

Double Fault

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Extract

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ONE

AT THE TOP OF the toss, the ball paused, weightless. Willy's arm dangled slack behind her back. The serve was into the sun, which at its apex the tennis ball perfectly eclipsed. A corona blazed on the ball's circumference, etching a ring on Willy's retina that would blind-spot the rest of the point.

Thwack. Little matter, about the sun. The serve sang down the middle and sped, unmolested, to *ching* into a diamond of the chain-link fence. Randy wrestled with the Penn-4. It gave him something to do.

Willy blinked. "Never look at the sun" had been a running admonition in her childhood. Typical, from her parents: avert your eyes from glory, shy from the bright and molten, as if you might melt.

A rustle of leaves drew Willy's gaze outside the fence to her left. Because the ball's flaming corona was still burned into her vision, the stranger's face, when she found it, was surrounded by a purple ring, as if circled for her inspection with a violet marker. His fingers hooked the galvanized wire. He had predatory eyes and a bent smile of unnerving patience, like a lazy lion who would wait all day in the shade for supper to walk by. Though his hairline was receding, the lanky man was young, yet still too white to be one of the boys from nearby Harlem scavenging strays for stickball. He must have been

searching the underbrush for his own errant ball; he had stopped to watch her play.

Willy gentled her next serve to Randy's forehand. There was no purpose to a pick-up game in Riverside Park if she aced away the entire set. Reining in her strokes, Willy caressed the ball while Randy walloped it. As ever, she marveled at the way her feet made dozens of infinitesimal adjustments of their own accord. Enjoying the spontaneous conversation of comment and reply, Willy was disappointed when her loping backhand tempted Randy to show off. *Ppffff*, into the net.

This late in the first set, she often gave a game away to keep the opposition pumped. But with that stranger still ogling their match from the woods, Willy resisted charity. And she wasn't sure how much more of this Randy Ravioli (or whatever, something Italian) she could take. He never shut up. "*Ran-dee!*" echoed across all ten courts when his shot popped wide. Between points Randy counseled regulars in adjoining games: "Bit too wristy, Bobby old boy!" and "Bend those knees, Alicia!" Willy herself he commended: "You pack quite a punch for a little lady." And the stocky hacker was a treasure trove of helpful advice; he'd demonstrated the western grip on the first changeover.

She'd smiled attentively. Now up 4-0, Willy was still smiling.

The Italian's serve had a huge windup, but with a hitch at the end, so all that flourish contributed little to the effort. More, intent on blistering pace, Randy tended to overlook the nicety of landing it in the box. He double-faulted, twice.

As they switched ends again, Willy's eyes darted to her left. That man was still leering from behind the fence. Damn it, one charm of throwaway games in Riverside was not to be scrutinized for a change. Then, he did have an offbeat, gangly appeal... Ignoring the passerby only betrayed her awareness that he was watching.

Newly self-conscious, Willy bounced the ball on the baseline six, seven times. If her coach knew she was here he would have

her head, as if she were a purebred princess who mustn't slum with guttersnipes and so learn to talk trash. But Willy felt that amateurs kept you on your toes. They were full of surprises—inadvertently nasty dinks from misconnected volleys, or wild lobs off the frame. And many of Riverside's motley crew exuded a nutritious exultation, losing with a shy loss for words or a torrent of *gee-whiz*. With Randy she was more likely to earn a huffy *see ya*, but she preferred honest injury to the desiccated *well done* and two-fingered handshake of Forest Hills.

Besides, Riverside Park was just across the street from her apartment, providing the sport a relaxing easy-come. The courts' wretched repair recalled the shattered Montclair asphalt on which Willy first learned to play: crabgrass sprouted on the baseline, fissures crazed from the alley, and stray leaves flattened the odd return. The heaving undulation of courts four and seven approximated tennis on the open sea. Poor surface mimicked the sly spins and kick-serves of cannier pros, and made for good practice of split-second adjustment to gonzo bounces. Craters and flotsam added a touch of humor to the game, discouraging both parties from taking the outcome to heart. An occasional murder in this bosky northern end of the park ensured generously available play time.

In the second set Randy started to flail. Meanwhile their audience followed the ball, his eyes flicking like a lizard's tracking a fly. He was distracting. When the man aped "*Ran-dee!*" as the Italian mishit another drive, Willy's return smacked the tape.

"You threw me off," she said sharply.

"It shouldn't be so easy." The onlooker's voice was deep and creamy.

Abruptly impatient, Willy finished Randy off in ten minutes. When they towed down at the net post, Willy eyed her opponent with fresh dismay. From behind the baseline Randy could pass for handsome; this close up, he revealed the doughy, blurred features of a boozier.

Emerging from his towel, Randy grumbled, "I've been hustled."

"There was no money on the line," she chided.

"There's always something on the line," he said brusquely, "or you don't play."

Leaning for his racket case, Randy grabbed his spine. "Oooh, geez! Threw my back last week. Afraid I'm a pale shadow..." Zipping up, he explained that his racket had "frame fatigue"; not much better than a baseball bat, *capisce?*

Her coach Max often observed, *When boys win, they boast; when girls win, they apologize.* "I was in good form today," Willy offered. "And you got some pretty vile bounces."

"How about a beer?" Randy proposed. "Make it up to me."

"No, I'll... stick around, practice my serve."

"What's left for you to practice, hitting it *out*?" Randy stalked off with his gear.

Willy lingered to adjust the bandanna binding her flyaway blond hair. The man behind the fence threw a sports bag over the sag in the chain-link at the far end and leapt after it.

"That was the most gutless demonstration I've ever seen," he announced.

"Oh, men always make excuses," said Willy. "Beaten by a girl."

"I didn't mean *he* was gutless. I meant you."

She flushed. "Pardon?"

"Your playing that meatball is like a pit bull taking on a Chihuahua. Is that how you get your rocks off?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I don't have rocks."

The lanky man clucked. "I think you do."

While Randy looked sexy from a court away and disillusioning face to face, this interloper appeared gawky and ungainly at a distance, his nose lumpy and outsized, his brow overhung, his figure stringy. But close up the drastic outlines gave way to a subtler, teasing smile, and elusive, restless eyes. Though his torso narrowed to a spindly waist, his calves and forearms widened with veiny muscle.

"Somebody's got to put loudmouths in their place," she snapped.

“Other loudmouths. You tired?”

Willy glanced at her dry tank top. “If I were, I wouldn’t admit it.”

“Then how about a real game?” He spun his racket, a solid make. He was cocky, but Willy Novinsky hadn’t turned down the offer of a tennis game for eighteen years.

At the first crack of the ball, Willy realized how lazily she’d been playing with Randy. She botched the first three warm-up rallies before reaching into her head and twisting a dial. Once it was adjusted up a notch, threads of the bedraggled net sharpened; scuffed paint at her feet flushed to a more vivid green. White demarcations lifted and seemed to hover. Fissures went blacker and more treacherous, and as it hurtled toward her the ball loomed larger and came from a more particular place.

She played guardedly at first, taking the measure of her opponent. His strokes were unorthodox; some replies came across as dumb luck. His form was in shambles; he scooped up one last-minute ball with what she could swear was a golf swing. But he lunged for everything. When she passed him his racket was always stabbing nearby, and though many a down-the-line drive was too much for him, she never caught him flat-footed on his T just glooming at it.

And there were no *Ran-dee!*’s. He never apologized or swore. He didn’t mutter *Get it together, Jack!* or, for that matter, *Good shot.* When her serve was long he raised his finger; at an ace he flattened his palm. In fact, he didn’t say one word for the whole match.

The game was over too soon at 6–0, 6–2. Willy strolled regretfully to the net, promising herself not to hand him excuses, but also not to gloat. Despite the lopsided score, they’d had some long, lovely points, and she hoped he would play her again. Before she’d formulated a remark striking just the right gracious yet unrepentant note, he reached across the tape, grasped Willy’s waist, and lifted her to the sky.

“You’re so light!” he extolled, lowering her gently to the court. “And *unbelievably* fucking powerful.” He wiped his palm on his sopping T-shirt, and formally extended his hand. “Eric Oberdorf.”

They shook. “Willy Novinsky.”

She’d been braced for the usual grumpy terseness, or an affected breeziness as if the contest were mere bagatelle, expressed in an overwillingness to discuss other matters. But grinning ear to ear, he talked only of tennis.

“So your father dangled a Dunlop-5 over your crib, right? Dragged you from the Junior Open to the Orange Bowl while the rest of us were reading ‘Spot is on TV.’ And don’t tell me—Dad’s on his way here. Since even now you’re nineteen, he still tucks you in at ten sharp. His little gold mine needs her rest.”

That she was already twenty-three was such a sore point that she couldn’t bear correcting him. “Don’t hold your breath. Daddy’s in New Jersey, waiting for me to put away childish things. Like my tennis racket.”

Which was just what she was doing, when Eric stayed her arm. “Unwind with a few rallies?”

Willy glanced at the sky, the light waning. She’d been playing a good four hours, the limit on an ordinary day. But the air as it eased from rose to gray evoked afterwork games with her father, when he’d announce that Mommy would have supper ready and Willy would plead for a few points more. On occasion, he’d relented. She was not about to become the grown-up who insists it’s time to quit. “A few minutes,” she supposed.

Eric volleyed. Tentatively she suggested, “Your backswing—take it no farther than your right shoulder.”

In five minutes, Eric had trimmed his backswing by three inches. She eyed him appreciatively. Unlike the average amateur, whose quantity of how-to books and costly half-hour sessions with burned-out pros was inversely related to his capacity to apply their advice, Eric had promptly installed her passing

observation like new software. She felt cautious about coaching if it manifested itself in minutes, for turning words into motion was a rare knack. With such a trusting, able student she could sabotage him if she liked, feeding him bad habits like poisoned steak to a dog.

Zippering his cover, Eric directed, "Time we had Randy's beer. Flor De Mayo. I'm starving."

"I may have missed it—was that *asking* me out?"

"It was telling you where we're having dinner."

"How do you know I don't have plans with a friend?"

"You don't," he said simply. "I doubt you have a lot of friends."

"I seem that likable?" she asked sardonically.

"No one with your tennis game is *likable*. And no one with your tennis game spends much time holding hands in bars."

"You're going to change all that?" she jeered.

"As for loitering in gin mills, no. But a hand to hold wouldn't do you a speck of harm." Eric grabbed Willy's athletic bag as well as his own, and strode in the twilight with both carryalls toward court three with a self-satisfied jaunt. He had correctly intuited that wherever her rackets went, Willy was sure to follow.

"So where'd 'Willy' come from?"

Her imprecations to consider the West Side Cafe's pleasant outdoor tables having been resolutely ignored, they were seated snugly inside Flor De Mayo. Willy was recovering from a petty sulk that she'd been co-opted into a Cuban-Chinese greasefest. At least the restaurant was clean and not too frenetic; the white wine was drinkable.

"Would you go by 'Wilhemena?'"

"Yikes. What were your parents trying to do to you?"

"Let's just say it's not a name you expect to see in lights. My older sister fared even worse—'Gertrude,' can you believe it? Which they hacked barbarously down to 'Gert.'"

"They have something against your sister?"

Willy screwed up her eyes. He was just making conversation, but she had so few opportunities to talk about anything but open- versus closed-stance ground strokes that she indulged herself. “They have something against the whole world, in which we’re generously included. But my parents bear Gert no special ill-will. Their feelings for my sister are moderate. Moderation is what she invites. In high school, she made B’s on purpose. Now she’s studying to become a CPA. The sum of this calculated sensibleness is supposed to make my father happy. It doesn’t. In my book, they both deserve what they’ve got... I’m sorry, you have no reason to be faintly interested in any of this.”

“Oh, but I am.”

Afraid he was going to add something flirty and odious, she went on quickly, “I think they scrounged ‘Wilhemena’ and ‘Gertrude’ from the nursing home where my mother works. Even as kids, we sounded like spinsters.”

Eric knocked back his beer with gusto. “You’re awfully young to worry about becoming an old maid.”

In the terms of her profession Willy was already shuffling toward her dotage; this man instinctively honed in on soft spots. “I’m not,” she fended off lightly. “It’s the implausibility of ‘Wilhemena Novinsky’ on a Wimbledon scoreboard that’s unsettling.”

“Wee-Willy-Wimbledon. ’Sgot a ring. Besides: shitty name, one more obstacle to overcome. On which you thrive, I’m sure. They did you a favor.”

All this assumed familiarity was grating, and only the more intrusive for being accurate. “If I thrive on obstacles, my parents have done me dozens of favors.”

The waiter arrived with their baked half-chickens with mountains of fried rice. Eric had ordered two plates for himself, which he arranged bumper to bumper.

“You’re going to eat all that?”

“And the remains of yours, when you don’t finish it.”

“How do—?” She gave up. He was right. She wouldn’t.

The rice was marvelous, scattered with pork and egg. The chicken lolled off the bone. "Don't look so greedy," said Willy. "I may finish more than you think."

"Just promise me you won't go puke it up afterwards."

"I'm not that trite."

"No tennis dad, no bulimia, and you're not overweight," Eric ticked off on his fingers. "Too good to be true. You *must* be having an affair with your coach."

Willy was a sucker for any contest, but this was the limit. "None of your business."

His eyes flickered; he could as well have scribbled her response on a scorecard.

"While I'm being crass . . ." Eric dabbed his mouth with his napkin; she couldn't understand how he could suck up all that rice in such a mannerly fashion. She'd have predicted he'd eat like an animal. "What's your ranking?"

There was no getting away. In tennis circles, this question arose five times a day, though it secreted far more malice than *What's your sign?*

Willy placed her fork precisely beside the vinegar, then edged the tines a quarter inch, as if to indicate the incremental nature of progress in her sport. "I'm ranked 437. But that's in the *world*—"

He raised his hands. "I know! I'm surprised your ranking is so high."

"Surprised! I pasted you today!"

He laughed. "Wilhelm!" He pronounced her new name with a Germanic *V*. "I just meant that I don't expect to run into a top 500 in the course of the average day. Touchy, touchy."

"There's not a tennis player on earth," Willy grumbled, picking her fork back up, "who isn't sensitive about that number. You could as well have asked on our first date how much money I make, or whether I have AIDS."

"Is that what this is?" he asked gamely. "A date?"

"You know what I mean," she muttered, rattled. "A ranking

is . . . like, how valuable a person you are.”

“Don’t you think you’re giving them a little too much power?” Eric rebuked her, for once sounding sincere.

She asked sarcastically, “And who’s *they*?”

“*They* are whoever you can’t allow to beat you,” Eric returned. “And the worst capitulation is thinking just like the people who want your hide.”

“So maybe you’re my *they*?”

“I’m on your side.”

“I’ve only had one person on my side in my life.”

“Yourself?”

“No,” she admitted, “I am not always on my own side.” This was getting abstruse. “I mean a real person.”

“But didn’t you like it?”

“Yes.” The question made her bashful. “Can we stop talking about me for a second? Like, what do you do?”

“I graduated from Princeton in May. Math. Now I’m taking some time out to play.”

“With me?”

“Yes, but play, not toy. Playing is serious business. You of all people should know that.”

“Do you . . . have any brothers and sisters?” The low grade of repartee in locker rooms had left Willy rusty and obvious over dinner.

“Three brothers. My father wants to take over the world.”

She let slide the implication that a patriarch would only do so with boys. “You,” she determined, “are the oldest.”

“Good.”

What he was applauding, or should have been applauding, was her having made the effort to imagine being in anyone else’s shoes but Willy Novinsky’s for an instant. Self-absorption was a side effect of her profession. Oh, you thought about other people’s *games*, all right—did they serve and volley, where was their oyster of vulnerability on the court. But that was all a roundabout way of thinking about yourself.

“Princeton,” she nodded. Extending herself to him was work. “Brainy, then. You wouldn’t have two words to say to the people I know.”

“I doubt you know them, or they you. Players on the women’s tour live in parallel universes. Though they’re all pig-thick.”

“Thanks.”

“The men aren’t nuclear physicists,” Eric added judiciously.

“Your folks have money, don’t they?” The tidy table manners were a giveaway.

“Hold that against me?” Eric lifted his drumstick with his pinkie pointed, as if supping tea.

“I might resent it,” she admitted.

“Check: you’re not bankrolled by nouveaux riches climbers.” He tallied again on the rest of his fingers. “*And* no pushy old man, no eating disorders, and you’re not a blimp. Four out of five right answers ain’t bad.”

That Willy hadn’t denied having an affair with her coach had evidently stuck in Eric’s craw. “This is a test?”

“Aren’t I taking one, too?” he returned. “Princeton: feather in cap. Math: neither here nor there. Money: black eye.”

“You’re Jewish, aren’t you?”

“Technically. Plus or minus? Watch it.”

Willy said honestly, “I don’t care.”

“So why’d you ask?”

He was flustering her. “I guess I’m pig-thick, too.” She glared.

“When I asked walking down here if your name was Polish, you seemed to realize that Pole-land was in Eastern Europe and not in the Arctic Circle.”

“Stupidity may be an advantage in tennis,” Willy proposed, teasing pork bits from the rice.

“The adage runs that it’s a game you have to be smart enough to do well, and dumb enough to believe matters.” Incredibly, Eric had cleaned his first plate and was making rapid inroads on the second.

“With the money on the line, tennis matters,” Willy assured him. “No, I look at fourteen-year-olds romping on TV and think, they don’t get it, do they? How amazing they are. They don’t question being in the Top Ten of the world because they’ve no conception of how many people there *are* in the world. And the game is best played in a washed, blank mind-set. *Nothing* is in these kids’ heads but tennis. No Gulf War mop-up, no upcoming Clinton-Bush election, just balls bouncing between their ears.”

Yet Willy didn’t quite buy her own dismissal of tennis players as stupid. Yes, exquisite tennis was executed in an emptied state that most would consider not-thinking. But more accurately the demand was for faultless thinking—since to regard hesitation, rumination, and turgid indecision as a mind functioning at its best gave thinking a bad name. Supreme thought streamed wordlessly from the body as pure action. Ideally, to think was to do.

But the lag between signal and execution was also closing up in Flor De Mayo. Willy no longer heard words in her head before they spilled on the table, and so became as much the audience of her own conversation as Eric, and as curious about what she would say. There was a like fluidity to be found, then, in talk.

Clearly hoping for one more right answer, Eric inquired, “Are you going to college?”

Meaning, *will go*, or *are going*, not *have gone*. After knowing this guy for a few hours, Willy already had a secret. “No,” she said flatly.

He took a breath, seemed to think better of the lecture, and exhaled, preferring the remains of her fried rice. She’d left him a few baby shrimp. Something about the sheer quantity of food he consumed was magnificent.

“So which players do you admire?” he asked.

“I’m old school. Still hung up on the last generation. Connors. Navratilova.”

“She cries,” he despaired.

“So what, if she feels like crying? I bet you like *Sampras*.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Eric shrugged. “His strokes are impeccable.”

“He’s a robot.” Willy scowled. “Give me back McEnroe any day, and a decent temper tantrum or two. John taught the world what tennis is about: passion.”

“Tennis is about control,” Eric disagreed.

“Tennis is about *everything*,” Willy declared with feeling.

Eric laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t go quite that far. But you’re right, it’s not the eyes. The tennis game is the window of the soul.”

“So what can you see about me in my game?”

“You play,” Eric replied readily, “out of love. Sampras loves himself. You love tennis.”

“I have an ego, I assure you.” She was lapping this up.

“You have something far nobler than an ego, Wilhelm,” said Eric, lowering his voice. “Which your ego, if you’re not careful, could destroy.”

Too mystical by half; Willy retreated. “Sampras—that there’s nothing wrong with his game is what’s wrong with it. Maybe more than anything, tennis is about flaws.”

He laughed. “In that case, I’ve got a future.”

“Your game is...incoherent,” Willy groped. “As if you scavenged one bit here and one there like a ragpicker.”

“Rags,” he said dryly. The bill arrived; he counted out his share and looked at her expectantly.

She stooped for her wallet, abashed by her assumption that he would pay. “I didn’t mean tattered. You made me work today.”

“My,” he said drolly. “Such high praise.”

“Praise is praise.” She slapped a ten-spot on the check. “Take what you can get.” Willy was offended in return. She doled out flattery in such parsimonious dribs, to anyone, that she had expected him to run home with the tribute and stick it under his pillow. He wouldn’t bully her into a standing ovation. He was better than she expected. Period.

Eric offered to walk Willy to her apartment, but up Broadway the air between them was stiff with grudge. "That was good food," she said laboriously at 110th.

"You thought it would be ghastly."

"I did not!"

"*Cuban-Chinese? Beans and stuff?* You whined, like, *Sher, I mean, if you wanna. Vintage Capriati.*"

She laughed. "OK, I thought the food would be revolting." The air went supple. Willy strolled a few inches closer to her companion, though he'd still have to reach for her hand.

His arms swung free. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Heading up to Westbrook, Connecticut, for the weekend. I train up there."

"Let me come see you."

She felt protective of Sweetspot, but a visitor would serve a purpose. "Maybe."

Eric crimped her phone numbers into the margins of his New York City tennis permit.

She lingered at her stoop for a kiss. It was not forthcoming. In the glare of the entrance light, Eric's woodsy eyebrows shimmered with mutated stray hairs, some up to an inch and a half long. Intrigued, not really thinking, Willy reached for the longest eyebrow hair to pluck it.

He slapped her hand.

"Sorry," he said as Willy rubbed her knuckles. He'd hit her hard. "I like those."

Cheeks stinging, Willy studied her tennis shoes. "I guess I liked those weird hairs, too," she mumbled. "Maybe that's why I wanted one."

When she glanced up again, he was pinching the same overgrown straggler; he plucked it and laid it in her palm. "Then it's yours."

Her fingers closed over the specimen. She didn't know what to say. Willy didn't go on dates.

"Eric?" It was the first time she'd ever said his name. The

syllables felt ungainly on her tongue, their use a monumental concession to the young man's existence. "I did go to college. My father made me. I quit, after my junior year, to go pro. I'm not nineteen, I'm twenty-three. I'm way behind. I have very, very little time left."

In reward for the successful exchange, one eyebrow hair for one confession, he kissed her. Willy could only hold one broad shoulder. The other hand fisted Eric's peculiar gift. Unaccountably, once in her apartment she would store it in a safe place.