

---

## THE PERSON WHO SERVES, SERVES AGAIN

So I call Angie.

“Hey, Angie,” I say. “Guess what?”

Angie sighs.

“That is the single most irritating opener ever. Call back. I’m doing Pilates.”

I call back.

“Hey, Angie,” I say. “My brother called.”

The line fizzes.

“Angie?”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

---

I haven’t seen Bryn for eight years. He used to call me at four in the morning to demand his lost inheritance, or to share insider dope on the secret London bus routes. He knew I’d told the nurses to poison his injections, and he warned me about people who conferred in sign language on the tube. Standing barefoot in the kitchen, I’d keep my eyes fixed on the pre-dawn sky. I objected sometimes, just for something to do. Hung up now and again.

Bit my tongue mostly, and waited for the sun to dye the tower block windows pink.

Then I found out he was wandering barefoot across London, further and further, to find a working phone box to call me from. I decided to unplug my landline, for both

our sakes. Or that's what I told myself. Angie approved. I snuck the cable back in a month later, but by then he'd stopped calling. I assumed he'd lost my number along with everything else he'd lost.

After that I heard about him second hand, usually after an accident or an arrest. I spotted him at bus stops once or twice, sent Hallmark birthday cards to the secure ward or the hostel or wherever he'd fetched up. I was next of kin, officially, ever since our mother had died. I was careful to be anywhere but next to him.

Then, last week, the four a.m. call.

It took a moment to recognise his voice. That flat, affectless tone was modulated now by a strange air of official courtesy, and the volume was down a notch or two. Bryn introduced himself clearly and slowly by his full name and waited until I confirmed my own. Then he moved on to business. He explained that his disability gave him reduced price access to the sports centre. That this was a daytime concession only. That badminton courts were available. That there were lockers, although not all of the keys were working. That I should bring a towel for the shower, because there would be showers if I needed one. That I should wear sports clothes that were loose but not too loose, because that was the style girls wore now.

Before he could get on to exactly which brands would be acceptable, I pleaded a lost diary and got off the phone. Then I stood in the dark hallway for a while, listening to the radiators click awake. Then I rang Angie.

---

Once Angie has accepted I'm not going to say no to him she suggests we do something else. Pretty much anything else really.

"Keep it on home turf. A walk in the park. A go on the swings. Public eyes."

"It's OK," I say.

"How about the common? There's a tennis court behind the bandstand. You can bash something out together there if that's what's got to happen."

"He can't play tennis. It's his shoulder. Badminton's better, no impact on the joints."

Angie sniffs.

"Go for his backhand, then. Trust me."

---

I'm usually the one doing the waiting but today, despite all my efforts, I'm late. I scan the concrete forecourt of the sports centre: my view of the doors is impeded by the body of a middle-aged man in an overcoat limping heavily this way and that as he chats and gesticulates into his mobile.

Then the man turns and of course it's him. And of course there is no mobile. Bryn's eyes light up. He stubs out his cigarette with tender ceremony and lumbers up to greet me. His face as it comes into focus is all crags and troughs. Deeper, more calcified than when I last saw him. His eyes peer through this stone curtain, tiny and lost.

'Yeh, right, you're here. Are you the sporty type, I thought you might be, you probably do sport a lot.'

After all these years I'm slow to get with it, to work out who I am in this conversation, which role I'm playing in the unreeling film inside him.

"Come a long way, have you. Live a long way from here, do you."

I lie on instinct: I don't want him hurling himself against my door in the middle of the night. His eyes flicker uncertainly as I talk vaguely of faraway boroughs, unfamiliar streets. And I realise that all he wants to do is impart bus advice. Shame twinges in me: I've robbed him even of that pleasure.

"Still, you're here, right."

I agree, not at all sure where I stand on this. He nods, satisfied, and we turn towards the sports centre foyer where an inflatable crocodile flops in the breeze, wearing Speedos to invite or perhaps menace the kids into the pool.

He's limping less now, listing less heavily to the left anyhow. It's pride I'm sensing, the pride of a man being seen leading a woman through a door. And I realise who I am: I'm the stand-in girlfriend, the one he's never had.

Bryn lights up again before we reach the sliding doors to the foyer. I stifle some sensible suggestion and hang back to wait it out. Bryn smokes an unheard-of brand in a navy blue livery - Carlton or Capitan or something. He's been loyal to them forever. I remember the dusty packs crushed under his teenage bed whenever I

shoved an arm in there to yank out the cat. He'd have locked it in his room to torture it, and the untouched bowl of Felix in the kitchen would have alerted me. It's a testament to a cat's short attention span that Bryn was the only one of us it really liked. Or perhaps the cat was brain-damaged by then. Whatever Bryn did to it - and I'd decided not to know - it was instantly forgotten.

Now he inhales deeply with head bent aside - an urgent, intimate gesture I feel odd about watching.

"I get the jitters," he's saying. "Heart palpitations, it's maybe a panic attack, it's side effects, they should bring the medication down, I tell them but they won't. They say it's this stuff, all the caffeine."

I notice for the first time that he's carrying a huge plastic torpedo of Coke Zero under his arm.

"It's pretty high in caffeine," I agree. "And acid. And saccharine."

But his teeth are fine, always have been. I run my tongue over the fuzzy, chipped surfaces of my own.

"Addictive personality," he says proudly. "Addicted to caffeine. Two of these a day I get through, two or three. I like the taste. It's better than Pepsi Max. It's just the palpitations, the panic attacks."

He coughs, hollow and far away, a dog barking at the bottom of a canyon. And when he's finished with that we go in.

Upstairs in the locker room I've ripped the tags off my new leggings, tearing a hole in the seam. I tell myself I'm too old for leisure wear but then so is everyone else in here. Tuesday afternoon in a sports centre, it's like the day after a rave - strangers wandering, greyish and dazed, under unforgiving light: the barrel-bodied pensioners, the sleep-starved new mothers and, yes, the mentally ill.

I swing the locker door shut and turn my back to inspect the rear view. Loose but not too loose? Who knows? I pluck at the knicker line, tuck in my T-shirt, untuck it, gurn at my own reflection. The movement shifts that ticklish little scar tucked into my nostril.

When he broke my nose it was a single swipe and cleanly done. He'd been practising that move ever since he saw Muhammad Ali on the telly. Along with the numbness came a lovely, vivid relief: this round was over and the next one definitely wasn't starting yet. Still, there was blood, lots of it, and even I was impressed by that. Our mother wouldn't be ringing the doctor anytime soon, so I did it myself. Later, somehow, there was a policeman in the hall on the phone to his girlfriend, me in the kitchen with a bag of frozen peas on my face and a social worker in the back room with Bryn, wilting by the gas fire. "He seems such a sweet boy," she sighed afterwards, baffled, like a line from a film.

And now he actually does, under the wreck of premature middle age. That's day

centre living for you.

The sports hall is empty when I get down there except for an assistant up the other end dragging crash mats across the floor for Toddlers' Playgroup. I watch her for a while. Then I fake interest in the cables snaking across the breeze block walls.

Finally I take to bouncing the shuttlecock on my racquet, keepy-uppy style, wondering if this is something badminton players do or whether I saw it at Wimbledon.

Twenty-five minutes later he shoves through the suction of the double doors and lopes across the hall towards me. He's wearing a greyed-out polo shirt, three-quarter-length cargo pants and black plastic trainers with ripped sides, through which his socks explode. His gait is heavier, listing dangerously to the left and dragging his hurt shoulder down with it. He's dislocated that shoulder seven, eight times - more, for all I know. The first time he tripped on the carpet while he was chucking me downstairs and we both landed at the bottom, him worse off than me. More than once, he overestimated his ability to ram my bedroom door. There were fights with strangers - at the school, the pub, the car park. Along the way he'd got into doing press-ups for Army Fitness, and the joint kept popping out. It's a mess.

Bryn stops and stares at his racquet, wondering.

"I've got a shuttlecock," I remind him.

He looks up at me from an infinite, sad distance. And this distance seems nearer,

somehow, nearer to the truth than the strange formalities that have got us here. He blinks and the moment's gone.

I offer up a little back-and-forth and he returns what comes straight at him, virtually ignoring anything that requires motion to reach. I glance at the clock.

'Let's play a game,' I say. "We've got twenty minutes." He nods, suddenly businesslike. "It's love all," he informs me, loud enough to alert a Chinese couple in all-whites who've set up camp on the next court but one. "It's love all, and the person who serves, serves."

He pulls the hired racquet out from under his arm. Even from here I can see the handle's bent. I go to say something and I don't. I want this over. In the corner of my vision the Chinese couple drift back and forth, chatting quietly, the smooth arc of their pre-match warm-up as reassuring as a pendulum.

I shuffle a bit behind the white line, mainly for their benefit, and raise my racquet half-heartedly to waist height.

The shuttlecock whips past me like a bat on a wire and tocks gently on the back line.

"That's one love," he says. "To the person who serves. And the person who serves, serves again."

I grunt from the bending over and knock it back over the net. Now he's off-duty again



he feels no need to catch it and only slowly wanders over to pick it up.

This could take days.

“They suit you,” he says. “Nike, are they? Adidas?”

He’s staring at my leggings which are suddenly, I decide, definitely too tight. I veer away. He seems to have learned something about staring at his day centre, because he lets this go. Once there would have been no way out. Once, the staring would have stopped only when something else began. Only when the inert statue I’d become had crumbled to dust. In those moments the whole world was his, and he was its king.

No-one can find that person now, least of all Bryn himself.

We play on, Bryn gathering stature as the numbers rack up. Once in a while I go for something high and see his bad arm reach and move oddly in the socket and drop. And I gasp then, can’t help it, at the pain he can’t feel any more. But most of the time he’s fluid, sure, and I’m the one a few seconds behind whatever’s going on, chasing something I barely understand and don’t much like. I wonder now if this is what infants’ school was like for him. Every day he had to be dragged up the basement steps in a screaming fury, small white fists ripped from each banister rail - up and up into the burn of daylight. I’d crouch in the stairwell, wrung out with a terrible, wrenching pity for him, this boy caught in a storm of his own making.

Bryn ploughs on, announcing his progress point by point. Every now and then, without warning, he retreats to the breeze blocks for a long draft of Coke Zero, warm from the bottle. Brown rivers stain his throat and he wipes them away with careful thumbs. I concentrate on the crash mats and ignore the sidelong looks from the Chinese couple.

Then he's back, shuttlecock dancing to its master's tune. A gentle tap and it hops over the net as I lurch for it like a bear fumbling a salmon. A low swipe and it goes sliding down the side line and all I can do is corkscrew hopelessly on the spot, sneakers squeaking. Once or twice it simply sails overhead, haloed by lamps, and drops dead at my bewildered back. I want to accuse him of practising but I know it's not true. No-one plays like this, lumbering one moment, effortless the next, with room enough - more than enough - for a few lazy moments when he really cannot be bothered to make the journey across court to return something. It's his control not over his game but over his own limitations that impresses.

I compliment him on a smash as I trudge breathless back into position, nine-two down in our third game. We're way over the hour but no-one cares.

"Yeh, I looked at where to put it and I put it there and not somewhere else," he explains helpfully. He points his bent racquet at my trainers.

"You need some special socks to go with them."

In his early years, Bryn seemed determined to escape his body, to burst himself open like a fruit. He'd ride his trike down a flight of stone stairs, smash his skull, come back from hospital and do it again. He shoved his hand into the mincing

machine, tore a finger off and carried right on grinding. He pulled out his own tooth and stuck it so far down his ear they had to operate. He nearly garrotted himself with a piano wire. Dogs bit him. He bit dogs. Bryn on. Bryn off. It was blood and fists and bottomless fury, but at least you knew where you were.

Then, adolescence. A hot smog of hormones, a fade, a tuning out. Gradually parasites burrowed in where Bryn had been. Adolf Hitler; a renegade Cyborg; the Joker from Batman - they all chattered and spat in his brain, venomous, sly, hungry for power. Bryn listened to them all night through the tape hiss of his cigarettes: pacing, pacing. Together, they told him, they would take vengeance on the world. But practise first on cats and girls. Bryn learned from them how to plan, to stalk. How to cook up fear and keep it on simmer. How hard to stare, how long to wait. Where the peculiar pleasures lay. They taught him all they knew and they grew fat on him.

As they gathered force he shrank inside them. Tiny and far away, you'd spot him every now and then, like a pair of eyes at the bottom of a well. Later, but not much later, there was the collapse. The wanderings, the accidents, the overdoses, the sectionings. And then the four a.m. calls.

Who'd want to remember? He's forgotten and I'm not telling. Silence is my habit, my Coke Zero, and I haul it around: corrosive, addictive, cheap.

"Match point again," he says. "And the person who - "

"I know, I say. On you go."

It's not that I wanted to beat him. It's that I assumed I would. The thing I said yes to - I get this only now - the thing I said yes to was the opportunity to play down to him, to let him win. I wanted to stand, smug and impervious, on the wall between now and then, surveying the difference between the two. I wanted to hold that knowledge somewhere private, somewhere cold. Take it home, wrap it up.

Where are we now if he won't even let me let him win?

---

I'm in the café next door where we've agreed to meet after getting changed. In the corner a girl is Instagramming her fat, wheezing bull terrier. She's been at it for half an hour and I'm damned if I'm going to shell out for another latte. I grab my things and I'm heading out the door when, right on cue, Bryn strolls out of the sports centre like Olivier for a curtain call, sweaty-damp and victorious. The foyer doors shush behind him.

"Yeh," he says. "I like to shower. It's nice to shower. Girls like it. The bath isn't working where I live. The man downstairs made it stop."

As we head to the bus stop Bryn explains the situation with his neighbour the way he sees it, and I reassemble the story in a different order: the forgotten taps left running all night, the blocked plughole, the slow waterfall down the side of the bath, the cork tiles buckled, the mat stained and stinking, the collapsed ceiling below.

It starts to rain and we shrink into the shelter. Bryn's bus has already appeared at the lights. He grinds his cigarette into the plastic seating and pockets the other half.

"Waste not want not," he smiles wryly.

He watches as I shoulder my holdall. "You did well," he offers, generous in victory.

"Girls aren't as strong as boys. You had me going there. Did you play when you were at school? I didn't, I didn't do sport, I was into biology. I did Biology GCSE at school, lymph nodes, I'd've been a nurse but they locked me up instead."

"I didn't play," I said. "We didn't have badminton at school. Remember?"

He gives me a look.

"At Stratford," I persist. "Stratford Comp."

"Oh yeh," he says. "Stratford. I grew up near there. In a house."

"Yes," I say. And then: "Yes. I know you did. I was there."

He smiles from a kindly, implacable distance: a busy professional with somewhere else to be. Through the blank of his eyes I drill the words.

"I'm your sister. I was there."

The bus pulls to a halt, but Bryn doesn't move. He stands at the door of his mind, weighing me up. Wondering whether to grant me entry. And finding me wanting, it seems, because he adds firmly:

"We had a nice house. I was well brought up."

---

“So. How’d it go?”

Angie leans over the back of her little leather armchair where I’m sat rubbing my sore calves. She’s been in the kitchen making the curry I like, the air all lemongrass and rice steam. Her lighter scrapes.

“You vont to tell?”

I play along, drape my legs over the chair arm and let my head flop back the other side. The square blue eye of the skylight looks back down at me, flat and factual.

“He thrashed me, doc. At badminton, I mean.”

She takes her time tapping a flake of tobacco from her lip. Eventually:

“Fair match?”

I puff my cheeks, try for a Gallic shrug. Something feels different: some old stiffness in the collar bone has fallen away and is gone.

“We’re playing again, if that answers your question.”

Angie nods and flexes her smoking wrist, experimentally. The white trail from her Silk Cut zigzags up to the skylight.

“Backhand the bugger next time. No mercy.”

I feel a grin coming on.

“Will do.”

