

FROM FAMEPUNK: PART 1 / US OPEN 1987

Chapter 2 / Old Man Tennis

Sy Morgenstern was an ex-ILGWU optometrist and betting man who'd watched the night match from the front row of the winning player's box. After the press conference he was easily found near the ground floor concession stands in the floor space that was at that time reserved for machers. A knot of men with flashing money clips made noise but kept respectful steps between itself and the man who faced it, almost the shortest and most wizened of them all. Two hours ago Sy Morgenstern had been a well-off man. Now he was rich, and all the other machers knew it. With brevity, Dr Morgenstern dismissed them. "Honey, take it from an expert as the word of God, those frames aren't doing justice to your beautiful face," he told me.

For the second time—as I reminded him. We'd met two days earlier, outside the distant side court site of Emma Jasohn's first round victory. I'd thought we'd made a connection then, not least of all because he'd said we'd made one. He'd been impressed that I carried a pocket handkerchief. Then he'd proceeded to become importunate for my telephone number. As I thrust a notebook scrap with all my numbers at him now, he was gracious: he respected a woman who didn't make herself available to every Tom Dick and Joe Schmoie that asked; because I was a lady, he said. "Listen," he said. "Lemme take you out for a nice lobster dinner."

I said, "Tell me about this bet."

“What bet? Whaddya talking about, bet?” The half-a-G she’d dropped on Helm; the bet I kind of thought he might have known about; the biggest story of the tournament, the tennis year, the Year in Sports, even, possibly: that bet. “Story?” Dr Morgenstern said, “Hah! You call that a story? Listen—you want a story.” He peeled up his shirt sleeve and flexed. He was seventy-six with a right arm from Popeye. He crooked it.

“Join me for dinner and I’ll tell you a real story.”

I reached.

The child was small for her age. When they finally met, he’d been surprised to learn she was already twelve. That was a whole year after people first pointed her out to him and he’d seen her himself, as close to the court as she could get every time he took it, chin on her knees and hands on her elbows, never removing her gaze from what he did—he, Sy Morgenstern, alone—for the entire summer.

It must be understood—and it must be pictured to be understood—that there is such a thing as Old Man Tennis. It flourishes on public courts, especially, as well as those of ancient clubs. Combining elements of both, the Brighton Beach Bath & Racquet Club was renowned as an Old Man Tennis showplace. The ingredients essential to its thriving abounded there: generational rivalries, yes; also decades-long rivalries within generations, as men who’d played to win as boys kept playing the same boys as men. And you can’t win ‘em all: motives for vengeance-seeking would accumulate as inexorably as the names on the lists of all the girlfriends and wives and secret loves and mistresses who’d looked on or not (you can’t

win ‘em all) from the shaded patio sidelines; women of all ages choosing to appear in states of colorful undress—essential. Sure, they’d *ooh* and they’d *ahh* over some young gun with a big serve and hair like a rock star: women liked their flashy. They liked it less when it was heaving exhaustion vomit onto its shoes after going a few rounds in the ring with Old Man Tennis. Youth Left Limp would be the caption here, hackneyed through overuse.

Because sometimes you can win them all. In the game of Old Man Tennis, if you can’t then you aren’t really playing it right. As if entitled by law and public sentiment to assume a ponderous mantle, the experienced Old Man Tennis player should take his position five or six feet inside the baseline at the center of the court and remain immobile while firing appallingly hard spiny groundstrokes that run his opponent side to side in desperate draining bursts of speed to positions from which the only reply is usually a weak one right back up the middle to where the old man waits. Ka-boom, again: his expression, a bronzed compound of dignity and indifference, should not change. He is allowed to hold a cigar or similar prop in his free hand. At least the pale chin-end tail of a bypass scar should be displayed whenever possible, like an amulet of frost. Another not unimportant sign of status is the possession of an achingly unreturnable drop shot used almost too sparingly—weeks apart even—and so undetectable in its execution as to appear to have transcended disguise and attained to sorcery. All this Sy Morgenstern possessed; but at the age of seventy-one, he also had an exploding corkscrew serve with which he shattered opposing bridgework with possibly actionable frequency, and a

rarely employed topspin lob that favored the surrounding air with something very like the smell of rose petals; at its arc's height, everyone would feel themselves inhaling. He was The King: fawned upon, pampered, adored—and possibly worshipped, now, by this motionless golden-eyed idol-like child.

Later still he learned she'd spent the previous summer watching everybody one by one.

The next year, she showed up as a ball kid. “The worst in history!” (An account later and widely corroborated.) One time in the middle of a point, Dr Morgenstern saw a little something in the corner of his eye and turned to find her standing on the court directly behind him, peeking around to examine his grip. When he'd finally sent his opponent sprawling he'd grinned down at her: “Do you mind, kid?” But someone, her mother, was already coming to lead her away to where others were waiting. Her mother: “The most beautiful woman in Brighton.”

So the kid loses the ball kid gig right away but shows up again a week later—this time with a racquet. Through the chain links she's seen, the same kid, still a figure of some notoriety, naturally, with her mother and her mother's racquet heading straight for the class registration cabana where she gets enrolled in baby classes. As her mother is explaining, she has never hit a tennis ball before that day.

Founded in 1907, The Baths, as everyone called the place, persisted from a bygone Brighton Beach lined with hotels and amusements long since replaced by apartment buildings. The wooden Boardwalk stretching east from Coney Island still lined

its long seafront side and the Atlantic Ocean still supplied its mammoth salt water swimming pool—a wonder of the urban century—directly. Admission was cheap, basic membership virtually free. People grew up at The Baths. Every possible summer day and without fail every weekend, families would be heading however far it took to the bottom of Brooklyn—miles from new homes out of town or stops from the same old places by subway or bus or mere blocks, such as Sy and Emma walked—to get there. Once inside, they'd split up: kids to play or kids to lessons, sometimes to competitions in the children's tennis courts or swimming pools; older people to their own pursuits. At The Baths you ate, you drank, you saw your friends. You took a steam, you caught a show or children's talent contest or watched high-divers soar. You played miniature golf and kibitzed at mahjong; you paraded and flirted and loved and fondled and tired of and fled, and watched others do likewise; you quarreled and made up or you didn't; you gossiped and unless you were dead, you gambled. People lived at The Baths: it was a place for living.

But what mattered most was the tennis. Some twenty outdoor hard courts lined the west side of the sprawling complex in blocks bordered by benches and bleachers, chain link fences and concrete paths winding through plantings of beach grass and dahlias. After almost forty years of fighting like a beast against iron weapons, Sy Morgenstern had finally won through to the prime hour on the best outdoor court at The Baths, right below the patio bar atop the premium members' clubhouse (shaded, cool and secret, one of the world's important places). At exactly 2:55pm, trailed by a retinue that

included the two or three victims he'd challenged directly or been challenged by since the previous afternoon, Sy would arrive at the fence door and open it. Here, where at any other time on this or any court could have been expected, with certainty, objections from the parties occupying the court for five more minutes and demands to shut the door, nothing of the kind occurred; it might have been a fact that relinquishing the court to Sy Morgenstern was considered an honor. Many men said so, ducking their heads as they did. Nonetheless, the 2pm slot was known to be truncated and sometimes you heard rumors of grumbling.

He would take the court alone and depending on the weather do his jogs and bends and stretches in his warm-up suit or not; he always wore the suit onto the court, always the best suits. Assuming the better side of the court he'd hit two or three practice serves and then remove whatever portion of the suit the courtside thermometer suggested; in high heat, he also drank water here. Thus signaled to approach, the first opponent would step through the fence door into a one-minute warm-up.

Play to commence. The rules (of immemorial age, untraceable) were these: No changes of end. Challenger to serve first. Loss of two consecutive points forfeits serve; otherwise serve remains. First player to ten points wins. Four ball kids—Sy was one who always got an extra two—would be supplied with a fresh can each and positioned to scurry. Drafted from the club staff in situations of uncommon rancor, an umpire would occasionally preside from a chair. Sy Morgenstern reserved the court for ninety minutes, a booking-and-a-half made in concession to his master status; no one ever booked

“his” last half-hour so he was saving 25% on court fees (but this had always happened, too). Timed, in one of his best months, his opponents were found to have lasted an average of six minutes per contest. Few served more than the two balls guaranteed them; few served twice, for that matter. It should have been more like four or five minutes at most, except he was ever the showman. When play commenced, Sy Morgenstern played to the galleries, prolonging points as tenors add beats to high notes or dying Macbeths drag out their final staggers. Onlookers watched his opponents being wrung out like washcloths and appreciated that in any other player it would have looked sadistic. But with Sy it was art—or at least showbiz.

Once the first beating was well underway, the rest of the challengers would start forming their line outside the court fence door. A few first-timers—local boys on a dare, out-of-town hotshots, other guys’ ringers—might show up among the regulars. It should be noted that Women’s Lib had reached and left its mark upon The Baths. An era when Old Woman Tennis not only grasped at the best times on the show courts, but one of women almost daily challenging in Old Man Tennis, too, difficult to picture, had come and been and passed. Left behind, alongside neglected memories of outrage, linked arms, roundness straining t-shirt fabric, chanting, jeers, were places in a line like Dr Morgenstern’s for women, rarely used now. Which he regretted, having come of late middle age in the thick of that heyday of Amazons: glorious, he’d thought living then. “The fairer sex,” he said. “Possibly!” All too seldom, a rival from those days would reappear in line, the racquet almost

vanishing against her bosom. Always he would wave her forward to the front and in his gallantry take at least ten minutes to beat her.

But for the most part, the daily line was the regulars, men he'd beaten Sy could tell you every single one how many times. Two, twenty, thirty, fifty: wouldn't matter. Some came back grimly, clench-jawed, as if compelled, addicted to the test. Some showed up with answers—the latest in shoes or racquets or trick shots that hucksters had sold them. Some returned to celebrate an anniversary or grandchild's birth, for sentimental reasons; some because a fortune cookie fortune or a traffic omen or a lady in a red blouse had seemed to say *Go back*—some men were at prayer by playing him, others bending to a Fate. And some of these guys were idiots, no question: complete and utter numbskulls always drifting to familiar comforts and routines, finding here adrenaline, attention, failure that felt right because the same. The bum sons of their punished fathers these men were.

For instance, Solly the Fatter spots his friend the Crown Prince Linsky standing in the line at 3:15pm on the Thursday after the Fourth of July, asks how it's hanging and goes, gets behind him, when he hears a low voice say, "Excuse me, sir." He looks down. The crazy ball kid adds, "I'm in front of you."

Solly the Fatter stepped back. He remembered he'd heard she'd gone into the baby class; her mother the looker. "How many lessons you had kid?"

"Three." She paused to add, "Sir."

Prince Linsky wheeled *on* her. "Pause again before saying *sir* to my friend, you little shnook! When's the last time your papa

had a job?”

“Hey. Hey. Hey.” Solly made the appeasing flat-palmed hand gestures like he’d seen big machers make.

The kid shrugged. She’d never even glanced at either of them. Her right hand tightened and relaxed on her mother’s racquet grip as she watched the doctor take another point.

Solly chose to stay in character—Solly the Fixer, Solly the Wise. “Kid,” he said, “you’re gonna get turned into paste.”

“Kids these days don’t care.” Linsky sold hats in his father’s eternally failing men’s hat shop. “They got no idea of respect—never heard of it. *Respect?*” He tried to sound dumber. “*What’s that?* No respect for their elders, no respect” like a morgue saw, his voice; his father always tried to keep him in the back and preferably the basement storeroom “for tradition, no respect for themselves. This kid, whadda she care she gets made into paste?”

He’d lost Solly, who informed the small head, “I don’t think the doctor’s gonna play you.”

“She don’t care, I don’t care, we don’t care—make the whole goddamn baby class into paste for all I care!”

“Hey!” Solly the Fatter led a chorus now. Interest being high in the present contest, its having been the object of important wagers, onlookers filled the seats and paths beside the court fence. The head of the challengers’ line had been noted and heard. “I’m just saying for example,” the Crown Prince subsided. The kid worked her grip.

“Never in a million years.” But Solly wondered. He lived with his mother, comfortably, on her union pension and his winnings. He had a single gift: when he spotted money

changing hands, he could move in its direction. He did so now. “Good luck anyway, kid,” he said in parting and made his way to put a little something on her. Just in case, he told himself. The last game was through. “I got fifty bucks says he plays her.” Fives and tens, arrested in mid-air: a beautiful sight to him.

The vanquished hopeful had already spun past with his daughter and son-in-law in a fireman’s carry, trailing groans. Sy Morgenstern stood at the court fence door, his right forearm almost obscuring the chest of a furious Prince Linsky. A gentlemanly bow for the little girl; for Linsky a door in the face: Solly was on a roll. “A hundred says she wins a point.”

So many takers, he had to fish out his notebook. The kid on the court with her back to him was so small she looked almost invisible, like Sy was hitting warm-up balls attached with rubber bands. A brief interruption: “*Ma! Do I gotta?*” A ball kid, calling umbrage at this view of an indignity too great—having to fetch balls not just for an ex-ball kid, a peer, but for the worst ball kid, ever, in world history: it sounded like all four were at it now, crying through the chain links at their mothers. “*You can’t make us!*” When Solly looked up from his figures again, they were standing in a row inside the fence, looking out, where Dr Morgenstern had sent them. Now Solly couldn’t see. Quiet had fallen. The kid must be about to serve: the ball bounced once, twice; then came a sound at which four sullen heads swiveled as one, followed by some scuffling, a few bits of popping.

“*What the hell was that?*” Solly Leghorn, inhabitant of premium space along the rooftop patio rail and possessor of the loudest, deepest male voice in Jewish Brooklyn, addressed his

reverberating inquiry to no one in particular; everyone else was asking the same thing, just in lower tones. *What the—*

“Five hundred,” the Fatter inserted. “Five hundred says she takes two.”

A bounce, another bounce. This time the four imprisoned children wince and hunch their shoulders as they turn. His fists become the funnel in a masher maelstrom.

“So I’m figuring, let the kid have her moment. So maybe she’s a little fruitcake. So what? Maybe the home life, who knows—at least she’s got guts, at least she loves the game. This from a man who’d had her as a ball kid, believe me, I’m thinking I’d rather be playing her.

“So we’re warming up, me and the kid. The first thing I notice—”

Lesson one: Keep your eye on the ball.

“You ever see a little kid look into a boxful of baby kittens? Like when they’re paddling around in there next to the mama? That’s how she was looking at the ball.” Who wouldn’t have found this disquieting? Sy Morgenstern could not; having sacrificed the weaknesses of other men to become their god on court, he filed his surprise under Slight. The kid’s racquet was too big for her, she had to hold it well up the grip with her right hand and guide every backswing and stroke with her left: the classical game, reinvented in necessity. She hit three serves at the end of their warm-up, otherwise unremarkable except that they had come off the racquet of a tiny twelve year-old child and not a full-grown man. With play to commence, Sy Morgenstern went to his normal receiving spot, two feet inside

the baseline.

“So her first serve lands on the line and almost hits me in the mouth on the bounce. God knows how I get my racquet on it but I block it back, she’s coming in for the approach shot, I’ve gotta retreat, she pins me in the corner and puts the next volley away to the opposite side. I’m describing for you what happened, you have to imagine for yourself pandemonium, a scene, which I can’t tell without your marvelous gift for words. Let me describe: the last time I’d lost a point that way, I hadn’t retired yet. But let me tell you her next serve—because that one, knock knock boom, she serves me a piece of vicious nastiness from the back end of hell that I, Sy Morgenstern, invented! No, you didn’t see it tonight.” He laughs and drains the contents of a lemon slice over a split and steaming tail. “She didn’t need it.”

A natural magpie when it came to grips, spins, approaches, the kid was a Raffles of first serves—a thief of jewels. Her second point serve to Sy Morgenstern, which she got from him, rarely comes back; that it did in this case remains a testimony to the man’s state of fitness and skill.

“I’m Superman to get this serve back, my own Murder Serve of all things she serves me. Next thing I know she’s got me on a string, side to side, corner to corner: Sy Morgenstern, running! She’s claiming the net, she’s hitting volleys, half-volleys, over the shoulder stuff.”

Lesson two: Take many small steps.

“She’s so little and so low, half the time I can only see her through the net, she’s getting to everything, most of it in mid-air, and I’m thinking, I gotta hit the lob, I gotta hit the lob. But

then she drops one short ball in there and I'm thinking, I'm on it! I'm racing, I'm there. And then *she lobs me!*" Sy Morgenstern, his knees refraining, watched the lob land good and shook his head. "Never saw it coming."

What was her third serve like? Nothing spectacular, but he couldn't make hay with it either. Instead, he found himself able to take the position in the middle of the court, five or six feet inside the baseline, that was his—that belonged to him, Sy Morgenstern, as the king of the best at The Baths. "I thought, okay, I'm taking control here, now. Enough." He could see the kid better now as he ran her side to side to side to side, a gleaming gaze conveyed by rushing limbs and multitudes of tiny footsteps. She kept hitting the ball right back to him. Briefly, he felt the planet being restored to its proper rotation; and then it slipped again. "She started to get to me. To my middle she's getting." Employing moves and variations perfected in ballrooms long-demolished, longer shuttered, the doctor demonstrated a fulcrum being shifted, unsteadied. It starts in the torso and drifts to the legs.

"And that by the way is her secret," he said. "But don't print that, I beg of you." He dipped me. I promised.

Leghorn, immortal: "*Yeah well that baby just took three points off Sy Morgenstern!*" Who'd ended up netting a forehand.

"And the thing is, and this is the point of the story, she never did it again. That day, she goes back, she serves, I'm back in my place, she's running—"

Lesson three: Practice.

"She doesn't win another point. That day. After that, she's back in line every other Thursday, I play her, every once in

awhile I feel this push, like she's almost going to knock me off balance again: never happens. And she wins her points—never a game, just points. One day she loves her new drop shot. Next time maybe it's a new serve, or some crazy thing with the backhand. For years now we're playing like that. Okay, I'm telling her finally, win a point now—you know the one I mean. But she wouldn't do it. For two more years, this kid gets in there, puts down her weapons, and shows that kind of respect to an old man.”

It was difficult not to be moved; I was still wondering about that bet, though. “Oh please.” Then he recalled the ending to their fourth ever point, when all you heard after the gamblers' groans faded was one woman's laughter and joyful applause, peals of both, on and on, rising heavenward. “Her mother.” He blinked, turned to me; his oaken forearm slid a little further along the leather seat back of his cream and gold convertible. We were watching the sun rise off Montauk. “Listen. Don't waste your time on the bet—you missed nothing there” (except my deadline, as he well knew). “I covered that bet with my own money, like I always do. She never stood to lose a dime. Now listen to what I'm telling you:

“This kid could beat Sy Morgenstern at his best when she was twelve years old after three—three” I saw them “baby classes. She had me dead to rights.” The man actually crowed. “And she knows it! Dear world, you ain't seen nothing yet.”

He patted my knee.

“There's your story.”