

NOTES FROM A  
**C**OURTSIDE MOTHER  
by **Lucy Ferriss**

August 1997

**I**t's a cool day on Cape Cod, and the tides are wrong for swimming. Luke, Dan, and I linger at the little recreation area. The playground and basketball court abut the tennis courts, fenced tall at the ends, with log rails at the sides. Yesterday we found a new toy in the closet at my husband's family's cottage, a junior tennis racquet left by one of the cousins. Blue, with a polka dot grip and strings that give when my thumbs press into them. Luke, at nine, wants to learn to play. We've grabbed some half-alive balls and waited for the adults to exit the courts for lunch. Dan, almost eight and self-motivated in his amusements, is shooting basketballs into the shorter hoop while his brother gets his first lesson.

"Hold the racquet this way," I instruct Luke. "Like shaking hands." I extend the handle and he grips it. "Perfect," I say.

I stand next to him. I turn my body sideways to the net. Dropping a ball, I swing my racquet and follow through, and the ball goes neatly over the net to the other side.

"Now me," says Luke.

"Not yet," I say. "Let's try a swing first."

"No, I want to hit the ball!"

“One swing first. For practice.”

I position his feet, but when he swings the racquet the edge is facing the net. I try to show him again.

“No! No!” he cries. “I want to hit the ball! You promised!”

“Okay,” I say. Standing just in front of him, I bounce the ball toward his racquet. He swings, misses. “Try again,” I say. He misses again.

“You’re not bouncing it right!” he says.

“I’m doing my best, honey,” I say. “It’s hard. It takes patience.”

Eventually Luke connects with the ball, which goes flying over the fence. His brother drops his basketball, fetches it, and throws it back to us. Dan’s got a great arm. His hair is still Buster-Brown long, a bandana around his forehead to keep it out of his eyes. Luke, who first had the idea of letting his hair grow in order to be an Indian, has cut it this summer, exposing his thin neck.

Now Luke wants me on the other side of the net. “Okay,” I say. “But I’m just going to throw it to you first.”

“No! Hit it with the racquet. I want to play.”

“In a minute,” I say.

I wish we had a bucket of balls. One, two, three, I toss them, then we have to scramble to get them back. When Luke connects again, he insists that I feed him the next ball with my racquet. I’m nervous. I can feel my son’s frustration, his impatience. “Why don’t we play a different kind of game?” I try.

“No! Tennis!”

I feed him the ball.

“You didn’t do it right! I couldn’t hit it!”

“Honey, it’s hard.”

Dan has stopped shooting hoops. He runs back and forth on the tennis court, fetching the balls. I feed them to Luke.

“Honey, back up a little bit. You need to be able to swing at the ball from the side.”

“I know that!”

“Here, I’m coming over. Let’s work on the swing again.”

“No! You’re hitting them wrong is all!”

I feed him another. He swings, misses.

“Stupid! This is stupid!”

The blue racquet flies out of Luke’s hand, sails past my face, skids onto the court. I take a deep breath, pull myself tall. I say, “I don’t play tennis with boys who throw their racquets.”

“I don’t care! Stupid sport!” Luke kicks at the net. He takes the ball that’s drifted to the side and hurls it over the fence. I instruct him to leave, and he stalks off. Sighing, I pick up the blue racquet.

“Mommy?”

It’s Dan, perched on the log fence.

“Yes, honey.”

“I won’t throw the racquet.”

And so we start.

#### Fall 1997

I know this sport only one way: the way my aunt Ruth taught it. Had she been born into a different era or a different family, Ruth might have been a professional athlete. But she was born genteel in 1915, and became the mother of four children. During our summer stays at the family enclave in Michigan, Ruth lived on the tennis courts in the morning and the golf course in the afternoon. She played men’s doubles, and she was the partner to get. It was understood that we children—all of us, Ruth’s own plus the nieces and nephews—were to take tennis lessons from Aunt Ruth.

She met us early in the morning, before the adults took over the two courts. Because she terrified us, we were never late. “Racquet back,” she would say. “Eye on the ball.” We hit against the backboard, mostly, while she instructed us. “I said racquet *back*.” The balls bounced away from the board—against the fence, or into the impenetrable woods where no dingy white tennis ball could ever be found. “Eye on the ball! The ball!” We took large backswings and tried to follow through. If we were lucky, Aunt Ruth would stand on the other side of the net and play a little game with us. We were to try to get the ball past the service line but in front of the baseline, and she would return it for an easy fore-

hand, an easy backhand. For a while, not sure whether I was right- or left-handed, I switched the racquet from one to the other, but Aunt Ruth disapproved of this practice. “The backhand is really a stronger stroke,” she said as I got older. “Put your whole body into it. Eye on the ball. Racquet back. Follow through.”

Now, on school days, Dan wakes me before seven to tell me he’s turned on my coffee. We dress in layers. I stuff my racquet case and pockets with old balls. On our bikes, we ride through our upstate New York village, down the alley, and around the school. We start with forehands, go to backhands, work on the only serve I know to teach, the one with three points—back, over the shoulder, follow through. We play a game in which Dan gets a point for every shot returned within the singles court, and I get one for every easy shot that he muffs. When the scores in his favor grow ridiculous, we start scoring for real—love, fifteen, thirty, forty, game. When he throws his racquet, we stop playing. Generally he waits until 8:45, when the other third-graders are streaming across the field to school, to throw his racquet. Sometimes he doesn’t throw it at all.

The days grow colder, the mornings darker. He shakes me awake. “C’mon, Mom, I need an hour. C’mon. We’re doing crosscourts today. You promised. Come on.”

By late October the town’s pulled down its nets. Dan begs for lessons. I call the local health club, which has two ratty tennis courts and runs clinics for kids, but they are full up in their beginner clinic and won’t consider Dan for intermediate. Then I’m talking to one of my advisees, Damon, who captains the college tennis team. Sure, he says, for twenty bucks an hour he’ll hit with the kid. We don’t call it coaching because Damon’s not allowed to coach. We call it babysitting. Dan is in heaven. After school we drive to the college and I go to my office while Dan shoots hoops in the gym and waits for Damon to get out of class. When the snow hits in November, they set up portable nets in the field house and hit on the rubbery surface. On weekends, Dan drags me back up the hill to the college and shows me where the portable nets are hidden. We set them up. We hit more balls.

In January a spot opens up at the health club tennis clinic. Proud and excited, Dan and I go racquet shopping. There's a big tag sale at the local sports store, held in a warehouse, with equipment and clothes heaped onto tables. We find the table with the grownup tennis racquets and start picking them up, swinging them. Finally a racquet feels right, not too heavy, and we pay the princely sum of \$50 and head for the health club. The coach there is a tiny man with a high voice who seems pleased to see Dan but adamant that he go with the beginners.

By the second week he's moved up.

Also the second week, we notice a sign posted on the club door. Junior tennis tournament, ages 10 and under. Syracuse. "Hey, Dan," I say. "Would you want to play a tournament?"

"How's it work?"

"You know. You play other kids. If you win, you play another kid who's won. If you lose, you go home."

"Like a basketball tournament."

"Yeah. But just you."

Dan loves basketball. He's the star of his after-school team, and stays up late with his dad watching the pros. From first grade he has his "basketball journals," folded and stapled sheets of paper with his daily reports on broadcast games, big plays and upsets either faithfully recorded or made up. For the science fair last year he did a computer project on basketball statistics, complete with 3-D charts. He loves soccer, too, of course, and baseball where he's either pitcher or first baseman. These sports triumphs create tensions with Luke, but Luke plays hockey now, and takes tap dance and art lessons and plays the piano. In fact, I have decided that tennis is the antidote to team sports for Dan, just as art lessons have been the antidote for Luke. Team sports are all fine, I tell other parents, but surely we can nurture the individual too; surely it needn't all be about boosterism and competition.

But here's the tournament, and here I am signing Dan up. He needs to be a member of the United States Tennis Association to play; I sign him up for that, too. We ask, at the clinic, if anyone else will be playing in this tournament. No, the other parents say. Their kids don't want tournaments. They're just having fun, just burning calories.

This tournament is 50 miles away, in Syracuse. My husband, Mark, tells me it's inappropriate. "He's only eight," Mark says. "Let him shoot hoops in the field house."

"He wants to go. He's really good," I say. "They've got him in with the 12-year-olds now, at the clinic. Damon says he's really good."

"So let him be good sledding down a hill. How much does this thing cost? Thirty bucks? That's ridiculous."

But Dan wants the tournament. He can hardly eat the night before, he's so excited about it. We drive to Syracuse in blowing snow and check in at a table set up in a swanky club. Already, I can tell we are out of our element. The cars in the parking lot are Mercedes and BMWs; the tight bodies riding the stationary bikes and crunching the machines have a different view of leisure than I've known. The man at the table is named Sam. He is in his 60s, a warm elastic face under a leather cowboy hat. "Good playing," he's saying about a close match. "Flip a coin—coulda gone either way."

Dan draws the Number 1 seed, a big 10-year-old named Tommy. I can watch the match only through glass, from up above. The balls loft back and forth. Dan's racquet looks enormous for him. His long hair gets in his eyes. They go to three sets, and Tommy calls the score, but even through the glass I can tell he calls it wrong. "Sam," I say. "There's a problem."

"They'll work it out," says Sam from his table.

"No, you don't understand. Dan's opponent called the score wrong. Dan just won the game, but the boy won't admit it."

Sam steps over to the glass. He sees the boys at the net, arguing. He goes down, spends a minute with them, comes back up. "Too late," he says. "They already started the next game."

Dan keeps looking at me. He's confused. He can't hit the ball right. And suddenly, the match is over.

"Coulda gone either way," says Sam.

On the way home, Dan won't speak for a few minutes. Then he says, "That kid cheated. He called the score wrong."

"I know he did, honey. But maybe it was a mistake."

“No, he cheated. But I can beat him. I’m going to beat him next time.”

“Really? You want to do this again?”

“I want to play every one,” says Dan. “You know how Luke travels with his hockey? How he gets up every day and goes and practices?”

“Sure, honey, but—“

“I want my tennis to be like Luke’s hockey.”

“Okay,” I say. “Okay. We can do that.”

### Summer 1999

**D**an and I drive up for the final round in Sam’s Grand Prix, at yet another outdoor club in Syracuse. I bring books with me to mark up for my course that fall. By now we know Sam pretty well. He and his wife, Marie, have no children of their own. How many young lives pass through their Grand Prix and come out a little wiser, a little more tolerant, is impossible to say. Already, signing up for Sam’s tournaments sets much of the rhythm of our lives. I never see Sam without the cowboy hat. He wears it indoors and out, rain or shine. I never see him play tennis either, though he has a ranking in the 65-and-over bracket. I see him behind the card table he brings with him, sometimes with Marie handing out forms, his temper cheerful and unflappable, pandering to no one. At every tournament there’s a little raffle, with a grand prize—a free week at a blue-ribbon tennis camp—at season’s end. Signing your kid up for tournaments with Sam, you can be forgiven for believing that this is a democratic sport, an All-American sport, as down-home as basketball or bowling. “Coulda gone either way,” he says. “Tough luck.” “Good going.” “Way to hang in.” “See you next time.”

At home, Dan’s friends are his groupies. They follow him on their bicycles. They live on small, struggling farms or in the sagging frame houses of the village; their fathers work as prison guards and foremen; their mothers clean houses. In a conversation I overhear between Dan and one of these admirers, Dan says, “If you could be anyone in the world, Ryan, who would you be?”

Ryan thinks for just a moment and says, “I would be you.” Then, after another moment of thought—they’re shooting hoops in our driveway, always a good philosophy forum—he says, “If you could be anyone, Dan, who would you be?”

Dan doesn’t hesitate. “I think I’d be me, too,” he says, and swishes the ball.

The tennis kids, on the other hand, present a challenge. They are rich and ambitious; their parents are rich and ambitious. They all want to be themselves, only more so.

This day, the last in the Grand Prix, seems saturated with blue as only August days can be. I know these people now. Mary Bowman’s there with the twins, Melanie with her motley brood in tow. Dan’s in the middle of a tense three-set match on a far court when pizza arrives for lunch. Players who are free gather around the table in the shade, grab sodas, and linger for the results of the raffle. I watch Sam hand out a pair of wrist bands, a tennis bag, and a cap, and then I drift back toward Dan’s court.

Suddenly, behind me, I hear his name. First it’s the club director, mispronouncing it. Then Sam, shouting it out: “Dan Couzens!”

I turn back. “He’s on court,” I say. “Don’t tell me we’ve won something, Sam. We never win anything.”

“He has won,” Sam pronounces, “the grand prize.”

“You mean the Van der Meer camp? On Hilton Head Island?”

“All expenses paid.”

Dan wins his match, learns of his good fortune, and screams with joy.

“You know,” I say to Sam as he’s packing things up, “you couldn’t have picked a better kid to win that prize.”

“I know it,” he says.

“I mean, Dan will really love going there. He really wants to do better. And there’s no way on God’s green earth I could have afforded it.”

“Last year,” says the club director, “the wrong person won it. It was this girl whose parents could have sent her there any time. And you know, I think they wanted her to go more than she did.”

“That’s the truth,” Sam says.

“Luck of the draw,” I say.

“We decided after that,” says the club director, “we didn’t want kids like that winning it.”

“What can you do,” I say.

“We were glad Dan got it,” he says. And then Sam shoots him a look.

Dan and I both shake Sam’s hand. He’ll be in touch about arrangements. We drive home in the waning light, the world at our feet.

### Winter 2001

**W**e’ve moved to Hartford, where I’ve promised Dan more tennis to compensate for a dislocation that includes his parents’ impending divorce. Inspired by his week on Hilton Head, Dan wants a coach. I can no longer offer my services; I’m lucky to get a game off my 11-year-old.

After a lot of shopping around with club directors who seem to promise my son the moon, we settle on John Tinney, a jolly Irishman who will go to fat if he ever stops exercising. Soon there is a new racquet, and a tennis bag that will hold three racquets—the new one, the old one, and mine—in case one breaks at a tournament. From John I learn that these racquets should all be precisely the same—the make, the grip, the stringing—so the player doesn’t have to readjust in the midst of a match. But we can’t afford three racquets just now. Dan’s started a “tennis fund,” into which he puts his odd-job earnings as well as his Christmas checks and allowance payments, but it’s understood that these funds are to go toward Zonals if he makes it.

Zonals are an addition to our vocabulary. So are Levels (One and Two), Supernationals, sectional rankings, national rankings, compass draws, flights, sponsorship, and various tensions and types of racquet string. Gone is Sam and his points system. The kids Dan meets at the local USTA tournaments, most of them from the Gold Coast of southern Connecticut or the wealthy suburbs of Boston, are being groomed—for what, I’m not sure yet, but Dan soaks up new ambitions along with the vocabulary, and I can tell we are already in far over our heads.

Still, my promise to Dan is coming true: the area is far richer in tennis resources, the competition steeper. The kingpin of the 12-and-unders is a Russian kid, Roy Kalmanovich, who lives and breathes tennis and already possesses a national ranking. Dan's greatest triumph is taking five games off him in a pro set—eight games total—which is what the younger boys play at tournaments here. As the boys collapse in their plastic chairs after the match, Roy's father comes up to me. "Your son," he says, thumping a fist to his chest, "plays wit' very big *heart*."

Sometimes, it seems heart is all he's got. He's skinny, after all, and has no training—even after we sign on with John, parents look at me in horror when they learn that Dan takes only a weekly lesson—and no exercise regimen, personal trainer, cache of racquets, or club membership. Yet as we settle into our new life, Dan's attention to tennis grows fiercer by the week.

At first, tennis in Hartford means blessedly fewer miles on the car. There are eight indoor clubs within a 12-mile radius of our rental home. Gradually, however, Dan's ambitions push outward. After the first heavy snowfall, I drive him to Nashua, New Hampshire, a destination that will become all too familiar, where an extensive year-round club keeps itself alive in this downwardly mobile community by hosting high-level tournament after high-level tournament. We have to go overnight, two nights if Dan wins, and there's Luke and our dog to think about, and no friends yet for Luke to stay with, no money for a kennel. So I chart our course. Thirty miles from the tournament lies a popular ski slope; having given up hockey, Luke's become keen on skiing in upstate New York. Before dawn, I load up the car with tennis gear, dog food, ski gear, overnight bags. We head northeast to Worcester, then straight north to the ski slope, where I get Luke set up with a lift ticket, lunch money, my cell phone, and the number of the tennis club to call if he has a problem. I promise to be back in 5 hours. Onward to the tennis club, a cavernous place smelling of mold, with eight courts stacked against the viewing window so you can see only as far as Court #4. Outside, it has begun to snow.

Dan wins; wins again. Before he goes out for a third time, I remind him that I'll be leaving to pick up Luke and he may have to wait for me

once he's off the court. I tell the club owner that I'm driving to get my older son, who may call to see if I'm on my way. "We close up here at six," the club owner says.

"Six!" I check my watch; it's 3:45. "I should be back," I say. "But if I'm not—"

"I'll just tell Dan to wait outside," he says.

"But it's cold out," I say. "It'll be dark."

"I'll tell him to wait outside," he says. There's a slight curl to his lips; other parents have told me he's a jokester. But I don't have time to find out what is a joke and what isn't.

Outside, the snow's thickened. Two inches on the road, maybe three. Dark falls fast. The ski slopes are lit, I remind myself; Luke has a day pass and lots of energy. But the road is slow going—hilly, slippery, with plows sometimes ahead of me, sometimes behind. The dog beside me whines, tries to lick my anxious face. I can't go much faster than 40. I have been an idiot, I tell myself. Thinking I could manage two kids at two different places when I know nothing of the geography, nothing of the terrain. Luke has my cell phone; I can call no one. To stop, to find the number at the ski slope, will waste valuable time. I push on.

Near five, I crunch into the ski slope parking lot. Now to find Luke! Eleven slopes, three lifts. I stumble to a pay phone and call my cell. "Hey, Mom!" Luke says.

"Sorry I'm late, honey," I say. "Where are you?"

"By the fire," he says.

He sounds happy. He has not broken his leg. We gather his skis and circle out of the lot. The dog wags his tail, nuzzles Luke. The snow piles down, relentless.

I try a different route back, longer but more expressway. The expressway is jammed, lanes closed. "Fuck," I whisper under my breath. "You dumb ass."

"Calm down, Mom," Luke says, falling asleep in the passenger seat.

By 6:30 we're outside Nashua. I press the pedal as hard as I can, use the gears. What if the guy meant it, and Dan is standing outside in the freezing dark in his thin jacket, his shorts? I wheel into the lot. One black

sports coupe sits at the end; the lights of the place are off. I slip and slide up the walkway and yank at the door. It won't open. "Dan!" I cry out. "Dan, where are you? Honey? Dan! I'm sorry! Dan! DAN!"

The door opens. There's the director, mildly annoyed, and Dan with his gear packed. "I am so, so sorry," I start. "The snow was deep, I didn't figure, I'm an idiot."

"Sokay," the guy says.

"I won," says Dan.

"Oh, good," I say. "Good for you, honey. Oh, good, good good."

We roll on to the Comfort Inn, spaghetti dinner, loud TV. We slip the dog into our room. When the boys are settled I go down to the bar, order a glass of red wine. "Had a rough one, huh?" says the bartender. I nod, and let out my breath.

### Summer 2001

**I**n a USTA-funded study of positive and negative parent behaviors among successful junior players, "creating and maintaining a stable, secure home life" and "supporting junior player" are—surprise!—among the positive behaviors. "Dual role struggles" and "being concerned with money" are among the negative behaviors. Never mind that a secure and stable family life is a good thing for any child; never mind that money worries are not something anyone chooses to have. These states of being, in the world of elite sports, become typified as *behaviors*, as susceptible to change as, say, learning to keep your mouth shut during a match.

If your family life happens not to be stable, if your best efforts cannot make it stable, so much the worse for you. If your support of your child cannot match the checklist ("general support, logistical support, managerial assistance, financial assistance, transportation, positive interaction with coaches") because you haven't the funds for, let's say, coaches, then you fall willy-nilly into the negative category. "You are negatively influencing your child's tennis experience," writes the USTA. "It is important that you think about your child's goals and why he or

she plays tennis. Reflect on your perspective of junior tennis and how it differs from a healthy perspective of developing the child.”

One might say you have no business allowing your child to lay claim to the ambitions suggested by such studies. But this is America: we all lay claim, to every ambition; we defy the odds.

This year Dan’s made the 12-and-under Zonals team. As #8 on a team of 10 boys, 10 girls, he represents New England against five teams from other parts of the country. His coach is Jim Solomon, a new presence in our life. Jim spotted Dan at a local tournament and introduced himself by asking where Dan would be attending high school.

“He’s in sixth grade,” I said.

“But when the time comes,” he said.

“Don’t know,” I said. “We may not be here by then.”

During the year, Jim is the high school coach; has been for three decades. He’s started taking a professional interest in Dan. But Jim cannot take Dan to Cincinnati, where Zonals is held. A parent must attend, must cover all the costs. Fortunately, I remember the Laniers, a family of old friends who’ve relocated to Cincinnati. Sure, they say when I call, they’d love for us to stay with them. Only they won’t be there; they’ll be visiting family on the East Coast.

Large and elegant, the Laniers’ house sits snug in a grove of trees; from the deck off the kitchen I can sit with their binoculars and spot warblers and cardinals swooping from tree to tree. Outside stands an enclosed trampoline, where after the first day’s matches Dan persuades me to come jump with him. We have one of those lovely little half-hours where we’re playing together, getting our bounces in synchrony.

The matches go well, go poorly, go well again. We are ensconced mostly at a boys’ prep school that resembles a corporate conference center and at one of the wealthiest country clubs I have ever seen—two swimming pools, 12 clay courts, 12 hard courts, bar, restaurant, spa. Dan’s main goal is to be accepted by the group of boys he’s with. He has never beaten any of them, and he is afraid they’ll think he’s here illegitimately, that his lack of training and funding betokens failure on the court.

He is embarrassed to be staying at a private home. All the other boys have suites at the hotel.

Most days, the boys hang around the courts looking like sheiks, wet white towels slung over their heats to forestall the oppressive heat. I seek air conditioning in the club restaurant, where I sit with little Erika, black, age 10, and her mom Dawn, who is plain and cheerful and comfortable with herself. “So they’ll let you bring in your own drinks?” I say when Dawn refreshes Erika’s iced tea from a thermos.

“I didn’t ask. Want some?”

“No, no. It’s just—everything so expensive here, isn’t it?”

“Stringing’s 30 dollars a racquet,” Erika pipes up. She has big teeth with gaps between them. I’ve seen her swing turn the tennis ball into a bullet. “We’re trying to hold off till we’re home.”

“Smart girl,” I say.

This is the first conversation I’ve had with another family about the money issue. And why, I ask myself, did I feel free to talk to Dawn, when I don’t dare bring it up with the white moms?

When the matches are over for the day, we pile back to the fancy club, where the kids are allowed to cool off in the pool but—being hard-wired competitive—soon engage in diving contests and races. Only one girl even wants to enter these competitions. To lend her support, I agree to race as well. Girl power, I tell her. The other parents are gathered in the shade, or dangling their legs over the edge into the pool. “My Midwest friends live their lives like this,” says one New England parent. “From country club to country club. It’s all they talk about.”

### December 2001

Next up is Winter Supnationals, conveniently held in Tucson, Arizona, where my good friend Kat has moved with her plastic-surgeon husband and daughters exactly my sons’ ages. At home, though, both boys’ grades are slipping. What I call the black hole of middle school is swallowing them up. The divorce doesn’t help. Both procrastinate and oversleep. Luke, moody, concocts a smorgasbord of excuses for shirking homework.

More than once, working at my desk in my upstairs bedroom, I've heard a shout and turned to see him waving at me through the window from the top branches of the maple tree in the front yard.

I set a goal: a report card by December 1 with no grades below B will allow either or both boys to go to Tucson after Christmas. We will afford this by going into debt.

The week before Thanksgiving, I'm with Dan playing semi-finals in New Hampshire. I get a phone call from Mark, who's at the hospital with Luke. In the side yard of the Unitarian church where they went that morning, bored with adult conversation, Luke attempted a tall evergreen. He fell 35 feet. He's broken five bones in his back. Looking through the glass at Dan playing, I feel my chest pulling in two. "Is he in pain?" I ask Mark. "What are they doing for him? Can he walk?"

"They've got him on morphine," Mark says. "The doctor thinks he'll be fine, but they'll keep him overnight." When I don't answer right away, he adds, "You don't need to be here right now. He's sleeping. Just ... as soon as you get back."

This is a big concession on Mark's part. "Dan'll be in the finals in an hour," I say. "If I let him play—I'd say four hours till we're home."

"I'll tell Luke when he's awake."

I am an awful parent. My son has broken five bones in his back, and I am not doing 80 down the interstate, flying to his side.

My son is going to be fine. His father is at his side. He's asleep. My being there would make no difference.

I am a coward. I can bear the thought of Luke's being asleep alone on morphine better than the thought of Dan's howling that I have dragged him away from a trophy.

When Dan comes off the court, I share the news. "We don't have to leave, do we?" he says, with all the compassion of an ambitious 12-year-old.

"I'm wondering how tired you are. If we can step up the final."

His eyes flick from me to the other kids to the court. Somewhere behind his selfishness lies a concern for his brother, to which he cannot admit. "I'm fine," he says. "I can get a Gatorade and a Powerbar and go right back out."

I keep leaving the waiting area to take another phone call from Mark, but I watch enough to know Dan is playing badly. “What’s up?” asks the mother of a boy playing for third place, on the next court.

“My older son,” I say. “Fell from a tree. He’s in the hospital.”

“My god,” she says. “I’d be frantic.”

“I am frantic,” I say.

Her son comes off court and stays to watch. I hear him tell his mother, “Couzens is stinking out there. He shouldn’t be in the final.”

“You hush,” his mother says. “He just learned his brother’s in the hospital.”

Tennis, I think, following her gaze out to where Dan has just double-faulted, is all about controlling emotions. But in my kid’s case, it’s all about channeling them too. Everything he cannot say about Luke, about our family, is there in his distracted stroke, his effort to stay in the game.

As soon as he loses, we hightail it home in the gathering dark, to where Luke lies doped up on a hospital bed, peeing through a catheter. “Hey, Dan,” he says sleepily as soon as we burst in. “How’d you do?”

“Better’n you, I guess,” says Dan. Then he sits in the one chair, blood draining from his face.

**B**y the first week of December, Luke is up and about with a back brace. He’s been a good patient; the experience has had a calming effect. His grades, however, have not improved. “Dan made the cut, grade-wise,” I tell Mark when the reports are in. “A good thing, since he’s the one wanting to play a tournament in Tucson.”

“You can’t leave Luke behind,” he says. “He’s depressed, he can’t do anything with the back brace, and I’m not babysitting him.”

I boil. I fume. Every parent manual includes this dictum: real consequences, not idle threats. Meanwhile Dan makes the draw for the tournament as well, and I’m scrambling just for two fares to Tucson. “It’s not babysitting,” I tell Mark for the umpteenth time. “It’s being with your son.”

“You can’t keep giving Dan everything and Luke nothing.”

“I don’t give Luke nothing! I fund his theatre dreams, I watch all his shows, I stay up night after night... What do you know about it, anyway? You’re not here!” I shake my head to clear it. “This isn’t about parity between the boys,” I say. “It’s about the requirement that they get decent grades in order to take this special trip.”

In the end, my father comes through. For Luke’s December birthday, he sends a round-trip plane ticket, “So you can support your brother on this exciting venture.” Now it’s not me giving way on the consequence; it’s granddad blessing Luke with a gift.

We fly to the desert, to Kat’s magnificent house planted among the cacti and tumbleweeds. Kat and I drink margaritas and laugh over old times. Luke and Kat’s daughter Emily pick up on a flirtation they left behind in kindergarten. One afternoon when Dan has no matches, I take all the kids to the Desert Museum, and we climb way up among the saguaro, where I take a photograph of Dan that Luke will later turn into a fine oil painting. Another day, I leave Dan alone at the matches and go with Kat and kids into the snowy mountains, where they have a cabin and we sled down long hills until dusk.

The tension drops away. We enter a new year with Kat and Kurt’s friends in their mountaintop home, where Luke strips to boxers and plunges into the ice-cold swimming pool, where all the other kids follow him.

Next day, Kat comes to Dan’s match. “Why, he plays just like a man!” she says. “He’s a boy, but he looks like a man out there!”

“That’s part of what scares me,” I say. Dan looks up at us. He pumps his fist. He looks nothing like a man to me. Not until he loses and holds his head high, and shakes his opponent’s hand firmly at the net. There, for a second, I glimpse the man.

### June 2007

**A**t his full height, Dan possesses a lean, ropy body that bends and arcs for the serve. Fluidly he approaches on his lefty slice. He sticks the volley at the net; he loops back for the overhead. As he moves in on a forehand, the fingers of his free hand splay out in a Kabuki-like gesture that

seems to spell the magic of the shot. Even as he completes a fast twirl of his racquet and coils to receive serve, his torso carries a dancer's tension and grace. I never tire of watching him play.

This week Dan is out to win the New England Tennis Championships for the second year in a row. Already this month he has been selected for the second year as New England Tennis Coaches' Player of the Year and as the local newspaper's High School Player of the Year. Nationally, he has placed in tournaments from Florida to Michigan, from Colorado to California. On an internet college recruiting website, he is a 4-star recruit. The shelves in his bedroom sag with the weight of trophies.

My annual budget for Dan's tennis is \$15,000, not counting frequent-flyer airline miles or gas mileage. When I take him to tournaments out of town, I pack sandwiches and fruit, and eat doggy-bag leftovers from dinner for the next day's lunch. Every year I bust through the budget. I spend perhaps a fourth of what other families with players at Dan's level spend.

Dan still reels from the divorce. "If you were any kind of decent parent," he tells me on bad days, "instead of the worst in the world, you would still be married to Dad."

Spectators at the championship matches say, "My god, he moves beautifully. You must be so proud."

By the end of this month, the deposits are due to Old Dominion University, Dan's college of choice—also, not incidentally, the only college that accepted him. All the others recruiting him for Division 1 tennis withdrew in the face of his disastrous high-school grades. Given those grades, hopes of a scholarship have evaporated.

At home, none of us sees Dan smile anymore. That extraordinary smile happens only on the tennis court, when he has performed certain miraculous feats with a little yellow ball. He wants more of this happiness, which is why he wants Mark and me to pay the deposits to send him to ODU.

Mark thinks he should go to community college. He thinks Dan should grow up and forget tennis.

Today I made Dan my final offer. "One year," I said. "Finish one year in good standing, and we'll find the money for the rest. Otherwise, you're on your own."

“Okay,” he said.

“And I am not the worst parent in the world. No more of that.”

“Okay.”

I am holding firm. That’s what I tell myself I am doing anyway. It is the world’s biggest, simplest piece of advice to parents of difficult teenagers. Meet their entitlement with expectations. Keep your eye on the prize, the responsible and empathic adult you hope will emerge from this warty chrysalis.

In her late 50s, my aunt Ruth was informed that she had a heart murmur. If she weren’t careful, she would die on the tennis court. She thanked the cardiologist for this information and went home. At 63, playing men’s doubles, she won the match with an astonishing overhead smash and dropped dead.

None of us, the children and nieces and nephews, has ever amounted to anything on the court. But now, sitting courtside as Dan jogs out to the championship match, as he flashes that smile, I know he’s the one Ruth was hoping for. And maybe, just maybe, she would have known what to do with him.

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**Lucy Ferriss** is the author of eight books, most recently the memoir *Unveiling the Prophet: The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante*, voted Best Book of 2005 by the St. Louis *Riverfront Times*; and the novel *Nerves of the Heart*, finalist for the Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel in 2002. Her collection *Leaving the Neighborhood and Other Stories* was the 2000 winner of the Mid-List First Series Award. Her next project, a historical novel set in the Hudson Valley in 1700, is forthcoming from Houghton-Harcourt in 2009. She also writes a column on elite youth sports for MomsTeam.com. She lives in Connecticut, where she is Writer-in-Residence at Trinity College.