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Desire

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(Author of *Tennis Hobo*)

Wherever sponsors put their money, circuits were played, or pretty women sat in galleries, there were whispers about Ulrik Lasst.

Lasst was a circuit regular from down around Louisiana way, and he could play any court, so long as it had lines and a net. They used to tell it he could outplay and outrun any man or woman,

on any surface, hard and fast, or soft and slow. And he was willing to prove it, blinded by sun in the heat of day, or in the cool of a candlelit night. Lasst never turned down a chance to play.

In locker rooms and bars, from clubs in Frisco to parks in Miami, voices hushed when others talked about Ulrik Lasst. They talked about his strokes, his moves, and his women, and his instinct to dominate. No matter what the odds, no matter what the score, Lasst always seemed to come out on top, cool and victorious and ready to go again.

Desire cont'd

His real name was VanLasstanger, but tales of his prowess grew and the name became shorter as it repeated across the country. He was lean and tall, blond and Dutch-blooded, and he emerged from tournaments in the southern states, never questioning a call, the word of an umpire, or the eye of a lady. A crowd-pleaser he was, with great touch and trick shots, but when there were no guarantees on the table, stadium courts resounded with the echo of his power, his canon-like serve, and his booming ground strokes. He hit hard off both wings and became sought after as a man who could play either side of the doubles court.

But those were the early years, the days before the big money in tennis, so Ulrik Lasst died without a penny to his name. And now, the preacher recounted that fact, and how a fine champion like Lasst would make a lot more money in the future.

It was a small graveside funeral. Only a few people were there, and the preacher did not have to speak loudly to be heard. “I tell ya,” he almost mumbled, “the game is spreading like wildfire, a man like Ulrik Lasst could make it rich one day real soon.”

The preacher paused to wipe a moist eye, and then he continued. “But Lasst wasn’t in it for the money, we all know that. And he would’ve kept playin’ too, but then his elbow caught up with him. So instead, he dug out a dirt court and he pitched balls to his son. Every day for ten years he worked with the kid. But then something else caught up with him — the bottle. And it drank the life right out of him.”

The preacher didn’t know if he should say anything else, so he dropped one of Lasst’s tennis rackets into the open grave as kind of a closing statement. He took a deep breath of the earthy air, and then he walked away.

The others followed, and when they were gone, a 16-year-old boy in worn-out clothes stood alone at the grave. The lanky youngster didn’t feel ready to shovel the dirt back in. On the ground, a few feet away was his mother’s gravestone, partially obscured by weeds. He had lost her three years earlier, and now the great loneliness inside him was changing — it was turning to desire, he could feel it. It was burning. It was as if his very soul had been singed. Nothing would stop him now. He was going to get some of that big money the preacher talked about. He would do it for his mother. She would have wanted him to have the money, so long as he stayed away from the bottle. The bottle had killed his father, but he would see that his name lived on. He would make the trip his father never got to make. He would go across the great Atlantic ocean and he would show the Englanders a thing or two. He would win the big one! And the whole world would hear. By God, the earth would shake, and his father would feel it, right down there where he lay. The boy thought these things through again, and again, as he shoveled the dirt.

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