile from school he saw her. Walking along the sidewalk on the right side, both arms cradling her books in front of her in that way that girls did. Her red hair looked darker in the gray clouded sun.

Barry usually drove her home; what did this mean? They must have broken up, they must be history -- she is free, free for him to sweep off the sidewalk and into his rusted Datsun forever! What luck that it should rain today, the day that she is walking home alone across rain-drenched streets and sidewalks wishing that he would come driving by.

He pulled off the street and onto the swale beside her, rolling down the passenger window as the car stopped. At first her look was strange, apprehensive, as though it didn't belong on the face that he knew in English class, but it quickly changed to the one he knew.

"Z," she said, smiling into the open window.

"I quit the team so I could give you a ride home," he opened the door.

She laughed as she got in. "I know you wimpy tennis players don't play in the rain."

"Oh yeah. That's good -- I get to stay on the team." He pulled back onto the street. "Where do you live, anyway?"

"A block up on the left. The white one."

"Well it's a good thing I saw you -- you must have been exhausted after walking nine tenths of the way home."

He loved her laugh. "I couldn't take another step," she said.

Water had collected in the dip at the base of her driveway, and as he pulled in the sound of the tires slicing through it

rose up and through the open windows of the car. He shifted to neutral and pulled up on the emergency brake slowly, with the button pushed in so as not to make any noise. The engine rumbled, calling for oil to replace what continually leaked out.

The sentences that he had played over in his mind so many times on the tennis court or while drifting away from an economics lecture, reserved for exactly this occasion, rushed through his mind now like newspaper headlines in an old-fashioned movie. He pushed the emergency brake button in and out. "Well," he said.

"Thanks for the ride," she said and collected her books and purse, shifting her weight toward the door.

"How come you were walking, anyway?"

She settled back into the torn bucket seat. "Barry's making up a test after school. I didn't feel like waiting."

"Oh."

"Are you coming Friday night?"

"Of course. I always come."

"Really?" Didn't she know that?

"I should have been in drama," he said. "I was really into it in junior high."

"I didn't know that, Z. I bet you were good. Why didn't you keep it up?"

"Tennis. Just not enough time, you know. Besides, I think the only reason I got the leading roles was that I was the only one who would memorize that many lines."

"Well, it's too bad you didn't. Then we wouldn't have had to wait until we sat next to each other in English to become friends."

Exactly, he thought. I could have been the co-star, I could have been the one to take you to cast parties, the one to rehearse key scenes together on rainy afternoons. Let Barry be the tennis player, let him be the one to play matches no one cares about, let him sit alone in a packed auditorium and watch me touch you on the stage.

"Anyway," he said. "You gonna come to the match Friday? It's the best one of the season."

"I'll try. I've got a lot to do to get ready for the performance, though. We have to be there real early and all. But I'll try to stop by for a little while at least."

"What more can a man ask?" he said, and immediately realized that it was no joke -- a man could ask for a hell of a lot more -- and he moved toward her instinctively. And then of course there was no turning back, it was like once you've given in to your friends and strapped yourself into the rollercoaster you can't very well unstrap yourself and jump out -- you're climbing to the top of that big one and going over and down so

fast that you'll rise in your seat against the bar, so he leaned into her and kissed her right on her actress's lips.

"Z," she said. How she could say his name, that initial which had become so synonymous with his own self-image that he no longer even heard its sound, and make it mean so much? That's really all she said, but from that one syllable he learned everything he needed to know, just like he knew he'd crack his forehead return of serve down the line on the big points. And saying only this she pulled her purse back up from where it had slipped down her arm, opened the door in the same motion, and stepped into the middle of the driveway puddle.

The lights high above Center Court burned holes in the indigo New York sky and shone down onto the hard green stage. Funny, he thought, you take away the lights and the stadium and all you have left is a regular green tennis court, identical to the hundreds of other ones you've played on. Phase everything else out -- that's the key.

He did this now, serving at 6-5 in the first set, but the more he concentrated on the court and his opponent, the more acutely aware he was of the people in the stands, of the television cameras in the corners, of everyone he ever knew watching him from their living rooms. And as he put his toe to the baseline and prepared to serve, he felt her presence. In the

corner of his eye he could see her red hair in the front row, waiting for him to put away the first set of the match. And when the camera panned the crowd, it would stop and zoom in on her, her with her hair and her face and her coke and her books, and everyone would know that she was finally his.

The cool night air of early September blew through the sleeves of his shirt as he bounced a ball in front of his toe. He closed his eyes for a second and then opened them and as he tossed the ball it seemed to rise all the way into the darkness and become a part of the night above, and he bent his knees and pushed himself up to meet it, bringing it back down to earth with a solid crack that echoed off thousands of silent faces.

One down, three to go.

Playing with everything he had, he brought himself to set point with a well-placed backhand volley and an overhead winner. One more and he would be in control of the match. He was completely within himself now, his opponent and even the entire other side of the net a distant blur. He knew her eyes were on him as he once again bounced the ball rhythmically and then set himself, weight perfectly balanced on both feet. He felt her watching him as the ball again framed itself against the dark sky and he arched his back, this time spinning it into the corner of the far service box and following it towards the net. Her eyes shot energy into his legs as he took the return above net level in the center of his sweet spot and without so much as

moving his racket volleyed it into the opposite corner for the set.

The crowd erupted as he calmly took the other ball from his pocket, knocked it over the net, and walked back to the baseline. Before he turned around to face his opponent and begin the second set, the applause faded quickly and he finally looked up from the cocoon he had been playing in to catch her eye.

But she was gone. Hadn't she even stayed for the end of the set? Where she had been there was only the shade of a palm tree. On the court on the other side of the grass, Jimmy hit a backhand into the net and cursed. As Z looked back to his own court and saw the other boy waiting for him to get ready, a bead of sweat ran down his forehead into his eye, and he felt the warm breeze rustle the hairs on his legs.