

Arlene in a Pickle

David should be dead. He smokes, drinks copious amounts of alcohol, requires insulin, and weighs 80 pounds more than on our wedding day. Yet, at 65, he's still sitting—because that's what he mostly does—on a \$2 million life insurance policy that could vastly improve my life.

My friends have buried partners with far healthier lifestyles. The prospect of my boring husband living on for decades is horrifying. But divorce isn't an option. I won't risk the financial rewards from my multiyear investment in a mediocre marriage. In the meantime, the widower around the corner is a stimulating diversion.

I sometimes fantasize about killing David. Could I smother him with his Mr. Pillow? Poison his dinner? Drug him and send his car over a cliff? At his age, it would be easy to blame a massive stroke or heart attack for his demise.

But murdering your mate without getting caught isn't the same as keeping an affair secret from someone who barely notices you. Plus, the authorities always suspect the spouse first. I need a way to hasten his death without ending up in prison—and losing that life insurance payout.

One option: Persuading him to up his exercise level from nearly zero to, well, anything. But how? Unlike most of our Desert Canyons Retirement Community neighbors, David hates tennis, bicycling, and running. And we barely have sex anymore.

I was stumped until my neighbor Marge gushed about something called pickleball at one of our neighborhood women's wine/whine afternoons. A rigorous workout in the Arizona heat just might be a "natural" solution to my dilemma.

The next morning, I fired up my laptop. Pickleball apparently is America's fastest-growing sport, especially among the retired set. It combines elements of tennis, badminton, and ping-pong. And, according to my research, it can be played by all ages and skill levels, indoors or out, with two to four players.

But can it be fatal? The health and safety page of one pickleball website asked: "Is there an automatic external defibrillator (AED) nearby?" The entry continued: "Unfortunately, AEDs will not always be able to save a victim of Sudden Cardiac Arrest." Bingo.

David didn't look up from his book when I announced I was heading to the supermarket. Instead, I drove our golf cart to the pickleball courts. They were full and the nearby benches were crowded with people waiting to play, including Marge. She hugged me and said, "I finally got you to check out pickleball! Arlene, you really should join the women's league."

I laughed. "I'm just here to see whether pickleball is something David and I could do together."

"Absolutely! Come for dinner tomorrow and we'll talk more."

Still engrossed in his book, David ignored my return as usual.

"The M&Ms invited us to dinner tomorrow night." I said, trying to sound cheerful. "They want to talk about pickleball."

"Who and what?"

"Marge and Milt Moreau. The couple down the street that puts out a flag for every holiday? I said yes."

David looked up. “What the hell is pickleball?”

Time to bait the hook. “It’s a game that might be fun to try together. Marge says lots of people we know play, including Tammy on Saguaro Street.”

“Does the pickle signify a penis? And is it pickleballs?”

I gasped. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s played with a paddle and a ball that looks like a wiffleball. The Moreaus love it, Tammy loves it, and you might love it, too, if you got your mind out of the gutter. Want to head over to the courts to see what it’s about?”

David shook his head. “Let’s just ask Tammy.”

Tammy Fitzgerald, an attractive divorcee who favors tight clothing, lives along the route we typically take for our late afternoon strolls comprising David’s only exercise these days. He times them for when she’s most likely to be working in her yard.

“You must try pickleball!” Tammy exclaimed so breathlessly that I wondered if she was having a medical issue. “And I need a new mixed-doubles partner because I’m about to move into the age 60 to 64 group. Is that too old for you?”

David beamed. The woman was good at flattery, I give her that.

“If you’re going to the M&Ms tomorrow night, we’ll chat more,” she continued.

“Can’t wait!” David chirped. I tried not to look surprised at his newfound interest in the Moreaus’ dinner—or that Tammy also was invited.

As we traipsed home, I told David I should be his mixed-doubles partner, not another woman, and especially not Tammy Fitzgerald.

David blushed. “It’s not good for a marriage to spend so much time together, especially in a competitive situation. And Tammy looks so fit that I bet she’s good. Are you jealous?”

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself that it didn't matter who David's pickleball partner was as long as he made it to the great tournament in the sky.

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Not unexpectedly, dinner was dominated by pickleball talk. My interest spiked when Tammy persuaded David to join a clinic the next day, clearing the way for my visit to the handsome widower.

It wasn't long before David and Tammy practiced daily, usually after 8 p.m. when most of our over-55 neighbors retire for the evening. Initially, he'd return home about an hour later. But the time soon lengthened. He claimed they merely shared a quick drink afterward to assess their performances.

I wondered if that also was a performance. But I tried to focus on the possibility that all his pickleball activity was adding stress to David's dull heart.

I was improving in the women's league, but David still refused to play—or compete—with me. Then he announced he and Tammy had entered a weekend pickleball tournament in Mesa. "I'll bunk with Milt Moreau and some of the other guys," David said as he pulled a soda from the fridge.

I froze. "Why aren't you bunking with me?"

David focused on the can. "I didn't think you'd be interested in going. If we make it to the finals, come over on Sunday."

"Who's Tammy staying with?" I said through clenched teeth.

"Some of the other women, I guess." There was something peculiar in his voice.

I telephoned Marge the next morning.

“David definitely has the pickleball bug,” Marge laughed. “Milt likes hanging out with the other guys as much as the tournament matches. And I get a break, too. Methinks you’re going to enjoy this development.”

I hesitated. “Did you know Tammy is going? They’re playing mixed-doubles.”

“Well, she’s as hooked on pickleball as anyone. If they all make the finals, we can go to Mesa together on Sunday. It’ll be fun.”

What wasn’t fun was realizing that things weren’t going according to plan. If Tammy couldn’t help David fatally overexert himself on the court, I didn’t want the scandal of her increasing his heart rate in the bedroom. Or persuading David to leave me and take his life insurance, pension, and bank accounts with him.

I needed to un-partner Tammy and David, but how? Badgering him about having a female partner instead of a male one wasn’t working.

“I like playing with Tammy and we’re getting good,” he said. “If we do well in Mesa, we move up in skill ratings. Tammy thinks there’s no limit to how far we can go.”

“Why not play with me?” I hated the whine in my voice, but things were serious.

David picked up his book. “I want to win, not play for fun. You understand, right?”

I understood all right. Tammy had to go.

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Our usually silent breakfast was interrupted by the dings of texts flooding our phones. “Ohmygod. I can’t believe it,” David wailed.

I grabbed my reading glasses. “What? Is it one of the kids?”

“No, it’s Tammy. Marge found her dead this morning after she didn’t show for their breakfast.”

“What? She’s younger than us. Was she sick?”

David shook his head. “This is crazy,” he mumbled. “I’m going to the Moreaus to see if they know more.”

When he returned, his eyes were red. “They think she died in her sleep. At least it was peaceful.”

I hugged him. “I know you’re disappointed about the tournament, but maybe I can sub.”

David looked at me like I was crazy. “I’m not thinking about Mesa right now, but if I were, you’re not ranked as high as her. Listen, I’m feeling shaky. My blood sugar is probably off.” I watched him retrieve his insulin kit from the drawer. “That reminds me—I’m low on insulin,” he said. “Can you refill my prescription? I must have miscounted the vials.”

It annoys me that an engineer who lived and breathed numbers for decades can’t keep track of his insulin. But it had provided an opportunity. And since Tammy was 60, it was easy for the medical examiner to surmise that she’d suffered a stroke or heart attack.

Tammy’s passing sparked a flurry of activity: memorial services on the pickleball court and at her church, a scholarship in her name, and meals for her children, who were emptying her townhouse. David returned to the pickleball courts a week later but wasn’t as happy playing with the men. He finally agreed to practice with me but continued rejecting the idea of competing together.

Meanwhile, things were heating up with the sexy widower. If I didn’t want to lose him or David’s money, I needed to find my husband a new pickleball partner to push him harder on the courts.

Susan Broad was quickly moving up in the skill ratings and also didn’t want to compete in mixed-doubles with her spouse. George Broad was known to keep a watchful eye on his wife,

and participated in the men's section of tournaments where Susan and David were most likely to compete. That made her my top prospect.

I signed up for a practice slot immediately after a women's league match where I knew Susan would be competing and made sure David and I arrived early so he could see her play.

"Susan told Marge she's looking for a mixed-doubles partner. She might be a good match with your next skills rating. How about I invite the Broads to dinner to get an idea of whether you're compatible?"

He agreed and the evening centered on pickleball, as expected. When Susan suggested that she and David try a mixed-doubles game, I was ecstatic. Soon they were practicing daily. I appreciated the time David was gone, providing new opportunities to visit my friendly neighbor's bedroom.

Everyone was happy. Until David and Susan began extending their time together. Once again, David claimed coffee or wine afterward was an opportunity to discuss strategy. It made me uneasy, but I knew the more David played, the more he risked a medical event.

Unfortunately, it seemed to have the opposite effect. He was in better shape and paying more attention to his appearance. But he still didn't request sex. I'd read enough to recognize the possible signs of an affair, which meant my marriage—and David's assets—were vulnerable.

I never anticipated that Susan would rupture her Achilles tendon on the court, requiring surgery, or the length of her recovery. Susan's injury also meant David was home more, interfering with my extracurricular activities. I finally persuaded him the best thing he could do for Susan was to maintain his pickleball skills by playing pickup games with the men.

I made my first delivery of comfort soup to Susan while David was on the courts. It took a while for Susan to limp to the door in her walking cast. "I'm so glad to see you," she gushed. "I

can't stand being here alone while George is out. I'd offer you wine, but I'm on Percocet and George removed all the alcohol so I won't be tempted."

"How about I make us coffee?" I asked. As I put the soup in the Broads' refrigerator, I noticed a prescription bottle nearby. "Do you need a pill?"

"No, thanks. Just took one. I'll be in la-la land soon, unless the coffee kicks in. I really appreciate your visit, Arlene. I hope you'll come again soon."

We chatted until Susan drifted off, almost mid-sentence. I rinsed the cups and let myself out. We followed the same routine every few days for the next couple of weeks: I brought a meal and Susan nodded off mid-conversation, usually after reminding me how wonderful David was compared with her husband.

As she was falling asleep one day, she mumbled how much she appreciated David's visits, confirming my suspicions. It was easy to add the pill to her prescription bottle and wait.

A week later, Susan was dead. The Medical Examiner suspected a Percocet overdose and ordered an autopsy. It revealed traces of fentanyl. Desert Canyons was in an uproar. Speculation ranged from an addicted Susan ingesting Percocet laced with the deadly narcotic—easily obtained from a drug dealer—to George murdering his wife.

David had lost a second, and even more proficient, partner. It delayed my plan to push David into the great beyond via an exercise-related heart attack, but his assets were safe.

David was morose. "First Tammy, and now Susan. Women will be afraid to play with me. They'll think I'm cursed."

I stroked his hand. "It's not your fault that Susan ruptured her Achilles tendon and got hooked on pain pills, or that Tammy died in her sleep. The smart women will want to grab you as a partner and move up in the ratings faster."

He shook his head no.

“Or you could play with me,” I said, smiling.

David’s eyes widened. He recoiled as if I’d struck him and barely spoke to me for days. I blamed grief.

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He finally returns to the courts a few nights later when I suggest we hit some balls to take his mind off everything. We’re the only ones there.

“Want to try a game?” I ask. “It might be a good distraction.”

I soon recognize my mistake. David slams the ball so I can’t return it, each time yelling that it’s for Tammy or Susan.

But instead of looking miserable, he grins as he watches me race back and forth, sweating as I struggle to return his volleys.

I beg him to take a break. David refuses, saying he’s finally beginning to feel better. I push on, flailing at his returns. Until I collapse in a cold sweat despite the stifling evening air. It feels like an elephant is sitting on my chest.

“I think I’m having a heart attack,” I moan. “Call 911. Get the defibrillator. Do something!”

He doesn’t move. “Well, aren’t you in a pickle now, Arlene?” he calmly says. “Without the defibrillator, you’ll be dead soon. Just like my partners.”

As everything is fading to black, I realize David was paying attention after all.

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