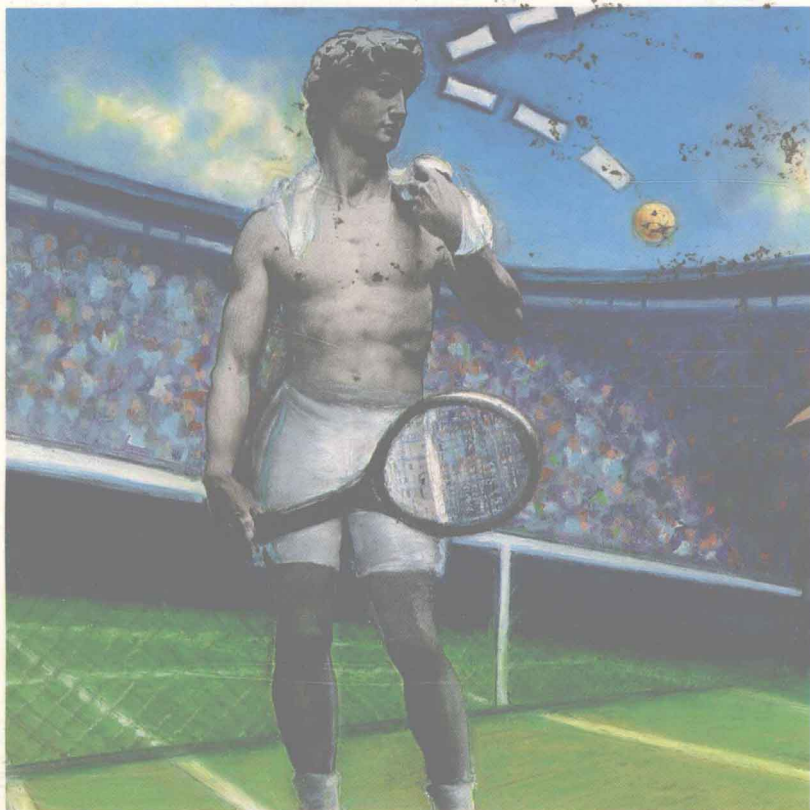


# BARRY HANNAH



## THE TENNIS HANDSOME

*"The Tennis Handsome is a miracle of invention, a fable of sport and lust, all written in a kind of moon-landing English. Barry Hannah is living proof that Stagger Lee goes on stalking the South, still armed, still dangerous."*

—Thomas McGuane

**BARRY HANNAH**

**The Tennis Handsome**

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*V*OICES OF THE *S*OUTH

## **The Tennis Handsome**

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*For my brothers*

*Larry Wells, Bobby Hannah, and John Quisenberry  
and for my brother and constant pal, Gordon Lish*

## **The Tennis Handsome**





## **Return to Return**

Dr. Levaster drove the Lincoln. It was rusty and the valves stuck. On the rear floorboard two rainpools sloshed, disturbing the mosquitoes that rode the beer cans. The other day he became forty. His hair was thin, his eyes swollen beneath sunglasses, his ears small and red. Yet he was not monstrous, or very ugly. He seemed, actually, to have just retreated from some untowardness. The man with him was a few years younger, built well, curly passionate hair, face dashed with sun. His name was French Edward, the tennis pro. They used to call him the happiest man on the court, and the prettiest. He had more style losing than L. or N. or S. did winning. The crowds hated to see French Edward beaten. Women anguished to conceive of his departure from a tournament. When he once lost a dreadfully long match at Forest Hills, an old Neapolitan man in the stands roared with sobs. Then female voices joined him in his keening. It was like seeing the death of Mercutio, or Hamlet going down with a resigned smile.

A mosquito flew from one of the beer cans on the floorboard

and bit French Edward before it was taken out on the draft. French Edward became severely angry, slapping his neck, turning around in his seat, lifting himself and peering down on the other insects that had kept to their station in the back. He reached for them, smacking at them. Then he fell over the seat into the puddles and clawed at the water.

Dr. Levaster slowed the Lincoln and drove into the grass off the highway.

"Here now, here now! Moan, moan!"

Dr. Levaster had given up profanity when he turned forty, formerly having been known as the filthiest-mouthed citizen of Louisiana or Mississippi. He opened the back door and dragged French Edward out into the sedge. "You mule," he screamed. He slapped Edward overvigorously, continuing beyond the therapeutic moment.

"He got me again . . . I thought. He. Doctor Word," said French Edward.

"A bug. Mule, who do you think would be riding in the back of my car? How much do you have left, anything?"

"It's clear. A bug. It felt just like what he was doing."

"He's dead," said Dr. Levaster. "Drowned."

"They never found him."

"He can't walk on water."

"I did," said French Edward.

"You just think you did," said Dr. Levaster. He looked in the back seat. "One of your racquets is in the water, got wet. The strings are ruined. Ah well, we got two more."

"I'm all right."

"You'd better be," Levaster said. "I'm not taking you one mile more if we don't get some clarity. Where are we?"

"Outside New York City."

"Where, more exactly?"

"New Jersey," French Edward said. "The Garden State."

\* \* \*

At his three-room place over the spaghetti store on 89th Street, Baby Levaster, M.D., discovered teenagers living. He knew two of them. They had broken in the door but had otherwise respected his quarters, washed the dishes, swept, even revived his houseplants. They were diligent little street people. They claimed they knew by intuition that he was coming back to the city and wanted to clean up for him. He didn't care whether they were lying. Two of them thought they might have gonorrhea. He got his bag and jabbed ten million units of penicillin in them. Then French Edward came up the stairs with the baggage and the racquets, and went to the back.

"Dear God! He's, oh. Oh, he looks like *love*!" said Carina, who was one of the housebreakers. She wore steep-heeled sandals and a deep blue turtleneck, and clocked about nineteen on the age scale. The others hung back, her friends. Baby Levaster knew her well. She had shared his sheets and he had shared her body, waking with drastic regret, feeling as soiled and soilsome as the city itself.

"Are you still the mind, him the body?" Carina asked.

"Now more than ever," Levaster answered. "I'd say he now has about an eighth of the head he was given."

"What happened?"

"He drowned," said Levaster. "And then lived. He went off the midpoint of the Mississippi Bridge at Vicksburg."

"Why? He looks happy," Carina said.

"Either trying to save or trying to drown his old tennis coach, Doctor Word. Word was on the rail and French went after him."

"I am happy," said French Edward, coming back to the room. "Whose thing is this? You children break in Baby's apartment, and not only that, you carry firearms. I don't like any kind of gun. Who are these hoodlums you're talking to, Baby?"

French Edward was carrying a double-barreled .410 shotgun pistol; the handle was of cherry wood, and silver vines were embossed down the length of the barrels.

"I'll take that," said Dr. Levaster, since it was his.

It was his Central Park nighttime gun. The shells that went with it were loaded with popcorn. He put it down on a table and then made a show of righteousness, running the teenagers out of his apartment. When he returned, French Edward was asleep on the couch, the sweet peace of the athlete beaming through his twisted curls.

"I've never slept like that," Levaster said to Carina, who had remained. "Nor will I ever. All his life he could do that, sleep whenever the notion took him. Me, I always had to go out in the night and run into something like you."

The girl studied French Edward sleeping. She said, "I saw him on teevee once. It was a match in Boston, I think. I didn't care a rat's prick about tennis. But when I saw him, that face, in his shorts, wow! I told everybody to come here and watch this man."

"He won that one at Longwood."

"I was praying for him. All of us were. You could see how the man was in love with all of it—the court, the other player, the crowd. It wasn't a game. I don't know what it was, but it wasn't a game," the girl said, batting her eyes at the slumbering athlete.

Carina and Dr. Levaster took a cab to Central Park. It was raining, which gave a congruous fashion to the physician's habitual raincoat, wherein, at the left breast pocket, the shotgun pistol hung in a cunning leather holster. Levaster almost swooned in a seizure of nostalgia for the vicious city of his residence. Everything was so exquisitely true and awful and forthright. Not only was the vicious city his to gaze upon, but he, a meddlesome, worthless, loud failure from Vicksburg, was jammed amok in the wonderful viciousness of it, a willing out in the unspeakability of New York. He stroked Carina's

thigh, rather enjoying her shy distaste. The cabbie was friendly and this, indeed, was a bit disappointing.

They entered the park under a light smashed by vandals. She came close to him near the dark hedges. He abided her bony warmth and noted the sweet vapor, winelike, rising from the pores of her concern. She'd done this routine with him several times before, and always with the same smell. What with the inconsequential introversion of his youth, in which he had not read or honed any skill but only squatted in derision of everything in Vicksburg, Levaster had missed the Southern hunting experience. But he assumed this New York thing to be more sporting, walking along in the filthy reality of the metropolis as bait for the muggers, who might have their own pistols, etc. Who knew what marvels of violence would ensue?

They walked two miles in a dry run. A horde of short Negroes passed them by, indifferent. Levaster was glad. He wanted no racial implications. At last, he asked Carina to go ahead and get down on the grass and make with her act.

"Oh, I'm coming, I'm coming! And I'm so rich, rich, rich! Only money could make me come like this!"

The rain had stopped, and a moon was pouring through the leaves. Two stout bums, one with a beer-opener in his hand, circled out of the bush and edged in on Carina. He, the armed bum, made a threatening jab with his instrument.

In a small tenor voice Levaster protested. "Please!" he cried, "we only're visitors here! Don't take our money! Don't tell my wife!" The bums turned away from Carina and headed for Levaster, who continued in high voice: "Do you fellows know Jesus? The Prince of Peace?"

When they were mere feet away, he shot them both in the thighs, whimpering, "Glory be! Sorry! Goodness. Oh, wasn't that *loud*?"

After the accosters had stumbled away, astounded at being alive, Levaster sank into the usual faint of contrition, his limp

wrist curled over the handle of the pistol. He removed his sunglasses. The rims had made cuts under his eyes. He seemed racked by the advantage of new vision. It was the first natural light he had seen since leaving French Edward's house in Covington, across the bridge from New Orleans. He saw Carina turned over onto her belly. She was yanking up grass and eating it.

"Didn't you get any supper?"

"Seeing him, Baby. Seeing French Edward. He's so healthy-looking. And he's almost as old as you. It makes me want to get vitamins and minerals in my stomach."

"But he has no mind outside of me," said Levaster.

To which Carina replied: "His body and his eyes, he doesn't need anything else."

They took a cab back, and found French Edward asleep again. He had taken off his pants and shirt, appeared, like an infant, to have shucked them off in the wild impatience of his slumbers. Lithe clusters of muscles rose and fell with his breathing.

Carina sat on the bed with Levaster. He removed the raincoat, the cord suit, the hot city boots that gave him two more inches of height and two more square yards of selfness, then the socks. Over his spread-collar shirt was printed a sort of Confederate flag as drawn by a three-year-old with a sludge brush. The shirt was almost rotten. It was the one he always wore to Elaine's to provoke a fight. But even so, he was always ignored, and never got to buy a writer or an actor a drink, or hit him. Nude, it was seen how oversized Levaster's head was, how outsized his organ, hanging large and purple like a small dead ogre. Undressed, Levaster looked more like a mutinous gland than a whole male figure.

"I'm the worst, the awfulest!" he said.

Carina gathered up her things and moved to the door, said she was leaving, but stopped to kneel at the living room couch to flick the tennis star's sexual part into her savvy mouth.

“Hands off!” Levaster shouted from the bedroom. “No body without the mind! Besides, he’s married. A New Orleans woman wears his ring, and she makes you look like a chimney sweep!” Then he toppled back onto the bed and moiled some minutes before falling into black sleep.

He dreamed. He dreamed about his own estranged wife, a woman somewhere in Arizona who sent him Polaroids of herself with her hair cut shorter and shorter in every succeeding photo. Last time he’d seen one, she had a crewcut and was riding a horse out front of a cactus. She said she thought hair interfered with rationality. Now she was happy, having become ugly as the cactuses she hung out with. But he did not dream about himself and French Edward although the dream thundered down onto him like the bricks of a hysterical mansion.

In high school, Baby Levaster was the best tennis player. He was small but cunning, and could run and get the ball like a terrier. Dr. Word coached the college team. He was a professor of botany and was said to be the town queer. Dr. Word drew up close to the boys, holding them to show them the full backhand and forehand of tennis, coming in close to their bodies and working them like puppets, large fellow that he was. Rumorers said Dr. Word got a thrill from the rear closeness to his players. But his team won its regional championship.

The only courts in Vicksburg were the college courts, which is where Dr. Word tried to coach Baby Levaster. But Levaster resisted the touching thing. It was his opinion Word was the queer he was said to be. Actually, what Baby Levaster thought had been true, up until a few months before French Edward came on the courts.

Word had seen French in a junior-high football game, saw him moving like a genius, finding all the openings, sprinting away from all the other boys. French was the quarterback. He ran for a touchdown nearly every time the ball was centered



to him. The only thing that held him back was passing or handing off to someone else. Otherwise, he scored, or almost did. An absurd clutter of bodies would be gnashing behind him on the field. So it was then that Word saw French's mother, Olive, sitting by herself in the bleachers, looking calm, looking auburn-haired, looking unbelievably handsome.

From then on Dr. Word was queer no more.

He made his move toward her. She was a secretary for the P.E. department in the gymnasium, whereas he was big, bald-headed, and virile, also suave with the grace of his Ph.D. from Michigan State, obtained years ago but still appropriating him some charm as an exotic scholar. Three weeks of tender words and Olive was his, in any shadow of Word's choosing. Curious and flaming like a pubescent, he caressed her on back roads and in the darkened basement of the gym, their trysts protected by Word's repute as a fairy. Olive's husband—a man turned lopsided and cycloptic by sports mania—never discovered them. It was her son, French Edward, who did, walking into his own home in sneakers and thus unheard—and unwitting—discovering his mother and the pansy coiled infamously.

French Edward's dad was away as an uninvited delegate to a rules-review board meeting of the Southeastern Conference in Mobile. As for French himself, he was not seen in his seeing. So he crawled under the bed of his room and slept so as to gather the episode into a dream, a dream that would vaporize when he awoke. What he dreamed of was what he had just seen, with the curious addition that he was present in the room with them, practicing his strokes with ball and racquet, using a great mirror as a backboard, while, reflected on the bed, they groaned in loud approval, a monstrous, two-headed, naked spectator.

By the time of this discovery, Word had taken French Edward and made of him quite a tennis player. He could already beat Baby Levaster and all the college aces. At eighteen, Edward