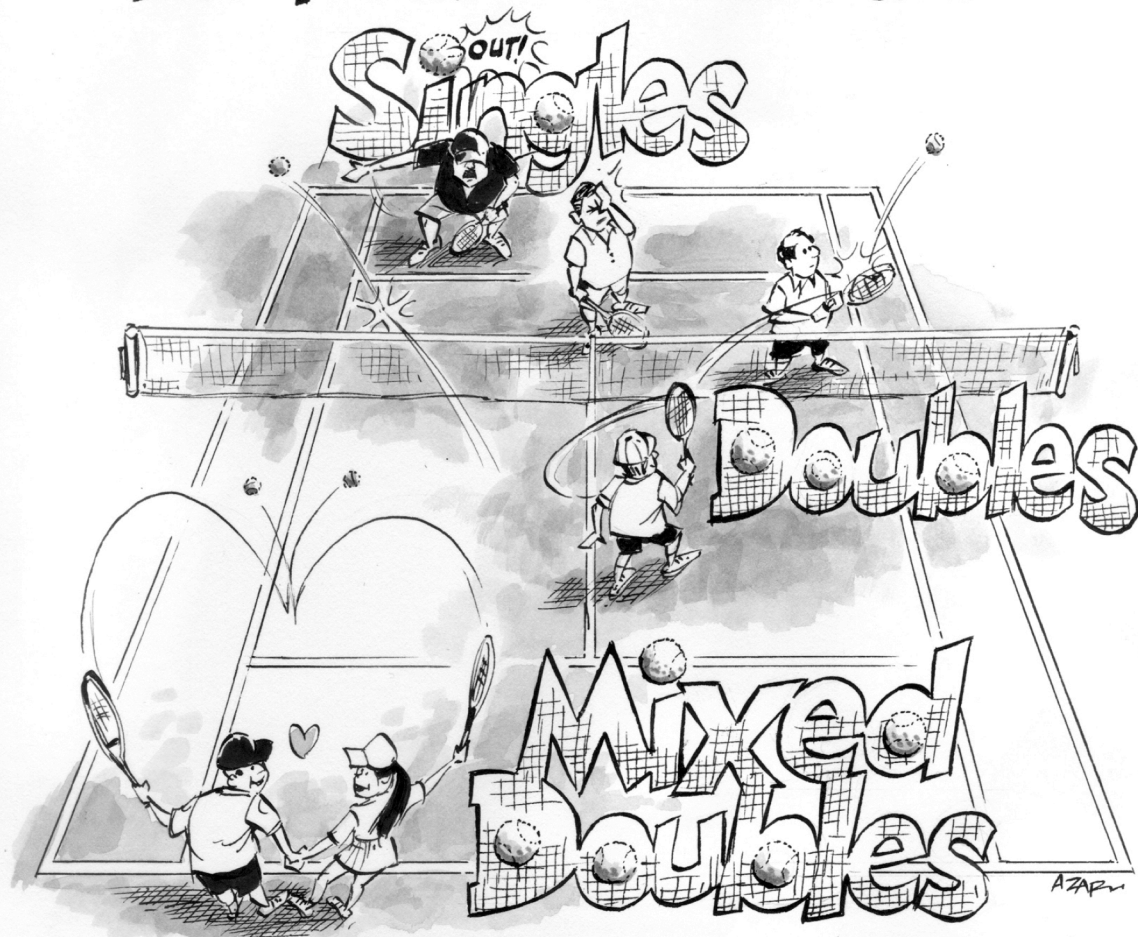


TENNIS. ANYONE?

THREE SHORT STORIES
That Feature the Net Game...



...and Illustrate the Adage,
"BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR."

BY

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SINGLES

Sam paused for a moment at the service line to steady himself. This was a critical moment in his match against Carl, and Sam wanted to make sure he gave it his all.

Sam and Carl were frequent opponents at their tennis club. They were well-matched and quite competitive. On this particular day, Carl had won the first set, Sam the second. The score in the decisive third set was 5-4 in Sam's favor. Sam was serving at 40-30 – match point for Sam if he won it.

Sam brought the racket back slowly behind his head, tossed the ball up a little to the right, and whacked a booming first serve ace into the far corner of Carl's service box.

"Wowee!" Sam exulted silently, raising his hands in triumph and starting toward the net to shake hands with his worthy but vanquished opponent.

"Out!" Carl's voice exclaimed from the opposite base line.

Sam, taken aback and wondering if he'd heard Carl correctly, looked over at his opponent. Carl was crouched in position to receive Sam's second serve.

"Did I hear you call my serve 'out'?" Sam asked, his tone verging on the incredulous.

"Yes, a little long," replied Carl without the slightest hint of doubt or repentance. "Second serve."

Sam was flabbergasted. He wanted to protest Carl's clearly erroneous call that deprived him of his immediate victory. He wanted to jog over to Carl's side of the net and point to where the ball had landed. . . He wanted to strangle Carl with his bare hands. . . .

But he did none of those things. Sam had always abided by the basic rule that in a match with no umpire or linesman, the call as to whether a ball is “in” or “out” belongs to the player on whose side the shot lands. So, being a fair-minded sportsman, he considered it unseemly to argue about the call – even when the serve was clearly in and would have given Sam the match. . . .

* * *

“I just couldn’t believe it,” said Sam to his friend Frank later that day, over a beer at the tennis club. “Match point, my serve clearly in, contest over – and Carl calls it out.”

After shaking his head slowly to empathize with Sam’s disbelief, Frank said, “And then – and then – come on, Sam, finish the story. . . .”

“And then. . . and then . . . I was so upset that I double-faulted, dropped the game, and proceeded to lose the set and the match.”

Frank took a sip from his glass. “Well, that’s a goddamn shame. But look, all of us make an inadvertent bad call now and then – especially on hard courts like these, where there’s no mark in the clay to serve as evidence. Why did you let yourself get so upset by this one?”

Sam had been asking himself the same question and now decided to share his answer with Frank.

“The reason was – and I don’t like being accusatory, but it isn’t the first time this has happened with Carl – that I didn’t consider his bad call to be because of poor eyesight, or flawed depth perception, or even wishful thinking on his part. I think Carl is consciously making bad line calls to help himself win.”

Frank raised a proverbial eyebrow. “Really? That’s a very serious accusation to make.”

“I know, but it’s the conclusion I’ve come to. Needless to say, the bad calls are always in his favor, never in mine. But the real kicker is that they’re not just random – they almost always come at crucial moments in the match.”

“Hmmm. . . . Well, if that’s the way you feel, why do you keep playing with him?”

Sam snorted, to acknowledge the incongruity. “Good question. I guess it’s because, except for the bad calls, I really enjoy our matches. We’re very even, both in our mid 40’s and in good shape, and the contests are extremely competitive. And other than this problem, Carl is a good guy.”

“Then case closed. . . .”

“No, no, I have to do something about this. Up to now, I’ve been a real pussy – going along with the adversity, never raising it as an issue. But it bothers me so much – and this match today is the last straw – that I feel the need to respond in some way.”

Sam paused, causing Frank to look over and notice his friend’s sincere expression. “And I thought that you, Frank – my good buddy – could advise me on a course of action.”

“I’m happy to do so,” replied Frank without hesitation. “I like to analyze sticky situations from different points of view.” He paused briefly to collect his thoughts. “Let’s go through the various possibilities, starting with the extremes. The first – and perhaps the best – is to make a conscious decision to just let it go, live with it, move on. . . .”

Sam’s response was quick and firm. “No, that’s what I’ve been doing, and it hasn’t worked. Hey, Frank, I’m a competitive guy – I don’t ever like to lose, but this is galling because I feel he’s taking advantage of me.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. So how about the other extreme. Have a heart-to-heart talk with Carl. Level your accusation that he has knowingly made bad

calls, tell him how his conduct has been bothering you, and state in no uncertain terms that he's got to cut it out or you'll be kaput as a tennis twosome."

Sam pondered this for a bit. "In theory, that's probably what I should do – but it's just too confrontational for me. Carl, of course, would deny even *making* any bad calls, let alone doing it on purpose. And it might well end up ending our competition, to say nothing of our friendship, which I'd rather not see happen."

Frank didn't press the point but moved promptly to the next alternative. "Well then, if you're not willing to make an overall indictment of Carl, how about taking issue with specific outrageous calls."

"I've considered that, but have always followed the rule of not contesting a call the other guy has the right to make."

"Yeah, but Carl ought to know how you feel – that he's taking advantage of you. So, when he makes one of those lousy 'out' calls, how about saying something like this: 'Hey, Carl, I know it's your call to make, and I'll go along with whatever you say, but you should know that I had a good view of where my shot landed, and it definitely looked in to me.' Wouldn't that be a gentlemanly way to get the point across?"

Sam considered the suggestion before replying. "That's a possibility – I'll see how I feel at the time it happens. Anything else?"

"Well, if you don't want to actually contest the call, you could at least pout a little" – and here, Frank acted out his words – "roll your eyes, frown, moan, shake your head in exasperation. If Carl has any brains, he'll observe your demeanor and realize you disagree with him but are too much of a sportsman to vocalize it. Maybe then he'll see the light."

Sam, smiling at Frank's exaggerated gestures, said, "I think I'll try that one first. . . ."

* * *

And so he did, when the initial opportunity presented itself during their next match. This time, in a crucial game, the trigger was Sam's scorching backhand return of service hugging the sideline, landing several inches in fair territory – a shot to bring Sam back to deuce from Carl's ad-in advantage.

"Out," said Carl. "My game." He began walking toward the bench and water cooler.

It was the right time for a monumental pout on Sam's part. He frowned, groaned, rolled his eyes, shook his head negatively from side to side, and stayed on the baseline a few extra seconds instead of heading over to the bench.

But Carl, drinking water and toweling off on the sidelines, gave no indication of having even noticed Sam's histrionics, let alone exhibiting any trace of remorse. Clearly, Sam reckoned, this approach wasn't going to work.

The next bad call occurred that same day at crunch time in a later set. As Carl ran toward the net, Sam hit a perfect lob over his head, the ball landing well in front of Carl's baseline. Carl called it "out" from thirty feet away.

Sam bit his lip and then gave the little speech Frank had suggested – "It's your call, Carl, I'll go along, but I saw it as clearly in" – to which Carl replied, "Oh, no, Sam – I was in a better position to see it. The ball was definitely long."

* * *

"So," said Frank at their next meeting, after hearing Sam's narrative, "it sounds like those intermediate steps didn't produce any positive effect."

"No, and if anything, the bad calls have become more frequent and more outrageous."

"Any chance of shifting the locale to a clay court, where the shots leave a mark? It's harder to cheat there."

“No, this is the club we belong to, and all the courts are hard surface. . . .What should I do?”

Frank, pausing for effect, said, “Well, I left one possibility out last time, because I didn’t think you’d go for it. But desperate times call for desperate measures. . . .”

“Give it to me straight – undiluted.”

“Okay, it’s called ‘tit for tat.’ Each time he gives you a bad call, you give him a bad one right back.”

“Ooh, I don’t go for that at all – it’s not like me. . . . I’m so careful with my calls – giving the other guy the benefit of the doubt on close ones, or at the very least, offering to replay the point. Even Carl has rarely questioned any of my calls.”

“Just try it once or twice. Because you’ve been so fair up to now, it’ll increase the likelihood of him getting the message you’re sending.”

* * *

Two days later, Sam and Frank were together again at the club.

“Well,” said Frank, “did you try the tit-for-tat?”

“I’m ashamed to say I did. It occurred right after one of Carl’s bad calls at a key juncture – he had botched his return of my serve, but then claimed it was a let, although it cleared the net by several inches. So I picked an unimportant point in the next game and called his close-but-good shot out.”

“And did it work?”

“Carl was outraged by my call and let me know it in no uncertain terms. I couldn’t defend the call – I *knew* it was wrong – and I didn’t want to say it was meant to get back at him, since two wrongs don’t make a right. I sensed a disaster in the making, so I quickly agreed to replay the point.”

“Somehow, I had a hunch tit-for-tat wouldn’t work.” Frank now reached into a briefcase and pulled out a book.

“Okay, Sam, I think it’s time for Potter.”

“What’s ‘potter’?” asked Sam.

“That’s Stephen Potter, my lad – the author of *Gamesmanship* and *One-Upmanship* – one of our real heroes during those cynical college years. I’ve brought along one of his books.”

Sam’s face had a quizzical look. “Is his book going to cure those bad calls by Carl?”

“Probably not – they may be here to stay. I’m trying a new tactic now – introducing some gamesmanship into the mix. The idea here is to disconcert Carl sufficiently that the negative effect on his game will more than offset a few bad calls.”

Sam looked skeptical. “Well, give me an example of Potter’s gamesmanship.”

“Okay,” said Frank, who started off reading directly from Potter’s book.

“It all began in 1931 when Potter and his partner, C. Joad, found themselves in a tennis match with two tall, athletic young men, Smith and Brown. Smith, serving first, whisked two cannonball aces in a row past Joad and Potter. On the third point, Joad managed to connect with the serve, only to hit the ball wildly into the back netting on the fly, a good 12 feet behind the service line.

“Now came the moment, says Potter, ‘on which not only this match, but so much of the future of British sport, was to turn.’ As Smith was crossing to the ad court for his next serve to Potter, Joad called across to him: ‘Kindly say clearly, please, whether the ball was in or out.’

“Smith – an admirable, sportsmanlike chap – stopped dead in his tracks. ‘I’m so sorry – I thought it was out,’ said Smith. ‘But what did you think, Brown?’

“Brown replied, ‘I thought it was out – but do let’s have it again’.

“ ‘No,’ said Joad. ‘I don’t want to have it again. I only want you to say clearly, if you will, whether the ball is in or out’.

“Smith – his sportsmanship now seriously in question – immediately double-faulted twice, and failed to get in another ace until the third set, by which time Potter and Joad had sewed up the match. . . . For Potter, it was ‘the birth of gamesmanship.’ ”

“Oh, I like that,” said Sam “ – except I’m not sure that Carl is enough of an ‘admirable, sportsmanlike chap’. . . .”

Frank, deep into Potter now, ignored Sam’s caveat. “It’s especially effective if you’re losing, and your opponent is in what Potter calls the ‘winning vein’ – he’s playing at his best. You have to break the flow. And the essence of that is to make the pause ‘as if for the sake of your opponent’s game’.”

“Give me another example.”

“Here’s one, right after the opponent has won six points in a row. The gamesman calls his opponent’s attention to a child walking 100 yards from the court – ‘Those damn kids . . . walking across your line of sight . . . ought to be shot.’ ”

Sam smiled. “Maybe I can try something like that.”

“Here’s another way to break the flow – Potter’s example is from golf, but equally applicable to tennis. The gamesman, down three at the turn, lavishly compliments the layman’s stroke – pointing especially to the ‘straight left arm at the moment of impact.’ After the layman’s next shot, the gamesman says,

“Beauty. . . . And even that one wasn’t as clean as some of the shots you’ve been hitting. . . .”

“The layman’s pleasure turns to doubt – ‘Wasn’t it?’ – as he begins to think. . . . And that’s it for the layman’s game; he almost never recovers. The words may vary, but in Potter’s view the sequence – first praise, then dissection, a brief discussion, and finally doubt – is ‘the same for all shots and for all games’.”

“I get the point. I’m going to try these out.”

* * *

“So,” said Frank, at their next meeting a week later, “how did the Potter gambits turn out?”

“Not great. I tried ‘state clearly whether the ball was in or out’ on one of my shots that landed way, way out, to which Carl replied, ‘What’s the matter – are you blind?’ I used the ‘kids-in-the-line-of-sight’ bit to break the flow when he was winning, and he just harrumphed, ‘What kids? I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about’ and stayed on his winning run.”

“How about his swing?”

“Yeah, I did that too, over-complimenting his backhand, which he was hitting well (although ‘the last few weren’t as clean as some of the earlier ones’). Carl accepted what I said as his due – an acknowledgment of his prowess – and began to play better than ever.”

Frank shook his head from side to side. “Well, I’m fresh out of ideas. It looks like you’re just going to have to live with this situation.”

* * *

Sam now realized that, unless he wanted to end their matches or provoke a direct overall confrontation with Carl – which he wasn’t willing to do – he would just have to accept the bad calls. Being a tough competitor, though, he

saw the need to overcome their adverse effect. To accomplish this, he chose the most direct of alternatives – playing better tennis – which he now proceeded to do.

And to his amazement, the improvement in his game – notwithstanding a plethora of bad calls by Carl – resulted in Sam winning their matches on a regular basis. The 50-50 outcomes had turned to 80-20 in his favor. And he could tell that Carl didn't like this one bit.

Some weeks later, Sam duly reported this state of affairs to Frank at lunch.

“That's terrific,” said Frank.

“Still,” said Sam, “with all the victories, it bothers me a lot every time Carl pulls one of those bad calls – I can't seem to get over it.”

Suddenly an exuberant expression came over Frank's face – the equivalent of a light bulb going on over a cartoon character's head. “Oh, boy, do I have a concept! Listen to this one, Sam. . . .”

* * *

The next day, Frank and his non-member friend Bob took seats on a couch at the club, near the chair where Carl, facing the other way, was reading a newspaper. Frank and Bob began to converse, and after a few minutes, Frank's voice rose to a level that he knew Carl could hear.

“Hey, Bob, you want to talk about poetic justice – listen to this one. You know my friend Sam, don't you? Well, he's been playing here in a game with this guy Carl for many years. They were about even skill-wise and very competitive. But Carl has a well-deserved reputation for making bad line calls at key points that sabotage his opponent's game.”

“I've never played with him,” said Bob, “but I've heard that said.”

“Anyway, these bad calls so enraged Sam that, in order to overcome their effect, he proceeded to really lift the level of his game – to the point where he’s now taking four out of five matches with Carl.”

“That’s a great story, Frank – he improves his playing to compensate for the bad calls, and now he’s winning most of the time – I love it. . . .”

* * *

The next time Sam and Carl played, an odd thing happened. Sam hit a crucial shot that was in by only an inch – just the kind of ball that Carl had been routinely calling “out”. This time, however, Carl said, “Good shot.”

It happened again a few games later, and then once more in the next set. All of a sudden, Carl was calling the lines accurately – like one of those electronic machines at the U.S. Open.

So, was Sam delighted at this favorable turn of events? No! – in fact, he was totally discombobulated. He had come to rely on Carl’s bad calls as the impetus to stir him on to greater heights. Now that the stimulus was gone, his game suffered badly – in fact, he lost that day’s match.

And as more of the same continued in subsequent clashes, he saw the superiority of his game dissipate. Sam realized he’d be lucky if he could get back to the old 50-50 level. . . .

* * *

“So that’s the story,” said Sam to Frank when they next met. “Your gambit worked beautifully for the intended purpose – there hasn’t been a bad call from Carl since. But it backfired so as to really hurt my game. I think they call this the law of unintended consequences.”

“How about that? It’s like the old saying – you’ve gotta be careful what you wish for.”

“Right. But what do I do now? I’m in the ridiculous position of wanting Carl to go back to cheating, so it can fire me up again! But now that he realizes it’s not in his best interest, he won’t do it.”

Frank pondered this for a few moments. “The key here is for you to somehow get Carl to the point where he’s agitated enough to resume the bad calls, even though he’s aware it may run counter to his best interests. . . . Hmm. . . . Well, I can see one possibility. . . .”

* * *

The next time they played, Sam won the first set, Carl the second. The score in the decisive third set was 5-4 in Carl’s favor. Carl was serving at 40-30 – match point for Carl if he won it.

Carl brought the racket back slowly behind his head, tossed the ball up a little to the right, and whacked a booming first serve ace into the far corner of Sam’s service box.

“Wowee!” Carl exulted silently, raising his hands in triumph and starting toward the net to shake hands with his worthy but vanquished opponent.

“Out!” Sam’s voice exclaimed from the opposite base line.

Carl, taken aback and wondering if he’d heard Sam correctly, looked over at his opponent. Sam was crouched in position to receive Carl’s second serve.

“Did I hear you call my serve ‘out’?” Carl asked, his tone verging on the incredulous.

“Yes, a little long,” replied Sam without the slightest hint of doubt or repentance. “Second serve.”

Carl protested, but Sam held firm. Still fuming, Carl lost the game. He fumed some more. It didn’t take long. In the very next game, Carl called a clear ace by Sam “long.”

Was Sam disconcerted as usual? Hell, no! A broad smile came over his face, as his game promptly swung into high gear once again. . . .

DOUBLES

I'm sitting on the small deck overlooking the tennis court in back of our house, feeling sorry for myself. The moment that thing went "pop!" yesterday, I knew it was my Achilles tendon. The guys had to help me off the court, and my doctor soon confirmed the worst.

The tough part was when the doc said, very matter-of-factly, "This means no tennis for Colin for the foreseeable future." What a bummer! Tennis has been a large part of my life since we bought this house a dozen years ago. Every Saturday and Sunday I've hosted a very competitive doubles game here on my court – even during the winter, at least when the Carolina weather cooperates. I'm really gonna miss that. . . .

"Hey, Grandpa, how ya doin'?" I know that cheery voice coming up from behind me – it's my precocious 12-year-old grandson, Robby. "I heard you got hurt, Pops, and I decided to come over and make you smile."

I grin as I turn to face him – my first smile in the last 24 hours. "I'm so glad you came." We have a big hug. "I've been down in the dumps, and it gets worse each time I look over at those things" – pointing to the two crutches leaning against the table – "especially because it means that you and I won't be able to hit balls for a while."

We gab a little about my injury. I ask him about school and how he's doing on his sixth grade tennis team. There's some family news to discuss. And then he says, "Hey, Grandpa, I can tell something's bothering you, and it's not just your leg . . . am I right?"

This kid is so perceptive. He *is* right, and I tell him so. "Hey, is it something I can help you out with?" he asks, with such sincerity that I decide to lay it on him – although I can't conceive of his being able to help me.

“Well, if you’re interested, I’ll go through it with you – but it could take a little time in order to give you the background. . . .”

“Don’t worry, Pops, I’ve got all afternoon. Just one thing, though – is it okay for me to ask you questions along the way?”

“Sure, fire away. Anyhow, the problem involves the regular game of doubles that we’ve been playing on this court every Saturday and Sunday morning for the last dozen years.”

Robby interrupts. “Is the problem having to find a substitute for you?”

Whew! – he’s right on the job. “That’s part of the problem, but it’s more complicated than that. There’s a story attached – let me start at the beginning.”

“Shoot – or, as Dad would say, I’m all ears.”

I take a sip of the vodka and tonic I’ve been nursing for the past half-hour, clear my throat, and begin the tale.

“Okay, so there were four of us – Andy, Stan, Lou and me. We were all about the same age, passing through our 60’s on the way to our early 70’s, and of roughly comparable tennis ability – nothing special, just good club doubles. But we were very competitive and thoroughly enjoyed our game. We played every Saturday and Sunday morning on this court, plus additional times on holidays and such. We started at 9:30 and went to about noon, playing three full sets.”

“Did you always have the same partners?”

“No, in fact we would work it so that each guy would play every set with a different partner – say, Andy and Stan against Lou and me the first set; then Andy and Lou against Stan and me in the second; then Lou and Stan against Andy and me in the third.”

“How about the scores – did the sets usually come out a certain way?”

“No – there wasn’t any definite pattern. Each set was well-contested, because we were all roughly the same caliber. Andy had a little better first serve than the rest of us, but his second serve was weaker; Stan had the best backhand but didn’t volley as well as I did – and so on. It all pretty much balanced out. Most days ended up with two of us guys winning two and losing one of the sets, and the other two guys winning one and losing two – but you never knew who would come out on top. That’s a big part of why it was so enjoyable.”

“Okay,” says Robby, “I get the set-up. So that means the problem is to find a substitute who’s equal to you.”

“It’s not that simple – just listen for a few minutes, and you’ll see why. What happened was that a year or so ago, things began to change. At first we tried to ignore it, but it soon became clear that Lou’s tennis had declined – it was definitely weaker than the rest of our games. Whoever was Lou’s partner, their team would lose the set. Every day, Andy, Stan and I would each end up winning two sets and losing one, while Lou would have lost all three.”

“That’s not good.”

“And even worse than the outcome was that the sets – which used to be decided 6-4 or 7-5 or in a tie-breaker – were now ending up 6-1 or 6-2, almost never anything closer.”

“Ugh, those one-sided sets aren’t much fun. But Pops, how did Lou handle this? He must have seen what was happening.”

“If he noticed anything, he didn’t show it. I think he was in denial. And Lou is a good guy, so none of us said anything about it to him. Every time he played poorly, he had an excuse of some kind – a painful elbow, a bad night’s sleep, whatever. I just figured his age was catching up to him.”

“Did the other three of you talk among yourselves about what was happening?”

“Not at first. It was a touchy subject – and besides, Lou always seemed to be around. But we each knew the others were aware of it, and all of us were unhappy about how the nature of the game had changed. And then one day, after we finished the third set, Lou had to take off right away because his wife had invited some friends for lunch.”

“Ah, hold it there for a minute.” Robby gets up, walks over to the cooler, takes out a can of soda, pops the top, and sits back down. “So, now for the first time, the three – uh, what’s the word? Oh, yeah, *conspirators* – the three conspirators are alone –”

That makes me smile for the second time today. “Good word, but we didn’t think of ourselves that way. After Lou left, Andy brought up the subject.

“Wait a minute Pops – I need a way to remember who is who.”

“Well, think of Andy as the agitator – that’s another good word, and the “A” makes it easier to remember which guy I’m talking about, like the “L” in Lou as the guy who was losing it.”

“Got it.”

“Andy spoke of how Lou’s game had gone downhill and, at his age, wasn’t likely to come back; how the closely contested sets had disappeared; how whoever plays with Lou always loses; and he concluded something like this –” at which point I change the pitch and accent of my voice to imitate Andy: “ ‘The tennis isn’t much fun anymore. I like Lou, and he’s been a good tennis buddy for a dozen years, but I say we’ve got to replace him in the group with someone of our ability. Lou’s just killing the game.’ Andy then turned to Stan and asked, ‘What do you say?’ ”

“How do I remember Stan?”

“Well, you can think of him as the stand-pat guy. Anyway, Stan said that he didn’t disagree with the numbers and the results, but he took issue with

dropping Lou from the group. He asked Andy and me” – and again I do an imitation here, this time of Stan: “ ‘Don’t you guys have any loyalty? Lou has given us twelve years of his tennis life – we shouldn’t be so quick to kick him out. And although I doubt he’ll pick up his game to its former level, he may just be going through a rough patch here.’ ”

I pause to sip my drink. Robby says, “Hey, Grandpa, it sounds like you’re going to be the deciding vote.”

“I was next up.”

Robby smiles as he says, “How do I remember *your* name?”

“Just think of Colin as the compromiser. I told them that I agreed our game would be a lot more fun if we could find a fourth who played better than the way Lou was now playing. I pointed out, though, that we didn’t really know such a person – especially one who would show up twice a week throughout the year. And in one key respect, I was on the same page as Stan – not liking Andy’s ‘get lost’ approach to Lou.”

“So you came out for sticking with things as they were?”

“No, I didn’t. I suggested that we proceed on two fronts. First we ought to look around to see if a suitable substitute for Lou existed. Second, we should take some steps to make Lou realize how badly he’s slowed up, with the hope he’ll decide the gentlemanly thing to do is exit ‘for the good of the game.’ And that’s what we decided to do.”

Robby takes a sip of his soda and asks, “So what kind of things did you do to wake Lou up?”

“Well, it’s a little embarrassing to recall but, let’s see – oh, at the beginning of each day, we never used to fuss about who played with who, because by the day’s end, we’d have gone through all three possible combinations. But now, when we first went onto the court, Andy would say, ‘I’ll play with Colin,’

and I'd say, 'I'll start with Stan,' and Stan would say, 'I'll begin with Andy' – each of us obviously ignoring poor Lou."

"Grandpa, that wasn't very nice."

"Wait, Robby, it gets worse. Let's say Andy played the first set with me, beating Stan and Lou 6-0; and then Andy played the second set with Stan, beating me and Lou 6-1; then, instead of automatically starting the third set playing on a team with Lou – as we'd always done – Andy would say, 'How about keeping the same teams for the third set?' "

"Ouch! That must have gotten to Lou, the loser," says Robby.

"Not that we could notice. So we went on to the next stage that I'm almost ashamed to recall. Up to then, we'd generally made a point of hitting the ball as often as possible to whoever was Lou's partner, so as to keep some semblance of competition. Now the three of us – and especially Andy – smashed the ball at Lou constantly. As a result, the sets were all ending up 6-0 or 6-1."

"That was really mean of Andy, who sounds like an angry guy – that's an easier "a" to remember than, uh . . . 'agitator'. But how about Lou – did he get the message?"

"He still didn't seem to have a clue. In fact, after one such day, he took me aside and said, 'I think Andy has lost it. Did you see the way he was smashing the ball at me today?' I muttered something in response – that I'm sure Andy didn't mean it, and I would talk to him about it."

"So, none of this worked to get Lou to drop out of the game?"

"Not a thing. Oh, I just recalled something else – listen to this dark deed. One Saturday, we told Lou that we'd all be away on Sunday, but we had arranged for him to be in a game with three other guys who needed a fourth. 'You'll like this game, Lou,' we said. The three guys we chose were all in their 80's and very mediocre players. We were sure that Lou would deduce from this

how low we judged the level of *his* game to be – it was implicit in our choice of the three hapless octogenarians. . . . Do you know that word?”

“Now I do.”

“How about ‘deduce’ and ‘implicit’?”

Robby grins, “I’ve deduced their meaning, which was implicit in your long sentence.”

“Good boy.”

“But did it work?”

“Not a chance. . . . At our game the next Saturday, Lou was telling us how great he had played with the three guys we fixed him up with – nothing about their age or incompetence.”

Robby makes a palms up gesture with his hands. “It sounds like you’re just stuck with Lou for life.”

“Wait, there’s more. The next day, Sunday, by prearrangement, Andy and Stan arrived here early before Lou showed up, so we could have another meeting on the subject. I’d had a particularly bad recent set with Lou as my partner the day before, so I said, ‘I’m throwing my lot in with Andy – Lou doesn’t get it, and I’m feeling very frustrated.’ ”

“Ah, now we have Colin, the clean house guy.”

“Not so fast. Andy was pleased to hear this and then asked Stan how he felt about it. True to his stand-pat form, Stan said, ‘I still disagree – I feel too strong a sense of loyalty to Lou. If you kick him out, I’ll leave also.’ This touched off Andy, who actually got abusive with Stan – trashing loyalty as an adequate motive for sticking with a bad situation – and the two of them started going at each other.”

“This is not good.”

“That’s what I thought, so I said that in view of Stan’s determination, I withdraw my support of Andy, since I don’t want to lose Stan.”

“The great compromiser strikes again.”

“You might say that. Anyway, then Lou arrived. the meeting broke up, and we had another lousy day, with Lou playing even worse than usual.”

I pause to sip my drink. Robby gets up, walks over to the table, puts one of the crutches under his arm, and says, “I’m beginning to think this story doesn’t have a happy ending. . . .”

“But later that day something happened to change the equation. Midway through the last set, Andy fell going after a ball and pulled his hamstring. He couldn’t finish the set, and the next day his doctor told him he had to stay away from tennis for at least a month while it healed.”

“So you needed a fourth to continue the game with Andy out.”

“Yes, and neither Stan nor I could think of anyone who would be willing to commit for the full month. But then Lou said he knew a guy who could do it. Stan and I were skeptical, but we really wanted to keep playing and didn’t have any other choice. So the next week, a guy named Newton showed up to play with us.”

“Wait, let me guess,” says Robby with a grin. “Newton, the new guy, is so bad he makes even Lou look good.”

“Quite the contrary. As a matter of fact, Newton is a terrific player, much better than either Stan or me. He partnered with Lou against us for all three sets, his strengths making up for Lou’s weakness, and we had a wonderful match. Each set went to a tie-breaker, and the Lou-Newton combo won two out of three.”

“That sounds great. Did it continue the same way?”

“Yes, it did for the next four weeks – those were some of the best matches we’d ever had. Lou played stronger tennis just having Newton on his side – and, as a matter of fact, so did Stan and I, in order to keep up with Newton.”

Robby picks up the second crutch, puts them both under his arms, and takes a few tentative steps. “But it couldn’t last, since Andy was coming back in a month.”

“You hit the nail on the head. Andy came back, took over for Newton, and it was the same old thing again. Without Newton to back him up, Lou’s game deteriorated to its previous low level, and his team never won – the sets weren’t even close.”

I watch Robby struggle with the crutches. “Okay enough of that,” he says, putting them down. “Continue the story.”

“I couldn’t stand it any longer, so one day I took Stan aside and raised the issue. Stan asked me if I thought the game would be better with Newton permanently in and Andy out. I said that I did, although I recognized Stan’s views about loyalty to charter members of the club. Stan surprised me, though, and said”– here again I imitate Stan – “ ‘Screw Andy – he’s the one who told us that loyalty shouldn’t count! Let’s just tell Andy we’ve got good news and bad news – the good news is that we solved our Lou problem; the bad news is that Andy is out of the game!’ ”

“Whew,” says Robby “ – what a turnaround for Stan.”

“And that’s basically what we did. First, we got Lou to make sure his buddy Newton was willing to join us on a permanent basis. Then Stan and I handled the kiss-off with Andy. Lou knew what we were doing to Andy, but he approved of it, because it brought his friend Newton back into the game and made Lou a winner again.”

“How did it go when you told Andy?”

“Not well at all – he was definitely pissed. Andy refused to accept our reasoning that it was ‘for the good of the game.’ ”

I pause to take a sip of my drink.

“So, is that the whole story?” asks Robby.

“No it’s not over. Here’s what happened next. Newton was playing better than ever. Partnering with Newton, Lou improved a lot – still not to the level of Stan and me – but although the matches weren’t one-sided, Stan and I found ourselves losing to Newton and Lou every time. After a while, we talked about it and realized that we weren’t having fun.”

“Hey, Pops, you always told me to be careful what you wish for. . . .”

“So, Stan and I both felt that we had made a mistake – we didn’t like the constant losing – and agreed that we’d be better off with Andy back in the game instead of Newton.”

“So now you’ve got to get rid of Newton.”

“Well, we figured Newton had no vested right to play – he was only a sub, although given the amount of time that had gone by, calling him a sub was a bit of a reach. But anyway, it would be easy to give him the bad news: ‘Hey, Newton, you’re just too *good* for us – we need to revert to our old level.’ See, it’s actually a *compliment*.”

Robby purses his lips and speaks slowly. “Hey, Grandpa, is that what’s meant by the word I’ve heard Dad use – uh, ‘rationalization’?”

I smile. “Touché – yeah, you could say that. The real problem was whether or not Andy would agree to come back – he’d been so mad over what we had done to him earlier. We decided to let Lou handle it. Here’s what we told Lou: ‘Although things were fine when Newton first came in, you picked up your game so much, Lou, that the combo of Newton and you is too much for us. We need Andy back for old times sake. He’s mad at *us*, Lou, not at you – so you ask

him back. And don't say it's because Newton is too good. Just say that the three of us have talked it over, we realize we acted too hastily in excluding him, and we'd like him back.' "

"Sounds like a good strategy."

"It was, but it didn't work. When Lou went to him, Andy brushed him right off – said he'd found a new and better game. And so we were stuck with Newton – which meant that Stan and I kept losing."

"My dad would say, 'You made your bed and have to sleep in it.' "

"But, wait a minute – it's not over yet. There came a time when Newton was going somewhere for two weeks and couldn't play. Stan found a substitute, a guy named Medoc – well-named, because he was a mediocre player, even a little worse than Lou. Stan took him as a partner, and I took Lou. We had a terrific match. With no Newton to back him up, Lou's form immediately deteriorated to about Medoc's level. And the next time we played, it was the same thing – with Stan and Lou versus Medoc and me. Stan and I were the stars, carrying Lou and Medoc – and although the quality of the tennis was mixed, the matches were very enjoyable, with the outcome unpredictable for each of the four times we played."

"What about Newton – what did you do when *he* came back from his trip?"

"It wasn't only that – at the very same time as Newton came back, Andy had a change of heart and asked to get back into the game."

"Come on, Grandpa, – you're making this up."

"No, this is just the way it happened."

"So what did you do?"

"Stan and I caucused. There were a lot of different ways we could go at that point. Each one had some good things and some bad things. For instance,

one possibility would be to reinstate Newton – which had the virtue of being the most recent format – but then Stan and I would keep losing, which was no fun.”

“No fun at all.”

“Alternatively, we could bring back Andy – restoring the original dozen-year group – but then Lou would keep losing with any partner, and the sets would average 6-1.”

“Not great.”

“Third, we could keep Medoc and have good games – with Stan and I as the stars – but at reduced quality and not quite fair to Newton who was only gone for two weeks.”

“Not bad,” says Robby, “but not good either.”

“Finally, we could go back to our original plan – bring back Andy, get rid of Lou, and find a fourth equal to the three of us – but where would we find the fourth?”

“That’s where you started out.” Robby takes a sip of soda and gives me a penetrating look. “So, I’m waiting to hear – what did you do?”

“None of them – because before we could decide, wham! bam! I tore my Achilles tendon.”

“So it’s still up in the air?”

“Yes. I let them know they could continue to play on my court, but Stan told me I had to solve their dilemma of who would be in the game.”

“I get it – and *that’s* what’s worrying you today.”

“Right. End of story.”

Robby stands up, walks over to me, puts his hands on my shoulders, and says, “Grandpa, I’m really proud that you trust me enough to tell me that whole story.”

I put my hands on top of his. “Robby, there’s no one I’d rather have as an audience.”

Robby strolls over to the cooler, whirls around, and says, “Well, Pops, it just so happens you came to the right guy for help. This mess is right up my alley.”

“It is?”

“Yeah – in fact, I had to solve something very similar this year. Want to hear *my* story?”

I’m thinking, isn’t this kid something? I wonder what he’s got up his sleeve. . . . “Absolutely.”

“Okay. You know I have a band – a quartet – that plays at school parties.”

“Of course I do. I’ve heard your group – it’s very good.”

“Well, I realized a few months ago that it could be better. I’m okay on guitar and vocal; the drummer is fine; the guy on keyboard really wails – but the bass player was a problem.”

“What’s the problem with him?”

“His rhythm is good, but he doesn’t know the chords, so he plays a lot of wrong notes. I’d shudder every time he hit a clunker.”

“I think I see what’s coming – you had to decide whether or not to replace him.”

“Yeah, and another guy was available who’s a really good bassist – like Newton in your problem. I’m the leader, so it was my decision, although I talked it over a lot with the other two guys.”

“What did they say?”

“The keyboard player wanted to get rid of the bassist – like Andy in your problem. The drummer disagreed and talked to me about loyalty – like your Stan did, at least at first.”

“How about you?”

“Music-wise I wanted to get rid of him, and I wasn’t as hung-up on loyalty as the drummer – but I had a different problem. The bassist’s father is a close friend of my father – and when I talked it over with Dad, I could tell he wasn’t happy about my dumping his friend’s kid – it might screw up his relationship with the father.”

“So you were in a real fix.”

“Yes, I was – like the fix you’re in now. . . . But then I remembered a story you told me a few years ago. You were in a deli and ordered a ham and cheese sandwich. The man behind the counter asked, ‘On rye or pumpernickel?’ You could see the loaves of bread, each looked delicious, and you wanted both – but you had to choose.”

“I recall it well. . . .”

“And then you suddenly realized that you *didn’t* have to make that choice. So you said to the counter guy, ‘I’ll take one slice of rye and one slice of pumpernickel.’ And you told me the sandwich was delicious.”

“I’m so glad you remembered that – it’s the damn ‘either/or’ syndrome, offering a false universe when other options are available.”

“I don’t know about syndromes, but that’s when I realized we didn’t have to stay a quartet! I told you the bassist had good rhythm – so I moved him over to play percussion. He gets along great with the drummer, and now he doesn’t have to worry about chords. And then I brought in the new guy to play bass in my *quintet*.”

“Brilliant.”

Robby beams at the compliment. “So now do you want to hear my ‘rye and pumpernickel’ solution for your problem?”

I can’t believe this is happening.... “You bet.”

“All *five* guys form a group that comes out to play every Saturday and Sunday. The first set is Andy and Lou against Stan and Medoc – or Andy and Medoc against Stan and Lou – very competitive matches, with Andy and Stan as the stars.”

“I get it – Newton sits out the first set.”

“Right. Then they play a set with Newton and Lou against Andy and Stan – good sets, although usually won by Newton and Lou, if Lou is playing okay.”

“That’s where Newton’s in and Medoc is out.”

“You got it. The third set is Newton and Medoc against Andy and Stan – more competitive, because you said Medoc isn’t as good as Lou.”

“I see – with Lou sitting out.” I think the kid is on to something. “Well, that’s a very smart format, I must say.”

Robby frowns. “But wait a minute – there’s a problem here.”

“What is it?”

“It’s this,” says Robby. “Andy and Stan get to play three sets each, but Newton, Lou and Medoc only get to play two.”

“Oh, boy, do I have a sharp grandson!”

I stand up, limp over to the table, and put the crutches under my arms. “But now, Robby, it’s my turn, because I know just how to solve that. They add on a fourth set of what’s called Canadian Doubles, in which Newton alone takes on Lou and Medoc – he hits to the double lines, they hit to the singles court. But don’t worry about Newton – I bet he can beat the two of them nine times out of ten.”

Robby comes over and gives me a big hug. “Hey, Pops, you’re pretty sharp yourself. . . .”

And for the first time in 24 hours, I don’t feel any pain from my Achilles tendon. . . .

MIXED DOUBLES

“Harry,” said his wife Jane, “I have a favor to ask you.”

Harry was poised in a diagonal stance, arms supporting his weight against their bedroom wall, stretching his calf muscles. He performed this exercise each wintry Saturday morning – part of his warm-up for the regular 10 am tennis match with his friend Chad at the indoor facility near his suburban home.

“What’s the favor?” he asked warily, hoping it wasn’t something to delay his departure for the court.

“Well,” she said, “I’d like to join the game you have with Chad on some of these Saturday mornings. Ask Chad to find another woman, and we’ll play mixed doubles. It would be fun.”

Harry groaned inwardly. Jane, although in good shape at 33, was not a strong player – and even if she had been, the concept of mixed doubles didn’t appeal to him. He relished his weekly jousts with Chad. The two of them were well-matched competitors in their late 30’s, with each day’s outcome uncertain.

“I don’t think Chad would be up for that,” said Harry, attempting to deflect his rejection onto his absent buddy.

“Well, then you’ll just have to persuade him to do it,” said Jane as she left the room – and Harry knew, in that way a husband comes to understand the precise degree of significance his wife attaches to each of her “suggestions,” that he would be unable to avoid a few sessions of mixed doubles. . . .

* * *

After he and Chad had finished their match later that morning and were toweling off in the locker room, Harry said, “I’ve got to ask you a favor. Jane announced today that she wanted to play mixed doubles with us – and while

I'd prefer not to, it's pretty hard to talk her out of something once she gets it in her mind."

Chad chuckled. "Another argument in favor of the single life that I've been cultivating for close to 40 years now! But sure, I'll help you out. I must say, though, I'm not a fan of mixed doubles, even when the tennis itself is competitive – which it usually isn't."

"Hey, I'm with you on that. It brings out some other feelings and emotions than what you experience in all-male doubles."

"Yeah, and the dynamics can change, depending on which of the women you're playing with."

"Speaking of the teams, I once paired with another guy of my ability against two women professionals, who made us look foolish."

"Anyway," said Chad, "if we have to do this, so be it – but let's not let it detract from our Saturday game. We'll play the mixed doubles on one Sunday this month– and then maybe another Sunday six months from now."

"Now you're talking."

"Do you have a fourth in mind?"

"No, I don't – I was hoping that you, drawing on your vast single guy's inventory, could come up with a woman whose tennis game is adequate, but not too formidable – like Jane's."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do about finding a suitable partner. . . ."

* * *

A few days later, Chad notified Harry that he had located a fourth, "who'll do". The mixed doubles match was scheduled for the Sunday two weeks ahead.

When Harry and Jane arrived at the court that day, Chad and his partner were already there, warming up.

“Hi, Jane,” said Chad, putting down his racket to give her a kiss on the cheek. “I’d like you and Harry to meet my friend, Tara.”

“Hello, Tara,” said Jane warmly, “So glad to meet you – and thanks for completing our foursome.”

Harry, unable to speak for the moment, nodded his assent to Jane’s greeting. He couldn’t speak because the sight of Tara had rendered him temporarily immobile.

She was, Harry thought, the most ravishing woman he had ever seen – a beautiful face framed by silken hair, her shapely torso descending to the skimpiest of white skirts, elegant legs that seemed to go on forever. . . .

As it turned out, Tara was also an accomplished tennis player, better than Jane by a considerable margin. That differential, abetted by Harry’s slipshod performance – dazzled as he was by Tara’s presence – resulted in the Chad/Tara team dominating the first set, 6-1.

As they paused briefly between sets, Harry was seized with a powerful impulse to impress the younger Tara with his tennis prowess. He proceeded to put forth a maximum effort, so unexpected as to evoke some astonished gasps from the lovely lady and even murmurs of surprise from Jane. Although the second set was closely contested, several unforced errors by Jane in the tie-breaker tipped the balance to the Chad/Tara team.

“Well,” said Harry as the four of them exchanged handshakes at the net, “that was a lot of fun, even though we lost. Naturally, we demand a rematch for next Sunday.”

* * *

Later in the men’s locker room, Chad said, “Harry, I was surprised to hear you ask for a rematch next week. I thought we’d agreed that the mixed doubles was going to be a twice-a-year affair.”

Harry sputtered for a moment before replying. “Well, I did too, but Jane had such a good time that she insisted I propose a quick encore. . . . Anyway, it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I was impressed by Tara – a lovely woman and quite a good player, too.”

“I told you I’d get a suitable fourth.”

“Is she your current girlfriend?”

“No, no, just an acquaintance – there’s nothing between us. She is beautiful, but feminine beauty doesn’t always turn me on. She’s just not my type.”

The “not my type” comment got Harry wondering whether Chad’s single status at this age had anything to do with his sexuality. They rarely socialized outside of tennis, but Harry had once run into Chad having drinks with a handsome young man in a midtown cocktail lounge – a man who Chad introduced as a colleague in the entertainment business. But then again, he had also seen Chad one night having a candlelit dinner in a cozy restaurant with an attractive female. . . .

“Well,” said Harry, “a young woman who is that good-looking probably has a steady boyfriend.”

“I don’t think so – in fact, I’m not aware that she’s ever had one.”

* * *

In the weeks that followed, the mixed doubles foursome became a regular Sunday morning event. Jane was thrilled to be playing with the guys, Tara seemed to be enjoying herself, and Chad had become reluctantly reconciled to the necessity. . . .

But poor Harry was in a state of exquisite agony – and not just because he no longer wore that therapeutic-but-unsightly tennis elbow strap on his forearm. On the one hand, he was consumed with his desire for the lovely Tara; at the same time, the effort required to conceal his infatuation from Jane was

exhausting. He alternated between periods of superior tennis – intended to exalt himself in Tara’s eyes – and atrocious tennis, as a direct result of his inability to concentrate on hitting the ball.

Finally, he could resist no more. Obtaining her office phone number one Sunday on the pretext of having to deal with “potential match scheduling problems,” Harry called Tara the next day at 4:30 – but it wasn’t about that sort of scheduling.

“Hi, Tara, it’s Harry. I just happened to be at a meeting in your building that will end in a half hour and wondered if you might be available for a drink. . . .”

Well, not to belabor things, Tara accepted the invitation; they sipped sauvignon blanc at the New Saloon next to her building; Tara proved to be as alluring in office dress as in tennis attire, and as thoroughly charming on a barstool as on the court. One thing led to another, and within two weeks, Harry had embarked on his first extra-marital affair.

* * *

The mixed doubles matches continued through the winter. At times, the teams changed, with Harry and Tara playing together. Although Harry perked up considerably when such opportunities arose, it was not an unmixed blessing for him. Since Tara was a better player than Jane, Harry had to struggle with whether to play his best game to impress Tara – but with the result being a lopsided victory over his wife’s team – or lower his proficiency level to keep the score closer, at the risk of undermining his status of tennis master in the eyes of his beloved.

Jane, who appeared to be very fond of Tara, didn’t seem to notice what was going on. Her latent curiosity was aroused one day, however, when she told Harry she wouldn’t be available the following Sunday because of a special meeting called by her favorite charitable organization.

“This is the one, Harry, that’s devoted to eliminating the glass ceiling and combatting other issues hampering females in their occupations. Something has come up that requires immediate attention, and the only time all members of the board are available is Sunday morning.”

“Oh, come on, Jane,” said Harry, “you can skip that meeting, can’t you? We’re all set to play mixed doubles Sunday.”

“As a matter of fact, Harry, I can’t miss the meeting – I’m very involved in the issue under discussion.” She paused for a moment – Harry’s reaction being so uncharacteristic of him. . . .

“And why, may I ask, are you so hot for the mixed doubles that you always scorned. . . . It wouldn’t have anything to do with that beautiful Tara on the other side of the net, would it?”

“Oh, come on, Jane – I just enjoy our matches. They’re very spirited. I thought you felt the same way. . . .”

* * *

Now that his affair with Tara was in full swing, Harry decided he had to tell Chad what was going on, and did so in the locker room after one of their Saturday matches.

“Well,” Chad responded to the disclosure, “I didn’t know that for certain, but I can’t say I’m entirely surprised – given the soulful way you gaze at Tara on the court, the fact that you rarely hit the ball to her weaker backhand side, the little verbal byplay when we switch partners, the canoodling that I observe between you two on the bench. . . .”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me.”

“Do you think Jane notices it?”

“I better pass on that one. . . .”

“Okay – but you have no objection to what has happened, do you? I mean, when I asked about it, you told me that Tara was just an acquaintance. . . .”

“No objection from me – although I’m not sure that Jane would share my view. . . .”

* * *

Later that day, as Chad reflected on the news he’d received from Harry, he found his mind turning to thoughts of Jane. He hadn’t known her very well before the mixed doubles sessions began, but he now realized how fond of her he’d become in recent weeks. She may not have Tara’s looks and youthful spirit, but she had other fine qualities – good judgment, a sense of humor, a disposition toward charitable activities – that he prized highly.

It bothered Chad that Harry was being unfaithful to Jane – she didn’t deserve that kind of treatment. It was especially troubling to Chad because, by introducing Tara to Harry, he’d been the precipitating cause of what had happened.

However it began, Chad ruminated, Harry has now made it clear – by embarking on this Tara affair – that he does not have a proper regard for his wonderful wife. If Harry were still true to Jane, Chad would then have felt a sense of loyalty to Harry, and the thought he was about to think would never have occurred to him. . . .

But now that very thought came into Chad’s head – and he decided to pursue Jane.

* * *

At that same time, Jane was puzzling over her recent conversation with Harry – the one in which he was so insistent about playing Sunday’s mixed doubles match, even though she had pleaded important other plans. That was strange behavior on Harry’s part, to say the least – he always seemed reluctant to

play mixed doubles, and here she had actually given him an excuse to beg off, which he didn't seize.

After eliminating other possibilities, a subversive thought came to her – could it be that something was actually going on between Harry and the beautiful Tara? Starting off on this line of inquiry, she was inclined to give Harry the benefit of the doubt. She'd never had reason to question his behavior before. In fact, Jane recalled observing how, on several occasions when they attended parties with attractive single women roaming the premises, Harry could be found off with one or more of the other men, deep in lively conversation.

And yet, she had been aware of something resembling flirtation on his part with Tara. She had noticed how Harry lit up when he and Tara were playing as a team – how he seemed to be running all over the place, fetching balls for her to serve. . . . But was it more than just a harmless flirtation?

And then she recalled some recent occasions at home, when Harry hung up the phone suddenly as she entered the room. And she remembered how many of their dinners Harry had missed in recent weeks, pleading the press of business. . . .

And so, the next day when Harry called in the afternoon to say he wouldn't be home for dinner, Jane drove into the city. Shortly before 5:00 pm, she parked across from the entrance to Harry's office building. Sure enough, Harry came out of the building at 5:05 and got into a taxi. She followed the cab to another office building ten minutes away. She checked the address and recognized it as the place where Tara worked. But then she lost sight of Harry in the crowd of people, and she never did see Tara.

* * *

Chad realized that in order to get something going between himself and Jane, she would first have to discover that Harry was cheating on her with

Tara. But he considered it too crude to tell her that directly and then follow up by asking for a date. The situation called for a more oblique strategy.

Chad recalled Harry saying that his episodes with Tara often took place on Wednesday – the two of them meeting outside her office building a little after five o’clock and then heading over to the bar of the nearby New Saloon. So, the next Wednesday morning, Chad called Jane, disguising his voice and speaking these words through a thick piece of fabric: “If you want to see who your husband is canoodling with, go to the New Saloon bar downtown at 5:15 this afternoon.”

When Jane tried to elicit more information, including the identity and motive of the anonymous caller, Chad hung up the phone abruptly. Shaken, but already suspicious of Harry from her prior downtown excursion, Jane followed the caller’s advice. And that afternoon, from her discreet corner table, she saw Harry and Tara enter the New Saloon arm in arm. . . .

Jane didn’t confront them, but instead slipped out a side exit. The next morning, she phoned a divorce lawyer for advice on how to proceed. Since he was then in the midst of a trial, they set up a meeting for ten days later.

That afternoon, Jane received a call from Chad. Speaking now in his natural voice (*sans* fabric), Chad expressed interest in participating in one of Jane’s charitable activities, inviting her to lunch the next day to discuss the matter. She readily accepted.

The lunch started out pleasantly enough, but it soon become obvious that Jane wasn’t her usual warm and gracious self. After a while, Chad remarked on this and asked what was troubling her.

Jane looked across the table at him, sighed, and said, “I’ll be frank with you – I feel we’re good friends, and however inadvertently, you’re involved in the situation.”

“How so?”

“I pleaded with Harry to play mixed doubles. I know, I know you have to be careful what you wish for, but this really came out of the blue. Harry is now having an affair with that girl Tara you brought in as a fourth.”

“Oh, no!” said Chad, “I don’t believe it.”

“I’ve seen them together with my own eyes.”

“Does Harry realize that you know?”

“No, I haven’t confronted him yet – I’m waiting until I speak with my lawyer next week.”

At that point, Jane began weeping; Chad commiserated with her; and, to put the matter concisely, one thing led to another, and in a few days they became lovers.

* * *

The ensuing mixed doubles match that Sunday was, to say the least, a weird 90 minutes. Chad and Jane knew that Harry and Tara were having an affair; but Harry didn’t know that Jane knew, and Tara didn’t know that either Jane or Chad knew. Chad and Jane were newly anointed lovers, but neither Tara nor Harry knew that fact. Shots were missed, apologies were mumbled, no one could remember the score . . . it was, all in all, a really bad show.

After the match, Chad gave Tara a lift home, during which some of that disparate state of knowledge got untangled. At a stop light, Chad turned to her and said, “You and I have never talked about it, but Harry told me that you and he are having an affair.”

Tara replied, “It’s true, although I haven’t told anyone. I hope you don’t mind that I got myself into this.”

Chad said, “No, no, that’s your business entirely. But it has had an effect on me. When I heard about it and could see from his conduct that Harry

didn't care so much for Jane, I realized that *I* did care. And now – this is just between us, of course – I've started seeing her."

Tara said, "Wow! – how about that. . . . Does Harry know?"

"I don't think so – at least not yet."

* * *

Having finally met with her lawyer, Jane now confronted Harry over breakfast in their kitchen – telling him she knew of his affair with Tara, and asking him for a divorce. At first, Harry denied the affair; but when Jane said she'd seen the two of them together at the New Saloon, Harry's defenses were shattered and he confessed all.

"I've done a terrible thing," said Harry. "I can understand that you must be very hurt."

Jane, savoring the moment, replied, "Don't be concerned on my account. When I found out you were cheating on me with Tara, I began seeing your friend Chad."

Harry was shocked at this revelation, which led to a lot of back-and-forth recriminations. During a brief period of quiet, Harry pursued something that was bothering him from before. "By the way, how did you know that Tara and I would be at the New Saloon at that day and hour?"

Jane replied, "I got an anonymous tip in a phone call from a man the day before."

"What did he say?"

"I didn't recognize his voice, but I remember his words exactly. He said, 'If you want to see who your husband is canoodling with, go to the New Saloon bar downtown at 5:15 this afternoon.' "

Harry pounced. "If I may ask, when did you start seeing Chad?"

"The day after I spotted you and Tara."

Harry, barely masking his glee, said, “Well, dear, that anonymous call was from Chad himself.”

Jane knotted her forehead. “It certainly didn’t sound like his voice. What makes you so sure?”

“He’s the only guy I know who would use the word “canoodling” – he says it all the time. That son of a bitch. . . .”

Jane began to cry softly. . . .

* * *

Harry now confronted Chad at his office. “You bastard – first telling Jane where to find me and Tara, and then grabbing Jane for yourself.”

Chad said, “What makes you claim that I told Jane about you?”

“Her ‘anonymous’ caller used the word ‘canoodling’ – no one else but you says that.”

“And how do you know whether anything is going on between Jane and me?”

“She told me – after asking for a divorce.” Harry’s voice growled out the words, his body language telegraphing real hostility.

* * *

Harry called Tara. “We have to cool it, honey. Jane knows about us and wants a divorce.”

* * *

Chad called Jane. “We have to cool it, darling. Harry knows about us and is so irate I’m worried for my well-being.”

* * *

A few days later, Tara went to see Jane at her home. She offered a heartfelt apology, delivered with real sincerity. “I feel terrible, Jane – this is all my fault. Harry swept me off my feet – I shouldn’t have let it happen.”

Jane, no longer teary and favorably impressed by Tara's genuine regret, replied, "I should be mad at you, Tara, but I'm not. In fact, you did me a favor by showing me what a complete louse Harry is – he's not for me anymore, that's for sure. I got a taste of what's out there with Chad. He's not someone I'd end up with – too sneaky for my taste – but it did get me started."

Tara took Jane's hand in hers and said, "Guys are strictly a mixed blessing. That's why I haven't limited myself to them."

"What do you mean?"

Tara shrugged. "Well, I guess you'd call me bisexual."

Jane grew pensive. "I don't know much about that. Oh, there was an incident when I was a kid in camp, but nothing really came of it."

Tara moved a little closer to Jane. "Haven't you ever had feelings for another woman?"

Jane, taking in the beauty of Tara and appreciative of her apology, said, "Well, I think I may now. . . ."

* * *

Chad sought out Harry at his office. His face bore a sincere look. "I did a bad thing, and I want to apologize. I should not have alerted Jane to your affair with Tara, and I shouldn't have gone after your wife."

Harry replied in kind. "That's good of you to say. But after further reflection, I realize that I'm the one at fault here. A little bored in my marriage, letting myself be swept off my feet by a beauty – I deserved everything I got."

Chad offered a handshake, and as Harry accepted it, Chad said, "Women are a mixed blessing. That's why I haven't limited myself to them."

"What do you mean?"

Chad shrugged. "Well, I guess you'd call me bisexual."

Harry grew pensive. “I don’t know much about that. Oh, there was an incident when I was a kid in camp, but nothing really came of it.”

Chad moved a little closer to Henry. “Haven’t you ever had feelings for another man?”

Harry, eyeing his long-time friend Chad and appreciative of his apology, said, “Well, I think I may now. . . .”

* * *

The weekly mixed doubles match that next Sunday was cancelled by mutual consent. Everyone agreed that the two men – louses though they were – would have been too strong a team for the two women to take on. . . .