

Partners

for Stacey

She was a pretty decent pool player, I'll say that much for her. She had a nice, smooth stroke and a good eye but tended to be a bit streaky. Nail three or four balls in a row and then blow what amounted to an easy tap in.

"Sorry," she muttered after one such miss. "I make that and I can just about run the table. Must be getting too cocky or something. *Shit.*"

"It's not like I'm exactly setting the world on fire," I consoled her. "You're doing a lot better than I am." It was true; I was playing dismally. Having to call the shots, say a certain ball was going into a particular pocket, meant I couldn't just fluke one in. And I was trying too hard which didn't help matters any.

"You're great on the break," she offered helpfully.

It's easy, I wanted to tell her, *I just picture my ex-wife's face*. That likely wouldn't go over very well. Women nowadays have this sisterhood thing going and they close ranks in a minute when they hear a crack like that. Their version of "all for one and one for all", I suppose.

The woman and I hadn't lost a game all night. We had partnered up casually, nodding to each other as I plugged my change into the table. She had her quarters ready, intending to reserve it when I was done. I think I was playing more out of boredom than anything else. Needing to hit something.

I'd been about to ask her to join me for a friendly game when a young guy had lurched up to the table, staggering and nearly falling across its worn, green surface. He was with the big wedding party that I noticed arriving earlier. He introduced himself as Jeff or John or maybe George, the groom-to-be, and basked in the glow of my mumbled, half-sincere congratulations.

"I wanna play," he announced, with drunken bravado verging on belligerence. "Me 'n my buddy," he gushed, leaning in close and grinning like a Hallowe'en pumpkin. "Us two against you 'n the lady." The woman didn't seem averse to the idea. She wanted to play pool and wasn't choosy about the circumstances.

The groom's pal wasn't in any better shape than he was. We had to keep telling them if they were shooting solids or stripes. At one point the woman caught my eye and smirked. I noticed she was pacing herself, her waitress friend bringing her the occasional drink, something with kahlua in it. I favour either beer or whisky so I can never remember what you call those mixed drinks.

After the groom and best man, we made short work of a couple of tipsy maids of honour. Those gals were anything but maids. One of them had big, jiggle boobs that kept spilling out of the scoop-necked shirt she was wearing. Her irrepressible mammary glands proved so distracting I actually made a good shot purely by accident.

"Nice one," my partner complimented me. "Or should I say," eying the items in question, "nice ones."

"Sheddup," I said and she blinked innocently at me.

The groom and best man kept coming back for more. We must have whupped those poor guys five or six times at least. They were good sports about it though. The groom seemed to have adopted me as his long lost pal. As I waited my turn to shoot, he started telling me his life's story (the long, dull, unedited version).

He was only twenty-one and already had a two year-old son with his fiance. They were one of those couples who are constantly on the verge of breaking up but never quite

manage to pull the trigger. Getting married was probably their last shot at it. They had come to a mutual decision that if it didn't work out in a year or so, they'd pack it in and go their separate ways. He just hoped that afterwards she'd let him see his son on at least a semi-regular basis.

Listening to the guy, I almost had to laugh. I had undoubtedly babbled the exact same inane line of bullshit twelve years ago, believing every word of it too. Bonnie and I were going to make it work this time. Bonnie was a great girl, my high school sweetheart. We were made for each other. We weren't a statistic. It was true love.

His buddy kept nudging him every time a good-looking woman walked by. They didn't seem picky, pretty much anything in a tight pair of jeans was worthy of their scrutiny. At one point the groom's mother, an attractive older lady, came up, took her son to one side and tried to read him the riot act.

He wasn't having any of it. "Fuck that, ma," I heard him say, practically hissing at her. "I'm getting *married* tomorrow. Tonight I'm havin' *fun*."

The best man scratched on the eight ball. It was the closest they would ever come to beating us and they knew it.

"Fuck, R.J.," the groom complained, "a drunk monkey coulda made that shot. Wassa matter with you?"

"Bring on fuckin' monkey then, asshole, let's see what he's got."

"How could you miss, dude?"

"Cause I'm *hammered*, okay? I can't hardly see the other end of the table." They giggled and ended up in a rough, sloppy embrace.

"Hey, remember how smashed we were at the Ozzy concert?" The groom was wearing the tour shirt--they had driven blind drunk to Edmonton and got there only minutes before the show started.

It was the best concert *ever*, I was assured over and over again.

I said I preferred Ozzy in his Randy Rhoades days but they didn't know what the hell I was talking about. "Whatever, man. I'm telling you, this guitarist he had was awesome. The best *ever*."

"What was his name?" I asked foolishly and they looked at me as if I had just flashed them.

"I dunno." They shrugged simultaneously. "Ronnie!" The groom howled. "*Ron-nie!*"

"What?" This big lug at their table hollered back.

"Who's Ozzy's guitar player?"

"*What?*"

"Who's Ozzy's guitar player!"

"Zakk Wylde!"

Their faces lit up. "Right! Zakk Wylde! He was smokin', man."

Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating. Were they as dumb as that...or just awfully, terribly *young*. A couple of kids already up to their necks in life and still learning how to swim. That was the gist of what I told my partner during a break in the action but she wasn't having any of it.

"They're *losers*. Complete scumbags, both of 'em." She pronounced sentence like a hanging judge, leaving no room for mercy or an appeal on compassionate grounds. I didn't like that. How certain she was. How quick to write them off.

"C'mon, they're just boys. Got a lot of growing up to do, that's all. They'll learn."

She acted like she couldn't believe her ears. "*Them?* They'll never learn and they'll never, ever grow up. Women eventually figure out the score but you men?" She laughed at the thought. "You haven't got a clue. Women know what they want a lot sooner than men do. You guys spend all your lives trying to catch up with us."

I told her my ex-wife would probably agree with her. "But just because you know what you want doesn't mean you get to have it," I added, pointing out what I thought was a flaw in her argument.

She nodded, looking at me with new appreciation. "That's right," she confirmed, "you don't. And that's something else women know before you do."

Her waitress friend snuck us one last drink even though technically it was past last call. I was so tight by then the effect was minimal.

The wedding party was gone, the place nearly deserted. An old George Thorogood song was playing on the machine over by the washrooms. To tell the truth, I've never been a fan of George's. Everything he does sounds exactly the same to me.

You could see the woman still felt unstoppable. She was riding high on the wave of all of her victories. The best pool she had ever played in her life, she told me, touching her glass to mine with a cheerful clink.

I was pretty beat at that point. I'd been drinking since right after lunch. Not heavy, but steady. I had that scraped out feeling. Some food would help.

It got on my nerves the way she kept digging out the money and looking at it.

She shouldn't have taken it. It would have been better if she'd given it back and told them to forget it. Everyone in the wedding party had thrown in a buck, two bucks, five bucks, some of them even more. The groom and best man against the reigning champs, winner take all.

I tried to back out but the woman was keen on the idea and they shook hands on it and made me shake too and we were on. We let them break and they got nothing. I had what looked like a wide open shot but I put too much on it and missed by a hair. The woman gave me a funny look but it wasn't like I had screwed up on purpose. Not so you would have noticed anyway.

When it was her turn she went on another one of her runs, knocking balls in right and left. As she lined up the eight ball we had most of the people in the bar gathered around the table. She potted it as cool as a cucumber.

Then she walked over and gathered up their money. Maybe seventy or eighty bucks, nothing really, hardly anything in the grand scheme of things.

She tried to offer me half but I wasn't interested. Didn't make a big deal about it, just said no. Nobody seemed mad at the outcome and the groom and best man just laughed it off. But they didn't stay long after that. The groom had to be pretty much carried out. He was going to have a bitch of a hangover for his wedding ceremony.

Not an auspicious beginning to a match made in Heaven.

Then again, what the hell did I know?

"You didn't like it when I took their money." It wasn't a question, more a statement of fact.

We were standing outside and wondering if we were going to end up spending the night together or if we even liked each other. As I said, I was strung out and fed up so it honestly didn't matter to me one way or the other.

"You could have been decent about it and let it go." I was surprised at how angry I sounded. "That would have been the right thing to do."

She snickered and lit a cigarette, another big turn-off. "Call it revenge." She pointed back inside. "A few years ago I was married to an asshole who could've been Junior's big brother. No good sonofabitch left me high and dry. Maybe I figured little brother owed me something. Let's just say I know the type."

"I'm not sure there's any such thing. Nobody's just a type. There are all different shades. A person like you doesn't see that." I was blowing it but my head was starting to throb like a bad tooth so I wasn't in what you would call a conciliatory mood. "You like to fit folks into convenient slots. Winners. Losers. Good People. Trash."

"Where does that put you?" Flicking ash off her cigarette. "What's your category?" She wasn't being snippy, she wanted to know.

"According to your high standards, I suppose I'd have to say I'm a loser."

"At least you acknowledge it." She grinned. "So am I. So what?"

"What happens when a person doesn't measure up to their own standards?"

She got that tough look back, the one she was wearing when she swept those bills up off the pool table. "You get used to it. Don't tell me you haven't figured *that* out."

I had to admit she had me there.

I don't recall how or when we decided that she would be coming with me. I wasn't really fit to drive but I managed to get us back to the hotel all right.

There were plastic shopping bags on the bed. Some t-shirts and a bunch of mystery books from a used bookstore I'd come across that morning. I cleared everything off and made us weak drinks from the bottle I kept in my briefcase and some pop from the machine down the hall.

She wanted to know what I did. I explained I was a consultant on contract to the town water department. I was supposed to inspect their facilities and write a detailed report about what I found. Strictly confidential, of course. I had another three or four days to go, then I was driving back to the city. To my so-called life. I kept it short and sweet and unlike the kid I didn't editorialize.

She sipped at her drink. She was sitting on the bed but it wasn't an invitation—I could tell by her body language. I straddled the only chair in the room, trying to keep up my end of the conversation while carefully avoiding any exposed nerve endings.

I knew she had been married.

I gathered things hadn't gone too well.

I assumed that as a result she likely didn't have real positive feelings toward men in general and therefore I had better watch my step with her. This could end up in a passionate clinch or a nasty fist fight.

I freshened my drink and she raised her glass. "To my partner. The best partner a girl could hope for. Well, compared to the rest of that crowd anyway."

I toasted her right back. "And a helluva lot of good I was."

She crawled up further onto the bed until she was right against the pillows. "Ah, you did all right. You just don't have any self-confidence. Did your wife get your balls in the settlement too?"

I laughed. It was a good line although it did cut awfully close to the bone. I could see her point--I didn't seem to be in any big rush to join her on the bed. "I was taking it easy on those boys. Trying to make you look good...as if you needed any help. You're a *shark*, lady."

"If you only knew." She rolled her eyes. "Seems like I've spent half my life in places like that. Only the names have been changed. But it's always the same lousy pool table with those small, shitty pockets." She set her drink on the nightstand, covering her mouth with her hand as she yawned. "Yep, you could say I've had plenty of practice." I waited but she seemed to be done. When I couldn't hold it another second longer I got up to use the bathroom. It felt like a week's worth of booze gushing out of me. I turned on the tap to hide the noise. I washed my hands, splashed some water onto my greasy face.

--trying not to look in the mirror, remembering what Bonnie had said the last time I went by to see her:

"I hardly recognize you any more. You've really let yourself go, Glenn. You look like a *slob*."

When I came out, the woman was asleep. Not putting on an act, snoring like a trooper. I found some room on one side of the bed, laid down on top of the stiff, sterile blankets. The room still seemed strange and unfamiliar to me. It was so quiet I could hear my watch ticking. She had both pillows so I rested my head on the crook of my arm. It was uncomfortable as hell.

I slept like a baby.

In the morning it got a bit awkward, both of us wooly-headed and self-conscious. She didn't stay long, politely but firmly refusing my invitation to breakfast. I offered to go for a walk so she could shower and clean up. She just wanted to be *gone*.

I gave her one of my cards. In case she ever got in to the city. After she left, I found it on the floor by the foot of the bed, next to a pair of smelly black socks and thirty-seven bucks in bills and loose change.

My cut.

Angie. I think she said her name was Angie. It was either Angie or Carrie.

She introduced herself at the bar but it was loud and I wasn't sure I'd heard right. Just to be on the safe side, I had never called her by name. I guess I was afraid of offending her.

Something told me she wasn't the sort of person you'd want to get mad at you. I had a feeling that, like a lot of the women I had a habit of getting involved with, she was the kind who would definitely hold a grudge.

End

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