

HOLDING THE T

My life in squash.

BY TAD FRIEND

When you carry a squash racquet in New York City, people admire you. They point you out on the subway and crouch beside their children to whisper, "He plays tennis!"

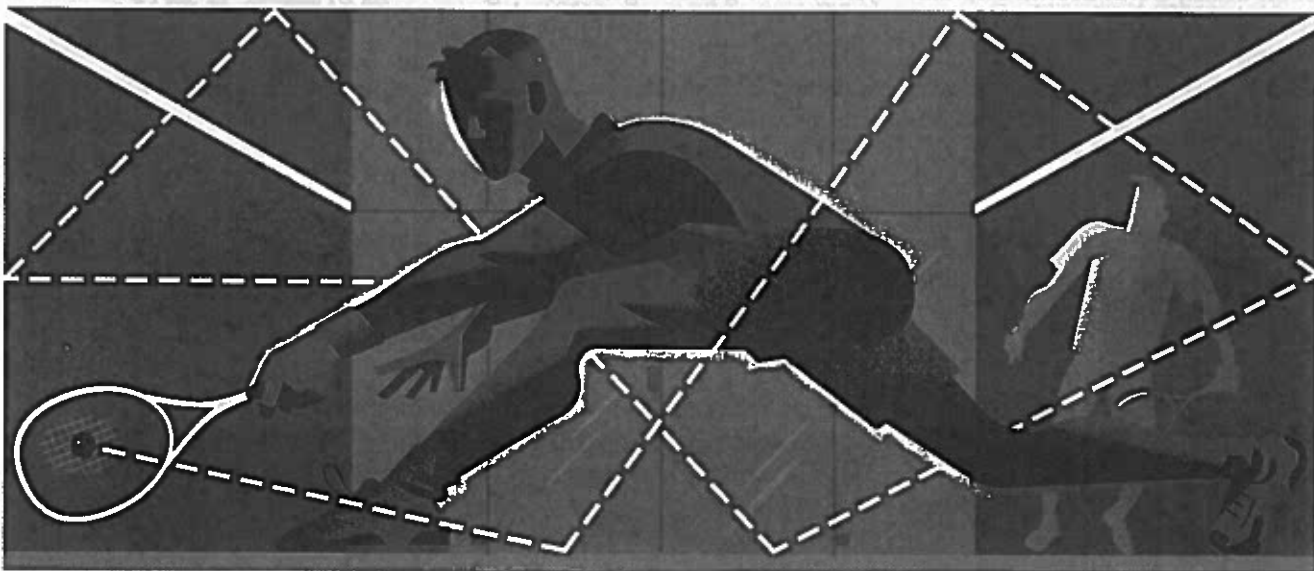
The game has a recognition problem, apparently. To be fair, though, it also has an image problem. Squash has long been synonymous with prep school, with being weedy and twee, and the most heinous clubs maintain an all-

the vomiting afterward, except when you vomit afterward. The game, above a certain level of skill, is played at a lunatic extremity of effort.

The great Egyptian pro Amr Shabana once explained squash's appeal after winning a gladiatorial match in London. Shabana, a slight, skittery lefty who clasps his racquet high on the handle, like a chef carving a roast, was everything I want to be on court—gracious,

pur. Most of the world's best players still hail from Britain or its former colonies: where once the Pakistanis held sway, now the Egyptians do.

For a century, North America had its own brand of squash: a narrower court; a harder, more wounding ball. It was one of those American innovations, like Nascar or monolingualism, that failed to sweep the globe. My father taught me the hardball game when I was seven or eight, at the Tennis & Squash Club in Buffalo. We entered frosty courts by a secret hatchway and waved wooden racquets in majestic arcs, a ceremony akin to polar explorers chiselling out ice caves. Hardball squash was a Wasp birthright, something handed down along with seersucker, circumspection, and a reflexive wip with a thank-you note.



Deep in a match, when your heart is hammering and your legs begin to seize, fatigue sweeps your mind clean.

whites rule that encompasses the skin tone of their members. Full disclosure: I went to prep school, and grew up in the Caucasian Chalk Circle.

Yet squash isn't just for douche bags. More than twenty million people worldwide play it, and *Forbes* has rated it the healthiest sport. You greyhound around a four-walled court to retrieve a ball caroming at a hundred miles an hour and send your opponent on the longest possible journey in return, then lunge into the far corner, where he's sent your shot, and so on—and on, and on, and on, for an hour or more. It looks like tennis at triple speed, and feels like heroin without the needles and the nodding off and

graceful, unpredictable, thirty-three. (I'm fifty-three.) Addressing the crowd from a nearly recumbent position, Shabana said, "By far, squash is the toughest, most brutal, most complete sport there is. It takes everything out of you. It takes every mental and physical effort you have. And if you do your best you have a fifty-per-cent chance to win."

The game began in 1865, at Harrow School, in London, and proliferated throughout the British Empire, acquiring a mad-dogs-and-Englishmen bur-nish as it spread. (There was a court aboard the Titanic.) I've played it on a tea plantation in Sri Lanka and in the bowels of an old hotel in Kuala Lum-

I began taking squash seriously in my late twenties, when the more exacting global version took hold here. Three times a week, it provided me with exercise and an occasion for magical thinking—believing, for instance, that I played better after a haircut because I was more aerodynamic. I gradually got to be pretty decent: a cagey lefty with a deceptive forehand boast, a shot spanked into the sidewall that ricochets obliquely off the front wall just above the tin, squash's version of a net. A few times in my thirties I even won the tournament at the Harvard Club, when the genuinely gifted players were busy with their version of Occupy Wall Street.

When I turned fifty, it was the chimes at midnight. The game I loved had begun to slip away, and I felt compelled to wrench it back—to see how much better at it I could still get. Or, rather, as I'd be seeking to improve while my body was rapidly disimproving, to see if I could learn how to cut my losses. Squash is a young man's game; tournament draws are rife with dudes who bound on court, their earbuds leaking Imagine Dragons, eager to go far too fast for far too long. I do better with erratic college players, female pros who never quite reached the top, and anyone who has a mortgage. One of my regular partners, Cece Cortes, just retired, in her mid-twenties, at No. 62 in the world. She hits terrific rails—the staple shot that hugs the sidewall—and is springy as a Super Ball. But if I muster the will to endure, hanging around like Toshiro Mifune stuck full of arrows, I have a fifty-percent chance to win.

My goal was to crack the top ten of the over-fifties, nationwide. And my window was small. My wife, Amanda, and I had twins, Walker and Addie, and suddenly they were in grade school and I'd become hoodie dad. Addie had recently leaned in after we laughed at the same thing—a businessman tripping over his own briefcase—and told me, “The only bad thing about growing up is that we get closer and closer and closer to you passing away.” Two college friends had fallen (leukemia; a runaway car), and twentysomethings were looking right past me. I consoled myself that I was still slim, still energetic after three macchiatos, and that by the candlelight in a restaurant bathroom I looked fortyish. Forty-five, tops. (I looked fifty.)

The truth is, I was having the only thing more wearisome than a midlife crisis: a midlife slump. A crisis is at least vivid—the crimson Ferrari, the pink slip. A slump is just a gray mass of days. I would wake at 5 A.M., the hour of remorse, pinned by cares: overdue tax payments; overdue museum-permission forms; an overdue article; Roth I.R.A. regret. Sometimes I'd pad into the kids' room to admire them as they slept: Addie clutching a stuffed penguin, Walker hand to heart, pledging allegiance. And then would come the disheartening recollection that, as vice-president of our co-op building, I had to find an exter-

minator for the rats that had chewed their way beneath our front stoop, along with a trapper for the squirrels scampering through gnaw-holes in the roof.

My path had become a rut. Unfortunately for my dreams of reinvention, squash itself was deepening it. After a match, my Achilles tendons felt like hawsers on a rusty barge, and as I clomped back to work I'd get passed by map-consulting tourists. At night, often as not, I'd bolt upright at 4 A.M., an hour before my scheduled remorse, with a searing calf cramp. Laboring groggily not to wake Amanda, I'd winch my calf over the side and stand to relieve the spasm. During this process, I more than once got tangled in the sheets and pinwheeled to the floor. So there were some issues.

In the movie version of this story, the training montage would go here. I'd have just lost a pivotal match—the match that made you understand, even before I did, that I had to change my life—following the death of my best buddy and/or my wife's leaving me for a player so good that it'd be exhilarating when I beat him at the end. That battle would introduce you to squash's rules (games are to eleven points, win by two, and a match is best of five games) and its strategy and protocols (you try to hold the center of the court, known as the T, while allowing your opponent a path to the ball).

After a florid breakdown, I'd start over as a locker-room attendant at a squash club run by Forest Whitaker/Morgan Freeman. At night, after I mopped the floors, Forest/Morgan would tear me down to rebuild me. He'd start me on gentle core strengtheners—the soundtrack here maybe “The Piña Colada Song”—but before long I'd be pounding crunches to Kanye. Next, I'd tackle innovative routines inspired by my former life as a writer: military finger pushups on a keyboard; the box-of-cold-brew clean-and-jerk; tearing a Kindle in half. Then, and only then, would Forest/Morgan permit me to again shake hands with a racquet.

But this isn't a movie, and I wasn't going to start over—I didn't have time, what with having a job and a family and TV shows to binge-watch. Instead, I began doing yoga every morning, dragging my body to the dog run: upward,

downward, junk-yard. After six months of intensive exercise to remediate my intensive exercise, my tendons relaxed and my cramps diminished. I also subscribed to all the squash Web sites, both of them. I spent my lunch hours watching Amr Shabana play matches on psasquashtv.com, trying to absorb his cat-like movement and deceptive, explosive swing, the way he imposed himself through cumulative pressure, conducting the points. And I turned to squashskills.com for daily video tips. Soon my brain was a jumble of imperatives about the locked-out position, the semi-cocked wrist, and the diamond setup.

Richard Chin, the pro at the Harvard Club, added that I should pronate my forearm rather than my wrist. Uh-huh. A banty Yoda from Guyana, Richard had a game predicated on getting to every ball, hitting a perfect lob, and regaining the T. Playing him was like contracting dengue fever: for a while, you hurt all over, and then you lost the will to live. He was great at peppering me with technical pointers and helping me find games when I travelled, but his chief role was to remind me, in a warm and helpful tone, of all the ways in which I sucked. In 2012, at the beginning of my quest, I lost in the finals of the Milt Russ Invitational, the tournament that Richard hosted for veteran players in the New York area. The match was close until the fourth game, but Richard just shook his head. “You really think hitting roll corners from the front of the court is the way to go?” he said. “I mean, Jesus, Tad! Jesus!”

Flummoxed by all this input, I began recording my matches on an iPad to identify my weaknesses. During the playback, I found myself rooting hard for me. I also saw that I was slow returning to the T; that I sometimes took an unaccountable extra hop before setting off, like Wile E. Coyote band-sawing his legs in midair; and that when I hit my backhand crosscourt I threw my body wide open, a cuckolded husband ripping aside the drapes. The best that could be said was that I often got to balls that looked out of reach, chasing them down with a stompy-footed grunt. When I told Amanda that an opponent had said I was faster than I looked, she said, “Most of the fast players have slim, springy legs. Yours are thick, like a

horse's." She meant this as a compliment: I had cleverly found an alternative power source, which happened to be a blubber stove.

More jarring was the evidence of my mood and character. My default expression on court was Notre-Dame gargoye. I scowled at my tins and bellowed "Chuckles!" when I butchered a put-away. (Chuckles was the clown on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" who got fatally shucked by an elephant.) I didn't curse, much, unless you count "goddammit," but I did occasionally throw my racquet. Usually, this was a gentle toss: committing the ashes of a loved one to the deep. But every six months or so I'd hurl it at the wall—then collect the mutilated frame, feeling like a total dick.

And, devastatingly, I could see what Adam Walker, a Brooklyn pro, had recently warned me about. After we played, he'd said, "You're hitting drops and boasts too early. You're trying to get out of the point when squash is all about staying in it. Bang, bang, bang, scrape it back, bang, run, hang in there, and the other guy makes a mistake." This was Richard Chin's point, too: squash is about endurance and sang-froid, about accepting everything your opponent throws at you with the appearance of imperturbability, until he loses heart. But *there*, and *there*, and again *there*, I could see where I'd failed the test.

Deep in the match, when your heart is hammering and your legs begin to seize, fatigue sweeps your mind clean.

Your limbic system, freaked out by all the incoming alarms, rashly orders, "Whack it just above the tin! No, no—above the tin!" Even the pros make tired errors, but they make them much later in the point. Fatigue exposed my fear of not keeping up, of being the sickly caribou that gets cut from the herd—which provoked the panicky behavior that identified me as the sickly caribou.

I'd always thought of myself as someone who fought back to win in five. It wasn't just in squash; I prided myself on being a late bloomer in school, in writing, in becoming a husband and father. I'd scope the drill, hone it, then ace it. When Amanda and I met, she was appalled by my "Mad Men"-era culinary skills and "Dead Poets Society" fashion sense, but, after no more than six or seven years of stout resistance, I'd actually begun to enjoy both cooking and looking quasi-of-this-decade. Since then, though, some stealth riptide had carried me away from myself. I'd become the guy who petered out. The gap between who I thought I was and the iPad double everyone else saw was the precise measure of my disarray.

The moments that survive in memory as emblems of youth always surprise you, because at the time you had no idea you were doing anything pivotal. They were moments of complete immersion, the main constituent of joy. For instance: walking down a gar-

bagey Boston street on a gusty spring morning, rain pending, as someone above throws up a sash. I am twenty, and I have just landed an extremely uncompetitive internship at *Partisan Review*, the first rung on a ladder that will lead, I suddenly believe, to a career as a writer. I am wearing my favorite navy-blue sweater with white bird's-eye checks, unaware that it will later become every costume designer's idea of early-eighties crap fashion.

Or: sitting in a window bay of the Empire State Building, at night, with Natalie. I am twenty-five, and oblivious of all the ways she is wrong for me, oblivious of her sorrows, her waywardness, her alcoholism. A group of us have smuggled Scotch and a stereo into a friend's office on the seventy-seventh floor, and "Wishing Well" is booming, that giddy drum-machine-and-bass hook. I wear contact lenses then, and one is killing me, so I take it out and cradle it in my palm as we kiss, and with my nearsighted eye I see her soft mouth and glacier-blue eye made enormous, while my corrected eye sees the Chrysler Building and the blazing city beyond, closeup zooming to master shot, the way New York can suddenly open itself to you for a moment, when you're young.

And: running barefoot on a beach in Australia, near Wollongong, at twenty-six. I am travelling around the world for a year, running everywhere to keep fit and explore. A low horizon, a gray sea, a hard flat wide beach, and the soft rain promised in Boston six years earlier falling now. I run for miles, skimming over the packed sand. The world is a treadmill and I can run forever.

We say we want our children to become the best version of themselves, but, inevitably, they're also alternate versions of us. The temptation for a vicarious do-over is immense, and so are the stage-mom rationalizations. Our kids will thank us later for saddling them with our concert-pianist regrets, right?

I introduced Walker and Addie to squash when they were three, hitting with them most weekends. Addie, a lefty who mastered the monkey bars at two, capered about like a leprechaun, indifferent to the fate of her swooping forehands. Walker was measured and

THIS MESSAGE HAS
NO SUBJECT.
DO YOU WANT TO
SEND IT ANYWAY?



scrupulous, the world's youngest old man. On court, for reasons of his own, he wore a gray-and-yellow wetsuit with matching goggles, which made him look like an old-timey Channel swimmer. He liked plonking the ball to himself over and over, but he also loved to mix it up unexpectedly, throwing in drop shots from everywhere against all reason, just as I do.

I wanted them to love the game without feeling pressure to be good, or to surpass me, or even to love it just because I did. I wanted it all for them, Sunday after Sunday for six years now—though they probably learned more from two months of lessons with Cece Cortes. Her swing was classic and correct, her manner cheerful and encouraging, and her agenda simple: instruction.

As a parent, you can't have a simple agenda. Even as I encouraged Addie to focus—*If you're going to swing, why not hit the ball?*—I also thought, Wouldn't it be great not to be so attached to outcome? And Walker's obsessiveness, his hopeful practicing, seemed to me both admirable and heartbreaking. Does anyone ever get all he wants from a game? Amanda snapped a photo of him crouched behind the court, racquet in hand, studying me. His utter susceptibility—*Is this right? Is this how you do it?*—filled me with a love close to terror.

I started playing four times a week, pushing my physical limits, and scheduling matches with better players. One was Will Carlin, also fifty, and even more of a tinkerer and a self-improver than I was. In his twenties, he'd been America's best player, fifty-third in the world. Stocky, intense, a stickler, he was armor-plated in fitness—his resting pulse rate, at one point, was a whalelike twenty-eight. He rarely gave a point away, scuttling low to retrieve my best drops and throw up a roof-scraping lob, waiting, then waiting some more, for a real opening before slotting in a forehand drop. Hashim Khan, the Pakistani legend, famously advised, "Don't hit tin." This had always struck me as idiotic—duh!—but Will's

game made me realize that if you don't hit the tin you make the other guy beat you.

He liked to drill afterward. I'd never been big on drills, but with Will I actually preferred them to matches, because the way his warmth and thoughtfulness contracted in competition reminded me uncomfortably of myself. So we traded baby drops and cross-court volleys: the training montage, at last.



As I examined my game, there'd be an occasional glint of brilliance—a moment when I lunged just right, held my shot to freeze him, then feathered in a drop to the nick, the delicious spot where the floor and the sidewall join and the ball rolls out dead.

But it was vexingly difficult to make such moments routine; Will's game was sounder in almost every aspect.

Amanda had endured my obsession patiently, the way you endure a car alarm, expecting it to stop any minute now. "How are the hammies?" she'd ask, gravely; it's possible that I'd occasionally discussed the state of my hamstrings in excessive detail. Now, deciding that the only way out was through, she gave me a Christmas present of a lesson with Peter Nicol. Peter, a lithe and buoyant Scot, was the world's top player for much of the late nineties and early aughts, a tireless retriever with a remarkable ability to analyze his opponent's game. After batting the ball to me for thirty seconds, he knew all my weaknesses. He demonstrated how cramped my swing was—it resembled a rudimentary defense against pickpockets—then had me stand farther from the ball and throw the bottom edge of my racquet at it, for more control and also, curiously, more power.

There was a coherent world view at work, one entailing less work for me and more for my opponent. The farther I stayed from the ball, the closer I stayed to the T, and the more correctly I hit the ball the faster I sprang back from it. Peter noted that Amr Shabana never seems to hurry, except when he's getting back to the T: "He floats to the ball." I labored to soften my galumphings, to give them shape. After an hour of



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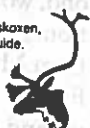
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hitting, I suddenly began to crack my backhand rails and recoil smoothly. It was an almost molecular shift, an upgrade in how my body fit into the world.

We played a game, just for fun. I got off to a lead, and then Peter began to reel me in, extending the points with a knowing grin. He shaved his rails tight, working me until my hammies quivered. But I was hitting good rails, too, thanks to him, and I converted a reaching-back-in-midair volley to go up, 6-5. Trying to catch me with low kills, he tinned a few, and then I dead-handed a drop shot to the nick. At 10-6, after a long rally, I held a forehand, then crunched a rail into empty space. He gave a little hop of chagrin and cried, "You . . . bugger!"

Afterward, Peter said, "You're very coachable. If you work on the form, you can get your basics up to the level of your drop shots, and then you'll be very tough indeed. Because I did not enjoy that game at all—it was horrible." His patently overgenerous compliments filled me with joy. I watched the video of the lesson repeatedly, and I practiced a more capacious backswing in the elevator, on the subway, even in the shower: striding in, throwing the bottom edge, bouncing back. I hit some great shower backhands, burying the ball by Addie's old red tugboat.

Six months in, I played in my first U.S. Nationals. The courts at Chelsea Piers in Stamford, Connecticut, are bisected by a long corridor. The show courts, featuring the twentysomethings in the Open division, America's best, were at one end, and the elders at the other. As I walked toward the outer courts, players time-lapsed before me, graying and thickening, growing encumbered with face shields, elbow sleeves, and knee braces, then freezing altogether at the T. Mobility is the game's cruel prerequisite: of the fourteen guys in the seventies' draw, only two could still sprint, and the eighty-five-plus division had no entrants. The winner, by default, was age.

I won my first match, lost my second, won two matches in the consolations, and then lost to a classy player from Massachusetts for reasons mercifully lost to history—my iPad had filled up and stopped taping. These mixed

DANGEROUS ASYLUM

As famous as a broken disc,
thanks for coming all this way.
That's why I have to do it,
to be a goon that matters
into another person's life.

You have a lousy voice, but
a good tenor. There, I've said it.
You'll have to quickly get back
on the job, brothers brothers.
In her transparent hair
she is, well, just a person,
Bruce confessed.

And that stuff is now getting cold.
I'll be there for you;
they want to cut them off from other
poppy-seed cakes,
getting—getting old again,
frustrated bobby-soxer.
Hold that opera—you made the lyrics.

You remind me of you.
We had been up to Speculator once before.

Off you go then.

—John Ashbery

results briefly boosted me to No. 10 in the country. I made a note to be thrilled, but, after five matches in less than forty-eight hours, I felt like a fossil hastily reassembled from a tar pit. Will Carlin, who'd just lost in the semis, came over in the locker room to commiserate. "We're pretty good players in our neighborhood," he said. "But there are a lot of neighborhoods out there."

If you love a demanding task, one that requires both discipline and talent—shooting hoops, playing drums, writing code—you eventually discover an innate boundary: you can apprehend real virtuosity, especially as it's used to best you, but you can't quite incorporate it. You will never be more than almost-great. The same wistfulness I now felt also crossed Will's face when he recalled winning a single point against the great Jahangir Khan, and Richard Chin's face when he recounted his brief match with Ramy Ashour, the stand-out of the past decade. Yet the truly great

players sacrifice so much that they stare back at us with equal longing. Or so we console ourselves as we batter against the boundary, moths outside a screen door, fluttering toward the light.

To play your very best, to make a Houdini-like escape from impossible conditions, you need a partner who handcuffs you and stuffs you in a mail sack, then hurls it into the river. He should also keep his mouth mostly shut, except to say "Nice shot." The box you're both in is too small—twenty-one feet wide by thirty-two feet deep—and the necessary do-si-do-ing too close to admit anyone who blocks or bickers. When you find a solid partner, you settle into an oppositional symbiosis, where you improve by trying to crush each other. Week after week, I prey on Naim's impatience, Dan's big-man dislike of twisting and turning, David's imperfect fitness—even as Naim and Dan and David prey on my impatience,

dislike of twisting and turning, and imperfect fitness.

These friendships are usually squash-specific: we play, postmortem a bit, then part. But they're stamped by the pleasure of jamming together, of collaborating on a jubilant rag of hissing strings, percussive splats, sneaker squeaks, and winded grunts. When the game soars like that, the showers are an Olympic platform. A squash-playing friend of mine, when asked to name his favorite body of water, wrote, "The showers at the Racquet Club."

The locker room, full of swaddled bodies dusted with baby powder, is a kind of late-life nursery. As I was changing to play the other day, the chatter, so often about hips and backs and knees, was about the virtues of dying on court. Dinny, in his seventies, mentioned a great of yesteryear, Pete Bostwick, whose father had a heart attack while playing polo at seventy-two.

Ted, a player my age, shook his head: "You die at that age and no one remembers you, no one comes to your funeral."

Another elder, knotting his wing tips, murmured, "You won't feel that way when you're seventy."

Dinny asked, "So when do you want to go, and how?" I gathered my racquets, heading out.

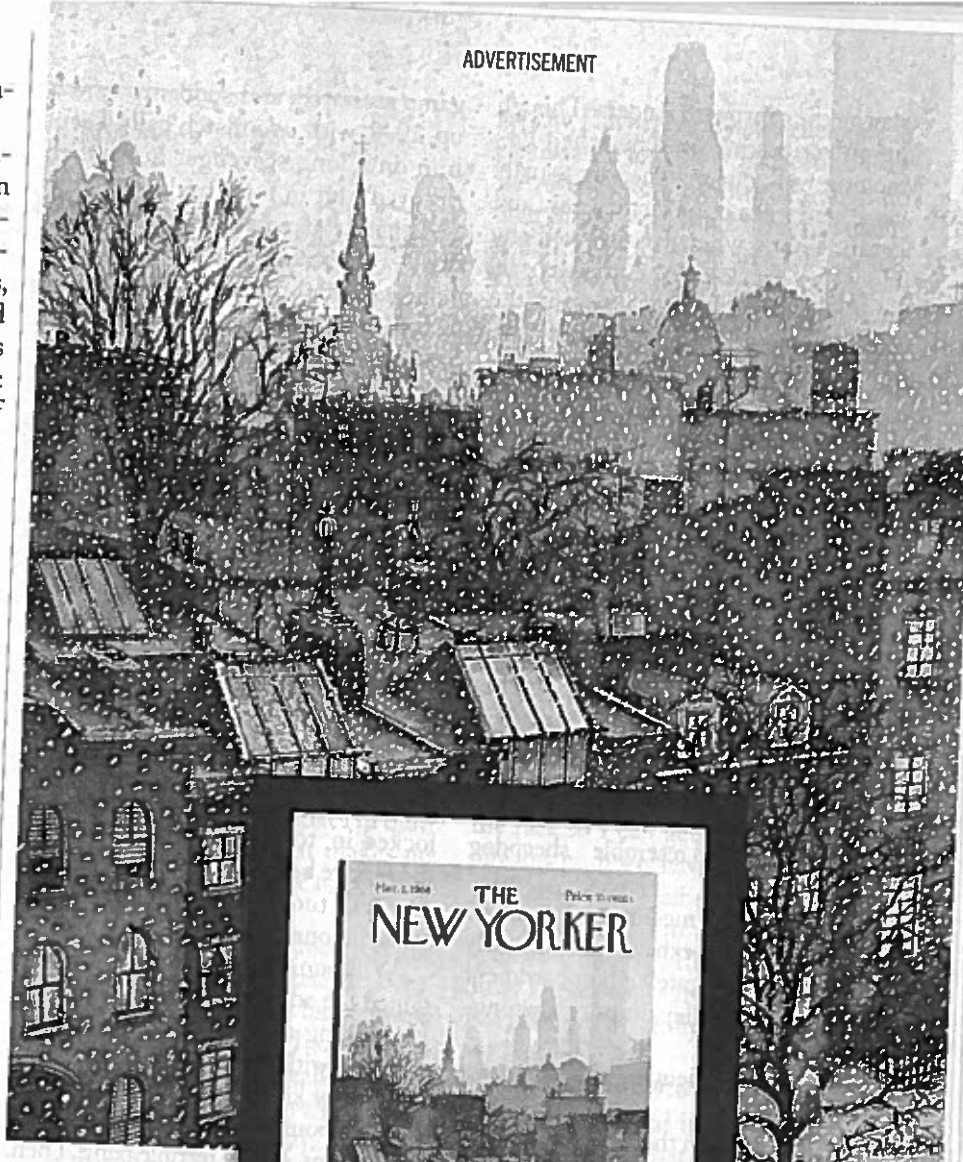
"I don't know," Ted said, "but I want it to be quick and painless and soon."

"What about lightning?" I heard Dinny ask, in the distance. "Have you thought about lightning?"

At fifty-two, I conceived a grand unified theory of squash. I was warming the ball up with a Swede named Anders Wahlstedt, an amiable art dealer who was once No. 18 in the world. In truth, Anders, in his fluorescent-orange shirt and iridescent-green socks, was doing most of the ball warming. He cracked forehands from a sturdy crouch, his swing full and flowing, the ball cannoning down the sidewall to expire in the back corner, repetitious as a gif. Anders calls his high-ordnance game his "bombardment." The word I prefer hearing, in his flat tones, is "motherfucker." Very occasionally, when his tactics aren't working, he lets out a "Motherfucker!" and shakes his fists at the ceiling, like Job in a silent movie.

I was thinking, How is it that I can

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stay on the court with Anders? Though he pulverizes me on days when he's moving well, our matches are usually close, and I eke out a victory now and again. That's when I conceived the Hourglass Analogy. At Anders's peak, in 1988—when he and I were in the top bulb of the hourglass—he'd have blown me off the court. In our seventies, his fundamentals will again make him invincible.

But now, in our early fifties, we're sliding down the neck of the hourglass together. And during this interlude I can still get to a lot of his shots, surviving long enough to counterattack. So Anders repeatedly buries me deep, making me run faster and lunge harder and twist more rapidly than anyone else. And when he wins a long point late in the match he bounds to the service box to get on with it, while I'm rubbing my sweaty palm in meditative circles on the wall, trying not to resemble a sheepdog in a hot car.

Anders denies me time to sharpshoot by extending and exhausting me. I deny him time to calibrate his bombardment by slipping in volley drops or a wrong-footing boast.

It's all about denying time.

In 2013, I lost in the semis of the Milt Russ in five long games. The match left me with a grapefruit-size cyst behind my left knee that took three months of physical therapy to fix, and with a conversation-starter in the locker room: my newfangled knee brace. When I was younger, taking a break like that made my body feel better, less banged up. Now it felt awful, like detoxing.

The following year, I advanced to the final—against Will Carlin. An overflow crowd of eight gathered, including Amanda, Walker, and Addie. Will, wearing an all-black outfit and a knee brace of his own, looked stern and focussed, but I'd finally beaten him the previous week in practice, and I came out attacking. After I edged him in the first game, 13–11, Addie cried, "Good job!"

Will began lobbing my backhand intelligently, monotonously; he took the next game at 7 and the third at 9. When I glanced over as we towelled off during the break, he didn't look nearly as tired as I hoped. The fourth

game seesawed, and suddenly he was up, 10–8, with two match balls. I sent him on a long scavenger hunt, then decoyed him in for a backhand drop and flicked it crosscourt into open space. At 9–10, I thumped a series of forehand rails and then whipped a crosscourt by him. Another crosscourt got me a game ball at 12–11, and a backhand volley, a perfect nick at the perfect time, closed it out.

Starting the fifth, I felt drained but game. I went up by a couple, then he won an extended rally after sending me all over. Before long I was down, 7–5, and my mind was swept clean. Walker, as I later saw on the video, was anxiously winding and unwinding the grip on his racquet. Amanda cried, "C'mon, Tad!" but I was so immersed I didn't hear her. I hit two tins, then, after a wipe-and-stroll to regain my breath, two quick winners. Totally locked in, totally tired, I marched to the service box thinking only, Don't hit tin. Will took the next point: 10–8. I took the one after that: 9–10.

Will punished my serve and maintained the advantage as we traded rails. Unleashing a mating attack, he pulled me wide with a crosscourt, then carved in a volley kill that I lunged to scrape back—a bounce too late. As Will threw up his arms, I felt a terrible pang. Then, as we embraced and staggered off the court, the pang diminished. I'd stayed in there—more than stayed in there—and still lost. But by God it was fun.

Addie has got a lot better at squash, but still doesn't much care if she wins or loses or never plays again. Walker has turned his focus to table tennis, where he scampers side to side, returning every ball. Neither of my children, it seems, is going to love squash as I do.

That love has only grown, to my surprise, even as I've swum out of the undertow. I haven't thrown a racquet in years, and the rats and squirrels are long gone (there's a lingering clothing-moth issue, but never mind). I played well at last year's Nationals, coming in sixth, which I'd like to think is the bottom of the top, even if it's really the top of the middle. Afterward, Richard Chin gave me one of his pep talks: "You wouldn't have won even if you were playing well, but you were terrible. I mean, just ter-

rible." Anders Wahlstedt lost the final, despite being up two games against a guy he'd have trounced when they were young. He stood in the center of the locker room, naked and stricken. Finally, he sighed and started for the shower—then paused to ask, "What happened out there, Tad?"

The game never quite lets you grasp it whole. Some days, I hit nothing but Peter Nicol backhands, and others I tattoo the tin. So I came into the Milt Russ in November with no expectations. I won my first three matches and felt reasonably quick and strong, but in the final I again faced Will Carlin. He'd scorched through the draw, and when we started I could see why. He'd been flying to South Carolina to work with a pro on his movement, and he was now a half step quicker and a hair more confident. Bossing the points, he took the opener easily. In the second game, I summoned my best to draw even from 4–8, then failed to keep the ball high and wide enough. In the third, I went up briefly, then tried a few rash volleys off his vexing lobs, and he closed me out, without nearly enough drama, 11–7.

I've always admired Samuel Beckett's maxim "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." But I had failed worse. Richard Chin said—well, you can guess. It occurred to me, during a long, long shower, that I might have passed my peak. Maybe last year's match against Will was the best I'd ever play, and I was now on the far slope of the mountain. This hit me very hard. It wasn't until I walked into our apartment, and under the banner Walker had strung to welcome me home—"Squash Daddy!"—that my life opened up to me again.

Finally, a week later, I watched the video. In the third game, at 7–8, came an extended point where we both probed patiently, jockeying for an opening. I hit an excellent crosscourt lob and Will turned at the back wall to play a safe, high-percentage shot, just as he always does—and the video froze. I'd run out of memory again. As I considered it longer, though, the freeze-frame moment came to seem encouraging. I'm on the T, racquet raised, on the balls of my feet, almost smiling. I'm behind, sure, and the eventual outcome seems clear—but I'm not out of it yet. ♦