

Le meilleur article sur Andre

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Ceci est un très long article de SI Illustrated, chapeau à celui qui le lira en entier .

Mais vous ne serez pas déçus, car c'est un très bel article, qui revient sur plein de choses, comme la façon dont Andre a abordé steffi, son enfance difficile et tellement d'autres choses .

Le journal l'équipe vient de publier cet article en version française dans l'équipe magazine .

You knew the end was near. You knew the screen would soon go black and leave you in the dark, wondering what the hell you'd just seen.

One Andre, two Andres, three Andres, four. Five Andres, six Andres, seven Andres, more. Has any athlete ever changed as much as Andre Agassi?

Sure, you'd watched Tiger Woods change his swing, Michael Jordan change his sport. But who changes himself? Metamorphosis is the rarest achievement in sports.

Why would a man bother to change when he's got the American dream by the throat? Maybe it's just too damn risky; what if it puts out the fire that forged his steel?

You traveled to a lake in Texas 20 years ago to find George Foreman, fished with him for bass and for the story of how he went from sullen menace to grinning Buddha. But even George's transformation got an asterisk, because it came during his 10-year hibernation from his sport.

All those years you kept watching the Andre show, rebel becoming humanitarian, showman becoming machine, style becoming essence. But something about all those images of him--there were just too many, too different, too quick--made you keep waiting. To trust the change. To be sure.

Finally, 10 months before his announcement that he would retire after the 2006 U.S. Open, you realized that the time to find out how Andre Agassi went all the way from there to here was nearly gone.

So you started moving closer.

Somebody at last year's U.S. Open would surely know. "He's changed as much as anyone I've ever seen," said Jim Courier, a four-time Grand Slam singles champion who'd known Andre since they were teenagers.

"It's almost like an atonement," said Patrick McEnroe, the U.S. Davis Cup captain.

"He decided to be a grown-up," said commentator Mary Carillo. "He didn't have to do that. He had all the money and fame. He didn't have to become a great champion, either. But he did both. Now you really feel there's a soul in that guy."

When you asked them how and why that occurred, they said, Well, he married a good woman, he had kids, he grew up. But plenty of athletes do those things. Those answers were like all those images of Andre: They made you think you knew what happened to the man when you didn't have a clue.

So you went closer.

You were 50 feet away, watching him talk to the media after winning easily in the first round at the 2005 U.S. Open. Years ago, after a victory, he said, I'm as happy as a fag in a submarine. Years ago he growled at an audience in his home state, Nevada, for cheering an opponent's shot. Now, asked why he'd felt nervous in a first-rounder at age 35, he said, Because everyone here took a day out of their lives to come watch me play. Did he feel badly for his opponent as he destroyed him? No, he said, you don't cheat anybody out of their experience, whatever it is. I promise you, it's all part of what makes you who you are down the road. And if a match is getting blown out one way or the other, you've got to learn from it and you've got to understand it for what it is. I've been on the other side of that. I wouldn't want to cheat anybody out of that experience.

You smelled it there, a whiff of what you were seeking.

So you went closer.

You were 10 feet away. Andre was showing Robin Williams and members of Earth, Wind & Fire the academy that he built in the middle of the most destitute neighborhood in Las Vegas. It's a charter school, mostly poor black kids. He was explaining why learning levels here had made leaps so striking that the academy's middle school was the only one among 328 public schools in its county that's received an "exemplary" rating.

He took us to the room where Cirque du Soleil performers taught the kids acrobatics. Past the art class where a French painter who trained with Picasso taught them the use of color and space. He led us into a kindergarten class where, like a five-year-old himself, he burst forward so eagerly to tell everyone about the academy's innovations that he knocked over half of an edifice of blocks that the class had built, then dropped to his knees in such haste and remorse to rebuild it that he knocked over the rest.

You followed him down the gleaming hallways, thinking, Man, he got it, he really got the big picture, and wondering what the world would be like if a couple of superstars in each city did this. But his annual fund-raising gala for the school was scheduled for that weekend, and he was too busy to sit and explain how he got here.

So you waited nearly two months ... and went closer.

You sat two feet away. Flying in a private jet last December with Andre and his wife, Steffi Graf, on their way to play an exhibition arranged by a company that they endorse, Genworth Financial, in order to raise money for its youth charity work and Andre's charter school. It was only the second time that he and Steffi had gone anywhere together without the kids, and they were stuck with you. And still he did something that, during 30 years in this work, you'd never seen. In a country in which celebrity means never having to ask a question, he asked a zillion of them. Almost as many as you asked him. With eyes unlike any you'd seen in an athlete: aglow.

But something was unsettling him. He kept wanting to know what aspect of his life you wanted to write about--to whittle down the big picture--and you kept explaining that it was the whole shebang you were after, how and why he traveled all the way from who he was to who he is.

It was all over that full moon of a face: hmhhh. But he knew his tennis life was about to end, and part of him yearned for perspective. So he invited you to his house for a steak dinner, but not just any steak dinner. If it's not the best steak you've ever eaten, he said, then I've failed.

Of course you said yes ... and went closer.

You were studying that steak. It was four inches thick, prime dry-aged loin, express-mailed from California in an ice pack, marinated by your host for 16 hours and now searing over charcoal and water-soaked wood chips on a backyard grill, all of which he'd painstakingly researched. The flame was caramelizing a coating of port wine, kosher salt, sugar and a palette of seasonings that he wouldn't reveal because it was the fruit of six years' seeking--launched when Steffi, eager to meet his friends, innocently uttered the words, Let's have a barbecue--and because if he told you, then his steak soon might find itself in a tie with yours as the best you've ever eaten. You were sipping a peach-raspberry margarita that was the product of the same exhaustive quest. And it was true. They were both the best.

You watched him, during brief breaks from his cooking, play with his four-year-old son, Jaden, with the intensity of a man living his second childhood--no, his first. Andre was three when his father began tugging open the bedroom curtains in the morning, tugging on his toes, tugging off his blanket, tugging him onto the tennis court before he ate breakfast so he could become what his dad already was telling other people he would be: the No. 1 tennis player in the world.

You were sitting in front of a fire after dinner, looking around a house without a single trophy, plaque or tennis picture, without a nanny, maid or cook, asking him how he came to see the big picture, how he got it ... and he started shaking his head no, saying that he hadn't got it, that he still couldn't see the big picture. I can't see anything objectively or in context, he said. I wish I could. It drives me crazy. It causes a lot of problems. Show me a drop of water, and I'm fine. I'll learn everything about it. But don't show me the ocean. Don't show me the whole forest. Every time I try to see the big picture, I'm finished, I'm lost....

Wow. The seer was telling you he couldn't see. The seeker was telling you that the only way to see the forest was to go even closer, inside it, and take it tree by tree. Then he remembered this game, introduced by his first wife, back in an earlier life....

You're about to enter a forest, says the beautiful woman. What does it look like? It's dense, says Andre. It's deep. There's no trail. No one has been here before. I have to find my own way.

You come upon a key, she says. What does it look like? What do you do with it?

It's rusty, he says. It's one of those big, old-fashioned keys. Normally I'd be curious, but in this case I feel no reason to find what it opens because it's obviously been used many times and what it opens has already been explored.

Following her prompts, he comes upon a cup in the forest ... then a bear ... a wall ... and a body of water, describing each one and his reaction as he sees it in his mind's eye. It intrigues him, this game called A Walk in the Woods. But what does it mean?

His depiction of the forest as difficult and dense, Brooke Shields explains, reveals how he sees life. That rings true. The key symbolizes education, and since Andre is an eighth-grade dropout who learns through experience rather than books, his reaction to the key makes sense as well.

His eyes kindle. The game conjures the path-blazing life he wants to lead, self-discovery around every corner. Whenever it comes to a pause, he grows so uneasy that he's willing to take wrong turns and even go backward.

Like marrying the beautiful woman.

Like leaving her in such haste that night: Jan. 26, 1999.

He has just arrived in Los Angeles after a 13-hour flight from Australia, taken her to dinner and confirmed what he knows in his bones: It's over. It's nearing midnight, he hasn't slept in a day and a half, but he grabs some clothes, a bag of coffee beans and his margarita blender, heaves everything into the backseat of his big, white '76 El Dorado, Lilly, and heads hell-bent for his hometown, Las Vegas.

What do words mean? What's COMMITMENT? What's REAL? Tears stream down his cheeks as he rips at himself. The traffic, as he climbs the San Bernardino Mountains, slows to a crawl.

The cars around him begin to peel off in search of motels. But he needs motion. When he proposed to Brooke 2 1/2 years earlier, he thought, I'm asking her to marry me, and I could just as easily be breaking up with her. But he's a glutton for experience, for what lies beyond the next bend, and so, like tonight, he ignored the omens and shoved on.

O.K. So he's wrong again. Snow has shut the mountain pass. He turns Lilly around and begins creeping back, pulling off and being turned down at one crowded motel after another. It all begins to feel like a dream ... or like his life. He's nearing 30, marriage shot, another Grand Slam title opportunity in Australia frittered away, his forward-then-backward career appearing ready to perish far short of the glory that his teenage fame and forehead promised.

A 12th motel sends him away. Now he's driven an hour and a half the wrong way, toward the life he just left. Wind batters his car. His mind swims with fatigue. Brooke's Walk in the Woods? It's just a Sunday stroll in the park compared with A Journey Through Andre's Forest.

He rises from a strange bed in a cheap motel somewhere between L.A. and the San Bernardino Mountains. What does he see in the mirror?

Eyes, wide as a child's, that he used to frame with eyeliner and mascara. Lips that pray before each meal and curse chair umpires. The face of a man who yearns to change, to find something rock-solid and reliable in himself that won't change.

He climbs back into his car. Which way now? His art goes to hell when he pursues love. His love goes to hell when he pursues his art. It's raining. He's crying. He heads back toward Vegas, toward an empty house.

His coach, Brad Gilbert, shows up a few weeks later. Andre tells him that his marriage is over. The television's on. As Andre clicks from one channel to the next, a vision fills the screen. The holy grail.

Tall. Willowy. Killer legs. Kind eyes. But private eyes. Resolute.

Steffi Graf's serving in the semifinals at Indian Wells, Calif.

"You need to meet her," says Brad.

Andre's eyes lift, full of futile hope. "I already tried that," he sighs. "A long time ago...."

It's 1992. He's 22. He comes upon a field of grass. What does it look like? Faded green, bordered by white lime, surrounded by vintage wooden seats. Intimate.

Sacred. That's what everyone else calls Centre Court at Wimbledon. To Andre it's stuffy, a place he avoided for three years. His fluorescent clothes, black hightops and denim shorts were forbidden by traditionalists there, the rebel complained, and besides, he needed the rest.

But this year he needs the grass. Somehow he has become his sport's richest and most famous player without doing one little thing: winning when it really mattered. It's his sixth year on the tour. He has never won a Grand Slam singles title. Credibility. That's what the sacred meadow offers.

And maybe her.

From the time he first laid eyes on Steffi, his soul knew. She is what he isn't. She has what he needs. At the French Open a few weeks earlier, he finally took a deep breath, gathered all his courage ... and asked his manager to ask her manager if they could meet.

"Meet her?" said Steffi's manager. "In regard to what?"

"Just to talk," said Andre's manager. "You know, he's not some wild rebel like they make him out to be. He's really a good, clean kid, very religious, in fact, born again."

Steffi's manager told Steffi that Andre wanted to talk to her about religion. Steffi told her manager to tell Andre's manager to tell Andre, No, thanks.

Her reply, reaching him just before Wimbledon begins, jolts him. They can't even talk? He's that unworthy?

He has one shot left. The male and female singles winners traditionally dance together at the Champions Ball at the end of the tournament. If they both win....

Steffi mauls everyone for the 11th of her 22 majors. Thump-thump....

One day later Andre survives 37 Goran Ivanisevic aces to win the men's championship in five sets--his first Slam title! He sags to his knees, drops to his back and sobs. Thump-thump, thump-thump.... On to the ball! His stomach tightens. He doesn't know how to dance. He can't wait to dance.

He arrives and stares. Swept-back hair, short white dress, plunging neckline.... That's Steffi Graf? A Wimbledon member sidles up to him. When, asks Andre, is the dance?

Sorry, old chum, he's told, that's been scrapped.

The rebel blinks. What about tradition?

He can't squeak out a word to Steffi when the photographers put them elbow to elbow and pop flashes in his eyes. He flies home to Vegas, throws a party, gets drunk, gets sick, takes off his clothes and ends up on his lawn, staring at the stars, as naked as....

The day he was born. He opens his eyes. What does he see? Fuzzy. Green. A ball. Dangling from a string attached to a racket hanging from the ceiling over his crib. Above it a man, moving the string, trying to compel the newborn's eyes to follow the ball.

Another ball. A balloon half filled with water, flying from the man's hand toward Andre's high chair a year later. The racket taped to Andre's hand--a Ping-Pong paddle split in half to make it lighter--smacks the balloon across the kitchen. Fifteen-love, says the man.

Then another ball. A bladder extracted from a volleyball so it's light enough for a baby to whack with a sawed-off tennis racket, chase it in his walker, then whack it again and again.

Those eyes. They're what convince the man, at a Ping-Pong tournament one day, that his two-year-old will be rare. Every head in the audience shifts back and forth to follow the action, except Andre's. His eyes alone flash, affixed to that ball.

As soon as the boy can walk, his father--a short, stocky Iranian with a thick accent and thinning hair--takes him to the Tropicana Hotel's two tennis courts, which the immigrant grooms in exchange for their use. Emmanuel Agassi swooned for the sport as a 13-year-old in Tehran, coming upon it one day on a dirt court behind the American Mission Church. Sure, said the American and British soldiers who played there, the little street fighter could play if he would be their ball boy and groundskeeper. The game and the big Americans entranced him, transported him far away from the one-room home, too cramped even for a table, where he, his parents and four siblings ate on a dirt floor and shared, along with 35 others crammed into the compound, one hole in the ground--their toilet.

He fought his way out with his fists, all the way to the 1948 and '52 Olympics as a boxer for Iran, but when he arrived in the U.S. at age 22 with a couple of bucks, a couple of words of English and a new first name--Mike--he didn't choose his

Olympic sport, the immigrants' sport, as his ticket into the big tent. He chose tennis. All his life he had been an outsider, a Christian Armenian in a Muslim Persian city. In his new land he was going to walk his yet-to-be-born children right up to the elite and hit 'em where they lived, where they played--in their country clubs.

He settled in Vegas and set to work. His eldest child, Rita, had the gift, but she hit puberty and hit the road, middle finger raised to her old man's relentless tennis regimen as she ran off with, of all people, tennis legend Pancho Gonzalez. His next child, Phillip, didn't quite have the foot speed or audacity that it took to play with the pros. His third, Tami, bumped her ceiling playing at Texas A&M.

That left Andre. Last child. Last chance.

Meet the future Number 1 tennis player in the world! Mike crows as he takes his four-year-old around the casino showroom where he serves as a host.

He builds a tennis court in his backyard. Andre enters a tunnel. As long as he remains inside it and never comes up to see the big picture--how vast the world is, how rife with challengers, how monstrous the odds stacked against him--he can go about the task of fulfilling his father's vision.

Dad plucks him from school a half hour early to get him on the court before Mike leaves for his night job at the casino. Weekends and summer days, Mike wakes up on a few hours' sleep and herds Andre onto the court where the 32 garbage cans await--each filled with 300 balls--along with the 11 machines that Dad has custom-welded to spit balls with different spins from different angles, one every two to three seconds ... for the first of Andre's three-a-day workouts. Thousands of balls struck each day, 365 days a year, including Christmas and the day after a surgeon reattaches the piece of finger sliced off by a kid's blade when the 10-year-old Andre goes ice skating, which, dammit, he never should've done. Day off to heal? Kid can rip a forehand with a cast on his left hand. Don't pull the racket that far back, son--shorter the backswing, bigger the pop, like a boxer's straight right. C'mon, step inside the baseline, hit the ball early, crush it--lower, deeper, closer, farther, more topspin, more--go for broke on every shot!

Now Andre's hands are as fast as those phenomenal eyes, so swift that 20 years later he will enter a cage with a pitching machine set to throw 90-mph fastballs and hit them with a bat while running toward the machine. But what about the fire that he'll need to dominate the world, the desperation that drove Mike to the Olympics and America? There are four bedrooms and two bathrooms in his house, plumbing, electricity--and no Muslim bullies in sight. Well, then, Mike will be the bully. Mike will be the fire. Mike will snarl at Andre when his game goes sour during junior tournaments in Utah, Nevada and California. Mike will bring a hammer to a tennis match and bang on the railing in disgust. Mike will scream at officials and get thrown off the grounds. Mike will drive home, obsessing over each shot no matter how good it was because it could've been better. That's when Andre wins, which is virtually always. When he loses....

He races off the court and hides behind a tree at age nine, sobbing in anticipation of the fire, after he drops the deciding tiebreaker in the final of the 12-and-under nationals. Runner-up trophies get left on the table at awards ceremonies or heaved in the trash.

What's a kid to do? Appeal to Mom? She's a peach, but tennis issues she leaves to her husband. Confront Dad? Sure, Andre is scared to, but it's more complicated than that. He loves his dad. Dad goes to war if anyone tries to take advantage of his son, gives Andre all his soul and heart, and his heart is as big as all Persia. In the middle of the night, if a friend has lost his job, Mike will go shopping and leave a heap of groceries on the friend's front step. He'll tip five bucks on a 50-cent cup of coffee, give people cars, nurse injured birds back to health, hard-boil eggs for them to sit on, end up with a half-dozen pigeons living in his house. But Andre can't, for the life of him, figure out why a game means so much to this man, why it feels as if it's his responsibility to keep his father and his father's home happy.

Puberty lurks. Mike grows anxious. He knows there's no player in Vegas good enough to compel his kid to keep improving. He knows, after his experience with his first daughter, that fathers and teenagers and tennis courts with 32 bins of balls are Vesuvius waiting to happen. Something has to give. Someone has to go.

The boy halts and looks around. He's 13. He's alone in the depths of the forest. He comes upon a training ground, an academy for young warriors.

What does it look like? What does he do?

Twenty-two acres. Forty-two tennis courts. One hundred eighty teenagers, but only the select. A leathery ex-paratrooper in charge. Twenty-five hundred miles from home. Andre's heartsick. He had agreed to come. He felt he had no choice.

It's only for eight weeks, he tells himself. That's all his dad can afford, two months' tuition on the half scholarship that Andre's been offered to attend the Bollettieri Academy in Bradenton, Fla. Tennis boot camp. That's what it was called in the 60 Minutes segment that introduced his father to it. Fifty-six days. Andre can last that long.

It rains one day, two weeks after his arrival. Andre's summoned to the indoor court to play in front of Nick Bollettieri for the first time. Ten minutes is all it takes. Nick calls Andre to his office and calls Mike in Vegas.

"Take your check back," says Nick. "He's here for free."

That's it. Gone, his friends. Gone, his mother's touch. Gone, his bedroom, his childhood and any normal teenage life. It's tennis, conditioning and school from 6 a.m. to lights-out, then dreams of dog eat dog.

Nick anoints Andre top dog. He has never seen a kid hit the ball so clean and early and hard. He has never seen such eyes. "I became hypnotized with those eyes," recalls Bollettieri. "I felt the depth. But there was also a question in those eyes: What am I doing here? I think Andre was frightened."

Terrified. But he's the coolest, most charismatic kid in camp; he can't tell anyone he's lost. He turns his fear and loneliness inside out, into hard, hip anger aimed at--no, not at the one who sent him here, not his father. At Nick. Rebellion by *****.

Andre breaks curfews, drinks Jack Daniels, berates opponents, smashes balls at their teeth, smashes rackets, trashes linesmen. He gets a Mohawk haircut, grows it out, dyes it red, dyes it orange, draws crosses on his face with eyeliner, grows an inch-long pinkie fingernail, paints it red, paints it black ... and takes the court at a televised Florida tournament in pink lipstick and ripped denim jeans. He'll do what his father--whose aversion to homosexuality is rooted in lurid tales he had heard as a boy in Tehran--wants him to do: play world-class tennis. But in a way that'll make his father wince.

Only a few see beneath the bluff, see Andre's loneliness on Thanksgiving Day when nearly all the other kids can afford to fly home. He finds suckers to play for 40 bucks a match, sells clothes given to him by sports-apparel companies and buys an airline ticket home, unbeknownst to his parents. Just to stay at the home of his best friend, Perry Rogers, to sit in class with him, mingle in the halls, talk about the big dance--just to smell a normal life. Then fly back.

He can't bring himself to say, "Please, Dad, let me come home, for good." He knows the game would pass him by, knows how much his dad has sacrificed, knows he can't turn his back on the immigrant's American dream. What he doesn't know frightens him more: What becomes of Andre without tennis? Dammit, how did this happen? He resents tennis. He'd never chosen it. How dare it wash him up so far from home?

Then, after Andre's been at the academy a year, it gets scarier. He goes numb. Dead inside. Indifferent. Nick explodes, tells him to pack up, it's over. Andre stares at him and says what he can't say to his dad: "What difference does it make, Nick? Have you ever stopped for one second to feel what it feels like for a kid to leave his home, travel across the country and do this?"

Something in the boy's deadness makes the ex-paratrooper pause ... then soften. "What would it take to make it better?" Nick asks.

"Leaving here," says Andre, "and turning pro."

He staggers out of a stadium in Washington, D.C. He's 17. He can't bear this. He's just found God in a flurry of prayer meetings and been born again. So why, if he's found the way, does he keep losing it in the third set? Why does he always feel that God is so angry at him? Why does he keep having that dream in which he's a child walking down the hall toward his bedroom door when his path is cut off by a terrifying creature?

He stops and looks around. He's in the woods. He reels through Rock Creek Park, just outside the tennis center, then comes upon a pack of homeless men. He opens his bag and hands them all his rackets. He's quitting tennis, done with this gypsy life in a crummy rental car. It's time to find Andre.

He returns to his hotel and informs his brother, Phil, who travels with him. "So what are you going to do?" asks Phil.

Well, he does have that high school diploma, the one he scored with help from his mother by doing four years' worth of correspondence courses after he dropped out. That qualifies him to ... uh ... hey, couldn't he give tennis lessons for \$50 a pop?

The phone rings. A player has just backed out of an exhibition in Winston-Salem, N.C. It's \$2,500 if Andre just shows up. That's 50 tennis lessons, he calculates. He's back in the crummy rental car, barreling down the path that isn't his.

Suddenly it opens wide. All that losing has shredded all those expectations for the long-haired hotshot out of Nick's academy. Suddenly he's got something to prove to himself instead of something to live up to: He's got purpose. He wins six tournaments in 1988 and rockets, at age 18, to No. 3 in the world. He still guns for white lines and glory on every shot, but he's just two steps from becoming what his father told everyone he'd be before he could tie his shoes, when....

The question drops like a snake from a tree.

Are you playing tennis for you ... or for someone else's image of you? Number 1 in the world--did you sign up for that?

His thoughts, during matches, start darting here and there, a flock of startled birds. He falls behind, overwhelmed by the mind flutter, and does the one thing that would cut Dad's heart deepest: goes numb, caves in, folds, accepts losing. Big strokes, small heart, the lads in the locker room start saying.

Then the oddest thing of all occurs. He comes upon the pot of gold. Millions in endorsement dollars and appearance fees. No need to show up for Wimbledon or the Australian Open. No need to lay off that Coke, burger and fries 45 minutes before taking the court. Just keep the hair long, the threads flashy, the bandanna flapping, the earring glinting, the jaw unshaven, the emotions bared. Just be the rock 'n' roll racket-rippin' rebel, the sassy foil for staid Pete Sampras. Just let Madison Avenue use that rebellion against a father that's never actually occurred, by a champion who's never actually won a major championship, by a rock 'n' roller who actually listens to Barry Manilow--to tap into a desire that every consumer has felt to tell his father or boss to go to hell.

So now he's living someone else's image of someone else's image of him. He gets the Lamborghini, the Ferrari, the Vector, the Corvette, the three Porsches, the JetStar airplane, the 727. He gets the Lamborghini girlfriend, Brooke. Nothing holds his interest. He sells the cars, sheds the airplanes, shears off all the hair. Blows off tennis, then feels lost without it. Sends himself on missions--brewing the world's best cup of coffee, procuring the planet's finest hair clippers, pouring the ultimate margarita--narrowing the world to one thing, tunneling to its bottom, then moving to the next. A second dream crowds his sleep: the dream of his tongue rubbing relentlessly against his teeth, pushing until one tumbles out. Even teeth don't last.

Canon asks him to say three words. He thinks they pertain to a camera--literally--not to a philosophy or to anything to do with him. He still has tunnel eyes, can't see the big picture: that Madison Avenue's calculation will come off as his calculation. Three words tied in a nice neat noose, just what everyone suspected of the Slamless Wonder: Image is everything.

Maybe some of the calculation is his. But the cynics don't see the multimillionaire sitting for hours on a weight bench in the ramshackle garage of Gil Reyes--the trainer who has turned his life into a study of body and spirit--wringing truth from the wise old soul as if his life depends on it. They don't see the rebel flying home from tournaments, driving straight from the airport to the home of a songwriting minister named John Parenti and driving circles around the glitter of Vegas all night, questioning, trying to find a gentler God, a comprehensible father, a reliable Andre.

One day Perry, his oldest friend and new manager, suggests that Andre enter the thorniest place: psychotherapy. Because nothing has ever been resolved between Andre and his father. Andre's first phone call after he finally wins that first Slam at Wimbledon? Dad. Dad's first words? Should've won in four sets.

But everything he has comes from his father. Who knows where therapy might take Andre or what it might demand that he do? Besides, he explains to Perry, it feels like a shortcut. I'm bound and determined to eat experience, he says. If you give me an option to cut a corner, I take more than I should. But if I make it hard, if I face it at its worst, then I stay focused and driven and it only gets better from there. I need to be in the thick of process. So I can't let myself have shortcuts.

Rather than dwell on what Dad took from him, he decides to help someone else with what Dad gave him. To turn millions of endorsement dollars into a 25,000-square-foot building, a Boys & Girls Club where thousands of children might find their own gifts.

Rather than stir old pain, he creates new pain. He digs at his cuticles and picks at his lips till they bleed when his strokes aren't perfect. He starts setting the fires that his dad's not there to set, lighting wads of paper on hotel balconies after he loses, and on a restaurant table in Toronto, where an infuriated waiter extinguishes the flames. He puts lit matches in his mouth, making his jaw glow like a jack-o'-lantern. Sure, that burns his palate and fingers sometimes. That's O.K. That's better than numb.

No, the forest isn't thick enough, he needs to dig under it, creating the tunnel that his father's not there to dig. He cocoons himself in process, obsesses over what tension his rackets are strung at, tweaks them each day according to temperature, humidity, wind. Fixates on his forehand or backhand even when they're fine, three days of drama involving everyone in his camp until, yes, he's figured it out, moved his hand an eighth of an inch.... No. Wait. It's the balls. Too much fuzz. They don't feel right. No. It must be the court. Damn, it's so exhausting, no wonder he's always on the verge of dropping the shovel and walking away. Because it's always so near, that urge. One slight shift in perspective, one glance out of the tunnel....

Like that October day in 1995, up 6--4 against MaliVai Washington in Essen, Germany, when the sole of his sneaker flaps off and Andre has to borrow a shoe from a friend while someone races to his hotel room for a backup pair--but too

late. He's already floating up, glimpsing the big picture, seeing himself down there playing tennis in a stranger's shoe, living a stranger's life, and it's adios, Andre, 6-1, 6-1 in the next two sets, and for most of the next two years.

He decides to marry the beautiful woman because marriage forces a man--doesn't it?--to be what Andre aches to be: the rock. But Brooke's an actress, a model: Image is her job. At night she wants to go to parties and premieres at which movie and TV people gather, to make the new friends she needs to succeed. Andre loathes that life, longs for something real. He becomes, he says, a dry, empty husk of myself.

Maybe that's why he risks a transformation that other athletes never do: because he, unlike them, isn't sure he wants to be an athlete. Somewhere in the wilderness, as lost as he's ever been, he gets an idea. O.K., maybe it's not his. Maybe it's his unconscious's idea: To go backward, as near as possible to where he entered the forest, and shatter everyone's image of him. To regress to No. 9 in the world, then No. 29 ... 74 ... 102 ... 141. It feels so awful back there. It feels so hopeless. It feels so ... perfect. At last he can choose his life and start over.

At age 27, in his 11th year as a pro, Andre Agassi signs up for tennis.

He begins in the satellite tournaments with the nobodies and never-weres. Number 122....

He reenters therapy. He's finally going to see the big picture, finally going to confront--well, no, he's not. He'll go for a year and a half, on and off, and skirt what happened in his childhood, but damn, he's trying. Number 87....

He lifts the blinds on his gym window, overlooking the house he built for his parents. He watches his old man, with a heart that's squeaked through quintuple-bypass surgery, hitting balls spit from a machine for an hour and a half on 100° days on his backyard court, and Andre feels something that he could never quite see: that it's bigger than him. That it's not personal. That this fire was set long before he was a child and still blazes long after he's become a man. Number 71....

He meets with Tony Robbins, the oracle of accountability, and gives himself a crash course in dreams, so he can learn to defang the hallway apparition and escape the endless loop of the tongue and the crumbling teeth. Number 50....

Each morning he awakens and writes two or three goals for that day in a notepad, then checks at night to make sure he accomplished them. Number 31....

He becomes the best-conditioned athlete in tennis, pares all motion between points except those that hasten the next point, to grind his huffing opponents to dust. Number 21....

At last he fully embraces the methodical game that Brad Gilbert, ever since replacing Bollettieri, has been pushing him to play, to stop gambling and start letting his opponents lose points instead of his having to win every one. Number 13....

He decides that the Boys & Girls Club and the 3,000 kids he's helped clothe aren't enough. He seizes on Perry's idea of a charter school and commits to building the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy. Number 6....

One more thing must be resolved: his inauthentic marriage. As he leaves his wife that night in 1999, as he grabs the world's best coffee beans and shuts the refrigerator door, his eyes fall on the picture there that Brooke cut out because she admired the graceful legs of the woman in it. Her. The undanced dance. The holy grail.

She's here. He can see Steffi's balcony from the condo he rents six weeks later on Fisher Island, Fla., where he's staying while he plays in the Key Biscayne tournament. What if...? Nah. She's already said no. She's had the same boyfriend for seven years. But if the guy hasn't sealed the deal by now.... Besides, the guy's not here!

Go down swinging, Andre tells himself. You're not the same guy she turned down. He goes to work. Huddles with his old pal John Parenti and starts preparing that first phone call to Steffi as if it's a State of the Union address. Recruits the Fisher Island ferry operator to report her comings and goings. Discovers her practice time, with help from Brad, so they can accidentally schedule Andre's practice right after hers. Contact! They hit together for a half hour! He's aching to tell her what's still a secret--that he and Brooke have split--and the other secret bursting in his heart. But he doesn't want to blow it. He floats back to his room. He blows it. He orders a bouquet of roses too big for the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton. He paces, bleeding over every word in the note to go with it, calls Perry to help him revise it again and again and finally sends the bouquet to her room. He watches her balcony window, spying ... dying....

At last Steffi staggers out under the megabouquet and deposits it on her balcony. That can't be a good sign. He waits. Forever. The phone rings. He pounces. "I want no misunderstanding between us," she says. "Don't come near me now. My boyfriend is here."

Here? He blanches. Reconnaissance failure! He parses every word she uttered. Don't come near me now. He loses his first match and heads home, his whole life rising and dipping on the kite string of that one word: now.

Two months later, on the clay he's never solved, he learns how much he can rely on himself. Down two sets against Andrei Medvedev in the final of the French Open, he wins in five sets, drops his racket and weeps: At 29 he's the first man since Rod Laver in 1969 to win all four Grand Slam singles titles. Seven years after his first attempt, he feels like a man who deserves Steffi Graf.

It's just the start of a 27--1 run in Grand Slam matches, the best since Jimmy Connors's 20--0 in '74; three majors in less than a year. On the flight to Wimbledon a few weeks after Paris, he scissors out a picture of a barn and a field from an airline menu, turns it into a birthday card, rolls it up, ties it with a ribbon and gives it to Steffi's coach to pass on. It's so sweet she has to call him. Boy, is the boy ever ready. I want no misunderstandings, he says. I'm sure you've heard by now about Brooke and me. I think you're beautiful and fascinating and I have a tremendous amount of respect for what appear to be the pillars of your life. Can we have lunch or dinner or coffee, take a walk, I don't care--I just want to get to know you better. Bull's-eye! She green-lights him to call her after Wimbledon.

One month later, two days before she plays the final match of her career at age 30, they go out to dinner in La Jolla, Calif., and Steffi gets a surprise: Andre's not at all like his image. They end up running on the beach and start discovering that somehow they're completely different ... and uncannily the same. That Steffi, too, has a foundation for children, one that addresses the psychological scars from violence all over the world. Her dad's a fanatic for tennis, boxing and soccer? Precisely the same as his! Her favorite musicians are George Michael, U2 and Prince? Exactly his! When she asks him his favorite alltime movie a few weeks later, she lets go of the phone and screams. It's hers, *Shadowlands*, the story of C.S. Lewis's finding his soul mate late in life and then losing her to cancer. Steffi, too, is a seeker--she planned to travel the globe to photograph animals until Andre began laying siege--but the big difference between them, the saving one, is this: Once she finds an answer, she trusts it. She leaves it alone.

She flies to Vegas to see his world. She approaches Andre's father for the first time. He's on his tennis court, of course. Andre tenses--remembering how Dad disdained his marriage to Brooke, how he walked out on their wedding reception--still yearning to be part of a family that's whole.

Steffi walks right up and wraps her arms around his father, an embrace so warm that it melts the old man ... and more of the ice between him and his son.

Here's what happens when a man finds a lens that makes every choice in his life clearer: Will it make my wife proud? Here's what happens when a boy raised to win more Grand Slam tournaments than anyone else on earth ends up with not even half as many as the woman in his own bed, and he's so damn grateful for it that at night he writes on a chalkboard in their kitchen the things he noticed and admired about her that day. Here's what happens when that gratitude begins swelling, rippling outward from that bed and kitchen.

He starts having children, and they turn his churning energy outward, and his meltdowns become rarer and rarer, and he starts playing some of the best tennis of his life, outlasting all the peers who'd been far more dedicated to the game. And in his children's faces he sees the child he didn't get a chance to be, and the faces of all the children who lose that chance, and he begins adding more classrooms to his school for kids from broken homes. He lifts his own kids to hold them so often that it aggravates a condition in his back, caused by a vertebra that's slipped over the one below it, and so then, to get things right with tennis that he got wrong all those years, he has to do it with pain shooting down his sciatic nerve.

And suddenly he's in front of the world in the first round of the 2005 French Open with his back killing him and a far lesser player taking him apart, but rather than quit and call off the embarrassment as he would've before, he fights to the end and then explains why with such conviction and such appreciation of the fans who'd paid to see him that an ESPN editor includes it on SportsCenter.

It reaches the eyes of a man on his back in California recovering from a kidney transplant, the hot television comedian George Lopez, who feels so moved that he sends a text message that ricochets from his TV producer to Perry to Andre. "Because," says Lopez, "you could tell Andre's words came from a man who has traveled the world and found compassion. A man who said Image is everything is now saying, Humanity is everything." And so, of course, Lopez accepts Andre's invitation to take the stage at his annual fund-raising gala last October, where he joins Robin Williams and Céline Dion and Barbra Streisand and a slew of other celebrities who come to Vegas to auction off their time and perform for Andre's cause, which raises \$7.5 million in one night, prompting Andre to bound to the microphone and round off that number, from his and Perry's pockets, to \$10 million, so that all the kids at his academy can walk into a brand-new high school that'll open this fall.

How do you move on when you've finally found the sweet spot? He couldn't say farewell to the game during the first six months of this year, even as back pain and inactivity from a severe ankle sprain kept driving him out of tournaments in the first round or before they even began. It wasn't so much the tennis he'd be losing but the cocoon of all that process. Finally on June 24 at Wimbledon, the field of grass he once couldn't bother to play, he swallowed hard at 36, said enough ... and felt liberated.

He insists he's not worried about a void after tennis, once he's done playing several hard-court tournaments and the 2006 U.S. Open, because he's learned by watching how his wife moved on without a hitch. Sure, his new life will probably have a lot to do with the academy, perhaps trying to replicate it around the country. Sure, it'll have even more to do with his own kids, but not likely on a tennis court unless they really want it. Already his father's telling him that Jaden's not playing enough and that Andre needs to start dropping the boy off at Grandpa's house at sunrise and picking him up at sunset, to which Andre just nods and says, "Yeah, I might do that, Dad" ... and never does.

Andre: I just hope the kids find something to pour all of themselves into because that's where the marrow of life comes from. If it's tennis ... wow, I'd take a deep breath. I'd have to hand it to Jaden if he did that. He'd have to have a mighty big pair of....

Steffi: It would work out, Andre. Just trust your instincts. You'd do it right.

Andre: Yeah ... but my instinct is to NOT trust myself.

Even now. After the magic thing happened.

The fifth set. Last September against James Blake in the U.S. Open quarterfinals. The changeover as Blake prepares to serve for the match. The crowd rising, love thundering from the highest seats like a waterfall, gathering volume as it rolls. Love for the battle Andre has waged, digging out of an 0--2 grave in sets against Blake, and for his 20 U.S. Opens, and for more than that: for his arc, for who he has become. He's as deep in the tunnel as he's ever been, but he looks up and around, and for the first time in his life he sees and hears everything outside the tunnel. He sees his friend James instead of the distant blur that his opponents have always been. He sees what he's never seen in the audience: actual faces, individual joy. He hears not the fuzzy din that he has all of his career but each syllable growing louder and louder: An-dre! An-dre! An-dre!

Chills run through him. He battles from behind once more and beats Blake. It's O.K., he says now, that Roger Federer defeated him four days later in the final because Federer's the best he's ever seen, and besides, being No. 1 never was what his journey's about. It's O.K., he says, because he finally knows what it's like to be totally absorbed in yourself and yet feel part of everything.

He shakes his head. All that trekking, only to find out that where you get to means nothing, and all that matters is how you look at the forest.

I used to look at it as something overwhelming, he says, something separate from me that I had to find my way through. Now I see myself as part of it. When you start out on the journey you think it's all about taking in experiences to fulfill yourself. But it's not. The greatest experience is changing someone else's experience of life. And once you come to that realization, it becomes your foundation, the ace in your pocket, who you are. It's the opposite of what you think it is. When you see the world through the lens of others, that's when you find yourself.

The fire's out. The world's best margarita blender's empty. The man yawns and rises. You thank him for taking you on the journey and wish him luck on the second leg, the new path. The one where the man who learned to see learns to trust his eyes.