

The Boy Behind The Tree

a short story by MARK BRAZAITIS



LEE ANN MCGUIRE

My father and I were on the third tee at Wildwood Golf Course when a boy in a red golf shirt stepped from behind an oak tree next to the ball washer. “Mind if I join you?” he asked.

He was about my age, fifteen, although there was a toughness about him — the squint in his eyes, the wiry muscles in his neck and forearms — that I associated with older boys. He no doubt rode his uncle’s motorcycle, even though he was too young to have a license, and had access to drugs and girls. I was jealous of him immediately.

My father waved the boy onto the tee and said, “I had a birdie on number two. Tell me you beat it, and you’re either lying or you’ve got a tour card in your pocket.”

The boy smiled, not in the smug way I did in response to my father’s attempts at humor, but with genuine amusement. His teeth were crooked enough to give him a rough appearance but not so crooked as to make him look like a hillbilly. (I’d been wearing braces for two years.)

“I had a par,” the boy said. “I was putting for birdie, but a leaf got in the way. Stopped my ball an inch short.”

“You sure it wasn’t Bigfoot who did it?” my father asked.

The boy’s laugh sounded like a backfiring engine. I could tell he and my father were going to be friends. And I was right: Over the next sixteen holes, my father told Jack — we learned his name on the fifth fairway — all the golf jokes he’d told me at least twice, but this time they received an enthusiastic reception. When Jack told his own, raunchier, jokes, my father laughed at every one of them.

Wildwood was the only course in our hometown of Sherman, Ohio, that didn’t require golfers to use carts, which is why my father liked it. He needed the exercise, he said, because of his blood pressure and his cholesterol level and his indulgence in the occasional cigarette. After we’d played a round, my father and I would stop for a Coke and a hot dog in the clubhouse — a far-from-heart-friendly snack, it’s true, but my father always said we’d “earned it” — and I would catch him up on my life.

My parents were divorced, and I saw my father only once every month. His construction company had grown so large that he devoted most of his daylight hours to it. But he’d once had the time to assistant-coach football and baseball at the high school where I was now a sophomore. In his fantasies, he had a son who played quarterback in the fall and shortstop in the spring, with scholarship offers pouring in from colleges across the country.

I believe these fantasies started when I was in the womb. The year I turned five, he signed me up for every sports camp open to boys my age. Although I didn’t mind throwing or kicking a football, I dreaded being tackled. Wherever the action was on the field, I stayed as far from it as I could, as if I might catch a disease. I liked baseball even less, afraid of getting beamed by a pitch or hit by a line drive. Coaches were happy to let me sit on the bench, and I was happy to be safe from harm and humiliation. Even so, my father came to every game and was sometimes rewarded by my appearance in the fourth quarter or the ninth inning of a lopsided matchup. He

called me a “late bloomer.”

When I was in the eighth grade and my sister was a senior in high school, our father and mother announced they were divorcing. During the “Year of Acrimony,” as my sister came to call it, our parents seemed to forget about us. My sister applied to colleges out west and got accepted by the University of Arizona. Meanwhile I severed all my connections to athletics, even though I knew I risked widening the divide between my father and me. Turning in my last uniform was like handing over a prison outfit. In the fall I joined the chess club and the drama club and was appointed secretary of the English club — an unprecedented honor for a ninth-grader.

My father, who was forty-four, set up bachelor’s quarters in an apartment complex on the edge of Party Town, the student-dominated section of Sherman, and attached himself to a red-haired hardware-store employee named Sierra. But he hadn’t given up on making his son an athlete. He had a new plan for me: golf.

“In golf, you don’t have to be afraid of the ball,” he said. “In fact, the ball should be afraid of you.”

But I was no better at golf than I was at any other sport, and I looked forward to the end of a round as if it were the end of a school day.

So when my father allowed Jack, whom I disliked at first glance, to play with us in our first round of the year, it gave me one more reason to hate the game. Although Jack’s golf bag looked like a hobo’s sack and his clubs appeared to be made of bamboo, he proved himself a good golfer — no, an excellent golfer. No matter that Jack’s way with words was to English what McDonald’s is to fine dining, he hit shots my father whistled at the way construction workers whistle at women.

Jack inspired my father to play his best. I’d never seen the old man so focused, so intense, so joyful. By the twelfth hole — a par four with a creek curling in front of the green — my father and Jack had begun to bet: twenty-five cents a hole. Both of them cleared the creek with their second shots. I put my third and fourth shots in the muddy middle of it. “You’re scaring the fish,” my father said with a smile, and Jack laughed his rat-a-tat-tat laugh. My father had dramatic features: deep-set eyes, a long nose, and muscles he’d toned as a boy on his family’s farm outside of Sherman. His hair was black, like Jack’s. In fact, the two of them looked more than a little alike.

For the rest of the round, my father said perhaps a dozen words to me. It was as if I weren’t playing the same course as he and Jack. They’d blast their tee shots, and I’d dribble mine. As I hacked away in the rough, they stood together on the fairway, conferring in whispers. Jack was nearly as tall as my father, who was at least three inches taller than I was, and he had already picked up one of my father’s favorite expressions: “Sing hallelujah to the Lord of the Links,” shouted after an especially good shot.

The only time Jack acknowledged me was when, on the sixteenth tee, I took a vicious swing — born of a growing frustration with how the day was going — and missed the ball entirely. “Strike one,” he said under his breath, and my father

chuckled before pretending to cough.

At the end of the round Jack owed my father a quarter. My father paused, perhaps to contemplate the penny-sized hole in the sleeve of Jack's worn-out golf shirt, then said, "We'll keep a running tab. I'm sure we'll see each other again. I hope so, anyway."

As Jack turned to go — headed away from the parking lot, which meant he had come without a motor vehicle — my father said, "Why don't you join us for a hot dog and a Coke?"

I'm sure my face revealed exactly how I felt about the prospect of Jack's joining us. But Jack didn't look at me. "I appreciate it, Mr. Graver," he said. "Maybe next time."

"Definitely next time," my father said.

Giving a short wave, almost a salute, Jack turned and walked off into the April afternoon.

"He probably has work he needs to get to," my father said, "like I did at his age."

After picking up our hot dogs and Cokes at the clubhouse cafe, we sat on the veranda overlooking the eighteenth green. My father said if Jack didn't play golf for his high-school team, it was a shame. "He could probably play college golf right now. I wouldn't be surprised if he's being recruited." My father wondered whether Jack played other sports. "He looks like a second baseman," he said. "Or a scrappy third baseman. If he plays football, I bet he's a cornerback."

We were done eating by the time my father turned his deep-set eyes to me. "So, what's new in your life?" he asked.

Ordinarily I would have unburdened myself of whatever was on my mind: girls, classes, drama club, girls. But I felt a wild resentment over all the time he'd spent talking about Jack, so I shook my head. "Nothing much," I said. "We should go."

My father and I played again in May, and Jack met us on the course in the same spot. I accused my father of arranging the meeting, but he denied it. When, during our round, my father asked Jack if he bothered to pay greens fees or simply started his round at the third hole, Jack blushed and apologized, as if he had somehow insulted my father with his transgression. My father laughed and said he used to sneak onto courses all the time when he was Jack's age. "Besides," my father said, "good golfers barely disturb the course. It's the duffers who tear it to shreds and keep the greenskeepers busy."

Jack laughed his backfiring-engine laugh and shot me a glance, perhaps to see if I, unquestionably a duffer, had taken offense. I fired back a grin. Two days earlier I'd kissed Jessica Sanders, the treasurer of the English club. We'd been discussing D.H. Lawrence when it happened. Golf seemed inconsequential compared to Jessica's red lips and braces-free teeth.

As before, my father and Jack ribbed one another and applauded each other's shots while I trailed them, hacking away as if my clubs were farm tools. I tried to think about Jessica — about how her lips had felt, about when I would kiss her next — but my father and Jack's conversation intruded like an alarm clock into a dream.

On the eighteenth tee I hit my ball deep into the woods and went after it, in no rush. When I emerged several minutes

later, I saw my father and Jack on the green, three hundred yards distant, finishing their rounds with tap-in putts. They slapped each other five, then walked off the course as if they'd forgotten all about me. Perhaps they had.

I didn't bother finishing my round but marched straight to the parking lot and stood beside my father's Mercedes, arms crossed, until he came along, pulling his golf bag. "No Coke and hot dog?" he asked, but he had already unlocked the doors. "I didn't think you were ever coming out of the woods," he said.

"I was considering becoming the next Thoreau," I replied.

"One of golf's pioneers," he said. It could have been a joke, but I'd have bet that he didn't know who Thoreau was.

(end of excerpt)