

Round Robin

2200 words

Spike had almost three months under his belt before he clocked the guy and got fired.

The guy charged into the club on a Tuesday afternoon, found Spike giving a lesson on Court 3, and confronted him. Spike was pretty sure the guy was going to hit him if he didn't strike first, so what could you do?

Spike delivered an overhand right that caught the guy on the temple, and he landed in the left serving box and didn't move. Someone called EMS and by the time they got there the guy was sitting up but having trouble answering questions, so they took him to Bellevue and kept him overnight.

When Spike finished his evening lessons he headed over to the hospital. Number one, he wanted to make sure the guy didn't take a turn for the worse and die, and number two he wanted to straighten things out.

The guy was drinking something with a straw and watching the Winter Olympics, the volume up loud against the steady coughing of his roommate. "Who are you?" he said to Spike.

Spike said, "I'm the one you had the little thing with . . . at the squash club. Remember?"

"No . . . They said I have a concussion. I can't remember what happened."

"I punched you," Spike said.

The guy squinted and cocked his head. "Huh?"

"You accused me of fooling around with your wife . . . I'm Spike by the way."

"George," the guy said, absentmindedly accepting the handshake. "Okay, so were you?"

"Absolutely not."

"All's I know," George said, "I'm not an idiot. Must have been some reason I acted on it."

"Well when you recall or find out, please let me know," Spike said. "But nothing happened with Penny."

"So I swung on you?"

"You were about to. And you're a lot bigger than me, it wouldn't have been pretty."

"God damn it," George said. "I go to tae-kwon-do four nights a week. The sensei is always telling us to be first."

"Whatever," Spike said. "No hard feelings?"

"I guess not."

"Do you ever play? Come in any time, the lesson's on me."

The truth was Spike was intending to make the moves on Penny but he hadn't gotten around to it yet. So far, out of the 10 am round robin group, he had hooked up with Ellen, Caroline, Grace and Jeannette. The word must have been that he was screwing all the women in the round robin, which simply wasn't true.

The next morning his boss confronted him. "We're going to have to let you go," Matthew the club manager said. "Which is too bad, since you've become the most popular pro here."

"Hold on a second," Spike said. "I had no choice. Even the cop that showed up agreed."

"He did," Matthew said. "But I spoke to corporate in California and they didn't."

"So that's it, right now? Just like that?"

"Yeah. I mean do what you have to do, finish your coffee."

In the locker room one of the other pros, Hank, said, "So what now?"

Spike finished clearing out his locker, threw a lot of in the garbage and stuffed the rest into a big Dunlop shoulder bag. "Don't know," he said. "I'm worried this was my best option."

"You shouldn't have had *any* option," Hank said. "But I do have to hand it to you."

Hank had given Spike a hard time since day one for not being a very good squash player. Spike admittedly embellished his resume when he showed up at the club directly from the airport, and he used his New Zealand accent to work his way in. Hank was retired off the pro tour, and Spike supposed he had a right to be cynical.

Spike said, "Well one thing, you can take over the morning round robin. It doesn't require much. I don't think I picked up my racquet a single time."

"Nah. I ran that for a few years. It felt too much like daycare . . . I see Penny is here. Guess the incident didn't shake her up too bad."

"She is?"

"Yep, the usual look, definitely presenting herself . . . You've done her, or no?"

"I was hoping to. I sort of feel bad for the husband now. George."

"I'll let her know you send your regards," Hank said.

Spike had never been to Florida and decided now was a good time. His friend Oscar, from back home in Palmerston North, was the tennis director at a resort in Duck Key, halfway between the mainland and Key West.

Oscar picked him up in Fort Lauderdale. Spike was about as inept at tennis as he was at squash, but Oscar said don't worry about it and seemed glad to have the help.

"What you mainly do," Oscar said, "you feed them balls and say, 'That's it, Mrs. Horowitz, just a bit more follow through toward the target.' "

"What if they're any good?" Spike said.

"None of them are," Oscar said, "but if you run across one you turn them over to me, not a problem."

Oscar also told him stay out of the water -- his first day there, at a bar overlooking the pier, he'd seen a shark, which he assumed was a dolphin but found out it really was a shark.

Spike said, "That's fine, I never like swimming where you can't see the bottom."

It was nice to be outdoors, tropical fragrances in the air, and Spike got into the routine. The trade-off was the money wasn't as good as the New York squash gig had been. He also had to roll and sweep and chalk the clay courts every morning, which was a pain.

A couple weeks into it he got a call from George. "Hey, you want to grab a bite?" George said. "Need to ask you something."

"I'm actually down south right now," Spike said. "But you're concerning me the incident is still on your mind. How'd you get ahold of me?"

"That other pro at the club . . . Okay then, listen . . . something else now. My wife is screwing *somebody*, that

much I know . . . Any direction you can give me on that?"

"Jeez, I don't like hearing this," Spike said, and he didn't. "Why do you think it?"

"Who cares why, I'm telling you. One thing for sure, this time, with this fucker, I'll be first."

"All right, take it easy," Spike said. "Let me digest this, see what I come up with."

"Thanks for nothing, then," George said.

Spike ran through the rest of his afternoon lessons, preoccupied now. It was clear that he and Penny had connected and that it would have been only a matter of time. It was disturbing that she could move on so quickly.

That night he called Hank. He said, "Hey there my friend, I'll get right to it. What's the word on Penny these days?"

"I have no idea," Hank said, "but why would you care at this point?"

"Only 'cause I think you might be making it with her."

"Unbelievable . . . You're even a crazier motherfucker than I thought," Hank said, and hung up.

Spike lasted through the weekend, told Oscar he had to take care of something, and flew back to New York. On the plane he figured the best way would be to get into that round robin. He couldn't run it anymore obviously, but you could walk in off the street, pay a guest fee, and there you were.

There were about fifteen of them assembled outside Court 1 on Tuesday morning. Nine or ten women, though no sign of Penny so far. Five or six men. Could it be any of those guys? You had Jeff, Aubrey, Ricardo, Anson, Nick, and it looked like one new guy limbering up. Had Penny been banging one them all along, right under his nose, or did things heat up after he got fired?

Meanwhile, several of the players said hello to Spike, asked how everything was going, though Ellen, Caroline and Jeanette didn't say a word but Grace at least was cordial.

Noreen, a middle-aged part-time pro from England was running today's session. She paired everyone up and had them start with a long-court drill, where you

couldn't hit drop shots. Spike hit a couple balls and said to Anson, his partner, "That gal Penny still involved with this?"

"Yeah, you see her most days," Anson said. "I like playing her, she's a real nice person."

That pretty much ruled out Anson. Spike was able to get court time with Jeff, Ricardo and Nick and asked them each a few questions but you couldn't tell anything, and 11:30 rolled around and it was over.

In the little club restaurant, Caroline was standing at the counter waiting for a smoothie. "Not even an acknowledgement?" Spike said.

Caroline ignored him. Spike said, "Didn't see your friend Penny up there today."

Caroline said, "She's not my friend. Secondly, you're so transparent it's laughable."

"You know what though?" Spike said. "I like being on this end of it. As opposed to having to introduce some aspect of the game every time."

"You did that?" Caroline said. "I don't remember you ever picking up a racquet."

He gave it another try on Wednesday and this time Penny was there. Hank was right, she was presenting herself beyond what you did to play squash. The worst was the thick lipstick -- what was the purpose of that?

Today the emphasis was the forehand volley, and on the fifth rotation Spike worked his way in with Penny. Spike said, "Hold it a second . . . If I'm out of line just tell me, but everything okay in your marriage?"

Penny said, "Gosh, could we be a tad more direct, how about? . . . I feel it is, yes. As for my husband and what happened, I'm very sorry."

"Don't be silly, that's water under the bridge . . . Who are you making it with though? These days?"

Penny flinched slightly and said, "There's no one . . . But if there were, it would be entirely none of your business."

Outside on 86th Street Spike called George. "On that situation," he said, "I've got a lead. The morning round robin, someone named Ricardo."

"Fuck. You sure of your facts?"

"Yeah. I'm in town for a couple days, stopped by the club, it kind of fell into my lap. I feel you should know, I owe you that much . . . Hello?" But George was gone.

There were two staircases you could take to get to the third floor courts where they held the round robin. Thursday morning, Spike made sure he stayed on the front courts with the glass back walls, so he could keep an eye on both of them.

A few minutes before eleven George came bursting through one of the doors. This time he was wearing sweats and sneakers, not the suit and tie from when Spike clocked him, and appeared to have his hands wrapped with gauze, the way boxers do it.

George eyeballed the situation and found Noreen, who was on the elevated metal catwalk holding a clipboard and offering encouragement and pointers to the players below.

George asked Noreen if she could direct him to Ricardo please, and Spike could see Noreen angling her head toward Court 9, in the corner, not giving it a thought.

Soon there was shouting, mostly from George though Spike thought he heard Ricardo shout something back, and a woman's voice got loud as well. The small back door to Court 9 was open and Spike saw George stalking Ricardo, circling, trying to pin him into the front left corner. Ellen, who'd been Ricardo's partner, was in between them, pleading with George to back off, her voice cracking.

Penny was rushing in now from the right, coming off of Court 4. Spike calmly walked into the court and using a combination high-forehand, low-overhead motion cracked George all his might in the back of the head with the racquet.

George spent another night in Bellevue and this time they banned Spike from the club, period. He went back to south Florida and tried it again with the tennis. Soon the weather got too hot and humid and the lessons thinned out and Oscar went up north to teach in Connecticut for the summer. Spike was down to one or two students a day, mostly in the late evening.

Around the fourth of July, Hank called. "I hate to get involved," he said. "But as a favor to her, Penny would like your number. Which I'm telling you before I hand it over."

"She does?"

"Yep, God knows why, she's asked me a bunch of times. I'm tired of telling her you've gone missing."

"What's she want, do you think? She seem angry?"

"No, more like frustrated. What can I say, she wants to get in touch with you."

Spike said, "Okay, good then, thanks for letting me know . . . And tell her you tried, but the number you thought you had, it didn't work."