



A Golfer's Story

Mind if I join you?" The voice behind me was gentle.

Not wanting to add an unknown single to our threesome of friends, I couldn't force a smile, so I didn't turn around at first. "Sure," I said, still trying to look busy in the pocket of my bag.

Slowly, when I could muster up some friendliness, I turned around and straightened up. The first thing that caught my lowered eyes were his shoes—Foot Joys, an older pair but clean.

"Evan," I said, stretching out my hand to shake his.

"J," he said, and his grip was strong.

"Good to have you with us," I lied.

The other guys introduced themselves, then we all hit drives in the fairway, or near enough to count. We climbed in the carts and headed out to our balls.

WRITTEN BY JEFF HOPPER

I'll make small talk for a while, just to sniff a guy out, so I said, "Jay. Is that J-A-Y?"

"No, actually. Just J."

"Go by your initial?"

"Yeah. Guys don't know what to do with my real name. Especially out here."

I didn't know how I was supposed to respond to that, so I gave it one of these: "Really?"

He didn't take the bait. "Really."

It wasn't much of an answer, but I didn't worry too much about making anything of his answers. After all, he was just our fourth. And you know how fourths are. Even if they're OK to play with, they really are here today and gone tomorrow.

The round was pretty uneventful for the first few holes, all of us pretty much minding our own business. Except I was keeping a close eye on Bryce. He and I had a game, and it was a grudge match for me because he'd nearly emptied my wallet last time out.

J was doing just fine himself. He wasn't the best player I'd ever seen, but he knew what to do with himself out there. He wasn't mouthy and he wasn't weird. He complimented us on our good shots and thanked us when we did the same to him.

But on the fifth hole things got ugly. To start, I rolled my drive. Not a good hole to do that on. There's a little ditch about 30 yards off the tee, and my ball went right down into it. I hit a provisional, but I wasn't happy.

We drove the cart up to the ditch and I walked along the edge looking down in to see if I could spot my ball. J followed right along behind me, then doubled back to give the creek a second look.

In a moment, he said, "I think I got it." Just as I turned around, he jumped down into the ditch, his head showing just above edge, then he reached down and picked up a ball. "Pro V with a black line, right?" he called, then he tossed the ball up on the grass.

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Could I have played it?"

"Trust me, no way."

Trouble was, I didn't trust him, not without seeing it myself. But now that he'd thrown the ball out, I had no choice. It was off to my provisional, where I'd be hitting my fourth shot. I was not pleased, not at all. I'm a guy who

likes to make my own decisions, even if this stranger was sure he knew what he was talking about.

Then it just got worse.

I bladed my approach, sending it screaming over the green—and the fifth is one of those holes with a gaping bunker behind the green.

I cut loose with a choice word or two, the kind my wife is always screaming at me not to say around the kids, then I cut loose with my 9-iron. Problem was, it landed on the cart path about 40 yards down the line and snapped in two.

J hit his approach onto the green, then quietly came back to the cart and put his club in his bag. He knew better than to say anything. At least for a little while.

We rode in silence for a hole or two, but after we'd teed off on eight and were heading down to the par-3 green, J said, "Evan, about that fifth hole back there..."

Surely, he wasn't about to apologize. I couldn't have lived with that. I blurted out, "Ah, it happens. Never should have hit that stupid drive in the first place."

"That's not what I meant."

"No?"

"What I meant was, everything OK at home, I mean with your family and everything?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, a guy gets all crazy like that about a game, it makes you wonder if everything's all right for him. Usually it isn't."

"Oh, I get it," I said, "you're a psychologist."

"No. Carpenter, actually."

"Really? You've got nice touch around the greens for a carpenter. Guys I've played with work construction, they hit it a long way, but they've usually got nothing around the greens."

"Um, thanks. But what about what I said?"

"Everything's fine," I lied.

"I don't think so," he said calmly, and he left it at that. Instead he changed the subject and asked me a question.

"That Scotty Cameron putter of yours, do you think I might try it?"

"I guess so." I know my answer sounded reluctant.

"I keep hitting greens," he explained, "but I can't seem to make any putts. Pars are nice, you know, but a guy likes to make birdie now and then."

“You’re telling me,” I said. Then: “Sure, give it a try— but it’s not for sale.”

He smiled, then he walked across the green to mark his ball. His tee shot had landed about 25 feet below the hole.

After I’d chipped up well inside of J, I handed him my putter. He reset his ball, lined up his putt, and stroked it on perfect line right into the cup. Birdie.

He looked at me, nodded, and handed back the putter. “I might want to try that again later,” he said with a chuckle. I’d missed my putt and made bogey, but I was able to laugh with him.

Nine is a long par-5, like a lot of closing holes, and we had plenty of time to talk. “Your wife’s not happy,” J said, as we left the tee.

Where did this guy come from? I wanted to know. But I found myself answering him, however feebly. “No.”

“You show up late most nights, and it’s not from work.”

“You faulting a guy for having a drink with friends on the way home?”

“Nope, nope. I didn’t come here to condemn you, trust me.”

There it was again: *Trust me*. But this time I could almost do it. “OK, what did you come here to do?”

“I came to find what was lost, if you want to know the truth.”

“You mean like my ball back on five?” It was the first time I was able to smile about that.

“Maybe. But I’m really looking for more important things.”

This guy had a knack for driving you crazy and keeping you fascinated all at the same time. I’m not sure whether I was more bothered or more interested at the way he said things only halfway. But I hung with him.

“More important than a \$4 golf ball? What could that be?”

“A life, maybe.” He paused. “You lost your life, Evan?”

“What?”

“I mean, the life you wanted—the one where you felt the satisfaction of a job well done, where your ideas came to fruition, where your wife appreciated you, where your kids looked up to you, where your friends depended on you for more than arranging a tee time. Have you lost that life?”

“Well, I guess if I had to be honest, yeah, I’ve lost that life. As a matter of fact, I’m not sure I ever found that life.”

“Spent a lot of time chasing down sidestreets, I bet.”

“You bet right. How do you know all this stuff, J?”

“Just do. Let’s say I’m acquainted with your grief.”

“That’s getting a little too personal for me.”

“Probably is. That’s because most people never get personal. They never identify with anyone else.”

“And you?”

“I don’t know how else to put it, but here’s the deal: I’m trying to get other people to identify with me.”

“Hmmm. Any luck so far?”

“One at a time, Evan, one at a time.”

“Kind of like golf shots, eh?”

“Kind of like that.”

Now I’m sure you’re wondering what ever happened to our golf game. Believe me, this was a long conversation over several holes. We hit our shots in between. J kept hitting greens and missing putts, and I found I was relaxing, too, hitting better shots. I had no idea any more what my buddies were shooting. J had given me other things to think about.

“You know what you sound like?” I finally said to him as good-naturedly as I could.

“No, what?”

“A preacher.”

“Do I?”

“Kinda. What I mean is, you’re like a priest, I guess, or a pastor. It’s like if I say stuff to you, you’ll pass it on to God for me.”

“That’s a little heavy,” J said. “Are you sure you want to go there?”

“I’ll tell you what,” I started to explain, “I’ve never really had an opinion about God. He might be there, He might not. I’m not sure. But if I could be sure, I’d take a chance, you know. I’d tell Him how great He is and how stupid I am. Do you think He’d buy that?”

“Probably.”

“How about if I told Him I’d like to start over and get things right this time? Do you think He’d let me do that?”

“Seems to me that’s His business, that’s what He does.”

“Well, what do you think?” I asked J. “Could you tell Him all that for me?”

“I could. Or you could just tell Him yourself.”

“And you think He’d listen to a guy like me?”

“Guarantee it.”

“Well, that’d change everything, wouldn’t it?”

“You could say that, yes.”

Sooner or later, we made it to the eighteenth green, putted out, and stood there shaking hands with Bryce and Andreas. Turns out Bryce and I had broken even. But I had a different feeling that day, a feeling like I had come out ahead. I told J this when he apologized for not being able to join us in the clubhouse after the round.

“Normally, I’d love to stay,” he said. “I kind of have a thing for a good meal. But I think I’ll try to find some others before the day is out, if you don’t mind, Evan.”

“I don’t mind,” I told him. “I know how glad I am that you found me. It’s such a great feeling.”

“It’s more than a feeling, Evan,” he smiled. “It’s a feeling based on fact. It’s for real. In fact, you can look it up.”

I laughed. “I just might do that.”

Then I asked him if he had a card. I wanted to give him a call, to play again soon.

“We carpenters aren’t very good about carrying cards,” he said. “How about if I just give you my name?”

“You said you don’t give that out.”

“That’s all right,” he assured me. “I think you know what to do with it now. My name is Jesus.”

Then he looked me in the eyes, shook my hand again, threw his bag over his shoulder and walked on. Of all things, I found I wasn’t even disappointed to let him go. I knew what he had given me. I knew someone else needed it, too.

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