Midnight Tennis

She's the former college star with the killer backhand, he's the electrician with the thrift-store racquet who keeps beating her, and when the McCarren Park lights cut out at 5-all on the hottest night of August, the bet is the only thing still on.

The first time I lost to Luke Brennan, I didn't believe it was happening until I was shaking his hand.

It was the second week of June, a Tuesday, on court four at McCarren Park, the one by the fence where the soccer balls come over. I was up 5-2 in the first set. I'd played Division I tennis at Boston University for three and a half years. I had a one-handed backhand that a man at the Central Park courts once stopped his own match to watch. Luke Brennan had a racquet he'd bought at Modell's before Modell's went out of business, a pair of basketball shorts, and a forehand that looked like a guy trying to swat a wasp off a picnic table.

He also got everything back.

That was the problem. I'd hit a ball that should have been a winner, deep to the corner, and he'd lumber after it like a golden retriever chasing a tennis ball, which, technically, was exactly what he was, and somehow get his racquet on it, and it would float back over the net, high and slow and spinning, and land two feet from the baseline. And I'd hit another one. And he'd get that one too.

By 5-5 I was hitting harder. By 6-6 I was hitting the back fence. He won the tiebreak seven to four, and then he won the second set 6-3, and I stood at the net with my face on fire while he wiped his forehead with the bottom of his T-shirt, which I did not look at.

"Good match," he said.

"You're a pusher."

"I'm a what?"

"A pusher. You just push it back. You don't hit anything. You wait for the other person to miss."

He thought about it. "Is that against the rules?"

"It's not against the rules."

"Okay," he said, "so it's tennis," and smiled, and he had the kind of smile that made the rest of his face look like it had been waiting for it. "Luke."

"I know. It's on the sheet."

"And you're Claire Donovan, with the backhand." He picked up his can of balls. "My buddy Tommy said watch out for the girl with the backhand. He said you beat him 6-0, 6-0 and didn't talk to him once."

"Tommy foot-faulted on every serve."

"He does do that," Luke said. "Same time next round?"

"It's a ladder. You don't pick who you play."

"Then I guess we'll see what the ladder wants," he said, and walked off toward Nassau Avenue swinging the Modell's racquet like a man without a single problem on God's earth, and I sat down on the bench and drank an entire bottle of Gatorade without stopping.

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The McCarren Summer Ladder was run by a man named Gary Feldstein out of a Google Sheet and a clipboard he hung on the fence with a bungee cord. Gary was sixty-four, a retired middle school vice principal from Kew Gardens who had moved to Greenpoint in 1998, before it was Greenpoint, and he ran the ladder the way I imagine he

ran a cafeteria. Matches started at eight. You brought a new can. You called your own lines, and if you called them badly he heard about it, and if he heard about it twice you were off the ladder. He had done this to a hedge fund guy in 2017 and still talked about it like Normandy.

It was co-ed, open level, sixty people, and nobody took it seriously except me.

I knew that about myself. I'd known it since I was nine.

I'd grown up in Bay Ridge, on the public courts at Dyker Beach Park with my father, who drove a bus for the MTA on the B63 and played tennis on his days off like it was a religion with one member. He taught me to hit against the backboard. He taught me to toss the ball like I was putting it on a high shelf. He let me win, when I was little, and then one day when I was twelve he stopped letting me, and I lost to him 6-1 and cried in the car the whole way home, and he said, "You'll get me," and I did, when I was fourteen, and he picked me up and spun me around in front of the entire Dyker Beach Park.

After that it was clinics and tournaments and the bus up to the junior circuit in Westchester, and a scholarship to BU, and then three and a half years of being very good on a team where everybody was very good, and waking up at five a.m. to lift, and losing in a way that felt like being found out. Halfway through my senior year I tore my labrum. They said I could rehab it. I said I didn't want to. My father didn't say anything, which was worse.

I didn't touch a racquet for six years.

I was twenty-nine now. I taught ninth-grade biology at a high school in Bushwick and lived in a fourth-floor walkup on Driggs Avenue with a window unit that sounded like a lawnmower having a nightmare. My father was sixty-one and still played at Dyker on Sundays. We talked about the Mets. We did not talk about tennis.

In April, he'd mailed me a racquet. A new one. No note. Just the racquet in a box, with the tags on, and a can of Penn balls.

I signed up for the ladder the same week. I didn't tell him.

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I beat Luke the second time.

It was the last week of June, and the ladder had shuffled me around through a dentist named Priya and a very sweet nineteen-year-old from Poland who apologized every time she hit a winner, and back down to court four, and there he was, in the same basketball shorts, eating a banana on the bench.

"Hey, backhand," he said.

"Hey, pusher."

"I've been working on stuff."

"What stuff?"

"You'll see," he said, which turned out to mean he'd learned to hit a slice. Badly, at first, but it stayed low and skidded, and it was annoying, and I was ready for it. I'd spent two weeks thinking about Luke Brennan's tennis, which I told myself was strictly professional. I'd figured out that he couldn't hit a high ball to his backhand. I'd

figured out that if I came to the net, he panicked and tried to lob me, and his lobs were short. I beat him 6-4, 6-3, and on match point I hit a backhand down the line so clean the guys on court three stopped and said, "Ooh," and I didn't even pretend not to hear it.

He jogged up to the net, grinning like he'd won.

"That was unbelievable," he said.

"Thank you."

"No, really. I don't even know what that was. Where'd you learn that?"

"My dad," I said, before I could think about it.

"He play?"

"He plays."

"He any good?"

"He's better than you."

"Everybody's better than me," Luke said. "I started two years ago. I'm an electrician. Local 3. I was doing a job on a building on Kent and the guy who owned it had a court on the roof, and he'd play with me on lunch. That's the whole story. I'm the worst person in this league who's ever beaten you."

"You're the only person in this league who's ever beaten me."

"Even better." He zipped his racquet into a bag that was clearly a bag for something else, a gym bag, maybe, with a broken zipper pull replaced by a paper clip. "You want a beer? Loser buys. That's a rule."

"That's not a rule."

"Gary told me it's a rule."

"Gary did not tell you that."

"Okay, Gary didn't tell me," he said. "But you've got to drink something, you're the color of a stop sign."

I looked at him for a long second. The court lights had just come on, those big humming floodlights, and the air was thick and gold and full of bugs, and somebody was playing salsa on a speaker over by the track. He had a smear of green court paint on one knee. His eyes were a weird bright gray, like a pigeon, which I did not plan on telling anybody.

"One beer," I said.

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We went to the Palace Café on Nassau, which was a Polish bar that had been there forever and looked it, with wood paneling and a jukebox and a bartender named Agnieszka who called Luke "Lukasz" and served us two □ywiecs without being asked.

"You come here a lot," I said.

"My grandmother lived on Eckford Street. I grew up three blocks away. Before all this." He waved his bottle at the window, at the Greenpoint of now, the coffee place with no sign, the shop that sold only candles, a couple walking a greyhound in a sweater in June. "My dad says the neighborhood got rich and moved away from us without leaving."

"Is he still here?"

"He's in Staten Island now. With my mom. They sold the house in 2015 and bought a place with a pool, and now he talks about the pool like it's his child." He drank. "You?"

"Bay Ridge."

"So we're both Brooklyn."

"Bay Ridge is barely Brooklyn. It's basically Staten Island with a better train."

"Don't let my dad hear you say that. He'll drive over and show you the pool."

I laughed, which surprised me. I hadn't been laughing much that year. I'd been doing a lot of grading and a lot of lying on my floor in front of the window unit and a lot of not calling my father back.

"So what's your deal," Luke said. "Backhand. You played in college."

"How do you know?"

"Because you yell at yourself in, like, a coach voice. 'Feet, Claire.' Nobody who learned at the Y says 'feet.'"

I put my beer down. "I don't say that."

"You said it eleven times tonight. I counted. Tommy's gonna make a T-shirt."

"Tommy foot-faults."

"Tommy does foot-fault," he agreed, and waited.

So I told him. Not all of it. BU, the scholarship, the shoulder. I didn't tell him the part about my dad going quiet in the car on the way home from Boston that last time, with my bags in the back and my racquets in the trunk, and the whole length of the Merritt Parkway going by with nobody saying anything. I didn't tell him about the racquet in the box.

He listened. He was a good listener, in a way I didn't expect, sitting there in a bar that smelled like old wood and kielbasa with his elbows on the table and his chin on his fist.

"So why'd you come back," he said, when I was done.

"I don't know. I missed it."

"That's a good reason."

"Is it?"

"Best one," he said. "I didn't play anything growing up. My dad did hockey, my brothers did hockey. I was the fat kid with the bad knees who read the instruction booklets for the Nintendo. I found tennis when I was twenty-nine, on a roof, with a guy who owns, like, nine buildings and wore socks with his slides. And I'm bad. You know I'm bad. But I love it." He shrugged. "I don't need to be good at it. I just like being out there when the lights come on."

I didn't have anything to say to that. I picked at the label of my beer.

"Rematch," he said.

"It's a ladder."

"Then let's hope the ladder has a sense of humor."

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It did.

The ladder put us together again the first week of July, and I beat him 6-0, 6-2, and he lay down flat on his back on the court afterward with his arms out like a snow angel and said, "Okay. Okay. I get it. You're a genius. Go away." And the second week of July, and he beat me in three sets. And the third week of July, and I scraped out a long, cranky three-setter I barely remember. And the last week of July, and he beat me again, a long ugly match that ended in a tiebreak at 10:58 p.m., two minutes before the lights went out.

The lights at McCarren went out at eleven. They didn't fade. They didn't flicker. At eleven o'clock, every night, a timer somewhere clicked and the floodlights went off all at once with a sound like a giant exhaling, and the courts dropped into a blue dark, and whatever you were in the middle of, you were done.

"I know where that box is," Luke said, the night of the tiebreak, sitting on the bench in the sudden dark. "The timer. It's on the pole by the gate, the gray one. I could open it with a flathead."

"Don't you dare."

"I'm just saying. I'm a professional."

"Gary would kill you."

"Gary would kill me," he agreed, "and then he'd take me off the ladder."

That was three wins for him and three for me. Six matches. Gary, who noticed everything, wrote BRENNAN / DONOVAN on the

clipboard with a little arrow pointing at both names, like a weather map.

"You two are a whole thing," he said. "I've done this nineteen years. I've never seen two people keep getting slotted into each other like this. It's the algorithm."

"It's a Google Sheet, Gary," I said.

"The algorithm," Gary said firmly, "is me."

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We texted now. It had started as logistics, court times, whether it was going to rain. Then it wasn't logistics.

> *You up*

> *It's 11:40 on a Wednesday. I'm a teacher.*

> *It's summer. You're not a teacher until September.*

> *I'm always a teacher. I'm teaching right now. Lesson one, don't text people "you up"*

> *Ok. Lesson noted. Are you, hypothetically, up*

> *Hypothetically*

> *I'm on a roof on Kent. Job ran late. You can see the whole city. Thought you'd like it*

And then a photo: Manhattan across the river, all lit up like somebody had spilled a jewelry box, the Williamsburg Bridge strung with its lights, and in the bottom corner of the frame, out of focus, the

toe of a work boot.

> *That's very pretty*

> *That's what I said*

> *You said I'd like it. That's different*

> *Do you like it*

I looked at the photo for a long time, lying on my floor on Driggs Avenue with the window unit groaning and a pile of summer-school lab reports next to my head.

> *Yeah, I wrote. I like it.*

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On the Fourth of July we watched the fireworks from Tommy's roof in Williamsburg, a whole group of people from the ladder, Priya and her wife, the sweet Polish girl whose name turned out to be Ola, and Gary, who brought a folding chair and a cooler and sat with the cooler on his lap like a cat. The Macy's barges were down on the East River that year, and every time a big one went off the whole roof said, "Ohhh," together, like a congregation.

Luke stood next to me at the edge, by the railing. Not touching. Just next to me, close enough that I could feel the heat coming off his arm in the heat that was already coming off everything.

"My dad used to take me to these," I said. "We'd go to the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights when they did it over there. He'd put me on his shoulders."

"He sounds like a good guy."

"He is."

"So how come you don't call him back?"

I looked at him. "How do you know I don't call him back?"

"Because when your phone rang at the Palace last week you looked at it like it was a bill." He didn't look at me. He kept looking at the fireworks, a big gold one that hung in the air and dripped. "Sorry. I'm nosy. My mom says I should've been a cop."

"It's fine."

It wasn't fine, but it was fine that he'd said it. I didn't know how to explain that. A purple one went off, and then a red one, and then about fifty at once, a big stuttering roar of them, and everybody screamed, and under the noise, without deciding to, I said, "He sent me a racquet."

Luke turned his head.

"In April. Just in a box. No note. I haven't called him since. I didn't know what to say. Thank you? Sorry? Sorry I quit? Sorry I quit the thing you gave me?"

"Is that the racquet you've been using?"

"Yeah."

He was quiet for a second. Then he said, "Maybe start with thank you," and the finale went off over the river, white and gold and so loud you felt it in your teeth, and in the light of it his face was lit up and soft and very close, and I thought, oh, no, and then Gary yelled,

"Who's got the bottle opener," and Luke stepped back to find it, and the moment folded itself up and went away.

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Here's what I hadn't told anybody: I'd started to look forward to losing.

Not losing. Not exactly. But I'd started to look forward to court four, and to his stupid Modell's racquet, and the way he'd yell, "Oh, come on," at himself when he missed an easy one, and laugh. The way he talked to the ball. "Stay in, stay in, stay in." The way, when I hit a shot he couldn't get to, he'd stop running and just watch it go by and say, "Wow," like a guy watching a meteor. Nobody had ever watched my tennis like that. Not coaches. Not my teammates. Not even, by the end, my father, who had watched it like a man checking a stock price.

For six years tennis had been something I'd failed at. And then, on the courts at McCarren, with the bugs and the salsa and the soccer balls coming over the fence, it was something I was just doing. Something I was doing with somebody.

I hadn't told anybody that. I definitely hadn't told him.

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The first week of August, Gary posted the playoff bracket.

The top sixteen on the ladder got a little single-elimination tournament at the end of the summer. There was no prize, except that Gary bought a trophy at a place on Manhattan Avenue that did bowling trophies and had the winner's name put on it, and the trophy stayed on a shelf behind the bar at the Palace with a Polaroid of the

winner taped to it. The Polaroid of last year's winner, a lawyer named Steve, had been there all year. Agnieszka had drawn horns on it.

I was the one seed. Luke was sixteen.

"He snuck in," Tommy said, at the Palace, on the Saturday the bracket went up. Luke was in the bathroom. Tommy was three beers deep and sunburned in the shape of a tank top. "He shouldn't even be in. He was seventeenth. He would've been seventeenth."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on." Tommy looked at me. "That match in July. When you guys went three. Third set, five-four, he's serving to stay in it, and he double-faults twice? Luke? Luke doesn't double-fault. Luke serves like my grandmother, but he gets it in. That's his whole thing."

I didn't say anything.

"He lost that one on purpose," Tommy said, "so you'd stay in the top sixteen. You'd lost to Priya the week before, remember? You were on the bubble. He did the math on a napkin. I was there. He was like, if she loses this one she's out." Tommy grinned, pleased with himself, like he'd told me something sweet. "He's into you. It's actually kind of pathetic. Don't tell him I told you."

The jukebox was playing Elvis. I remember that. Return to Sender.

I remembered the match. It had been the end of a long, hot night in mid-July, and I'd been tired and cranky and playing badly, and he'd been playing better than he ever had, and at 5-4 in the third he'd double-faulted, twice, on the last two points, and I'd won, and I'd been so relieved I'd hugged him at the net. I'd hugged him. He'd

smelled like sunscreen and court dust, and he'd said, "You got me," in my ear.

You got me.

Luke came out of the bathroom drying his hands on his shorts. He saw my face from across the bar and stopped.

"What," he said.

I put a twenty on the table, for my beer, which cost six dollars. I stood up. I didn't trust my voice, so I didn't use it. I walked past him and out the door onto Nassau Avenue, into the heat, and turned toward Driggs, and he caught up with me halfway down the block, under a streetlight, in front of the shoe repair place that's been closed since COVID.

"Claire. Hey. What happened?"

"Did you throw that match."

He stopped walking.

That was the answer. I didn't need anything else. I'd seen people stop walking like that in the middle of a hallway when you asked them where their homework was.

"July," I said. "The double faults. Did you throw it."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Okay. It's not... Look. You were on the bubble. You'd lost to Priya. I thought, she's the best one here, she should be in it, it doesn't matter to me, I'm just..."

"It matters to me."

"It's a rec league, Claire."

"I know what it is." My voice did something then, cracked down the middle, and I hated it, I hated it so much. "You know what my dad did, when I was little? He let me win. For years. And I thought I was so good. And then he stopped, and I found out I wasn't, and it was the worst day of my life, but it was the first true thing anybody had ever told me about it. And then I spent my whole life trying to be good enough that nobody would have to let me win. And then I wasn't good enough anyway, and I quit, and I didn't pick up a racquet for six years. And this summer, this summer was the first time it felt like mine again. Like it was just a thing I did. And you..." I stopped. I didn't want to cry on Nassau Avenue in front of a shoe repair place. "You made it a thing somebody gave me."

He didn't say anything. He looked like I'd hit him.

"I wasn't trying to give you anything," he said finally. Quiet. "I was trying to keep seeing you."

"Then you could've asked."

"I know."

"You could've just asked me, Luke."

"I know," he said. "I know. I'm sorry."

I walked home. He didn't follow me. Later, lying on my floor in the dark, I heard the G train go under Nassau, a faraway rumble like weather, and thought about the fact that he'd known exactly where my line was and stepped over it anyway, and the worse fact, which was that a part of me, a small stupid part in the middle of my chest, had liked hearing it.

I was trying to keep seeing you.

I turned over and put my face in the floor.

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I didn't answer his texts for a week.

> *I'm sorry. Really. I'll say it as many times as you need.*

> *I told Gary. He took me off the ladder. Then he put me back on because he said nobody else knows how to fix the bungee cord.*

> *I know you're not reading these.*

> *I'm still sorry.*

The first round of the playoffs was the next Tuesday. I beat Ola 6-1, 6-1, and she apologized fourteen times. In the quarters I beat Priya, who'd beaten me in July, in a match that took two hours and left me so wrecked I threw up a little in the planter by the gate. In the semis I beat a guy named Josh who worked in crypto and called every ball on the line out, and Gary stood behind the fence with his arms crossed and said nothing, nothing at all, and Josh lost the third set 6-0 because he couldn't stand the silence.

Luke, the sixteenth seed, the worst player in the playoffs, the man with the Modell's racquet and the gym bag with the paperclip zipper, won three matches in a row.

"He's possessed," Tommy said, when I passed him at the fence. He'd stopped talking to me about anything else, mostly out of guilt. "He beat Steve. He beat Steve the lawyer. Steve threw his racquet into the parking lot. He's out there every morning at six. He's got a hopper of

balls. He's hitting serves against the handball wall before work like a lunatic."

"Good for him," I said.

"He's not doing it for him," Tommy said, and then looked like he wished he hadn't, and went to get a Gatorade.

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The final was on the third Thursday of August. The forecast said ninety-six degrees. At eight-thirty at night it was still ninety-one, and the air felt like the inside of a mouth.

We didn't get the court until 9:20, because the women's doubles final, which Gary had added this year in a fit of ambition, went three hours. By the time we walked onto court four, the whole park was out. It was too hot to be inside. People were lying on blankets on the ball fields. The track was full of runners going in slow, sweaty circles. Somebody had a Bluetooth speaker playing Biggie on the hill. Over on Driggs, by the pool, a fire hydrant was open, and you could hear kids shrieking in it from a block away.

There was a crowd on the bench. Ola. Priya and her wife. Tommy, who'd made a sign out of a pizza box that said LUKE IS POSSESSED. Agnieszka from the Palace, who'd closed the bar early, she said, because it was too hot to pour. Gary in his folding chair with his clipboard, wearing a visor that said KEW GARDENS ROTARY.

Luke was on the other side of the net, bouncing a ball on his strings. He looked tired. He'd gotten a haircut. He'd gotten a new racquet, a real one, a Wilson, and he was holding it like it might go off.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"I didn't know if you'd come."

"It's the final, Luke."

"I know. I just... I thought maybe you'd forfeit. To make a point."

"That would be letting you win," I said. "I don't do that."

He almost smiled. Not quite. "Fair."

We warmed up without talking. He was hitting differently. The slice was real now, low and nasty and staying down. The forehand still looked like he was swatting a wasp, but it was a faster wasp. He'd been practicing. He'd been practicing for this, at six in the morning against a handball wall in McCarren Park, and I didn't know what to do with that, so I hit the ball harder.

At the net, before the coin flip, he said, "Can I say one thing?"

"You're going to anyway."

"I want to make a bet."

"Luke."

"Listen. If you win, I'll leave you alone. I mean it. I'll quit the ladder. You won't have to see me at the Palace. You can have the whole park."

"And if you win?"

He took a breath. Sweat was running down the side of his face into his collar. "If I win, you let me take you to dinner. Real dinner. Not a

□ywiec. A tablecloth."

"And you won't let me win."

"I'm going to try," he said, very seriously, "as hard as I've ever tried at anything in my life to beat you, Claire Donovan."

I looked at him across the net. The lights hummed overhead, white and fierce, and the moths were throwing themselves at them, and behind him the whole park was hot and dark and full of people, and somewhere far off a siren went down McGuinness Boulevard and faded.

"Fine," I said. "Deal."

Gary flipped the coin. Luke won the toss. Of course he did.

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I'm not going to tell you every point. I don't remember every point. I remember it the way you remember a fever.

I remember I won the first set 6-3 and thought, okay, this is it, this is just tennis, I'm better than him, I've always been better than him. I remember he started the second set by changing everything. He stopped pushing. He started coming to the net, on purpose, which he'd never done, which was insane, because I could pass him every time, except I couldn't, because he'd figured out that if he hit the slice low to my backhand and came in behind it, I had to hit up, and he was six-two and had a wingspan like a coat rack. He'd thought about me. He'd spent two weeks thinking about my tennis, which I assume he told himself was strictly professional.

He won the second set 7-5. The bench went crazy. Tommy waved the pizza box.

The third set was the hottest hour of my life. I changed my shirt on the bench. He poured a whole bottle of water over his head and shook it off like a dog. We didn't talk on the changeovers. We didn't look at each other. It was 1-1, then 3-3, then 4-4, and somewhere in there the speaker on the hill switched from Biggie to Whitney Houston and people on the ball fields started singing, and neither of us noticed. At 4-5, serving to stay in it, I went down 15-40, two match points, and I heard myself say, out loud, "Feet, Claire," and on the bench Tommy said, "There it is," and I saved both of them, one with a backhand down the line that I can still feel in my wrist, and held.

5-5.

I bounced the ball to serve. I looked up at the lights.

And they went out.

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The whole park said, "Ohhh."

It was eleven o'clock. I'd forgotten. We'd all forgotten. It came down all at once, the great humming white of the floodlights snapped off and gone, and for a second I couldn't see anything, my eyes still full of the glare, the whole court one big blue-black nothing with the net a darker line across the middle of it.

Then things came back. The orange of the streetlights out on Bedford, coming through the trees. The windows of the apartment buildings on Driggs, a hundred little yellow squares. The headlights

on Nassau. A big, low, yellow moon, almost full, sitting up over the Citibank building in Long Island City like somebody had left it there.

"Well," Gary said, in the dark. "That's the rules."

"We're five-all," somebody said. Priya.

"I know what the score is," said Gary. "I'm saying the rules are the courts close at eleven. We'll resume tomorrow."

"Tomorrow it's going to storm," Agnieszka said. "Big storm. All weekend."

"Then next week."

"I'm in Poland next week," said Ola, sadly, like it was her match.

I was still standing at the baseline with the ball in my hand. Across the net, in the dark, I could see the shape of Luke, his white shirt, his hands on his hips.

"I can get to the box," he said. To me, not to Gary. "Two minutes. I've got a screwdriver in my bag."

"No," I said.

"Claire..."

"You'd get fired. You'd get arrested. You're a union electrician and you're going to break into a city light box for a rec league?"

"For a rec league," he said. "Sure. Is that what it is."

I didn't answer. The heat was pressing down on everything. My heart was going so hard I could feel it in my fingertips. And I didn't want to stop. That was the thing. That was the true thing, the only true thing I

had. I didn't want it to be over. I didn't want to win on a coin flip next week in a thunderstorm, or lose that way. I wanted this. Right now. Him and me and the net in the dark.

"Phones," I said.

"What?"

I turned to the bench. "Everybody. Phone flashlights. Point them at the court."

There was a pause. Then Tommy said, "Oh, hell yeah," and his light came on, and then Priya's, and her wife's, and Ola's, and Agnieszka's, and then people I didn't know, people who'd been lying on the ball fields and drifted over in the dark to see what the yelling was about, a couple with a stroller, two teenagers on Citi Bikes, a guy in a Mets jersey holding a bag from the bodega on Driggs. They came up to the fence and held their phones up, and the little white lights came on one after another all along the chain link, twenty, thirty, forty of them, until the court was lit, not lit like before, not bright, but lit, a soft wobbling silver, the shadows going everywhere, the lines glowing like chalk.

Gary stood up out of his folding chair.

"This," he said, "is extremely irregular."

"Gary," said about nine people at once.

Gary looked at the clipboard. He looked at the court. He looked at me, and at Luke, and back at me. He took off his visor and wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist.

"Five-all," he said. "Donovan to serve. Call your own lines. If I hear one bad call I'm taking you both off the ladder for life."

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You couldn't see the ball until it was almost on you. That was the first thing. It came out of the dark like something thrown at you in a dream, a yellow blur, and you just swung. There was no strategy. There was no coach voice. There were no feet. There was just the ball and the sound of it and the sound of him across the net, breathing, and the little lights trembling on the fence, and the crowd going "Oh!" and "Oh!" every time either one of us got to something we shouldn't have.

I held serve. 6-5.

He held. 6-6.

Tiebreak.

It went back and forth. 2-1. 3-3. Somebody's phone died and they yelled, "Sorry! Sorry!" and somebody else filled in the gap. At 5-5 he hit a ball that landed right on the baseline, I swear it was right on the baseline, a little puff of white, and I couldn't see it, not really, and I stood there with my heart in my throat and every phone on the fence pointed at me.

"In," I said.

He looked at me across the net.

"It was in," I said. "Your point."

6-5. Match point. His.

He served. It was a good serve, a real one, the best one he'd hit all night, and I got my racquet on it and sent it back deep and we were in it, the two of us, the longest point of the whole summer. Crosscourt and back. Down the line and back. He slid, he actually slid on a hard court in his sneakers, and got to a backhand I'd have bet my life was a winner. I came in. He lobbed me, and it was a good lob, a real lob, high up into the dark where I lost it completely against the black sky, and I backpedaled and backpedaled and it was coming down, somewhere, and I couldn't see it, and then I could, a yellow ghost against the yellow moon, and I swung at it with everything I had.

I hit it into the net.

It just dropped. Plop. Rolled back toward me. Lay there on the court at my feet in the circle of everybody's flashlights.

The whole park went silent, and then the whole park went absolutely crazy.

. . .

I don't know who reached the net first. I think it was me. I think I ran.

He was standing on the other side of it with his new racquet hanging from his hand and his mouth open, like he didn't understand what had happened, like he'd been running toward something for so long he'd forgotten it had an end.

"You didn't let me win," I said.

"I didn't let you win," he said. He sounded dazed.

"You beat me."

"I beat you." He looked down at the ball, still sitting there on my side. "Was the five-all one in? Really?"

"It was on the line."

"You couldn't see it."

"I could see it enough."

"You could've called it out. Nobody would've known."

"I'd have known," I said. "That's the whole point. That's the whole point of the whole thing."

He stared at me. Then he started to laugh, a disbelieving, wrecked kind of laugh, and dropped the racquet on the court, and I was laughing too, and crying, a little, in the heat, in the dark, with forty strangers holding their phones up and Tommy waving a pizza box over his head like a man at a Jets game. And then Luke leaned over the net, slow, a question, giving me plenty of time to say no, and I grabbed a fistful of his soaking-wet T-shirt and pulled him the rest of the way.

He tasted like salt and Gatorade. He had one hand on the side of my face and the net was digging into my hip and the fence was cheering, actually cheering, like it was the US Open, and I didn't care, I didn't care about anything.

When we came up for air, Gary was standing next to the net post with his clipboard.

"Brennan," he said. "Three-six, seven-five, seven-six. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Gary."

"Kissing over the net," said Gary, "is also extremely irregular."

"Is it against the rules?" Luke asked.

Gary considered this. He looked at the two of us for a long time. Then he put his visor back on.

"I'll allow it," he said.

. . .

Nobody wanted to go home. It was too hot. Somebody bought a whole case of Modelo at the bodega on Driggs and handed them out along the fence, and the couple with the stroller asked who had won, and Tommy explained the entire summer to them at great length, with diagrams, on the pizza box. Agnieszka hugged me and said something in Polish that she refused to translate. Ola cried. Gary folded up his chair and took the bungee cord off the fence and said, "Same time next year," and walked off toward Nassau Avenue, a little old man in a Rotary visor in the moonlight, and I loved him.

Luke and I walked out the gate onto Driggs. We weren't holding hands. We were just walking very close. Our arms kept bumping. Neither of us moved away.

At the corner by the pool the fire hydrant was still open, a big fan of white water spraying out across the street and catching the streetlight, with three kids running through it screaming in their underwear while their mothers sat on a stoop and fanned themselves with takeout menus.

"So," Luke said.

"So."

"I won the bet."

"You did."

"Dinner. A tablecloth. That was the deal."

"I know what the deal was."

"I'm just making sure you remember. It was a very tense moment. People forget."

"I remember," I said. And then, before I could stop myself, because it had been a summer of saying things before I could stop myself: "You don't have to wait for dinner."

He stopped walking. Under the streetlight his eyes were that pigeon gray, and very dark in the middle, and his hair was wet, and he was looking at me like I'd hit a backhand he didn't know was coming.

"What do you mean," he said.

I walked backward, a step, into the spray of the hydrant. It was freezing, the water, a shock, it took my breath away, and the kids shrieked, and I stood there in it with my arms out and the water running down my face and my shirt and my legs, cold, finally, finally cold, for the first time in weeks. Luke stood on the curb and stared at me.

"Come here," I said.

He came. He walked into the water in his sneakers and his shorts and his ruined T-shirt and took my face in both hands, and the water came down on both of us, and the kids yelled, "Ewww," and one of the mothers on the stoop said, "Oh, leave them alone, it's August," and he kissed me again, slower this time. Nobody was cheering. Nobody

was holding up a phone. It was just him, and the cold water, and the hot night, and his hands sliding down to my waist and staying there like they'd always meant to.

"I live on Driggs," I said into his mouth.

"I know. You told me. At the Palace."

"Fourth floor. The air conditioner's broken."

"I'm an electrician," he said. "I can probably fix it."

"I don't want you to fix it."

He pulled back. Just enough to look at me. Water was dripping off his eyelashes. "Okay," he said, a little hoarse. "Okay. Then I won't."

· · ·

We went up the stairs too fast. The stairwell smelled like the neighbor's cooking and old paint, and the bulb on the third floor had been out since May, and he tripped on the second-to-last step and I laughed and he pinned me against the wall by the mailboxes and kissed me until I stopped laughing. I couldn't get the key in the lock. My hands were shaking. He put his hand over mine, steady, an electrician's hand, and turned it.

The apartment was dark and hot as an oven, and the window was open onto Driggs, and you could hear the hydrant still going down on the corner and the kids, fainter now, and a radio somewhere playing a Yankees postgame, and the long low rumble of the G under the street.

He stood in the doorway, dripping on my floor. I stood in front of him, dripping on my floor. Neither of us said anything for a second.

"Claire," he said.

"Yeah."

"I really did try as hard as I could."

"I know," I said. "That's why."

I took his hand and pulled him inside, and he reached back without looking and pushed the door shut behind us, and the last thing I heard before it closed was the whole city, out there in the heat, still awake.

. . .

The storm came the next afternoon, the way Agnieszka said it would, a huge green-black wall of it that came across the river from Manhattan and shook the windows on Driggs. We watched it from my bed. He'd fixed the air conditioner after all, at around nine in the morning, while I slept, with a butter knife and a paperclip, and when I woke up it was humming like a normal machine for the first time in two years and he was sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxers looking extremely proud of himself.

"I said don't fix it."

"That was last night," he said. "Different conditions."

On Sunday, while the rain came down, I called my father.

He picked up on the second ring. "Claire?"

"Hi, Dad."

There was a long pause. In the background I could hear the TV, the Mets, losing.

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything's okay. I just wanted to say thank you. For the racquet."

Another pause. Longer. Then he cleared his throat, and his voice went funny, and he said, "Are you using it?"

"I'm using it. I'm in a league. In McCarren Park."

"How're you doing?"

"I lost in the final," I said. "To a guy who started two years ago."

"You lost?"

"I lost."

"Was he good?"

I looked across the room. Luke was in my kitchen, which was also my living room, which was also mostly my bed, in a pair of my gym shorts that were too small for him, trying to make eggs in a pan I'd never used.

"No," I said. "He's terrible. He's the worst player I've ever lost to."

My father laughed. He laughed like he used to, in the car, on the way home from Dyker, before any of it.

"Bring him on Sunday," he said. "I'll take him apart."

"He'd love that," I said, and Luke turned around from the stove with a spatula in his hand and mouthed, What? and I just shook my head and smiled at him, and listened to my father tell me, for the next forty

minutes, everything that was wrong with my second serve.

. . .

The trophy is on the shelf behind the bar at the Palace Café now, next to the □ywiec tap. It's a bowling trophy. The little gold man on top is holding a bowling ball, because the place on Manhattan Avenue was out of tennis guys, and on the plaque underneath it says MCCARREN SUMMER LADDER CHAMPION, and under that, LUKE BRENNAN.

Taped to it is a Polaroid. Agnieszka took it, on the court, in the dark, with the flash. It's mostly black. You can see the net, and the little lights all along the fence behind it, and two people leaning over the net, a blur of white shirts, kissing like nobody's watching.

Nobody's drawn horns on it. Agnieszka says nobody would dare.

Under it, in Sharpie, in Gary's handwriting, it says REMATCH: NEXT SUMMER.

We've been practicing.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.