

FORE!

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The sun was going down and in a few swift minutes it dipped below the horizon and the shadows came out from under all the trees, and one by one the golf-range practicers scabbarded their clubs, packed their golf balls, shucked their dark glasses, and headed for the parking lot. When the sun was completely gone the cars had gone with it; the lot was empty, the driving range abandoned, or almost abandoned.

Glenn Foray was checking some figures on his computer in the small office behind the tee-off point when he heard it. Once, twice, three times.

Whack, whack, whack.

Good solid blows of a club against three balls.

That was not ordinary.

Glenn Foray glanced up.

To the far left of the range, situated on the tee with an old-fashioned niblick driver in hand and his tartan cap pulled low on his brow, stood a now-familiar figure, a man who had been in and out of the range for some years but now was bending to

tee three more balls as if it must be done quickly. Then he straightened up, adjusted his club, and whack, whack, whack again.

Glenn Foray regarded the missing sun, the empty car lot with but two cars, his own and this lone golfer's. He rose from his desk and went to stand in the doorway, watching.

The routine was repeated. One, two, three. Whack, whack, whack. The golfer was starting a third attack when Glenn Foray arrived to his right. The man seemed not to notice and drove the golf balls, one after another, far out on the green fairway.

Foray watched them sail, then said,

"Evening, Mr. Gingrich. Nice go."

"Was it? Did it?" Gingrich said, having ignored where the balls landed. "Well, yes. Sure. Evening. Quitting time?"

Foray waited as Gingrich placed three more. There was something in the man's face and the way his arm stretched and his knuckles clutched the missiles that stopped his agreement.

"Quitting time?" he said. "Not yet."

Gingrich stared at the golf balls on the new tees. "Glad to hear that. Just a few more?"

"Hell," said Foray quietly. "Take your time. I got some figures to add. Be here at least another half hour."

"Good news." Gingrich had a nice backswing

and follow-through. One, two, three. "I know it's not your job. But could I have, oh, say, two or three more buckets?"

"No sweat." Foray turned, went, and brought back three more fully loaded golf ball carriers. "Here you go."

"Thanks," said Gingrich, still not looking up, shoving more tees in the turf. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes hot with a kind of sporting frenzy as if he were playing against himself and not happy. His fingers, thrust down, seemed flushed with color, too. "Very kind of you," he almost shouted.

Foray waited for three more solid cracks and three high-flying white balls before he backed off.

From the office doorway he watched Gingrich attack with an even more concerted energy, blow after blow, almost as if he were striking—what?—a bad day at the office? A fellow golfer? A dishonest friend? Foray snorted at his own one, two, three hard-driven thoughts.

At his computer he tried to recall what he had been summing up, but still the solid blows came as the twilight set in and the night lamps switched on, flooding the empty fairway with light. It was late on a Sunday, the one night when the range closed early, and still the man with the angry eyes and the crimson face slammed the balls high and before they fell thrust more tees in place to empty the buckets.

By the time they were empty, Foray had carried two more full loads out, quietly, and set them down. Gingrich, seeing this as an act of friendship, nodded his thanks and continued his robot performance. One, two, three, one, two, three, one—Foray did not move for a long while. At last he said, “Everything okay, Mr. Gingrich?”

Gingrich hit another three and then at last looked up. “What could not be okay?” he said.

And there were tears in his eyes.

Foray swallowed and could find no words until at last he said, looking at the crimsoned cheeks of the man and the fiery eyes, “As long as it’s all okay, then. Okay.”

Gingrich nodded abruptly and lowered his head. A few clear drops of water fell from his eyes.

Foray said, “I just figured. It’ll take me another forty minutes, an hour, to finish up. You can close the joint with me.”

“Fine. Damned fine,” Gingrich said.

And clipped three clumps of grass and turf.

Foray felt the blows as if the club hit his midriff, they were that intense. The effect was like a film speeded up. No sooner were the balls up than they were gone. The air seemed full of white birds sailing in the night trees.

Foray kept rising to go to the doorway and stare out, taking the impacts, stunned with the progress of this lonely game.

"None of my business," he murmured, but still turned to his computer. He called up the index of frequent players: Galen, Gallagher, Garnes . . . Here it was. Whack, whack, whack, in the twilight.

"Gingrich. William. 2344 Patricia Avenue, L.A. 90064. Mr. and Mrs. (Eleanor). Golf practice lessons early on. Repeat a few months ago. Steady customer." All the notes he had typed himself.

He looked out at the range and watched the man in his almost lunatic frenzy and wondered, Do I bring more buckets, yes, no? He brought more buckets. This time, Gingrich did not even glance up or nod.

Foray, like a man walking underwater, for reasons he did not quite understand, moved out toward his open-top roadster, listened to the constant knock, saw more white objects fly in a sky where the moon was slowly rising, and drove away.

What do I say? he thought. Mrs. Gingrich, come get your husband?

When he had parked in front of 2344 Patricia Avenue he looked in at the large Georgian house where some, not all, of the lights were lit. He saw shadows moving to one side in the windows. He heard distant music and dim sounds of laughter.

To hell with this, he thought. What's wrong with you? Fool!

He stepped on the gas and started to glide away but in his head he heard the chopping sounds, one,

two, three, and stopped and coasted the car back near the curb. He waited a long while, chewing his lower lip, cursing, and at last got out, stood swaying, and moved up the walk. He stood before the front door for another long minute listening to the soft voices inside and the music playing low, and at last touched the doorbell with almost as much force as the lone player thrusting in the tees. Silence. He rang again. More silence. One, two, three. Three thrusts. Three bell sounds, each louder.

He stopped and waited.

At long last the door opened and a woman's face appeared.

Her hair was tousled and her face was moist with a faint perspiration. Her eyes adjusted to his face and she said, "Yes?"

"Mrs. Gingrich?" Foray said.

"Yes?" She seemed confused, and glanced swiftly over her shoulder. In a far doorway, Foray saw the shadow of a man, or what seemed the shadow of a man.

"Yes?" she said again, quickly.

He swayed in place. One, two, three. Knock, knock, knock. Crack, crack, crack. No one else heard the sounds. He wet his lips, closed his eyes, opened them, and for some reason said, "I'm Gingrich."

"What?" she said, even more confused.

"Gingrich, William," he said, louder.

"You're not my husband!" she said.

"Yes," he said. "I am."

And hauled off and struck her in the mouth with his fist. As she held her lips with both hands, falling back, he cried, "And if you come out, you'll get the same!"

The shadow in the far door did not move. Foray turned and walked back underwater to the car and drove away.

At the driving range Gingrich was still hitting the white objects, striking the blows, mechanically, downswing, strike, downswing, crack, downswing, bang!

Foray appeared nearby with a golf bag full of clubs.

Gingrich paused and looked at the bag.

"What?" he said.

Foray said, "How about one last round?"

Gingrich looked at the open fairway to his left. A wire screen door opened there to the first tee.

"This late at night?" he said.

"It's never too late," said Foray. "I'll carry the clubs."

"I'll be damned," said Gingrich.

"Not if I can help it," said Foray.

Gingrich said, "We won't be able to see."

"We will." Foray nodded at the sky.

A full moon was rising to light the long spreads

and the low hills, the waiting sand traps and the small lake. A wind rustled in the oak trees.

"I'll be damned," whispered Gingrich.

He let himself be led out the wire screen door to the first tee.

"You first," said Foray, and placed the ball and tee for him.

Gingrich watched, almost frozen.

When Foray stood back, Gingrich took steady aim, raised his club, and brought it down like a blow of summer lightning. Bam!

He watched the ball fly like a lovely white bird up toward the moon and down toward the fairway green.

"Son of a bitch!" he cried.

"Oh, oh," he cried again. "Son of a bitch!"

"Fore!" Foray shouted, though there was no one out there on the course to harm. Or maybe there was someone way out there, a shadow.

"Fore!" he said.