

All it took to bring out the Texas in me was one look at the lady in the jacked-up mini standing by the ninth green. I thought, man, if this is a golf mom, you can dip my ass in batter and fry me for dinner.

The jacked-up mini was bright blue, the legs were tan. They were toned and shaped and it was a good guess she could kick a hole in the ceiling of a motel room if she was on her back doing what it looked like she could do best. I might add that she was also first-team upstairs in a formfitting, sleeveless, scoop-neck white top—and if those were store-boughts, she damn sure got her money's worth. But all this was merely the opinion of Jack Brannon, white man, forty-seven, sportswriter, and spiritual person of great depth, which was me.

I was at this tournament for chicks. You could say I was trying to change my luck. Or you could say I'd grown tired of writing Tiger Woods, comma. For more than twenty years I'd been covering the PGA Tour, but in the last ten or twelve years all I'd done was write about Tiger whipping up on a bunch of slugs—in his sleep, blindfolded, with one endorsement contract tied behind him. I needed a break from watching him beat guys who all dress the same, get rich for finishing tenth, and couldn't give you a good quote if you stuck a shoehorn down their throats. There's a joke in the press-rooms now that the tour should be known as Black Jesus and the Dwarfs.

So I decided to check out the ladies. See if the rumor was true that the LPGA Tour was suddenly interesting, more heterosexual

than it used to be, and even halfway glamorous. There was supposed to be a surprising batch of young babes out there now—a new wave of Lolitas—who could solid play the game and were good-looking along with it.

Anyhow, it was a warm day at this tournament, and the jacked-up mini was behind the gallery ropes with a leather bag slung over her shoulder. Her streaked blond hair was falling open in the middle like the showstoppers on Fox News. She wore tinted shades. I watched her glance up at the big scoreboard on the veranda and then back down the fairway.

For all I knew, she could have been a golf aunt, a golf sister, or a golf cousin as easily as she could have been a golf mom. What I did was, I decided to ask one of the obvious golf moms about her.

I had choices. The ladies over by the putting green were obvious golf moms. I could tell. How? Because they looked like middle-age flight attendants and were in possession of chair seats, binoculars, and pairings sheets. What else could they be?

I strolled over to a lady who looked pleasant, helpful. Ann Wendell she said her name was. Fortyish. Adequate brunette. I pointed to the jacked-up mini and asked if she knew the person's identity and wittily wondered why security hadn't called for backup.

Ann Wendell ignored the attempt at humor and looked at me like I'd been living in Antarctica or Oregon and said the woman I was inquiring about was Thurlene Clayton, of course.

Of course?

I said, "Excuse me, but why am I supposed to know who Thurlene Clayton is?"

She said, "That's Ginger Clayton's mother, for goodness' sake!"

"No fooling?" I said.

I did know who Ginger Clayton was. She was one of the reasons I was out there. I'd read about Ginger Clayton, seen photos. She was the newest child star in women's golf. A fiery eighteen-year-old blonde who could launch it and putt it. She was from North Cliff, Texas, which I was familiar enough with to know it considered itself a suburb of Dallas and had the freeway traffic to prove it.

Ginger had turned pro last year and won an LPGA event and a

million and a half dollars overall. She'd already been second twice this year and scooped \$200,000. And I knew one more thing. If Ginger was eighteen, the jacked-up mini couldn't be more than thirty-eight—and could play younger.

Ann Wendell said, "That's an interesting statement Thurlene is making with the Vuitton shoulder bag she brought to the golf course. It must have cost her daughter fifteen hundred dollars."

Headline: Man Finds Jealous Woman Among Golf Moms.

I casually asked if there was a Mr. Jacked-Up Mini around. I hadn't seen a guy in a muscle shirt anywhere with gold shit around his neck.

"They're divorced," Ann Wendell said. "He isn't here."

I thanked Ann Wendell and walked away, thinking that the sight of Thurlene Clayton had begun to change my mind about women's golf.

In my wholesome life as a sportswriter and recreational golfer, all women's golf had meant to me was four plump ladies in shin-length skirts, cardigan sweaters, and floppy hats directly in front of me, and playing so slow and squatting so long behind so many putts that they'd force me to yell, "Pick it up, Doris—it's good!"

I decided the jacked-up mini needed to meet me, since I was in a position to help her daughter's career, owing to the literature I turned out regularly in the magazine I wrote for.

If you wanted to attach an ulterior motive to why I wanted to meet her, you could start with the fact that I'd been single for three years, the result of two losses in the marriage game. My first wife, Carolyn, the magazine reporter, left me for a stockbroker for the same reason that my second wife, Renata, the real estate agent, left me for a gel-hair lawyer.

I took a philosophical view of it. Stockbrokers and lawyers, pound for pound, made a shitload more money than journalists. So I wrote it off as one of God's mistakes, like not letting dogs live longer.

I'd stayed friends with Carolyn. She was a nice person, had a good heart, and I didn't blame her much for wanting a husband who made more money than I did and wasn't always out of town in a bar or a pressroom.

Renata, on the other hand, was a different package. She was attractive, fashionable, and inquisitive, but that was the disguise I fell for.

She turned out to be a humorless, screeching, spend-with-both-hands, life-sucking bitch who could throw a clock radio into a wall mirror harder and straighter than Tom Brady could throw a football.

The gel-hair guy was welcome to her. He's the only lawyer I've ever pitied.

This was early March. I was in a part of Southern California I didn't know existed. I was at an exclusive new country club and real estate development that was advertised as an "enthralling resort destination." This was despite the fact that it was located in a vast desert somewhere between Indio and El Centro and populated by happy throngs of illegal aliens at work and play in their quaint regional costumes.

I'd flown from New York to L.A., spent the night at the Hills, dined on the McCarthy salad, and rented a Lincoln the next morning. I'd spent six hours driving. The first three hours were for enjoyment. The last three I felt like I was in a desperate race to reach the Wadi Zim Zim ahead of Rommel's Afrika Korps.

The tournament was the Firm Chick Classic. Firm Chick was a skin cream, I was excited to learn. And I was always impressed when a golf tournament declared itself a classic in the first year of its existence.

The first round was already under way on this Thursday in the kind of LPGA tournament where the winner makes page nine in the sports sections but could be a nail-biter if you were a golf mom or a golf dad and had a precious princess in the hunt.

The fifty-four-hole event, a ladies thing, Saturday conclusion, was taking place at the Enchanted Villa, which was the name of the "resort destination."

I'd checked in at the front desk, received a press credential and a press packet of info, dropped off my bag and laptop in my room, freshened up, and gone out to case the joint.

According to the press guide, the Enchanted Villa was owned by Topy and Connie Pemberton of La Jolla. They had realized their lifelong dream when they built Enchanted Villa and hired Burch Webb, the “world famous architect,” to design thirty-six holes of golf. Villa was the “championship course,” where the tournament was being held, and Cottage was the shorter, easier course.

I didn’t need to look at the two layouts to know they’d feature fake waterfalls, dirt-shoved hills, phony ponds, rows of palm trees flown in from Kauai, and here and there a copycat golf hole.

Ah-ha—the eleventh at Merion. And what have we here? I do believe it’s the eighth at Pebble Beach.

Nor did it take much imagination for me to conclude that Topy and Connie Pemberton were born-rich golf nuts and the place should be called Rancho Trusto Fundo.

But now I was standing there peering at the jacked-up mini again and wondering if Ginger Clayton’s mother would think “Rancho Trusto Fundo” was as funny as I did when I put a breath mint on my tongue and went over to make my move.

It was tempting to open up with an old standby and ask the lady if she was as interested in poetry and art as I was, but I only smiled and said, “Golf is my life—how about you?”

When she turned to look at me, I said, “Hi, I’m Jack Brannon with *SM* magazine. My investigative talents have uncovered the fact that you’re Thurlene Clayton . . . Ginger Clayton’s mother.”

She offered me her hand. “I *am* Thurlene Clayton. Who did you say you were . . . are?”

“Jack Brannon. I write for *SM*. *The Sports Magazine*.”

“You’re Jack Brannon? The writer? Really?”

“You read?”

A little humor there. Got back a look.

“You certainly don’t have to,” I said.

Got another look. Then she said, “I do read and I’ve read your books, as a matter of fact. I read *Excuse My Free Drops* first. Isn’t that the name of it? The short stories?”

“Collection,” I said. “Stuff from the magazine. It sold like a collection of stuff from a magazine.”

“I read your novel too.”

“The title of which was . . . ?”

“*You Can Bet Me*. How am I scoring on the test?”

“I’m surprised you found a copy of it. Oprah never saw it. Hollywood never called. And the publisher’s idea of promotion was to put it outside the door of every room at the Comfort Suites in Shreveport, Louisiana.”

She pulled her shades down on her nose and squinted at me.

“Hey, I’m flattered you know my name,” I said. “Usually people can’t find my stuff in *SM*—they get lost going through Myrtle Beach or exploring Florida’s new gated communities.”

I was referring to those multipage ad inserts that piss off readers so much. They vary between golf destinations that promise to improve your game and marriage and the “hot lists” that tell you what’s new in the zany world of golf equipment.

She said, “If you don’t mind my saying so, I can’t always tell if you’re serious when I read you. Are you writing a new book?”

“I’m always serious and very deep,” I said. “Yeah, I’m creeping up on something, but the muse doesn’t seem to be in a hurry. As far as the magazine goes, people don’t know what they read or where they read it. Guys come up to me and say they saw my piece in *Golf Digest*. I say, No you didn’t. They say, Okay, it must have been *Golf World*. I say, No it wasn’t. They say, Okay, *Sports Illustrated*, and I say, Yeah, that was it, hoping to end the conversation. Then they ask what I do for a real living.”

“You mostly cover men’s golf, don’t you? The PGA Tour and all?”

“I have for a long time, but it’s no fun anymore. I decided I’d try Lolita golf for a while.”

“*Lolita* golf? Is that what you said?”

“Aren’t there a lot of young babes out here with talent?”

“Yes, there are. Maybe we should promote it more. Come to the LPGA, follow Lolita golf.”

“It got me out here.”

“Why aren’t the men fun anymore? I would think . . .”

“I’m over-Tigered.”

“You don’t like Tiger Woods? He’s awesome.”

“I like him fine. But he happened to come along at a time when he has no competition. It’s the slugs that have worn my ass out. They think they’re celebrities even though they don’t win squat. Meanwhile, for some reason, the tournament sponsors slobber over them, pamper them, lust to have their pictures made with them. America used to reward winners.”

“Slugs? You call them *slugs*? Players good enough to make it on the PGA Tour?”

“What PGA Tour? It’s Tiger and a bunch of guys playing pushover courses the tour sets up. There used to be a lot of good players who could win tournaments and do that incredibly difficult thing of talking to the press at the same time. Nicklaus, of course. And Trevino . . . Crenshaw, Curtis, Lanny, Fuzzy, Watson, Nick Price. Some others. They even played tough courses now and then. But this was before the slugs came along. These guys get rich for not winning . . . and this is while they’re criticizing the golf course, *and* the clubhouse food, *and* telling the sponsor they may not come back next year. They don’t even know each other, much less the press. They only know their agents, swing coaches, sports psychologists, and TV anchors. It’s a boring, dreary period in American pro golf. The worst since 1911 or 1912, before World War One, I’ll argue. When the only star we had was good old Johnny McDermott.”

She said, “Why do I think I’ve read that somewhere?”

“You have,” I said. “I wrote it in the magazine three weeks ago—and lived to tell it.”