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# Mike

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*For my lovely friends –  
Anna, who first introduced me to Mike,  
and  
Henny, who earns her living getting people  
to listen to him.*



*This is a true story . . .*





# 1

Floyd bounced the ball on the ground three times, held it to his racket for a moment and then threw it into the air in a move he had practised at least a hundred times a day for the last eight years. His body lifted on to his toes, he swung the racket back up and slammed the ball towards the far side of the court.

As he did so, a movement to his right caught his eye. It was only a momentary distraction, but it meant the ball was a centimetre lower in the air when the racket struck and, instead of skimming over the top of the net, it grazed the canvas webbing and deflected fractionally upwards before landing back in the court.

‘Net!’ called the umpire. ‘First service.’

Floyd took a second ball from the clip round his waist and glanced up at the spectators. What he saw didn't entirely surprise him.

It was Mike. Of course.

He was walking along the top row of the tiered seating, his ankle-length black coat billowing behind him in the breeze, and then he turned and began moving down the steps.

Spectators are not supposed to walk around in the stands while a game is in progress. Once a match has started, they stay in their seats and don't move because moving will distract the players. Bouncing the ball a few times, Floyd decided to wait. Presumably Mike wanted to sit in one of the rows lower down, where he would be closer to the action, and there was no point trying to continue the game until he had settled.

Mike walked all the way down the steps but, to Floyd's surprise, instead of finding himself a seat, he opened the gate in the barrier that surrounded the court and walked over to the umpire's chair.

‘When you’re ready, Mr Beresford!’ called the umpire. Clearly, he hadn’t noticed Mike, who was now standing a little behind and beneath him.

Floyd pointed with his racket. ‘You’ve got a visitor,’ he said.

The umpire frowned. ‘Is something wrong, Mr Beresford?’

‘Yes,’ said Floyd, still pointing at Mike. ‘Him.’

The umpire’s frown deepened and he glanced down at Mike before looking back at Floyd. ‘I . . . I don’t quite understand.’

‘Well, I can’t play while he’s on the court, can I?’ Floyd wondered why the umpire was being so slow. ‘Could you ask him to leave, please?’

There was a restive murmuring amongst the spectators, but the umpire made no move to get Mike to leave. His fingers hovered uncertainly over his scoring pad as he looked around.

Floyd’s father came on to the court, a look of concern on his face as he walked over to his son. ‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ said Floyd, ‘except that I can’t play with him there, can I?’

‘Who?’

‘Him!’ Floyd pointed at Mike. ‘Why does everyone seem to think that someone walking on to the court in the middle of a match doesn’t matter?’

Over by the umpire, Mike carefully studied the sky before turning to face Floyd. ‘Why don’t we go for a walk?’ he said. ‘By the sea.’

‘I am not going for a walk!’ Floyd told him firmly. ‘I am playing tennis. Now, would you please just . . . go away!’

‘I didn’t say anything about going for a walk,’ said his father. ‘And I’ll be happy to go away as soon as you tell me what’s wrong.’

‘I wasn’t talking to you,’ said Floyd. A part of his mind was trying to work out why everyone was behaving so strangely. ‘I was talking to Mike.’

‘Mike? You mean he’s here?’ Floyd’s father looked sharply round the court. ‘Where?’

‘There!’ Floyd pointed. ‘He’s standing right over there!’

His father looked at the umpire's chair and then all around the court. 'I'm sorry,' he said eventually, 'but I can't see anyone.'

'But . . . but . . .' Floyd blinked. How could his father not see Mike? He was standing only a few metres away, wasn't he? What did he mean, he couldn't see him? A small tremor of alarm ran through his body as he stared at the figure that, apparently, no one else could see.

'It's all right!' Mike smiled as he raised a hand in a gesture of reassurance. 'Nothing to worry about. I'm a friend.'

'What is it?' Mrs Beresford had followed her husband on to the court. 'What's happening?'

'He says he can see Mike,' said Mr Beresford in a low voice as he pointed to the umpire's chair. 'Over there.'

Mrs Beresford looked in the direction her husband was pointing and frowned. 'But there's nobody there!'

'Yes, there is!' Floyd protested. 'There's Mike.'

'All right, old fellow.' Mr Beresford put an arm round his son's shoulder. 'Let's call it a day, shall we?'

‘No!’ said Floyd. ‘I don’t want to call it a day. I’m playing tennis.’

‘No you’re not. Not this afternoon. Come along.’ Mr Beresford took his son by the arm. ‘We’re going home . . .’ And he led his son gently from the court.

It wasn’t quite the ending to the tournament that either of them had planned.

## 2

Floyd's parents took him to Altringham House, a private hospital on the outskirts of Sheffield that specialized in sporting injuries. Floyd had been there before on several occasions, with problems ranging from a torn neck muscle to a chipped ankle bone, and Dr Willis, who ran the facility, greeted them like old friends. Although it was seven o'clock on a Sunday evening when they arrived, he was waiting for them in reception, and ushered them straight through to his office.

One end of the office was furnished with two enormous leather sofas facing each other either side of the fireplace, and he motioned Mr and Mrs Beresford to one of the sofas, while sitting himself next to Floyd on the other.

‘Your father gave me the broad picture on the phone,’ he said, as a nurse brought in a tray of coffee and sandwiches and placed them on the table in front of him, ‘but you’d better fill me in on the details. What happened exactly?’

Floyd explained how he had been playing in the last match of a three-day under-18s tournament at Scarborough, when Mike had appeared.

‘He was winning the thing hands down,’ put in Mr Beresford. ‘He’d won the first set 6-2, and he was 5-1 up in the second and serving for the match.’

‘So . . .’ Dr Willis turned back to Floyd. ‘You were all set to chalk up another Beresford victory when . . . the invisible man appeared.’

‘He wasn’t invisible to me,’ said Floyd.

‘No.’ Dr Willis helped himself to a sandwich. ‘How did he do it? Appear, I mean.’

‘He was just . . . there,’ said Floyd. ‘I saw him walking along the top of the stand. Then he came down the steps. I waited, because I thought he was just looking for somewhere to sit down, but he came out on to the court and



stood there by the umpire. I couldn't understand why someone didn't tell him to leave. It wasn't till Dad came over that I realized that . . .'

'That no one else could see him.' Dr Willis nodded sympathetically as he finished the sentence. 'That must have been quite alarming for you.'

'Yes,' said Floyd. 'It was a bit.'

'I take it, from the fact that you knew his name, that you had seen this "Mike" person before?'

'Yes. Several times.' Floyd found himself sweating slightly. Dr Willis's questions were gently put, but made him realize how strange all this must seem to anyone else – indeed, how very strange it all was.

'And when you saw him before . . . what sort of things would he be doing?'

'He'd be watching, mostly. You know. I'd see him standing in the crowd while I was playing, and he'd be . . . watching.'

'Had he ever spoken to you before?'

'A couple of times,' said Floyd. 'But that was when I was practising on my own.'

‘And he seemed quite normal?’

‘Yes! I never understood *why* he was there, but . . . he always looked perfectly real.’

‘Hmmm . . .’ Dr Willis sipped thoughtfully at his coffee. ‘Interesting.’

‘What do you think it is?’ asked Mrs Beresford, nervously.

‘Well, that’s what we have to find out, isn’t it!’ Dr Willis put down his cup. ‘I think it would be best if Floyd stayed here tonight and we’ll run some tests on him tomorrow, but I’ll give him a quick check-over now, if that’s all right. Make sure there’s nothing urgent to attend to.’ He stood up. ‘We won’t be more than a few minutes.’

Dr Willis took Floyd through a door at the far end of his office that led into a consulting room, where a nurse with a clipboard was already waiting. He gestured to Floyd to take a seat on the examination couch and stood in front of him.

‘Just a few questions to start with,’ he said. ‘Any headaches recently?’

‘No,’ said Floyd.

‘Blurred vision?’

‘No.’

‘Aches and pains in the muscles?’ The doctor probed with his fingers at the glands under Floyd’s jaw.

‘No.’

‘Any trouble sleeping at night?’

‘No.’

‘Are you taking drugs?’


The question took Floyd rather by surprise. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Never.’

‘I don’t just mean recreational drugs.’ Dr Willis looked carefully at Floyd as he spoke. ‘A lot of sportsmen know that taking certain chemicals will enhance their performance in some way. Have you been . . . experimenting with anything like that?’


‘No,’ said Floyd. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘Sensible fellow!’ Dr Willis smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Well, in that case, I suggest we go back and finish those sandwiches, while Janice here sorts out a bed for you.’


‘Thank you,’ said Floyd. ‘Can I ask . . . I mean . . . Is it serious?’



Dr Willis put an arm on his patient's shoulder as he steered him towards the door. 'I think anything that puts you off your tennis is extremely serious, but I don't think you need to worry too much. Whatever the trouble is, we're here to sort it out and we're rather good at that sort of thing! All *you* have to do is make sure you get a decent night's sleep!'



Dr Willis had the knack of making people believe what he said – it was one of the reasons the Altringham clinic was such a success – and Floyd left the consulting room reassured that, whatever the problem was, Dr Willis would find the solution and that then . . . everything would be all right.



# 3

Floyd's room at the hospital was very comfortable. He had his own television and bathroom, a telephone line to the kitchens in case he wanted anything to eat or drink, and his mother was in a similar room just next door. Mr Beresford went home – someone had to be there to look after the business on Monday morning – but Mrs Beresford had promised she would call him as soon as there was any news.

In the morning, a nurse took Floyd and his mother to a different part of the hospital for the first of what turned out to be a long series of tests, scans, X-rays and exercises on a wide variety of machines. After lunch, he and his mother went for a walk in the grounds and at two o'clock

they went back to Dr Willis's office, where the doctor sat at his desk and announced that the news was good.

'Physically, you're one of the healthiest individuals I've ever come across,' he said, looking at the top page of the open file on his desk. 'If I had your fitness recovery times, I'd be a very happy man I can tell you.'

'There's nothing wrong with me?' said Floyd.

'Nothing at all!' said Dr Willis, firmly. 'No brain tumours, no trace of drug abuse.' He tapped the file with his finger. 'Clean as a whistle!'

'If there's nothing wrong with me,' said Floyd, 'how come I'm seeing someone who isn't there?'

'Yes . . .' Dr Willis smiled. 'Well, now that we've ruled out any physical problem, I think the most likely answer is that we're dealing with a simple mental disturbance, probably brought on by the stresses and strains of your sporting career.'

'A mental disturbance?' Mrs Beresford looked at him anxiously.

'No need to be alarmed!' Dr Willis's smile was as reassuring as always. 'You have to remember that our

Floyd here is no ordinary racehorse! He's a thoroughbred – a highly exceptional animal – and, as such, exceptional things are bound to happen to him.'

'Are they?' said Mrs Beresford.

'Your son has been pushing himself to the limit – that's why he's so successful – but that sort of success tends to come at a price.' Dr Willis gestured to the file on his desk. 'In physical terms that price has been the sort of injuries and muscle strains that you won't see on most fifteen-year-olds, and I'm afraid we have to expect the same sort of wear and tear on the mental level as well.'

'Oh . . .' said Mrs Beresford.

Dr Willis leaned forward in his chair. 'It's what happens to a lot of top athletes. The mental muscles can get pulled and strained in exactly the same way as the physical ones. But fortunately, when this happens, we have people who know how to treat the damage – in the same way we have people who know how to treat, say, a sprained ankle.'

Mrs Beresford still looked worried. 'You say this happens to a lot of athletes?'

'At some time or another, almost all of the really good

ones,' Dr Willis assured her. 'Why only last week I had one of our top marathon runners sitting in that very chair telling me that she couldn't race any more because her feet had turned to stone. Literally.' He gave a chuckle. 'But we sorted her out! She'll be running in Vancouver on Sunday.' He turned to Floyd. 'I'm arranging for you to have a session with our resident psychologist, Dr Pinner. He's a good man. You'll like him.'

'How long will it take?' asked Floyd. 'To sort it all out?'

'Well, you can't hurry these things,' said Dr Willis, 'any more than you can hurry a torn muscle. You just have to give it the time it needs.' He paused. 'You're thinking of Roehampton, are you?'

Floyd nodded. The UK National Under-18s Tennis Championship took place in Roehampton every June and this was the year that Floyd was hoping to win the title. He would still only be fifteen, and no one had ever won the national championship at fifteen before, but Floyd's father was convinced that he could do it.

'Roehampton . . .' Dr Willis consulted the calendar on



his desk. ‘Well that gives us six weeks, doesn’t it? And Dr Pinner’s very good. One of the best. I’m sure he’ll have you sorted by then.’

And, because he was Dr Willis, both Floyd and his mother believed him.

# 4

Dr Pinner was a stocky, broad-shouldered man with a shaven head and the sort of muscles that more usually go with being a rugby player or a night-club bouncer. But his smile was friendly enough as he welcomed Floyd into his office and there was a kindness in his eyes as he cleared a pile of magazines from an armchair and invited Floyd to sit down.

‘So,’ he said, gently removing a cat from his own chair before sitting at his desk and looking across at Floyd, ‘you’re a tennis player.’

Floyd nodded.

‘And a remarkably good one, by all accounts.’ Dr Pinner glanced down at the file in front of him. ‘Possibly

even good enough to win the national championships – if we can just sort out this business of invisible people wandering on to the court while you’re trying to play!’ He closed the file and leaned back in his chair. ‘So . . . any idea who he is, this “Mike” character?’

‘No,’ said Floyd.

‘No ideas at all?’

Floyd gave a little shrug. ‘Well, I did wonder if perhaps he was a ghost.’

‘A ghost?’ Dr Pinner looked surprised. ‘Really?’

‘No,’ said Floyd. ‘Not really. But I don’t see what else he can be.’

‘Hmm . . .’ Dr Pinner tapped his pen on the desk for a few seconds. ‘Can you describe him for me?’

‘He’s tall . . . And he’s got this dark, curly hair. And he wears this long black coat over a T-shirt and jeans.’

‘And how old is he?’

‘I’m not sure. A bit older than me, I think.’

‘And when you look at him, does he remind you of anybody? Anyone you know?’

‘No. Well . . .’ Floyd hesitated. ‘The first time I saw him, he did seem sort of familiar. Like I’d seen him somewhere before. Except I hadn’t.’

Dr Pinner scribbled something in a notebook. ‘And when was the first time? Could you tell me about that?’

The first time Floyd had seen Mike was two weeks after Christmas, in the school sports hall that Floyd used for his early morning practice sessions in the winter. Normally, his father would have been with him, but on that particular Wednesday Floyd’s mother was in hospital having a kidney stone removed and Mr Beresford was doing his best to try and juggle hospital visits, housework and his business – as well as Floyd’s coaching sessions. It meant that, for a week or so, Floyd had to manage the morning practice on his own.

It was while he was setting up the ball-gun to deliver some cross-court shots so that he could work on his back-hand, that Floyd had realized he was being watched. A glass balcony ran along one end of the hall and when Floyd looked up, he saw Mike staring down at him. He

wasn't particularly bothered, but he did think it was odd that someone should be there so early in the morning, and wondered how he had got into the building.

The next morning Mike was there again. And the morning after that, while Floyd was gathering up balls to refill the hopper on the gun, he appeared, not on the balcony, but standing by the wall at the far end of the court.

Floyd decided to go over and ask him who he was.

'I'm Mike,' said the figure, looking slightly surprised, as if it was something he had expected Floyd to know. Looking closely, Floyd did have the feeling he had seen him somewhere before.

'Have I played you at tennis or something?' he asked.

'No,' said Mike. 'I'm not that interested in tennis.'

'So why are you here?'

Mike did not answer.

'Because, frankly, I'd prefer it if you went somewhere else,' said Floyd. 'I'm here to practise, and you hanging around like this is kind of distracting.' He turned on his heel, and went back to finish loading balls into the hopper.

When the machine was ready, and he was walking to the other end to continue his practice, he was relieved to notice that, although he had not heard him leave, Mike was gone.

‘You told your parents about all this?’ asked Dr Pinner.

‘I did that time,’ said Floyd.

‘And what did they do?’

‘Everything.’ Floyd sighed. ‘They contacted the police. The headmaster from the school came and talked to me and said if Mike ever turned up again I was to call him directly . . .’

‘And did he? Turn up again?’

‘No.’ Floyd shook his head. ‘Dad came with me to practices after that. Mum was out of hospital, and Mike never came back. Well . . . not to the sports hall.’

‘But . . . ?’

‘He started coming to matches. If I was playing in a tournament or a competition, I’d see him sometimes in the crowd, watching.’

‘And you told your parents about that, as well?’

‘Not always,’ said Floyd. ‘Mum thought he was a stalker who was going to knife me or something. It made her really . . . upset.’

‘But you didn’t worry about that yourself? That Mike might hurt you?’

‘No. No, I didn’t.’ Floyd couldn’t say why, but he had never thought of Mike as someone who would harm him in that way.

‘Then yesterday,’ Dr Pinner continued, ‘he not only came to watch a match, but walked out on to the court, right?’

‘Right.’

‘And that was the first time you realized that you were the only person who could see him.’

‘Yes.’ Floyd looked down at his hands. ‘I’m not going mad, am I?’

Dr Pinner smiled. ‘I don’t think so. You’re not the first person this has happened to, you know. There are lots of cases on record. They even made a movie inspired by one of them. Called *Harvey*. With James Stewart. Have you seen it?’

‘Who’s James Stewart?’ asked Floyd.

Dr Pinner was about to answer when there was a soft beeping sound and he looked down at his watch.

‘I’ll tell you next time.’ He stood up. ‘I’m going to suggest to your mother that she brings you in for three sessions a week starting as soon as possible. Would that be all right with you?’

‘Sessions?’

‘Yes.’

‘What does that mean? What do I have to do?’

‘You sit in that chair and we talk,’ said Dr Pinner.

‘That’s it?’

‘It’s usually enough.’ The psychologist was moving towards the door. ‘If it isn’t, I may have to fall back on the magic green pills, but the talking usually does the trick.’ Dr Pinner reached the door, but paused before opening it. ‘I meant to ask. Did he say anything to you?’

‘What?’

‘Mike. Yesterday. Did he say anything, when he walked out on to the court?’

‘He suggested we go for a walk,’ said Floyd. ‘By the sea.’



‘Anything else?’

Floyd thought for a moment before answering. ‘Yes. He said there was no need to worry, because he was a friend.’

‘Well, that’s encouraging, isn’t it?’ Dr Pinner was smiling again. ‘Always good to know you have a friend.’

# 5

When they got home, Floyd's father was waiting impatiently for details of how the day had gone, and listened carefully as his wife told him about Floyd being an exceptional racehorse, and how nearly all top athletes could expect the occasional mental disturbance. Then Floyd repeated what Dr Pinner had told him about how seeing people that no one else could see had happened to lots of other people in the past.

'They even made a film about one of them,' said Mrs Beresford. 'It was the one with James Stewart talking to a six-foot rabbit, remember?'

'You're not seeing rabbits as well, are you?' asked Mr Beresford.

‘No,’ said Floyd.

‘But the story was based on a real case,’ said his mother. ‘Everyone thought James Stewart was mad, but he wasn’t.’

‘And Dr Pinner says I’m not mad,’ said Floyd. ‘He reckons if I go to these sessions, we can find out who Mike is and then he’ll disappear.’

‘That’d be good,’ said Mr Beresford. ‘What happens in a “session” exactly?’

‘We talk,’ said Floyd.

‘You talk? That’s all?’

‘Dr Pinner says that’s all it usually takes.’

‘Well, I suppose he’s the expert . . .’ Mr Beresford pulled thoughtfully at an ear. ‘Did he say anything about training?’

‘He advised Floyd to go carefully for a bit,’ said Mrs Beresford. ‘He said he should stay in third gear until this has all been sorted, and not push himself too hard.’

‘So we have to keep this racehorse in third gear, do we?’ Mr Beresford put a hand on his son’s shoulder. ‘A mixed metaphor like that’s not going to be easy!’

‘He reckons mostly I can carry on as normal,’ said Floyd. ‘I can train, do tournaments . . . do whatever I usually do.’

‘And what happens if Mike turns up again?’

‘If he does, Dr Pinner says I should just treat him like I would anyone else. I can talk to him, or ignore him, or if he gets in the way or something, I can just ask him to move.’

Mr Beresford thought about this. ‘Maybe we should ease up a bit,’ he said eventually. ‘Start a half hour later in the morning, perhaps. And we could scratch the club tournament tomorrow. It’s not as if it’s important.’

Floyd insisted he was fine and there was no need for either of these things, but he did agree to see how he felt the next day before deciding whether or not to play in the tournament, and that he would try starting the morning training half an hour later to see if it made any difference.

‘We’ve been driving you pretty hard for a couple of years now,’ said his father. ‘Maybe too hard. Perhaps you need a chance to catch up with yourself.’

\* \* \*


After supper, Floyd's parents presented him with a blue-ringed angelfish. It was astonishingly beautiful, with a coppery body and luminous blue lines sweeping up towards its tail.

'But I didn't win,' he said. 'I only get a fish when I win.'


'Your father and I thought,' said his mother, 'that what you've been through the last couple of days was a lot harder than winning any tennis match. You deserve it.'

'We're both very proud of you,' said Mr Beresford. 'You know that, don't you? I don't think either of us could have coped with what's happened as calmly as you have.'

Floyd took the fish through to his room and began the process of transferring it to his aquarium. First, he let the bag float on the surface for a while, so that the temperature of the water could adjust to the warmth of the tank, then he tipped the bag on one side and allowed the fish to swim out. He watched as it explored its new surroundings, and came to the decision that he would train tomorrow exactly as normal.



Whatever the doctors at the Altringham clinic might say, he knew that he felt fine. He wasn't stressed or tired and he saw no reason why he shouldn't carry on training and playing matches exactly the way he had always done. He felt inside him a fierce determination not to let this thing beat him. He didn't care who Mike was or what he wanted. If he turned up again, Floyd would ignore him and carry on regardless. And he would play in the club tournament tomorrow. He would play and he would win, as he was supposed to do, with invisible spectators or without them.



The one thing he was *not* going to do, was let someone that only he could see ruin the plans of a lifetime.

