

ON THE LINE

SERENA WILLIAMS
WITH DANIEL PAISNER

THORNDIKE PRESS
A part of Gale, Cengage Learning



Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London



This Large Print Book carries the
Seal of Approval of N.A.V.H.

THREE: ME AND V

One year. Three months. Nine days. That's the age difference between me and my older sister Venus. These days, it doesn't seem like much, but when we were kids it felt like I'd never fill the gap.

She cast a big shadow, I'll say that. She was taller, prettier, quicker, more athletic. And, she was certainly *nicer*. There was no living up to her. I certainly tried. I wanted to do everything just like Venus. Like Lyn, too, but Venus was first in line. Whenever we went to a restaurant, my mom would make me order first, because if I didn't I'd just order whatever Venus ordered. I'd never speak my own mind. When we were little it was always "Venus this" and "Venus that." "Venus, Venus, Venus." The more we developed as players, the more I became the tagalong kid sister. That was the perception.

I still remember this one national newspaper article about Venus that suggested I'd

never be anything more than a footnote to Venus's career. It talked about how in tennis the younger sibling never amounts to much, and how that would be my fate, too. That article came later, after we'd started playing in some tournaments, but it put me in mind of how I felt when we first started playing seriously.

Imagine somebody writing something like that about a child. Declaring that a younger sibling would never amount to much. It's harsh, don't you think? That's why I always have all this sympathy for the younger siblings, for people like Eli Manning and Patrick McEnroe. Everyone counts you out before you even get started. For our whole life, growing up, we're like the underdogs.

I promised myself I'd never forget that article, that one day I'd prove the reporter wrong. It was such a cruel thing to say, but I turned it into some more of that silent fuel. I filed it away for later. Everyone took it as such a big positive for Venus, and for all of us, and for the most part it was just that. With all the excitement in our house when it came out, I thought we'd be off on another one of Daddy's paper-grabs. There's no denying that it put us on the tennis map. *All* of us. But Tunde read between the lines and saw what I saw. She felt what I felt. As

the oldest, she was the furthest removed from my runt-of-the-litter perspective, but she understood. She took me aside and said, "Don't pay any attention to that article, Serena. You'll have your day. You'll have your time. And it's gonna be even bigger."

I never forgot that. Filed that away, too.

Growing up on those tennis courts in Compton and Lynwood and all over Los Angeles, it sometimes felt like nobody believed in me. I suppose I understood it on some level. Clearly, Venus was the phenom, the prodigy, the rising star. But on another level it hurt. Even my dad, who's always been my biggest supporter, was spending more time with Venus, more time on her game, more time talking to reporters and coaches about her. The more he talked to people about us, the more he took us out to these events, the more connections he made in the game, the more it became about Venus.

She was the main attraction. I *get* that now. I *get* that Venus deserved all that extra tennis attention. I *get* that you can raise only one champion — until you look up one day and realize you've raised two.

My parents believed in me, in their own way. Absolutely, my mom believed in me. Wholeheartedly. That's a great word for how

she felt about her girls. She believed in all of us, with all her heart, and she had each of us believing in ourselves and in each other as well. We could do anything we wanted, be anything we wanted, accomplish anything we wanted. She had this great way of isolating each of us and making us feel special. Didn't have to be about tennis. It could be about school, or dance, or gymnastics, or the way we'd decided to wear our hair. She singled us out and allowed us to shine.

It wasn't just my parents who believed in me. Venus knew I could play, too. Even when we were kids, she knew I could play. She didn't understand why she was getting all the attention. She used to tell me I was a clever player, but I think that was her way of putting a positive spin on my game. I was good, but I was more of a counterpuncher. I wasn't strong, like Venus. I wasn't an intimidating presence, like Venus. I didn't have a superaggressive game. I eventually found one when I got a little taller and stronger, but when we were little I was all about lobs and really, really long baseline rallies, and doing whatever I could to break my opponent.

Venus never held it over me, that her game was bigger and better; she didn't rub my

face in it. She had such a good, kind heart. (She still does!) She was always so positive and generous and accommodating. She just told me to work hard and to play my game. "The rest will come," she used to say. "Your time will come."

As I got older, I started sleeping more and more in Venus's bed. Even when Tunde moved out of the house and there was a bunk bed to call my own, I still crawled in with Venus most nights, and we'd talk about these kinds of things. You'd think we'd get enough talk of tennis during the day from Daddy, but Venus used to take the time as we drifted off to pick me up and set me right. She could see when I'd had a tough day, when I needed a lift.

One of the reasons Venus cast such a big shadow, of course, was because she was so tall. Always, always. I used to watch her play and think she was like a fierce swan out there on the court, with this incredible wingspan, able to reach every shot. I just couldn't get the ball past her. (Nobody could!) In contrast, I was really, really small — the runt of the litter. That's how I felt, growing up with all these big, beautiful sisters. And it wasn't just Venus who dominated me on the court. Isha, too, had some serious game. That's another thing people

don't know about our family, that for a long time Isha was a rising star, too. She could never quite touch Venus's game, but she was good. In her own right, she was good. She was training to be a champion, just like me and Venus, up until she was about thirteen, when she started to have some trouble with her back and had to step away from the game. That was a real heartbreak for Isha, and for the rest of us, because she had a real shot. After that, she took some time off and returned a couple years later to become a strong high school player, but it was at a different level. And so, when we were kids, I was competing with Isha, too. That made two shadows for me to hide behind.

By this point, Tunde and Lyn had drifted from the game. Tunde always said she didn't have an athletic bone in her body, so she was happy to give it up. Lyn was a good athlete, but she started running track in middle school and said she didn't have time for tennis. Plus, she loved writing and music — she had an artistic soul. From time to time, Daddy would work on Lyn to get her to take it up again because he said she showed a lot of promise, but she didn't want to play. She'd had enough, she said. So that just left the three of us.

I didn't start growing until I was fifteen or

sixteen years old, and my "clever" game was a direct result of my size. It came from necessity; I had to compensate. I learned to be resourceful on the court, to work on my shot placement, to out-think my opponent, because there was no way I was overpowering anybody out there. Physically, there was just no way.

That observation I made earlier about never cheating my opponent on the lines? It didn't apply against Venus, because the only way I could beat her was to cheat. She knew I was cheating, and I knew she knew I was cheating, but I cheated anyway. If the call was close, it was mine.

I look back now and hate myself for cheating my big-hearted, generous, accommodating sister. Really, I'm so embarrassed by my behavior, but at the same time I recognize that it goes hand in hand with how I cheated that girl in the Domino's Pizza League, when I felt I needed to. When my back was against the wall. When it was the only way I knew to compete. I wanted to win so badly that I'd stoop to this, but I guess I didn't see it as stooping. It was just reaching — in the wrong direction.

Daddy had us play against each other in practice. Not all the time, but a lot. He tried to get other hitting partners for us, and we'd

hit with local teenagers or college players from time to time, but the default option was always me against Venus. We were always around. Anyway, we weren't really competing against each other in these practice matches. Things weren't like that between us. They were like that in my head, but only in my head. I was definitely competing with myself. I was competing against the low expectations everyone had set out for me, against the high expectations they had for Venus. Plus, I still hated to lose, and I knew if I played Venus straight I'd probably lose. So I called balls out that weren't. I insisted some of my shots were clearly in, when they clearly weren't. My justification was no justification, really. Venus was better than me, that's all. Way better. This was just my way of trying to win. It was wrong. I admit it. But it felt to me like I was doing what I had to do to keep pace.

Venus never seemed to mind. She certainly never said anything. She just accepted my calls and played on — and in this way, I guess, we pushed each other. She pushed me to get good enough to beat her legitimately. I pushed her to get good enough to beat me so badly I couldn't cheat my way from losing.

Daddy had this idea that he didn't want

us to play in proper tournaments. He didn't want us to have to face all that pressure. Also, he didn't want so many sets of eyes on us, I think. He wanted to give us time to develop as players, before people had a chance to check us out and weigh in on what he was trying to do. He didn't care for second-guessing. He liked that we could just do our thing on these different public courts, on our own timetable, without having to deal with these know-it-alls in the tennis community who always seemed to have something to say.

Venus was ready to play in tournaments before I was. First of all, she was older, so she qualified. Second, and more important, she was so physically impressive that I could no longer give her much of a game, even with my not-so-generous calls, and the players Daddy brought around weren't much competition, either. Very quickly, Venus got to where she really wanted to see how she'd do in a proper tournament, just like the players on television, but my parents wouldn't allow it. I joined in on the argument, of course. I might have been a notch or two below Venus, but I was pretty good, too. I wanted to play, too. Finally, we wore Daddy down. He said if Venus could beat him straight up, he'd let her play — and I

knew that once that happened, I wouldn't be too far behind.

We all looked forward to that match between Venus and Daddy like it was a Wimbledon final. We talked about it the whole time leading up to it. At least, Venus and I talked about it. At night, before we'd fall asleep, Venus would say, "Do you think I can beat him? Do you think I really have a chance?"

I had no idea if she could beat him, because Daddy was such a good player. He was much stronger than Venus, obviously. He was bigger. And he was smart. He really understood the game. Plus, we were so young! Venus was only nine or ten. How could she hope to compete against a full-grown man? But I didn't say any of these things to Venus. Most likely, it's only in retrospect that I recognize them. At the time, I probably just thought, *Yeah, sure, Venus can beat him. Why not?* So that's probably what I said.

The day of the match finally arrived. It was set up at night, at one of the public parks. We all went out to watch. (You can bet Daddy opened a couple new cans of balls for the occasion.) I remember it as a real exciting moment, a highlight family event, and Venus beat him. She did! I don't

remember the score, but I don't think Daddy eased up to let her win. It was a hard-fought match. Daddy was sweating. He was trying, most definitely. We were all there; we all saw it. But Venus beat him, she really and truly did, and we went to bed that night so happy because it meant that Venus could start playing in tournaments. It meant we'd both be playing, before long. We talked and talked and talked about it under the covers before we finally fell asleep.

Sure enough, that's what happened. Venus started playing, and we started bouncing around as a family to all these tournaments. For me, it was a mixed blessing. I was happy for Venus, and I really wanted her to do well, but now the focus shifted even more in her direction. Now Daddy started to spend even more time on her game. This was around the time they started signing me up for all those local recreational leagues so I'd have more of a chance to compete against kids my own age while Venus was out doing her tournament thing, but I wanted what Venus had. I wanted the chance to beat Daddy in my own match, so I could play tournaments, too.

Every day, I'd say, "Daddy, let's play. Give me a chance. I want to play in tournaments, like V."

But he'd always say, "Not yet, Meeka. You're not ready."

I was so mad, so frustrated. I didn't think there was anything I could do but wait for my chance, but then Venus was signed up for this one tournament and I had an idea. Venus was nine, so it was a 10-and-under tournament. I was eight. The germ of my idea was this: I used to play Office a lot with my sisters. It wasn't really a game; it was more of a mind-set; we'd pretend to answer phones and fill out papers and sit at our kitchen table like it was a desk in a real office. It's like playing House, only with phones and paperwork — a way to pretend we were grown-ups. So there I was one day, pushing around all these papers, when I noticed an application for this particular tournament. For some reason, we had two applications lying around, so I filled one out and sent it in. I didn't have a checkbook, obviously, so I couldn't pay the entry fee, but I sent in the entry form. Then, when the tournament came around on the calendar, I went along for the ride with Venus and the rest of my family, just like I always did. I didn't say anything to anybody, not even my sisters.

A lot of times, I'd take my racquet with

me to these tournaments, because there was a chance to hit on one of the open courts, and there were usually other little sisters and little brothers running around, looking for something to do. Or, sometimes my mom or dad would hit with me, while Venus was resting between matches. So nobody thought anything of it that I was dressed to play, and when Venus went with my dad to go play her match I walked over to the registration table to see where I was in the draw. Pretty dévious, huh? But I didn't think I was doing anything wrong. I just wanted what Venus had. That was all I ever wanted, to be just like Venus — my role model, then and still — so I went out and took my turn like I had it coming.

When I tell this story now, people are amazed that I had the nerve to do something this big behind my parents' backs. They say that for an eight-year-old kid to go against authority like this is fairly remarkable — but I didn't see it that way at the time. I thought there was a good chance I'd get into some kind of trouble over it, but that didn't stop me. I was too excited to play to think of any negative consequences. The only potential negative, really, was that I wouldn't play well, but I wasn't too worried about that. I knew I could beat these girls.

As long as I didn't have to play Venus, I thought I had a shot.

My plan almost backfired, because Venus won her match in no time at all, and before long my dad was looking for me. He didn't like that I wasn't around watching my sister. He didn't like that he couldn't find me. People kind of knew who we were at this point, so he started asking people if they'd seen me. He asked one of the tournament officials, and the guy said, "Oh, you mean the younger one? She's playing her match on that court over there."

He nodded his head to indicate the court. Daddy thought there must be some mistake. He said, "No, sir. She's not playing. She's too young. She's not signed up."

The guy said, "No, Mr. Williams. I'm afraid there's no mistake. She's in the other half of the draw. She's playing right now."

My father couldn't believe it, but the guy walked him over to where I was playing. I didn't know he was there at the time. He stayed back, away from the court. That was just as well, since I don't think I would have noticed him if he'd pulled up close. I was too focused on my match to worry what kind of trouble I'd get into once my parents found out I'd entered the tournament without their permission. Right then, I was

only worried about my opponent. I had just turned eight a week or so earlier, but I was determined and single-minded even then. I was trying to run this girl all over the place and tire her out — and I was doing a pretty good job of it.

I ended up winning that match, and when it was over I heard my dad's sweet drawl coming at me from behind the fence. He said, "Meeka! Look at you! You won! You played great!"

He was so positive, so upbeat. Here I'd thought I'd be in for another whupping, but he couldn't have been more encouraging. I was prepared for punishment — at the very least, I thought I'd get a good talking-to — but it never came, and so for the time being I was just happy that Daddy was happy. And he was happy that I was happy.

He said, "I can't believe you won. I can't believe my two girls both won. I'm so proud of you."

And he was proud, I could see that. He was beaming. My mother, too. And Venus, when she found out what I had done, she had a smile on her face like you wouldn't believe. Not because I'd won, I don't think, but because I had the brass to enter the tournament in the first place. Deep down, I think she knew I'd win if I had the chance

to play, so she wasn't surprised by the outcome. She was just surprised to see me playing.

Right away, Daddy started talking about what I'd have to do to win my next match, the few things he saw in my game I might need to fix before the next round. Venus was in the other half of the draw, so I didn't have to worry about facing her just yet. I had two other girls to get past on the way to the finals. I had never given the finals a thought going in, but after that first match I thought I could do well. My next opponent was a girl I used to play a lot in practice, so Daddy knew all kinds of ways for me to beat her. He said as long as I had entered I might as well go on to the finals.

I said, "You really think I can beat her?"

He said, "Meeka, you can do anything."

It worked out so he could be at that next match, to cheer me on, and then at the semifinal match, against another girl we knew, so he gave me some tips on how to beat her, too.

Now things were getting exciting. It was a 10-and-under tournament and I was the youngest girl in the field, by a lot, so people were coming around to watch, to talk to my parents, to talk to me after my matches. All of a sudden, I had what Venus had. It was

the most thrilling, encouraging day. And so much fun! But then I realized these wins now put me in the finals against Venus, and all of a sudden I was intimidated. I knew I couldn't beat her, because it was the final round of a sanctioned tournament. There'd be people watching, so I couldn't cheat. Venus was just too good, and I was just too little.

It was the first time we'd face each other in tournament play — the first time of many. And, of course, it was such a big, big deal in our family. My parents were so excited for both of us. They said afterward they didn't know which one of us to root for. They just wanted us to play good tennis, and to have fun, and to learn from the experience. That became their standard response whenever we'd face each other. Our sisters were also terribly excited for both of us. And I was so excited for Venus. I really was. I tell that to people, and they think it's just a line, but it's the God's honest truth. I always want the best for Venus when she's out there on the court. I want her to make her shots, and hold her serve, and all that. Even if it means I'll have to face her in the end. I just don't want her to do all those things against *me*.

My thinking has always been, Look, she's

the best player on the tour. Next to me. If you ask Venus, she'd probably say the same thing: "Serena is the best player on the tour. Next to me."

That's how we felt as kids, too, and it wasn't bluster or arrogance that had us feeling this way. No. It's that we really were good. As soft as my game might have been, it was only that way in comparison to Venus's game. Everyone else my age I could beat. Everyone else Venus's age I could beat. At least, in and around Los Angeles. I'd seen all those girls play. I'd played most of them in practice, or in some recreational league or other. I didn't have the power to beat them with anything but lobs and rallies and placement, but I had the shots. I had that mental edge, that toughness. Daddy had me thinking about my footwork, and moving my opponents around, and working my serve, and that was all fine against these other girls, but we all knew that finals match against Venus would be another story.

Meanwhile, just before the final, my father came over to talk to me about the tournament fee. I think it was forty dollars — and naturally I hadn't paid it. He'd spoken to the director between matches, and puzzled together how I'd sent in my own application, and he thought he'd have some fun

with me about the fee. He said, "How you planning to pay for this tournament, Meeka?"

It turned out he wasn't really mad that I had entered. He was happy that I cared enough about playing to arrange this sneaky end around into the draw. And he was happy that I was doing well. But I had no money to pay my own way. I hadn't thought things through that far, so now I had something else to worry about, along with going up against V in the final. It never occurred to me that he was just joking with me. I could see he was smiling, but you could never tell with Daddy. He was always smiling.

He probably thought this would be a good distraction for me, to get my mind off my worries about facing Venus, and I guess it was. And yet, distraction or no, I couldn't keep up with Venus. She beat me easily; 6-2, 6-2, I think. I tried my best, but she was playing at a whole other level. And I was happy for her, too, that she'd played so well. I was sad for me, though. Really. If I was any older, or more mature, I might have given myself permission to sulk or fuss about losing, but I didn't think there was any room in the moment for me to be upset. It was Venus's tournament, after all. I didn't

really belong there. I should have been happy for V that she'd won. She deserved to win. She was meant to win. But I was surely disappointed — and I couldn't let on! Here I'd had this great tournament. I'd made it all the way to the finals. I was the youngest girl there. I got a lot of attention. But when you're eight, you don't have it in you to appreciate the big picture, so I remember feeling this huge letdown.

At the awards ceremony right after, they gave Venus a nice gold trophy. They gave me a nice silver trophy as the runner-up. It was my first real trophy, so you'd think I'd be excited about it, but I just kept looking at Venus's gold trophy and wishing I could have somehow beaten her. Oh my God, I wanted that gold trophy so badly.

Venus could see I was upset. After all, she was my big sister. She was used to taking care of me. She knew just what to do to pick me up. She came up to me after the awards ceremony and said, "You know what, Serena? I've been thinking. I've always liked silver better than gold. You want to trade?"

It was the sweetest, most selfless gesture. She set it out like I'd be doing her a favor by trading trophies. Took me completely by surprise, but we traded trophies right there. She was my big sister so I did what she said,

and to this day that's the most meaningful trophy I've ever received. I didn't earn it, but I cherish it. It's the only one I keep close — at my bedside, actually. Every night when I'm home, I go to bed and look at Venus's gold first-place trophy from my first-ever tournament and count my blessings. That I have the world's best big sister. That at eight years old I was able to beat all these girls a year or two older. That Daddy never did make me pay him back for that entry fee. That I wouldn't have to play in those silly recreational leagues anymore, now that I had shown everyone I was ready to play in real tournaments. That my whole family was so incredibly supportive of me during that first tournament, just as they have been at every tournament since. And that no matter how many times Venus and I face each other on a tennis court, we'll always be sisters.

We'll battle each other like nobody's business, but the competition will never separate us.

The buzz around Venus's game only got louder as we developed, because she never lost a match as a junior player. Me, I didn't lose many, but I did lose a few. And yet despite that small gap between us in terms of our records, the space between us in

terms of our reputations was just huge. Venus was still the rising star, and I was still the kid sister. I started to think maybe that newspaper reporter was right, because our situation wasn't about to change. Venus was still way taller than me, but a lot of times people couldn't tell us apart. They'd call me Venus; they'd call her Serena. But once they saw us play, that made it easier. They could tell the fierce swan from the ugly duckling, no problem.

After that first tournament, Daddy did what he could to make sure we didn't compete against each other in a meaningful match. He put Venus in the 12-and-unders and me in the 10-and-unders. And that was how it was until we both turned professional. Venus went pro first, and I followed soon after, kind of like it first happened for us on the circuit in California. After that, we couldn't really control when we'd face each other. We could only hope it wasn't too early in the tournament, so we'd each have a chance to get on a roll and reach into the later rounds. Ideally, we'd stay out of each other's way until the end.

The very first time we competed as professionals was in the second round of the 1998 Australian Open. I'm skipping ahead here, but I want to finish out these thoughts

about going up against Venus, and growing up as a player in her magnificent shadow. It was my first major (also known as a Grand Slam tournament), so I was pretty nervous. I'd ended the previous year ranked 99th in the world, so I was starting to make my mark. A couple years later, I'd see that 99 ranking on the way down, and it felt a whole lot different to me, but on the way up it felt great. On the way up, it was a real marker, the first time my rank reached into double digits — and then, into single digits. People around tennis were talking about how this was going to be a big year for me — but you have to remember, Venus was already making her mark. She was already ranked in the Top 20. I'd watched her struggle in her very first professional matches, then get it together and have some success. That's why I think I went into that second-round match in Melbourne with a defeatist attitude, because Venus was playing so well, and because she was expected to play so well.

It's not that I was convinced I would lose, but I was resigned to it. It's better to say I was *prepared* to lose — and, of course, that's no way to prepare to win. (Sounds like one of my dad's motivational quotes!) In any case, that's the kind of rookie mistake I used

to make when I was just starting out. I'd put myself in the wrong frame of mind before a match, not realizing how important the mental part of the game was in relation to everything else I put out on the court. But my head was cluttered with so many negative thoughts, so many drags on my performance, there was just no way I could have played well.

Yes, I was bigger and stronger than I was the first time I'd played Venus in that first-ever youth tournament. Goodness, I was nearly as big and strong as Venus. But I was only sixteen years old. It was my first full year on the tour. Nobody expected me to win. Everybody expected Venus to win. And even if I did manage to get past V and into the third round, nobody thought I'd have a shot at going much deeper in the tournament, against all that great competition. Most important, I didn't think I'd have a shot. Venus, though, she had a shot — and she knew it. She'd been playing well enough to win the championship, so a part of me thought, *Hey, this is my sister. She deserves to win. Better for her to win and go deep in the tournament than for me to win and get knocked out in the next round.* That's how this first matchup had me thinking. Like a loss to V would come with its own silver lin-

ing, because she'd get to keep playing. Like if I managed to win it would somehow knock both of us from the field.

I hated that we had to meet so early in the tournament, but that was how it fell. And over the years, that was how it would fall again and again. As we moved up in the rankings, as we earned higher and higher seeds, the draw would be set in such a way that we couldn't meet until the later rounds, but that wouldn't happen for a while. In 1998, before I'd ever played a Grand Slam tournament, it was inevitable that we would meet in the first or second round, so the thing to do was power through and hope for the best — never fully knowing if *the best* meant a victory for me or Venus.

We were both a little tentative in that match. Venus ended up beating me in straight sets, but the first set went to a tie-breaker. She took control in the second set, though, to beat me 7-6, 6-1. Neither one of us played particularly well, like we were careful not to show each other up. I kept looking at the players' box, where my sisters were sitting with my mom, and it was so weird, no one knowing when to cheer or what to wish for. Tunde didn't make the trip — she had kids of her own by this point, and Melbourne was a *long* way from

her home in Los Angeles — but Isha and Lyn were there. I felt the same tug-and-pull down on the court. I wanted to win, but I wanted Venus to win, too, if that makes any sense. As disappointed as I was to lose (remember, I *hate* losing!), that's how happy I was that Venus had won.

Later on, people would say we'd set up our matches and figure out beforehand which one of us would win, but that's absurd. It's enraging, really. I bristle every time I hear something like that, but what can you do? People are going to believe what they want to believe and say what they want to say.

I have no response to these kinds of comments, so I hold my tongue. Venus, too. We were raised to believe that a lie cannot stand forever — and it certainly cannot stand on its own. I think of that great line from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from that famous speech he made after his march from Selma to Birmingham. "However difficult the moment," he said, "however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you will reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long, but it

bends toward justice."

True, Dr. King was talking about something a whole lot more significant than a tennis match, but it goes to human nature, don't you think? *Truth pressed to the earth will rise again.* There's such power in that sentiment, such grace. It's not quite what Dr. King had in mind, but it applies. At least, I choose to apply it here, because the first time I heard that charge against me and V I came away thinking, *If someone hurls an untruth in your direction, it doesn't always pay to swat it back. Sometimes the thing to do is to just let it hang there, unanswered, and wait for it to disperse.*

Because no lie can live forever.

Over the years, these run-ins with Venus have become legendary in tennis circles. People say it's been an epic battle. I don't know about that, but I do know that it's put a stamp on my career. On Venus's career, too, I think. We've played each other pretty close — at one point going into the 2008 U.S. Open, we were dead even in tour matchups, at eight wins apiece — but we've each had our momentum runs. In the beginning, Venus had the big-time edge. Then, for a stretch, I won a bunch of times in a row. More recently, we've traded

punches. In 2008, Venus beat me in the finals at Wimbledon; I beat her in the quarterfinals at the U.S. Open. We've been up and down, and all over the place.

Nevertheless, this first-ever Grand Slam tournament between me and V at the 1998 Australian Open was a real turning point in my career. It announced my arrival. I hated that I lost, but at the same time I didn't mind, because the match held out a carrot for me in terms of the player I might become. Throughout my development, there was always Venus to set the standard. At times, when I was little, it seemed like an impossible standard, but there it was. She was the embodiment of my best self. She was the player I hoped to be — the person I hoped to be, too. I'd watch her play, and go to school, and order ahead of me when we went to a restaurant, and generally carry herself throughout her days, and I'd think, *Someday, that'll be me.*

During the 2008 U.S. Open, a reporter asked me an interesting question. She had been looking over my history with Venus in all these Grand Slam tournaments, and she asked me how many more majors I might have won if Venus had not loomed in my path on so many occasions. It was a reasonable question. Venus had knocked me from

a major on five different occasions, twice in the finals, so just going by the numbers I could see where the reporter was going with this line of thought. But I went another way in my response. Without hesitating I said, "I don't think I would have won nearly as many."

This wasn't exactly what the reporter expected to hear, so I talked about how growing up in Venus's shadow has been such a positive motivator for me. How the impossible standard she set on the court (and off!) was such a powerful model. How she pushed me to be the very best I could be. I talked about how I learn by watching. All my life, that's how it's been. I'm a good mimic; show me a couple dance moves, and I'll have them down. Let me watch you learn your lines and hit your marks on a television or movie set, and I'll do the same. If you *tell* me something, it'll probably go in one ear and straight out the other. But if you *show* me, I'll get it. That's how it was, watching Venus when we were little. At her very first tour event, I was taking all these mental notes. She lost, but I could see where she lost. And when she lost, I lost. When she won, I won. How I played was all tied in with how she played. And so by the time I went out there to fight my own

battles, I was ready. It's like I had all this experience — Venus's experience. Without V to lead the way, it would have taken me longer to get to where I wanted to be. And then, once I started having some success on my own, I still looked to Venus. If she won a major, it fired me up to win the next one. If she went out early to practice on the morning after a big win, I went out early to practice.

Really, I don't know where I'd get that drive, were it not for Venus. I suppose I would have found it somewhere, but it might have taken a while. Yes, you look at the scoreboard and see that Venus beat me a bunch of times in Grand Slam tournaments. She beat me twice in the finals — at Wimbledon in 2008 and at the U.S. Open in 2001 — so right there that might have been two more titles for me. But I don't see it that way. The way I see it is, Who knows if I would have even made it that far without Venus?

It's the difference between a roadblock and an open lane — and it's all the difference in the world.

FOUR: THE FIERY DARTS OF INDIAN WELLS

There's one match between me and Venus that stands out — only it's memorable because we never played. I got credit for the win in a walkover, but I would have gladly taken the loss if it meant we could have avoided all the grief and ugliness that came our way as a result.

It was at the 2001 Indian Wells Masters. I had already won at Indian Wells in 1999, beating Steffi Graf in three sets in the finals when I was only seventeen. That was a big deal. After that, it became my absolute favorite tournament, for a lot of reasons. It was in a small town, just outside Palm Springs, California. I loved the setting. I loved where it fell on the tour calendar, right before Miami. I loved that the fans were knowledgeable and respectful and appreciative. And I especially loved that it was one of the few tournaments that allowed us all to be together, as a family. Palm Springs

115

She beat Venus, so take it to her. Play deep to her backhand. She gets nervous. U have nothing to lose, so play like it. U will set the tone. Make her run. Get her. Remember, it takes courage and discipline to do/be Serena Williams — the best. U R Serena Williams. U R the best. Keep that courage and discipline. Stay relaxed. Be happy.

— MATCH BOOK ENTRY

was close enough to Los Angeles that Tunde could peel away for a few days, and we'd all stay together in the hotel and hang out, and it was so much fun.

I came to Indian Wells at such a positive time in my career that I naturally attached all of these positive feelings to it. But then the 2001 tournament came around and changed things up on me. That's how it goes sometimes. Whenever you're feeling most comfortable, most in control, something happens to knock the wind out of you. In this way, tennis is a lot like life. You might think you're in control, but you're never really in control. You might have a good game plan, but then you run into someone or something on the other side of the net trying to move you off of it. You might do everything in your power to prepare for a special moment, and you're still caught unprepared.

I'd looked forward to the tournament for months. Then I got off to a strong start. Venus did, too. We were both happy about that. We always liked it when we both did well — in the beginning of our careers, especially. Venus basically owned me in our tour matchups at that point, with a 4-1 record, but I'd been playing well and I was ready to take it to her. Venus had already

won a couple majors by this point, and here I was, her younger sister, starting to make some noise with eight tour championships and a major of my own. I'm sure the Indian Wells people were happy about the possible matchup.

As it played out, we each advanced to the semifinal round. I beat Lindsay Davenport in the quarterfinals 6-1, 6-2. This was a big victory for me, because Lindsay was playing great tennis at the time. It was a real statement match. That's what a convincing win can do for you early in your career against a strong player. It can set you up as a player to watch. Already, with the way we came up and joined the tour, Venus and I were players to watch, but now I was finally playing like the fuss was for real.

Unfortunately, Venus struggled in her quarterfinal contest against Elena Dementieva. She won, but she struggled. The straight-sets score didn't really show it, but it was a tough match, mostly because it was ridiculously hot. That's the one knock on Indian Wells — it's out in the desert and it can get really, really hot, although usually in March it's not that bad. On this day, though, Venus came down with heat exhaustion. The match went on for a long, long time. She was so dehydrated, she started to cramp.

She wasn't really moving too well at the end. She couldn't breathe when she came off the court. It was crazy. She hurt her knee during the match, too. She won, but the match took its toll. Privately, she worried if she'd be good to go for the semifinals. I felt terrible for her. It's like I wrote earlier: when she won, I won; when she lost, I lost; and when she hurt, I hurt, too. We talked about it, even though we were playing each other. We didn't care about things like giving the other one an edge. There was no gamesmanship. We were sisters. We each wanted the other to be at her best.

Despite Venus's injuries, we prepared for the match like we normally did, and when we got to the stadium on the morning of the semifinal Venus checked in with the tour trainer and told him she didn't think she could play. She couldn't have done anything before that — and besides, she was hoping to be able to compete. A lot of times, you go to bed in a lot of pain and you wake up in a lot less pain and you're able to play. She wanted to give her body a chance to respond, but when she woke up on the morning of the match she knew she was in no shape to play a semifinal in a Tier I tour event. Her knee was giving her too much trouble. She was completely up front about

it. She didn't want to withdraw, but she believed she had no choice.

Daddy tended to leave it to us to listen to our own bodies. Game-day decisions like whether or not we were fit to play were pretty much ours to make, so it was Venus's call.

That is, it was Venus's call until it wasn't.

See, the way it works on the Women's Tennis Association tour is that the tournament trainer consults with the tournament director on all significant injuries. At least, that's how it's supposed to work. If there's a possibility that a player won't be able to compete in her next match, they work it out so they can reschedule another match in its place. They'll slot in a doubles match, or a junior match, or maybe relocate a match from one of the outer courts. It happens a lot, so they have all these backup plans in place, and usually no one thinks anything of it if someone has to pull out. It's a shame, but it happens. It's part of the game.

The key, though, is you have to make this kind of decision in a timely manner. The closer you get to your scheduled start time, the less understanding the crowd and the tournament organizers are likely to be. But on this day, with the two of us scheduled to go at it in such a big match, no one wanted

to see Venus pull out. The tournament director didn't want it. The fans didn't want it. The sponsors didn't want it. Venus and I certainly didn't want it. There was buzz, hype, drama . . . and all of that. People said it was good for the game, a match like this, but at the same time Venus felt strongly that she couldn't play. She knew her body. She knew she wasn't able to go at anything close to full strength. More than that, she didn't want to risk a more serious injury, with three majors coming up in just a few months.

No doubt about it, there was a lot riding on this one decision, and Venus was in a difficult spot. If she was an older, more established player, she might have been a little more forceful about the situation. She might have bypassed the trainer and gone straight to the director. But she was a relative newcomer, and the rules said she had to get the trainer's approval before making a withdrawal, so that was what she tried to do. For hours and hours, that was what she tried to do. And for hours and hours she got a kind of stiff-arm from the trainer, who kept telling her to hold off on making any kind of final decision.

It was the strangest, most frustrating thing. I felt so badly for V, not just because

she was hurt, but also because she couldn't get anyone to take her seriously. This went on for a while after we got to the stadium. Venus wanted to pull out because of her knee, but the tournament officials were stalling. They kept putting her off. It was like they weren't letting her do what was best for her. They wanted only what was best for them, which was for the match to go off as scheduled. I had no idea what was going on. Nobody did. At one point I said to Venus, "V, what's the deal? You gonna be able to play?" It didn't matter that I was her semifinal opponent; she would always be straight with me.

She said, "I really don't think so. I'm hurt."

I knew my sister. If she said she couldn't play, she couldn't play. Plain and simple. Plus, I could see she was hobbled. She wasn't right. If she could have gone at sixty percent or seventy percent, she would have sucked it up and played — and she would have given me a tough match, I'm sure of it — but that quarterfinal match against Dementieva had really taken a bite out of her. She couldn't go at all.

That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. The tournament officials kept dragging their feet, until finally I had to go

and get dressed and warmed up. The clock was against us. I had to treat it like any other match, against any other opponent, and underneath these preparations we were just waiting and waiting. I went out and did my usual prematch warm-up. I stretched. I started to hit and tried to find my rhythm. My father came down to the court to watch. Not to talk about Venus, but to watch me hit. I was just working on my game. I hit some forehands crosscourt. I hit some backhands crosscourt. I hit some serves, some volleys, and then I was done. After that, I usually talked to my dad about strategy, but when I'm playing Venus he just says, "Have fun." That's the strategy. As far as I know, he says the flip side of the same thing to V. And that was all he said that morning. Just "Have fun."

Venus came up to me in the locker room after my warm-up and said, "I really don't know why they're not making some kind of announcement. I told them I couldn't play two hours ago."

I look back now and think maybe I should have said something, done something. But I was even younger and less established than Venus. It didn't even occur to me at first to step in, and then when it finally did I didn't see that there was anything I could do. I

mean, I was just a kid. I didn't think I had the juice to make any kind of stand for Venus, and even if I did my situation was complicated because I was also her opponent. I couldn't really argue with the officials that my opponent should be allowed to withdraw.

For the moment, everyone was moving around like the match was still on. The fans had all filed in, expecting to see the Williams sisters in this great semifinal showdown. All the VIP types, the sponsors and benefactors were on hand. There was no public indication that Venus might be sidelined until about five minutes before the match was scheduled to begin, when a tournament spokesperson finally got on the loudspeaker and announced to the packed stadium that Venus was withdrawing due to injury.

Well, the place went nuts — and not in a good way. The fans were angry, which I can certainly understand now, considering how things were handled. I would have been mad, too, if I'd paid my money and gone to all the hassle and hustle of getting to the stadium. Understand, all these people had planned their day around this match. They'd looked forward to it. The television people sold a lot of advertising for it. The sponsors

were all lined up. But what I couldn't understand was why the anger was directed at us. It wasn't Venus's fault she was injured. It wasn't my dad's fault. And it certainly wasn't my fault. It was just one of those things. Venus tried to pull out in a timely fashion. She did everything by the WTA book. But the late scratch let people think there was some grandstanding going on, or that the Williams sisters had somehow held the tournament hostage to our own way of doing things.

Here again, I thought back to that quote from Dr. King, because of course there was no way to answer these claims. *Truth pressed to the earth will rise again.* That didn't really help us just yet. The whispered charges against us didn't really deserve an answer, but there they were. The tournament officials didn't really do anything to discourage people from this view. They certainly didn't want to take the heat for how things went down — and believe me, there was a ton of heat. I learned later there was even a rumor that my dad was behind all this, that he was manipulating the situation to decide which of his daughters would play in the finals. All of these ridiculous lies were being said about us, all because some bullheaded tournament official was determined to give

the fans and the sponsors and the broadcasters what they wanted instead of giving the players the respect they deserved.

It got nasty when they made the announcement, but after that I thought the incident would pass and I could concentrate on the final. Man, was I wrong! We had to do a press conference right after the match was canceled, and there were questions suggesting that we sisters had somehow manipulated this situation to our advantage. I sat there and thought, What advantage? What did either one of us gain by any of this? In fact, the walkover actually cost me points in the rankings, because if Venus had actually tried to play for a couple games before withdrawing those points would have come my way. But still, we had to answer for it publicly. On the tour, they're always sticking a microphone in your face. Before a match. Right after a match. And, apparently, right after a late scratch, so we had to go out into the press room they had set up at the stadium and do a little dance and put a positive spin on the situation.

I said, "I don't know why everyone is blaming Venus. She told them as soon as she arrived that she couldn't play. Ask the trainer. She'll tell you."

Of course, nobody asked the trainer.

Nobody looked at what actually happened. People were only too happy to cast us as scapegoats, when really we were just victims of a stupid system and an abuse of authority. People were pissed and disappointed and they took it out on us. No question, it should have been handled differently, and now here we were at the other end, getting ripped for something that was out of our control. Venus caught the brunt of it, but some of it fell to me. My dad caught a bunch of it, too. I could almost understand why people were upset with Venus, especially if they didn't know what happened, because she was the one who withdrew from the tournament. But I couldn't get why folks were mad at me.

I still had a lot to learn, I guess.

Despite all the noise and controversy, I thought things would return to normal soon enough, so I tried to focus on the finals. I was going up against Kim Clijsters, a strong young Belgian player who was just coming onto the scene and doing well. The year before, she was named as the WTA Newcomer of the Year, so there was a lot of excitement about this matchup. She was only seventeen, and I was nineteen, so it was a real sign that the women's game was

getting younger and fitter and more energetic.

Plus, Kim had been having a great tournament. That always adds a whole other level of anticipation to a match. She'd just beaten the number one player in the world, Martina Hingis, in an exciting semifinal match, and she'd knocked off an up-and-coming Justine Henin, her countrywoman, in one of the early rounds. I guess it seems kind of obvious to say someone who reaches the finals in any tournament is having a great run — but that's not always the case. When you're an underdog and you manage to beat a couple top players along the way, it puts you on a roll going into the finals. You start to think it's your destiny to win the whole thing, and it's tough to compete against that kind of mind-set.

I talked to Venus about Kim's game. Venus was always my first and best read on an opponent. She had a good head for tracking a player's strengths and weaknesses. She paid attention to that kind of thing. Me, I tended to just go out there and play my game. My thinking was: as long as I'm on, no one can beat me. Let the other girl worry about *my* strengths and weaknesses. I didn't care if you had a killer serve, or an aggressive ground game, or a vicious drop shot.

As a matter of fact, if your forehand was your strength, I'd go to that side all the time, to show you I could beat you on your best shots. I would make you change your game to counter mine. I would overpower you. That was always my basic plan of attack — still is, by the way — but it didn't hurt to get my big sister's input on a new opponent. So we talked about the matchup and how I wanted to approach it, and all this time it never occurred to either of us that there would be any fallout from Venus's injury.

Here, I drew strength from my previous matches against Kim. I'd beaten her in the 1999 U.S. Open and here at Indian Wells in 2000. I was seeded #7 in the tournament to her #14. She was certainly solid, but I had a bigger serve and a lot more power. This was her first Tier I final, whereas I'd made it this far a bunch of times, so experience was on my side as well.

(A Tier I event, by the way, is a premier-level tournament that is considered just a notch below the majors in terms of importance; there are Tier II, III, and IV events, too, and the draws tend to get a little weaker, and the prize money and ranking points a little stingier, as you drop down.)

By every prematch measure, I thought I

had an edge — and yet there was one all-important measure that would go against me: the crowd.

I stepped onto the court a couple minutes before Kim, and right away people started booing. They were loud, mean, aggressive . . . pissed! It was one of those tournaments where they give you a bouquet of flowers when you go out to warm up before the finals, and for some reason that struck me as so absurd at just that moment. Me, walking onto the court with a bouquet of flowers while everyone booed. It's like one of those "What's wrong with this picture?" scenes. It didn't fit. What got me most of all was that it wasn't just a scattered bunch of boos. It wasn't coming from just one section. It was like the whole crowd got together and decided to boo all at once. The ugliness was just raining down on me, hard. I didn't know what to do. Nothing like this had ever happened to me.

What was most surprising about this uproar was the fact that tennis fans are typically a well-mannered bunch. They're respectful. They sit still. And in Palm Springs, especially, they tended to be pretty well-heeled, too. But I looked up and all I could see was a sea of rich people — mostly older, mostly white — standing and booing lustily,

like some kind of genteel lynch mob. I don't mean to use such inflammatory language to describe the scene, but that's really how it seemed from where I was down on the court. Like these people were gonna come looking for me after the match.

At first I thought maybe there was something else going on, some piece of news that had flashed on the scoreboard that had gotten them all upset . . . *something* to explain the jeering. But then I realized it was meant for me. By this point, Kim was out there on the court as well, with her own bouquet, and she got a big cheer before everyone set their sights once again on me.

There was no mistaking that all of this was meant for me. I heard the word *nigger* a couple times, and I knew. I couldn't believe it. That's just not something you hear in polite society, but I was a long way from polite society on that stadium court. I didn't make the connection to Venus's injury just yet, but it was clear I was the target. And then, just to reinforce how angry these people were at me, when Kim started in with her warm-ups, the crowd stood and cheered for her all over again. Everything she did, they cheered. Everything I did, they booed. It was freaky. And cruel. I'd played in matches before when the crowd was

against me and pulling for my opponent for whatever reason, but this was so far off the map of my experience I didn't know what to do.

I tried to block it out and prepare for my match, but it's tough to ignore fourteen thousand screaming people — especially when they're screaming at *you!* It's tough to tune out such ugliness and venom. And it got worse. The fans quieted for Kim's introduction and then gave her a standing ovation. Then they introduced me and the booing kicked up another couple notches.

I wanted to cry, but I didn't want to give these people the satisfaction, or let them know they could get to me.

Just before the start of play, my dad and Venus started walking down the aisle to the players' box by the side of the court, and everybody turned and started to point and boo at them. At Indian Wells, it's such a long, long walk down the stairs to the players' box that I thought they'd never get there, underneath all this booing. It was mostly just a chorus of boos, but I could still hear shouts of "Nigger!" here and there. I even heard one angry voice telling us to go back to Compton. It was unbelievable.

That's when it finally came to me that this was connected to what happened in that

semifinal scratch. I should have made the connection sooner, because it was so transparent, but I was rattled. Remember, I was just a kid. What did I know? But now it was clear even to me that these people were angry at Venus and my dad, and that I was somehow caught up in it. I suppose I knew this all along, on some level, but it took watching my father and sister run the gauntlet to their seats, while all around people were shouting at them and pointing at them for me to figure out what was really going on.

Daddy didn't help matters, I'm afraid. When he got to his seat, he turned around and pumped his fist in the air, in a gesture of defiance. I'm sure he meant to send a clear message that he and his family would not be beaten down by something like this. Perhaps he wanted to call to mind that famous black power protest from the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, when two American athletes pumped their fists from the medal stand during the anthem. But whatever his intent, the gesture had the unintended effect of inciting the crowd even more.

My first thought as I took all of this in was for V. I was okay when I thought all this nastiness was meant for me, but once I saw it was directed at my family I got my back

up. It set me off. I'm extremely protective of my family, and I hated that Venus had to deal with something like this, after what she'd already had to deal with leading up to our semifinal. She looked great, and I could see she was trying to put on a brave face behind her sunglasses, but I could see that deep down she was hurt by the negative reaction. Truth be told, I don't think any of us knew quite how to handle it, but I had a match to play so I had to do more than just handle it. I had to overcome it. I had to move on.

Now, I don't want to misrepresent the situation, because this incident got a lot of attention in the tennis press. You can dig up videotape on it if you look hard enough. I know I've got a tape of the match somewhere at home, but I can't watch it because it brings back too many painful memories. And so, to be completely objective about it, I shouldn't state that every single fan in that stadium was yelling at me and my family. That's probably not accurate. I'd say there were about a hundred or so people shouting out encouragement, and maybe another hundred or so not saying anything. That seems about right. For every ninety-eight people yelling at me, there was maybe one person on my side and another person just

keeping quiet.

It's also not accurate for me to suggest that everyone in the stands was rich, white, and old. Certainly, *most* everyone in the stands was rich, white, and old, but there were probably another hundred or so black faces in the stands, and maybe another hundred or so who lived from paycheck to paycheck, like most people. There was actually one guy in the crowd whose voice managed to make it through, and he was really, really helpful to me. I couldn't tell you if he was black or white, but it didn't matter. He was on my side. He kept telling me to hang in there, not to listen to all these people, to just play my game.

Oh, yeah. My game. For a beat or two I'd forgotten about the match. It was hard to concentrate. I imagine Kim Clijsters also had a tough time concentrating. There was just too much going on. She held her serve in the first game without breaking a sweat. A backhand return into the net. A forehand wide. An ace. Another forehand into the net. Four straight points. Not exactly the way I wanted to start out the match — but then, there was a lot about the match that wasn't going according to plan. With each point, Kim got a bigger and bigger cheer, and it only got worse when it was my turn to

serve. I remember I missed my first serve and the crowd was just overjoyed. In tennis, you never hear fans cheer a player's mistakes, but here they were, cheering. It was just awful. And then, the biggest, most derisive cheer of all erupted when I ended up double-faulting. Oh my God, it was such a low moment!

They kept it up for the entire match. No matter what I did, these people booed. Or cheered — a mean chorus that almost sounded worse than booing. Or — worst of all! — sat in stone silence after I won a point. Kim broke me in my very first service game, and the first set went downhill from there. She actually won the first seven points of the match, and a tiny part of me wondered if I'd ever win a point. I couldn't get into any kind of rhythm. I couldn't focus or get anything going.

Kim won the third game, too, and when I questioned a call on a ball I thought was out, it was like these people were ready to string me up.

Somehow, I found the strength to hold serve in my next service game, and then to break Kim back in the following game to bring us essentially even. For a while, it seemed the crowd had quieted, but then I double-faulted again to start the next game,

down 2-3, and the crowd was on me all over again.

I look at pictures of me from that tournament — all fresh-faced and excited, looking sharp in my pink Puma jumper, my hair in braids and gathered into high pigtails in back, held in place by my black Puma visor. I looked so cute! And yet these people were just ripping me. I was just a kid, and they were ripping me. I feel so badly for the little girl I was back then. I mean, I was still just a teenager! How can you justify treating a child so badly?

It had to mess with my concentration. Kim's, too. She put out a tremendous effort that day and a stirring show of sportsmanship under difficult conditions. She got off to that great start, on the back of all this nonsense, but I battled back and held serve, then I broke her again to go up 4-3. For a moment, I thought I'd put all that ugliness behind me, but I stumbled in my next service game and let the jeers and taunts start messing with my head. I ended up giving that break right back, allowing Kim to tie things up at 4-4.

Neither one of us was playing particularly well. My first-serve percentage was terrible, and I was making tons of unforced errors. I kept hitting balls wide and long — but they

were so far wide and long that they weren't even close! Most of the points I won were on Kim's unforced errors, so she was struggling, too. Everything was just off.

Kim held serve, then rallied back to break me again to take the first set. On the very last point of the set, I approached the net, thinking I could maybe force Kim from her comfort zone. I'd only been to the net a couple times to that point, and here I thought I could push the issue and take control of the match. At first, it appeared I'd do just that, as I went to put away Kim's return. I was *right there*, and what did I do? I hit the ball directly into the net, to give the crowd something new to cheer about.

I thought, *Man, I just can't catch a break!* I looked ahead and couldn't imagine how the rest of the match might go. I was just going through the motions. We stayed on serve for the first few games of the second set, but they were ugly holds. I'd go up 40-0 and then give back a bunch of points before holding on to win. That's no way to win, if you're hoping to put any kind of stamp on the rest of the match. I was defeated, deflated. Emotionally drained. You could see it in the way I carried myself, in the tentative way I returned to the baseline after each point. I didn't think I had it in me to

keep going. The booing was just wearing me out.

During the next changeover, trailing 1-2 in the second set, I sat down and cried into my towel. I don't mind admitting it here. I don't think it makes me soft or weak, just human. The crowd was all over me. I was down a set. I couldn't think how I would get through the rest of the match. It seemed to stretch out in front of me in an unreachable, unending way. At just that moment, I didn't care if I won or lost. I didn't want to go back out there. I couldn't. And then I thought, *Okay, Serena. You need to be tough.* I thought if Althea Gibson could fight her way through far worse, I had an obligation to fight through this. And not just fight — I had an obligation to prevail. In my head, it was no longer a battle between me and Kim Clijsters. Now it was between me and this hateful crowd. Now I would not be denied, and so I summoned whatever reserves of inner strength I could find and stood to take my place on the court, telling myself I would not lose this match. Whatever happened, whatever would keep happening, I would not be beaten down by it.

I have to believe there was some racist component to all of this. If it had been twenty years earlier and Chris Evert had to

make a late scratch in a semifinal match against her sister Jeanne, nobody would have booed Jeanne the next day. Nobody would have suggested that the sisters were conspiring in some way, or manipulating the game. Nobody would have booed some blond, blue-eyed girl. And nobody would have shouted down her father with cries of, "Go back to Compton, nigger!" I'm sorry, but that would not have happened — not in Palm Springs, anyway — so you tell me this attack on me and my family wasn't racially motivated on some level. You tell me that this mostly white crowd wasn't beating up on this nineteen-year-old black girl and her family in part because of the color of our skin. Go ahead and make that argument. I'll listen to it. But I won't buy it. Why? Because I was there. Because I was the target. Because you don't know what it's like to have all of this entitled vitriol rain down on you. These privileged, entitled people were up in my face and all over me and my dad and my sister because they were denied their entertainment the day before. That's the bottom line.

I understand that I'm in the entertainment business. I compete at the highest levels of my sport. I know the only reason there's all that prize money and endorsement money

is because people buy tickets to watch. I get that. But I also get that I do what I do for me. I'm not out there busting my butt for the blue-haired Palm Springs jet-setter. No, I'm out there for me. People need to understand that. I'm no different than any other athlete. We play to win, and to prove something to ourselves and our opponents. If you enjoy watching us compete, that's great. If you want to root for us and take a little sideline pride in our accomplishments, that's great, too. Go ahead and pull for us because we feed off of your excitement. Go ahead and expect the best from us because we rise to meet those expectations. But don't take it out on me if you don't get what you want out of the deal. Don't ask me to play in a pain you could never endure. (I *always* play in pain, by the way. Every athlete does.) Don't hold me to any standard you wouldn't place on yourself — or your own daughter. That's not part of the bargain.

If I'm on my game, I'm on my game; if I'm not, I'm not. But count on me to give one hundred percent, and I'll count on you to leave me to do my thing.

During that emotional changeover, all I could think about was my dad, and every-

thing he'd been through. He was born in 1942, in Shreveport, Louisiana, and he'd suffered all kinds of oppression and racism in his life. He had a tough time, but he was determined to keep his family from the same tough time. He'd pushed me and my sisters, hard, to become the best players we could possibly be. Somehow, against all odds and against everyone's low expectations, he pushed us to the very top levels of the game. People in tennis seemed to either admire this about him or to resent him for it. There was no in-between. Either way, there's no denying that it was because of him that we were even here at Indian Wells. It was because of him that thousands and thousands of young black athletes could now look to Venus and me as role models. And it was because of him that a great many of those young black athletes were picking up their first tennis racquets. I thought, *My dad doesn't deserve this kind of grief. Venus doesn't deserve it. I don't deserve it.*

I didn't know what else to do, so I prayed. Right there on the court, during the changeover. I said a simple little prayer that just about changed my life. I said, "Jehovah, give me the strength to get up from this chair. Give me the strength to finish this match. Give me the strength to persevere."

I actually spoke these words out loud. Well, not *out loud* in any kind of public speaking voice, but in a whisper I could certainly hear above the din. I didn't ask Him to help me win. I didn't ask Him to help me with my serve. I didn't ask for anything but the resolve and strength of character to power through a difficult situation. That's all. Really, all I wanted was to walk off that court with my head held high and to somehow be a better person because of it.

There's a wonderful scripture in the Bible, Ephesians 6:10-17, that talks about the shield of faith, and I called it to mind here: "Put on the complete suit of armor from God, that you may be able to stand firm against the mechanisms of the devil. . . . Stand firm, therefore, with your loins girded about with truth and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and with your feet shod with the equipment of the good news of peace. Above all things, take up the large shield of faith with which you will be able to quench the fiery darts and burning missiles of the wicked. Also, accept the helmet of salvation and the sword of spirit that is God's word."

So I stood and cloaked myself in that shield and went back to work. I tried to tune

out the fiery darts and burning missiles of the Palm Springs set and play my game, to let all that venom fall softly to the stadium floor, and to work my way around it, and as I stepped back on the court I heard that lone voice of support yet again: "Come on, Serena!" It was such a powerful, positive cry! A true Godsend.

The "shield of faith" thing helped, too. It really did. *Stand . . . having on the breastplate of righteousness . . .* Those words gave me the power to believe that these people couldn't touch me. It let me feel invisible and invincible. Most of all, it let me get back to the game.

Initially, I thought I'd made the situation worse. I took the court after that changeover feeling recharged and refocused, that the match was now in my hands and in my heart, but then I double-faulted right away. It felt to me like I'd given the power of that moment right back to the crowd — and to Kim Clijsters. Somehow, I managed to string together a few points in a row and hold serve. And then, at 2-2, I took the next four points in a row against Kim's serve, to go up a break. It was a thrilling turnaround and it seemed to quiet the crowd. They were still on me, but now it was just garden-variety-type heckling. It wasn't so personal.

Unfortunately, the crowd wasn't quiet for long, because Kim broke me right back, bringing the angry mob right along with her. They were all over me, all over again, and I allowed myself to get swallowed up once more. Kim held serve to go up a game. Then she pushed me to break point in the next game, which would have put her up 5-3 in the second set and serving for the match. It was a key point in the match, obviously, and I hated that the crowd was so much a part of it. The only good thing about all that noise and nastiness was that it seemed to be rattling Kim almost as much as it was rattling me. By some odd mix of luck, will, and justice, I pushed the game back to deuce on an unforced error. It was like we each took turns being pushed off our game by the crowd, and now it was my turn to help with the pushing. My serve had been hit-or-miss the entire match, but here I unleashed a 114 mph bullet for an ace — my biggest of the tournament! — to help me hold and knot the set at 4-4.

Once again, I let myself believe the momentum that had been sucked from that stadium before the very first point was once again on my racquet — and I carried that belief into Kim's next service game. Down 30-40, she misplayed a drop shot that I

managed to reach, which put me back up that all-important break. The crowd wasn't too happy about this latest turn. They'd been relatively quiet when it appeared that Kim was in control, but now that I had battled back into position to serve for the set, they were on me again. It was like I'd set them off — and now they were madder than ever, because it appeared I might deny them the knockout jeer they seemed to desperately crave. At one point during my next service game, it appeared a line call had gone my way, and the fans started jeering — *right in the middle of the point!*

I'd never seen such terrible behavior, and I'd certainly never been on the receiving end! I wanted to climb into the stands and fight these people, but at this late stage in the match, with the second set finally within reach, I told myself I wouldn't let this ugliness push me from my goal. Here again, I was helped in this resolve by that same lone voice of support coming from the stands: "Come on, Serena. You can do it."

I heard that and thought, *Okay, Serena. Keep it together. Just hold serve and you're back to even. Just hold serve and all this energy will shift over to your side of the net.* I figured I had this one guy on my side and that was all I needed, so I pulled myself

together and did just that.

Unfortunately, the seesaw continued to teeter in the third set. I went up 0-40 in Kim's service game to start the set, but she hung on to take the first game. For me, it was one unforced error on top of another, and each one seemed to allow Kim to play with a little more confidence. Until the seesaw tilted back in my direction. Then I'd capitalize on one of her mistakes and go on a momentum run of my own. That's what happened here. I took the next five games, to take a commanding 5-1 lead in the third set, up two breaks.

I thought, *That should keep these people quiet!*

I ended up winning the match 4-6, 6-4, 6-2. I don't know how I did it, but what mattered to me most of all at just that moment was that it was over. It wasn't about winning. It was about powering through. At the same time, I remember feeling badly for Kim Clijsters. She's a great girl. Absolutely, the crowd affected her, too. Neither one of us deserved to be caught in such a hateful moment, and as a result I don't think either one of us got to play our best tennis that day. We'd each been having such a strong tournament, it was a shame for the championship to be decided on such a pair of

unremarkable performances.

By the end of the match, a good portion of the crowd had come over to my side. There were still boos, but it was almost like being at any other sporting event. Once I went up those two breaks in the third set, it seemed inevitable that I would win, and the crowd softened. I imagined the fans felt badly about how they treated me and my family at the outset, and that explained why the mood of the stadium turned a little bit. Not a whole lot, but a little.

In the postmatch interview they do on the court, I thanked my dad and Venus and the few people who cheered for me throughout. "And to those of you who didn't," I said, "I love you anyway." My throat was all knotted up. I tried to smile. I didn't want to choke on my words in front of all those people, so I kept my speech short. I held my head high and said what I needed to say, and then I waved to the crowd and disappeared into the runway beneath the stadium.

You want to talk about strength? It was harder — *way* harder! — to get through that postmatch interview than it was to play the match itself, but I would not be reduced by these people. I would rise above them. And it would take every measure of strength in my nineteen-year-old frame to lift myself

from this moment.

I was crying when I left the court, but I didn't want anyone to see so I kept wiping away my tears. I was tired and sweaty, so that helped. The tears just blended in with the anguish of the match. I choked up, too, during the press conference afterward, but the whole time I kept thinking of Althea Gibson and how she had to deal with some of the same vitriol. I remembered reading that Althea had to sleep in her car when she was out on the road traveling to all these tournaments, because she couldn't stay in the hotels. I don't know if I could have done that, but she did it so I wouldn't have to. She was a true tennis pioneer for African-American women. Zina Garrison, too, a couple generations later. She had her own trials to get past while she was walking the path Althea had set. And now here I was, all these years later, at my favorite place to play, in a supposedly enlightened time, hearing the same garbage all over again.

I look back now and think something could have been done about this situation before it got out of hand. Some tournament official could have gotten on the loudspeaker and explained to the fans that Venus had been legitimately hurt, that I had nothing to

do with her withdrawal, that every effort had been made to cancel that semifinal match in a more timely manner. Some effort could have been made to quiet the crowd. But no one did anything. The WTA people just sat there with their mouths open as all these people beat up on a little girl. The Indian Wells people just sat there with their mouths open, too. Everyone was in shock, I think — but that's no excuse.

I could cry about it now if I wanted to, but I choose not to. I could lose sleep over the sight of that little girl — me! — wearing her adorable pink Puma jumper, and her braids, and playing her heart out in front of such an angry mob. But I choose to gain strength from this sorry moment, not to give it away. I choose to recognize it for what it was, to learn from it, and then move past it. And yet I call attention to it because I believe it's instructive, because I think we need to call out bad behavior, especially when it cuts across racial lines and is directed at our children. After all, that's what I was at the time, a child. Say whatever you want about my dad and how he handled our careers when we came onto the scene. Say whatever you want about me and Venus and how our approach to the game may or may not have been different from the ap-

proach taken by the other girls on the tour. At the end of the day we were just a couple kids, trying to do our best.

We need to hold each other accountable for our actions, don't you think? Nobody really talked about this at the time, and Venus and I never really talked about it, not even in the car ride back to Los Angeles with our sisters. We all drove back together, and it was the strangest, most unsettling ride, because usually after a big tournament win we'd all be giddy and excited. But here it was like we had been stunned into silence. We all knew what we'd just seen and experienced, and it just kind of hung there in the car with us, like a pall.

In some ways, it's with us still. You can see it in the stand Venus and I took afterward. We refused to return to Indian Wells. Even now, all these years later, we continue to boycott the event. It's become a mandatory tournament on the tour, meaning that the WTA can fine a player if she doesn't attend. But I don't care if they fine me a million dollars, I will not play there again. They can also suspend you from the next tournament, but my feeling is that if I go back to Indian Wells I'll send the wrong message to little black girls who for whatever reason have chosen to look up to me, who might

have a dream of lifting themselves up and out of their present situations and becoming something else. If they fine me, they fine me. If they suspend me, they suspend me.

As I write this, it looks like I can keep to my principles on this and I won't be fined or suspended — but I really don't care either way. I have a responsibility to those little girls who look up to me, just as I have a responsibility to myself. They might not even know what happened at Indian Wells in 2001, but I'll know. And I'll know that if I don't make my small stand on this, it will be harder for them to make their small stands when they come up.

It's amazing to me how every year some tour official comes to me and asks, "Are you playing Indian Wells this year?" It's as if we never had the conversation before. And every year I say, "Hell, no. I'm not playing Indian Wells. Are you out of your mind?"

The most amazing thing is that they keep asking, like it never happened. But you don't get past racial tension by forgetting about it. You don't just ignore this kind of prejudice and hope it goes away. That's not how it works. If you sweep it under the rug, one day you'll lift the rug to redecorate and there it will be.

No, I won't go back. I will not give these

people the validation. I will not stand down. It's a point of pride. I don't care what these folks say about me, about how I'm vindictive or stubborn or reading too much into the situation. I actually heard that one, early on, from some official. He said I was making something out of nothing. But I don't think so. Remember, I was there. I was the target. I know what I know. What I don't know and what I can't say for certain is whether or not the small stand my sister and I are taking on Indian Wells will amount to anything in the ongoing fight for equality. Probably it won't, but you never know. You don't make these stands to accomplish a specific goal, I've come to realize. You make them because they're right. You make them because, taken together, they add up to something. In all walks of life. At all times. At all costs. You make them because you wouldn't be here if someone didn't make them for you, long before you were even born. You make them to ensure that the doors that are at long last open to you will keep from closing. You make them because you can, and because you must. Most of all, you make them because somewhere some little girl might be watching. This little girl might be black or white or brown. She might be rich or poor. She

might be a future tennis player or a doctor or a fashion designer. Whatever she wants to be, she can be. It's like my mom used to always say, all she has to do is set her mind to it and get busy. And all I have to do is set a positive example.

Piece of cake, right?