

Theme: Road to Newport

Newport, Rhode Island is the typical New England beach town. Gothic mansions line the streets with sharp pillars extending towards the deep blue sky, providing the mocking seagulls a reprise from soaring through the salty breeze. The waves can be heard crashing onto the beach so gently yet with so much force that the shrieks of laughter and glee from the families vacationing there are merely background noise. Beyond the miles of seafront, other visitors celebrate their arrival in Newport-- but not because of its pristine beaches or upper-class atmosphere. Deep in the shrouded forests of this forgotten community exists a hidden castle among the hubbub of the city: the International Tennis Hall of Fame. The ornately decorated walls of the 13,000 square foot museum are lined with photographs of the world's preeminent tennis players. The walls of Newport's iconic building serve as the dream destination for tennis players around the world, myself included. The odds are high and the competition is fierce, but even if I don't find my own image gracing the walls of the Hall of Fame, I still want to share my story about tennis and its surprise appearance in my life, its dominance, and the photographs that tell the tale.

I am seven years old and five feet tall, standing alone at the back of the line and staring straight at the camera, chastising my mother with my eyes for making me come to tennis camp. I tower over the children in front of me, who are chatting excitedly with each other, constantly suffering reprimand for their lack of focus. One boy is running, a blur in the back of the photograph, showing off his natural athletic ability that I wish I had. In my right hand I clench my father's old tennis racquet, grey frame with frayed orange strings, rubber grip barely sticking to the handle. The racquet holds the forgotten stories of my father's break-up with the sport and the months of depression he faced upon realizing he could never turn pro. Untouched for twenty years, the racquet's ominous presence weighs it down, feeling heavy in my hand and showering dust with every unsuccessful swing. My white visor sits lopsided, not doing much in terms of sun protection, as my left eye crinkles and squints in attempt to escape the sun's blinding rays. My professional-looking Nike tennis dress seems out of place compared to the other children's ratty and faded casual t-shirts and shorts. I recognize the irony which simply deepens my discomfort; at first glance, an onlooker would assume me to be the best in the class, the one born with a racquet in

her hand--which would soon prove untrue. You really can't judge a book by its cover, after all. I try to hit a ball and instead hear a pitiful "woosh!" moments before the racquet rams into my forehead, erupting a chorus of laughter behind me. The piercing stare I give my mother tells her that I desperately want to escape, so she swoops in, always coming to my rescue, and hastily ushers me off the court, trying to salvage any dignity either of us might have left. I vow to never pick up a tennis racquet again.

Flash-forward eight years. I am fifteen and find myself once again standing on a tennis court, racquet dangling from my hand. I'm still decked-out in Nike tennis gear: new black skirt with white pinstripes paired with a purple tank top with orange trim. Shiny white tennis shoes adorn my feet, each step accompanied by a bright sun ray, bouncing off the shoes' reflective surface. But this time, something is different. Rather than fighting the sun's rays, I welcome them, letting the warmth fill my body. I hold not the outdated racquet representing my father's long-lost tennis dreams, but rather, a lightweight, glossy white racquet, brand new and freshly strung--a racquet made for *my* hands. I am not staring at the camera; I am intently focused on the fuzzy, lemon-yellow ball heading full-speed towards my racquet, and I can't help but let a slight smile peek out from hardened exterior. I am still angry with my mother for forcing me to break my promise, yet, exhilaration and adrenaline consume me. This is the fourth swing I will take with my new racquet and the fourth of many more to come. Like an ex-boyfriend begging for a second chance, tennis slyly reappeared in my life and stole my heart.

Three weeks later: while still the giant among a group of tennis players, I've improved enough to advance from private lessons to group lessons. Pride and encouragement come from the rapid progress I've made, but humiliation and frustration are byproducts of being on the same level as the middle schoolers. "At least I have an excuse," I remind myself. After all, most of these kids have been playing for years. Last month I didn't even know how to hold a racquet. I sarcastically roll my eyes, pretending to be annoyed with the immaturity of my much-younger company. Once again, however, I cannot help but smile. My burned cheeks are evidence of the long days I have spent in the inescapable sun, growing to embrace its warmth and the art it leaves on my skin. I glance over my shoulder at my mother, who captures the moment perfectly. While I am frustrated with how far I

have to go and how much work I have to do, I find motivation within the countless hours I've sacrificed to be on the court and the knowledge and skills I have accumulated within a mere three weeks.

Wide eyes and pale skin expose the fear that consumes me. A month and a half have passed since I fell in love with tennis and today is the day of my first official tournament has finally come I'm not looking at the camera, but rather, staring off in the distance, willing myself to remember how the scoring works. The chain-link fence surrounding the court is visible, trapping me within until I conquer my fears. I spin my racquet between my hands, a new nervous habit I've developed to keep calm between points. The newly wound tacky grip sticks to my already-sweating hands, drenching the sticky material, eliciting the familiar "eeech!" every time my hand strays from the racquet. The scorecard on the net reads 0-0, a blank slate, ready to be filled with the results of the practice matches I've played and the strategies I've devised. Struggling to control my jagged breaths, I silently remind myself that no matter what happens, nothing can take away my passion for the game. I inhale, exhale, and prepare for battle.

Today marks one month after my first tournament and the last week of the summer tennis season. Once again surrounded by tall fences, a battle cage, rendering my opponent no way out, I am confident and ready--no--eager-- to play and more importantly, to compete. On the other side of the net stands the girl who has hurt me with her words for as long as I can remember. In the past, the mere thought of facing her wrath evoked quivers of fright and anxiety, but not this time. When I size her up, I see the six years of tournaments and practice under her belt, six more years of experience than I have, but I also see her weaknesses. She has an aggressive, to-the-point playing style and will quickly lose patience if I can just return every ball she whips across the net, matching her power with my speed, forcing her to be the one who blasts the ball out of bounds or into the net. Formulating my game plan in my head, my face is set, cemented and firm with no hint of emotion. My left hand clenches the ball tightly in attempt to mask the stress welling up inside me, my cool exterior masking the ticking time bomb of anxiety and pressure building up within. Now is the time to prove myself, and I must rise to the occasion.

Two hours have passed since the anxiety-filled pre-match photo was taken. I am shaking hands with my opponent, facing the camera, looking off to the right at my coach, who is bringing me the first place medal. I can't even try to hide my excitement as my eyes crinkle and the corners of my lips explode up into a toothy smile. My teeth seem to reflect the sun's rays, light beaming off of me as the truest joy and pride I have ever known oozes from every cell of my being. My opponent glowers over her shoulder at her mother, her hands thrown up in annoyance. The scorecard reads 6-4, totaling ten close, grueling games--ten emotional, exhausting, sweat-drenched games. Ten games I will cherish as the result of sunburns, sweat stains, and sacrifices. Ten games of concealing every emotion that tried to surface: the perfect continuous poker face. Ten games during which I battled not only my resilient opponent, but also the voice inside tearing me down with every mistake.

Through these perfectly captured snapshots marked with sweat, tears, and emotions, I tell the story of the sport that defied the odds and won my heart. As a gawky seven year old dying to get off the court and escape the sun's heat, the Tennis Hall of Fame never came to mind. On the day I broke up with the sport for what I intended to be forever, I forbade my mother to display the pictures from tennis camp, shedding all reminders of the pain and failure the camp evoked. For eight years, the photos sat buried at the bottom of a splitting plastic box, dusty and untouched, hidden by the snapshots of other forgotten memories. Not until I gave tennis another chance did I realize that by repressing my initial failure, I was leaving out a vital part of my story. The photos now adorn the hallway leading to my bedroom, the first small step towards more distinguished galleries. After I won my first tournament, the photograph of the medal ceremony was hung on the court's fence--the next stepping stone on the path to Newport. Last March, after my first win on my school's tennis team, my photo was taken once again, this time of me smiling and shaking hands with my opponent while my teammates looked on in pride and amazement. The photo made the school's yearbook where it will remain to tell my story long after I no longer walk the halls. The International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport may be many miles down the road, but then again, the school yearbook seemed just as unattainable only a few years prior. For now, my story will be told to anyone who looks at my photos, and I will travel towards Newport--one gallery at a time.

Best: Where the Locusts Sing

The sun was beginning to disappear behind the trees lining Branched Oak Lake, putting an end to my cousin's 14th birthday party. I was exhausted from hours of adventuring in the woods and relaxing in the water; dreams of collapsing onto my soft, protective bed were already filling my head. In the span of just 12 hours, I undertook more new experiences than my usually hesitant, cautious self knew possible. For starters, I was new to the whole lake-going lifestyle. I had never experienced the "day at the lake" so fondly talked about by my peers and was under the impression that lake water would be the cause of my ultimate demise if swallowed. The mere thought of touching the "toxic" algae could make me scream, and everything that grazed my leg was probably a shark, right? The fact that I allowed my toes to skim the water was a miracle in itself. Needless to say, I scaled many mountains that day, leaving my fears on the other side. However, the real triumphs happened after the sun disappeared behind the trees and the moon made its appearance.

My sister, cousin, and I were taking our last whirl around the lake in the kayak, as the sky grew darker and a few locusts began their annoying buzz. While the gentle flow of the waves carried me swiftly through the water, I was unable to completely relax, as I knew all too well what was coming next. My sweet, convincing, guilt-tripping cousin wanted me to stay overnight with him and my aunt, Johnna, in the unforgiving unknown of the great outdoors. Jackson's incessant pleas were no match for the camp site's lack of appeal. The small four-person tent was propped on a grassy hill, in the direct path of the jagged rocks marking the lake's entrance. Speaking straight to my anxiety, the tent's ominous position fomented irrational scenarios, all resulting in my sudden tragic death. I wasn't sure why Jackson thought he stood a chance. Sixteen years and counting and I'd never given in and spent the night away from my own bed. Why would that night be any different?

Truly, I wanted to stay. I wanted to bury my fear of the unfamiliar once and for all. I wanted to experience camping--to spend a night in the wilderness, in complete isolation from the luxuries and amenities that make life so easy. However, I also longed for the comfort of my loving parents: my mother's gentle smile and my father's warm embrace. The decision became less and less about camping and more and more about choosing between

freedom and comfort. Suddenly, the choice I had to make carried much more weight, as if my consensus would determine the path of my future. Do I stick within my bounds, saving myself the stress and anxiety--but also depriving myself of adventure? Or do I abandon every belief I once held true, every moral I vowed to maintain, exposing myself to the world, standing alone and vulnerable, all to gather new experience? Sitting alone on the mossy rocks while my family loaded up the car, I focused on the rhythmic splashes of the frantic fish, observing their internal struggles as a means of escaping my own, the anxious, defenseless little fish in a constant battle of needing food but not wanting to become dinner.

Looking out across the water, I saw the gentle ripple of the waves masking a foreign world of fish and fauna under the surface. I saw the cottonwood trees' branches swaying in the breeze, lushly outfitted with billowing hunter-green leaves, sustaining countless communities of miniscule insects and harmonious birds. All around me, the earth was breathing, thriving, teeming with life. And all of the life surrounding me--my parents and my aunt, the fish and the trees--had found the balance between freedom and comfort. Freedom and comfort do not have to be independent of each other. When one is free, one is comfortable. In that moment, I knew that I did not belong on the road back to Lincoln, but rather, I needed to spend a night under the stars.

My decision to stay did not silence the anxiety welling up inside of me, however. I still longed for my own inviting bed, and home-sickness filled my stomach. But I knew what I had to do. Approaching the members of my family staring at me with anticipation, a single tear made its way down my cheek as I mustered a weak, "I'm going to stay. Goodnight." Eager for my parents to leave before I could vacillate, I turned my back on all prospects of familiarity and ambled toward my makeshift home for the night. I heard the loud roar of a car engine, out of place in the silent, peaceful woods, followed by the unmistakable sound of my aunt's hiking boots behind me. She took a seat next to me on the flat rocks over the water, and we relished in the absence of city lights and sounds. I had never been in such total darkness, and had never seen so many of nature's own lights. Above me, the stars told their ancient stories of hunters and scorpions, fish and monsters. At once, my fears seemed so petty and irrelevant

in the grand scheme of the universe. I had made the right decision, and had just entered the one-way, no-turning-back, full-speed-ahead highway of a fearless, limitless life.

Sure, I still felt untamable butterflies tickling my stomach, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was walking on dry, itchy grass, but I was beginning to understand the beauty in conquering my fears--the rush of endorphins, the overwhelming feelings of pride and accomplishment, and the lessons learned. My aunt and I walked in silence back to the illuminated tent, the only sign of human infringement on nature for miles. Once I found myself lying underneath the tent's nylon tarp flaps, I was surprised by the uncomfortableness of the combination of a stuffy fabric room, a polyester sleeping bag, and the uncertainty of a new situation. The ground was hard, the blanket was scratchy, and the feeling of doubt had made its way back into my stomach. I looked over at my aunt and was overcome with placidity. I was fine. "I'm proud of you, you know" my aunt lovingly declared, and for one of the first times, I was proud of myself, too.

Although I had made peace with the situation, the tent was still just as cramped and humid, rendering me restless and antsy. My drooping eyelids fought my over-alert mind, which assumed every rustle in the bushes to be something much more dangerous than simply a harmless gust of wind. Sensing my heightening discomfort, my aunt told me story after story about the fears she'd conquered and the lessons her triumphs had taught her. One anecdote in particular, about my aunt's time in Africa, made me eager to see where else my hesitations could take me, and helped me realize that worries don't have to hold me back. My aunt was spending the night in the middle of the savannah in a twenty-by-twenty foot caged enclosure with wild animals roaming around just outside. The night was black, and the animals could be heard plodding along and communicating, but they were unable to be seen. At first, my aunt's cot was in the middle of the cage, but every fifteen minutes, she dared herself to inch closer and closer to the edge. Finally, she was so close to the outside that she could touch the cage, and laid awake among the wild beasts for the rest of the night. Hanging over her head was the knowledge that just inches away from her face, enormous, powerful animals roamed free, possessing the ability to easily kill a human. While she was trembling with fear and longed to move away from the edge, to step back into the of comfort, she knew

that if she didn't take advantage of the once-in-a-lifetime experience, she would regret her hesitancy forever. My aunt's trepidations challenged her, giving her the most exhilarating, pride-filled night of her life.

Listening to my aunt's stories, I found a new sense of vigor and adventure. Releasing my inhibitions opened new doors, and the extent of my abilities seemed endless. I had let anxiety hold me back for too long. Fears are a necessary part of growing and learning, because they force us to take a step outside of our comfort zones and experience life from a different vantage point. Lying in that cramped blue tent listening to the bugs humming and the frogs croaking, my ears rang with a familiar sound--the locusts' song. At first, a lone locust crooned the same song I heard outside of my bedroom window every night, and I prepared myself to ignore the annoying background noise as I routinely did. However, as more and more locusts joined in, the familiar song began to quell my home-sicknesses, and I could almost pretend I was at home, my body gracing my fluffy, luxurious bed. Allowing my heavy eyelids to gently slide shut, I let the comforting notes fill my head. I fell asleep to the shrill buzzing flowing through my ears and realized that maybe home is wherever the locusts sing.

Earth as Home

The earth spoke to me
through the ancient pictures
in the pitch black sky.
Bright stars peeking through
the curtain overhead, hiding the
sleeping sun.
Humbled by the vastness of the universe,
I want to look down
to go back into my
own
small
world. Where
everything is comfortable
and predictable
and familiar.
But I cannot.
The words of my ancestors pull my gaze,
forcing me to look up. They speak
to me through the stars.
Telling me "do not be afraid."
And so I stand, filled with fear yet
captivated by
the vastness of the world.

The earth spoke to me
through nature's peaceful yet profound sounds.
All creatures
transitioning from day to night.
A lone bird warbles in relief as he reaches
the comfort of his nest. Creatures
so

free
with wings to soar over the land,
yet
grounded
by fear and responsibility.
Returning home night
by night
to family and familiarity.
--not so unlike we humans.
Envious of the birds I hear
peeping in contentment.
Because I too long to return to my
comforting nest.
But the locusts' constant
placid song
urges me to
face fear--
And I realize that maybe
wherever the shrill of the locusts can be heard
is home.
And so I lay, anxiety-ridden yet
on a mission
to expand my horizons
once
and
for
all.