

# G O L F I N G   V I E T N A M

B Y   L E W I S   S H I N E R

SHE HADN'T SEEN Brian in five years, not since they both graduated from UNC Wilmington. His phone call caught her at a perfect time: between relationships, bored, a little nostalgic. When he mentioned Ashley and Dylan's wedding she was blindsided by a powerful longing to see everyone again.

"I'd been thinking about going," she said, "but then I had to pay for a new engine in the Honda."

"Why don't you go with me? I'll fly you to Wilmington, we could stay at a bed and breakfast or something, go to the wedding together." When she hesitated he said, "No obligation or anything. I mean in terms of . . . you know."

On two separate occasions in college they'd tried and failed to sustain a serious romance. It seemed to her that the sex, while fun, had not been profound for either one of them. On the other hand, she was not above a little fun at this point in her life.

"Can you afford to do that?" she asked. "Is your father paying you that much?"

"I'm not working for the old man anymore," he said with a note of satisfaction. "Just wait. I'll tell you all about it when I see you."

AND SO SHAWN found herself in the passenger seat of Brian's rented Sentra, headed south toward downtown from the airport. It was the first Saturday in June, unseasonably cool enough that Brian had asked to leave the windows down. Half a mile to their right she could see a solid green wall of trees on the far side of the Cape Fear River. The Atlantic was close enough that she could taste its salt in the air, bringing back memories of pelicans gliding in front of pink and purple clouds, of waking up without an alarm clock, of Brian's boyish, nearly hairless body.

"So tell me this big secret," she said, turning toward him and noticing again, as she had at the airport, how dramatically his short, reddish-blond hair had receded from his forehead. "When did you quit the oil business?"

"Two years ago. It kind of took me by surprise, really. I'd been playing at the club every weekend, and before I knew it I was doing really great."

He'd lost her. "What club? Are you in a band?"

"The Dallas Country Club. I'm playing golf."

"Golf? *Golf?* You're a *golfer* now, is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I did a year as a club pro, and then last year a bunch of the guys there put a stake together for me and I went out on the Australian tour. I was out for nine months and I've already paid everybody back." He glanced at her for a reaction.

"You never said anything to me about golf."

"I was on the team in high school. I kind of kept a low profile about it in college, I guess because I was afraid it wouldn't sound cool or something, but I

still went out every once in a while. Wilmington has some outstanding courses. With the Spanish moss and everything, first thing in the morning, with the mist over the water hazards. . .”

“Well, you were right about it not sounding cool,” she said. “I can’t believe you mutated into a golfer when I wasn’t looking. Do they make you wear plaid pants and those awful polyester caps?”

He was staring straight ahead, the smile frozen on his face. He’d paid for her trip, and not thirty minutes into it she’d trounced on his feelings. She really did hate herself sometimes. “I’m sorry, Brian. I didn’t mean to tease you.”

“When I was thinking about you, about us, I never thought about what a smart mouth you have. I’d completely forgotten that whole side of your character.”

“I said I was sorry.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Come on, Bri, forgive me. Even if I don’t deserve it. Tell me about this tour you’re on.”

She had to coax a little more, but by the time they crossed Market Street she had him talking again. He parked on Third in front of a two-story Victorian with turrets and a wraparound porch.

The sight of the place warmed her like a glass of champagne. The house was beautiful and romantic and just slightly decadent. The magnolia tree in the front yard was in full bloom, drenching the air with heavy, sensuous perfume. Brian rang the bell and a middle-aged woman answered the door. She gave them a short tour and then left them alone in the Hibiscus Room.

Brian went to the window and opened it. “You like it?” he asked.

“It’s great,” she said. He stood awkwardly with his hands in his pockets, and Shawn knew he was waiting to take his cue from her. The minor skirmish in the car had somehow put her off and now she couldn’t seem to find an intimate mood. The queen-sized bed loomed large in her mind. “Um,” she said, “I’ve got a lot of getting ready to do before six.”

“Sure,” Brian said, with only a hint of disappointment.

THE SERVICE TOOK forty minutes, counting processional and recessional, hymns, prayers, vows, and some sort of contemporary Christian love song that one of Dylan’s fraternity brothers delivered in a prissy tenor that made Shawn cringe. Ashley was radiant in a low-cut, arctic-white gown, her blonde hair piled Gibson-girl style with long wisps curling free on both sides, her veil suspended from a pearl headband. Dylan and his groomsmen, all in white dinner jackets, looked like waiters at an exclusive resort: tanned, muscular, poised on the balls of their feet.

Drawn-out as it was, Shawn appreciated the ritual, the sense that nothing was being left out, nothing hurried over. Ashley and Dylan would have to come out of this, she thought, feeling well and truly married.

The congregation was up and down a half-dozen times for one reason or another, and each time she sat Shawn found Brian’s arm stretched out on the pew behind her. Brian himself did not even seem to be looking at her, seemed more impersonally possessive than overtly sexual, though she knew in Brian’s dream world they would have made love before she got dressed. What she needed, she thought, was to feel desired instead of merely obligated.

In the reception line, Ashley seemed genuinely thrilled to see her. “I was so afraid you weren’t going to make it!”

“I had a mysterious benefactor,” Shawn said.

Ashley glanced at Brian, who'd just kissed her and was now pumping Dylan's hand. "You'll have to tell me everything later."

"Nothing to tell," she said, but Ashley had already turned to the next in line.

Dylan grabbed her and kissed her. "You look so hot. What's Brian got that I don't?"

It was impossible to set him straight in the milliseconds available. "It's what he doesn't have. Like a brand-new wife, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Dylan said. "Her." Shawn assumed he was kidding but still didn't know how to react, other than to smile and keep moving.

Dylan's father pretended to remember her while also pretending not to look down the front of her dress. The effort left him somewhat frazzled and left Shawn feeling better about herself than she had in a while. It was in fact a major statement of a dress, strapless and short, the perfect shade of taupe to set off her shoulder-length brown hair. There were plenty of disadvantages to living in D.C., but a lack of shopping was not one of them.

The video crew kept them waiting for nearly half an hour while they shot close-ups at the altar, then, unhappy with the camera placement on the church steps, handed out fresh packets of birdseed for a second take of the exit.

"Did you ever think," Shawn asked, "that we work so hard to immortalize all the big events of our lives that we're forgetting to have any emotions to come back and revisit?"

"You're never going to have any fun if you keep thinking so much," Brian said. He took her arm. "Let's go find the bar."

**D**URING THE CIVIL WAR, Wilmington had been the last refuge of the Confederate blockade runners. After the war there'd been money in textiles and shipping. In the 1890s, a mob of white citizens had burned down the offices of the city's black-owned newspaper and run its black mayor out of town in one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. Now the city catered to supertankers, tourists, and the film industry. It was an easygoing city, for the most part, willing to do whatever it took to get by.

In the '80s, when Shawn had first come to Wilmington with her parents, the entire downtown area had been a slum. Fifteen years and millions of dollars had brought the tourists back to cobbled streets and restored Victorian houses, historical plaques and a boardwalk along the river.

Ashley's parents had rented the Ice House, a downtown bar, for the reception. There was air-conditioning inside and an R&B band out on the patio, with bouncers at the back gate to keep Riverwalk tourists from wandering in.

There was no champagne, only white wine, beer, and well liquor. Shawn, not yet ready to commit to serious drinking, settled for a Coke. The bride and groom made their entrance and Shawn stayed well away from the bouquet toss. Dylan threw a garter and there were photo opportunities galore as they cut and posed with their cakes.

She and Brian ended up at a big table outside under the floodlights with a dozen old friends. "You know me," Brian said. "I'm not going to be indoors if there's an alternative." It got very drunk very quickly. Between the band and the shouting back and forth across the table, Shawn found it hard to keep up an individual conversation.

It was evidently getting drunk inside as well. On her way to the bathroom Shawn heard somebody's father say, "I'm sort of the junior partner in a one-partner firm." Across the room a red-faced man in his thirties waved his hands and said, "This goddamn mild weather is putting my utility shares in the toilet. If we don't get some serious ice storms this winter I'm fucked." Standing at the mirror in the ladies' room one of the bridesmaids said, to no one in particular, "I just think a lot more people would have liked Ashley if she hadn't been so popular."

At the buffet Shawn ran into one of her roommates from freshman year. "So," Kirsten said, "are you still painting?" Kirsten's hair was an expensive shade of blonde and her makeup was impeccable.

"Not for a while," Shawn said. "There just doesn't seem to be any time."

"You're working?"

Shawn nodded. "I was in Greensboro for a year, living with my parents, and I wanted to just get away from everything and everybody, so I took a job with this ad agency in D.C. I mean, I still get to draw, just. . ."

"Just not what you want."

The men she worked with all had the right haircuts and suits and worked twelve hours a day. It made her feel nearly human again to get a little sympathy. "One of the accounts they gave me is a tobacco company, I guess because of my being from North Carolina and all. I hate it, but I'm afraid they'll fire me if I say anything."

"It's a bitch," Kirsten said. "Come sit down?"

They found two places at a table full of parents. "So what's happening with you?" Shawn asked.

"Well, you know I married Stephen, right? I'm still teaching second grade, but we're hoping I can quit in a couple more years?" Shawn nodded, thinking how she'd missed the upward-turning cadence of Kirsten's speech, its simple need for acknowledgment. "So Stephen's in the Law Library twenty-four hours a day, wondering how he's going to bring in any new business if he can't even get to the golf course."

"Golf," Shawn said. "You'd think it would have died out, except for maybe a few decrepit old guys. With real estate brokers circling them like vultures, waiting to put condos on all the fairways."

"Honey, where have you been? You can't do business if you can't break ninety. Especially if you're dealing with the Japanese? And of course every big corporation in the world is buying themselves a P G A tournament." She glanced up. "Uh oh, we've been found out. Hey, Brian."

"Hey, Kirsten." He offered Shawn an unconvincing smile. "I was wondering where you got off to."

"We were just talking about golf," Shawn said.

"Very funny."

"No, really."

"Stephen's been playing the Carolina Country Club?" Kirsten said. "And I've been taking lessons."

"Brian's turned pro," Shawn said. It gave Brian obvious pleasure to hear her say it, and she thought it might make up for the grief she'd given him earlier.

"He's on the Australian Tour now."

Kirsten seemed puzzled. "Right now?"

"It's winter there now," Brian explained patiently. "We start up again in August."

“I wouldn’t think there’d be enough golf courses there for a whole tour?” Kirsten said.

“We play all over the place. Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia. I love the travel, I love getting to play in all these exotic places. We’re even playing Vietnam this year.”

“Excuse me,” said a guy in his fifties from the other side of the table. “Did I hear you say you’re playing *golf* in *Vietnam*?”

“Yes sir, that’s right.”

The guy was short and barrel-chested and had on an ugly yellow suit. “Jesus Christ,” he said, collapsing back in his chair. “Jesus Christ. I did three tours over there, and now they’re playing fucking golf.”

The woman next to him put her hand on his arm. “Now, Ray.”

Another old guy at the end of the table said, “What the hell you want to go over there for, son?”

“I played in Bangkok last year,” Brian said, looking like he didn’t know whether to get self-righteous or apologize. “It was great. Everybody seemed really excited to see us.”

“To see your money,” the guy in the yellow suit said.

“Probably,” Brian agreed. Shawn liked him for that; five years ago he wouldn’t have bothered to be polite to a cranky old drunk. “It’s kind of primitive over there. You have to step over the rats if you get up in the night, the power goes on and off all the time. They told us all to carry pocket flashlights everywhere. But it was crazy, just wide open. With a little money over there you can do just about anything you can imagine.”

“So this year it’s Vietnam,” the guy in the yellow suit said. “They still got some of our boys prisoner over there, you know that?”

“He’s one of those X-Generation people, Ray,” said the old guy at the end of the table. “He doesn’t give a damn.”

“Actually,” Shawn said, “Gen X is all in their thirties now.” She kept talking, wondering if she could keep Ashley and Dylan’s wedding from breaking down into open warfare. “We’re the Un Generation. Kirst-UN, Bri-UN, Dyl-UN, half the people I know have UN names. No wonder we’re so depressed.”

Brian was looking at her like she was retarded when one of the groomsmen came up and whispered in his ear. “Excuse me,” Brian said. “Duty calls.” He smiled briefly and walked away.

“Go ahead,” said the guy in the yellow suit, not quite loud enough, Shawn thought, for Brian to hear. “Have a great fucking time.”

Shawn stood up too. “Sorry gentlemen,” she said. “Peace with honor, okay?”

SHE FOLLOWED BRIAN outside where he, Dylan, and another seven fraternity brothers formed a circle, arms around each other’s shoulders, in front of the stage. They rocked back and forth and sang, in maudlin *a cappella* detail, about lying on their death beds with the name of their beloved fraternity on their lips.

The band—with the waiters and busboys, the only black faces at the reception—looked on with mild amusement, and when it was over launched a medley of disco hits including “Brick House” and the inevitable “YMCA.” Shawn got Brian briefly onto the dance floor where she asked, “Are you having a good time?”

He'd shed his coat and tie and undone a couple of buttons on his white shirt. "Yeah. I forgot how good it is to see all those guys. You?"

She was no more able to explain her sense of dislocation than she was willing to seem ungrateful. She wished she hadn't brought it up. "Me too. It's been a long time." Actual years, she thought, might not entirely express how long it felt.

After two songs someone called Brian's name and he excused himself with a smile. Shawn got a glass of bourbon and found a chair off to herself. She was close to the wall that separated the club from the cool, humid darkness of the Riverwalk a few yards away. She sniffed at the drink, which suddenly smelled medicinal and unappealing. One of the waiters, wearing a white dinner jacket like the groomsmen, was leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. He looked to be about Shawn's age, clean-shaven, with his hair trimmed to a short stubble. His skin looked purplish-black in the harsh floodlights.

"You want this?" she asked, offering the drink. "I haven't touched it."

"No thank you. It'd be worth my job, they saw me drinking that."

"Sorry," she said. "I guess I wasn't thinking."

"That's okay. You not supposed to be thinking, you supposed to be having a good time."

"You work for the caterer?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I wish you wouldn't call me ma'am. My name's Shawn." She held out her hand.

"Franklin," he said, and shook it warily. Then he dropped his cigarette in the gravel and crushed it with his shoe. "I better get back to work."

Stephen, Kirsten's husband, grabbed at Franklin's sleeve as he walked by. "Say, man," Stephen said, "you wouldn't happen to have change for a twenty, would you?"

"Think so," Franklin said, reaching into his pants pocket. Shawn abandoned her drink and went to find a chair at the table.

THE GENDERS HAD POLARIZED, with Brian and the other males all at one end. Brian was telling a story in a hushed voice as Shawn came up behind him. Apparently it was something she was not supposed to hear, because even as she reached out to rest her hand on his shoulder, Dylan looked up and saw her and said, "Yo, Brian, cool it, dude."

"What's the deal, Dylan?" she said.

"Nothing," Dylan said.

"Golf stories," Brian said, and the men all laughed.

Kirsten, from the far side of the table and just over the border into the women's zone, said, "They were talking about hookers."

Shawn felt ill. She clutched her purse with both hands behind her back, hearing her mother's voice in her head saying, "Sooner or later, you have to pay the piper."

"Hey," Stephen said. "Guy's ten thousand miles from home, not going to see any woman he knows for another two or three months, what's he supposed to do? Terrorize the sheep?"

"Australians," Brian said, "are very protective of their sheep."

More laughter. There was no way, Shawn thought, she could sit down at that table now. As she walked away she heard Dylan say, "You're in deep shit now, man."

SHE SAT FOR half an hour with Ashley's parents, then decided she was being childish. Why should Brian keep her from the rest of her friends? Back on the patio, Brian had found a broomstick and was giving golf lessons at the back fence. "So," Brian said, "the old boy asks, 'Aren't there *any* Democrats at this club?' and Billy says, 'Not on *my* watch.'" "

In the laughter one of the groomsmen bent over and came up with a crumpled piece of paper. "I'll be damned," he said. "Look! Twenty bucks!"

"That's the only way *you're* gonna get lucky tonight, Jason," somebody yelled.

"Found money," Brian said, straightening from where he'd been bent over his improvised club. Shawn heard a focused quality in his voice that was new to her. "Want to double it?"

Jason squinted drunkenly at Brian. "Double it how?"

"I'll bet you I can take this rock, hit a tee shot with this broomstick right here, and knock it over the fence and all the way into the river."

"No way. This is some kind of trick, right?"

"No tricks, just pure golfing ability. Twenty bucks says I can do it."

"You're on."

The thing Shawn had found most appealing about Brian in college was the very thing that eventually broke them up, both times. He'd been laid back, always willing to go with the flow, able to take his own pleasure out of nearly any situation he might find himself in. Long-term, his lack of direction dragged her own ambitions down, but in the short term it had always made him fun for a weekend at the beach.

Somewhere Brian had found his direction, and Shawn didn't care much for the way it sat on him. His posture was still nonchalant, but there was a light in his eyes as he took a golf tee out of his pocket and set the rock on it. He adjusted his grip, took a practice swing, and then stepped up to the tee.

There were twenty or more people around him now in a loose gallery. A few of the more drunken fraternity brothers were laughing and calling out comments but Shawn could see, even from her obstructed view, that Brian was inside a zone of silence and perfect concentration. He brought the broomstick back smoothly and turned his whole body into his swing, hitting the rock with a solid *crack*.

He turned away just before the rock splashed into the river, and with a polished gesture he plucked the twenty-dollar bill from Jason's fingers. His friends surrounded him, slapping his back and lifting both his arms in victory. Someone handed him a fresh beer.

Of course he's different, Shawn thought. He has this now.

SOMEONE BRUSHED PAST HER. "Hey, Franklin," she said. Franklin nodded, distracted, and headed for the group that surrounded Brian. "Excuse me," he said when he got there. "Sorry to interrupt, but did any of y'all maybe see a twenty dollar bill out here? Thought maybe I might have dropped it when I was giving that man some change."

Franklin's posture was awkward, defensive, and Shawn thought of Brian with the Vietnamese vet earlier, unsure whether to flatter or attack. Life, she thought suddenly, was full of Vietnams. She seemed to be having one now.

Nobody answered at first. Two or three faces in the crowd turned briefly toward Brian, then looked away again. "Don't think so," Brian said. "We'll keep an eye out for it, though."

More than anything, Shawn was embarrassed by the transparency of the lie. She stepped up and asked, "Did you say you lost something?"

Franklin held her eyes for a second. She wasn't sure what he was looking for. "It wasn't nothing," he said. "Forget I asked."

"Because I found this a few minutes ago," she said, fumbling in her purse, finding a twenty, and crumpling it as she pulled it out.

Franklin took it from her, nodded stiffly, and walked away. He was barely out of earshot when Brian said, "What the hell did you do that for? You made us all look like we were trying to rip that guy off."

"Weren't you?"

"I *earned* that money."

"You won it. It's not the same thing."

"Shit," Jason said. "I wouldn't have bet him if I hadn't just found that money. No way I was going to cough up another twenty."

"Earned and won is exactly the same to me," Brian said. He moved in toward her, turning his back on his friends and dropping his voice. This was the new, intense Brian. "Where do you think half my money comes from? Gambling and hustling."

"You and me both," she said, thinking at first of work, then realizing how it must sound to Brian in the context of the weekend. Then she thought, that's okay. Let it stand.

"Look," Brian said. "Here's the twenty bucks, okay? I don't want you covering for me. I can take care of myself."

"Keep it. Consider it a down payment on my plane ticket. I'll send you the rest when I get home."

"What's that supposed to mean? You've had a chip on your shoulder since you got off that plane. I don't want anything from you. I just want to have a good time and see my friends. I don't want your money."

The crack about the chip on her shoulder hurt. It was something her mother always said to her and she worried that it might be true. In the flame of Brian's self-righteousness the hurt flared into anger. "Why not? What's so special about my money? You seem to want everybody else's. You could always use it to buy yourself a hooker while you're in Vietnam."

"Is that what all this is about? Sex?"

"A little. Some of it's about money. And I think some of it's about golf. About black men carrying white men's clubs. You know? About all you guys living in this pretty green fantasy world and getting paid millions of dollars for it. And then you walk right past the napalm victims on your way to the clubhouse."

"Vietnam again. You don't get it, do you? You just don't get it."

"Get what?"

"What an asshole that vet inside was. Me playing golf in Vietnam means we won. No bombs, no helicopters, just good old-fashioned American hustle. The way we won the Cold War, the way we're about to win in China. *We won.*"

The band had finished and there was a chill blowing in off the river. The voices around her had begun to sound strident and artificial.

Time to go, she thought. She smiled at Brian, touched his cheek, and went to find a taxi.

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