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Summer Rules

It was July, and the midwest's own Springpatch Public Golf Course had a visitor, the sirocco, a Saharan wind, hot like the breath of the great Tolkien dragon Smaug. This wind thinned the traps, its heat baked greens now mostly browns, made fairways hard. It looked as if Smaug had dragged his fat body out of his cave, stoked his internal furnace, and breathed fire over the course.

But there were no caves on the course, just a pond. A pond no longer a blessing to the food chain, one that looked unable to sustain any of the usual pond-life, let alone Smaug. It was a stagnant mess, rotting and boiling, gothic-like, a place for lurking horrors, a place for a drunk Poe to bathe his imagination.

On the course was a foursome, members of a schizophrenic flock that had split and migrated four directions, only to gather again at their shared summer home. They saw the familiar pond, and were disgusted.

"I can't believe I'm out here again," I said to Dave as I cranked the ball washer, cleansing last year's grass and dirt and the winter's dust from the dimples. "Last time was a nightmare. Did you buy a new driver?"

"Sure did. Tommy Armour autograph." Dave swung his new stick easily. The day was hot. It hadn't rained for a month and a half. We had been warned by the clubhouse manager to avoid the pond, or what was left of it. It seemed the pond was another victim of the thesaurus of heat blowing through Springpatch. He had suggested it was now only a carnage of weeds and thick water, and perhaps it would be insulting to sight and smell.

I stood on ground brown and hard, ground that resisted tent stakes, lawn darts, kids digging to the Orient. It rejected metal tree fertilizers, the old kind you hooked to the hose and watched the pellets of fertilizer disintegrate under the running water.

"Greens will be fast today," Jason commented. "As if that matters to you, Jeff."

"Fuck you. I've been getting better since the last time we played." I rebutted Jason's verbal assault.

"You mean when you only used your putter the last three holes because you claimed it was the only club you didn't shank?"

"It *was* the only club I didn't shank. I parred the eighth, remember." I altered the course of my practice swing and clipped Jason in the shin.

"I bet you can't finish today within thirty strokes of me." Jason pushed up his black Detroit Pistons hat and took a tee from behind his ear. He prepared to take honors on the first hole.

"Someone betting? Let me in on it." Max, the last of the foursome to wake up, jogged over from the clubhouse. Sweat beaded on his upper lip and forehead.

"All right." Jason spoke after exchanging a glance with Dave. "Dave and I against you and Jeff. The bet is twenty-five apiece that we beat you by sixty strokes."

"Oh c'mon Jason. That's like taking candy from a baby."

"No summer rules, Jeff. Balls in the water count. Out of bounds counts. No 'two drives on each hole, I'll take the best.' No twenty foot gimmes."

"Interesting. I've never played that way." I looked at Max, who seemed unconcerned. He was busy looking for a ball to tee-off with. The handle of my driver was beginning to get sticky with palm sweat. I switched it to my right hand.

"Max?" I asked.

"It's a bet dudes. Let's party away."

"You going to drive that practice ball?" Jason said.

Max held a plastic ball. "Just kidding, dudes." He turned and rummaged for another.

"O.K., its a bet," I said. "Let's just have fun. Remember, the greens will be fast, Max."

"Excellent. Fast greens. We'll be done faster. Get some brews."

Jason took a slow back swing and his metal driver rushed forward, connected dead on with the ball.

"Sweet-spot shot," his partner said. "Take it away, Jeff. And don't use your putter."

I thought the day should be fun. Max and I had to average less than eight a hole to put Jason and Dave, prominent fixtures on their respective collegiate golf teams, in their place.

I studied the flatlands of the first fairway. Thick air rose in hazy fumes, blurred trees and bushes making them look impressionistic. I heard a mower, but the air strangled the sound and tried to shove it back to its origin. I took a few graceful practice swings. The sound of the club rushing through the grass, dividing the brown, brittle turf like the Dead Sea, making that professional swooshing sound. Then the grass settling back on a Pharoah's army of ants and summer crawley things. It was much better than straining wrist and elbow by hitting the ground too hard even to make a divot, or missing the ground entirely, which wretched the shoulders.

My drive had good altitude but only went 80-90 yards. It was relatively straight. I figured if I could just stay in the fairway I could pull fives or sixes on each hole. I related the strategy to Max, whose

subsequent drive never got above six inches off the ground but went straight and also stayed in the correct fairway.

"Good start, fellas. Looks like you're at least going to make it interesting," Dave said before hitting a violent drive. The ball accepted the premeditated abuse and landed 80 feet from the pin.

"Let's do it," I said. "Can you feel your wallet growing lighter, Jason?"

"You're funny, guy. The only thing that's going to be left in your wallet after today is a melted condom and some dust." Jason stripped off his t-shirt and sheathed his driver before walking after his drive. Fashionably, he had washed the grass stains into his white tennis shorts. His feet featured Nike Legend high-tops, which provided no traction and a tan line above the ankle.

We came to my ball first.

"Shit, I hate topping the ball." I watched my ball take top-spin hops for fifteen feet. I pulled my shirt off and wiped the sweat from everywhere. The sun threatened my skin. My tan would only protect me for three, maybe four holes.

"Blow it off," Dave said. "You're only one stroke behind..."

I interrupted, "...at this point, I know."

A finished hole later Max and I were nine strokes back. Dave carded a bogey 5, Jason a double bogey 6, Max a quinta-bogey. An eleven tainted the first box by my name. An inaugural septa-bogey.

"Lotta bogey's on that hole. Excellent," Max said. We walked to the second tee. I lifted my Cub hat and adjusted it. Jason spit and wipes his face on a ragged kitchen towel hung from a ring on his bag.

"You all go to Sarah's party last Thursday?" I hadn't made it.

"No," Dave answered first. "I went out with Jacki."

"As usual. Did you get laid?" Jason asked.

"Yea."

"As usual. They must teach you things like that out at that country club."

"It's not a country club. Better than that." Dave teed off. I noticed his laceless topsiders.

"Nice golf shoes."

"I'm a professional. Why did you ask? Did you go to Sarah's?"

"No. I could care maybe a little less, but not much. I just thought someone might have seen George or Alex. Maybe Laura." My skin cracked a little on my second weak drive. I'd have to keep moving or the sun would dry me out, make me immobile.

"Still mad at her, Jeff?" Jason asked. Max was behind him, thinking about hitting.

"Like I said, it doesn't matter. I just avoid her, and if I see her I ignore her."

"At least you got a piece."

"What a way with words you have. And anyway, that was two and a half years ago."

"Hey, I've had her sooner." Jason smiled and turned. I was glad; he didn't have to read my lips. Dickhead. I really didn't care, but Jason was vain enough to think I did, which was enough to piss me off. It was getting progressively less worthwhile to discuss anything with Jason. I watched puffs of dust lift from his feet as he walked after drive number 2.

"Hey Jeff." He turned twenty feet ahead. "Remember at half-time during the game against Jacksonville?" he said. "Your going to need that kind of luck today." He assumed I remembered. What was he talking about? I hit a shot from the bench at halftime. That's it. For three bills. No metal, nothing but string. The heat, no, the time slowed my memory.

I might need more luck than that I thought after we finished the third. On the fourth hole, the day was lost. Max and I were already down 32 strokes, and since we never made par, we could never catch up. So we conceded we were awful and hot, and that Dave and Jason were just hot, and decided to have some fun.

The heat came alive about 12:30. Metal buckles on the golf bags burned legs, singed the hairy ones. Dribbles of fallen sweat made indentations in the dry earth and many together indicated where one of us had teed off. Perspiration dripped into my ears, my eyes, my mouth. I sniffed a drop up my nose. I sweated wood glue. Everything stuck -- hand to the leather grip, my socks stifled my toes.

"My balls are stuck to my boxers." Dave threw in his own complaint. Max's supply of chocolate eggs bubbled in the ball pocket of his bag.

"How's the pre-law going?" I asked Dave.

"Not bad. I hear I better drink now, get fucked up before I get to law school. No time then. It's a serious bitch from there on."

"You getting some good parties in?"

"Fuck yea. As often as possible. But I have to study once in a while. Parents are paying a shitload for school."

Which is a good reason to study, I guessed.

"Hey Max, you gonna clean that ball off?" Too late. The chocolate covered Titalus rolled down the fifth fairway. I was playing to get it over with at this point -- I hadn't started the day with any pride. Max wasn't helping.

I hit my longest shot of the day on the fifth, but it rolled into the pond. Jason and Dave laid up on the near side, but I had under-estimated by ability to get lucky.

Max found his ball covered with grass clippings. He stood staring at it while I walked past Jason and Dave, down a small embankment to the edge of the pond.

It looked like a swamp. There were a few inches of stagnating brown water, disgustingly stuffed with rotting vegetation. My eyes watered -- which took care of the final place in my body that could ooze anything liquid. It smelled like a road-killed skunk, perineal glands still emitting an odor now tainted with death. Several frogs lay dead on the embankment. Their dehydrated skin looked like leather. Their eye sockets were empty-- or had something left like a shriveled grape. They had no chance to escape -- the sun came up, they fried where they sat. I remembered the clubhouse manager's warning, and decided not to look for my ball.

"Anyone want a frogskin wallet?" I asked, turning away from the swamp and taking a step up the embankment.

"Fore!"

"SHIT!" I returned as the shot clipped my left temple. I fell backwards, despite my almost psychic desire not to. My body felt momentarily split as I urged it forward though it fell down toward the prime mosquito-breeding real estate. My head felt first the muddy, chunky water, then the pond-weed vegetation that was the bottom. I struggled to get up, but my arm, used as leverage, sank to my shoulder. I went under again. I was in a murky, filmy hell of hot liquid, cut off from my fellow golfers. The soup violated my ears and nose, tried to pry into my eyes.

And something fleshy and scaly ran into my leg. I jerked away, my heart excited. How could anything live in this.... this shit? I was repulsed, felt myself almost add my vomit to the pond.

I finally scrambled on to shore. Weeds stuck to my skin, took root in the mud and the chunks of goop in my shorts. A film of rank slime covered my body and immediately began attracting flies that had most recently been nibbling idly on the dead frogs.

"You fucked up a great shot," Jason said.

"I'll fuck you up," I returned.

"I'm just kidding, guy." He might have been trying to say "are you all right", but the words wouldn't come out. He leaned on his five-iron, I pictured it animated, beating him. He laughed in my face. That hazy thick air was back, it obscured Dave, made the outline of his body fuzzy. He was on the ground near where he had taken his second shot. Max hadn't noticed. He wiped his ball off on his shorts, threw it over the pond. "Excellent," he muttered.

I watched Dave get up. Jason was on one knee, head down. He was attempting two things -- not to show me how funny he actually thought it was, and to stabilize his breathing and pulse before he hyperventilated because of the heat. Dave approached, his dusty face streaked with sweat.

"You've had one helluva bad day," he said.

"Shut up," I said to Jason, who stood up and just looked like he was

going to add to Dave's summation. I wanted to laugh and kill. The smelly mud mixture that covered me had an insulating effect, and I perspired buckets. This served to naturally wash some of it off. Deodorant was rendered an anachronism in the history of the day. I had fleas and gnats. And it was so fucking hot.

"Lighten up Jeff. Let's get this round over with and I'll buy you a Margarita," Dave said. He paused, then smiled. "I'll just put it on your tab."

By the seventh hole the remaining mud on my skin crusted and began to flake off. I cringed at the memory of that flesh and those scales on my skin, thinking whatever it was somehow denied the reality of the pond. I hoped it wasn't amphibious, not caring to see anything having the ability to survive in that mucous.

I hadn't seen my partner since he threw his third shot on the fifth. I felt Dave and Jason laughing at me as I used my three-iron as a machete, taking long, arcing whacks at the prairie grass where my ball had bounded like a lost, disembodied rabbit's tail. I flushed a family of grouse, decided not to finish the hole and wandered off in search of the fairway. Several hundred yards ahead, on the mown, smooth expanse of a fairway, I watched Jason punch his ball high. His chip hit the green hard and bit, then rolled back and settled within what I assumed was ten feet of the hole.

"Nice shot, dickhead," I muttered. Dave was already on the green. He turned as I walked out from under the trees between the seventh and another fairway.

"Givin' up, Jeff?"

"Yea, this hole. Shit, I already got my money's worth. I only paid for nine holes, but I feel like I've played 36."

"You've taken enough shots for 36."

"Exactly my point."

"Where's Max?" Jason asked.

"Lost." I scratched the back of my neck. My fingernails came back full of dirt. "He's lucky, though."

"Why?"

"Cause he doesn't *know* how bad he is."

I watched Dave and Jason hole out. I put the pin back in the hole for them, and we walked to the eighth tee. A fly buzzed my control tower, but I ignored it and hoped it wouldn't crash.

"Hey Jeff, we'll give you honors. You have to contend with the swamplands again." We had traveled in a semi-circle since the fifth hole, excluding unplanned detours, and once again faced hitting over the Springpatch Public Golf Course Everglades.

"Shit." I felt like crying, but didn't want to dehydrate completely. The

opposite shore was 90 to 100 feet away, in between what I now saw to be a decayed vegetable stir-fry. Definitely not a gimme. "Forget it. I'm packin' it...no, I'll play it out." I didn't want to quit, and decided to suck it up and play the final two holes.

"You don't have anything to lose." Dave said.

"Yea, you've lost everything today." Jason finished Dave's thought. "Your pride. Your temper. Your money."

"Your partner." Dave added.

They were right.

"Double or nothing', Jeff. I'm feeling sympathetic. Double or nothin'. Just hit the ball over the water." Jason smiled.

"No more bets." I was cutting my losses. I teed up before I could change my mind.

"Don't be stupid, Jeff."

"I'm not. I haven't won a thing today."

"Oh, c'mon. Your bound to win something. It's only a hundred feet."

I pulled my club back. "Fuck" I said at the top of my swing. "You" I finished when the club solidly hit the ball.

"Sucker," Jason said.

"Pretty shot." Dave liked it too. And it was pretty. It cleared the water by 75 feet. I sat down next to the tee. I'm not going to get pissed, I thought. Not going to tell Jason I hate his stinking fucking guts. Not going to replace Dave's spinal cord with my putter shoved up his ass.

I looked up. Dave had already hit. Jason was in the process. He topped his drive -- first time I'd ever seen him do that - and it rolled to the edge of the pond. He walked after it, swearing.

"A minor victory, Jeff," Dave said.

"Yea, minor. And I still have another hole to play. Maybe I can work up some momentum."

Jason picked up his ball off soggy land.

"Hey, that's your..." I was going to say drive and something about summer rules, but a movement in the pond behind Jason distracted me. The pond was bubbling a little, alot. Despite its apparent lack of depth, small waves began washing the dried debris off the shore. They originated maybe twenty feet out. Something big was disturbing the pond. My leg involuntarily tensed at the memory of its meeting with the unknown.

Jason had stopped, had stepped into a soft spot. He sank. I could hear the suction sound as water and mud rushed over his foot, filling the void it had momentarily created. He wasn't really stuck, though it slowed him down. But it annoyed him enough that he lost his temper and tried too hard to yank his food out. The ground said no. He lost his balance, his body met the ground.

The next seconds were lively. A huge, amphibious-like snake or serpent lunged out of the water at Jason. It clamped its jaws on his free leg and began dragging him into the pond. The creature was a slimy brown and deep green. It was difficult to tell if its skin was skin or was actually mud and weed, like the pond bottom. It had long black feelers like a catfish. It didn't have much in the way of teeth, but it was doing its best to jaw Jason into submission.

Jason screamed in a way some would call desperate. Dave and I watched hypnotically stricken into inaction. But Dave willed himself forward, drew this three-iron for battle, while I thought how the situation could somehow end up negating the bet. I organized and perused my thoughts, though the commotion made this difficult, then snapped out of reverie in time to see Dave taking wild swings at the Creature from the Springpatch Pond.

The monster had no legs but reared up by balancing itself on its submerged tail. It was coiling its scaly body, lifting Jason some twenty feet in the air and then bashing him on the ground, each time nibbling a little further up his leg. The creature had reached Jason's pelvis and was working toward his lower torso. Each time it bashed Jason on the surface of the pond, Dave would take several swings at the serpent's head. Dave was agile for a golfer, and quick enough to land several blows in his partner's defense.

It might have been Jason's choking and gurgling screams that tempted me into action. Regardless, I was by Dave's side, wielding a three-wood rapier. We beat madly at the serpent, yelling for Jason to hang on, dammit, hang on. I was excited, we fought together again, on the same side for the same goal. Like the old neighborhood weekend wars. There was happiness, briefly, fueled by adrenaline.

Jason looked like a mutated mythological creature, half serpent, half little human. His Piston's hat was lost. I saw penitence in his eyes and beat harder, without inspiration but with a primitive urgency. I put out one of the serpent's large, black eyes, but Dave lost his weapon when it became stuck in one of the aquatic murderer's gills.

He made the mistake of trying to recover his weapon. He reached for it, and fell. Briefly submersed, he came up gasping and shaking. He was under the serpent, and the predator must have felt his presence. It rose, wavered under its own weight, then dropped. Dave never knew; he was still wiping his eyes and face, legs unsteady on the pond's ill-defined bottom. While he reoriented himself to the world above the pond's surface, the serpent landed, crushed him; I heard bones crack or crunch and he disappeared.

I took a step back, the serpent began to slowly retreat to the middle of the pond. I was losing the battle. Only Jason's shoulders and limp head

were left for me to see. He struggled weakly. Serpent drool and slime dripped on me as it raised up in the air and then disappeared into the middle of the pond. This created a vortex, sucking in froth and bubbles and shredded vegetation, vestiges of bottle. I watched for Dave's body, the look unsuccessful.

I stood silent in a waist deep soup, felt biblical and stunned into autism. The sun relentlessly fried me. I dropped my club into the water. I went to my bag, dragged it to the edge of the pond and opened one pocket. Tees, an old manual score-keeper similar to the ones umpires use to keep track of balls and strikes -- this one kept track of strokes. And a glove. I threw it all into the pond. Practice balls followed. They floated and bobbed away, mocking my surrender. Then I threw my clubs in, one at a time. The driver, the pitching wedge, the putter. The irons and the plastic tubes I kept them in. All into the pond.

I looked up, threw my bag in, then walked away from the swamp and its vicious tenant. I thought about Jason, by now probably half-digested in the bowels of the creature. And Dave drowned, his body smashed into the mud bottom, someday to be fossilized; Max lost in some time warp on the fifth hole. I pulled my watch out of my pocket. It read 3 bells through a muddied face; the flock had migrated again.

Jim Cox