

LOSERS

I open my eyes. Spears of afternoon sunlight stream through the window. Crumpled sheets. Puckered pillows. Yes, I think. I remember where I am.

—Seven letters, says Arianna. First letter ‘c’. Third letter ‘c’. Fourth letter ‘k’.

I prop myself up on one elbow.

—‘Cock’ something, I say. ‘Cockeye’? ‘Cockpit’?

She shakes her head.

—‘Cocksure’?

—Seven letters.

—Oh, yes.

—Seventh letter ‘d’.

She’s sitting at her dressing-table, wrapped in a cream bath towel, the newspaper folded on her knee, chewing her pencil. This is Arianna. She is not a cosy lover. She has no patience with post-coital clinging.

—What’s the clue? I say.

—What?

—The clue?

—Doesn’t matter, she says.

Our arrangement might so easily have gone awry ...

Green grass. Soft breeze. An open court. Set point to me. The ball — a ripe, bright apple — hangs temptingly above the net. The urge to smash is nearly irresistible. But, no. Not as irresistible as satin sheets, plump pillows, Arianna’s spread of golden hair.

—‘Support for proposal’, she says. Four letters. First letter ‘k’.

I drive the ball fiercely into the net. The first set lost. And then — a weak surrender — the second. “Bad luck!” “Well done!” We shake hands. I have been eliminated in the first round. ‘The champion’ cannot quite disguise his satisfaction. His path to the final is now clear.

—Well? I say.

—Well what?

—What was the answer?

—‘Knee,’ she says.

Oh. Knee? I’m no wiser.

—I can’t do crosswords, I tell her. Puzzles of any kind defeat me. My brain dislikes being teased. Life is tricky enough already. I feel no need to burden it any further.

Arianna isn’t listening. Her mind has moved on. I’m forgotten.

—Edward de Bono, I say. The proponent of lateral thinking. There’s a puzzle in one of his books. What was it? 111 players enter a knock-out tennis competition. How many matches will have to be played to produce a winner? You may see the answer right away but I didn’t. My first thought was how thoroughly irritating that the organisers should allow 111 players to enter. Why not insist on a neater number? 128 or 64 would have tapered down tidily to the quarter-finals, semi-finals and then the final itself. Counting the number of matches would have been child’s play.

—Here, she says. This is a classic. Six words. One, two, three, four, one, four.

—What’s the clue?

—There isn’t one.

—What do you mean?

—That’s the whole point, she says. The clue is a blank. A dash.

This is beyond me. I pretend to think although there’s really no need. Arianna has forgotten me again.

I picture the tennis club. The well-ordered flower-beds. The brick-built clubhouse. Crisp white shorts and skirts. Polite greetings. Icy rivalries. Tea and tiny sandwiches as the climax of the day approaches. Here is the soon-to-be-crowned champion. Black moustache, cold, colourless eyes, square shoulders, flaxen hair. After defeating his chief rival in round one, his victory is assured. His name will once again be engraved on the cup.

—Give up? she says.

—Yes.

—One, two, three, four, one, four?

—Yes?

—‘I do not have a clue,’

—Oh, I say. Yes. So simple. And so very clever.

111 players and one winner. There must therefore be 110 losers. To produce 110 losers, 110 matches have to be played. Such a straightforward solution. What sticks with me, however, is the number of losers there will be: 110 losers; only one winner. It seems faintly unjust.

—What’s the time? she says. I ought to be there for the final, oughtn’t I?

We will cheer as he holds the cup aloft. We will share his champagne. And he will soar: the single winner in a sea of losers.

She unwraps her bath towel. Begins to dress. Her shining skin. Her golden hair. I button up my shirt. This evening she will be his again. Both Arianna and the tennis club cup.

—What was the answer to the ‘cock’ clue? I say.

—The ‘cock’ clue? No, not ‘cock’. ‘Cuck’.

—‘Cuck’?

—‘Cuckold.’