

# Strokes

**1650 words**

Being on hand for someone's evening squash match was the last thing Bart felt like doing, considering he'd killed a guy that morning.

But, he prided himself on keeping his word--plus he'd been hoping for a while to get somewhere with Melinda--so here you were.

Bart had never seen squash before. It was obviously a hybrid tennis deal, and there were plenty of those, but this was pretty intense. Melinda and her opponent were in close quarters, both wearing light-colored shorts and tank tops and both sweating quite a bit, and the view was admittedly interesting as the players turned and chased balls into the back corners where the spectators were watching through a glass wall.

What impressed you though was Melinda's fighting spirit. It was clear she wasn't as skilled as the opponent, her strokes were wilder and her shots weren't as accurate, but dang, she fought hard. Plus she got mad.

Both at herself and the opponent too, and once even at the referee, who made a call she didn't like.

The other woman won all three games, so that was *match*, and there was a cursory handshake and Melinda came out of the court fast and grabbed her racquet bag and was making a bee-line for the locker room but saw Bart and stopped and said hi.

“Hey, I appreciate you coming,” she said. “You caught me off guard actually, I'd forgotten that I'd invited you.”

It sounded a bit obnoxious, putting it that way, but Bart could see it. There'd been a get-together at her place, a bunch of people he didn't know, and it was hard to gauge if she was involved with any of them. As he was leaving Bart tried to pin her down for a date, and none of his suggestions worked but she finally said you can come and watch me play this match and we can grab a bite after.

So he made a mental note of it, a week from Monday, 8pm at the Bay Club off the Embarcadero, the guy that he had to drown not on the radar yet--or if he

was, nothing to indicate it would advance to the next level.

That part, Bart tried to not think about tonight. You hoped the guy would float outside the Golden Gate--meaning due west--and keep going, not get reversed back in by the tides . . . but it was something you couldn't control, and no point torturing yourself with multiple scenarios.

He said, "Gee, sorry you lost, but it was entertaining. Your competitor side, it really showed."

Melinda said, "Well as I expressed, I'm glad you could make it."

Bart was thinking more, she's *not* glad about that, because look at her, she's red as a beet and furious that she lost. And now she has to make small talk.

He said, "You revealed a little temper out there too. Never the worst thing, but an interesting component of you."

"Bart, with all due respect, I don't need to hear that."

"Whoa . . . I meant it as a positive, mostly. Also--now I don't know *anything* about the sport--but as a

layman, I picked up a few things, might help your game.”

“*Okay* now,” she said. “I take lessons, I know what I’m doing. You can leave it alone please.”

“Your *ball*,” he said, “it was landing too short. Right in her wheelhouse . . . What you *want*, I think, is to hit it higher on the front wall. Push her to the back . . . That’s what she was doing to *you*.”

“Dammit Bart!” she said, and she spun and disappeared into the locker room. A man and a woman came over, who Bart recognized from the party at Melinda’s. The guy said, “She doing okay? Mel?”

“Not sure,” Bart said. “I think I set her off, I was giving her some advice from the cheap seats--for next time--which I shouldn’t have been doing.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” the guy said. “We love her, but she’s a terrible loser. Takes her an hour, then she’s normally fine.”

Bart was putting together the *we*, and after a few more observations--meaning some people he recognized from the party on other courts now too--it was clear this was a group thing, they called it a league match,

Melinda's team against another one . . . and the team concept extended to the going out for a bite part, at the diner around the corner.

They were all nice enough, 4 guys and 2 gals plus her, so what could you do, and they wanted to hear Bart's impression of their 'little sport', and he said well, *one* thing for sure, they all looked like athletes out there. Someone said he was full of shit but they'll take it, and even Melinda laughed and the guy was right about her snapping out of it after an hour.

When they finished and were outside, Melinda asked Bart if he wanted to come over for some coffee, but it felt a bit forced, and he suggested an after dinner drink at a place he liked on Chestnut Street, McLanahan's. She said that could be fun--except her match (and her day) were catching up to her--but thanks.

So that was that, the little peck on the cheek, and goodnight. Bart headed over to McLanahan's anyway. The last thing he needed tonight was to fall asleep early--or at all--the dreams looming unpredictable.

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“Yo, what’s shakin’ my brother?” Shep, the bartender said.

“I’m good,” Bart said. “All things considered.”

“Ooh. Now what does *that* mean?”

Bart said, “Have you ever, like, got caught up in a woman, where when you strip it all away--she doesn’t give you the time of day?”

“Jerking your chain,” Shep said.

“I guess, yeah.”

“No,” Shep said, “I haven’t.” He went to wait on a kid in a Duke sweatshirt, and the news was on, and *Holy Toledo* there was a reporter talking, looking serious, standing in front of the Cliff House, right there at the start of Ocean Beach.

Bart froze for a moment and then a weather map was superimposed over the reporter’s shoulder, and thankfully that’s all it was, a report on the big surf that was coming our way later this week, and to watch out for the sleeper waves. Bart didn’t know if this was good or bad—as to *his* situation—but at least you didn’t have a development.

“You ever been analyzed?” Shep said when he was back.

“You mean . . . *psycho*-job-wise? That way?”

“Sure, why not.”

“No.”

“Friend of mine--and mind you he’s *still* wrestling with this crap--dude’s pushing 50 and continues chasing women that remind him of his mother.”

“That can happen, I’ve read about it . . . You’re saying he could use some help.”

“No, he’s had years of therapy. First week, it sounded like, they got to the bottom of it, the replacement mother part . . . Downhill from there.”

“So he knows *why* he’s doing it, but it doesn’t matter,” Bart said, wondering, was *he* screwed up like that too?

“The crazy part, this guy hates his mother . . . Or hated her, she kicked the bucket, finally.”

Shep refreshed Bart’s drink. “Tough to figure,” Bart said. “Then you think, did the guy’s dad dislike the mom, and the kid is imitating the *dad*?”

“That’s not bad,” Shep said, “a different angle.”

Bart said, “Remember the last gal I brought in here?”

“Sure, how could you not. She radiated old-fashioned sultry, you don’t mind my saying.”

Bart had to admit . . . there *was* something about her lower lip and her pose, not to mention everything a size too tight. Elaine.

“Fine,” he said. He could feel the booze kicking in. Loosening up. “Her, I spend an evening there, you *know*, and it’s fine . . . she has a flat in the Haight. But I don’t stay the night, it didn’t seem necessary at that point.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. So it turns out I have to take care of something, 4 or 5 hours later.”

“Hmm. Off-hours, you’re saying.”

“More or less. Anyways I’m on 19th Avenue, ballpark of her neighborhood, so I figure I’ll swing by again, what the hay.”

“Wake her up, you mean?”

“I wasn’t sure. But there’s another car, her side of the driveway, behind her Mini Cooper.”



“So?”

“That’s what I’m thinking too . . . But I ring the bell anyway.”

“Jesus. She answer?”

“She did, and she read me the riot act, told me she was putting up a girlfriend who’d had a relationship issue, and how dare I . . . meanwhile I’m hearing some guy cough in the other room.”

“Yeah, well,” Shep said.

“What are you gonna do,” Bart said.

“What was *your* deal though? Needing to take care of something at that hour.”

“Oh. I had to send something I neglected, priority mail to Florida, they have a post office with a 24-hour self-serve lobby, the one on Taraval.”

“Unh huh . . . And it couldn’t wait until the morning.”

“Not really, no.” Shep knew this was BS of course, but you’re not going to volunteer that it seemed prudent to put something in Lake Merced at that hour. So you wouldn’t be connected to an incident that may have taken place in Contra Costa County.

Shep gave him a long look, and it wasn't the first time.

There were circumstances. It would be unfair to lay any of that on his plate, even if you could.

The thing now, might as well stay put until closing time. Then, don't go to sleep. Which could involve some driving around. Mornings were always good, you started fresh.