

Orange juice in the morning, tomato juice by noon, tonic through the afternoon, straight from the freezer at night, it all adds up to a bottle of vodka a day, that and the beer.

I sit in the 19th Hole and watch Tommy move behind the bar, a slow and deliberate man, careful to make his drinks just right, measuring out the doses by some private mysterious law, a jigger here, a double there, all done as if he is a doctor prepping his potion at an operating table. Tommy nods at my empty glass and I nod back for another. For me he pours the vodka up near the top and levels it off with a splash of tonic. He knows my day ahead.

Tommy nods over my shoulder. He is a man of few words and those words are usually 'yep' or 'nope'. Here he says 'yep' and I turn for a look.

Mrs. Harmon is at a corner table with her stepson and they are waiting for Mr. Harmon. She wears her turquoise golf outfit, a light blouse and long shorts, even her visor and shoes match, and she has her dark hair up in a severe ponytail. Today Mrs. Harmon reminds me of a ripe fruit, maybe an avocado. She sips at her white wine and talks to her stepson.

Tommy whispers to me, "Unplayable lie."

I leave my drink on the bar and wander over to say hello. Mrs. Harmon gives me her careful smile and polite stepson Ben stands to shake my hand. He thanks me for joining them for a round on my day off. Mrs. Harmon smells of sand and coconut, her Sunday scent.

“Lovely day,” she says.

Outside it is a Carolina sky, that bright, delicate blue. Wispy clouds dot the horizon. I’d hoped for rain, a real deluge, a tornado or two, weather big enough we would have to close the course, rather than spending an afternoon with the Harmon family. They are the town’s royalty and they live on a high hill in a giant white house, porticos and Greek columns, and you can see it from anywhere you go. We call it the Acropolis.

I’ve been there once, the Acropolis, for a staff party, all of us up there on a Tuesday afternoon, standing by the big outdoor pool and drinking mimosas and margaritas, listening to Mr. Harmon give a long speech about history and honor. He raised his glass and toasted the South and its culture. There was a rented Port-O-Let by the diving board. We weren’t allowed inside the house, even after it began raining a little, huddling like refugees under a party tent as the drops caused ripples across the blue pool water. It was us and the bartender and the margarita machine all crunched together. Mr. and Mrs. Harmon had disappeared inside.

I do like Ben, a sturdy fourteen year old, and his stepmother and I have a thing, and his father is the town tyrant, owning the bank, the pharmacy, whatever else, but Sundays are my own time and I usually spend the day on the couch in front of the television, just biding my hours with my vodka and my football, maybe a woman by my side, maybe not. Though I have no choice, when Mr. Harmon calls you answer.

Mrs. Harmon asks if I like her new outfit. "Everything matches," she lowers her voice, "everything." Her stepson hears her and rolls his eyes.

Ben is by far my best student. He has a wicked three wood where the ball explodes off the club and streams into the sky and levels at its apex before falling to the fairway two hundred yards ahead. It is magical. It makes you want to write poetry. My job is to get the rest of his game to come about, especially the short clubs around the green, and he's getting close, except the putter, which continues to give him all kinds of trouble, but that happens to all of us.

The 19th Hole is packed on this Indian summer Sunday, everyone happy and safe, the club members at home with their wealth and privilege, spending their afternoon among their own kind, reveling in the best life can offer, sheltered from anything even suggesting the big bad world outside the guarded iron gates. Many of them are my students and when I survey the room I see hooks, shanks and slices. Some give me a slight nod, others ignore me. I am a hired employee of the club, above most of the staff but still nothing more than a servant.

Mrs. Harmon stares at me. Her green eyes have that searching look, as if she expects me to read her mind. Those, I know, are thoughts better left alone. Under her polished surface roams an accident waiting to happen. Drama should be her middle name. Her painted nails tap the table. She waits for me to return her stare. It is a game she plays and I know it well.

Ben checks his watch, nervous his father might be late, our start time coming soon, and he is not a boy who handles stress well. He leaves his putts short all the time, hesitant with the blade, timid as he bends over the ball. He needs a girl, something sweet, a girl more physical than emotional, a girl who knows what to do and how to do it. That would set him straight.

Then again, we all need that, no matter who we are.

Back at the bar I take a long swallow at my drink and I feel Tommy keeping an eye on me. It is a troubled eye, one laced with care and concern. "Take the drop," he says, "mind the hazard." Sometimes Tommy and I speak in golf runes. I reply that I have relief from an immovable obstruction. This actually makes Tommy smile and that makes my day. He is not one who smiles much.

I have him make me just one more and carry it to the table. Mrs. Harmon keeps her stare going. Ben tells me he hit the practice green for a while and he thinks he has his lag down right. Behind them I see Mr. Harmon enter the room and everyone seems to take a breath. The club has a little junta, a secret group inside the board of directors, and these men control everything as if they are generals in some third world country, commanding all that goes on inside this

private enclave, and they are led by Mr. Harmon, him and his silver spoon pomp and prosperity. It is easy to imagine him wearing a uniform with hundreds of medals dripping from his chest as he strides across the barroom floor, his eyes taking in the crowd, as if sizing up the members and finding them lacking, a tyrant among his toadies .

“Hank,” he says to me. To his son and wife: “Ben, Claudia.”

Mr. Harmon, in his pressed slacks and ironed golf shirt, club crest on the breast, asks me if I am good. I say sure. He always seems to vibrate with barely hidden rage, as if someone is about to steal something valuable. He taps his toe, standing over the table, while Mrs. Harmon arranges stuff in her turquoise purse. He tells me women are mysterious things.

He is the type of man who calls women things.

As we leave Tommy whispers, “Stay out of the rough.”

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8:30 Tuesday and Thursday mornings I sit in my living room and drink my vodka and orange juice and wait for the sound of tires on the gravel drive and then heels coming up the walk. Mrs. Harmon doesn't knock. She locks the door behind her. She turns her back and begins removing her clothes, carefully placing them on the chair, smoothing the silk and linen to keep wrinkles out. My duty in her undressing happens at the end. She stands very still and lowers her head and lifts her hair, revealing the nape of her neck, and I unhook the clasp of the chain

that holds the small gold and diamond cross that nestles in her cleavage. There is no How are you. There is no Good morning. She lies on my bed and stares up at the ceiling while I get my clothes off. Our accoutrements are ready and waiting on the bedside table. She likes household objects, a hairbrush, a spatula, sometimes a clothespin or two. Romance won't ever enter the equation. She pulls me to her.

Now I can call her Claudia. She wants her name whispered, spoken with lust, passion, adoration, liking me to shout Claudia just as she begins her climax, hearing her name echo around my threadbare bedroom. Claudia. Claudia. Claudia.

After we are done she likes a cup of coffee while she dresses. Her coffee must be made just right, dark and heavy with a hint of sugar.

"Umm," she says, "perfect."

I hold her coffee while she touches up her makeup in my bathroom mirror, taking her time to get her face perfect. She has her purse in my sink and she reaches down to find the blush, the rouge, the eye shadow, watching herself in the mirror as if she is painting a masterpiece.

"Hank," she says, "do you like me, like me as a person?"

"Sure," I say, adding a soft flat Claudia.

And now we talk, mostly about her, her and Mr. Harmon, her favorite subject, her common complaint, his cruelty, his demands, his mistresses, those women who will do what she won't do, and it is here she becomes almost

human for a while, showing a side of her kept under heavy wraps. These are the moments I wait for during our mornings together. The sex is okay, pleasant given her parameters, but when I sit and drink my vodka and tomato juice and listen to her go on about her life holed up in our town's Acropolis I come close to liking her a whole lot. She knows what she is, what she has done, though that doesn't mean that she has to take it laying down. She doesn't do too well being on the bottom.

She is the second wife, his quality pick. Mr. Harmon found her in Atlanta, where she was doing just fine, thank you very much, working in sales at a brokerage firm, engaged to a local celebrity, and he stole her away, courting her like a southern gentleman, sending flowers and buying diamonds, his chase resembling a business deal, a merger and acquisition plan, and these days she feels like a bought commodity, a piece of property, a piece of art, an object, an investment, she laughs, a piece of ass.

Using a golf term, she is an albatross, at least physically, and a bogey to snowman on the emotional side.

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Mr. Harmon partners with me, which isn't good. I'd expected he'd pair with his wife and I'd have Ben in the cart by me, a simple way to pass the day, my biggest worry being how to make small talk at the tees and greens, keeping the time light and friendly, trying to get through the round as smoothly as possible, but Mr. Harmon occupying the driver's

seat, because he has to drive, because he's Mr. Harmon, that pretty much ruins everything.

At the first tee Mr. Harmon practices his level, compact swing, arcing the club, making a swishing sound like a machete cutting through the clean air. He takes first honors and his drive lands halfway down in the middle of the fairway. He plays corporate golf, safe and careful, steady drive, long iron near the green, easy chip within one or two putts to the hole, ending in a par or bogey, perfect for business out on the course, his game secondary to the purpose at hand, bled dry of anything creative and dangerous, staying out of nasty problems and embarrassing situations. He is, above all, a businessman.

Ben hits next and his shot finishes a bit further. I hold my drive back so I am behind Mr. Harmon and his son. It is best that I play a little bit less; no reason to show off and better them. I don't get paid for that.

Mrs. Harmon hits from the ladies tee and her shot straddles the rough until it finds the near side bunker. She lets out a funny Dammit!, full of off-key frustration.

At the bunker, addressing her ball, she does a little wiggle with her rear end and it's apparent what she means. Mr. Harmon watches me watching her. He asks, "You like that?"

Well, of course I do. And who wouldn't? Golf, by its nature, is a sexual game. You have your chips, your approach shots, your lags, your high fades, your

low draws, and you are always trying to get it in the hole. But he is Mr. Harmon and she is Mrs. Harmon so I do a half-shrug and leave it at that.

I tell Mrs. Harmon to keep her head down and spread her legs a bit more.

Mr. Harmon gives me a short glance, as if I have been too clever. He says the course looks in good shape for late in the season. He says he knows my contract is up for evaluation at the end of the year. He says I should expect some competition, not much, but some.

Golf is in a bad way all across the country, clubs closing down left and right, the game suffering an extended twilight, hardly catching an ember in the ashes left over after the great economic debacle. Golf, they say, takes too long, that it's too expensive and too hard to play. Well, those are its benefits, its charms, why you learn the game. We get sent faxed resumes from just about every area code, golf pros searching for employment, and this is a plum position, maybe not Augusta or Riviera, but it's steady and it's comfortable and it pays well.

At the third green Sarah, wearing her short-shorts and tube top, shows up in the beer cart. Mr. Harmon looks at her like she's naked. Mrs. Harmon doesn't acknowledge her existence. Ben stares at his feet. Sarah tells me she's had a good tip day, a nice surprise this late in the season. I order two tall Buds. Mr. Harmon gets a Heineken. Mrs. Harmon has white wine. Ben can't get his eyes above Sarah's tube top.

Mrs. Harmon, as she brushes by me, whispers that we need to talk. Her husband points his canned beer at Sarah and says it is always a pleasure. Ben takes me to the side and asks if he should use his driver or three wood off the fourth tee. I drink my Bud.

In the fifth fairway Mr. Harmon asks me if Sarah has fake tits. He thinks they look real. He likes them like that, big and firm and real. He says his wife's are big and firm and fake, though the job is so well done that it takes a practiced hand to know the difference.

I have no idea how to respond to any of that and it's obvious he doesn't expect me to. He wants me to ruminate on the idea. I worry why.

I'm immune of tit lust, after being on the tour, all of a season, where when you arrive at a new town you ask where 'the bar' is before you ask about the course, 'the bar' meaning where women, mostly blond and lower middle-aged, go to meet golfers. Every town and city is the same. Golfers do something for certain kinds of women.

I learned to like the situation more than the woman and the woman more than her body parts. Call me ass backwards.

Mr. Harmon, as he watches Ben ready an approach shot, asks me about his son, if he has enough talent to think about sending him down to a Florida golf camp next summer, and I suggest we wait until spring to see where he is. The Florida camps can be rough if you don't have the right stuff. What he is really asking, without saying it, is if Ben has what it takes to think about a pro career,

and that is not an answer I want to give. Of course the boy doesn't have a chance. His three wood might be miraculous but true professional golfers, the ones you see on Sunday TV, those are as rare as shorting a par four dogleg left and the ball hitting the green and rolling across for a hole in one. They are born, anointed, crowned, not culled or taught. They are freaks, savants, mutants, and I should know. I'm not one of them. You always know best what you can't be.

In the cart Mr. Harmon says they went to church this morning. He says Reverend Jones gave a great sermon, describing what we need to lead a big life. We must have faith, obedience, discipline, honor our work and family. We must be firm and dedicated, valiant and determined. I expect to hear the word vindictive. That is my word for religion.

They, the Harmons, are Baptists, the Southern kind, and they attend services every Sunday, like pretty much everyone else at the club. There are a few Methodists here and there, some Lutherans, keeping a low profile, an uncomfortable minority hiding among the chosen elite.

Mr. Harmon says, "You keep what you take in life."

He gives me a look like I should know what he is talking about while we are waiting for the group up ahead to play out of trouble. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a hard squeeze. His thumb and fingers press in as if he is trying to send me a silent message.

"God watches," he says. Adding: "So do I."

He grips my shoulder even harder. He must know it hurts, but he doesn't care. I stand firm and try not to wince.

Mr. Harmon slices one into the trees and I know there is no way he will ever find it and I watch him walk around like he is searching and then I see him drop a ball out of his pants pocket onto the short rough and he acts surprised as if it is a miracle from heaven.

"Look at that," he says. "Who would've thought?"

Mrs. Harmon sprays the ball everywhere. There's not a trap or hazard she doesn't find and by the sixth hole she's given up trying to hit out of trouble and she just finds a new ball out of her bag and hits it from where her last shot disappeared.

Ben plays steady, but he's trying too hard, going for greens when he should lay up, swinging for flags when he should settle for the middle of the green. He never lags, every putt heading for the cup and sliding too far by. He's lucky to be only four over par.

I miss shots here and there, doing my best to screw up enough to keep even with them. Mrs. Harmon has stopped keeping score and when I look at Mr. Harmon's card all I see are omissions and small white lies.

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At the turn Mr. Harmon takes a call, standing over by the practice green like a statue, probably thinking he's a David or Zeus, while he whispers in his phone like he's giving what they call pertinent information. Ben talks to me a bit

about his front nine, looking for instruction, concerned with his five iron on the fourth and his mugged wedge out of the greenside bunker on the seventh. He's good at taking criticism, taking it in, letting it slide off, and he listens patiently while I tear apart his course management, how he tried to do too much with too little.

"It's my dad," he says. "I get nervous."

I think, Don't we all, but say, "Pretend he's not here."

Ben says he wishes he could.

Home must be rough, from what Mrs. Harmon tells me, the house run like a bank, a business, the country club, Mr. Harmon ruling the roost with a bark and a glare. She says there are times where she and the boy hide in their bedrooms afraid to make a sound, wary of incurring the wrath of one of his dark moods.

She sends Ben off for another white wine and she nods to Mr. Harmon and lowers her voice. "He's talking to her. I can tell."

Her is the new mistress, a woman in Charlotte, where he supposedly goes on business twice a week, a constant subject during our after sex conversations the last couple of times. She's worried about this one. It's been going on for a while.

"He's a beast," she says.

I try diverting the conversation, telling her she needs to straighten her shoulders and pause before she addresses the ball and relax as she begins her

back swing, that way, if she's lucky, she will be able stay somewhere near the fairway.

"He knows," she says, and the way she says it doesn't leave any doubt. "I told him last night."

"Why did you do that?"

"He wanted me to do something, you know, something, and I wouldn't do it and he got mad. And I got mad. I said he should get his Charlotte thing if he wanted to do that. He made me do it."

"He made you tell him?"

"No." She shudders. "He made me do what he wanted. Somewhere in there I told him. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Christ. You're sorry?"

"He's not happy."

"What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. It won't be good. I am so sorry."

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I have two water bottles in my bag, one for water and the other filled with vodka and tonic, and I had planned to leave the second one alone during the round, trying to remain half-sober while I am with the Harmons, but after her little revelation I am sipping at the thing like it is my last drink before being led to the guillotine.

We're on the par five 12th, in the middle of the fairway, and Ben and Mrs. Harmon have laid up on their second shots, and Mr. Harmon motions me over with his hybrid, asking me if I think he can find the green. I say he better hit it solid. I tell him to at least wait for the forward group to finish putting into the hole.

He makes a couple of practice swings and then balances the head towards me, pointing it like a pale harpoon.

"Let's say you were screwing my wife." He holds my gaze. "Let's say it was hypothetical. How would you go about it? Would you be on top or go on bottom or would you go at it from behind?"

I say I know he knows.

"I don't know shit. Tell me what I know."

I keep my mouth shut. The group ahead has finished putting and left the green, their carts already by the next tee box. Ben and Mrs. Harmon sit in their cart, watching us, waiting for us to hit. Mrs. Harmon has her visor off and she is adjusting her ponytail, setting it right.

"Come on, dad," Ben calls.

"I suggest from behind, for obvious reasons."

He hits a nice shot, his ball landing hole high ten feet from the flag, fair distance for an eagle.

As he drives he grabs the vodka and tonic water bottle from me and sniffs it and says he thought so. "Drinking is for cowards. Are you a coward?" I say no.

“Well, I think you are. Tuesdays and Thursdays. You think people don’t see her Mercedes in your driveway?”

So he always knew.

The breeze through the valley on this beautiful afternoon smells of leaves slowly going orange and yellow but it also carries a scent of sewer and decay. A gentle autumn can’t disguise that winter is coming.

“I should maybe thank you. I was thinking about it but you got me started, getting my finances in order. There’s ways around the pre-nup that will break her heart. She’ll never know what hit her. I’m not going to thank you.”

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I sit in the 19th hole and watch Tommy clean up behind the bar. He is an efficient man, stacking glasses, toweling the sink and granite, polishing the gold and silver face plate, the whole time eyeing me as if I am about to dissolve and disappear. Behind me Carl the waiter is busy running a carpet sweep under the tables.

I can hear the night staff and their vacuum cleaners and floor shine machines echo in the empty clubhouse. My bag and everything out of my locker are already in my car. They will send my last check in the mail.

Tommy sighs. It is one of those dark sighs that you normally hear at funerals. “Abandoned ball,” he says, “two stroke penalty.”

He makes me one last drink, telling me it has been an honor.

