

A Seat by The Band

The story of the 2023 WTA Chicago Women's Open

For the most part, they travel alone. A father and a daughter, on a perpetual journey, suffering and learning, clashing and growing, ever evolving and adapting as time races by. There is a mother and a brother and a boyfriend. There are friends who surface, as I would, at opportune times in convenient locations. At the larger events there are coaches and trainers, shared resources who make their contribution and disappear, like consultants hopping between organizations. But in the end it's the two of them, fighting as one without pausing to rest, running from nothing to chase after something, always moving and reaching towards the edges of the universe with certainty only of grasping each other.

The calendar year for the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) tour consists of events at four different levels: WTA 250, WTA 500, WTA 1000, and Grand Slams. The number of the tournament type indicates the number of rankings points awarded to the tournament champion with the winner of each of the four Grand Slam events – the Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon, and the US Open – receiving 2,000 points. Every match won advances a player to the next round, and every round advanced earns a player additional ranking points. Ranking points are everything. Based on results across all tournaments played in a rolling 12-month window, players carry an aggregate total of ranking points that determines their world ranking. With a field of 128 players but allowances for qualifiers and wild cards, a player must be ranked in the top 104 places six weeks prior to the event to earn direct entry into the main draw of a Grand Slam tournament. The guaranteed prize money for competing in the first round of a Grand Slam is \$100,000.

Entries to any WTA tournament, and the coveted opportunities to earn both ranking points and cash, are distributed to players with sufficient rankings. For those trying to work their way up the ladder, there is the International Tennis Federation (ITF) World Tour. Second-tier professionals travel far and wide to scrape together enough rankings points in these less prestigious, lower stakes tournaments to cement positions in the more lucrative WTA events. 100 points are awarded to the winner of the highest rated tournament on the ITF tour, compared to 250 for the lowest level WTA events.

There is a third, global series of events available to women's professional tennis players. Consisting of tournaments worth 125 points and known as the WTA Challenger tour, it exists somewhere in the chasm, according to Wikipedia, "below the top-tier WTA tour and above the ITF Women's World Tennis Tour". It carries the WTA moniker, yet win/loss records and titles won in these events are not attributed towards a player's official WTA tour results. Some events are diligently promoted in pleasant locations while others appear overnight on the schedule, dotted with patrons after being hastily cobbled together a month before the start date. Contested by both burgeoning youngsters and grizzled, often well-known veterans, it's the perfect resting place for players who live somewhere in the void between obscurity and fame.

My friend and her father landed in Chicago on a Friday, shortly after midday. It was a bright, August afternoon, simmering around eighty degrees. The tournament, a 125 that had appeared on the schedule with neither expectation nor explanation at the end of July, was scheduled to begin Monday. Because the WTA only offered hospitality beginning two nights before the event, I was hosting for one night until their hotel was ready the following day. Customs and rush hour traffic meant it was several additional hours until their taxi pulled in front of my home. They spilled out of the car, lugging suitcases, backpacks, and racket shaped tennis bags.

It was the second time we were meeting in person, the first following qualification matches for the US Open the year before. My friend's ranking was hovering in the mid 80s, which meant she now qualified automatically for the main draw in Grand Slams. She had come to Chicago to make sure that remained the case. I had followed her career from afar with avid interest for many years. We were connected via a close friend of mine from university, her boyfriend who resided back in their home country. I'd cheered from the crowd at the clay courts of Roland Garros and watched on at the hard courts at the Billie Jean King tennis center sitting next to her father, who approached me now with a toothy smile.

"Welcome to Chicago," I said. We embraced like old friends.

"Good. Thank you," he said. Eloquence in the English language is not his calling card.

"Hi Greg," said my friend. We hugged and I lifted a suitcase from the curb. We ascended to my second-floor walkup and entered the apartment into the combined kitchen/living space. I steered them around the corner and into the hallway. I indicated the guest room on the right and offered the living room we'd just come from if they needed to spread out further.

"This is great!" said my friend. "It's twice the size of the rooms where we stay in Europe." Her father indicated his approval by flopping onto the bed, where he became engrossed with a game on his I phone. We left him and went back to the kitchen.

It was approaching 4pm. "You said there is a gym close by?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I think it's good to get outside after the flight. Otherwise I will get sleepy already."

"Ideal for beating the jet lag."

"I have one workout program from my physio. I just need to put down one hour for the doping agency."

"What's that?"

“Every day, I have to provide a one-hour period when I am available if they want to come test me. I have to be at that location at that time. If they come and I miss them three times, I would be suspended. Will six to seven be ok?”

“Yes, perfect.” I helped her enter my address into an online portal.

“Let me check on my father before we leave.” She slipped into the hallway, I followed a few steps behind. “Dad,” she said in their native language. “We are going to the gym. You’ll be ok?” I heard a grunt reply. I poked my head into the room.

“Would he like to watch Cincinnati on the TV?” I asked. My friend translated.

He looked up from his phone. “Cincinnati?”

“Yes.”

“Cincinnati, good.” He brushed past us and out of the room. He settled in the living room and I turned on the coverage of the combined ATP/WTN 1000 event that for the world’s best served as a tune up to the US Open. All the players there would travel to New York the following week, as we would. A match with world number two Carlos Alcaraz was in the middle of the second set. The father indicated his approval and we set out.

It had cooled a tad and the afternoon air felt lovely. We carried long sleeve tops but didn’t need them. I thought it would be a perfect day for hitting tennis balls. I probed with caution on the short walk, eager to learn, hesitant to overstep.

“Have you always played with Babolat rackets?”

“Yes.”

“They give you rackets for free?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Two years ago they stopped giving. But this year I got some.”

“And Nike gives you the outfits you play in?”

“No, they give nothing!”

We skipped through the final intersection, skirting past turning cars. I held open the door to the gym and we stepped to the front desk.

“What do I need to pay?” she asked, holding her wallet.

“That’s ok, I have a free guest pass.”

After signing some forms, we made a preliminary lap around the facility. The gym was busy but not overcrowded. By 5pm on Monday through Thursday an enjoyable workout was out of the question, but the same time on a Friday was far more manageable. Her program called for a

twenty-minute warm up, followed by three rounds of three sets of weighted exercises. I directed her to an exercise bike and indicated the workout area where we could meet when she was ready. I went that way and sprawled out on a strip of astroturf, stretching without much intention. There were three new emails in my inbox: I responded to one and marked the other two for later. The Cubs game had just gone final; six other games were scheduled to start in just over an hour. I selected a set of light dumbbells from the rack and sat on a bench, lifting the weights in a haphazard pattern. The television to my right showed a split screen with three men in suits previewing the upcoming NFL season alongside highlight reels. To my left, the coverage jumped between faces while the weekly closing prices in the stock market scrolled along the bottom. After twenty minutes, my friend rounded the corner. She smiled and dropped to a mat, progressing through her program. She did not look at the televisions. We talked between sets.

"What's next?" I asked.

"Rows for the back," she said, miming the exercise.

I pointed to the bench I'd been using as a suitable location. I retrieved a heavier set of dumbbells and performed some back rows of my own, hunched over with one knee on the bench, yanking the weights up from the floor and up towards my armpit as if starting a lawnmower. As my friend completed her first set, a large man approached us. He wore a single stud earring and a sleeveless top that exposed bulging, tattoo covered biceps. His hair was cut very short and there were hard lines etched on his forehead.

"Can I work in on those for a second," he said, pointing to our dumbbells. He picked them up without waiting for an answer. We waited side by side, hearing his soft grunts between the clatter of weights. One of the televisions began playing an advertisement with Serena Williams.

"Didn't you play her at Wimbledon?" I asked.

"Yes, I got to play on the Centre Court."

Our new friend dropped the weights and walked off. "One sec," I said. I grabbed two moist clothes and wiped down the dumbbell handles. My friend continued with her program and after a short while we left, stepping out on the sidewalk. I pointed in the opposite direction from the apartment.

"The park and the lake are not much farther down that way. Should we take a walk?"

"That would be nice." She checked her watch. "Yes, we just have to be back within an hour."

"Plenty of time."

We set out and reached the edge of the park in five minutes.

"Will your coach who made the workout program be at the US Open?" I asked.

"A tennis coach and a physio I work with will be there. I will share them with a few other players."

"How often do you work with a coach?"

"Sometimes I train at an academy. But it's very expensive to bring a coach to a tournament. It's five hundred dollars per day. Sometimes seven fifty."

We were in the park now and walking along a dirt path, passing between a baseball diamond and a turf field meant for sports. Ahead there was a high arching bridge that extended from the park and looped over the highway that ran along the city's lakeshore. We climbed a small set of stairs and began the crossing, heading towards the water.

"Do people recognize you back home?"

"Not really. Sometimes I get a call asking to do a radio program or something. I don't really like it."

"I think you've had a great season," I offered.

"It's ok. Travelling all the time with my father there has been a lot of tension. It's not easy to be with someone so much. I guess the expectations were higher for the grass court season."

"You are playing all the Grand Slams. This is an incredible achievement."

"Yes. I know many people are not making it as far as me." There was a sadness to her voice.

We were walking on a sandy path at the edge of the beach. In the foreground was a patch of grass with a few sparse trees and the sparkling, blue lake. It was still perfect daylight and the sun shone on the surface of the water. As the tide eased out, I felt the formalities fall away, the foundations of friendship washing over us as the gentle waves rolled back in.

"It is very competitive. Everyone is looking out for themselves. And with girls there is a lot of drama."

"It must be hard to have some friends on the tour."

"Some... not any!" We walked in silence for a bit, returning to the park in the direction of the apartment.

"People also forget where they came from sometimes," she continued. "That's very important to me."

"I understand."

She checked the time. "Let's go back so we won't be late."

We left the park and arrived home a few minutes before six.

There was a sharpness to the day when we woke in the morning. Yesterday had been foggy, a lolling of logistics as we traversed the purgatory between transport and the start of the race. Today felt like the beginning of something.

For breakfast we had toasted bagels with cream cheese and smoothies with fruit, nuts, and milk I combined in a blender. We made sure to add the WTA-approved, protein powder my friend carried in her suitcase. My university friend appeared on a phone screen and the four of us spent the morning together in the modern way: three of us in one room, the other connected remotely, the same soccer match playing on screens in both backgrounds, shared experience unhampered by thousands of physical miles. In that manner, an outline of the week swam into focus.

"I will practice today at 12pm," said my friend, looking up from the confirmation message she had just exchanged with a fellow player. "And I need to warm up thirty minutes before."

"We can drive down at 11," I said.

"It's not too much?"

"No, it's good."

"Penalty!" said the father. We all looked at the television.

"You are behind," said her boyfriend from the phone. "I already saw what happens."

"After practice I'll take you to the hotel."

"Perfect."

The three of us in Chicago paused to watch the kick. The first attempt was saved but the striker scored off the rebound, which made things a little more exciting.

"Semi-finals will be 57 points," said her boyfriend as our celebrations died down. "Ah 57 points. That would be good."

"Let's see when the draw comes out tomorrow. The first match will be Monday or Tuesday."

"You can join for the practice also tomorrow," continued the voice from the phone. "If you have nothing else to do."

"Of course I will."

"Then we will meet directly at the tennis center tomorrow."

It was a good plan with clear goals and it made us feel energized. We left at 11 and arrived at the tennis center within twenty minutes. Most of the drive was on the highway and there was no traffic. There was a spacious parking lot with many open places. We approached the large,

glass facade of the building, stepped through the vestibule, and met a glassy eyed staff member behind the front desk, as if we were club players checking in for a court reservation. My friend and her father were handed their credentials and one can of tennis balls. We passed through a turnstile; in front of us was a dimly lit passageway flanked by heavy, vinyl curtains that guarded the indoor courts. We took a sharp left, stepped around a relaxed security guard sitting in a folding chair, and entered the players only area. It was an open space with a high ceiling. A stretch of turf, sprinkled with foam rollers and kettlebells, started at our feet and ran out thirty yards, spanning the length of the area. On the left was a workout area with bench presses and other machines that looked out through the large, glass windows to the parking lot. Lining the right wall were a series of treadmills and bikes. Towards the back was a cluster of grey, cloth couches and armchairs that I guessed came from IKEA. The lines of a basketball court were painted on the floor just beyond, leading to the hoop hanging from the ceiling. A young-looking girl in tennis attire heaved a shot from the three-point line, both her and her coach laughing at her attempt to reach the basket. There were around a dozen people in the space. A friendly employee printed my credential, fastening it to a lanyard before offering me a Gatorade from a small refrigerator at his side. I accepted both and swung the credential around my neck and tucked inside my shirt, just in case it decided to try and run away.

A few minutes before noon we exited the players area via a double door with a horizontal, metal bar from the far end, stepping straight outside into the clear sky. The weather was like yesterday's. A paved walkway split two clusters of tennis courts, each stacked side by side with a waist-high fence as a delimiter. The closer courts were surfaced with orange clay that in theory resembled those at Roland Garros, the ones beyond layered with the blue hardcourt that is synonymous with summer tennis in the United States.

The walkway opened to the central hub of the grounds with several abandoned stalls that would house refreshments and merchandise when the tournament began. Beyond were the three courts for competitive play, aligned across to form the top of a "T" with the walkway as the stem. The central court was surrounded by makeshift bleachers at the ends and wooden platforms propped up on wheels at the sides – these held seats facing the center court and the one adjacent, allowing the structures to serve as dual purpose stands. Out of the player's lounge, into the sun, down the walkway, past the practice courts, through the patrons and commerce, and onto the battlefield: this is the journey every player would make.

My friend and I talked as we traced the onset of this route for the first time. Her practice partner today was a familiar one. Both women had existed on the tour for several years with a similar ranking, meaning a frequent overlap in tournament schedule. But this appeared to be the final time: she was retiring in two weeks after the U.S. Open.

"A lot of injuries. Bad back problems," explained my friend.

"How old is she?" I asked.

"I think twenty-nine."

“Still very young.”

“Yes. Only a year older than me.”

We passed the clay courts and turned onto the hard courts. The practice partner was waiting, limbering up slowly but with grace. There was no one with her. We exchanged pleasantries. Each player went to the service line on either side; the father strolled towards the baseline on the same side as his daughter, finding a shaded area along the back fence. I concentrated hard on placing the small gym bag I carried along the side fence and lingered in the vicinity of the net post. The players warmed up in the short court for no more than a minute before backpadding, continuing the shot exchange with unbroken fluidity until they had transitioned into a baseline rally. The ball flew with a consistent trajectory, soaring over the net before dipping to land within five feet of the baseline, completing a pleasant parabola. They moved with intent as the ball approached, shuffling no more and no less than needed to repeat the same swing motion over and over. Dozens of shots were traded before one went awry. They were focused but not uncertain, like mathematicians working through arithmetic they knew would balance when the equation was complete.

As balls scattered, her father sauntered around the back of the court, bending to pick them up in no great hurry. I hesitated for a few minutes but eventually followed suit, scurrying diligently to scoop the ones that rolled into the net. In this manner we passed the hour: me hopping around the outskirts of the court, recycling balls in their general direction, the father passing them to his daughter who stayed concentrated on this task at hand. Hovering in her vicinity, her father talked little but appeared to be evaluating and advising; they seemed capable of communicating without speaking.

When time was up, the four of us merged by the side of the court, partially shaded by an umbrella that covered the player's seating area. We exchanged handshakes, a professional acknowledgement of the mutually beneficial preparation that was just shared. The practice partner appeared to have a very pleasant disposition. I had looked her up surreptitiously on my cell phone at one point during the practice: she had maintained a frequent presence in the top 100 during a career spanning a decade, playing in every Grand Slam several times and twice passing to the second round.

“What will you do next year?” my friend asked.

She shrugged. “I'm not sure. There is a business course at MIT sponsored by the WTA. I might try it.” She spoke like a university student approaching graduation, lightly considering whether to try a first job or pursue further studies. We chatted for several more minutes before she set out first, leaving with a friendly wave.

“She was very nice. Easy to talk to,” I told my friend as we began to walk back.

My friend nodded in agreement. “Yes. One of the few.”

The next day I sped down the highway, eager to get back in the action. It had just turned noon when I arrived and my friend and her father were already on the court. I assumed my role from the day before as the practice began. The sun was cranked up a few notches and beads of sweat soon clustered on the back of my neck. Muscles loosened, the speed of the ball increased, and I sensed a shift in the atmosphere from the day before. The tournament would start tomorrow and each passing minute that brought us closer to the bell was laden with increased tension. The players cooperated but focused in isolation with steely determination, prowling like boxers whose perception of the only purpose for their opponent's existence was for them to be knocked out. The father and I stood on our half of the court, two coaches with the other player on theirs, each of us protecting our fighter, the net serving as an invisible wall between us.

After an initial sequence of rallies, it was suggested that the players could compete in a tiebreak to seven points. My friend served the first point. She struck the ball cleanly, landing these initial shots with margin inside the lines of courts. It seemed impossible that she would miss. After several shots were traded, her opponent made an error. The other player served the next two points. On the first, my friend crushed the return of serve, sending the ball on a fierce diagonal. The opponent made a desperate lunge towards it, just grazing the ball with the outer edge of her racket frame, sending it dribbling towards the side fence. The next was a double fault. My friend walked back towards her baseline, preparing for the next point, calm but engaged. The other player swung her racket through the air and whined in the direction of her coaches who regarded the histrionics with stoic silence. My friend won seven points to two. Of course, it meant absolutely nothing. But for some reason, it felt significant. It felt like we had taken the first small step towards reaching our goals.

After a curt handshake, the other player left with her entourage.

"I'd like to finish with some good serves," said my friend. "Greg, you can return the balls?" She lifted a second racket from her bag and stood smiling, extending it towards me. I did not wait to be told twice. I scampered to the other side of the net, nearly stumbling as I started. Waiting in position to receive, I could not stop thinking that I was wearing the wrong pair of sneakers. I reacted to the serve and pushed it with all my might towards the other side of the net, landing it in play. My friend took a few, measured steps in and then sent the ball rocketing back, skimming off the court with no possible chance for my racket to get anywhere near, crashing against the back fence with a satisfying thwack. We played out half a dozen sequences in this fashion.

"Last ball," she said. The serve came down. I returned it in play and the next shot sped towards me. Somehow, I reached the ball with an outstretch arm, looping it just over the net and plum on the singles sideline, a miraculous stroke of luck.

"Ah ha!" cried the father, applauding wildly by the side of the court. Laughing, the two of us jogged towards the net. We clasped hands like players who had just contested a match at Wimbledon.

"I hope the returns were ok," I said.

"Very good! It's very nice to finish with some..." She paused as she gesticulated her forehand motion, looking for the right word. "Power."

We drove back together in high spirits. I directed them to the nearest Chioptle, their most trusted American staple. Her message came through once I was back home, cleaning dishes from my own meal. The draw had just been made. She was scheduled for the first match tomorrow at 11 a.m. The opponent would be our friendly partner from our first practice session.

Monday morning. Always an end, always a beginning. The achievements of the prior week resigned to history, the plan of attack for the one ahead commencing. I lurked on work calls like a double agent, maintaining appearances until the moment to execute my mission manifested. When ten o'clock hit, I piled my laptop into my bookbag and scrambled into the car. I saw the message as I settled into a space in the open parking lot. Our opponent had withdrawn. The scheduled match would not go ahead.

As I was processing, I entered the tennis center and saw her standing by the front desk. She recognized me with a smile.

"Hello!" I said, and pushed through the turnstile so we were face to face. "How are you!"

"Been better, you could say." She made a point of reaching for her back. "It is not too bad, I think. I just cannot risk the U.S. Open."

"Of course."

"Maybe I'll see you there!" she said, as if we were two work colleagues attending the same seminar.

"I'll look for you in the draw." I left and, credential swaying from my neck, eased into the player's lounge. My friend and her father were waiting for me on the couches.

"So we are in the second round?" I asked.

"No," said my friend. "Because she withdrew before the tournament started I will get a new opponent. They will give me a lucky loser from qualifying."

"They are playing the qualifying now?"

"Yes. We will wait to see what happens."

We made small talk for a while before I left to take some work calls. On the second floor of the building there was a makeshift cafeteria that was sectioned off by a temporary curtain. I climbed the stairs, credential in hand, and settled with my laptop. Against a wall there was a table with a basket of apples and bananas, small bags of chips and pretzels, energy bars, and muffins wrapped in plastic. A pile of cream and sugar sat beside a cheap coffee dispenser with Styrofoam cups. Adjacent was a small kitchen area where a lady stood behind a counter serving made to order stir fries. A few players lounged at tables, sipping beverages and staring at cell phones, and I tried to keep my voice down.

My friend joined me after an hour and we approached the counter. The lady was very friendly and offered us a choice of meats, rice, quinoa, or pasta, and a variety of vegetables. She threw everything into a wok and squirted a generous helping of oil, sizzling the ingredients. After topping with our selected sauce, she portioned each meal into a plastic container. My friend handed over a raffle style ticket and I paid twenty dollars for mine. The food was fresh and flavorful, and we joked while we ate, swapping movie recommendations. We went back downstairs to the player's lounge carrying a handful of snacks for the father. We still had no idea when or if she would play a tennis match today.

My friend gave me half a smile. "This is how we are, always at the tennis center. Very boring life!"

"I think it's exciting."

"You don't do it all the time."

"That's true."

We waited longer and eventually we were approached by someone wearing a WTA logo. It was after 2pm.

"The supervisor is ready for you in his office."

My friend shot up like a caged lion whose gate just opened. I followed behind, not wanting to miss something significant. Her father did not seem particularly concerned. We traversed the main lobby and ducked into a narrow hallway, slipping past office doors on either side. After a turn we reached an open door where a middle-aged man with short, dark hair and tan skin sat behind a desk. Even when sitting down, it was clear that he was not a tall man. He waved us in.

"Hello," he said, addressing my friend by name. "We have completed the qualifying and I have drawn a lucky loser for you to play." He spoke with a heavy Italian accent, emphasizing both syllables in the word "loser". In front of him was a piece of paper with four names printed: the names of the players who'd lost their qualifying match this very morning. His index finger hovered over the list, and it seemed he was about to select one of the names at random.

"This will be your opponent," he continued, landing his pointer next to a name. "Now, I have not been able to reach this player yet to confirm, so first I must find this player." He slid another

piece of paper in front of us that showed the scheduled order of play. "Your match was scheduled for the center court, so we will wait for these matches to finish, and then we will play your match as a followed by."

I studied the schedule and made a quick assessment in tandem with the ongoing match scores I'd been tracking on the WTA app. The match currently on center court was in the second set, with another match scheduled to follow. The match currently on court 1 was nearing the end of the first set with no further matches scheduled. Waiting for center court to open would require us to wait an additional hour to start the match, possibly even two.

"I think this is the last scheduled match on court 1," I offered. "We might get on court much sooner if we play there."

"But this will be a followed by," said the supervisor. "So we will not waste any time and go onto the center court as soon as it opens."

"Yes, but there is another match scheduled on this court that has not even begun."

The supervisor opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. He gazed at us with a furrowed brow. He looked down at his papers and then back to us.

"I must find this opponent you will play. I will make the confirmation and meet you then in the players' area. Please, wait for me there."

We went back to our pile of bags by the IKEA couches. The father was absorbed in a game on his cell phone. Within ten minutes the Italian supervisor appeared. He strode with purpose down the astro turf, heading directly for us. He had a broad smile.

"I have confirmation that your opponent is ready to play." He flourished the paper with the schedule once again. "Now, although this match was scheduled for the center court, as there are not further matches scheduled for court 1, and we have been waiting for this match since the morning, we will move your match to the court 1. And we will play this match as a followed by."

"I think that's an excellent idea," I said.

"Very good."

I glanced at the live, updating scores. "The match on court 1 is nearly finished."

"Yes," said the supervisor, very pleased.

"So we might go on court in fifteen minutes?"

"Yes, it could be." He turned and left. My friend said nothing and reached for her bags.

We stepped outside into the brightness of the afternoon. The shift in our purpose was tangible. Inside we were idle hunters, lolling in a field, waiting unbounded as the day stretched before us. In the daylight we were jolted awake, called to action with heightened senses as prey finally crossed into our vision. The sun was warm and pleasant – it was an afternoon you'd be happy to pass with a long stroll. My friend and her father progressed through a routine with tennis balls and elastic bands, working efficiently, speaking little.

I tried to learn about our opponent as I watched them. I understood she'd received an invitation as a wildcard for the qualifying round – she'd lost that match 6-0, 6-2. The father approached me and tapped on the screen of my phone displaying the WTA profile.

"No ranking, no ranking," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"Ahhh." He smiled and went back to manning the bands. An official approached us and told us it was time to take the court, offering a golf cart which we declined. The father carried his daughter's tennis bag while I held a stack of towels. My heart pounded as we walked past the practice courts, this time not for a dress rehearsal. Both my friend and her father seemed relaxed. We clasped hands once we reached the court and the father and I sat on two folding chairs in line with the baseline at court level. Each was affixed with a piece of printer paper that read "Reserved for Player", held in place by two small pieces of scotch tape.

The warmup began and I saw little difference between the two players. Our opponent struck the ball well from both the forehand and backhand side. She approached the net with grace, handling volleys with finesse. Her serve landed with force and direction as the chair umpire announced one minute until the end of the warmup. My friend began serving the first game. The wind had picked up considerably and she struggled to find a consistent toss. A forehand held up in the breeze and sailed long. The score went to deuce and I felt my stomach turn. Was it possible we might lose this match? Would it all be over before it even began?

My friend won the next two points and the players changed ends after the first game. We broke serve in a scrappy game, then held quickly for a three-love lead. Slowly, it was revealed. As the rallies unfolded, my friend's shots penetrated through the court, our opponent's replies carrying a little less weight, floating with decreased spin, landing just a little shorter with each additional swing. After half a dozen commendable strikes, she began to miss, sending a ball aimlessly wide, dumping a shot into the net. Then, after only three or four. An understanding dawned on me. The match was no more than a sparring session, a chance for a professional to trade blows with a capable amateur under no pretense of contention. The play was competitive but the match was not. Armed with an excess of talent and experience, my friend operated with ease from a fortress, no amount of will or luck existing that would allow the challenger to infiltrate. When this ended, we'd prepare for the next match tomorrow, travel to the U.S. Open the week after, and continue forth with the circuit beyond. Our opponent would pack her bag and leave the court behind, returning to the continuity of everyday life.

With the score six-love and four-love in the second set, our opponent raised her racket and took a seat on the court. Under the pretense of adjusting her sneaker, she looked left and looked right. When she got up, it would be for the last time, her next chance to return unknown. I peered down the row of seats towards the group I assumed was her family, sitting in the opposite corner. They smiled knowingly, expressing neither sorrow nor joy. They were there to support an individual, not to accomplish a mission. For our opponent this was an outing; for my friend, it was a lifestyle.

We walked back to the players' lounge together, content with the only fact that mattered: we were in the second round. My friend went to shower and I saw a message on my phone from her boyfriend who had been watching back home. It was late in his time zone but he never missed a match, forgoing sleep at any hour. The text was only three words. "We'll take it."

Tuesday went by without meaning. I meandered through a work day, pausing every ten minutes to refresh the WTA website in the hope that the next day's order of play would be posted. I left the office just after 5pm and was taken aback by the heat; the sun was high in the sky and it felt like early afternoon. My shirt clung to my back as I climbed the steps to the elevated train tracks. Groups of people were waiting on the platform but, even in the throes of rush hour, the work from home revolution meant it was not overcrowded. While I rode the train, my friend was resting in her air-conditioned hotel room. At the same time, our next opponent was just walking off court, dripping with sweat after laboring through her first-round victory. I fell asleep wondering if everything might just be falling into place.

The match was scheduled third on center court. It was expected to start around 3pm. I tried to be productive in the morning, completing any menial task my brain would allow to have my focus. I went into go mode just before noon: packing the laptop, changing into athletic shorts, filling water bottles. The sun was brutal and piercing and my friend needed a cap for protection. I picked up several options from the store, all white, and set out for the tennis center. It took several minutes for the cool air to kick in from the vents as I guided the car towards the highway. When I arrived, I found my friend and her father in the player's lounge, comfortable on the section of the couches by this time we'd claimed as our own. My friend had completed a light practice session on court, showered, and now had been waiting for over an hour.

I snacked on a protein bar and chips as we caught up on the activities from the day off. The practice had been sharp and the evening restful. I decided to stretch my legs and ventured towards the exit, pushing through the double doors. It was like stepping into an oven. I baked as I made a deliberate circle of the outdoor warm-up area. Breathing felt like swallowing syrup. After a few minutes, I was ready to be back in the air conditioning.

"My God it's hot out there!" I told my squad. "I could hardly breath."

My friend recounted some of the brutal conditions she had been forced to play in over the years. Today would be added to the list. As the minutes dripped away, the temperature rose both outside and in. The build up to this second-round match had an entirely different feel than our first-round experience. We were drawn against a formidable opponent, a 15-year stalwart on the WTA tour who'd reached the fourth round of every Grand Slam and was once ranked as high as 11 in the world. She had reached the sunset of an admirable career, still hungry for one more deep run, still eager to fight. You might say it was a fifty-fifty proposition if you were being generous; the oddsmakers suggested we were not the favorite. Our first-round victory had earned fifteen rankings points thus far. My friend has travelled a long way and spent a lot of money for only fifteen points.

We watched the score of the preceding match like hawks, trying to anticipate when we'd be called on court. My friend hopped from foot to foot, trying to stay loose. The tension increased with every point that brought us closer to a conclusion, numbers blinking on our phone as if a dial was being turned with a slow click. At last it ended and we began the warm up. Our opponent yanked on cables and pumped her knees to her chest no more than ten feet away. We expected to be on court within twenty minutes.

My friend and her father were working with the bands when I saw the supervisor entering the lounge. He walked towards us accompanied by a younger woman wearing a white polo shirt with no logo. He approached and both players paused to give their attention.

"Good afternoon," he began, the accent thick. "You are scheduled now to go on the Center Court. However, we must consider the playing conditions". We formed a semi-circle around him, two parties on either side of a mediator at the negotiation table.

"I have brought with me here our independent physician," he continued, without indicating his colleague. "She will inform you the possible dangers of beginning a match with the temperature outside."

"Are you saying the match will be delayed?" I asked.

"I did not say the match will be delayed!" The Italian supervisor was becoming very passionate now. He held up both hands. "I make no comment regarding whether or not the match will begin. I said the doctor will inform you about the conditions and then you will take a decision."

The young doctor took a small step forward and cleared her throat. She began a speech that was clearly a template, her voice shaky to start but evening out as she settled into the familiarity of her routine. She referenced the heat index, noting its level far above the acceptable range for athletic competition. She mentioned key words such as dehydration and dizziness. Before the doctor began, we had no intention of letting a little heat stand in the way of our tennis match, but as she continued I felt that perception shifting amongst all of us.

"And it is not only the external effects one has to consider in conditions such as these," said the doctor, bringing it home. "While a player may display no outward signs, they may still be at

severe risk of heat exhaustion resulting from a severe spike in the body's core temperature. With a heat index this high, strenuous activity can result in a cooking effect of the internal organs, leading to permanent damage."

My friend and I exchanged a quick glance. I sensed our opponent do the same with her coach. The supervisor stepped back in to ask for our final decision. Both players acquiesced with a resigned nod. They refused to look at each other. With that it was settled: we would wait longer and begin play at 5pm.

We waited for two hours. The minutes crawled by but we waited in earnest. Two hours was nothing. We'd waited all week. My friend had been waiting her whole life. We'd wait as long as it took.

If the heat index had lowered by the time we walked to the courts it was hard to tell. We glistened with sweat as we took our seats, the father and I in our papered folding chairs, my friend in her seat next to the umpire's stand. Something was off as the warmup began; things seemed to be moving in slow motion. At first, I thought it was just the heat. Then, as I watched my friend bend down by the back fence, I realized: there were no ball kids on the court. As a result of the heat, it had been determined that it would not be appropriate to expose minors to these conditions. The players would soldier on, retrieving their own errors as a reward.

The match began. We were the only ones watching and we cheered loudly, encouraging after every point. Our claps pierced the haze shimmering above the courts, echoing off the stands. The players moved methodically, walking after errant balls at a snail's pace, going to the towel often. After losing a point with a missed volley, our opponent trudged with her head down back to the baseline, only to turn and find a ball resting in the doubles alley, forcing her to retrace her steps. She cursed in her local dialect, flicking it away in disgust. The whole affair might be mistaken for a club match if you didn't know the result might determine who played in next year's Australian Open. Our opponent's coach appeared after a few games, too preoccupied with something else to arrive at the start of the match. We glared at him as he walked past us to take his seat in the opposite corner. Clearly this match didn't mean to them what it meant to us. She was at the end of her career, her best days behind. Her time had happened, and now it was ours. We wanted it more.

And it seemed that we would get it. My friend edged in front to an early lead, striking the ball with precision and determination. We sensed that, on this day, we were the stronger player. If the law of averages was allowed its full application, over three sets the scales of justice would ultimately tip in our favor. But our opponent had no intention of letting the jury rule without casting her objections. You don't last for fifteen years on the WTA tour by readily accepting defeat. As we bludgeoned from the baseline, she responded with finesses, floating cushioned drop shots that descended millimeters over the height of the net, forcing my friend to chase forward like a rabid dog. Just as we built momentum, on the verge of overpowering, she would carve a low slice or find an acute angle, stealing a point and requiring us to reset. It would not

be simple, but it never was. My friend stayed focused, countering the craft from across the net to take the first set six games to four.

The second set got underway and neither player could pull away. My friend maintained her level but our opponent was throwing the kitchen sink, refusing to go quietly. It was four games all and the match was being contested on equal footing. The set could be decided within the next ten minutes, but it was impossible to tell which way it might go and the tension was unbearable. We were desperate to win the next two games, not only for the obvious reason of closing out the match, but also because of the time. The hour had crept past seven and the sky had turned a muted shade of grey, the sun no longer in sight. With no lights on the courts, play would be suspended soon due to darkness. At most a few more games could be finished. We waited all day, and now we were out of time.

Our opponent held serve with confidence to take a five-four lead. She pumped her fist as the players changed ends, sensing she had done enough to survive. At the least, she was coming back tomorrow. Deflated, my friend stepped back to the line, needing to hold serve to stay in the set. We'd gone from the precipice of winning into survival mode of our own. If serve was broken, the match would be tied and we'd go home no closer to the next round than when we'd arrive, the day's efforts amounting to nothing. Forget that. A few quick points and maybe there was still time to finish it tonight. Love-fifteen. The last flickers of daylight were fading. Love-thirty. Our opponent was two points away. She crushed a backhand down the line, well out of my friend's reach. Out! cried the father and I in unison, bursting from our seats. Mercifully, the umpire agreed. Fifteen-thirty. The close call was the lifeline we needed. My friend won the next three points and the set was tied at five all.

The players met at the chair for a brief conference with the umpire. There may be time for one final game, but not two. No, there was no chance to finish the set. Better to stop now then, with the score tied, than with one player ahead six to five, the players agreed. The umpire made the announcement to the half dozen of us in the vicinity. The match could be over in fifteen minutes, but we would have to wait overnight.

I slammed the accelerator once we reached the highway. The father sat next to me in the front seat. The radio played at a good volume. We were elated to still be in the second set but crushed we hadn't already won the match. It was like receiving a bonus from work, only to be told you had to pay half of it back. My friend leaned forward from the back, sticking her head between the two front seats.

"Thank God that ball was out in the last game. Would have been love-forty!"

"We are still ahead," I said.

"Those drop shots were driving me crazy. They were landing just over the net every time."

I used some colorful language to describe what I thought of those drop shots and turned up the chorus of the song. We laughed and talked some more about the match.

"You need to eat," I said.

"Yes, let's pick up Chipotle by the hotel."

"Chipotle again?"

"Yes."

"I know a few other good places in the area."

"Better to be safe."

I stayed with the car while my friend and her father went through the assembly line. They would eat in their hotel room, I would take mine home after dropping them off.

"Guess who was in front of us in line?" said my friend, sliding back into the car.

"You're not serious."

"Our drop shotting friend."

"Unbelievable. Did you say anything to her?"

"Of course not," she sneered. "That was the last person I wanted to see." The battle was still underway.

I rose in full daylight, the summer sun racing towards the peak of the sky. It was clear the day would bring no relief from the heat. The restart was scheduled at 11 a.m., the first action of the day's play. There was no concern with being able to finish the match at the midmorning hour, but also little doubt that once the heat reached its afternoon peak the organs would sizzle like sausages on the grill.

The elastic bands were already out by the time I arrived. My friend went through her routine with diligence, cutting no corners, preparing for any eventuality. We made the walk to the court a few minutes before eleven. The players completed a standard warm up and suddenly we were ready for play at five all in the second set. Reaching this crescendo so abruptly was unsettling; it was difficult to feel the tension the scoreboard demanded. The father and I scooted to the edge of our seats, sputtering as we tried to push our engines towards maximum capacity just after starting the car. Perhaps sharing this understanding, both players held serve with little resistance, allowing the match to gain some traction. It was now six games all and the set would be decided with a seven-point tiebreaker. Blood was pumping, sweat was pouring, and the moment had come to life. We sensed the next round might be only minutes away.

My friend won the first point and stayed ahead. Our opponent pushed back doggedly, remaining within touching distance. But the closer we moved towards the seven-point finish line, the less attractive her proposition appeared. Each lost point dimmed her spirits, like a

drizzle falling lightly on a campfire. She appeared exhausted, the prior day's efforts weighing heavily. Did she really want the reward of fighting on for a third set? An unreturned serve brought the score to six-five, earning my friend her first match point. Our opponent would now serve to stay in the match. Her first effort sailed long. My friend gripped her rack a little tighter and swayed gently from side to side, eyes locked across the net, daring her opponent to throw her final punch. She kept her eyes trained on the ground, bouncing the ball methodically. Finally, after all the waiting, the hours in the sun, the countless drop shots, she cracked. The serve plummeted into the net. Double Fault. We were in the quarterfinals.

It was the first of two matches we needed to win that day but, knowing it would be several hours before we went back on court, we were able to enjoy the victory. My friend showered, changed, and visited the physio before we ate lunch together. Shortly after, our opponent, who'd had the luxury of completing her previous round the day before, appeared. She sauntered into the player's lounge wearing shorts and flip flops, as if she was in a spa. It had just passed 2pm and the courts were open, but we didn't need the supervisor to tell us we'd be holding off for some time. The atmosphere was broiling. We waited, then waited some more, then at last began to limber up when the hour had almost reached five and the heat index had descended to acceptable standards.

The match began on even footing, but as it had the day before, a feeling of optimism settled in. On the balance of play, it seemed that we had a little more to offer. Eventually it showed on the scoreboard; my friend won a long first set seven games to five. Now men of experience, the father and I urged our player on as the second set began, willing her to get off to a strong start. It was just after 6pm and we knew the drill: close the match out with a quick second set or be subjected to another sleepless night and a conclusion tomorrow. It was never that easy. With a feeling of inevitability, we watched the same movie unfold, the set creeping towards a climax at four games all, the next round barely an arm's length away, our opponent making one last surge to take a five-four lead. This time, we couldn't quell the uprising. The second set was stolen, four games to six, and the match was tied at one set all.

It was still a few minutes before 7pm and we'd reached an awkward convergence. It was unlikely that there would be enough time to complete the match, but with potentially half an hour of available daylight halting now was unthinkable. There was no choice but to simply carry on. Neither player showed any expectation that the match would not continue. Our opponent, momentum firmly on her side, sprinted back on the court, eager to restart. Perhaps, with a quick blitz, she might even be able to wrap things up right here and now.

Momentum changes quickly. We would serve to open the final set. My friend steeled herself, knowing the fight was only just beginning. She locked in from the first point, sending a message. Our opponent's enthusiasm quickly dampened as she was forced into making errors. We held, taking a one-love lead.

As the players changed ends, our opponent stopped in front of the umpire's chair.

"It is too dark, we need to stop," she said. The umpire gave her a quizzical look and said nothing, so she tried again. "I can't see the ball." She thrust her racket upwards, indicating the color of the sky.

"Ba ha ha! Ruski, Ruski!" cackled the father, referencing the player's nationality. He made sure he was loud enough to be heard. I glanced around anxiously and spotted the Italian supervisor hovering nearby. I gestured for him to come over and enter the fray. He was happy to oblige.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, approaching the players. Both were standing on court next to the umpire's stand. The umpire had descended and looked like she was still considering the initial statement.

"We cannot continue in these conditions," said the opponent.

"There is enough light to play."

"Really! How would you like to hit the ball when you can barely see it!"

"We will continue for now," said the supervisor.

My friend lingered, wiping her arms and forehead with a towel, saying nothing. Our opponent levied more objections, making no headway. Cursing, she snatched her racket and stormed to her side of the court. I gave a subtle nod to the Italian supervisor as he left the court. The match would go on.

The players split the next two games and my friend led two to one. Our opponent strode towards her chair like a bull and sat down, craning her neck to yell at the umpire.

"I guess you want to keep playing!"

"I think there is enough light still," said the umpire slowly, getting up to speed.

"This is a joke." She rose from her chair and continued berating the umpire. My friend paid no attention, almost seeming unaware. At the end of the allotted time, she rose and took her respective side of the court. The Italian supervisor watched closely from just off to the side to make sure our opponent would do the same. She wasted a further minute, but eventually succumbed. She shared some opinions with the supervisor as she walked past him and received the balls to serve. She made two quick errors. Our opponent was cursing after every point now, alternating her focus between the umpire and her coach. Neither responded. We broke her serve to lead three games to one. She smacked the balls to our side of the net, loudly questioning the integrity of the tournament. She appeared fully unhinged. My friend held serve quickly. Four-one.

Our opponent crashed into her chair, somewhat subdued. She laughed mockingly, muttering out loud. The father and I looked at each other, daring to hope. It was now seven-fifteen, and the sky was racing towards darkness. The conditions were admittedly questionable. There were only

minutes to spare; this would surely be the last change of ends. The players crossed over and play resumed. We broke serve to lead five games to one. Our opponent slumped around the court. This was it, we would serve for the match. Suddenly, for no discernable reason, our opponent sparked to life, producing majestic shot making to break back, closing the gap to five games to two.

The players walked towards their chairs in silence. Our opponent stared into the distance, seemingly somewhere far away. If there was any daylight left, it could be measured in seconds. The father and I sat frozen, fearful that the slightest blink might jolt the umpire to suspend the match. Please, just one more game. The umpire remained silent. My friend glanced back at us, uncertain. We nodded our reassurance. One more game.

The players took the court, a curtain of gray hanging overhead. Our opponent landed her first serves with precision. She held and it was five games to three. There was no question of play going on. My friend shook her head and muttered softly, pointing to the sky as she walked to her chair. The umpire announced the suspension of the match, to be concluded tomorrow. Our opponent approached, wearing a perplexed look.

"We are stopping now? I think we can keep playing." There was no trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"It is too dark to continue," said the umpire.

"Now it is too dark! Great!" She slammed her bag on the ground and began tossing in rackets and half empty bottles. Both players collected their things and left the court, my friend a few steps in front. Once they passed by the stands, they were intercepted by the Italian supervisor. The other coach, the father, and I slipped in behind, forming a semi-circle not unlike the one we'd made the day before as the doctor lectured us on the dangers of the playing conditions. The supervisor addressed the group.

"We must decide what time to restart the match tomorrow. We can begin at 11, or if you would like to rest a bit more, we can start at 1."

"Why would we want to start early?" scoffed our opponent.

"If we start later, then the winner will not have time to rest before the next match."

"Ha! Well for sure I'm not going to be the winner."

"That I cannot say! I can only say what time we will restart the match."

"Fine, then we can start at 1."

"Let's just start at 1. I don't care anymore," said my friend. She will still in shock that the match was not over.

The opponent turned to leave. "Hold on," I said. "If we begin at 1, what time will the semifinal be?"

"That will be played as a followed by," answered the supervisor.

"With no break in between?"

"No."

"That's not right. Then we should begin at 11." My eyes darted from person to person as I waited for someone to challenge. But nobody said anything. The opponent looked at the supervisor and shrugged.

"Very well, then we will begin at 11," confirmed the supervisor. My friend set off, flanked by me and her father. The three of us walked back to the player's lounge as one, leaving the others behind.

For the second straight night we drove home as the sky blackened, our fate uncertain. But our spirits remained high. Despite everything thrown at us, we were still standing, as strong as when the week began, as strong as ever.

"This is crazy, same thing two days in a row," said my friend. She was sprawled in the backseat with one leg extended, resting an ice pack on one thigh.

"Not quite the same. 5-3 is much better than 5-5."

"Yes. And she wanted to quit after the first game!"

"She was trying all the tricks."

"It's always like this at every stage of my career. I always have to do it the hard way."

"I hate to tell you," I said steering the car onto the exit ramp, "but tomorrow might be a little harder. Your opponent in the semi-final got a walkover today."

"Oh, very nice for her," said my friend. There was no bitterness in her voice and we were both smiling. "It's fine, we just need to close out this match."

"We will."

The same song from the day before came on the radio. I turned the volume loud and we sang along as the night air rushed in through the open windows. The lights of Chicago shone brightly. I grabbed the father by the shoulder.

"Sing in my friend, sing it!" He rocked his head back and forth and crooned a few notes, giving his best rendition. That got the biggest laugh of the week.

"How about some dinner?" I asked, turning to the backseat at a red light.

"Chipotle."

When I dropped them off at the hotel, I didn't need to say what time I'd be at the tennis center tomorrow. We'd been here before.

The peak of the heat wave has passed. It was a hot, cloudless, summer day, but the heat index would not be stretched beyond limit. My friend would take the court at 11, and if she finished the job, the semifinal would begin early that afternoon.

I found them limbering up by the couches. Gone was the jovial carefreeness that lifted us home last night, replaced by a pulsing anxiety. We'd thought all night about how close we were to the finish line. 57 rankings points were waiting out on that court, a single game away, but not yet within our grasp. What was once a formality at five-one was now a contest at five-three. We talked very little. We all knew how much it would hurt if somehow this slipped away. Losing something you thought you had hurts much more than missing something you never expected.

The match would restart on the center court, followed by both semifinals. A dozen or so patrons were milling around, the first of the week so far. My friend and I locked hands by the entrance to the court. "See you in five minutes," I said. Her father handed over her bag and gave a quick, firm embrace. We took our seats, ready to attack from the first point. Play began and the players traded groundstrokes. My friend rifled a backhand at her opponent's feet, several inches of blue court showing between the ball and the white, painted baseline. Our opponent could only shovel the ball into the bottom of the net.

"Out," said the line judge, raising a limp arm. We were directly behind where he sat, hunched over with a high, arching back. His hair was white as snow and the profile of his face I could see was laden with wrinkles. The father and I shot out of our chairs.

"Correction, was good!" shouted the umpire.

"This is not real!" screamed my friend from the far side of the court.

"Replay the point."

We clapped and yelled, trying to encourage. She didn't look our way, only staring at the balls she would serve. Any small mistake, just one single point, could change the course of a match if you lost focus at the wrong time. She didn't. First serves were made, groundstrokes were executed, our opponent erred, and it was over after six points. Game, set, and match, seven-five, four-six, six-three. We were in the semifinals.

We glided back to the player's lounge and collapsed on the couches. Quickly, our attention turned to the next steps. By all accounts the tournament could now be considered a success, but there was no consideration that the work was complete. The players were just warming up for the first semifinal. Yes, we should eat, there was enough time. A good meal, some time to rest, and we'd be ready to go again.

We made our way to the cafeteria. Our opponent was sitting with her coach at a table near the entrance. They sat relaxed – it was approaching 48 hours since she'd last taken the court. She had a young face and reminded me of a university student passing time between classes. Aside from the cook, there was nobody else in the room. We were like determined festival goers, staking out for days to earn a place near the stage, inching closer as we sifted through the crowd. We held our target in sight, stepping forward into the void left by those who peeled off, pushing through those who remained in our path. The closer we came, the louder the music played, and the better it sounded.

We ordered food and picked a table near the back. I tapped the WTA app on my screen.

"Something's not right, it says the match is over." The score was two-one in the first set, but there was a small arrow next to the "two" that indicated that player had advanced to the final. My friend and I looked at each other at the same time. "The one girl retired," I said. She held her fork in midair, a small pile of rice resting on top.

As if summoned, the supervisor burst through the curtain and into the cafeteria. He approached our table.

"There has been a retirement and the first semifinal is complete. We must start your match shortly. We have not before 1pm on the schedule. We can wait until 1:15pm"

I looked at the time. It was past 12:30. My friend still had half her meal left in her container. "Surely we can wait a bit longer. How about 2pm?" I asked.

The supervisor shook his head. "I do not think so. We have the fans waiting and the schedule."

"What if they agree," I said, indicating our opponent a few tables over. The supervisor tilted his head. I took it to mean that he'd give some consideration if he received a joint proposal.

I slid my chair back and walked towards the other table. I stood in front of our opponent's coach. He only looked up at me when I began speaking, as if he had only just realized I was in the vicinity.

"We are supposed to start at one-fifteen. But we have just come off court from our last match. Would it make sense to start at two instead?"

He stared at me as if I must be unwell. "We have not before 1, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then what's the problem?"

I smiled and went back to join my friend. She was eating methodically while sending some messages. In her position I'd be outraged at my bad fortune, but she seemed at ease, radiating a calm acceptance. This wasn't the first time fate had betrayed her and it wouldn't be the last.

That was life on the WTA tour. She closed the lid to her container with one third of her portion remaining and we went back to the player's lounge.

I watch my friend as she pulled out the elastic bands one more time. The physical toll the week had taken was clear. I didn't need to ask how she was feeling. As if reading my mind, she turned to me and smiled.

"It's ok," she said. "We got what we came for."

We made the walk back to the center court, passing mulling spectators as we neared. Each time you entered the arena you hoped it was not for the last time, each time you knew that was never guaranteed. We all soaked it in. Energy levels were high as the match began. Any fuel left in the tank would be spilled on the court before all was said and done. Drawing from the depths of the well, my friend persevered through a grueling first set, winning in a tiebreaker. Inevitably, her level dropped once the second set began. Our opponent, looking the fresher of the two players, eased back into control, winning the second set six to three.

The father stood to stretch his legs before the decider began. He appeared neither happy nor sad, only enveloped by a neutral reality that this evening he would pack their 57 points alongside his folded shirts and toothbrush in his suitcase and head towards the airport. I studied our opponent, waiting in her chair for play to resume. Her shoulders sat low. She picked lightly at the strings on her racket. She was not nonchalant, but not vigilant either. I imagined she could be thinking about tomorrow's final. But as the third set got underway, and my friend crafted a few well-chosen shots to take the first game, her demeanor changed. Why was my friend still fighting on, refusing to throw in the towel? Our opponent thought she'd done enough, but now it seemed more was needed. Frustration grew at a rapid pace. Her body was still on court but her mind was in the locker room and there was no way to remarry the two. It all happened too quickly for her to reset. Relying on an accurate serve and powerful returns to take control of points early, my friend stacked games in quick succession. In less than half an hour, she won the final set six-one.

The three of us hugged outside the court, drunk on the surreality of the pleasingly unexpected. Strangers came down from the stands to congratulate my friend. Although they just arrived, they seemed to grasp the magnitude of the accomplishment. You deserve it, one of them said. The hum of the crowd's admiration drifted behind us as we walked back to the lounge. My friend left to shower and find a physio. The father sat next to me, his elbows resting on his thighs and his chin on a few fingers. His joy was palpable.

"I thought... third set... retire, retire," he said, stretching the limits of his vocabulary. He rocked back gently. "I am very happy, very happy."

An hour later, we said goodbye standing outside their hotel entrance. I would not see the final the next day. I had an early morning flight for an unmissable family engagement, a reality we'd

been prepared for in this eventuality. We'd meet again in a few days at the US Open. There was no bitterness or remorse, only a feeling that everything was happening as it should. They would finish as they started, as they always were, father and daughter, alone together.

I sat in a café the next day, eyes glued to my phone. I had bread, a plate with olives and sardines, and a small glass of light, crisp beer. A tiny, tennis ball icon flashed on my screen to let me know the match had started. All I could see were the names of the two players with a 0 next to each. My friend won the first game. Then the next. Quickly, another. 1-0, 2-0, 3-0, 4-0. The numbers seemed to be ticking upwards with every blink, like a slot machine pouring out a jackpot. I messaged her boyfriend, my close friend, who was ever faithfully watching the live stream. Was there something wrong with our opponent? Was she injured? No, he replied. The Chicago wind was gusting and wreaking havoc. My friend was adjusting much better to the conditions. It appeared fate was finally blowing in her direction.

The second set followed the first. She led six-one, five-two, one game away from the championship. The score ticked to 5-3, then 5-4. Match points came and went. When it seemed every obstacle had finally been cleared, there was always one more to hurdle. My friend had come too far to stumble now. She broke serve to win the match. After 8 years on the tour, she had won her first WTA title.

We shared joyful messages of congratulations and gratitude. Pictures flooded in from the on-court, trophy presentation. After the short ceremony, my friend showered and sought out the physio. Her father waited with patience. She reappeared and sat beside him on the couches, the player's lounge empty of all others. Finally they were done, no more matches to complete, no more tasks to execute. The trophy rested against a suitcase at their feet. They celebrated by loading their bags into a taxi. They had a flight to catch in three hours. New York City awaited. The next tournament would begin in two days.
