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THE TENNIS COURT

Everyone hated Shimura; but no one really knew him: Shimura was Japanese. He was not a member of the Club. About every two weeks he would stop one night in Ayer Hitam on his way to Singapore. He spent the day in Singapore and stopped again on the way back. Using us – which was how Evans put it – he was avoiding two nights at an expensive hotel. I say he wasn't in our club; yet he had full use of the facilities, because he was a member of the Selangor Club in Kuala Lumpur and we had reciprocal privileges. Seeing his blue Toyota appear in the driveway, Evans always said, 'Here comes the freeloader.'

Squibb said, 'I say, there's a nip in the air.'

And Alec said, 'Shoot him down.'

I didn't join them in their bigoted litany. I liked Shimura. I was ashamed of myself for not actively defending him, but I was sure he didn't need my help.

That year there were hundreds of Japanese businessmen in Kuala Lumpur selling transistor radios to the Malays. It seemed a harmless enough activity, but the English resented them and saw them as poaching on what they considered an exclusively British preserve. Evans said, 'I didn't fight the war so that those people could tell us how to run our club.'

Shimura was a tennis player. On his fifth or sixth visit he had suggested, in a way his stuttering English had blunted into a tactless complaint, that the ball-boys moved around too much.

'They must stand quiet.'

It was the only thing he had ever said, and it damned him. Typical Japanese attitude, people said, treating our ball-boys like prisoners of war. Tony Evans, chairman of the tennis committee, found it unforgivable. He said to Shimura, 'There are courts in Singapore,' but Shimura only laughed.

He seemed not to notice that he was hated. His composure was perfect. He was a small dark man, fairly young, with ropes of muscle knotted on his arms and legs, and his crouch on the court made him seem four-legged. He played a hard darting game with a towel wound around his neck like a scarf; he barked loudly when he hit the ball.

He always arrived late in the afternoon, and before dinner played several sets with anyone who happened to be around. Alec had played him, so had Eliot and Strang; he had won every match. Evans, the best player in the Club, refused to meet him on the tennis court. If there was no one to play, Shimura hit balls against the wooden backboard, barking at the hard ones, and he practiced with such determination you could hear his grunts as far as the reading room. He ate alone and went to bed early. He spoke to no one; he didn't drink. I sometimes used to think that if he had spent some time in the bar, like the other temporary members who passed through Ayer Hitam, Shimura would have no difficulty.

Alec said, 'Not very clubbable.'

'Ten to one he's fiddling his expenses,' said Squibb.

Evans criticized his lob.

He could not have been hated more. His nationality, his size, his stinginess, his laugh, his choice of tennis partners (once he had played Eliot's sexually browsing wife) – everything told against him. He was aloof, one of the worst social crimes in Malaysia; he was identified as a parasite, and worst of all he seemed to hold everyone in contempt. Offenses were invented: he bullied the ball-boys, he parked his car the wrong way, he made noises when he ate.

It may be hard to be an American – I sometimes thought so when I remembered our beleaguered Peace Corps teachers – but I believe it was even harder to be a Japanese in that place. They had lost the war and gained the world; they were unreadable, impossible to know; more courtly than the Chinese, they used this courtliness to conceal. The Chinese were secretive bumblers and their silences could be hysterical; the Japanese gave nothing away; they never betrayed their frenzy. This contempt they were supposed to have: it wasn't contempt, it was a total absence of trust in anyone who was not Japanese. And what was perhaps more to the point, they were the opposite to the English in every way I could name.

The war did not destroy the English – it fixed them in fatal attitudes. The Japanese were destroyed and out of that destruction came different men; only the loyalties were old – the rest was new. Shimura, who could not have been much more than thirty, was one of these new men, a postwar instrument, the perfectly calibrated Japanese. In spite of what everyone said, Shimura was an excellent tennis player.

So was Evans, and it was he who organized the club game: How to get rid of Shimura?

Squibb had a sentimental tolerance for Malays and a grudging respect for the Chinese, but like the rest of the club members he had an absolute loathing for the Japanese. When Alec said, 'I suppose we could always debag him,' Squibb replied fiercely, 'I'd

like to stick a kukri in his guts.'

'We could get him for an infraction,' said Strang.

'That's the trouble with the obnoxious little sod,' said Squibb. 'He doesn't break the rules. We're lumbered with him for life.'

The hatred was old. The word 'Changi' was associated with Shimura. Changi was the jail in Singapore where the British were imprisoned during the war, after the fall of the city, and Shimura was held personally responsible for what had gone on there: the water torture, the rotan floggings, the bamboo rack, the starvation and casual violence the Japanese inflicted on people they despised because they had surrendered.

'I know what we ought to do,' said Alec. 'He wants his tennis. We won't give him his tennis. If we kept him off the courts we'd never see his face here again.'

'That's a rather low trick,' said Evans.

'Have you got a better one?' said Squibb.

'Yes,' said Evans. 'Play him.'

'I wouldn't play him for anything,' said Squibb.

'He'd beat you in any case,' said Alec.

Squibb said, 'But he wouldn't beat Tony.'

'Not me – I'm not playing him. I suggest we get someone else to beat him,' said Evans. 'These Japs can't stand humiliation. If he was really beaten badly we'd be well rid of him.'

I said, 'This is despicable. You don't know Shimura – you have no reason to dislike that man. I want no part of this.'

'Then bugger off!' shouted Squibb, turning his red face on me. 'We don't need a bloody Yank to tell us –'

'Calm yourself,' said Alec. 'There's ladies in the bar.'

'Listen,' I said to Squibb, 'I'm a member of this Club. I'm staying right here.'

'What about Shimura?' said Alec.

‘It’s just as I say, if he was beaten badly he’d be humiliated,’ said Evans.

Squibb was looking at me as he said, ‘There are some little fuckers you can’t humiliate.’

But Evans was smiling.

The following week Shimura showed up late one afternoon, full of beans. He changed, had tea alone, and then appeared on the court with the towel around his neck and holding his racket like a sword. He chopped the air with it and looked around for a partner.

The court was still except for Shimura’s busy shadow, and at the far end two ball-boys crouched with their sarongs folded between their knees. Shimura hit a few practice shots on the backboard.

We watched him from the rear verandah, sitting well back from the railing: Evans, Strang, Alec, Squibb, and myself. Shimura glanced up and bounced the racket against his palm. A ball-boy stood and yawned and drew out a battered racket. He walked toward Shimura, and though Shimura could not possibly have heard it there were four grunts of approval from the verandah.

Raziah, the ball-boy, was slender; his flapping blue sports shirt and faded wax-print sarong made him look careless and almost comic. He was taller than Shimura and, as Shimura turned and walked to the net to meet him, the contrast was marked – the loose-limbed gait of the Malay in his rubber flip-flops, the compact movements of the Japanese who made his prowl forward into a swift bow of salutation.

Raziah said, ‘You can play me.’

Shimura hesitated and before he replied he looked around in disappointment and resignation, as if he suspected he might be accused of something shameful. Then he said, ‘Okay, let’s go.’

‘Now watch him run,’ said Evans, raising his glass of beer.

Raziah went to the baseline and dropped his sarong. He was wearing a pair of tennis shorts. He kicked off his flip-flops and put on white sneakers – new ones that looked large and dazzling in the sunlight. Raziah laughed out loud; he knew he had been transformed.

Squibb said, ‘Tony, you’re a bloody genius.’

Raziah won the toss and served. Raziah was seventeen; for seven of those years he had

been a ball-boy, and he had learned the game by watching members play. Later, with a cast-off racket, he began playing in the early morning, before anyone was up. Evans had seen him in one of these six o'clock matches and, impressed by Raziah's speed and backhand, taught him to serve and showed him the fine points of the game. He inspired in him the psychic alertness and confidence that makes tennis champions. Evans, unmarried, had used his bachelor's idleness as a charitable pledge and gave this energy and optimism to Raziah, who became his pet and student and finally his partner. And Evans promised that he would, one of these years, put Raziah up for membership if he proved himself; he had so far withheld club membership from the Malay, although the boy had beaten him a number of times.

Raziah played a deceptively awkward game; the length of his arms made him appear to swing wildly; he was fast, but he often stumbled trying to stop. After the first set it was clear that everyone had underestimated Shimura. Raziah smashed serves at him, Shimura returned them forcefully, without apparent effort, and Shimura won the first two sets six love. Changing ends, Raziah shrugged at the verandah as if to say, 'I'm doing the best I can.'

Evans said, 'Raziah's a slow starter. He needs to win a few games to get his confidence up.'

But he lost the first three games of the third set. Then Shimura, eager to finish him off, rushed the net and saw two of Raziah's drop shots land out of reach. When Raziah won that game, and the next – breaking Shimura's serve – there was a triumphant howl from the verandah. Raziah waved, and Shimura, who had been smiling, turned to see four men at the rail, the Chinese waiters on the steps, and crouching just under the verandah, two Tamil gardeners – everyone gazing with the intensity of jurors.

Shimura must have guessed that something was up. He reacted by playing angrily, slicing vicious shots at Raziah, or else lifting slow balls just over the net to drop hardly without a bounce at Raziah's feet. The pretense of the casual match was abandoned; the kitchen staff gathered along the sidelines and others – mostly Malay – stood at the hedge, cheering. There was laughter when Shimura slipped, applause when the towel fell from his neck.

What a good story a victory would have made! But nothing in Ayer Hitam was ever so neat. It would have been perfect revenge, a kind of romantic battle – the lanky local boy with his old racket, making a stand against the intruder; the drama of vindicating not only his own reputation as a potentially great tennis player, but indeed the dignity of the entire club. The match had its charms: Raziah had a way of chewing and swallowing and working his Adam's apple at Shimura when the Japanese lost a point; Raziah talked as he played, a muttering narration that was meant to unnerve his opponent; and he took his time serving, shrugging his shoulders and bouncing the ball. But it was a very short contest, for as Evans and the others watched with hopeful and

judging solemnity, Raziah lost.

The astonishing thing was that none of the club staff, and none of Raziah's friends, seemed to realize that he had lost. They were still laughing and cheering and congratulating themselves long after Shimura had aced his last serve past Raziah's knees; and not for the longest time did the festive mood change.

Evans jumped to the court. Shimura was clamping his press to his racket, mopping his face. Seeing Evans he started to walk away.

'I'd like a word with you,' said Evans.

Shimura looked downcast; sweat and effort had plastered his hair close to his head, and his fatigue was curiously like sadness, as if he had been beaten. He had missed the hatred before, hadn't noticed us; but the laughter, the sudden crowd, the charade of the challenge match had showed him how much he was hated and how much trouble we had gone to in order to prove it. He said, 'So.'

Evans was purple. 'You come to the Club quite a bit, I see.'

'Yes.'

'I think you ought to be acquainted with the rules.'

'I have not broken any rules.'

Evans said curtly, 'You didn't sign in your guest.'

Shimura bowed and walked to the clubhouse. Evans glared at Raziah; Raziah shook his head, then went for his sarong, and putting it on he became again a Malay of the town, one of numerous idlers who'd never be members of the Ayer Hitam Club.

The following day Shimura left. We never saw him again. For a month Evans claimed it as a personal victory. But that was short-lived, for the next news was of Raziah's defection. Shimura had invited him to Kuala Lumpur and entered him in the Federation Championship, and the jersey Raziah wore when he won a respectable third prize had the name of Shimura's company on it, an electronics firm. And there was to be more. Shimura put him up for membership in the Selangor Club, and so we knew that it was only a matter of time before Raziah returned to Ayer Hitam to claim reciprocal privileges as a guest member. And even those who hated Shimura and criticized his lob were forced to admire the cleverness of his Oriental revenge.