

Winner of the *Crazyhorse* Fiction Prize

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John McEnroe Visits Seven Months

“I’m so disgusting, you shouldn’t watch. Everybody leave!”

John McEnroe, shouting between points, 1981 Wimbledon tournament.

“In 1984, McEnroe may have been the best player ever. He won 82 matches and lost just three, the highest winning percentage (.965) since the dawning of the Open era. After that year’s U.S. Open, at age 25, McEnroe took a seven-month sabbatical from the game of tennis. He would never win another Grand Slam or be ranked No. 1 again.”

ESPN.com

1. Love Is Out There:

She was always openly tenuous; she didn’t, like other people he knew—knew very well—try to hide from her truth, to have her shit together, when it was flying through the air around her. She would go out—to the gas station for a bag of pretzels, to a premiere where she’d certainly see others—in blue jeans, a baggy sweater; her hair bundled in a loose ponytail. She would lie in bed for days without guilt. She would light a joint while driving, or lift a bottle of champagne to toast a passing police car, and he would say, “Tatum, why?” and she would smile and say carefully, “John, this is the future. Right now.” He wouldn’t understand; didn’t enjoy her cryptic side, her

way with words, what acting had taught her, the malleability of a phrase, of meaning—the things she would say, the things he would never:

“Show me an owner’s manual to this life.”

“If it feels good, it is good.”

“I *prefer* lost to found.”

But still he was attracted to her. She had the high cheekbones, she had the intense eyes, the side-glancing—pall of boredom/flash of violence—of something caged, and she would smoke all night and want to talk all night, would say things about her skin tingling, itching, gripping too tight, her mind most likely not meant for this world, for the way things are said to work in this world, most likely switched with someone else’s body, some cosmic mix-up, a mistake, an evil, corny, tiresome joke, and maybe he could somehow relate and so watched her exiting the Amoco station, kneeling to pick something from the asphalt, opening the car door; and he felt they knew each other.

“It’s a 1970 quarter,” she said. “Let’s drive to Vegas and spend it.”

“I’d do it.”

And so they did. And so for days he drove, the car drawn to the desert as if by a magnet, until she woke from a nap and gave a surfacing-from-underwater look and asked to know where exactly they were, where exactly, her voice skipping. She

glanced about, twisted her hair in tight knots, and said, “Vegas, John? Las-fucking-Vegas? Don’t you know it’s only a metaphor?” And they swerved hard, U-turned the highway, engine ticking, wheels hissing, and headed east for New York, for home. Either way, he’d lost four days of training. He drummed his fingers on the wheel; his throat tightened, a jittery heat blossoming through his body. Who was to blame? He drove the car, so who?—this is what he asked himself.

Three days later he looked up *metaphor* in the dictionary, simply because he really didn’t know—it wasn’t his thing, and so he looked it up, and he seemed to understand, yes, he understood the joining of unlike things, the comparing, but still who? Him? Her? Or was it the fault of something larger, something about compromise? Relationships? His pulse thudded. His heart seemed a wild thing, in its ribcage. He put the book away; it didn’t provide the answer.

2. Of Altered States:

The Things I Loved about Drug Use.

1. Up.

2. It bonded us. Sex was better. And this one Sunday we ate an entire box of grape Popsicles, two cans of Pringles, and a walnut cheese ball. Later we stood in the garage and I popped the hood on Tatum’s Mercedes and pulled out the dipstick, waved it around like a fencing sword, whipping and slashing the air, dancing a little jig—and it was giggles and laughter, laughter like we hadn’t

shared in months.

3. Legs floating. Hell, yes, they would float, float all over like those long balloons people twist into shapes, walk across the room on their own, across the ceiling. I don’t know. It felt good not to be walking those legs. I could just sit there.

The Things I Hated about Drug Use.

1. Down.

2. The people. I never understood it. All these strangers—always huddled together, around a car, on the porch, a backroom overflowing at parties. They call the house, drop by all hours, always this way they think you’re one of them, a community, that’s what they want. But why? One night I’m holding a towel to a guy’s forehead while he’s vomiting and my skin crawls and I’m kneeling on the cold bathroom floor, kneeling and holding this towel, this guy I don’t even know, have never seen, and I just feel my skin crawling, crawling . . . and I’m thinking, Hey, maybe I am one of them?

3. Blue dye crusted in my nose.

4. Fast-food places wouldn’t exist without all of this, that’s what I think, all these late-night drive-thrus, twenty-four-hour things. One night I ate an entire large anchovy pizza. I detest anchovies. Another time all these people were in my kitchen—they just appeared there—and I crunch up this taco, sprinkle it in the coffee filter, and make coffee. Taco coffee. I thought I was a genius, like I’d found something, telling all these people how great it tasted. Oh, the laughs. They laughed for hours, days. Laughed. I’m still

not sure why.

3. Fitness as Definition:

A man stands in his underwear, staring into the mirror. He stares at his body, he does, looks it over carefully for bulging, flaws, the residue of a wrinkle, folds of skin, turning and tilting in the light, angles and shadows, and his eyes roving every inch, scanning for it, a sagging, a loosening, a change.

A woman enters the bedroom, strides to a closet, and tells him to get ready and to wear the gray tuxedo and he says to her, “Is my stomach the same?”

“I can’t see it,” she answers, reaching high for a pair of red elevator shoes. “Your stomach is an internal organ. What you mean is your abdomen.”

The woman exits, flipping off the light. The man walks to the window, gazes out over the city. Headlights blur in the steady rain, the sky low, a leaden gray, and then a jogger, a woman in a vibrant orange windbreaker, running, leaping a puddle and around the corner gone, and inside his stomach—yes, the internal organ—throbs like something stretched taut.

His thoughts go sing-song like this:

Running, rain, running-rain-running, rain.

And the phone rings twice and something about an umbrella and the walls flex with a dull pulsing, the living room stereo, or miles-away thunder, or maybe footsteps, and the man presses his palms against the windowpane, pushing, the frame bulging, bending, cracking. Harder he pushes.

Harder. There, his hands, cold and empty.

4. Opinions Abound for Everyone:

—Jack Nicholson hands me a gin and tonic the size of a Wimbledon trophy and says, “Johnny Mac, don’t ever change.”

—Jimmy Connors calls my house one night, says to me, “John, somebody just showed me a *People* magazine, the front part, with the pictures and the parties. What the hell are you doing?”

I’m shocked. Connors and I don’t speak by telephone. Don’t speak at all unless we’re on the court, where we generally say things like, “Nice shot, Alice,” and “It was out by *two* miles, asshole.” So I ask him, “What do you mean?”

He says, “John, you make me ill, physically ill. Listen: every person has one thing they’re placed on this earth to do, born to do. Think Mozart, think Pistol Pete. Most people—I bet ninety-nine percent—never find their one thing. Not ever. They live miserable lives, half-lost, feeling like something’s not right. We’re one of the lucky, John. Born in the right place, right situation. Fate is smiling and you’re just going to shit on it. Throw it away! So, I ask you again—what-the-hell-are-you-doing?”

I hang up the phone.

5. Recreation, Re-creation:

Woozy from the sun and the alcohol, you sit in a lawn chair, center court, feet propped on a flaccid net. You raise the margarita glass, squint, your eyes focused on a suspended rind of lime, and then you dip your finger, taste the salt, hold

the glass high, to the setting sun, a greenish blur, and remember how once you once gave interviews, right here, sitting high in the umpire's chair you had installed, a tall green monstrosity, a joke for the press.

And why did you quit?

You didn't quit. It's a restful time. A holiday.

And why?

You'd felt floaty, a half inch off the ground, so you hit your two thousandth serve of a Thursday afternoon and simply couldn't hit two thousand and one. You stumbled to a corner, knelt over, and vomited. Earlier, it was three hundred of your forehand, backhand, lob, and an even thousand of the drop shot, the spin variety, the one that dethroned Borg, captured Wimbledon. This is where the great shots begin, an outdoor court with shifty lighting, shadows, just a fading net, baselines bleached in the sun, and in each corner a Shotmaker tennis machine, expanded hopper, thousands of neon yellow tennis balls. The people never see the reality behind the appearance, behind the comments—"such quick hands, quick, soft hands, so natural." Behind the lyrical names: Saddlebrook, Flushing Meadows, Roland Garros, and Wimbledon, with its royalty peering over center court and its strawberries and its dappling, summer rain

And so why did you quit?

You didn't quit.

As a child you enjoyed team games—basketball, baseball, soccer—and played them often and well. Not for the trophies and the praise, but for the camaraderie, the *esprit de corps*, laughing in

the locker room, high fives and practical jokes, practice time, meetings, strategy, rallying against the opponent, together, all together—us against them, *us*, not *you*—but you were talented, yes, the club pro informed your father one fateful afternoon, potentially gifted at tennis, and you play tennis alone.

And why did you quit?

A stormy breeze scuttles across the court and ruffles the net, your feet swaying, your mind swaying. A fresh margarita, a refilled glass. Strange. You take a sip, shudder, tequila swelling your veins, your heart churning, and two thousand is a hell of a lot of serves. Anyone can see that. A hell of a lot, but you don't choose, no, the things life finds for you, and then you've hit them all and they lead to other choices, expanded hopper, expanded, until suddenly you're not where you wanted, not what you wanted to be, you've lost it—it's gone.

What? What are you saying?

It's a hell of a lot of serves is what you're saying, two thousand, every single day, and don't forget the smashes.

6. It Can Be Almost Amazing:

"No one talks anyone into anything, not really."

"Then quit talking."

"Come on, Johnny. They all want it. Just do the trick."

They stood and sat and knelt and leaned, on the patio, under umbrellas, along the sidelines, and drank gin and tonics and martinis and whatever imported beer was the new thing, and suddenly

someone had a racket, someone had a can of tennis balls, someone had a way of spreading the word, about him, what he could and maybe would do, about a trick.

“It’s entertainment, that’s all. Come on, it’s just a trick.”

“Do I look like a magician? Do I?”

“Johnny, come on. It doesn’t mean anything.”

He paced the court, scowled at the sun, finished his beer with a dramatic fling of the bottle into the air—gasps, laughter, shaking of heads—and he ripped open the can of balls and set the empty can on the service line, on its side, the open end facing the net. He returned to the opposite service line, three balls in his left hand, fingers splayed. His shirt felt tight and sweat pooled at the waistline of his khakis. Drops trickled into his eyes and everything fell away, a tunnel of blurry edges. The first ball he served into the open can with a hard *thump*, the can skittering back, and now more gasps, a murmuring, eyes leaping from the can to the second serve, a streaking comet, another solid *thump*, and the balls seated inside, the can rising, wobbling upright, on its base, and now everyone standing, mouths open, drinks limply in fingers.

A kind of silence, finally.

The final ball was a high looping lob, up, up into the sky, long and arcing, and then falling, a whirring shadow, down, down—*whoomp!*—into the can—a ruffling sigh, a crazy shout—the ball spiraling, a tight spin, wavering, a yellow orb above the rim, a setting sun, and then rising, lightly skipping, dribbling out, spinning to rest against the side of the can.

A collective groan, a little girl screamed, “Mommy, what happened?” and then applause, applause, all this adoration—for a trick that didn’t work, for a trick, for a tricked one.

7. When To Know for Sure:

You want to know what it’s like pitching Pop-Tarts? It’s like this: two days—ten hour days—to shoot a thirty second commercial. Cables everywhere, a world of black snakes, cables on cables on cables, and then the lights, daytime lights, little and big and some so big they make you sweat like actual sunlight, and cameras mounted on these towering cranes, like the T. Rex in that museum off Central Park. People scurry about, place to place, weaving, pausing, weaving, men and women with signs and tape recorders and these electronic clipboards, all wandering about and drinking coffee and eating little sandwiches and pastries (not a Pop-Tart in sight!) and shouting things . . .

I remember *rolling!* And something like *gripper!*

This was out at some big time producer’s house, some synthetic blue court, but they didn’t want me to play. Mostly they wanted me to wait, sit in a folding chair by the caterer’s table, platters of boiled shrimp, sandwiches, chips, red and white wine, cubes of cheese stacked tall as my head. And I didn’t question this . . . when they handed me this tight polyester getup, beige and pink, a shirt and shorts the exact hue of a strawberry Pop-Tart. Didn’t question when they spent hours taping this young black kid scrambling back and forth, service

line to net, net to line, with maybe five minutes to change into fresh sneakers, sweat pouring off, spotting the court in drizzle.

Eventually he hurried to the table, to grab a napkin.

“Nice job,” I told him for some reason.

“Thanks.” He wiped his arms, the muscles shiny. “I’m an actor.”

I smiled. “So am I.”

He took a step back and looked closely, eyes slitted, a measured half-squint. He was eyeing the glass of wine; he wanted to say something. I returned his stare, drilled into his eyes, my mind screaming, pleading, *Say it, I want it said*, but then someone called his name and he shrugged, knelt to change his shoes, sprinted back onto the court, line to net, net to line, some guy in earphones trailing him with a little black and silver box that rolled clicking along a track.

They were recording his sneaker squeaks to play later over my video footage. They didn’t want the sound of *my* shoes squeaking, only his. Same with hitting the balls. The *thump* was done with a drum machine.

I picked up the napkin the boy had left, looked for a garbage can, didn’t see one, so tossed it on the floor. A young girl strolled up and took a Polaroid of my feet, each one separately.

Why am I here? I grabbed a cube of cheddar,

swallowed the dry lump, and yelled, “Why am I here!”

“Ask your agent,” someone might have said.

“Because you’re terrified,” someone might have said.

“Don’t be a brat off the court, too,” someone might have said.

But did they? Did someone just say that, to me?

I asked Tatum, who suddenly stood there, looming above, struggling with a corkscrew and a bottle of white wine. “What are you asking me?” she laughed, waving to one of them, her friends. “Just relax, John. Drink something. That’s the whole point.”

The boy jogged to the table, breathing hard, toweling off with a puffy red cloth, the word POP-TARTS emblazoned in white icing across its center. He folded the towel, placed it on the table, and poured a glass of water, drank it down, and poured another.

“You finished?” I asked him.

He emptied the glass and gave me that squint. “Yeh, they’re done . . . but can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I said, scanning the table for a pen, “ask me anything.”

He gave me a look; I can’t explain this look. Then he said, “Who are you?”

