

FORE!

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It was a straightforward eight-foot putt, the kind Stuart made all the time. His father leaned on his putter and watched from the fringe of the green, willing him to hole the ball to keep the match alive. Phil and Gary stood together a few feet away, hoping that he'd fail.

Stuart eyed the hole one more time and stroked. Too firmly. The ball lipped the cup and careened away.

His father's sigh was audible enough to hear on the next tee. Irwin tramped onto the green, picked up the errant golf ball, and tossed it in the direction of his disappointing son. "Stuart's obviously not going to win a golf scholarship to Yale," he said to the two victors, already backslapping each other. "It's a good thing he's a legacy."

Stuart stifled his response.

"Stuart hit the ball well today, much better than you," Phil needled his senior law partner as they walked off the course. "But winning comes down to who can execute under pressure."

"Stuart thinks too damned much," Irwin said. He paid the caddies and handed Phil and Gary each two one hundred dollar bills. "The problem's not his stroke, it's his head."

"Lucky for him, he's not paying," Gary said. "Or does he lose his allowance this week for missing that putt?"

Stuart left them laughing on their way to the clubhouse. Playing golf with his father was always a mistake. He dumped his clubs in the trunk of his father's Mercedes and walked the mile and half to their Cheviot Hills home. If he practiced more, really pushed himself, maybe he could lower his handicap. The goal didn't seem worth the effort. He didn't aspire to play for Yale. His golf score didn't define him. Although he didn't know yet what did.

Santos looked up from the rose bush he was uprooting in the Goldfarb front yard to see their lanky teenage son approaching. "*Hola*," Stuart greeted.

The gardener had seen the boy and his father drive away with their golf bags earlier that morning. Now the boy was returning on foot, without his golf clubs, looking sullen. "Rough day?" Santos said.

The boy seemed surprised, as if he didn't expect him to speak English. Santos had been working for the Goldfarbs barely a month and only spoken to the wife.

"I want to break my putter," Stuart said.

"I know the feeling."

"You play?"

"When I was your age, yeah. . . ." The gardener, now at least two decades older, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a blue bandana. "You any good?" he asked.

"I'm decent. A six handicap."

"I was scratch." The gardener grinned.

"No shit!"

"That was a long time ago, when I was playing every day. I picked up the game when I was caddying. In Texas. When I first came here. Played early in the morning before I carried any bags. Learned from watching some great players. Caddied for Lee Trevino a few times."

"Lee Trevino. Wow!"

"Yeah, he encouraged me to keep at it. But I had no money and no papers. So I came to L.A. and took up gardening instead." He shrugged, as if the boy could possibly understand the fear and desperation that drove him here.

"You don't play any more?"

"Nah, I got a wife and three kids now, strollers instead of golf clubs . . . Maybe I'll go back to it someday. When they grow up. Or I get too old to do this." He plunged his spade into the earth to emphasize the point and returned to digging up the rose bush.

The boy lingered a moment as if uncertain what to say, then headed up the flagstone path to the house.

Santos didn't know why he'd boasted about his golfing skill when he hadn't touched a club in years. Maybe it was envy of the youth. Or resentment. Or a desire to show the boy that not only did he speak English, but he was more than just a gardener.

The next Saturday morning when the gardener pulled into the Goldfarb driveway at 7:30, he found the boy waiting for him in torn jeans and fancy leather work boots. "I'd like to help," Stuart said.

"Your mother send you?"

"No. . . no. . . I just thought. . . I need to show my parents I'm not the slacker they think I am."

Santos turned to his older helper Guillermo, who spoke little English, to see if he understood. "Now they want me to be a *niñero* too," he said in Spanish.

"You should charge double," Guillermo said.

Santos studied the tall, earnest *adolescente*, whose polished work boots looked like they'd just been purchased. If the boy's hands had any calluses, they were from golf clubs not a shovel. He wondered if Stuart's offer to help wasn't just an excuse to talk about golf or Trevino. Still, it was more trouble to turn him away than let him work. Santos reached into the trunk of his pickup and tossed Stuart a spade. "Here, you can dig up the flower beds in the backyard with Guillermo."

When the gardener checked a half hour later, Stuart's shirt was damp and his ripped jeans spattered with dirt. The boy leaned on his shovel to rest. "Maybe this will help me drive the ball farther," he said.

"It's your swing more than your strength. A caddie I knew was twenty pounds lighter but hit the ball longer."

"He must have been a good player."

"Yeah, but he got sent back to Mexico."

"They deported him?"

"Like a lot of *compañeros* I knew . . . Lucky I overslept the morning *la migra* raided the club. . ." He wiped a muddy hand on his jeans. "But I got no more time for stories, I got other yards I have to work today."

"Well, I don't want to get in your way." Stuart handed the shovel back to him.

Later, driving home to his wife and children in their cramped apartment in Downey, Santos regretted talking to the boy about his days as a caddy. That he once played golf seemed to change Stuart's view of him, make him think they could have a different relationship. Stuart's naiveté reminded the gardener of his own innocence when, at 15, he decided that he had no future in La Unión in Oaxaca. His father had left for Mexico City years before, vanishing forever. Santos fled north instead, crossing the border in El Paso, hidden in a truck filled with crates of avocados. With little English and no education beyond eighth grade, the only job he could find was caddying—like Trevino, who'd also grown up in a dirt floor shack, with no running water and indoor plumbing. And no father.

His strained encounter with Santos embarrassed Stuart. He realized that offering to help in the garden was a clumsy way to start a conversation. Guillermo barely acknowledged his presence, and Santos, too, seemed uneasy with his questioning. Deflated by the gardener's brusque dismissal, he retreated to the house.

His father was making coffee in the kitchen, dressed in his overpriced

designer sweat suit. The luxury outfit was too tight, and its ash color accentuated the graying temples he knew his father was trying to dye.

"You know Santos is a scratch golfer," Stuart said.

"Who?"

"Our new gardener."

"Interesting," said Irwin, who didn't seem interested at all. He carried his coffee cup to the table, then turned back to Stuart, as if struck by another thought. "Do you believe him?"

"Why would he lie?"

"Well, if he's that good a golfer, it didn't get him very far in life."

Stuart groped for a fitting reply, but all he could think of was his father's response when he questioned his shielding millions of tax dollars for his wealthy clients. "To succeed in this economy, you need to seize every advantage," his father said without compunction.

"Mom says he's an exceptional gardener," Stuart finally said. "That's why she hired him to redesign our yards."

His lame response to his father and his bumbling encounter with Santos discouraged him. His father was pressuring him to apply to Yale, but everything he loved about his alma mater--the fraternities, the social life, the sports--were why Stuart didn't want to go there. The counselor at his expensive private school had suggested that a small New England college like Amherst or Wesleyan might be a better choice for him. Stuart still found himself unable to write the essays they required. What did he have to say about Amherst's question about "the inevitable tensions and opportunities of diversity and inclusiveness?" Growing up in a six million dollar house in Cheviot Hills, he had little contact with anyone who couldn't afford to live in his neighborhood. It made him wonder what it was like for Santos to brave crossing the border to live in a country that was constantly looking for reasons to send him back.

Mowing lawns and trimming bushes were never Santos's life ambition; they were just a way to provide for his family. The dull, repetitive labor bored and wearied him. All he really enjoyed about his work was the occasional chance to design a garden, like Louise Goldfarb's ambitious plan to make her expansive backyard drought resistant.

"You are legal, aren't you?" she'd asked when they first met. "If you aren't, my husband won't let me hire you."

It wasn't the first time he heard the question. Thanks to his American-born wife, he was a citizen now and no longer had to lie. He just had to be

deferential to the wealthy owners of the homes he tended and careful not to offend them.

Though Mrs. Goldfarb welcomed his ideas about plants and flowers, he remained wary, especially of her husband whose curt nod when he walked past on the way to his Mercedes was his only sign of recognition. Then there was the teenage son in his unsoiled boots who kept rising early to meet him, as if the gardener were part of a school assignment to get acquainted with an immigrant. Santos wanted to ask Mrs. Goldfarb to keep Stuart away, but he blamed himself for the boy's interest with his foolish bragging about golf.

"I read about Trevino," Stuart told him. "It must have been amazing caddying for him."

"Yeah, he was a real hustler, constantly cracking jokes while he stole your money. When he won big, he tipped big, so we all wanted to carry his bag."

"I play a lot better by myself, when it's just me and the course," Stuart confessed.

"When you're poor, sometimes you have to gamble," Santos said.

"I guess . . ." Stuart considered it. "The article I read said he joked that you don't know what pressure is until you play for five dollars a hole with two dollars in your pocket."

Or you're living illegally in this country, the gardener thought.

"Playing with my dad is enough pressure for me, and he pays when we lose," Stuart said, scuffing the dirt with his expensive boots.

His confession made Santos as uncomfortable as the teen. He didn't know why Stuart was confiding this to him.

"Could you please tell your mother I'd like to speak to her," the gardener said. "I need to know where she wants me to plant these fuchsias."

A week before the deadline for his college applications, rising early again to talk with Santos, Stuart found his father toasting a bagel in the kitchen. "So where are you finally applying?" Irwin began in what seemed a reasonable tone.

"Still deciding," Stuart said. "I'm not sure yet what's right for me."

"How the hell do you know what's right for you when you haven't visited a single college?"

"I've done other research," Stuart tried to remain calm.

"Playing golf? Doing yard work? That's your idea of research. You're flushing your future down the toilet."

There was something so overblown, so absurd about the accusation that Stuart almost laughed. "That's not how I see it."

"Well, I do. And I refuse to let it happen." Irwin held up the keys to Stuart's Jeep. "I'm taking away your car. No more golf. No more yard work. You're going to stay home and finish those damned applications."

His father was treating him like he was still in grade school. As if grounding could really make him comply. The stupidity of it emboldened Stuart. "If I do complete them, what do I get in return? What's my incentive?" he asked.

"Your incentive?"

He didn't know why the idea struck him, but it was perfect. An assertion of his own independence and a demand that was sure to piss his father off. "I'll do the applications if I can invite Santos to golf at Hillcrest." Irwin looked dumbfounded. "Why the hell would you want that?"

"He's a scratch player. He can give me pointers on my game."

"Fine, take him to Rancho Park."

"You embarrassed to bring him to the club?"

"Of course not." Although a Republican, his father considered himself liberal about race. "Don't you think he might feel out of place? Uncomfortable?" Irwin said.

"Why? He'll just be playing golf."

His father's mouth tightened as he considered the proposal. "You'll apply to Yale and the other colleges your counselor recommended?"

"If Santos can play..." Applying didn't mean he had to go there.

His father's eyes narrowed. Either resolve or anger hardened his features. "Okay, invite him. But I want to play with you to see if he's really as good as you say. Phil and I have a tee time booked for 9 tomorrow. See if your Mexican Tiger Woods can join us."

The boy's unexpected invitation alarmed rather than flattered Santos.

"It's been a long time since I picked up a club," he demurred.

"It doesn't matter," Stuart said. "I'm sure I can learn from you."

Santos said he'd check with his wife, but he didn't think he was free tomorrow. He hoped that ended it.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Goldfarb came out to the backyard in her garden gloves and floppy sunhat. "I know Sunday is your day with your family," she said, "and what Stuart's asking is unusual but he's going through a difficult time right now. It would mean a great deal to me if you accepted his invitation. He says you're a very good golfer. I'm sure you could help him. And

it would end a foolish fight between Stuart and his father. I'd be grateful for the favor. I know other families in this neighborhood who're looking for a good gardener."

Honey rather than vinegar, Santos thought, though either way he was the fly.

Still, he didn't want to lose the huge landscape redesign she was planning. He said he'd change his plans for tomorrow.

When he finished work, he dropped Guillermo off and drove straight to the Rio Hondo driving range. After all these years away from the game, he knew it was crazy to think he could play par golf again. He picked up a five-iron to see how much his body remembered. Even the borrowed club felt good in his hands. He struck the ball and watched it sail high and straight. The beauty of muscle memory. He hit a bucket of balls with irons and then moved on to woods. And then another bucket of irons. His hands stung and he felt the ache of muscles he hadn't stretched in years. It would take months of practice to gain consistency or rhythm. At least, he wouldn't disgrace himself tomorrow.

When Stuart impulsively decided to invite Santos for a round of golf, he didn't expect his father to play with them. And he certainly didn't want his father's junior law partner, Phil, to join them. What he really wanted was time alone with the gardener when he wasn't occupied with work. Now his father had spoiled that chance.

"I've heard you're quite a golfer. I hope the course is a fitting challenge," Phil said, extending his gloved hand to shake Santos's bare, calloused one. Stuart quickly rummaged through his bag and found a worn golf glove for the gardener. It was too late to do anything about his dirt-stained tennis shoes.

"Show us how it's done, Stuart," his father said as they walked to the tee.

The first shot of the day always made Stuart nervous. Too many eyes on the first tee. His legs felt loose, unreliable. He backed away, took a deep breath, then stepped forward again. The moment he swung, he knew he hooked the shot; the ball sank behind a sycamore and disappeared into the left rough. Shakily, he picked up his tee and handed the driver to Santos, who was using Stuart's clubs. The gardener's Dodgers cap cast a shadow across his face so Stuart couldn't tell his reaction.

His father went next. His drive landed safely on the right side of the fairway, about 30 yards behind Stuart's. Phil nodded for Santos to proceed. The gardener took a few practice swings, wagged the club, then quickly struck

the ball with a short flat swing that sent it flying about 250 yards into the heart of the fairway. Though his form was unorthodox, he hit with power. Phil admired the drive, then teed up his own ball and used his long, looping swing to drive his ball into the fairway, 20 yards farther than Santos.

"It looks like we're evenly matched," Irwin said, as they followed the golf carts their two caddies drove onto the course. "Why don't we play best ball, Phil and me against the two of you."

"With a two-dollar Nassau to make it interesting," Phil added. "I expect we can all afford that." He looked at Santos.

"Of course the price will be higher for Stuart." Irwin gave his son a knowing look, as if Stuart understood exactly what was at stake.

His stomach lurched. He didn't look at his father. Inviting the gardener to the club had provoked him far more than he'd imagined.

"You don't have to do this," he said as Santos walked with him. "That's not why I invited you here."

"Your call," Santos said, "but I don't like to run from bets. It messes with your head. You beat yourself up afterwards for backing down. Just relax, play your regular game. I got your back."

Stuart's hand tightened around his three-iron, hating his hesitancy. If Santos was willing to compete with his father, how could he refuse? He didn't know the higher price his father alluded to, but he and Phil would have to win the match to exact it.

His ball sat up cleanly in the rough, and he hit it just short of the green. He looked over at his father watching from the golf cart. "We'll take that bet," he said.

He walked with Santos to the gardener's ball and they conferred about the distance to the hole. Santos finally pulled a hybrid 4-iron from Stuart's bag and hit a low, straight shot to the front of the green, where it skittered to a stop 40 feet below the flagstick. His mouth flitted with a grin when he returned the iron to Stuart.

Irwin's second shot was short, but Phil knocked his 20 feet from the pin. Stuart and Irwin both pitched onto the green and waited for Santos, who was farthest away, to putt. His ball stopped a foot from the cup. Phil's birdie putt slid past the hole, and he conceded Santos's tap-in.

"I can see why Stuart invited you," Phil said as they walked to the second tee. "You know your way around a green."

Whether compliment or shade, Santos ignored the comment. The two lawyers, whose matching gray baseball caps were embroidered with the country club crest, reminded him of golfers whose bags he once carried, men who tossed C-notes around like they were dollar bills, and blamed their

caddies for handing them the wrong club when they landed in a bunker. Their two caddies today were older –one white the other Latino-- probably veterans at the club. Since he clearly wasn't a member, or paying them, they ignored him.

The rich country club, the hilly terrain and lush fairways of Kikuyu grass, all irritated him. The course was completely different from the dusty, windblown Texas hardpan where he'd learned the game. The greens alone required more water in a week than the Goldfarbs would save in years making their backyard drought resistant.

Surveying the second hole, a short, 155-yard, par three, Santos selected an 9-iron from Stuart's bag. He took a deep breath to compose himself, then focused all his anger on the ball. His shot rose in a high arc before dropping straight down to the sunken green, a foot from the pin.

"You're a lucky man," Irwin said. "If your ball rolled into the cup, you'd have to buy drinks for everyone at the club."

"I'll stick to birdies then," Santos said. He made his putt and he and Stuart were one hole up.

His father's condescension toward Santos—or was it meanness?—made Stuart cringe. But it didn't seem to faze the gardener. Though Santos sprayed his drives, Stuart admired the way he scrambled, followed a bad shot with a good one, and never stopped attacking the course. Spurred by his example, Stuart played more aggressively and started dropping putts. When one of them missed, the other covered. Phil stayed steady. Irwin rushed. After the front nine, Stuart and Santos remained one hole up. Walking to the 10th tee, Irwin pressed to double the bet on the back nine.

Stuart looked at the gardener. Santos shrugged. Doubling the bet didn't double the pressure. The money was *miseria*. It was clear the match wasn't about money anyway, but some argument between Stuart and his father that neither bothered to explain. But he wasn't about to let the arrogant lawyer use him to teach his confused son whatever lesson the boy had failed to learn.

They split the next three holes, with either Santos or Stuart matching Phil's pars. On the par 5, 13th, Phil hit his first poor drive of the day, slicing the ball into the deep rough on the right. Trying to compensate, Irwin swung too hard and hooked his ball into the left rough. Santos's shot also faded to the left but bounced safely into the fairway. Irwin hopped on the golf cart with his caddy and sped to find his ball. Santos followed on foot.

He stopped a moment, about 20 yards behind Irwin, when he noticed the lawyer nudging his ball with his iron to get a better lie in the thick grass--a clear penalty. Irwin quickly struck the ball and exited the rough. Glancing

back, he spotted Santos staring at him and jumped on the cart as if whatever the gardener saw had never happened.

Santos said nothing. Stuart and he both hit good drives and were in position to reach the green in regulation. Meanwhile, Phil was in trouble in the other rough. His second shot dribbled onto the fairway, and his third landed in a bunker. Although still 150 yards from the hole, Irwin hit his best iron of the day to the back of the green. All three missed their birdie putts. "We halved another hole," Irwin said as he retrieved his ball from the cup.

Santos stayed silent. So did Stuart, if he'd even noticed his father's cheating. Of course, he'd seen it before, if he'd wanted to.

The next hole, another par three, played into the wind. Santos took an extra club and stood longer than usual on the tee until his pulse finally slowed. Then he lofted the ball high in the air where it lingered an instant before falling softly on the green, six feet from the flag. *Top that, cabrón!* He nailed the putt and birdied the hole. Two up! Four holes to go. Stuart high-fived him as they walked to the next tee.

"You've turned my son into a real competitor," Irwin said as the gardener prepared to drive the 15th hole. "Brought out his dormant Goldfarb genes. I'm happy to see that, Stuart. I wish you'd played this well when we were partners. But the match isn't over yet. That's why Phil and I would like to press the bet again for these last holes."

Stuart looked at his father in astonishment. "I don't get it. You're losing. Why redouble the bet?"

"The higher the stakes, the greater the test," Phil said.

"Are you up for it? Or are you going to wimp out?" his father challenged.

Stuart didn't even glance at Santos. "You want to raise the stakes, go ahead," he said.

"Fine," Irwin said. "Only instead of playing for money, let's play for college. If you win, you can pick any college you want. But if you lose, you have to go to Yale if you're accepted."

"You got to be kidding!" Stuart exclaimed.

Stuart's face reflected the gardener's own disgust. So this is what they were fighting about, Santos thought, an exclusive college his children could never afford to attend.

The boy's shoulders sagged as if he were carrying a weight heavier than a golf bag. "What about Santos? Why should he agree? This has nothing to do with him."

Irwin turned to Santos as if he were an afterthought. "A five dollar an hour raise if you win. But if you lose, we hire a new gardener—hopefully one who doesn't play golf." His grin suggested he relished the prospect.

Santos slowly pulled off his golf glove, a finger at a time. Win or lose, his days with the Goldfarbs were over. He was the help after all, as expendable as any other dark-skinned immigrant. He tossed the glove to Stuart. "You're on your own now. This isn't my fight."

The boy looked at him, abject, defeated. "I'm sorry. I . . . I never meant. . ."

Santos held up his hand to stop. It pained him to see the boy abase himself. He'd done too much of it himself. "You don't need my help any more," he said. "You can win this on your own. You're actually three up now, not two. Your father moved his ball to get a better lie on 13. He didn't par that hole, he bogeyed it." He smiled at Irwin as he said it, with the same relish that Irwin had smiled at the thought of firing him.

Stuart saw his father's face flush and Phil's flash of irritation as he slapped the grass with his club. Stuart stared at the driver in his hands as discomfited and wordless as they were. He turned to Santos for guidance but the gardener was already striding toward the clubhouse. He felt a wave of despair as he watched the solitary figure cross the fairway and disappear behind a grove of trees.

Walking toward the parking lot, Santos thought how he would explain to his wife why he wouldn't be working for the Goldfarbs any more. In the end the explanation was simple--a lesson he'd learned long ago caddying in Texas, and should have remembered before picking up a club again: *Golf is not a gentleman's game.*

Stuart hoisted his golf bag to his shoulder and followed Santos toward the clubhouse. He didn't know what he would say to his father, or whether Santos would ever forgive him for dragging him into this. He just kept walking, away from the tee, away from the match. It didn't matter any more whether he won or lost, or where he applied to college, although now he finally had something to write Amherst about "the tensions and opportunities of diversity and inclusiveness." He vowed to practice what he'd learned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Jonathan Harris is an Emeritus Distinguished Professor at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, where he led the documentary film program for many years. A three-time Oscar-winning filmmaker, he also writes fiction. *Misfits*, a recent collection of his short stories, was named a Distinguished Favorite by the Independent Book Awards.