



# Out of Sight

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It's around mid-day and I'm just coming off one of the ground-pass courts with my 16-year-old sister and fellow official. As soon as we've left behind the intensity of the match, our stiff professionalism wilts. We weave steadily through the teeming crowds until we reach Rod Laver Arena's basement corridors. We surreptitiously peer into the Player Gym as we pass. David Ferrer is pounding the treadmill, head down. In the corridor up ahead is a towering blonde player, stalking to the practice courts with her coach. "Is that... Maria Sharapova?" Kayla whispers. We sheepishly attempt to evade the TV cameras that swing around to cover each of her languorous steps.

This is our first Australian Open as line umpires. Among the crowd I feel slightly aloof: one of the initiated who receives the security guard's acquiescent nod, who traverses the secretive regions of Melbourne Park. Yet as we descend to the operations room under HiSense Arena, my borrowed self-assurance gradually deflates like a bicycle tyre. Entering the lake of uniforms I become the newcomer, the observer; the uninitiated.

An artificial glow from the corridor emanates through the glass wall of the dim officials' lounge. Sitting in the corner near the drooping pot-plants are a few internationals chattering in Spanish or Portuguese, half-watching the match on Rod Laver. Some of the older line umpires are grouped at a table playing cards. Long service awards were handed out yesterday morning; that old guy shuffling the deck with square glasses on a string has worked here every year for 35 years. Nearly twice my lifetime, I think as I refill my sponsored Mount Franklin bottle with ice.

"I'm going to meet Alex up at the staff café," Kayla says, and leaves. It's been two days and already she's found someone to flirt with. I fetch my book and settle in a chair on the edge of the room. But I'm distracted by a ceremony unfolding a metre away.

Leonardo, a young Brazilian official, is making tea. He takes a large packet of vivid green powder and pours it into a smooth earthenware jar. "This is called *chimarao*," he explains to Michelle sitting beside him. "It's a traditional Brazilian tea." He covers the jar with his hand

and turns it horizontally, coaxing the tea so it fills one side of the jar and leaves a cavity. He pours hot water from his thermos into the cavity and stirs it gently with a spoon-like metal filter. He then sips the brew from the filter's hollow handle, as naturally as breathing.

Stumbling across this *chimarao* ritual is like finding an ancient spearhead in my own backyard. There's the thrill of initial discovery and the sense that its significance belongs to me alone. Yet I'm struck by my artefact's location. Everything at Melbourne Park seems to be part of a controlled, sanitised microcosm. Its employees have been scrubbed into uniformity and professionalism. It's almost as if I've unearthed the *chimarao* artefact in the corridor of a skyscraper.

It's 3.50 PM. Like clockwork, our squad assembles at Court 11 where R. Safiullin of Russia and M. Valkusz of Hungary are fighting like two desperate bulldogs. They grind out shot after shot from the baseline, but besides their entourages we're the only ones watching. Sweat-soaked and browbeaten, Valkusz throws a defensive forehand, but it plops into the net and Safiullin claims the match. There's a brief smatter of applause as they gracelessly shake hands with the umpire, avoiding her eye. Squad A files off the court and dissipates into the crowd. We're left to wait in the afternoon sun for the next match.

The players are a long time coming so we settle into the blue plastic chairs of the stands. Tim is next to me. He has short grey hair, horn-rimmed glasses

and an uncrushable positivity. “Hi Ale,” he had said to me this morning at the briefing. “Nice to meet you. This is going to be a great day. This is going to be a really great day.”

“So what do you do, Tim?”

Beaming, he tells me he’s a zookeeper. He used to work at Melbourne Zoo, but now he works out at Werribee, where it’s open-range.

“Last week I had a few days away, and when I went back to work we drove out in the ute to feed the bison. We were hauling out these big hay bales for them and you could tell they were so excited, tossing their horns around — you’ve got to be careful — but you could tell they recognised me. They get to know you.”

On my other side, the squad leader Marina tells me she’s travelled from Northern Italy.

“I work in a bookshop,” she reveals, leaning across to include Tim. “My boss is really good... he used to be a line umpire so he understands. She tends to dish out thoughts with her hands.

“How do you call the ball in Italy?” I ask.

“‘No’. It’s just ‘no’ for everything. Much better than remembering you have to say ‘fault’ for the serve instead of ‘out’, yes?”

I nod in agreement. I had choked on the wrong call several times myself. There have also been times I’ve nearly blurted out some bizarre word that has more relevance to my daydream than tennis.

Isaac sits in the row in front of us, twisted around awkwardly to hover on the edge of our conversation. He fidgets with the lid of his pop-top water bottle and watches the steady flow of spectators ambling through the maze of courts. He

hasn’t spoken much.

“What about you Isaac?” I say.

He looks up. “Um... I’m in second-year dentistry.” He opens the pop-top.

Tim asks if he’s always wanted to be a dentist.

He hesitates. “My mum and dad wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer, or something like that... I didn’t really know what I wanted.” He unscrews the lid of the bottle and replaces it. “But I like doing practical things. So I thought dentistry might be alright.”

“Are you enjoying it?” I say.

He closes the pop-top with his thumb. “It’s ok.”

I want to ask more questions, but our conversation is interrupted by the players’ arrival; our vocabulary is reduced to two words and hand signals.

They’re missing someone from Court 21 and I’ve been transferred across, where a girls’ singles match is in progress. As I walk across Garden Square, cheers erupt from Rod Laver Arena, muted and contained by the immense stands. The crowds have begun to dissipate from the grounds, dispelled by the exhausting heat. Some riotous teenagers have invaded the Hot Shots Court where the little kids usually swing tentatively at low-compression balls. I side-step a puddle of ice-cream melted on the tarmac. Continuing through the staff area, which is constructed by portable buildings in the carpark, I stay out of the way of some dedicated ballkids practising their rolls. They still look fresh, meaning they’ve probably been rostered to work the night session on Centre Court. They’ll be on their best game, sprinting to attend

to the players as the TV channels cut away to advertisements and the spectators take selfies tagged *#ausopen*.

When I reach Court 21 it's the end of the set, so I go straight on and sit down next to Jonathon, who's a Taiwanese-Australian. I had found out yesterday from my sister that he's married to Tim. Jon has a broad face with a wide-set honest gaze. He's softly spoken, with a thick, clipped accent that makes him difficult to understand. Despite his mild nature, he's self-assured and has a sharp sense of humour.

"The girls I don't like to watch," he mutters as the players take their rest. "They are so slow. When I watching the baseline I fall nearly asleep. And between points that girl – she pull her skirt, then she blow on her hand, then she bounce the ball, then she blow on the hand, then she throw it to serve and everyone has already gone home."

The umpire calls, "Time!"

Throughout the course of the tournament, I converse with a playful bank manager, a witty English commerce graduate, a whole family of

officials, a painfully polite mathematics major, a Steiner schoolkid, a stern lady who keeps three cows. It strikes me as strange sometimes, to uncover them here at these bustling yet sterile tennis courts. The players appear to burst at the seams with vivacity, but from watching the officials working, one would never guess that they possess equally fascinating stories and personalities.

By the time we return to our seats for the change of ends, the floodlights are beginning to glow faintly, sentries relieving the sun. The evening air is tranquil. Gentle *thunks* and squeaking shoes and faint 'out' calls wash over the expanse of Melbourne Park. Jonathon remarks something to me but I don't quite catch it.

"That was Tim's voice, that called 'out' just then," he repeats with quiet satisfaction.

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Alessandra Prunotto (19) has difficulty reconciling her urge to sleep with her desire to become both a writer and a musician. She is a mediocre tennis player.

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'The Echo of the Celestial Cacophony' (overleaf) is by David C Mahler (23), a Melbourne based cartoonist and filmmaker. His work explores consciousness, connection, energy and loneliness. →