

CARRY

by

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Golf and tennis grew up together at country clubs where people have money and time. The era of the country club is threatened with extinction, but I moved to Rancho Mirage, California, where lots of snowbirds and retirees came, so the threat level was lower. My grandfather was a charter member of a Jewish country club in Wisconsin that went bankrupt, but he said someday I'd play golf. I loved his optimism: that day had come.

Rancho Mirage has been called the playground of the Presidents, and President Ford had been an honorary member at Tamarisk Country Club, where I played. Obama was an honorary member at another private club called Thunderbird. Obama'd spend time at the Annenberg down the street during his presidency. I found the desert honored people at their best times. Michael's Café has pictures of Marilyn Monroe during her happiest times and Elvis at his. I hoped that somehow the desert could preserve me at my best time—my apex.

I'd bought my father a used golf cart a few years back. Dad used my grandfather's old clubs. Dad had all this old stuff and didn't care. He just liked to be outside. The vintage cart had a radio in it that got only one station: country. I'd heard carts were all about the battery, and this one had a new one. I began using the cart, and after a few rounds with rental clubs, I got my own set. Owning golf clubs felt like a commitment, and I hoped they didn't end up in the corner of the garage.

All I knew was, I felt better when I played golf. I'd felt bad from loving a man who did not want to make a life with me and from the pain of my mother's former house being burned down by the rural community where she'd lived for forty years. Nobody told me. That was the part that bothered me the most, and it made me not want to go back there. I found out when my cousin mentioned it in passing months after it happened. I'd sold the house, but the shock of the fire brought up a whole other set of emotions. I couldn't stop thinking of all the time I'd spent with my mom in the house and on its porches looking out at Washington Harbor and Boyer's Bluff.

Memories were the problem, and I tried to erase them with each swing I took. Listening to country music helped with the relationship. I could forget, and the words were like a Band-Aid. It started with this song called "Good As You." The singer just wanted to be as good as you. I now listened to the country station in my car, and if that song was playing when I pulled in my garage, I would stay in the car until it finished. The breakup songs made me feel better too. I would wait for the refrain about needing "whiskey glasses" and knocking back shots. I never drank whiskey but it sounded healing.

There were so many things from my past I wanted to forget: Washington Island and Dodd Delvy especially. Both had been a source of great pleasure for me and now were a great source of pain for me. With every round of golf I played, I felt closer to the point of indifference.

Sometimes I thought of Dodd when I tried to hit a ball really hard. A couple of times it produced a good shot, but it made me feel even worse if I hit a bad one. It was best to have a clear mind when hitting the ball.

Dad and I played eighteen holes at his club when he came back out, and I learned that if we tried that again, it would be faster in two carts. I moved my clubs over to the driver's side of his cart when he went back to work in Milwaukee. Dad's golf bag looked shabby compared to my new one, and so I bought him a new one. I marked my golf balls with my initials, and bought collared shirts and a few longer-than-tennis skirts from clearance at the PGA store because the club had a dress code.

Herb from the pro shop said the game couldn't be perfected, yet I was afraid to even make a divot because I didn't want to do anything wrong. My golf pro, Annie, told me that it was okay to tear up the grass and let my head follow the ball. She showed me what was barely a grip and said to relax my hands before I took a backswing. I heard on the Golf Channel that most people hold the golf club way too tight. I'd started out with a death grip on the club and would wake up the next day with a sore hand. My dad told me that my grandpa said to take off the golf glove when you putt so that you would have more "feel."

Golf and tennis people reminded me of cat and dog people: some love both, but most have a strong preference for one or the other. I'd had a cat just like I'd played tennis, a victim of opportunity, but now I was a dog person and played golf. I'd heard golf was hard, but at least the ball was not moving when you hit it. No one hit it back at you.

You just had to keep track of how many times you hit it. What I liked most about golf was going from long-range vision when you teed off and then switching to a very short-range vision when putting. Golf got hard the closer you got to the pin.

There was a whole language to golf, such as "bogey" and "birdie," that had to do with scoring. There was technical talk such as ball position, footwork, swing, clubs, and trajectory.

My favorite was the word “carry.” I didn’t know that much about it, but I liked the concept. Depending on what kind of club you used and how you hit it, a ball would carry in a certain way. I learned from Annie that a seven iron could, for example, be hit in such a way that the ball would ride up into the air, which could be useful for clearing obstacles. I learned that there was a whole family of wedges that were used with precision as you got closer to the green, and a variety of grasses that encircled the green: some were called rough, and some were more flat like degrees of a buzz cut; the greens themselves were the smoothest of all grasses, but with that came a variety of undulating surfaces. I felt seasick when I tried to read the greens. They looked like what I would have called chop in my waterskiing days. I had a certain anxiety about it, which I told Annie. I’d heard of the “yips,” but hadn’t been playing long enough to have them.

“You’re going to put a stroke on the ball,” she said, “and whatever stroke it is, it is.” It made me feel less scared to hit the ball. She told me that rolling the ball the right speed was really important. So was aim, touch, and feel when putting. First I took my golf glove off; then I marked the ball while I lined up the writing on the ball with the hole while trying to read the green; then I took a practice stroke at the speed that I would hit the ball. The sound of the ball going in the cup was gratifying. I knew people who didn’t even look until they heard the sound. Annie said a study had been done, and the sound was up there with that of a symphony in the register.

Even if I hit a bad shot in the fairway, I felt like the next time I hit that shot, it would be corrected. The whole idea behind a mulligan, what it’s called when you get a redo when you mess up, was that reason: you could hit it better the second time. But I just played one ball and did not keep score.

I liked fluorescent red and green balls. They were really soft. I hit one on the eighth hole from behind a fairway bunker. I could only see an egret take off from the water that was in front of the hole. “All the Ajax in the world ain’t gonna clean your dirty laundry” came from the radio. I searched the pond for my ball and saw somebody else’s ball in there, even though there was nobody on the course in the afternoons in the summer. I gave up and saw my ball right in the middle of the fairway.

Driving the cart to get to the ball reminded me of a game drive on safari, but I noticed the professionals on TV walked and I tried that too. There were no caddies where I played, and emphasis was placed on rate of play, so carts were a way of life. I purchased my own cart that was older but in good condition. I put butterfly decals on it to make it my own.

The sprinkler heads in the fairways were labeled with the yardage of the hole. Annie said don’t pay attention until you get to your ball, but I liked to count them down just like I used to skim my hand in water when I had a boat. In boating, buoys mark channels or the no wake zone. In golf, the sprinklers reminded me of them. They were touchstones. I used to ocean swim, and a buoy was everything if you swam way out.

To know how far you actually hit the ball, you had to do some math. I counted it down much like I did when I swam in a pool. How far your ball went was called “carry.” Carry implied that something was happening outside of your control. Carry is what happened after you did stuff and the ball was suspended through the air at its apex. Carry was the best part.

Faded paint could look white, but in the desert that color was pale yellow. Yellow meant far, like 150 yards, and so I grabbed one of my hybrid clubs. I didn’t even have a four iron, the club that Gerald Ford, who became the President after Nixon, used to make a hole in one on the

fourteenth hole. He'd done it twice, once in 1978 and 1981, and from the location of the plaque, it looked like he'd done it from the black tee markers, so that was pretty far back. I just noticed that after playing that hole at least ten times. It had water on it, so you had to be careful of that.

I wondered how long I would be carried by my father's golf membership since as a grown child of a member you could only play so many times annually until you had to get your own membership—at a reduced rate that increased at age fifty-five. Then it got expensive. At forty-eight, I still had a few good years left. Frank Sinatra had built a house on the seventeenth hole and had a landing pad for a helicopter. There was so much foot traffic to his house that they considered making a tunnel under the fairway. Now there was just me about to tee off and what looked like some renters enjoying the pool.

Golf was something new to do alone. I was the only one on the course in the afternoons, when there was no shade and it was over 110 degrees. In that sense, I hadn't changed at all since my Ironman Triathlon days. It made me feel closer to people who were gone. My mom complained that nobody ever watered the course where she'd play. I thought of my mom when I played in the desert summer and the lush desert fairways turned brown and were ripe for shots called "worm burners."

"Don't panic; it's organic," the Realtor on Washington Island said when I asked him about the fire. While not the memorial I had in mind for Mom, my Realtor in Rancho Mirage said it sounded like a phoenix rising. I liked being in Rancho Mirage in the summer instead of being on Washington Island, having a reverse season where everybody left in the summer and the real season started in the fall. The greenkeepers had gone home, and Tamarisk became an especially private club for me. I like how it sounded kind of like my name, "Tamara," plus my

middle initial was “K.” But my name really meant “date palm,” which though not indigenous to the valley thrived here. Wind blew through the trees, and snow was still on the tops of the mountains, and I lived in the art of the landscape. There’d been a lot of rain last year, and Tamarisk was one of the courses that didn’t lose any holes because it was on higher ground. “There’s a little dirt on my boots, but I’m taking you uptown tonight” came from the radio. I hit the ball using what was called a Martini tee that was supposed to help you drive the ball straight and far. I didn’t care as long as it had carry, which it did.