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At seven o'clock of a Caribbean morning, on the island of Antigua, one Peregrine Makepiece, otherwise known as Perry, an all-round amateur athlete of distinction and until recently tutor in English literature at a distinguished Oxford college, played three sets of tennis against a muscular, stiff-backed, bald, brown-eyed Russian man of dignified bearing in his middle fifties called Dima. How this match came about was quickly the subject of intense examination by British agents professionally disposed against the workings of chance. Yet the events leading up to it were on Perry's side blameless.

The dawning of his thirtieth birthday three months previously had triggered a life-change in him that had been building up for a year or more without his being aware of it. Seated head in hands at eight o'clock in the morning in his modest Oxford rooms, after a seven-mile run that had done nothing to ease his sense of calamity, he had searched his soul to know just what the first third of his natural life had achieved, apart from providing him with an excuse for not engaging in the world beyond the city's dreaming spires.

Why?

To any outward eye, his was the ultimate academic success story. The State-educated son of secondary-school teachers

arrives in Oxford from London University laden with academic honours and takes up a three-year post awarded him by an ancient, rich, achievement-driven college. His first name, traditionally the property of the English upper classes, derives from a rabble-rousing Methodist prelate of the nineteenth century named Arthur Peregrine of Huddersfield.

In the term-time, when he isn't teaching, he distinguishes himself as a cross-country runner and sportsman. On his spare evenings he helps out in a local youth club. In vacations he conquers difficult peaks and Most Serious climbs. Yet when his college offers him a permanent Fellowship – or to his present soured way of thinking, imprisonment for life – he balks.

Again: why?

Last term he had delivered a series of lectures on George Orwell under the title 'A Stifled Britain?' and his rhetoric had alarmed him. Would Orwell have believed it possible that the same overfed voices which had haunted him in the 1930s, the same crippling incompetence, addiction to foreign wars and assumptions of entitlement, were happily in place in 2009?

Receiving no response from the blank student faces staring up at him, he had supplied it for himself: *no*, Orwell would emphatically *not* have believed it. Or if he had, he would have taken to the streets. He would have smashed some serious glass.

It was a topic he had thrashed out mercilessly with Gail, his long-standing girlfriend, as they lay in her bed after a birthday supper at the flat in Primrose Hill that she had part-inherited from her otherwise penniless father.

'I don't like dons and I don't like being one myself. I don't like academia and if I never have to wear a bloody gown again, I'll feel a free man,' he had ranted at the gold-brown hair clustered comfortably on his shoulder.

And receiving no reply beyond a sympathetic purr:

‘Hammering on about Byron, Keats and Wordsworth to a bunch of bored undergraduates whose highest ambition is to get a degree, get laid, and get rich? Done it. Been there. Fuck it.’

And raising the odds:

‘About the only thing that would *really* keep me in this country is a bloody revolution.’

And Gail, a sparky young barrister on the rise, blessed with looks and a quick tongue – sometimes a little too quick for her own comfort as well as Perry’s – assured him that no revolution would be complete without him.

Both were *de facto* orphans. If Perry’s late parents had been the soul of high-minded Christian socialist abstinence, Gail’s were the other thing. Her father, a sweetly useless actor, had died prematurely of alcohol, sixty cigarettes a day and a misplaced passion for his wayward wife. Her mother, an actress but less sweet, had vanished from the family home when Gail was thirteen, and was reputed to be living the simple life on the Costa Brava with a second cameraman.

Perry’s initial reaction to his life-decision to shake the dust of academia from his feet – irrevocable, like all Perry’s life-decisions – was to return to his grass roots. The only son of Dora and Alfred would put himself where their convictions had been. He would begin his teaching career all over again at the point where they had been forced to abandon theirs.

He would stop playing the intellectual high-flyer, sign up for an honest-to-God teacher-training course and, in their image, qualify as a secondary-school teacher in one of his country’s most deprived areas.

He would teach set subjects, and any sport they cared to

throw at him, to children who needed him as a lifeline to self-fulfilment rather than as a ticket to middle-class prosperity.

But Gail was not as alarmed by this prospect as perhaps he intended her to be. For all his determination to be at the *hard centre of life*, there remained other unreconciled versions of him, and Gail was on familiar terms with most of them:

Yes, there was Perry the self-punishing student at London University where they had first met, who in the mould of T. E. Lawrence had taken his bicycle to France in the vacations and ridden it until he keeled over with exhaustion.

And yes, there was Perry the alpine adventurer, the Perry who could run no race and play no game, from seven-a-side rugby to pass the parcel with her nephews and nieces at Christmas time, without a compulsive need to win.

But there was also Perry the closet sybarite who treated himself to unpredictable bursts of luxury before hurrying back to his garret. And this was the Perry who stood on the best tennis court at the best recession-hit resort in Antigua on that early May morning before the sun got too high to play, with the Russian Dima one side of the net and Perry the other, and Gail wearing a swimsuit and a broad-brimmed floppy hat and a silky cover-up that covered very little, sitting amid an unlikely assembly of dead-eyed spectators, some dressed in black, who appeared to have sworn a collective oath not to smile, not to speak, and not to express any interest in the match they were being compelled to watch.

It was a lucky chance, in Gail's opinion, that the Caribbean adventure had been planned in advance of Perry's impulsive life-decision. Its inception dated back to darkest November when his father had fallen victim to the same cancer that had carried off his mother two years earlier, leaving Perry in a state

of modest affluence. Not holding with inherited wealth, and being in two minds as to whether he should give all he had to the poor, Perry dithered. But after a campaign of attrition mounted by Gail, they had settled for a once-in-a-lifetime bargain tennis holiday in the sun.

And no holiday could have been better planned, as it turned out, for by the time they had embarked on it, even bigger decisions were staring them in the face:

What should Perry do with his life, and should they do it together?

Should Gail give up the Bar and step blindly into the azure yonder with him, or should she continue to pursue her meteoric career in London?

Or might it be time to admit that her career was no more meteoric than most young barristers' careers, and should she therefore get herself pregnant, which was what Perry was forever urging her to do?

And if Gail, either out of impishness or self-defence, had a habit of turning large questions into little ones, there remained no doubt that the two of them were separately and together at life's crossroads with some pretty heavy thinking to do, and that a holiday in Antigua looked like providing the ideal setting in which to do it.

Their flight was delayed, with the result that they didn't check into their hotel till after midnight. Ambrose, the resort's ubiquitous major-domo, showed them to their cabin. They rose late and by the time they had breakfasted on their balcony the sun was too hot for tennis. They swam on a three-quarters-empty beach, had a solitary lunch by the pool, made languorous love in the afternoon, and at six in the evening presented themselves at the pro's shop, rested, happy, and eager for a game.

Seen from a distance, the resort was no more than a cluster of white cottages scattered along a mile-wide horseshoe of proverbial talcum-powder sand. Two promontories of rock strewn with scrub forest marked its extremities. Between them ran a coral reef and a line of fluorescent buoys to ward off nosy motor yachts. And on hidden terraces wrested from the hillside lay the resort's championship-standard tennis courts. Meagre stone steps wound between flowering shrubs to the front door of the pro's shop. Once through it, you entered tennis heaven, which was why Perry and Gail had chosen the place.

There were five courts and one centre court. Competition balls were kept in green refrigerators. Competition silver cups in glass cases bore the names of champions of yesteryear and Mark, the overweight Australian pro, was one of them.

'So what sort of level are we looking at here, if I may inquire?' he asked with heavy gentility, taking in without comment the quality of Perry's battle-scarred racquets, his thick white socks and worn but serviceable tennis shoes, and Gail's neckline.

For two people past their first youth but still in the bloom of life, Perry and Gail made a strikingly attractive pair. Nature had provided Gail with long, shapely legs and arms, high, small breasts, a lissom body, English skin, fine gold hair and a smile to light the gloomiest corners of life. Perry had a different sort of Englishness, being lank and at first sight dislocated, with a long neck and prominent Adam's apple. His stride was ungainly, he seemed to topple and his ears protruded. At his State school he had been awarded the nickname of Giraffe, until those unwise enough to use it learned their lesson. But with manhood he had acquired – unconsciously, which only made it more impressive – a precarious but undoubted grace.

He had a mop of brown curls, a wide, freckled forehead, and large, bespectacled eyes that gave out an air of angelic perplexity.

Not trusting Perry to blow his own trumpet, and protective of him as always, Gail took the pro's question upon herself.

'Perry plays qualifiers for Queen's and he got into the main draw once too, didn't you? You actually made it to the Masters. And that was after breaking his leg skiing and not playing for six months,' she added proudly.

'And you, madam, if I may make so bold?' Mark the obsequious pro inquired, with a little more spin on the 'madam' than Gail cared for.

'I'm his rabbit,' she replied coolly, to which Perry said, 'Sheer bollocks,' and the Australian sucked his teeth, shook his heavy head in disbelief and thumbed the messy pages of his ledger.

'Well, I've got one pair here might do you good people. They're a sight too classy for my other guests, I'll tell you that right now. Not that I've a vast selection of humanity to choose from, frankly. Maybe you four should give each other a whirl.'

Their opponents turned out to be an Indian honeymoon couple from Mumbai. The centre court was taken, but court 1 was free. Soon a handful of passers-by and players from other courts had drifted over to watch the four of them warm up: fluid strokes from the baseline casually returned, passing shots that nobody ran for, the unanswered smash from the net. Perry and Gail won the toss, Perry gave first serve to Gail who twice double-faulted and they lost the game. The Indian bride followed her. Play remained sedate.

It wasn't till Perry began serving that the quality of his play became apparent. His first serve had height and power, and

when it went in, there wasn't much anyone could do about it. He served four in a row. The crowd grew, the players were young and good-looking, the ball boys discovered new heights of energy. Towards the end of the first set, Mark the pro casually turned out to take a look, stayed for three games, then with a thoughtful frown returned to his shop.

After a long second set, the score was one set each. The third and final set reached 4-3, with Perry and Gail having the edge. But if Gail was inclined to hold back, Perry was by now in full cry, and the match ended without the Indian couple winning another game.

The crowd drifted away. The four lingered to exchange compliments, fix a return and maybe catch a drink in the bar this evening? You bet. The Indians departed, leaving Perry and Gail to gather up their spare racquets and pullovers.

As they did so, the Australian pro returned to the court bringing with him a muscular, erect, huge-chested, completely bald man wearing a diamond-encrusted gold Rolex wristwatch and grey tracksuit bottoms kept up by a drawstring tied in a bow at his midriff.

Why Perry should have spotted the bow at his midriff first and the rest of the man afterwards is easily explained. He was in the act of changing his elderly but comfortable tennis shoes for a pair of beach shoes with rope soles, and when he heard his name called he was still bent double. Therefore he lifted his long head slowly, the way tall, angular men do, and registered first a pair of leather espadrilles on small, almost feminine feet set piratically apart, then a couple of stocky, tracksuited calves in grey; and, coming up, the drawstring bow that kept the trousers aloft, double-tied as such a bow should be, given its considerable area of responsibility.

And above the bow-line, a belly of finest crimson cotton blouse encasing a massive torso that seemed not to know its stomach from its chest, and rising to an Eastern-style collar that if fastened would have made a cut-down version of a clerical dog-collar, except that there was no way it could have accommodated the muscular neck inside it.

And above the collar, tipped to one side in appeal, eyebrows raised in invitation, the creaseless face of a fifty-something man with soulful brown eyes beaming a dolphin smile at him. The absence of creases did not suggest inexperience, rather the opposite. It was a face that to Perry the outdoor adventurer seemed cast for life: the face, he told Gail much later, of a formed man, another definition that he aspired to himself, but for all his manly striving did not feel he had yet attained.

‘Perry, allow me to present my good friend and patron, Mr *Dima* from Russia,’ said Mark, injecting a ring of ceremony into his unctuous voice. ‘Dima thought you played a pretty nifty match out there, am I right, sir? As a fine connoisseur of the game of tennis, he’s been watching you highly appreciatively, I think I may say, Dima.’

‘Wanna game?’ Dima inquired, without taking his brown, apologetic gaze off Perry, who by now was hovering awkwardly at his full height.

‘Hi,’ said Perry, a bit breathlessly, and shoved out a sweated hand. Dima’s was the hand of an artisan turned to fat, tattooed with a small star or asterisk on the second knuckle of the thumb. ‘And this is Gail Perkins, my partner in crime,’ he added, feeling a need to slow the pace a bit.

But before Dima could respond, Mark had let out a snort of sycophantic protest. ‘*Crime*, Perry?’ he objected. ‘Don’t you believe this man, Gail! You did a *dandy* job out there, and that’s

straight. A couple of those backhand passing shots were up there with the gods, right, Dima? You said so yourself. We were watching from the shop. Closed circuit.'

'Mark says you play Queen's,' Dima said, the dolphin smile still directed at Perry, the voice thick and deep and guttural, and vaguely American.

'Well, that was a few years back now,' said Perry modestly, still buying time.

'Dima recently acquired Three Chimneys, right, Dima?' Mark said, as if this news somehow made the proposition of a game more compelling. 'Finest location this side of the island, right, Dima? Got great plans for it, we hear. And you two are in Captain Cook, I believe, one of the best cabins in the resort, in my opinion.'

They were.

'Well, there you go. You're neighbours, right, Dima? Three Chimneys is perched slap on the tip of the peninsula across the bay from you. The last major undeveloped property on the island but Dima's going to put that right, correct, sir? There's talk of a share issue with preference given to the inhabitants, which strikes me as a pretty decent idea. Meanwhile, you're indulging in a bit of rough-and-ready camping, I hear. Hosting a few like-minded friends and family. I admire that. We all do. For a person of your means, we call that true grit.'

'Wanna game?'

'Doubles?' Perry asked, extricating himself from the intensity of Dima's stare in order to peer dubiously at Gail.

But Mark, having achieved his bridgehead, pressed home his advantage:

'Thank you, Perry, no doubles for Dima, I'm afraid,' he interjected smartly. 'Our friend here plays singles only, correct, sir? You're a self-reliant man. You like to be responsible

for your own errors, you told me once. Those were your very words to me not so long ago, and I've taken them to heart.'

Seeing that Perry was by now torn but also tempted, Gail rallied to his rescue:

'Don't worry about me, Perry. If you want to play a singles, go ahead, I'll be fine.'

'Perry, I do not believe you should be reluctant to take this gentleman on,' Mark insisted, ramming his case home. 'If I was a betting man, I'd be pushed which of you to favour, and that's a living fact.'

Was that a *limp* as Dima walked away? That slight dragging of the left foot? Or was it just the strain of carting that huge upper body around all day?

Was it here too that Perry first became aware of the two white men loitering at the gateway to the court with nothing to do? One with his hands loosely linked behind his back, the other with his arms folded across his chest? Both wearing trainers? The one blond and baby-faced, the other dark-haired and languid?

If so, then only subconsciously, he grudgingly maintained, to the man who called himself Luke, and the woman who called herself Yvonne, ten days later when the four of them were sitting at an oval dining table in the basement of a pretty terrace house in Bloomsbury.

They had been driven there in a black cab from Gail's flat in Primrose Hill by a large, genial man in a beret and an earring who said his name was Ollie. Luke had opened the door to them, Yvonne stood waiting behind Luke. In a thickly carpeted hall that smelled of fresh paint, Perry and Gail had their hands shaken, were courteously thanked by Luke for coming, and led downstairs to this converted basement with its table,

six chairs and a kitchenette. Frosted windows, shaped in a half-moon and set high in the exterior wall, flickered to the shadowy feet of passing pedestrians on the pavement overhead.

They were next deprived of their mobiles and invited to sign a declaration under the Official Secrets Act. Gail the lawyer read the text and was outraged. 'Over my dead body,' she exclaimed, whereas Perry, with a mumbled 'what's the difference?', signed it impatiently away. After making a couple of deletions and inking in wording of her own, Gail signed under protest. The lighting in the basement consisted of a single wan lamp hanging over the table. The brick walls exuded a faint scent of old port wine.

Luke was courtly, clean-shaven, mid-forties and to Gail's eye too small. Male spies, she told herself with a false jocular-ity brought on by nervousness, should come a size larger. With his upright posture, sharp grey suit and little horns of greying hair flicked up above the ears, he reminded her more of a gentleman jockey on his best behaviour.

Yvonne on the other hand could not have been much older than Gail. She was prissy in Gail's initial perception of her, but in a blue-stocking sort of way beautiful. With her boring business suit, bobbed dark hair and no make-up, she looked older than she needed and, for a female spy, again in Gail's determinedly frivolous judgement, too earnest by half.

'So you didn't actually recognize them as *bodyguards*,' Luke suggested, his trim head eagerly switching between the two of them across the table. 'You didn't say to each other, when you were alone, for instance: "Hello, that was a bit odd, this fellow Dima, whoever he is, seems to have got himself some close protection," as it were?'

Is that really how Perry and I talk to each other? Gail thought. I didn't know.

'I saw the men, obviously,' Perry conceded. 'But if you're asking, did I make anything of them, the answer's no. Probably two fellows looking for a game, I thought, if I thought anything' – and plucking earnestly at his brow with his long fingers – 'I mean you don't just think *bodyguards* straight off, do you? Well, *you* people may. That's the world you live in, I assume. But if you're an ordinary citizen, it doesn't cross your mind.'

'So how about you, Gail?' Luke inquired with brisk solicitude. 'You're in and out of the law courts all day. You see the wicked world in its awful glory. Did *you* have your suspicions about them?'

'If I was aware of them at all, I probably thought they were a couple of blokes giving me the eye, so I ignored them,' Gail replied.

But this didn't do at all for Yvonne, the teacher's pet. 'But that *evening*, Gail, mulling over the day' – was she Scottish? Could well be, thought Gail, who prided herself on her mynah bird's ear for voices – 'did you *really* not make anything of two spare men hovering in attendance?'

'It was our first proper night in the hotel,' said Gail in a surge of nervous exasperation. 'Perry had booked us Candlelight Dinner on the Captain's Deck, OK? We had stars and a full moon and mating bullfrogs in full cry and a moonpath that ran practically to our table. Do you honestly suppose we spent the evening gazing into one another's eyes and talking about Dima's minders? I mean, give us a break' – and fearing she had sounded ruder than she intended – 'all right, *briefly*, we *did* talk about Dima. He's one of those people who stay on the retina. One minute he was our first Russian oligarch, the next Perry was flagellating himself for agreeing to play a singles with him and wanting to phone the pro and say the game

was off. I told him I'd danced with men like Dima and they had the most amazing technique. That shut you up, didn't it, Perry, dear?'

Separated from each other by a gap as wide as the Atlantic Ocean they had recently crossed, yet thankful to be unburdening themselves before two professionally inquisitive listeners, Perry and Gail resumed their story.

Quarter to seven next morning. Mark was standing waiting for them at the top of the stone steps, clad in his best whites and clasping two cans of refrigerated tennis balls and a paper cup of coffee.

'I was dead afraid you guys would oversleep,' he said excitedly. 'Listen, we're fine, no bother. Gail, how are you today? Very peachy, if I may say so. After you, Perry, sir. My pleasure. What a day, eh? What a day.'

Perry led the way up the second flight to where the path turned left. As he turned with it he came face to face with the same two men in bomber jackets who had been loitering the previous evening. They were posted either side of the flowered archway that led like a bridal walk to the door of the centre court, which was a world to itself, enclosed on four sides by canvas screens and twenty-foot-high hedges of hibiscus.

Seeing the three of them approach, the fair-haired man with the baby face took a half-pace forward and with a mirthless smile opened out his hands in the classic gesture of one man about to frisk another. Puzzled, Perry came to a halt at his full height, not yet within frisking distance but a good six feet short, with Gail beside him. As the man took another step forward, Perry took one back, taking Gail with him and exclaiming, 'What the hell's all this?' – effectively to Mark, since neither the baby face nor his darker-haired colleague

showed any sign of having heard, let alone understood, his question.

‘Security, Perry,’ Mark explained, pressing past Gail to murmur reassuringly into Perry’s ear. ‘Routine.’

Perry remained where he stood, craning his neck forward and sideways while he digested this advice.

‘Whose security exactly? I don’t get it. Do you?’ – to Gail.

‘Me neither,’ she agreed.

‘Dima’s security, Perry. Whose do you think? He’s a high-roller. Big-time international. These boys are just obeying orders.’

‘Your orders, Mark?’ – turning and peering down on him accusingly through his spectacles.

‘Dima’s orders, not mine, Perry, don’t be stupid. They’re Dima’s boys. Go with him everywhere.’

Perry returned his attention to the blond bodyguard. ‘Do you gents speak English, by any chance?’ he asked. And when the baby face refused to alter in any way, except to harden: ‘He appears to speak no English. Or hear it, apparently.’

‘For Christ’s sakes, Perry,’ Mark pleaded, his beery complexion turning a darker shade of crimson. ‘One little look in your bag, it’s over. It’s nothing personal. Routine, like I said. Same as any airport.’

Perry again applied to Gail: ‘Do you have a view on this?’

‘I certainly do.’

Perry tilted his head the other way. ‘I need to get this absolutely right, you see, Mark,’ he explained, asserting his pedagogic authority. ‘My proposed tennis partner *Dima* wishes to make sure I’m not going to throw a bomb at him. Is that what these men are telling me?’

‘It’s a dangerous world out there, Perry. Perhaps you haven’t heard about that, but the rest of us have, and we endeavour to

live with it. With all due respect, I would strongly advise you to go with the flow.'

'Alternatively, I might be about to gun him down with my Kalashnikov,' Perry went on, raising his tennis bag an inch to indicate where he kept the weapon; at which the second man stepped out of the shadow of the bushes and positioned himself beside the first, but there was still not a legible facial expression between the two of them.

'You're making a mountain out of a molehill, if you don't mind my saying so, Mr Makepiece,' Mark protested, his hard-learned courtesy beginning to give way under the strain. 'There's a great game of tennis waiting in there. These boys are doing their duty, and they're doing it very politely and professionally in my judgement. Frankly I do not understand your problem, sir.'

'Ah. *Problem*,' Perry mused, picking on the word as a useful starting point for a group discussion with his students. 'Then allow me to explain my *problem*. Actually, come to think of it I have several problems. My first problem is, nobody looks inside my tennis bag without my permission, and in this case I do not grant my permission. And nobody looks inside this lady's either. Similar rules apply' – indicating Gail.

'Rigorously,' Gail confirmed.

'Second problem. If your friend Dima thinks I'm going to assassinate him, why does he ask me to play tennis with him?' Having allowed ample time for an answer and received none, beyond a voluble sucking of the teeth, he proceeded. 'And my third problem is, the proposal as it stands is one-sided. Have I asked to look inside Dima's bag? I have not. Neither do I wish to. Perhaps you'd explain that to him when you give him my apologies. Gail. What do you say we dig into that great big breakfast buffet we've paid for?'

‘Good idea,’ Gail agreed heartily. ‘I didn’t know I was so peckish.’

They turned and, ignoring the pro’s entreaties, were heading back down the steps when the gate to the court flew open and Dima’s bass voice drew them to a halt.

‘Don’t run away, Mr Perry Makepiece. You wanna blow my brains out, use a goddam tennis racquet.’

‘So how about his age, Gail, would you say?’ Yvonne the blue-stocking asked, making a prim note on the pad before her.

‘Baby Face? Twenty-five max,’ she replied, once again wishing she could find a mid-point in herself between flippancy and funk.

‘Perry? How old?’

‘Thirty.’

‘Height?’

‘Below average.’

If you’re six foot two, Perry, darling, we’re *all* below average, thought Gail.

‘Five ten,’ she said.

And his blond hair cut very short, they both agreed.

‘And he wore a gold link bracelet,’ she remembered, startling herself. ‘I once had a client who wore one just like it. If he got in a tight corner, he was going to break up the links and buy his way out with them, one by one.’

With sensibly trimmed, unvarnished fingernails, Yvonne is sliding a wad of press photographs at them across the oval table. In the foreground, half a dozen burly young men in Armani-type suits are congratulating a victorious racehorse, champagne glasses aloft for the camera. In the background, advertisers’ hoardings in Cyrillic and English. And far left, arms

John le Carré

folded across his chest, the baby-faced bodyguard with his nearly shaven blond head. Unlike his three companions, he wears no dark glasses. But on his left wrist he wears a bracelet of gold links.

Perry looks a little smug. Gail feels a little sick.

It was unclear to Gail why she was doing the lion's share of the talking. While she spoke, she listened to her voice rattling back at her from the brick walls of the basement room, the way she did in the divorce courts where she currently had her professional being: now I'm doing righteous indignation, now I'm doing scathingly incredulous, now I sound like my absent bloody mother after the second gin and tonic.

And tonight, for all her best efforts to conceal it, she occasionally caught herself out in an unscripted quaver of fear. If her audience across the table couldn't hear it, she could. And if she wasn't mistaken, so could Perry beside her, because now and then his head would tilt towards her for no reason except to peer at her with anxious tenderness despite the three-thousand-mile gulf between them. And now and then he would go so far as to give her hand a cursory squeeze under the table before taking up the tale himself in the mistaken but pardonable belief that he was giving her feelings a rest, whereas all her feelings did was go underground, regroup, and come out fighting even harder the moment they got a chance.

If Perry and Gail didn't actually saunter into the centre court, they agreed, they took their time. There was the stroll down the flowered walkway with the bodyguards acting as guards of

honour and Gail holding on to the brim of her broad sunhat and making her flimsy skirts swirl:

'I flounced around a bit,' she admitted.

'And *how*,' Perry agreed, to contained smiles from across the table.

There was shuffle at the entrance to the court when Perry appeared to have second thoughts, until it turned out that he was stepping back to let Gail go ahead of him, which she did with enough ladylike deliberation to suggest that, while the planned offence might not have taken place, neither had it gone away. And after Perry sloped Mark.

Dima stood centre court facing them, arms stretched wide in welcome. He was wearing a fluffy blue crew-neck top with full-length sleeves, and long black shorts that reached below his knees. A sunshade like a green beak stuck out from his bald head, which was already glistening in the early sun. Perry said he wondered whether Dima had oiled it. To complement his jewelled Rolex, a gold trinket chain of vaguely mystical connotation adorned his huge neck: another glint, another distraction.

But Dima, to Gail's surprise, was not, at the moment of her entry, the main event, she said. Arranged on the spectators' stand behind him was a mixed – and to her eye *weird* – assembly of children and adults.

'Like a bunch of gloomy waxworks,' she protested. 'It wasn't just their overdressed presence at the ungodly hour of seven in the morning. It was their total silence and their sullessness. I took a seat on the empty bottom row and thought, Christ, what is this? A people's tribunal, or a church parade, or *what*?'

Even the children seemed estranged from each other. They caught her eye at once. Children did. She counted four of them.

‘Two mopy-looking little girls of around five and seven in dark frocks and sunhats squeezed together beside a buxom black woman who was apparently some sort of minder,’ she said, determined not to let her feelings run ahead of her before time. ‘And two flaxen-haired teenaged boys in freckles and tennis gear. And all looking so down in the mouth you’d think they’d been kicked out of bed and dragged there as a punishment.’

As to the adults, they were just so *alien*, so oversized and so *other*, that they could have stepped out of a Charles Addams cartoon, she went on. And it wasn’t only their town clothes or 1970s hairstyles. Or the fact that the women despite the heat were dressed for darkest winter. It was their shared gloom.

‘Why’s nobody talking?’ she whispered to Mark, who had materialized uninvited in the seat beside her.

Mark shrugged. ‘Russian.’

‘But Russians talk all the time!’

Not these Russians, Mark said. Most of them had flown in over the last few days and still had to get used to being in the Caribbean.

‘Something’s happened up there,’ he said, nodding across the bay. ‘According to the buzz, they’ve got some big family powwow going on, not all of it friendly. Don’t know what they do for their personal hygiene. Half the water system’s shot.’

She picked out two fat men, one wearing a brown Hom-burg hat who was murmuring into a mobile, the other a tartan tam-o’-shanter with a red bobble on the top.

‘Dima’s cousins,’ said Mark. ‘Everybody’s somebody’s cousin round here. *Perm* they come from.’

‘*Perm*?’

‘*Perm*, Russia. Not the hairdo, darling. The town.’

Go up a level and there were the flaxen-haired boys, chewing gum as if they hated it. Dima’s sons, twins, said Mark. And

yes, now that Gail looked at them again, she saw a likeness: burly chests, straight backs, and droopy brown bedroom eyes that were already turning covetously towards her.

She took a quick, silent breath and released it. She was approaching what in legal discourse would have been her golden-bullet question, the one that was supposed to reduce the witness to instant rubble. So was she now going to reduce herself to rubble? But when she resumed speaking, she was gratified to hear no quaver in the voice coming back to her from the brick wall, no faltering or other telltale variation:

‘And sitting demurely apart from everybody – *demonstratively* apart, one would almost have thought – there was this really rather stunning girl of fifteen or sixteen, with jet-black hair down to her shoulders and a school blouse and a navy blue school skirt over her knees, and she didn’t seem to belong to *anyone*. So I asked Mark who she was. Naturally.’

Very naturally, she decided with relief, having listened to herself. Not a raised eyebrow round the table. Bravo, Gail.

“‘Her name is Natasha,” Mark informed me. “A flower waiting to be plucked,” if I’d pardon his French. “Dima’s daughter but not Tamara’s. Apple of her father’s eye.””

And what was the beautiful Natasha, daughter to Dima but not Tamara, doing at seven in the morning when she was supposed to be watching her father playing tennis? Gail asked her audience. Reading a leatherbound tome that she clutched like a shield of virtue on her lap.

‘But absolutely drop-dead gorgeous,’ Gail insisted. And as a throwaway: ‘I mean, *seriously* beautiful.’ And then she thought: Oh Christ, I’m beginning to sound like a dyke when all I want is to sound unconcerned.

But once again, neither Perry nor her inquisitors seemed to have noticed anything out of tune.

‘So where do I find Tamara who isn’t Natasha’s mother?’ she asked Mark, severely, taking the opportunity to edge away from him.

‘Two rows up on your left. Very pious lady. Known locally as Mrs Nun.’

She did a careless swing round and homed in on a spectral woman draped from head to toe in black. Her hair, also black, was shot with white and bound in a bun. Her mouth, locked in a downward curve, seemed never to have smiled. She wore a mauve chiffon scarf.

‘And on her bosom, this bishop-grade Orthodox gold cross with an extra bar,’ Gail exclaimed. ‘Hence the Mrs Nun, presumably.’ And as an afterthought: ‘But *wow*, did she have presence. A real scene-stealer’ – shades of her acting parents – ‘you really felt the willpower. Even Perry did.’

‘Later,’ Perry warned, avoiding her eye. ‘They don’t want us to be wise after the event.’

Well, I’m not allowed to be wise before it either, am I? she had half a mind to shoot back at him, but in her relief at having successfully negotiated the hurdle of Natasha, let it go.

Something about the immaculate little Luke was seriously distracting her: the way she kept catching his eye without meaning to; the way he caught hers. She’d wondered at first whether he was gay, until she spotted him eyeing the gap in her blouse where a button had opened. It’s the loser’s gallantry in him, she decided. It’s his air of fighting to the last man, when the last man is himself. In the years when she was waiting for Perry, she’d slept with quite a few men, and there’d been one or two she’d said yes to out of kindness, simply to prove to them that they were better than they thought. Luke reminded her of them.

Limbering up for the match with Dima, Perry by contrast had scarcely bothered with the spectators at all, he claimed, talking intently to his big hands set flat on the table before him. He knew they were up there, he'd given them a wave of his racquet and got nothing back. Mainly, he was too busy putting in his contact lenses, tightening his shoelaces, smearing on sun cream, worrying about Mark giving Gail a hard time, and generally wondering how quickly he could win and get out. He was also being interrogated by his opponent, standing three feet away:

'They bother you?' Dima inquired in an earnest undertone. 'My supporters' club? You want I tell them go home?'

'Of course not,' Perry replied, still smarting from his encounter with the bodyguards. 'They're your friends, presumably.'

'You British?'

'I am.'

'English British? Welsh? Scottish?'

'Just plain English, actually.'

Selecting a bench, Perry dumped his tennis bag on it, the one he hadn't let the bodyguards look inside, and yanked the zip. He fished a couple of sweatbands from his bag, one for his head, one for his wrist.

'You a priest?' Dima asked, with the same earnestness.

'Why? D'you need one?'

'Doctor? Some kinda medic?'

'Not a doctor either, I'm afraid.'

'Lawyer?'

'I just play tennis.'

'Banker?'

'God forbid,' Perry replied irritably, and fiddled with a battered sunhat before slinging it back into the bag.

But actually he felt more than irritable. He'd been rolled and didn't care for being rolled. Rolled by the pro and rolled by the bodyguards, if he'd let them. And all right he hadn't let them, but their presence on the court – they'd established themselves like line judges at either end – was quite enough to keep his anger going. More pertinently he had been rolled by Dima himself, and the fact that Dima had press-ganged a bunch of strays into turning out at seven in the morning to watch him win only added to the offence.

Dima had shoved a hand into the pocket of his long black tennis shorts and hauled out a John F. Kennedy silver half-dollar.

'Know something? My kids tell me I had some crook spike it for me so I win,' he confided, indicating with a nod of his bald head the two freckled boys in the stands. 'I win the toss, my own kids think I spike the goddam coin. You got kids?'

'No.'

'Want some?'

'Eventually.' *Mind your own bloody business*, in other words.

'Wanna call?'

Spike, Perry repeated to himself. Where did a man who spoke mangled English with a semi-Bronx accent get a word like *spike* from? He called tails, lost, and heard a honk of derision, the first sign of interest anybody on the spectators' stand had deigned to show. His tutorial eye fixed on Dima's two sons, smirking behind their hands. Dima glanced at the sun and chose the shaded end.

'What racquet you got there?' he asked, with a twinkle of his soulful brown eyes. 'Looks illegal. Never mind, I beat you anyway.' And as he set off down the court: 'That's some girl you got. Worth a lot of camels. You better marry her quick.'

And how in hell's name does the man know we're not married?
Perry fumed.

Perry has served four aces in a row, just as he did against the Indian couple, but he's overhitting, knows it, doesn't give a damn. Replying to Dima's service, he does what he wouldn't dream of doing unless he was at the top of his game and playing a far weaker opponent: he stands forward, toes practically on the service line, taking the ball on the half-volley, angling it across court or flipping it just inside the tramlines to where the baby-faced bodyguard stands with his arms folded. But only for the first couple of serves, because Dima quickly gets wise to him and drives him back to the baseline where he belongs.

'So then I suppose I began to cool down a bit,' Perry conceded, grinning ruefully at his interlocutors and rubbing the back of his wrist across his mouth at the same time.

'Perry was a total bully,' Gail corrected him. 'And Dima was a natural. For his weight, height and age, amazing. Wasn't he, Perry? You said so yourself. You said he defied the laws of gravity. And really sporting with it. Sweet.'

'Didn't jump for the ball. Levitated,' Perry conceded. 'And yes, he was a good sport, couldn't ask for more. I thought we were going to be in for tantrums and line disputes. We didn't do any of that stuff. He was really good to play with. And cunning as a box of monkeys. Withheld his shots till the absolute last minute and beyond.'

'*And he had a limp,*' Gail put in excitedly. 'He played on the skew and he favoured his right leg, didn't he, Perry? And he was stiff as a ramrod. And he had a knee bandage. And he *still* levitated!'

'Yeah, well, I had to hold off a bit,' Perry admitted, clawing

awkwardly at his brow. 'His grunts got a bit heavy on the ear as the game went by, frankly.'

But for all his grunting, Dima's inquisition of Perry between games continued unabated:

'You some big scientist? Blow the goddam world up, same way you serve?' he asked, helping himself to a gulp of iced water.

'Absolutely not.'

'Apparatchik?'

The guessing game had gone on long enough: 'Actually, I teach,' Perry said, peeling a banana.

'Teach like you teach *students*? Like a professor, you teach?'

'Correct. I teach students. But I'm not a professor.'

'Where?'

'Currently at Oxford.'

'Oxford *University*?'

'Got it.'

'What you teach?'

'English literature,' Perry replied, not particularly wishing, at that moment, to explain to a total stranger that his future was up for grabs.

But Dima's pleasure knew no bounds:

'Listen. You know *Jack London*? Number-one English writer?'

'Not personally.' It was a joke, but Dima didn't share it.

'You like the guy?'

'Admire him.'

'*Charlotte Brontë*? You like her too?'

'Very much.'

'*Somerset Maugham*?'

'Less, I'm afraid.'

'I got books by all those guys! Like hundreds! In Russian! Big bookshelves!'

John le Carré

'Great.'

'You read Dostoevsky? Lermontov? Tolstoy?'

'Of course.'

'I got them all. All the number-one guys. I got Pasternak. Know something? Pasternak wrote about my home town. Called it *Yuriatin*. That's *Perm*. Crazy fucker called it *Yuriatin*. I dunno why. Writers do that. All crazy. See my daughter up there? That's Natasha, don't give a shit about tennis, love books. Hey, Natasha! Say hello to the Professor here!'

After a delay to show that she is being intruded upon, Natasha distractedly raises her head and draws aside her hair long enough to allow Perry to be astonished by her beauty before she returns to her leatherbound tome.

'Embarrassed,' Dima explained. 'Don't wanna hear me yelling at her. See that book she reading? *Turgenev*. Number-one Russian guy. I buy it. She wanna book, I buy. OK, Professor. You serve.'

'From that moment on, I was Professor. I told him again and again I wasn't one, he wouldn't listen, so I gave up. Within a couple of days, half the hotel was calling me Professor. Which is pretty bloody odd when you've decided you're not even a don any more.'

Changing ends at 2-5 in Perry's favour, Perry is consoled to notice that Gail has parted company from the importunate Mark and is installed on the top bench between two little girls.

The game was settling to a decent rhythm, said Perry. Not the greatest match ever but – for as long as he lowered his play – fun and entertaining to watch, assuming anybody wanted to be entertained, which remained in question since, other than the twin boys, the spectators might have been attending a revivalist meeting. By *lowering his play*, he meant slowing it down