

Members Only

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Sunday

We were just starting our third night of interviews, and I felt the kind of weariness that comes from having wasted time.

“Raj,” I said, introducing myself to the first couple.

The man was wearing a casual half-sleeve shirt, and his wife was refreshingly unremarkable—in a loose dress, her hair in a simple ponytail. I liked them for it, but only for about ten seconds.

“Rog?” the wife asked, leaning in.

It was a question I had been asked too many times in my life.

“Raaaj,” I exaggerated.

“As in Federer?”

I feigned a smile, unsure if she was joking. They moved on, introducing themselves to the rest of the membership committee.

The committee—Suzanne, the efficient and disciplined chair; Stan, a balding sixtyish lawyer; Richard, a leather-skinned club pro; Leslie, a childhood friend of my wife; and I—had an particularly difficult task. Over the course of two evenings the previous week, we had already spoken with ten different couples about why they wanted to join the Tennis Club, simple nouns elevated to proper status. Tonight, we would talk to still more and then choose five out of the total fifteen to let in.

The club had opened several decades before, in the early seventies, when couples were riding high from breaking rules in the sixties and yet wanted to make sure their children knew how to slice a backhand properly. The original membership had been a mixture of old money and lawyers and doctors, all of whom downplayed the breadth of their bank accounts. But the past several years had brought the movie and hedge fund people, who’d bought up the old estates and come driving into town in cars that were never more than a year old. As the town’s gilding glowed ever brighter, the club—or the TC, as it was known among members—had continued on, a simple place with eight courts, a swimming pool,

and a rustic clubhouse with worn wicker couches. No flat-screen TVs, no towel service; there was a soda machine that still charged fifty cents for a Coke. Simplicity was the brand. And the simpler it stayed, the more people wanted to join, perhaps to rub off some of their new-money sheen. The membership committee was tasked with bringing in families that had some sense of that earlier, understated ethos, as well as some of the newer sort, who paid their monthly dues but generally preferred to use their home swimming pools and tennis courts.

My wife, Eva, had grown up coming here, her parents a little ambivalent about its clubbiness and yet appreciative of that selfsame simplicity. When we moved to town, we had joined together, though both of us were concerned by how quickly we were losing our urbanity. I, in particular, had fought the idea of the place, though quietly, somewhere inside, I knew I had been drawn to its luster. But for me, tennis courts and swimming pools were meant to be public. I had honed my tennis skills on muni courts in the East Bay, after my family had moved to California from Bombay. I was hazed into playing better by a group of Filipinos who worked the night shift at the post office, slept several hours in the morning, and then set up shop at the courts until they had to go to work again.

In high school, I hated the kids on our team, who, with their multiple, freshly gripped racquets and unscuffed Nikes, went off to private clubs after practice for further instruction. They had at least one parent who came to all their matches, while my parents were always working. I could sense then the deeper differences between us, though I didn't yet have the language to articulate them, or the experience with which to understand them.

But, somehow, now, I had grown to love belonging to my own club—or at least parts of it. I loved the late afternoon matches when the soft winter California sun lit up the surrounding hills in orange phosphorescence. I loved grilling meat with our friends while the children swam and swooped in for bites of hot dog. I loved diving into the pristine pool, swimming the length in one breath, and appearing at the other end, refreshed and alive. And most of all, I loved being there with Eva and our boys when the place was empty, hitting balls on a court and then jumping into the pool, the four of us a perfectly self-contained pod.

In most every way, the club was not so different from the club my family had belonged to before we left Bombay. We'd joined a gymkhana—one of many clubs that had originally

been made for British colonials, but later, by the time we were members, were populated mostly by Bombay's upper middle class—after my father had gotten a big promotion. That was where I'd swum in a pool for the first time, and after swimming I'd lounge in the comfortable, dilapidated clubhouse with a mango lassi and a vegetable frankie.

I had easily blended into the background at the gymkhana; not so much at the TC.

"Can we get you anything?" Suzanne asked, pointing to a table spread with cheese, dried meat, and wine. The couple and their sponsors—every prospective new member needed a sponsoring couple—sat on one side of the center table, and we all sat on the other. They said no. The couples who declined a glass of wine were usually the nervous ones, the ones I tried to put at ease.

"Why don't you tell us a little about your family and your interest in tennis?"

Suzanne exuded order—her milky, unblemished skin, contrasted by her shiny dark brown hair; her expensive outfits draped over her wispy body, always impossibly pressed; her immaculate Tesla. Suzanne easily fit in with countless other women at the TC who spent their days marinating in their luck and good fortune. But she was also something more: driven, smart, restless. She'd had a full, successful career as a management consultant before she stopped to have kids. Now, our older sons were in the fourth grade together, and she was the head of the PTA. She brought a certain fat-trimming zeal to that group, as well as the TC's membership committee, several nonprofit boards, and her own home, none of which seemed to burn her substantial reserve of fuel. Eva liked her for who she had been, but not for what she had become—a sharp, skilled woman who now devoted too much of her time to the success of her children. I liked her for the impatience she was unable to hide from her face during some of the interviews. Like this one.

"Who doesn't love tennis?" the husband asked. At first it seemed like a rhetorical question, but then he continued, lowering his voice a bit and raising his eyebrows so that his eyes got bigger: "But actually, I do find myself getting a little bored after a while. Like, is this all there is? A game comprised entirely of hitting a yellow ball back and forth into a bunch of squares?" He was holding his arms out and his palms up in mock exasperation, as if he had just delivered the punch line in a comedy routine.

I bit my lip not to laugh. I appreciated his honesty, but man, he'd gotten his audience wrong. His wife seemed to lean slightly away from him. Both Suzanne and Leslie gave him a

tight, polite frown.

“I know that feeling,” I said, trying to pull him away from the nervous wilderness he was entering. “I’m often thinking about other things on the court, but then a ball comes whizzing by and I’m back.”

The husband just sat there, not taking my help. I wondered if he would have taken the lead if Stan or Richard had offered.

Sensing that things might be going south, the sponsors interjected, talking about how wonderful the applicants were, how much their children would take to the game. And for the next ten minutes, the committee discussed family, tennis, and community, topics that had been preassigned to each of us by Suzanne. I talked about the strong communal sensibility of the club.

As the fifteen-minute mark neared, Suzanne interlaced her fingers and placed them on her lap, her tell that she was ready to wind the interview down. “Thank you so much for coming in. We’re going to be meeting at the end of the week and we’ll let you know.”

As we were all saying our goodbyes, the wife turned to me and said, “It was lovely meeting you, Kumar.”

I looked straight at her for a few long seconds before responding. Messing up my easy name earlier was one thing. But this was something else entirely, not even in the same ballpark. I could feel my back tighten. “It’s Raj,” I finally said, feeling a sliver of heartbreak.

The expression on her face changed. I couldn’t tell if it was embarrassment or defiance or indifference. At least if she’d been embarrassed, I’d know she felt bad. I noticed, too, that Suzanne was listening to the exchange. Her face had slightly contorted, as if she’d just witnessed a car crash and knew that I had gotten rear-ended. The rest of the committee had either not heard it or, as was typical with this group when something untoward happened, didn’t know how to react.

The woman had leaned closer to her husband, now cradled in his arms. They were amiably chatting with the other committee members.

A few months before, Suzanne had asked me to be on the committee, saying that I would be “a perfect addition, a friendly face.” I remember the quote because the words, and their juxtaposition, had wormed through my ears for days. What exactly was I adding? I was, indeed, quite friendly. But was my presence also a show of diversity? Did they all think

I was the token who wouldn't rock the boat? I hated the idea that this was what they thought of me, and yet I'd proven them right by not barking at that woman for calling me Kumar. There were already too many TC events—Labor Day barbecues, Wednesday evening doubles socials—where I clearly stood out, but pretended not to. And that's why at first I didn't want to be on the committee. And yet I knew that if I didn't do it, the TC would likely continue on the same as ever.

Privately I had a plan: I wanted to darken the TC, which had only a handful of nonwhite members, all of whom had white spouses, as I did. It was my midlife project, after years of ignoring the fact that all of the social circles I had been part of—high school, college, graduate school, work—were overwhelmingly white. I had tried not to make too much of this fact. I had convinced myself that my presence in these circles was the start of the change I wanted to see in the world. But then that change never seemed to come. It was almost always just me and a lot of kind, well-meaning white folks. There are members here who still refer to “Orientals” and ask me about the “African mind.” And in the face of it, I've mostly said nothing, because I just want to play some tennis and not give a lecture.

My family had arrived in America not long after my eighth birthday, and I had started the third grade in a threadbare public school. The first friend I made lived upstairs from us, his family recent refugees from Vietnam. Perhaps because of the basic lunches we all ate in the school cafeteria together or the small apartments we returned to at the end of the day, I got along with the white and black kids, moving easily between them. But starting around junior high, I noticed that there were classes filled with mostly white kids and classes filled with all black kids. I was placed in the “advanced,” white classrooms. And by the time I arrived in high school, the divisions felt cemented. I spent the school hours with my white friends, who, at the end of the day, walked home up the hill, while all the black kids and I took buses back to our neighborhoods far away. It was only some years later that I connected the image of all those buses lined up after school with the policy of busing. The black students were brought in to diversify the school, but remained very much separate within it.

And throughout this time, there was only the smallest handful of Indians. In that environment, I'd come to see myself as the person in the middle, someone who could talk to everyone, translate across the aisle, and bring people together. Maybe it was that I hated

conflict, or maybe I could genuinely empathize with different points of view, find some common ground.

When we'd first started the interviews the previous week, it was a thrill to sip local wine, sit back, and watch how the machinery operated. Couples came in, some nervous, others overly confident. Their sponsors peacocked, we dog-whistled about the importance of family and the culture of the club, and I pulled out my go-to phrase about how this was "our shared backyard." I was very aware of the fact that, for once in my life, I was in a position of judgment, and I could sense—like a dog can sense a coming earthquake—that this made a lot of the potential candidates uncomfortable. When a couple first walked in, they would chat easily with the other committee members, but with me they seemed at a loss for how to make small talk. I enjoyed it all in the way my historian friends enjoy discovering a hidden corner of an archive, a trove of formerly redacted documents returned to their original integrity that finally prove whatever they'd long been hypothesizing about a certain time, place, and event.

Now, as we were reaching the end of the selection process, not having interviewed even one Asian-American couple, I had the sinking feeling in my belly that I was on a small raft, trying to make my way up the white water instead of down. I knew most of these sponsors. I liked many of them. We tended to share similar views on organic produce and politics. And yet, no one had sponsored a couple who did not, in some much more literal way, replicate themselves. I couldn't help but feel that my efforts at darkening the TC were going to be thwarted despite my best intentions; at the end of this whole process, I'd still be one of the darkest folks around, which didn't say much. And thus, as the next couple and their sponsors filtered into the room, I continued to be struck with the weariness that comes from having wasted time.

For the next three interviews, I kept mouthing incensed lines to myself: "It's Jane, right? Oh, Amy? Sorry, they sound so similar." "No, it's Raj, not Kumar, but I do a pretty decent brownface, if that makes it easier for you." "Why is 'Raj' so hard to pronounce? I get 'Becky' right." I couldn't quite parse the source of my anger. I was mad at that woman for getting my name wrong twice, but perhaps even angrier with myself, for hoping that, given time, I could be part of this club without losing some vital part of myself and my dignity.

Another couple left and I gazed out the clubhouse window at the fading daylight.

Before I could catch myself, I let out a full, uncontrolled yawn.

“Are we boring you?” Suzanne asked in a tone that seemed to cut and soothe at the same time.

Of course I was bored. And disgusted. But I didn’t want to let Suzanne or anyone else in on how vulnerable I felt. “No, no. The kids haven’t been sleeping well lately. Bed-wetting.” A lie, but the first excuse I thought of.

Suzanne’s boys seemed as if they had never peed or eaten or talked out of turn. On the court, they mimicked perfectly the strokes the pros had taught them; they seemed destined to become either the Bryan or the Menendez brothers.

I could sense a slight tremor on her face, as if my fibbed account of our familial chaos would rub off on her.

“There are ways to stop that,” she said.

“I’m sure there are,” I said.

I got up, walked over to the food, poured myself more wine in a plastic cup, tossed a sweaty piece of aged Gouda in my mouth, and went back to my seat.

“The Browns are our last family,” Suzanne said. “And funnily enough, their sponsors are the Blacks.” She let out a slight snort.

It was a stupid joke, one I wished she’d not made. But unlike the woman who’d come in earlier, I could clearly sense Suzanne’s embarrassment. If I were to be charitable, perhaps she’d said it because she recognized that, in fact, there had not been any browns or blacks in these interviews. But where before I might have smiled, wanting to make her feel OK about it, wanting to be part of the joke even as I felt guilty about smiling and thereby offering my approval, now I ignored her as I sat back down. If there was one of us who was going to say something stupid and inappropriate, it was Suzanne. For all her decorum, she had a need to elicit laughter. But then again, so did I.

Eva had warned me that this tendency would get me in trouble, and it had, on more than one occasion. In Suzanne’s case, of course, we would all laugh it off and move on. I didn’t always have that luxury.

Once, when I was in my first year of graduate school, I was at the anthropology department potluck, waiting in the food line in front of a senior visiting scholar who’d written a remarkable book on matrilineage in an East African tribe which rethought ideas

of power, hierarchy, and seemingly everything else. I admired her work so much it left me tongue-tied. As I piled my plate with too much pesto pasta, I tried hard to figure out the right thing to say so that she might remember me. I wanted to take a class she was offering the following semester that I knew would be packed. I should have just told her how much her book had shaped my thinking and taken my chances with that, but instead, this came out of my mouth: “So how was it spending so much time with all those strong women for a change?” I had meant it to be a genuine question, with a playful chaser—something that gestured at our mutual struggle, as different kinds of minorities in a field traditionally dominated by old white men. But the second the words were out of my mouth, I knew I’d missed my mark. Did she think I was suggesting that she had no strong women in her life already? That she had to travel halfway across the world to find them? Maybe she didn’t like me suggesting that we were similar, considering that she was at the top of this particular academic totem pole and I was the Indian at the bottom.

She didn’t answer my question. Instead, she turned to the table with the food, took a few slices of a beautifully glazed ham, and walked away. I didn’t bother trying to get into her class. And a few days later, my advisor stopped me in the department hallway and suggested I needed to work on my professionalism.

It was the same advice I now wanted to pass on to Suzanne.

“Here they are,” she said. Two couples walked into the clubhouse.

The Blacks, of course, were white. But the Browns were black. I looked at the handsome couple and breathed a sigh of relief. It was as if an alternate, younger version of the Obamas had just walked in.

I glanced at the rest of the committee, all of them looking at the alt-Obamas with big, friendly grins. The room was completely silent. We could hear the cicadian murmur of kids finishing up at the pool outside.

“Let me introduce you to Doctors Bill and Valerie Brown,” Mark Black said.

Bill was roughly six feet tall and fit. He was wearing lean, perfectly fitting khakis, loafers, a button-down, light pink shirt, and a navy-blue wool blazer. I had recently read an article somewhere about how every man needed a perfect navy-blue blazer. Bill’s certainly was that. On one of his wrists was a bracelet of Tibetan prayer beads, and on the other, a blue-faced octagonal Audemars. I placed my hand on my stomach and sucked it in a bit. I

wished I went to the gym more often, got my shirts pressed more regularly.

Valerie was a tall, striking woman who stood comfortably on her own, close enough to be intimate with her husband, but not subsumed by him.

The Browns' sponsors were Mark Black, a well-regarded cardiologist in town, and his wife, Jan. Mark had the confidence that comes with being able to slice open chests. I didn't see him on the courts often, but when I did, his strokes were compact and tidy, his body always moving instinctively in the right direction. He struck me as a little uptight, always appropriately dressed for whatever occasion he was attending. I don't think I'd ever seen his toes, which was noteworthy given the fact that one of the only things we had in common was access to the same pool.

Jan was pretty and put together, her prettiness perhaps enhanced by all the time and money she had to take care of herself. They were a family obsessed with being on the cutting edge of trends. They bought their Range Rovers—his in black, hers in white—while most people were stuck in their Audis. Jan took the family to spend a year in Spain so their kids could get used to playing on real, red clay before everyone was taking a year off and calling it a sabbatical. Once, I overheard Mark say that his shoulders were sore because he had been skeet shooting the day before. I genuinely thought he was kidding, until I realized he wasn't. Who goes skeet shooting? Perhaps everyone soon enough, if the Blacks continued to have their fingers on the upper-middle-class pulse.

The Browns went around the room, shaking hands with all of the committee members. When they came to me, they lingered for an extra few seconds, their eyes asking for help managing what was clearly an awkward situation: a roomful of white people deciding whether they wanted to let a black couple into their club. I'm here for you, I tried to say as I reached out my hand to shake theirs. "Rajesh Bhatt. Everyone calls me Raj."

"I knew a Raj in college," Bill said, smiling.

I think everyone knew a Raj in college. Except, of course, the woman from earlier in the evening.

Bill had a deep, calming voice, one you might hear on a TV commercial for a Mercedes sedan. "I think he runs Google now. Or something."

"I use Google," I said, returning his smile.

"Can we get you anything?" Suzanne asked.

“Water would be great,” Bill said.

I happened to be the one closest to the table with the drinks. Suzanne glanced at me for the slightest beat of a second. I looked at her as Bill looked at me.

“You know, how about a sip of something stronger instead,” Bill said, moving toward the table. “I’ll get it.”

I stepped over to the table with him.

“What do you like?” he asked, examining the open bottles of white and red. I sensed that he knew his way around labels.

I reached for a lone, half-full bottle of a nearly translucent pinot tucked behind the mineral waters. “This is the high-end stuff.”

Bill took two clear plastic cups from a stack. I gave us both a liberal pour. Bill took a small sip and then turned to me and said, “It certainly is.”

Our backs were turned to the rest of the group. Bill ate a dried apricot, I had a piece of salami, and we both took another sip. Before placing the bottle back, I poured us a little more of the wine.

“Shall we?” I asked.

Bill took his wine in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. He handed the water to his wife and took a seat next to her. I sat down on the couch facing them.

For a moment, I wondered whether Bill was originally from the Caribbean. If he was, he would have grown up with Indians, maybe had a grandfather who had arrived on the island as an indentured servant, worked through his contract, and decided to stay instead of going back to the small Indian village he barely remembered. Maybe somehow, over the years, the “Bhatt” had changed to “Brown.” If that was the case, I mused, going back several generations, Bill and I could well be cousins.

Since Eva and I had joined the TC, I’d slowly learned the rules of places like this—what games to join, when to engage in conversation, when to say nothing. Never to ask what someone did for a living. I’d made plenty of tennis friends, but I hadn’t met anyone with whom I felt simpatico. I wanted Bill to be that guy. He and I were different kinds of doctors, but certainly he’d have some appreciation for my doctorate, in contrast to most of the rich knuckleheads I met here, who probably thought of Indiana Jones when I said I taught cultural anthropology at the university in town. I’d not been getting many invitations to

matches lately. I couldn't understand why. My game had continued to improve. I'd begun to wonder if they'd realized finally that I didn't fully fit in, that when they talked about the vacations they were going on, to Marrakesh or Fiji, I usually pretended to be adjusting the strings of my racquet. But maybe Bill and I could play.

"We've read all of these wonderful letters of support you have," Suzanne said, holding up their file. "You're so new to the area, and yet you've obviously made a lot of friends and set your roots quickly. Why don't you tell us about yourselves, your family. And your interest in tennis."

I'd read the file, which had letters from the Blacks and several other members attesting to how wonderful the Browns were. As I was reading the letters, I could sense something different about them, but I couldn't pinpoint it. Now I knew that they were a master class in colorblindness. The Browns were "friendly" and "laid-back." The phrase "they'll fit right in" had been used in three different letters.

"Where shall we start?" Valerie asked.

"Wherever you like," Suzanne said.

"Bill and I met in medical school in San Francisco, and we went to Boston to do our residencies. Bill in cardiology, me in trauma surgery. We both grew up in Los Angeles. Just a few miles apart, but we never knew each other."

I wanted to know which part of LA they'd grown up in, but I didn't ask. Inglewood, always up to no good? Perhaps Baldwin Hills.

"After winters and residencies that lasted far too long, we realized we missed the sun, the oak trees, and the huge, congested freeways," Valerie continued. "And so when the opportunity opened up at the hospital, we jumped at it. We're less than two hours away from our families in LA, and the community here has been very welcoming to us. Our sons are also showing some interest in tennis, and Mark can't say enough about how much he loves this place, so it seemed like the right fit for us."

As she spoke, Valerie made careful eye contact with everyone in the room. She knew exactly how to make a roomful of strangers feel comfortable as they gawked at her, trying to piece together her beauty, all her fancy degrees, the fact that every day when she went to work, she kept death at bay.

"How old are your sons?" I asked.

“Eight and five,” Valerie said.

Perfect, I thought. They’ll be fast friends with my own.

“Boys are fun, but they can be complicated,” I said.

“Yes,” Valerie said. “Yes, they can.”

I sensed from the inflection of the second “yes” that raising boys for them was going to be a particular kind of complication, similar to but ultimately different from the one Eva and I would experience. As our boys grew older, I’d talk to them about the dangers of driving while brown and how they would not always get the second chances some of their classmates would get. But Bill and Valerie would have to have this conversation on a much higher, far more sobering level.

“I’m glad your kids are interested in the game,” Suzanne said. “What about you two? We have a strong, competitive interclub team you could play on.”

“Bill and I had our first date on a tennis court. And I’ve hit the ball around with him since, but it’ll be a while until I’m game-ready.”

Eva and I had also had a tennis first date. I didn’t want to get too far ahead of myself, but I could imagine a regular doubles match in our future.

The women’s interclub matches were on Wednesday mornings, and most of the other women we’d interviewed were eager to play, especially because the TC team had won the interclub championship for the past two years running.

“I’m sure Wednesdays are busy at the hospital,” Leslie interjected, distinguishing Valerie from all of the women we had interviewed who didn’t work.

Leslie and Eva had grown up coming to the TC. Their parents were friends, and they’d run cross-country together in high school. Leslie had been a hippie in college, had a girlfriend her junior year, and had worked in New York and Boston for several years before returning home to get married and have a family. She and her husband Tim had sponsored us, and since we’d joined, we’d spent countless weekends together, barbecuing and drinking and talking while the kids swam and ran around. I liked her; we shared a similar ironic sensibility. Throughout the interviews, however, she’d rebuffed my attempts to dish about the inherent problems with the process—namely, that the prospective members were all so interchangeable—but Leslie liked the place a little too much to go there. Lately, I’d sensed that Eva had been pulling away from her too. I don’t think they’d had a

disagreement, but Eva worked and Leslie didn't, and that may have been the difference.

"Yes, Wednesdays are tough," Valerie said. "But Bill is the tennis player in the family anyway." She placed her hand on her husband's knee, handing the ball over.

"I played some in college," Bill said, a little too matter-of-factly. I sensed Bill was downplaying his level.

Stan jumped in. "Where?"

In every interview, the only time Stan spoke up was when there was a mention of a college. He'd ask about it, and without missing a beat, talk about Williams, how he'd played fullback there, *read* philosophy, went on to Harvard Law School, and settled into a life of contracts. Stan was lean and the veteran of two shoulder surgeries, brought on by several decades of playing tennis four times a week.

Before this whole interviewing process had started, I'd had no opinion of Stan. I'd seen him around, always getting off the court with an ice pack balanced on his shoulder. But at the start, Suzanne had asked everyone on the committee about their vision for these interviews. Everyone, including me, had said this and that about considering the past to forge the future. And then there was Stan: "I've thought about it and I've realized I don't have a vision. I just want high-level tennis players. Bad tennis offends me. This is a *tennis club*."

A few days earlier, I'd seen him sitting in the hot tub reading a tattered copy of *Don Quixote*. When I asked him about it, he'd said that he was rereading all the books that he had loved as a young man to see if they still hooked him in the same way. "I'm trying to remember who I was back then." He had just finished with the Russians, and after Cervantes he was going to hit the Americans. I loved the idea that *The Great Gatsby* might help Stan see the conspicuous consumption all around us. It made me realize that, despite all the Williams business, there was much to like about him, and I appreciated that he was up-front about the fact that, in asking people about their alma maters, he was sizing them up. At least I always knew where I stood with him.

"Stanford," Bill said.

I wasn't the human *U.S. News & World Report* annual college ranking that Stan was, but I knew how to translate "played some" at Stanford. Bill was very good. Like heavily recruited in high school and nationally ranked good. John McEnroe had played some at

Stanford.

“Were you there with Tiger Woods?” Richard asked, suddenly perking up. Richard wasn’t a member, but traditionally one of the senior pros sat on the membership committee, perhaps to make it seem like the process was more equitable. He and I were both in our mid-forties, but working under the blazing sun had prematurely aged him.

“In fact, I was,” Bill said. “I was just glad that he wasn’t on the tennis team as well.”

That’s it, I thought. Don’t ask him any more about Tiger. I was sure that at this point in his life, Bill must be tired of answering questions about Tiger just because they were vaguely alike.

“What was he like?” Stan asked. “Did you take any classes with him?”

“I didn’t. I was stuck in bio and chemistry.”

Bill and Valerie made the slightest eye contact.

“What did Tiger study?” I asked, wanting to turn the conversation away from whether Bill had known Tiger, toward Tiger alone. Somehow that seemed better.

“I’m not sure,” Bill said. “Econ maybe. He was only there for a couple of years. Clearly, he didn’t need to take any more classes. He figured out macroeconomics all on his own.”

I couldn’t contain my grin.

“So, did you both always want to go to medical school and become doctors?” I asked, moving us away from Tiger entirely. The main purpose of these brief interviews—some as short as ten minutes—was to let the prospective members talk so we could get some sense of them. The due diligence was performed in the letters and in whispers.

“I did,” Valerie said. “My father is a doctor, so it was assumed that I’d go into the family business. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I still can’t.”

“I thought about other things,” Bill said. “I flirted with law school, but it didn’t feel quite right.”

“As usual, Bill’s being a little modest,” Mark interjected. Throughout the interview, he’d sat there self-satisfied, like he’d brought the fatted calf to the banquet. “He decided to forgo the Tour to go to medical school.”

This bit of information dazzled the men in the room. They all seemed to lean in toward Bill at that moment. I suddenly felt sad about the state of both my game and my career. I had done just enough to get by at both. Bill, on the other hand, had excelled, and had the

freedom to choose between two enviable options.

“That’s not exactly how it went,” Bill said. “I played in a few professional tournaments and lost in the early rounds. I couldn’t deal with the uncertainty of it all. But the fact is that I haven’t had much time in the past fifteen years to keep up with the game. Medical school and then residency and kids didn’t leave time for doubles. But I was thinking that I’d get out there a little more now. Get rid of the rust. At least if Mark doesn’t work me too hard at the hospital.”

Bill’s mention of work got me thinking about my own. I had papers to grade before the next morning. I’d grab a burger after this to soak up some of the wine swirling around in my head. And by the time I got home, I hoped, the kids would be asleep. I felt exhausted from all this talking and smiling.

Bill added, “It’ll take me some time to catch up with you all.”

I bit at my lower lip. I have a tendency to mouth words to myself before I actually say them, as a way of testing out the safety of what I’m about to say, something I’d learned from lecturing: sound out the joke before letting it loose. But this time—maybe because I was distracted, maybe because I was so desperate to show Bill that we could be on the same team, that I understood where he was coming from—as I mouthed the words, the complex mechanism that occurs between air and tongue and throat to create sound did its job, against my deepest wishes.

“Nigga, please.”

For a second after I said it, I thought it might be fine. That in a room with four other committee members and two other couples, all engaged in various conversations, no one had heard me. That maybe I hadn’t really said it at all.

But it became very clear that none of that was true. They all turned to me as if I’d suddenly caught on fire. And in many ways, I had.

As I sat there burning, I wondered just how bad this was going to be.

On those bus rides home in high school, I had teathed on the details and matters of black life. After some headbanging to Ozzy and Black Sabbath in middle school, listening to N.W.A for the first time felt like genuine rebellion. I certainly didn’t live in Compton. But I understood Ice Cube’s rage, and listening to it through cheap headphones in my bedroom gave voice to my confusion, my feeling that I was on the outside, unsure of how to get

inside, of where inside would even be.

In college, I'd made a personal religion out of Ralph Ellison, the outward anger of N.W.A now replaced by a considered philosophical probing of not being seen. The first time I read the last line of *Invisible Man*, it brought me to tears. *Who knows but that, on lower frequencies, I speak for you?* You do, Ralph. Yes, you do. And maybe, on some other frequency, I speak for you, Bill? If Bill knew the invisibility that I'd felt, which I suspected he did, then I hoped that would mean he and I could see each other clearly. That he would know exactly what I meant—that I was nothing like the others on the committee, that I was reaching out to him, albeit in a stupid way.

I was staring down at my feet, and when I finally raised my head up, I noticed that Bill was running his thumb and index finger over each of the prayer beads he wore around his wrist. I couldn't bring myself to turn away from the movement of those beads, hoping somehow they would bring me peace too.

The silence lasted somewhere between a few seconds and forever. My entire back was soaked in sweat; my ears were ringing. Outside, the last of the daylight was gone.

"No, honestly," Bill said at last, flashing an absurdly handsome smile. "I'm that rusty. But let's hit some balls soon, Raj. We can team up."

It was the kindest thing anyone had done for me in a very long time. I now wanted desperately to be his friend, but I knew that the next time I saw him, he'd turn away and keep walking. I'd done something so stupid and wrong, made so much worse by the fact that I'd done it in front of this particular audience, forcing Bill and Valerie to choose between the anger that was their right and the compassion Bill had shown.

Suzanne said nothing. She just sat there horror-stricken, trying to figure out how to manage the situation and bring the interview to a close.

I don't clearly remember the minutes that followed. It felt like I was underwater, that there was conversation going on above that I couldn't piece together. But it seemed like everyone was trying hard to put the moment behind them.

"Those earrings are beautiful," Valerie said to Suzanne.

"Really?" Suzanne said, fiddling with them. "I designed them myself. They're inspired by a trip my family took to India. I so loved the place and the people. They'd look beautiful on you. I'll send you some."

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. She loved *all* of the one billion people in India? A lot of dumb stuff had been said that night, and that was definitely near the top of the list. But I knew that I, of course, was by far at the top.

“No, no,” Valerie said, “I couldn’t.” She seemed taken aback by the intimacy of the offer.

“I’d like to,” Suzanne said, an almost pleading tone in her voice, as if a pair of fancy earrings could ease the awkwardness of the moment.

“That’d be nice. Thank you.”

“Did you play a sport in college?” Stan asked Valerie.

“I didn’t,” she said, turning to Stan, and added before he could ask: “UCLA. Just a fan.”

There were a series of conversations going on around the room. Leslie was busy talking to Mark and Jan about their time in Spain, telling them how much she’d loved her study abroad year in Seville. Bill was talking to Richard about the rigors of junior tennis. I was having trouble getting Bill’s attention. Somehow, I needed to get him alone so that we could talk.

We were now well past the fifteen-minute mark that we allotted for each couple. Suzanne didn’t place her interlaced fingers on her lap. Instead, she let the conversation die down naturally. And when it did, she said, “Thank you so much for coming. We’ll be in touch very soon.”

The meeting came to a close. Once again, the Browns shook hands with everyone, and when they got to me, Valerie had a kind, calm expression on her face, perhaps the one she typically reserved for when a skinhead with a bullet-ridden chest rolled into her operating room. Bill shook my hand as well, gave me a muted smile. When they left the room with the Blacks, I wanted to follow, to apologize in the privacy of the darkening evening outside.

“I’m going to see if I can catch the Browns before they leave,” I said. I didn’t expect any opposition. This was precisely what they all wanted to hear.

And with that, I ran out of the clubhouse, into the night and toward the cars. There were no lights in the parking lot, but at the far end I could see an SUV backing out of its spot. As it came toward me, I stepped forward, hoping it was the Browns. I wasn’t sure if they knew I was out there, but as the car got closer, the headlights shined directly at me. The car slowed down. Thank god, they were going to stop. But then they maneuvered away from me, and as they passed, I could see Valerie in the passenger seat, illuminated from the

light of her cell phone. Bill was saying something to her, with his eyes on the road. They drove out of the lot before I could catch their attention.

I turned back toward the clubhouse, and through the windows I could see that the rest of the committee was still there, in animated conversation.

In the dark, I felt so horribly alone, with the light from the bright stars above not quite making it down to me. It was the first cool night after a long summer, and the damp air felt refreshing on my skin. How had I become the one who, again and again, filled every last bit of silence with some stupid joke? Why was I incapable of learning a simple lesson? Shut up, Raj.

I headed to my car.

“Raj.”

The sound echoed in the parking lot, the voice coming from the dark, as if a hellhound were barking my name. I heard heels tapping on the ground in quick succession. I stopped and waited. Finally, Suzanne appeared. The only light came from the clubhouse, and when she stood close to me, I couldn't see her very clearly.

When I had first met her and her husband Jack, it had been a very hot day and our kids were all swimming in the pool. We were talking in the shallow end, and after I told them what I did for a living, they spent the rest of our time together trying to persuade me that a liberal arts education was a waste of time and money.

“If they want to read books, they should go to the library. They should be learning to *do* something when they're in college. Be a doctor, an engineer.”

I had reduced Suzanne to those words, convinced that she thought all human endeavors had to have utility. And yet, every time I saw her after, she did and said things that surprised me, often inquiring about and showing a genuine interest in what I was teaching that term.

The previous week, we'd been the last ones left after the membership meeting, cleaning up together. In the parking lot, as we were about to get into our cars, a little drunk off the wine and the power to say yes or no, laughing and making fun of the couples we had seen that night, she had told me about her visit to the Taj Mahal. “What a luminous place,” she'd said. “I was so happy to have Jack and my boys at my side. But as I gazed at all that marble, I realized that no one would ever build something so majestic in honor of me. I

know it sounds ridiculous. Of course they wouldn't. But still I was left with such a deep, profound melancholy. It was almost like my whole body was melting away."

Several seconds passed without either of us saying anything.

"Maybe it was the summer heat," I finally offered.

There were a few more seconds of silence and then she belted out this wild, beautiful laughter that echoed in the empty parking lot.

Now here we were again, though I imagined the conversation would be rather different.

"Did you catch them?" Suzanne asked in a soft voice.

"No." I'd wanted to so badly. And now I wished I'd gotten in my car immediately after the Browns had driven away. I needed to be by myself, and I certainly didn't want to talk this through with Suzanne.

"What happened back there?" Suzanne asked in a gentle yet stern tone that I suspect she used with her children after they'd thrown a temper tantrum.

My mind felt like a hive of bickering bees. I ran my fingers through my hair, as if that might help order my thinking. "I said something terrible. I didn't mean to, it just came out. Now I feel sick to my stomach." Much as I desperately wanted to, I couldn't take this back. "I get the sense that you and the rest of the committee are very concerned about it."

"Yes, we are."

I mean, who wouldn't be? But still it rankled that after years of turning the other way, they were finally taking a stand on something.

"I'm not making an excuse for myself here, but I didn't see that same concern from everyone when that woman called me Kumar. I know they're not the same. But still."

"I'm sorry about that. She's an idiot and they're going on the bottom of the list. But you know this is of an entirely different magnitude. You just called—you called an African-American man, an African-American doctor . . ." Her voice dropped off.

"I didn't," I said. "And what does it matter that he's a doctor?"

"Several people in there would disagree with that. Everyone heard it. We're all horrified. And no, it doesn't matter that he's a doctor, but you know exactly what I mean. It would have been equally bad if you said it to someone else."

I wasn't going to explain to her the difference in intention and the crucial replacement

of the “er” with an “a” in what I had said. But then I did.

“I’m not your student,” Suzanne said, snapping at me. “And I don’t live under a rock. And neither do you.”

I was figuring out how best to reply, but Suzanne continued on, as if reciting a script the committee had hastily put together for her.

“Do you understand that there are legal implications? He could sue the club.”

“For what?”

“Hostility. Racial bias. Discrimination.”

“Then I should have sued this club long ago.” But I didn’t want to talk about my grievances right then. “You don’t understand, Suzanne. I wasn’t being hostile.”

“What else do you call that? I saw the way you stared at him when he came in, when he was talking about choosing medical school over pro tennis. The envy was pouring out of you.”

It took me a few seconds to register what she was saying. I wanted to hang out with Bill; I wanted to be him. And so yes, I was envious. But it wasn’t a hostile envy. Is that what they all thought I was feeling? “Are you kidding?” I asked, my voice louder and more forceful than before.

“Raj, I’m not going to argue with you about this, but I think you need to resign from the committee. We all do. I’ll call Mark and let him know. And you’re going to have to apologize. To both the Browns and the Blacks.”

“Fuck that.” The words came out, once again, before I could stop or soften them. All of them wanted me to resign? I trusted Leslie with my kids. I’d had an insightful conversation with Stan the other day about Dostoyevsky.

I was certainly going to apologize to Bill. I’d stop by the hospital in the morning, or send him and Valerie an email. But I wasn’t going to let Suzanne and the rest of the committee dictate how that apology went. I needed to do it on my own terms.

“Sorry. Let me start again.” I ran my fingers through my hair, this time feeling like I had more control of my racing thoughts. “As I said earlier, I know I messed up. Big time. But I’m not resigning.”

“We like you, Raj. We like your family. Please don’t do anything to jeopardize that.”

These words, more than any others that had been uttered that evening, felt as sharp as

a knife, slicing the dark space between us.

“Are you threatening me?”

I couldn't see her face. And she didn't immediately respond.

“No,” she finally said, in a steady, slow voice that I'd never heard from her before. “I'm just trying to make things right.”

“So am I. I'll see you at that meeting on Friday.” I walked to my car.

Once inside, I sat in the dark of the driver's seat and watched as Suzanne walked back to the clubhouse. My hand was unsteady as I tried to fit the key into the ignition. I turned on a light.

For years, I had been meticulous about my car, keeping it clean and organized, washing it inside and out every weekend. Now, granola bar wrappers littered the floor, shattered potato chips ground into the folds of the seats, and a layer of thick dust caked on the dashboard. I put the key in, started the car, and then noticed a headless Lego man near the gearbox. I examined it for a few seconds and, unsure of what else to do with it, put it back. I pulled out of my spot, my front left tire screeching against the body of the car where I'd gotten into a fender bender several months before. Mine was the anti-Tesla, noisily announcing itself everywhere it went.

There was no gate at the entrance of the club. As I waited to merge onto the street, I closed my eyes for a few seconds, hoping to gain some clarity, as Bill seemed to from his prayer beads. When I opened them again, I glanced in the rearview mirror. There was no one behind me. But I saw a small wooden sign attached to a stake in the ground, one that I had seen a hundred times before. Eventually, I had stopped noticing it. Now it was as if it were lit up only for me—THE TENNIS CLUB—and right below, in smaller letters, two words shining in the glow from the lamp on the ground beneath it: MEMBERS ONLY.

I put the car in reverse and drove close to the sign. When I got out, I saw the committee through the large bay window of the clubhouse. Suzanne was saying something to the rest of the group. They were all listening, but then Leslie noticed that I was outside. She turned toward me. One by one, the rest of them did as well, as if they were all on shore and I had boarded a ship set to sail. What were they all thinking? Did they think I was one of them? I looked back at the sign, still glowing, still proudly announcing its intent. I had hated that sign when we'd first joined the club, and the layers of meaning in those two simple words.

And yet, I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy being on the inside, being part of a club that others wanted to join.

I got back into my car and drove home.