



# Mentor

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THE LESSON THAT FRIDAY at four o'clock might have been just one more that Rory didn't want to teach, but when he saw Conrad race ahead of his mother onto the court, he knew it was destined to be especially bad. The boy, just seven, skinny, blond, with wire-rimmed glasses, ran as if the half of his legs below the knee worked independently of the half above, with his arms working independently still. He was one of the most awkward kids Rory had ever seen, certainly among those trying to learn to play tennis. Yet there he was, dropped off that Friday, as he would again be on Monday, and Wednesday, three times a week—like an overhead smash right through the pretense that Rory's playing career was not over.

After seeing Conrad's mother off, Rory had rolled out the shopping-cart hopper, filled with worn yellow balls, so that he could spend the hour feeding without wasting time picking them up. It was a sunny late afternoon in May, a day like thousands Rory had spent on a court since he himself was little older than Conrad. Hardly a breeze fluttered the dark green windscreens that wrapped the fences or the high thin netting that separated the courts. Rory had positioned Conrad at the service line, then stepped over the net to see what the boy could do. One after another he gently underhanded the balls, and one by one Conrad took big flailing swings that sent them sideways and across his body, directly at Court 2 and into the netting, which billowed, distracting a foursome of well-dressed ladies. Each time, they looked over and did not smile. Realizing that this was unlikely to cease of its own, Rory suggested, "How about

a few backhands, Conrad?” to which the boy eagerly nodded and again took his intensely exaggerated waiting crouch. That was the thing about Conrad: no matter how poorly he did anything—and he did everything poorly—he always seemed to be enjoying himself. He could hit ball after ball off the racquet’s frame, or miss the ball entirely, and seem just as eager for the next. Immediately and without questioning he acted on whatever Rory said, and he didn’t speak much, though if especially enthusiastic he would sometimes nod like a crazy person. But the backhands went no better. In attempting them he was so late in swinging that the balls again went sideways, again right at the women on Court 2. After another minute of this, Rory suggested they take a break and drink some juice.

It was after this lesson that Rory had advised Mrs. Federmeyer that perhaps he wasn’t the best person to be teaching her son. He understood not to use her first name, Eve, because that was not how she had introduced herself—few members did at Warwick, this swanky Connecticut club. A number of the other pros, he explained, were especially experienced with youngsters and knew best how to start them in the game. He himself was new to teaching.

Seemingly very young and on that day wearing a dark blue dress with pearls, she only smiled, as if reassuring him. “My husband and I saw you play on television once. My husband manages the pension fund at the university and told Jack he’d be willing to help build the pool here at the club, so Jack’s giving us a break on lessons.”

“So ... you don’t have to pay the eighty-five an hour?” The club charged eighty-five for Rory, sixty-five for the next two pros, and it went down from there.

“Three lessons a week, free.”

Rory scratched a spot on his cheek that did not itch. “Some of the guys and gals are great. The kids love them.”

“Only the best for our boy.” By the best, she meant Rory. She patted Conrad’s head. All during this conversation, Conrad pressed himself to his mother’s side, under sweaty blond hair and in his mini-Lacoste whites, looking up at Rory with an illuminated watchfulness, as if accepting of whatever the two adults were saying.

After Monday’s lesson turned out to be a repeat of Friday’s, Rory went looking for Jack, the one person who could relieve him of having to teach Conrad. He

found him on an outer court, hitting with Eldridge Trey, the nineteen-year-old spiky-haired tour pro that Rory himself had played once before he retired. Rory had played Jack too, many times, but that was years ago. Jack hadn't lasted on tour, had quit in his twenties and now ran this club. Rory had played Eldridge in a Challenger tournament, at a time when Rory was hopping trains across Europe, entering as many events as he could afford, and while the kid was still on the way up. The last ATP tournament for Rory had been five years ago, something he knew, he *knew*, wasn't going to happen again. Thirty-five years old was ancient for a professional tennis player.

He arrived at the fence behind Jack just in time to see him hit a backhand winner, upon which Jack turned and saw that Rory saw. With a self-satisfied nonchalance, Jack retrieved a ball at the fence by pinning it with his racquet against his foot and bending his knee. He was grinning.

"You think you're so special," Rory said.

"I'm a little bit special," Jack said.

"Got a minute after? I want to talk to you about one of my lessons."

Jack turned and shoveled a forehand over to Eldridge. "Sure," he said. "I need to talk to you too. Hey, why not come in here and spell me? Stop by the office when you're done."

Rory looked across at the young star, tall and thin and bouncing a ball on the frame of his racquet, and his heart started pumping. He pushed through the fence, let Jack pass, then, because the distance to the other side was too great to cross for chit-chat, something that Rory knew Eldridge wouldn't want to spend time doing anyway, he walked instead to his own baseline.

Eldridge switched from shyly bouncing the ball on his frame to twice on his strings to stopping. "What do you want to do?" he yelled.

Rory tapped his racquet against both shoes to clear the treads of clay. "Serve 'em up, E.T.," he said. "I'm warm."

From almost the first time Rory had held a racquet—at nine, to hit with his dad, who himself played in a weekly doubles league that Rory sometimes watched—the motions, the sensations, suited him. Without having to learn to time a ball or develop feel, he could swing with a balance that no observer failed to compliment. One summer he spent a few weeks at a tennis camp, and the camp in turn traded him up to a better, more serious, one. This led to

tournaments, most of which he won. He had a special talent, everyone said. When he was eighteen, the University of Florida granted him a scholarship, where, as a freshman, he won the NCAAs. This awarded him an exemption to enter professional tournaments. That very summer he left school to play—in front of fans, coaches, and commentators, who repeated to him and others the accolades he had heard since he was a boy.

It was an astonishing start, and those were golden days. But the exemption was for one year only, and so to stay at the ATP level he had to make a good showing. He did not. The competition was like nothing he had seen before, and under the pressure of what victories could have meant, his game mysteriously left him. For ten years then he played the role of journeyman, on the satellites with a thousand other players, though with little money to win and no crowds to impress, qualifying for the U.S. Open twice, but never ranking highly enough to return to the Tour.

Looking back, he understood that his talent, while the perfect foundation, was also a ceiling. His results had been so automatic through college that he never doubted they would always be. Other players had to work like farmers, spending hours on the court, in the gym, before video screens, with sports psychologists, but not Rory. Or so he thought. Truth was, he had been afraid to touch his game. To even analyze it, he feared, let alone change something, could ruin what he had. Now he was at Warwick, in career limbo, delaying the inevitable. Which, he knew, was what Jack wanted to discuss.

But at this moment, and as soon as Eldridge Trey had served the first ball, he was playing tennis and, in these moments, was himself again. They were alone on the last of the four courts on this stretch of ground, with fence on three sides and tall pines beside them, on a quiet early evening in spring with the air temperature a gentle blend of warmth and cooling, the soft gray clay slick under Rory's feet. Today especially his body responded and the action slowed as it did when you felt healthy and your head was clear. The ball pocketed cleanly off his strings and spun as designed; he was able to cover Eldridge's pace, anticipate where it was coming, slingshot back a reply, and be ever ready to repeat this sequence with patience, even eagerness. He slid comfortably to each side for his groundstrokes, his upper body rotating freely, and the ball hissed and jumped as intended. It was the feeling that came now and then and, when it came, transported him to a confidence that nothing was impossible and everything was pleasure. Rory won

four straight points on Eldridge's serve, then four straight on his own, until the normally polite young man axed the net, after Rory reached his best drop shot and passed him. Both standing together now, Rory said, "I'm afraid that's all I have time for today, E.T." He reached across, and the two shook hands. "Thanks for playing."

"Man," the boy said, a confused and worried look in his eyes and on his mouth. "If you can still play like that, you should come out of retirement."

Rory smiled. The twinge he felt was like the pain of an oblique injury, though none was there.

Jack's office was a messy tiny room off the pro shop, with a desk, a stringing machine, a computer, and Jack himself—late thirties, sweat-suited, face sculpted by a lifetime of physical activity and tanned, as if permanently—at the desk, writing.

"Come in, come in," he said.

Twirling his racquet, Rory said, "Up or down."

"Up."

Rory exposed the butt of the handle. "Up it is. You first. What did you want to tell me?"

Jack said what Rory anticipated. The head of the Honda dealership had called again to ask if Rory was ready to be trained in the sales department. Jack knew the man, indeed knew many local business people (he had emphasized to Rory how important the connections were), and as a favor to Rory had made the *entrée*. The money was potentially good, the cars practically sold themselves, and the owner said he'd love having a former athlete on his staff. For Rory, the thought of selling cars was depressing, but he had no other idea about what to do with his life. Most of all, the job meant the end of competitive tennis, the only passion he had ever known. He hadn't even dated much, traveling the world, struggling financially, preoccupied with his lack of success. Now he was facing a life of both unsettling memories and meaningless job prospects.

Jack stood to open a chest-high drawer behind him and slide a folder into it. He closed the drawer but remained standing.

"I'll call him," Rory said.

"They're doing me a favor," Jack said. "I don't want to cause them a problem." He looked irritated, but only somewhat. He tugged absently on the latched

handle of the cabinet. Finally he squinted. “Why *are* you still here?”

Rory gave the facial equivalent of a shrug.

“Look, I understand,” Jack said. “I faced the same deal myself, many moons ago. Of course, I had no game, unlike you. That’s the way it is: some do, some don’t. So now we’re both done, and I run a business I’m proud of.”

When Jack hesitated to complete the thought, Rory demurely added, “And the question is, What will I do?”

“You’re not thinking about playing again?” Jack said. When Rory didn’t answer, Jack eyed him. Then he softened. “Just don’t wait too long to call them, or it won’t be there.”

“Understood, and thanks.”

“Now, what did you want to discuss?”

Rory described the lessons with Conrad and, as respectfully as he could, asked if he could be reassigned. “The kid needs more of a babysitter than a coach,” he said.

Jack was sympathetic, commenting offhandedly that most of the members couldn’t improve anyway. It was an odd comment for a club owner to make, but Rory let it go. Were it not the Federmeyers, Jack said, he might request a switch. “Believe me, I didn’t steer them your way. Many members know who you are and can afford you. Hell, some of them have seen you on T.V.”

“Maybe twice my whole career I was on T.V.”

“They like to tell people, ‘My tennis instructor is Rory Benson. You remember? From the U.S. Open?’”

Rory tilted his neck to one side, stretching it. “How about Teddy for Mrs. Federmeyer’s kid? He’d be excellent.”

Jack fanned his fingers. “What can I do? Anyway, soon you’ll be indoors and off this skin cancer train, making good money, doing something with your life.”

As the weather warmed and the days lengthened, Rory’s slate of lessons filled. He still saw Conrad three times a week and, more than at other times, felt ready to begin selling cars. He spent those sessions slumped over the shopping cart, feeding ball after ball while Conrad, as energy-filled as if his mother were electrically charging him before each lesson, ran around and flailed and eagerly awaited the next one. Instruction seemed beside the point. Conrad didn’t care: he had fun just picking up the balls. By now Rory knew on which courts to

schedule them, to least disrupt other members. Intermittently he would cease feeding balls and talk to Conrad, lest he appear to be providing no help at all. Conrad seemed to enjoy these discussions, though Rory only said things like, “Are you having fun?” or, “Would you like something to drink?” Even Rory didn’t mind them, because Conrad made you like being with him. When you spoke he listened at full attention, clutching his racquet like a Kalashnikov, wide-eyed and knobby-kneed. And nodding—at everything Rory said. Rory was certain that Conrad expressed pleasure in the lessons to his parents, because his mother, coming to retrieve him, always smiled at seeing the two clearing the court, Rory pressing the metal basket down, snatching clumps of balls, Conrad bending to pick them up one-by-one by hand, like fallen apples.

That Conrad wasn’t learning anything seemed not to matter to Mrs. Federmeyer. She never came early to watch and never said much after, usually just thanking Rory kindly and, hand in hand, leading her son away. Still, she seemed pleased enough that, without his risking trouble with Jack, Rory thought it worth a second try to see if she might at last be willing to switch Conrad into a group or to any other instructor—anywhere, so long as he were freed.

The day he chose to do so was an especially beautiful one; the air was still and the late-afternoon sun lit the grounds in orange. When Mrs. Federmeyer approached near session’s end, Rory and Conrad had already cleared the court and were sitting on the bench beside the net post. Conrad swung his legs happily, and Rory winged his elbows onto the back on the bench. Perhaps it was their air of being comfortable together that relaxed Mrs. Federmeyer too, because as she neared, she gave a small smile, taking it in. Spotting her, Conrad popped up and ran over. Rory stood and went to greet her.

“Looks like someone has been behaving himself,” she said, gently enveloping Conrad at her side. Conrad nodded enthusiastically.

“Always,” Rory said.

“I must say,” Mrs. Federmeyer said, “you must be very good with him. He’s always saying how much fun tennis is.”

Though something tugged at Rory, he saw his chance. He praised Conrad for being a fine boy, and he described many new programs being offered at the club. There were groups designed just for children; they used special equipment and games, and Conrad could meet other kids. As he spoke, he was careful to pitch a tone that reflected his desire only to meet Conrad’s needs, and listening, Mrs.

Federmeier seemed to consider these possibilities. At one point she seemed even about to agree, but then he made his fatal mistake. “Anyway,” he said, “I don’t think I’m teaching Conrad all that much.”

At this she looked down and ran her fingers through Conrad’s hair. “Oh, please don’t worry about that,” she said lightly. “Conrad has a hard time learning things.” And that had sealed it. After that, she said she preferred to keep their current arrangement.

The immediate effect of that exchange was to relegate Rory to the dispiriting fact of more lessons with Conrad. But later, in the darkness of that evening, with his feet up on the couch in his fourth-floor apartment, Mrs. Federmeier’s comment bore upon him differently. It produced a kind of aftertaste, which wouldn’t diminish. The apartment had a sliding glass door that opened to a balcony and looked out upon the tops of willow trees. The door reflected back his reclining image, as he lay with one hand draped atop his head. Another image, the one in his mind, was of Conrad, looking up at his mother and hearing the words, “Conrad has a hard time learning things.” Rory had barely registered it then, but Conrad’s reaction made him a little queasy. Or his non-reaction: Conrad’s expression hadn’t changed at all, as if his mother had said, “It’s sunny today.” His eyes had remained bright, his chin, upturned. At the time, Rory had experienced the scene with only a twinge of discomfort, but now it nagged him. Was that how Conrad saw himself, as unable to learn? Given Rory’s experience every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, that certainly was how Rory saw him. Conrad was *sui generis*, and what marked him was his smiling unchangeability. But it had never occurred to Rory to wonder how Conrad saw himself. By now he understood Conrad to be a seven-year-old boy who did what adults said. Did he also think what they thought? Had nothing suggested either to him or his mother that his abilities might be otherwise?

As if summoned, as had happened so frequently since retiring, Rory again recalled Hans Baylor. It was both a tender and bitter memory—tender for the recollection of what Hans had done for him, bitter because the benefits of what he had done had come fifteen years too late.

Rory and Hans had been contemporaries. Many times across the years they had played and every time, Rory had won. That is, until Zurich, two years ago. On that day, Hans had been the better player: fitter, stronger, cagier. Shockingly



so. So, when in the locker room after the match, Rory couldn't resist commenting on the change, Hans told Rory of his new regimen and who was helping him. He also claimed that Rory had a half-step hitch when moving to his left, an unnecessary motion that Hans had only that day noticed and was able to exploit. Reluctantly, Rory questioned further; Hans then mimicked the flaw and suggested an alternative. "Would you like to try it?" he asked. They returned to the court and, with Hans feeding him a bucket, Rory repeated the movement Hans had recommended. They agreed to drill together more, so Rory remained in Zurich till Hans lost, then the two jumped a train to Lausanne to play another tournament and continue practicing. That very tournament Rory reached the semis, something he hadn't done for years, all the while feeling less exposed to tactics that had always confounded him. It was then he realized his mistake in managing his own career, and worse: he realized what might have been.

Whatever Conrad actually believed, just the possibility that he saw himself as Rory suspected was painful to consider. And shameful: who but Conrad's teachers, of which Rory was one, could help him experience, not his limitations, but his possibilities? On the other hand, maybe he *was* that limited and pushing him would only disrupt his apparently contented acceptance of who he was. But the more Rory pondered that fragile boy, completely trusting and perhaps filled with a kind of happy resignation about all the things he could not now or ever do, the sicker Rory began to feel.

"How are you today?" Rory said to Conrad, when his mother dropped him at their next lesson. Conrad had sprinted from the parking lot to the court, heels kicking high and sideways across the stretch of grass and through the gate, and stopped with a little jump, inches in front of Rory.

"Good," he said, his breath catching. He was cradling his racquet.

"Ready to play tennis?"

Conrad nodded.

"What would you think about doing something a little different today?" Rory said. "Here, come sit on the bench for a minute." Though it was four o'clock, the temperature was still in the eighties and the air was humid, thinned only by a slight breeze. The club itself was set back on a few acres, so that the only sounds were the regular thwack of balls being hit around them, the subtle scraping of feet sliding on clay, and leaves rustling.

Conrad wriggled backwards onto the bench, staring up at Rory. Rory sat

close, amid a faint but fresh scent of the boy's soap or shampoo. "Instead of our regular hitting," Rory said, "I'd like to show you some new things. I think you're ready." He assumed a kindly and enthusiastic tone. As well as Conrad played now, he said, Rory was confident he could play even better. "Would you like that?" Conrad liked the idea. Rory explained that when he was a boy learning the game, people showed him things that helped him get better. (Months into their lessons, he felt guilt at saying this only now.) "It's not always easy to learn," Rory said, "but when you do, it's really fun." Rory asked Conrad to be sure to let him know if lessons ever stopped being fun, and Conrad agreed. "I'm going to give us both jobs to do," Rory said. "My job will be to teach you things that will help you. Do you know what your job will be?" Conrad didn't know. "Your job will be to practice what I show you. That's the secret. If you practice, if you do what I show you over and over, you'll get better in no time."

One could never tell with Conrad, but after this conversation Rory detected a more earnest and pleasantly solemn look about the boy. He seemed to appreciate being addressed in this way.

The first step was to invent small moves to demonstrate to Conrad, things that he could actually do yet still benefit from. Perhaps the pleasure of any successful change, however limited, would build his confidence and encourage him to attempt more, even broaden his concept of what he could and couldn't do. One lesson, they hit foam balls only. Another, Rory demonstrated the forehand grip, placing Conrad's hand properly in place, pointing out where the V between his thumb and forefinger went, then had Conrad hold the racquet like that for five minutes straight, hitting just a few balls, to promote a comfortable feel with the new grip. During such drills ("games," Rory called them), he reassured Conrad not to worry about where the balls went, or whether he hit them at all, and, as always, Conrad didn't worry.

Like this, they worked from stroke to stroke. Everything Rory asked of him Conrad obeyed eagerly. "You always want to swing up on your groundstrokes," Rory told him. "Here, try this," and he positioned his right hand in front of Conrad, at the height of the boy's head. "Go ahead and hit my hand." Challenged thus, Conrad swung as hard as he could. What wanted to be a pain-filled yelp, Rory choked into a swallow. Conrad seemed pleased with his aim. Rory said, "Let's try that again," though this time fetching his own bag from the sidelines and lifting it to the same height as before, asking Conrad to hit the bag instead.

Over and over, Conrad, delighted, did.

“Want to see me serve?” “Want to see me lob?” This is how Conrad now started every lesson. “Want to see me? ...” He wanted to demonstrate to Rory the fruits of his practice between lessons, a practice consisting mainly of having Conrad take a racquet into the backyard and swing a certain way. Amused, his mother had reported that she was having difficulty getting him to stop for meals or bed. “Absolutely, Conrad,” Rory always said, and Conrad would proceed to send balls happily every which way, as if he hadn’t practiced at all. “Outstanding!” Rory always said, as earnestly as possible.

For Rory, the most enjoyable moments came in the brief breaks they took, when they would sit together on the wood-slatted bench, sipping water or Gatorade, talking. Conrad had an enraptured way of listening to everything Rory said. His legs swung as he sipped, his short blond hair was matted, his eyes hardly left Rory’s. Rory told of matches he had played, of countries he had visited (Conrad loved the part about taking all those trains), of the crowds, sometimes, and the endless pairs of shoes. His heart was filling with affection for the boy, and he wished more than anything to be able to give to Conrad what he had set out now months ago to give.

During one of those breaks, Rory noticed smudges on Conrad’s glasses. Sipping, Conrad allowed Rory to remove the glasses and wipe them with a dry cloth from his bag. Rory asked, “Are you liking school so far this year?” and replaced the glasses gently.

“I have a new school!” Conrad said.

“A new school? I didn’t know that.”

“It’s a special school!” Conrad said.

From Conrad’s mother Rory learned that Conrad was taking classes for children with learning disabilities. “Conrad says his school is special,” Rory had told her, and, pressing Conrad’s head gently to her hip, she explained, “Conrad has a hard time in school.” Then, seeing Rory’s expression, she said softly and not unkindly, “We don’t like the labels either. But we’ve accepted that—sometimes—they do fit.”

Just after Labor Day, Rory got a call from the manager of the Honda dealership. They could still use him. But if he wanted the job, they needed him soon. Rory lobbied the owner of the dealership to give him just a few more months, saying that he had promised some students to coach them through the

fall tournament season. It wasn't true, but it was the best reason he could think of. At first they refused, but relented only because Jack had spoken so highly of Rory.

"Conrad, that's excellent!" Rory said, each time the boy came even close to executing a stroke as he was supposed to. He encouraged, he invented still more games—he did whatever he could think to do. What did he want to see? He wanted to see that joyous outburst that comes when a child grasps something. He wanted to see the pleasurable recognition on Conrad's face born of a newly-acquired skill, and more—from the knowledge that he could acquire them. But Conrad never showed any indication of that. Everything was fun, but in a way empty of self-awareness. Whatever Rory did, Conrad got no better and seemed to take no real satisfaction in what he was doing. The hitting was hardly less wild than when they had first met, and Rory began to wonder if he was helping at all. Or even hurting, further proving to Conrad what he had all along suspected about himself.

It was a Friday in early October that Mrs. Federmeyer and Conrad arrived for his lesson, though with Conrad dressed, not in tennis clothes, but in khakis and a blue polo shirt. Rory left the court to meet them.

"How's everything, Mrs. Federmeyer?"

"Call me Eve," she said and smiled. Conrad moved off to squat at the base of a large oak tree and pick at the grass.

"We just wanted to stop by to thank you," she said. "My husband and I are leaving the club. With our schedules, we aren't getting to play much tennis anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rory said.

"But thank you so much for teaching Conrad. I know, compared to what you must be used to, it couldn't have been very interesting. ... Conrad," she yelled. "Come over and say good-bye to Mr. Rory." Conrad stood and came running.

"Are you sure, Eve? I'm certain we could work out something with Jack, if you'd like to keep bringing him."

Conrad arrived at his mother's side and stood at attention. His mother looked down. "Do you want to say 'thank you' to Mr. Rory for all your lessons?"

"Thank you, Mr. Rory," Conrad said.

Rory looked from Conrad to Mrs. Federmeyer. "Will Conrad be taking lessons anywhere else?"

Mrs. Federmeyer shook her head. Then she again looked down and placed a palm atop Conrad's neatly-combed hair. "Conrad's going to play soccer for a while, in a town program. Isn't that right, Conrad?"

Conrad nodded enthusiastically.

Fifty yards away, behind Mrs. Federmeyer and in Rory's line of sight was the clubhouse, a long white rectangular building with large windows on either side of the front steps and protruding awning. One set of windows looked into the pro shop and Jack's office.

"You know," Rory said, "if you want, I'd be happy to make myself available for lessons outside the club. Maybe on Saturdays or Sundays. The town courts can be reserved. Some time when I don't have to be here."

The look on Mrs. Federmeyer's face was puzzlement, a squint combined with momentary scrutiny. But then she said, "That's very good of you, Rory. Can I say, I really do appreciate how much time you've been willing to spend with Conrad."

"We could do an hour Saturday morning," Rory said.

"Thank you ... but I think we've had enough tennis for a while." They both looked over at Conrad, who had wandered away, found a stray tennis ball, and was attempting to dribble it like a basketball in the grass. Every two bounces or so it got away, and he scampered after it. Mrs. Federmeyer looked back at Rory, smiling gently. "It's not necessary," she said.

On one of the first warm spring days a year and a half later, Rory decided to take a long walk. He followed the sidewalk from his apartment to the footpath that went through the woods and ended by the open fields of the high school. The forsythia were almost in bloom, and the trees were budding. It was Sunday, Rory's one day off from the dealership, which, weather permitting, he liked to spend outside, where he had spent so many days of so many years; he was still unaccustomed to an inside life. On days like this he preferred, for hours sometimes, to breathe the air and feel the pressure of the earth against the balls of his feet.

The job was fine enough. He liked the cars and his fellow sales associates; he didn't mind interacting with the customers. But whether each month he sold one car or ten mattered little to him, and lately he had been thinking of quitting his job and returning to Warwick, to teach. Not for the reason he had originally, not to protect the fantasy of competing again. His career had been what it was: it had

had its moments; it had yielded its regrets. But most of all it was his past, and he accepted that. He had been thinking that at least he could use his knowledge of the game to make it more fun for others, of any age, to be a vehicle for them to get some exercise and avoid injury. Not all that meaningful a life, perhaps, but something. For what else could ever replace the fulfillment and passion he had had as a player, underachieving one or not?

Many people strolled the path today, like him seasonally uncocooned. Cheerful, they nodded hello, and those on bicycles swung amply by. In the woods the path was muddy but dry at the point of emerging at the field. Far across the field, atop a two-tiered hill in the white morning light, was the mammoth brick high school. Between there and where he stood was open space, but for a pair of soccer nets and bleachers. Rory set off for the high school, then remembered the group of six tennis courts off to the side, hugging the woods on the edge of the property. He decided to pass by. He liked to see people playing tennis, further evidence perhaps that he did belong back on the court teaching, if only to feed balls and joke with students.

Today was probably the first day that anyone could have played outside, and as Rory approached, he did see two boys hitting on the closest court. They were very young, but at this distance showed reasonable form, reacting well, swinging fully, and keeping the rallies going. In his mind he saw himself at that age, stripping off his sweats and running to the baseline to warm up. In the morning his parents would drop him off, if he were home and not at camp, and for lunch they'd come and drag him away. If that day no one was free to join him, he'd instead bring a bucket of balls and hit serves or rally against the backboard.

When he got to within twenty yards of the fence, he decided to stop and watch. The boy on the far side of the court, facing him, was tall with dark hair. The boy nearer, facing away, was short and thin, with blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Rory couldn't believe it and had to move to get a better look, but as he did, he realized that it *was* Conrad. He felt his own mouth open. The boy's hair and glasses were the same, but he seemed at least six inches taller and, astoundingly, moved with a respectable balance. The boys hit forehand to forehand, and Conrad pointed his racquet high and early in the backswing as Rory had taught him, then dropped it down and rotated up and through, all with an odd hitch, but really not that badly. Then they switched to backhands, and Rory saw the deep knee-bend and the faintest suggestion of arcing topspin on

Conrad's ball. What he witnessed seemed unreal, and from time to time he felt his eyes widen in disbelief.

After he had watched a while, he thought to say hello, then decided against disturbing their practice and concentration, and he wasn't certain Conrad would remember him anyway. He was about to continue on when the boy with the black hair shanked a ball into the fence on Rory's side, and Conrad jogged over to retrieve it. As he was bending, he happened to glance up. When he saw Rory, he stood and momentarily froze. Rory thought he detected recognition in Conrad's long stare, so he smiled and waved faintly, making one windshield-wiper pass with his hand at the height of his chest. At this, Conrad dropped his racquet and started sprinting toward the back of the court, pushed through the chain-linked gate, which clanked back on its frame, and raced toward Rory across the grass. As the distance between them closed and Conrad didn't slow, Rory tensed. Then Conrad leapt and wrapped his legs and arms around Rory and put his head on Rory's shoulder. He just held there, making not a sound. He was still the light little boy that Rory remembered and, looking up, Rory saw the other boy, still on the court, staring.

For a moment they remained like that, silently, till Conrad just as suddenly released his grip, dropped to his feet, pivoted, and started running back to the court. As he ran, his heels kicked up and out in that same gangly way they always had. Without looking back, he fetched his racquet, then the balls, and resumed hitting with the other boy.

Taking this in, Rory felt that he could have stood there, on that grassy spot, and watched for the rest of the day. Maybe, even, for the rest of his life.