

PLAYING ARLINGTON

From the walkway next to the Iwo Jima memorial, Tanya stared at the cemetery's side entrance--a gap in the low stone wall like the missing tooth in a child's smile. Just the thought of what she was about to do was itself an offense. Arlington National is hallowed ground, our nation's most sacred shrine. She knew that. But a life was at stake.

Tanya moved forward through strong slanting sunlight. From this distance the intersecting diagonals of grave markers and their shadows resembled the dimples on a golf ball. It was a warm evening and her skin was already moist under her shirt and waistband. She had chosen the first Monday in June because it was a time of recovery from the busy Memorial Day commemorations.

Don't look furtive, she reminded herself as she entered the grounds and stepped off the marked path. Hide without hiding. The shafts of her six iron and wedge felt slick through the plastic of a department store shopping bag.

Oak leaves overhead luffed in a soft breeze as Tanya dropped a Lady ProStaff onto a clear spot. She gazed across Section 52 and inhaled the scent of newly trimmed lawn. She brought the six around smoothly and launched the ball out of the shadows. She admired its flight, the trajectory radiating into blue sky, a ripple from the center of her own pond.

During that wonderful summer with Nelson, when everything seemed possible, she occasionally offered to take him golfing. He always gave her his look, with the eyebrows and all, and said things like, "You mean that thing with the sticks that white guys do when they're too old for tennis?" But one morning over scrambled eggs and toast in her kitchen, he asked if she thought there might be a tee time open. She looked at him, her eyes like searchlights across his steady gaze. She didn't know he had been sneaking off to the driving range for several weeks, inventing mandatory ROTC events as his cover story. Nelson was a track man, a sprinter and a hurdler. Women always noticed his legs. By the end of that summer before basic he got pretty decent at golf too.

Tanya found the ball in the grass aisle between two rows of markers. Not a bad lie. Trees grew thickly across the road that curved through that sector, and she aimed for a clearing seventy yards out and a little to the left. She needed to hook it with enough loft to get over a wide-hipped dogwood blocking her way. She got under the ball well and cleared the dogwood, but the shot went straighter and longer than she planned. A faint *thock* resounded off a tree trunk in the grove beyond.

Arlington National Cemetery has the shape of the last piece of dough on the cookie sheet. Neither round nor square, the property's six hundred leafy acres roll and fold down from the mansion, originally the home of George Washington's stepson, and later that of Robert E. Lee. The biggest attractions, John F. Kennedy's grave and the Tomb of the Unknowns, are like two raisins stuck slightly off-center. With few open spaces, it is not a place for long towering drives. Tanya's plan was to play the perimeter until the official closing time of seven o'clock, then move in to hit the

marquee sites. Next she would traverse all the way to the southern boundary before cutting back to Section 60 to find Nelson. If she made it, if she didn't get caught, if she finished before dark, if she didn't run out of balls...then, fine. That would decide it.

Tanya proceeded steadily, using the trees to screen herself from view. Before closing the gates the staff would make sure any remaining visitors left immediately. She played her way over to Section 27, off in a low corner of the grounds, the resting place of thousands of former slaves who fought and died in the Civil War. On these soldiers' weathered markers appear the words "Civilian" or "Citizen" rather than their names. Nelson was never much for sightseeing but this place would have held him. Tanya brushed the stones with her fingertips as she passed.

While Tanya was lining up a shot over near the maintenance buildings, a voice came floating over the fence. She crouched against a young pine.

". . .you know what I'm saying?"

"What'd you think of that blonde?"

"Who?"

"At the last one. With the short black dress."

"That girl?"

"Heh-heh, so you were lookin' too!"

"She was a kid. Probably his little sister."

The voices receded; one last cloud of laughter drifted over the tombstones; car doors slammed. When it was quiet again, Tanya stood and stroked her ball toward the interior of the grounds.

The Kennedys were part of history, just like everyone else here. Their tragedies struck before Tanya was born. But the eternal flame was the one thing in the whole place that resembled a pin. It was also a very tricky spot to reach with a golf ball. A high stone rampart, inscribed with words from JFK's famous speeches, curved around the face of the site. Stout oaks stood behind like sentinels. Tanya decided that the steep grassy slope down from the mansion offered the best avenue of attack. She circled the base of the hill until she had a clear shot at the lawn. In a spacious field of markers, she stood up straight and drove the ball across Sherman Drive. It soared over the Robert Kennedy fountain, struck flagstone, and bounced over the solitary white cross on the edge of the grass. The sun had not yet set; Tanya felt exposed as she climbed the rise, her skin cooling in the air.

She stepped around Robert Kennedy's cross and got up on the lawn. The eternal flame was a short dogleg away, sharply uphill and then down a narrow corridor through the trees. With the wedge she reached a point twenty yards up from her target. Although a hedge blocked her view, she knew the tongue of fire was there. Below, legions of white markers marched down green fields. Across the Potomac the Lincoln Memorial absorbed color from an expiring sun.

She tapped the ball with her wedge and kept it on the grass. On the other side of the hedge, across fifteen feet of pavement and cobblestone, the eternal flame poured up from the ground. Rough slabs of granite interspersed with a tough stubble of clover framed the hole. Bouquets lay scattered and silent like September

sunbathers. With a careful stroke she lifted the ball over the bush. It bounced on the pavement, pinballed around the granite slabs and stopped against a clutch of daisies tied with a ribbon. She putted across a smooth piece of slate inscribed with JFK's full name and abbreviated life span, and the ball struck the lip of stone that encircled the flame. That would count. Putting the ball in the hole might smother the fire.

She thought the e-mail from the guy claiming he had been in Nelson's unit was perverse Army humor. More than three years had passed since she kissed Nelson goodbye. She knew she should forget him. Her parents had always been cool about Nelson, but they wanted her to recover. To move on. Even Mrs. Palmer emerged momentarily from her grief at the funeral to tell her not to look back. And Tanya tried, she dated other guys, she had her friends and her job and her two-bedroom. That's what people did. They went on. But curiosity, if that's what it was, overpowered her; she contacted the clinic. It turned out to be true: Nelson had left samples and named her as the sole beneficiary. This was not something they had talked about. Everything was still so new and wide-open. It would have been too soon and far too heavy.

With dusk coming on she hurried toward the Unknowns. At all times, in full ceremonial dress, a young soldier paces the courtyard in front of the massive block of bone-white marble. Tanya approached from the formal garden behind, and her shot landed on the lawn close to the base of the tomb. She crept forward behind the tall hedge that walled in the sides of the garden. Just before the sentry pivoted at the far point of his route, she ran softly across the grass to press herself against the back of the monument. The courtyard was twelve feet above the garden and she could hear the *click* when the soldier snapped his heels together at each turn. She timed him: he was regulation, thirty seconds end to end.

Twenty-seven seconds after his next turn, she stepped to the ball, took a short backswing, paused, and tapped her shot against the base of the monument hard enough so that the rebound would leave room for an exit swing. She waited a minute and a half, and timed her swing to strike on the *click* again. Her ball flew out of the garden and landed across Roosevelt Drive.

Now she had a long, straight course to the southern boundary of the grounds. Ten good strokes would probably do it. In the dimming light she jogged between shots. This was a crazy situation and a crazy way to decide. But why not? She was looking ahead and what she wanted was a family. This was one way to do it.

The report said that Nelson was killed on routine patrol. It was the word "routine" that left the bitterest residue. *Focus*, she told herself. Ahead was the edge of the cemetery, the iron fence separating the living from the dead. She lifted the club high and brought it around in one motion, twisting her hips and shoulders to follow through. The shot cleared the outer drive and stayed inside the boundary. She chased after it while it was still rolling.

Traffic rushed along the highway outside. About 500 yards to go. She had shot 93 so far, and she wanted to finish in under 100. Tanya figured, if I can do this--guide a little white ball over all the obstacles and past all the dangers to reach my chosen destination--then what can't I do? Playing Arlington was a compressed version

of a much grander challenge. She had counted dozens of reasons to accept and dozens of reasons to refuse Nelson's posthumous offer. This test would tip the balance.

She reached Section 60 in three, and found the ball resting against the back of Cpl. Raymond Diggs, 1947-1967. This could cost her a stroke. She squatted, peering closely to see if there was any way to squeeze past, her hand balanced on top of the marker. To her surprise, the stone tilted, very subtly, revealing a missing chunk of marble at the base--a casualty of the lawn mower wars.

Nelson lay three rows beyond, beneath the fourth marker in from the end. She had to chip straight over two headstones and bounce into Nelson's or reach him directly through the air. She had made more difficult shots in club tournaments, with people watching.

"Ma'am!" It was a command.

She swung, too hard, and with a slice. She grimaced as the ball sailed over Nelson, struck the upper edge of Sgt. George Healy in the next row, and bounced back at a weird angle, landing in front of the fifth marker, Nelson's neighbor.

"Do not move, Ma'am!"

The security guard had gotten out of his truck and was approaching fast. She turned and saw him slip in the dew, striking his leg audibly against Pvt. Ramon Hernandez. While the guard lay on his side, hands cradled over his left shin, Tanya stepped forward to take her final shot to reach Nelson. It shouldn't be hard from one grave away. As she came up to the ball, she bent to study the lie, then froze.

For a long moment she stared at the name. Nelson Victor Palmer. Leaving the ball in place, she straightened, her brow tightened in puzzlement. With her eyes she counted the stones again and her smile ignited. This was the fifth marker, but it was Nelson's.

She walked to the end of the row and stopped in front of Juwan Chambers, the new guy. She said out loud, "Nelson and I are going to have a baby, and we're naming him after you."

The guard reached for his radio, but he never pushed the button as Tanya sprinted into the darkness, gripping her clubs like a baton.

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