

Contribution

“That’s it Mrs. Horowitz,” Alyona said. “Just a bit more follow-through toward the target if you can.”

Alyona fed another ball and Mrs. Horowitz awkwardly corkscrewed the racquet back and sailed another forehand ten feet over the baseline.

“That’s okay,” Alyona said. “What’s good, is your shoulders are rotating nicely.”

“You’re a sweetheart,” Mrs. Horowitz said when they finished.

“I’m being honest,” Alyona said. “A big difference today.”

Mrs. Horowitz laughed, and said she’d see her Thursday, and Alyona’s next lesson showed up and she went back in the court and cranked it out plus three more after that.

At lunch on the little patio off the club kitchen Henry said, “Mr. Patterson, he offered us tickets for Indian Wells, prime seats for the quarters. You don’t want to go, do you?”

“That’s always tempting,” Alyona said. “Except for the whole trip to Palm Springs part.”

Henry looked around and lowered his voice. “His son punched him. He says he can’t focus on watching tennis matches.”

“Gosh, Jamie?”

“I know. I’ve been trying to wrap my head around it. What a nice kid.”

Alyona and Henry were married. Alyona was the head pro and Henry was the assistant pro at the Greenbrae Racquet Club in Marin County. The club had a forty thousand dollar buy in, and dues of three grand a month, meaning that most of the members were millionaires at least. For whatever reason, during lessons they would sometimes confide in Alyona and Henry.

“Anyhow, what else do you got?” Henry said.

“Dane Morris, then the kids, then a women’s 3.5 practice.”

“Oh, I had Garrison this morning. He invited us to a party on Saturday. They renovated their house.”

“That sounds fun,” Alyona said, “I get a kick out of Garrison.”

“I’m sure he’ll have the Indian Wells stuff on, probably a movie theater sized TV. Easier than going all the way down there, in spite of the generous offer.”

“Much,” Alyona said.

Garrison’s house was in Tiburon. On weekends traffic was nasty from when you got off 101, but eventually you turned up into the hills and then you were good. Garrison was about halfway up, with views of the bay and the city. He was on a dead end street that connected to open space, and dog walkers passed by in a steady stream.

There were a couple of monster houses you could see further up. One of them was under construction and the rumor was it belonged to the head Google guy. A vacant lot up here alone would run you a couple million.

Garrison’s spread was modest but, Henry thought, impeccably set up. The south side was floor-to-ceiling glass, and the living room opened onto a simple and elegant redwood deck. Henry and Alyona recognized a

few club members among the guests, though not as many as they would have expected.

Garrison said, “I’m glad you like it. We started with a 1960’s ranch. It had cheesy wood paneling, no insulation. It was actually a summer place for a couple from Woodside.”

“Dang,” Henry said. “You could have fooled me.”

“It was my baby,” Garrison said. “Took about a year and a half. I did most of the work myself.”

“Really,” Alyona said. “So you have hidden talents, beyond just tennis.”

“You’re buttering me up again, which is why you’re such a popular instructor,” Garrison said.

“How’d you learn everything?” Henry said.

“Just bit by bit over the years. No one trade is that complicated actually, long as you take your time. Most of what you need’s on YouTube now, if you get stuck.”

“Well your attention to detail, it’s really impressive,” Henry said.

“Thank you . . . Being entirely open? This is what I’d like to be doing, renovating houses.”

“You mean, period?” Alyona said.

“Yep. Pushing people’s money around all day, that gets old. In fact it sucks. Pardon my French.”

“So . . . why don’t you then?” Henry said. “Although I guess I have an idea of the answer.”

“There’s a lifestyle you get locked into . . . Sandra does her thing, the kids in private schools, the house in Aspen, the trips to Europe, the club memberships. A chain reaction, is sort of how it unfolds.” Garrison took a good-sized gulp of his drink.

“What I’m hearing,” Alyona said, “is you’re an excellent provider. And that’s admirable.”

Garrison smiled. “You know what? You always look at the glass as half-full, don’t you?” He patted Alyona’s shoulder and let his hand linger for a moment, Henry thinking just slightly too long.

Alyona was on her second glass of wine. She said, “Okay then, since everyone’s baring their souls here, I’ll go too.”

Henry didn’t know what she meant by everyone, but Alyona continued. “I used to play right-handed,” she said.

Henry chimed in. “She had an injury. She screwed up her wrist.”

“Back in the juniors. And I was impatient and I had surgery,” Alyona said. “It never bounced back.”

Garrison said. “Jeez. So you’re saying the surgery made it worse?”

“Then I ended up in rehab. Not physical therapy rehab, real rehab.”

Henry had never heard about any rehab, and was hoping she was making this up too.

“Amazing,” Garrison said, as though the rehab disclosure was no big deal. “Were you at least a little ambidextrous?”

“I don’t think so. I re-learned the strokes, mostly with a ball machine. The serve was the toughest part.”

Sandra appeared and said hi to everyone. She was tall, blonde and large chested, Henry assuming everything was enhanced to some degree. “Two of Garrison’s favorite tennis people,” she said. “When it thins out, why don’t you stay for dinner?”

Garrison said, “Don’t even think about it, we insist.”

Alyona said, “That’s so nice. I hope we can contribute something beyond shop talk.”

“You do,” Garrison said.

They were in the hot tub, just the four of them left, and the sunset was framing Mount Tam.

Henry said, “It must be so rewarding, to have put your blood, sweat and tears into this place, and it culminates with this.”

“Where’re the kids?” Alyona said.

“Tahoe,” Sandra said. “With the neighbors.”

Alyona had borrowed a swimsuit from Sandra, Henry thinking it was pretty microscopic, not her usual style, but also thinking she wore it well. Henry was in his boxers.

“Oh,” Garrison said to Alyona, boosting himself out of the hot tub. “I’ve been meaning to show you -- that lesson where we set up the video camera? I fiddled around with some goofy editing, you’ll get a kick out of it. Give me a minute.”

Sandra said to Henry, “He ever take lessons from you too? Or just your beautiful wife?”

“He does, but there’s a dynamic I’ve noticed,” Henry said. “Guys often prefer a woman’s approach. I can see it both ways.”

Alyona smiled. “Maybe it’s because I’ve been at it longer,” she said.

“She’s right,” Henry said. “If you can believe it, I took a lesson from her. In Florida. That’s how we met.”

“He was a good athlete,” Alyona said. “A point guard. Basketball. He picked it up quickly, at least well enough to teach it.”

“More like a third-string one,” Henry said. “But yeah, all sports are similar to an extent. Tennis is all about muscle memory.”

“Interesting,” Sandra said.

Garrison was back. “I heard part of that,” he said. “Jeez, have to give you credit . . . Unfortunately my ipad’s dead, I’m recharging it.”

“That’s okay,” Alyona said, getting out. “You can show me inside. I have to use the girls’ room, and a refill sounds good too.” She wrapped a towel around herself, which sort of did the job, and Garrison followed her into the house.

“Where were you a point guard?” Sandra said.

“Vanderbilt. It’s in Nashville.”

“I’m familiar with it. An old boyfriend, he wanted to give it a year and see if he could break through. I went with him.”

“Did he make it?”

“I never found out. At one of the open mics, while he was backstage waiting to go on, I met someone. We drove to San Diego.”

“Just like that? That night?”

“Pretty much,” Sandra said.

“You have a bit of a streak in you then,” Henry said.

“That’s what Garrison liked about me when we met. He can be a bit wild himself.”

“Yeah? And where was that?”

“On the ferry, to the city.”

“He was going to work, and what were you doing?”

“I was doing some modeling in those days,” Sandra said.

“That’s what I figured . . . Seems to be taking a while in there.”

“You lose it, it’s not easy,” she said. “I had my breasts done last fall, a wonderful doctor in Bel Air.”

“Ah,” Henry said.

“Would you like to see them?” Sandra said. “How about just for informational purposes?” She unfastened her top.

Henry tried not to look but couldn’t help it. He said, “I’ll admit, if those were *not* enhanced, you might be setting a world record, right here in this hot tub.”

“You’re sweet,” she said. “Touch them.”

Henry looked toward the house, no sign of anything, and did as he was told. Sandra put her head back and closed her eyes.

“Must you stop?” she said.

Henry said, “You think . . . something’s going on in there?”

Sandra re-fastened her top and laughed. “Good chance of it . . . Has she ever cheated on you, that you know of?”

“No . . . It’s weird, part of me doesn’t mind . . . in the way I would have thought.”

“So come back here.”

“Not right now . . . but she does lie about stuff. Not sure whether it’s pathological.”

“Yes?”

“You might not have been there, but the switching to playing left-handed business? That’s a crock . . . What it is, Alyona was a high-flying junior prospect but ended up only a so-so college player. She tried the satellite tour after, and that was a disaster.”

“I see. So she builds in an excuse?”

“And I play along. It’s pretty silly. The ones that knew her, she can’t lie to, and the ones that didn’t, they don’t care that she wasn’t a star.”

Sandra took her top off again. This time she tossed it up onto a patio chair.

“What’re you doing?” Henry said.

“It’s fine,” she said. “When they come back it’ll serve them right . . . Meanwhile I’m a little stiff, would you mind rubbing my back please?”

Henry just sat there but there was no denying the beauty of her re-released anatomy, fake or not. They were white and succulent against the rest of her body,

which was a golden tan. He was seeing now that she had the thin waist and voluptuous hips of a younger woman.

“The other thing earlier tonight,” Henry said. “She threw it out casually that she’d once been in rehab, before we met.”

“And that was the first you ever heard about it.”

“Un-huh. You’re good.”

The sliding door opened and Garrison and Alyona got right back in the hot tub.

“That must have truly been some video,” Sandra said.

Alyona noticed her now, stared for a moment and then glared at Henry. Garrison seemed out of it.

Sandra said, “I hope no one is offended . . . When I was 22 I spent a summer in Estonia. They’re not as uptight.”

“We should go,” Alyona said. “I actually have to work tomorrow.”

“On Sunday?” Sandra said. “A pity.”

“We don’t want to wear out our welcome,” Henry said.

In the car Alyona said, “You mind telling me what the fuck was going on there?”

“Just what you saw,” Henry said. “She’s relaxed about her body, apparently . . . you want to go to In-N-Out?”

“Well I wouldn’t mind, honestly. You’d think there was enough to eat, but I’m starving.”

They went to the one in Mill Valley. It was late but the place was packed, you could barely park. “I never knew about the rehab,” Henry said.

“You never asked. Plus it didn’t seem pertinent.”

“I mean I don’t know, when you’re getting ready to marry someone, you’d think . . .”

“Okay -- what all haven't you told *me*?”

Henry thought of one or two things. “I’m not going to play that game,” he said.

They finished eating and Alyona said to drop her at her mother’s, if he would please.

Henry returned Sandra’s call Sunday afternoon. “She’s got a lot of nerve,” Sandra said, “turning it around like that.”

“Well I talked to her this morning,” Henry said. “And I think we resolved it . . . She did concede they smoked some weed, and apparently Garrison kept starting and stopping the video and telling stories.”

Sandra said, “He’s sailing today. There’s a regatta . . . Can you come over?”

“Does he . . . bang other women . . . in your experience?”

“Big-time,” she said.

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Henry felt a little guilty driving back there, especially when he passed the central San Rafael exit. This was Alyona’s annual Sunday when she gave free all-day clinics to low-income kids at a park in town.

This time when Sandra opened the door she was completely nude, except for a pair of blue elevated sandals.

Henry surveyed the situation and said, “I apologize. It may take me a minute to regain my equilibrium.”

“Take your time,” Sandra said.

“You ever see that James Bond movie?” he said. “Where she asks him to give her something to put on?”

“I haven’t,” Sandra said, moving closer.

They were below Carmel, in the middle of the famous 49-mile drive.

“Well, we needed this, both of us,” Alyona said. Henry was driving and she had her hand on his leg.

“That stuff we might not know about each other, though?” Henry said. “You don’t have to answer . . . but you ever . . . fantasize . . . about doing it with someone else?”

“I fantasized about doing it with Garrison,” she said, moving her hand up slightly.

“Someone could have walked in,” Henry said.

“I know. I wanted to do it in the closet.”

“We did that once . . . Remember Wayne and Chelsea’s party, that time in Rhinebeck? There were probably fifty people milling around.”

“That’s what made me think of it,” she said.

“Anyhow . . .”

“The wife though. Wasn’t that unbelievable? What a bunch of nonsense, Estonia liberated her.”

“That was pretty funny,” Henry said.

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