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# OPEN

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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*Alfred A. Knopf* New York 2009

*For Stefanie, Jaden, and Jaz*

*One cannot always tell what it is that keeps us shut in, confines us, seems to bury us, but still one feels certain barriers, certain gates, certain walls. Is all this imagination, fantasy? I do not think so. And then one asks: My God! Is it for long, is it for ever, is it for eternity? Do you know what frees one from this captivity? It is very deep serious affection. Being friends, being brothers, love, that is what opens the prison by supreme power, by some magic force.*

—Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, July 1880



# THE END

I OPEN MY EYES and don't know where I am or who I am. Not all that unusual—I've spent half my life not knowing. Still, this feels different. This confusion is more frightening. More total.

I look up. I'm lying on the floor beside the bed. I remember now. I moved from the bed to the floor in the middle of the night. I do that most nights. Better for my back. Too many hours on a soft mattress causes agony. I count to three, then start the long, difficult process of standing. With a cough, a groan, I roll onto my side, then curl into the fetal position, then flip over onto my stomach. Now I wait, and wait, for the blood to start pumping.

I'm a young man, relatively speaking. Thirty-six. But I wake as if ninety-six. After three decades of sprinting, stopping on a dime, jumping high and landing hard, my body no longer feels like my body, especially in the morning. Consequently my mind doesn't feel like my mind. Upon opening my eyes I'm a stranger to myself, and while, again, this isn't new, in the mornings it's more pronounced. I run quickly through the basic facts. My name is Andre Agassi. My wife's name is Stefanie Graf. We have two children, a son and daughter, five and three. We live in Las Vegas, Nevada, but currently reside in a suite at the Four Seasons hotel in New York City, because I'm playing in the 2006 U.S. Open. My last U.S. Open. In fact my last tournament ever. I play tennis for a living, even though I hate tennis, hate it with a dark and secret passion, and always have.

As this last piece of identity falls into place, I slide to my knees and in a whisper I say: Please let this be over.

Then: I'm not ready for it to be over.

Now, from the next room, I hear Stefanie and the children. They're eating breakfast, talking, laughing. My overwhelming desire to see and touch them, plus a powerful craving for caffeine, gives me the inspiration I need to hoist myself up, to go vertical. Hate brings me to my knees, love gets me on my feet.

I glance at the bedside clock. Seven thirty. Stefanie let me sleep in. The fatigue of these final days has been severe. Apart from the physical strain, there is the exhausting torrent of emotions set loose by my pending retirement. Now, rising from the center of the fatigue comes the first wave

of pain. I grab my back. It grabs me. I feel as if someone snuck in during the night and attached one of those anti-theft steering wheel locks to my spine. How can I play in the U.S. Open with the Club on my spine? Will the last match of my career be a forfeit?

I was born with spondylolisthesis, meaning a bottom vertebra that parted from the other vertebrae, struck out on its own, rebelled. (It's the main reason for my pigeon-toed walk.) With this one vertebra out of sync, there's less room for the nerves inside the column of my spine, and with the slightest movement the nerves feel that much more crowded. Throw in two herniated discs and a bone that won't stop growing in a futile effort to protect the damaged area, and those nerves start to feel downright claustrophobic. When the nerves protest their cramped quarters, when they send out distress signals, a pain runs up and down my leg that makes me suck in my breath and speak in tongues. At such moments the only relief is to lie down and wait. Sometimes, however, the moment arrives in the middle of a match. Then the only remedy is to alter my game—swing differently, run differently, do everything differently. That's when my muscles spasm. Everyone avoids change; muscles can't abide it. Told to change, my muscles join the spinal rebellion, and soon my whole body is at war with itself.

Gil, my trainer, my friend, my surrogate father, explains it this way: Your body is saying it doesn't want to do this anymore.

My body has been saying that for a long time, I tell Gil. Almost as long as I've been saying it.

Since January, however, my body has been shouting it. My body doesn't want to retire—my body has already retired. My body has moved to Florida and bought a condo and white Sansabelts. So I've been negotiating with my body, asking it to come out of retirement for a few hours here, a few hours there. Much of this negotiation revolves around a cortisone shot that temporarily dulls the pain. Before the shot works, however, it causes its own torments.

I got one yesterday, so I could play tonight. It was the third shot this year, the thirteenth of my career, and by far the most alarming. The doctor, not my regular doctor, told me brusquely to assume the position. I stretched out on his table, face down, and his nurse yanked down my shorts. The doctor said he needed to get his seven-inch needle as close to the inflamed nerves as possible. But he couldn't enter directly, because my herniated

discs and bone spur were blocking the path. His attempts to circumvent them, to break the Club, sent me through the roof. First he inserted the needle. Then he positioned a big machine over my back to see how close the needle was to the nerves. He needed to get that needle almost flush against the nerves, he said, without actually touching. If it were to touch the nerves, even if it were to only nick the nerves, the pain would ruin me for the tournament. It could also be life-changing. In and out and around, he maneuvered the needle, until my eyes filled with water.

Finally he hit the spot. Bull's-eye, he said.

In went the cortisone. The burning sensation made me bite my lip. Then came the pressure. I felt infused, embalmed. The tiny space in my spine where the nerves are housed began to feel vacuum packed. The pressure built until I thought my back would burst.

Pressure is how you know everything's working, the doctor said.

Words to live by, Doc.

Soon the pain felt wonderful, almost sweet, because it was the kind that you can tell precedes relief. But maybe all pain is like that.

MY FAMILY IS GROWING LOUDER. I limp out to the living room of our suite. My son, Jaden, and my daughter, Jaz, see me and scream. Daddy, Daddy! They jump up and down and want to leap on me. I stop and brace myself, stand before them like a mime imitating a tree in winter. They stop just before leaping, because they know Daddy is delicate these days, Daddy will shatter if they touch him too hard. I pat their faces and kiss their cheeks and join them at the breakfast table.

Jaden asks if today is the day.

Yes.

You're playing?

Yes.

And then after today are you *retire*?

A new word he and his younger sister have learned. *Retired*. When they say it, they always leave off the last letter. For them it's *retire*, forever ongoing, permanently in the present tense. Maybe they know something I don't.

Not if I win, son. If I win tonight, I keep playing.

But if you lose—we can have a dog?

To the children, retire equals puppy. Stefanie and I have promised them that when I stop training, when we stop traveling the world, we can buy a

puppy. Maybe we'll name him Cortisone.

Yes, buddy, when I lose, we will buy a dog.

He smiles. He hopes Daddy loses, hopes Daddy experiences the disappointment that surpasses all others. He doesn't understand—and how will I ever be able to explain it to him?—the pain of losing, the pain of playing. It's taken me nearly thirty years to understand it myself, to solve the calculus of my own psyche.

I ask Jaden what he's doing today.

Going to see the bones.

I look at Stefanie. She reminds me she's taking them to the Museum of Natural History. Dinosaurs. I think of my twisted vertebrae. I think of my skeleton on display at the museum with all the other dinosaurs. *Tennis-aurus Rex*.

Jaz interrupts my thoughts. She hands me her muffin. She needs me to pick out the blueberries before she eats it. Our morning ritual. Each blueberry must be surgically removed, which requires precision, concentration. Stick the knife in, move it around, get it right up to the blueberry without touching. I focus on her muffin and it's a relief to think about something other than tennis. But as I hand her the muffin, I can't pretend that it doesn't feel like a tennis ball, which makes the muscles in my back twitch with anticipation. The time is drawing near.

AFTER BREAKFAST, after Stefanie and the kids have kissed me goodbye and run off to the museum, I sit quietly at the table, looking around the suite. It's like every hotel suite I've ever had, only more so. Clean, chic, comfortable—it's the Four Seasons, so it's lovely, but it's still just another version of what I call Not Home. The non-place we exist as athletes. I close my eyes, try to think about tonight, but my mind drifts backward. My mind these days has a natural backspin. Given half a chance it wants to return to the beginning, because I'm so close to the end. But I can't let it. Not yet. I can't afford to dwell too long on the past. I get up and walk around the table, test my balance. When I feel fairly steady I walk gingerly to the shower.

Under the hot water I groan and scream. I bend slowly, touch my quads, start to come alive. My muscles loosen. My skin sings. My pores fly open. Warm blood goes sluicing through my veins. I feel something begin to stir. Life. Hope. The last drops of youth. Still, I make no sudden movements. I don't want to do anything to startle my spine. I let my spine sleep in.

Standing at the bathroom mirror, toweling off, I stare at my face. Red eyes, gray stubble—a face totally different from the one with which I started. But also different from the one I saw last year in this same mirror. Whoever I might be, I'm not the boy who started this odyssey, and I'm not even the man who announced three months ago that the odyssey was coming to an end. I'm like a tennis racket on which I've replaced the grip four times and the strings seven times—is it accurate to call it the same racket? Somewhere in those eyes, however, I can still vaguely see the boy who didn't want to play tennis in the first place, the boy who wanted to quit, the boy who *did* quit many times. I see that golden-haired boy who hated tennis, and I wonder how he would view this bald man, who still hates tennis and yet still plays. Would he be shocked? Amused? Proud? The question makes me weary, lethargic, and it's only noon.

Please let this be over.

I'm not ready for it to be over.

The finish line at the end of a career is no different from the finish line at the end of a match. The objective is to get within reach of that finish line, because then it gives off a magnetic force. When you're close, you can feel that force pulling you, and you can use that force to get across. But just before you come within range, or just after, you feel another force, equally strong, pushing you away. It's inexplicable, mystical, these twin forces, these contradictory energies, but they both exist. I know, because I've spent much of my life seeking the one, fighting the other, and sometimes I've been stuck, suspended, bounced like a tennis ball between the two.

Tonight: I remind myself that it will require iron discipline to cope with these forces, and whatever else comes my way. Back pain, bad shots, foul weather, self-loathing. It's a form of worry, this reminder, but also a meditation. One thing I've learned in twenty-nine years of playing tennis: Life will throw everything but the kitchen sink in your path, and then it will throw the kitchen sink. It's your job to avoid the obstacles. If you let them stop you or distract you, you're not doing your job, and failing to do your job will cause regrets that paralyze you more than a bad back.

I lie on the bed with a glass of water and read. When my eyes get tired I click on the TV. *Tonight, Round Two of the U.S. Open! Will this be Andre Agassi's farewell?* My face flashes on the screen. A different face than the one in the mirror. My game face. I study this new reflection of me in the distorted mirror that is TV and my anxiety rises another click or two. Was