

## The One-Minute Mulligan

By Matthew Dunn

It's all a matter of stealth, Ray reminded himself as he eased his way through the cube farm matrix. Well, cunning and stealth, really; cunning, stealth and ingenuity, if he was going to be totally honest. And, of course, luck. You had to have a thick layer of luck, spread generously like the grape jelly on a PB and J, his daily lunchtime ritual conducted several hours ago. It's memory still sticky, Ray's stomach grumbled.

Slowing as he approached the halfway marker – the office water cooler - his mind attempting a u-turn - the emergency bag of barbeque chips he kept in his desk drawer - Ray realized he hadn't yet devised a plan to scale the wall between himself and freedom - his boss. Cunning, stealth, ingenuity and luck were great, but he still needed a plan, one the gatekeeper hadn't heard before. His next move uncertain, he mounted the aluminum life-spring, pressing his foot hard against the worn pedal sending a cold, refreshing jet-stream across his lips. He straightened up and gargled the entire mouthful down his throat (a healthy portion bubbling over and barreling down his chin and beyond,) before tripping into a choking and coughing fit. Panicked, he covered his heaving mouth with both hands, desperate to muffle his presence far outside his cell – an irrelevant 8x8 cubicle he was convinced was designed as a sleeping aid by some insomniac mathematician. After subduing the convulsions, he towed off with the dry end of his tie and stood motionless like a bank robber who'd just arrived at the teller window only to realize he'd forgotten the note *and* the gun. *Ah...*

"Inspiration, that's what I need," he thought. "It's all a matter of inspiration." (And cunning, stealth, ingenuity and luck, of course.)

Ray stood there for several minutes, protecting the watering hole while staring off into oblivion – the origin of all original thought.

"I know that look," Catherine said, before nudging her zombied colleague aside to take a turn at the well. After a long pull, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, a bad habit she'd unwittingly acquired after years working in an office full of men. "When's your tee time?" she asked. Having worked in the accounting department with Ray "forever," Catherine knew his summertime routine and consequently already had the correct answer to her question. But it was like watching a man wrestle with a condom. Though she knew she would eventually have to step in, it was still fun to watch the preliminary bout even when it was clearly an unfair fight. *If only I had some popcorn.*

With his probing eyes still fixated on the invisible cosmos, Ray replied, "Three o'clock." (The chosen time of serious golfers up and down the east coast, a mid-afternoon departure afforded enough time to play eighteen holes by sunset. It also required skipping out of work early.)

Catherine glanced at her watch – a masculine shackle of Swiss-forged gold preferred by astronauts and secret agents – and laughed. It was currently two forty-five (seven forty-five in London according to the smaller dial.)

"Crunch time," she said, grinning. "You don't mind if I hang around and observe, do you?"

"Observe what?" Ray asked.

"The master in action."

"Who?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I want to see what ingenious plan you come up with this time. You're an inspiration, Ray. You know that don't you? To the whole office."

*Exactly*, Ray thought, *it's all about inspiration*. But as he continued to gaze forward, the bumblebee buzz of calculating calculators and clicking keywords filling the void, nothing appeared on the horizon (or in this case, a wall of vertical filing cabinets.) His stomach grumbled again. *Give me barbeque chips!*

Ray tilted his head toward her, his eyes squinting into narrow slits, and sighed. "You're not helping."

"Sorry," Catherine said, struggling to contain her laughter. Raising her hands as a shield, she took a step back. "I'm a fly on the wall."

Ray returned to his trance. After several silent minutes the fly began to fly around his head.

"Food poisoning?" Catherine suggested.

"Used it last week," Ray quickly replied.

"Terminally ill mother?"

"Last month."

"Uncle was in a car accident?"

"Last Tuesday."

"Dentist appointment? Car repair? Court appearance?"

"Used it, used it, used it."

"Cramps?"

A glimmer of hope flashed across Ray's face. Who was to say that a man couldn't suffer from cramps? Not Ray. With a knowing smile he headed toward his boss's door.

"Ray!" Catherine said, anxiously, "I was kidding! He won't buy that."

Pausing, Ray looked back at Catherine and then again at the obstacle that stood between him and recreational bliss. "How do you know?"

"Trust me," she said walking up to him. "And since he has already left for the day – something about his sister-in-law suffering an allergy attack (she rolled her eyes as she said it) – you won't have to test my theory."

Ray's jaw dropped. "Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?"

Catherine shrugged, envisioning a torn and therefore potentially dangerous condom as she chuckled under her breath, and said, "I don't know." She looked at her watch again. "Ten minutes to tee-off."

After twelve holes of play, Ray was one-under par and euphoric. Never in his life had he ever been under-par this deep into a round before and as he stepped onto the thirteenth tee – a picturesque par three guarded by a cattail-laden pond – he sensed something magical in his swing. He was in the zone, the mystical heaven where golf balls spring from the grass like ballerinas – straight and true – and land with grace and precision exactly where the mind's eye directs them.

There are no sand traps in golfer's heaven. No trees to dodge or creeks to traverse or out-of-bounds to evade, nothing but plush green stretches of pristine carpet leading to the promised land – a pampered oval lawn where putts disappear like startled meerkats into cups the size of manholes. It's a place where country club warrior legends are made – warriors like Ray.

"This one's going in," Ray said confidently as he stood over his ball. "No doubt about it." And with that declaration, he pulled his weapon back, his body coiling, his head motionless, his steely eyes

locked onto his target – an innocent white sphere speckled with tiny moon craters. Then, in a streaking flash of silver came the attack, ruthless and deliberate. Ray groaned as his barely visible biceps flexed, the sharp blade of his seven iron ripping into the earth and sending an explosion of dirt into the summer breeze and the ball rocketing skyward.

“Be the one, baby!” Ray yelled as his body tilted and squirmed in a flight coaxing seizure. The flagstick was a hundred and sixty yards away but Ray could see the trajectory was perfect. *The golfing gods still love me.* His eyes widen. A victorious smile began to emerge. “That’s got pin written all over it,” he said as his heart fluttered in anticipation of a perfect landing at the mouth of the cup.

*Kur-plunk!* Welcome to golfer’s hell, the sign read.

“Nice submarine launch, Ray,” Gerry said, a frown snarling in the wake of his partner’s disappointing effort. Gerry hadn’t picked Ray for the two-ball match against two of their buddies as much as he acquired him. Like the last kid standing unselected in gym class (the politically incorrect adjective being *spaz*), Ray was not a guy you wanted on your team. He would ask inane questions in the middle of your backswing – *you sure you want to hit that club?*; considered every putt of *his* within twenty feet to be a gimme, breaking out into a tourettic fit if the opposition didn’t agree; and vehemently swore that the official rules of the game granted one mulligan – a full pardon and replay of an errant shot - per hole. He had yet to substantiate the latter ruling, saying only that he had read that the Scots had penned it in only to then have the English burn the page out (like so many of the Scots themselves.) Now, by some freak act of nature, Ray was playing great golf and Gerry had almost started to believe they had a chance. Almost that is, until Ray started to think for himself and cast his ball into the pond like a trout lure.

“You should have used the six like I suggested,” Gerry added, as he watched the penalizing ripples spread across the pond. He then stepped forward and invited Ray to vacate the tee with a wave of his hand. *This match is basically over,* he thought grimly. *Ray will spiral out of control now, his game deteriorating into an ugly demonstration in the not-so-delicate art of earth excavation.* Grand entertainment for their opponents, not to mention wallet-fattening, but somewhat exasperating for the course groundskeeper.

“That’s what I like about playing against you, Gerry,” Derek said with a grin. “I can focus on my game and not worry about trash-talking my opponent because you’ll demoralize him for me, even when he’s your partner.”

If Gerry’s feeling were hurt he didn’t show it. He just shrugged, mumbling something about it being a golf match and not a hug fest, and then began looking for a comfortable spot to tee his ball. The only problem was Ray was still standing in the way, befuddled.

“Ray,” Gerry said finally, “you going to let the rest of us take a shot on this hole or what?”

“Hold on,” Ray replied. He then walked deliberately to his bag, swapped irons (the six replacing the seven, as his partner had originally advised), retrieved a fresh Titliest from the kangaroo pouch and returned to the tee box. Ignoring Gerry, he setup in the exact same spot as his first ill-fated shot and took a practice swing that nearly clipped his partner up side the head.

“Christ, Ray!” Gerry screamed as he ducked his partner’s six iron. He quickly backed out the way before Ray could reload. Joining the other two golfers at the edge of the tee box, he then futilely attempted to advise his partner, “There’s a drop zone up by the green, next to the pond. Hit your next shot from there, not here. A good chip and a one putt still gets you bogey.”

“Bogey my ass,” Ray retorted, “I’m going to birdie this hole.”

Derek and his playing partner, Al, didn’t waste their breath objecting. They had the situation well in hand and besides, the *mulligan man*, as they referred to Ray, wouldn’t have heard their protests anyway. As they were all savvy accountants, they kept a second set of books – a second scorecard – that recorded Ray’s score sans his delusional do-overs. That tally was the official reckoning used to settle the most important matter of the round – the dollar-per-hole match payoff. And money meant using prove-it-in-writing rules. Now, if Ray wanted to believe he was shooting par by using his long-lost, fictitious Scottish regulations, then who were they to burst his balloon, as long as he anted up in the bar afterward.

Regaining his rigid focus, Ray repeated his swing, only this time with a little more metal in his hands. Once again the ball flew and the world fell silent. The pond held its breath, as did Ray and Gerry, Derek and Al, the birds and bees and the surrounding sycamore trees, until a resounding cry ripped through the air like a clap of thunder. Shouting triumphantly, Ray watched his ball land in the center of the green no more than fifteen feet from the hole. *A gimme for birdie*, he promptly concluded.

Except for the chipped veneer roll top desk he'd found at a yard sale down the road, the second bedroom of Ray's apartment was empty. The owner of the yard and the desk, a toothpick-sized elderly woman aided by a high-tech walker on wheels who graciously offered to prop one end of his purchase on the handlebars to help Ray take it home, had insisted it was an antique. So, thinking it would appreciate in value, Ray quickly grabbed it, paying one hundred dollars more than he had budgeted. (It was made by Sears, Ray would later determine, which meant its only appreciation would come from the oddly nostalgic Sears customer.)

"Don't worry sonny, I've got brakes on this thing," the seller reassured him, pumping the handbrakes repeatedly to illustrate as the two plodded the six necessary blocks, Ray pulling and the women pushing like a two-headed lama, before soliciting several of Ray's neighbors to carry the thing up the stairs (the desk, not the old woman.) She even threw in an "antique" milk can for free, to use as a chair after she realized Ray hadn't one, delivering it personally, although slightly dented from a spill she suffered attempting to jump the curb in front of Ray's apartment building. The bulbous canister lifted Ray a little higher off the desk than he would have liked, creating severe wrist and back muscle fatigue when he worked, but it was free and like many accountants, Ray would walk on hot coals for anything free.

Adding his computer to the modest ensemble several days later, Ray accomplished his goal of transforming the previously barren space into a fully functional office. (He was considering getting a floor lamp and calendar for the wall but held off, reasoning it might make the room look cluttered.) *The perfect getaway where I can work anytime I want, he thought, far, far away from the distractions of home.*

Arriving home now from his golf outing, he headed straight to his perfect getaway to check his email. It was past ten in the evening and as he struggled to locate the power button of his desktop computer, he began to seriously reconsider the floor lamp.

Opening his inbox, Ray found 97 new messages waiting patiently, 95 of which were offers to purchase Viagra over the web at reduced prices. The subliminal implication seemed wrong to Ray. *Wasn't the intent of Viagra to enlarge?* He thought. *Then they should be selling it at engorged prices.* Confident he hadn't a need for the little blue pill, he hit the delete key.

One of the remaining two emails was a trial run from his father, whom Ray had set up with an internet account several weeks ago. Ray Sr. explained that it was just a test, closing with a request that his son give him a call if he didn't get this message. With a chuckle, Ray wrote back that he had not gotten the email, suggesting to his father that he try sending it again. "Let's see how many replies it takes before you figure out I'm pulling your leg," Ray said as he clicked the send button. *Payback for all those times you told me we were only twenty minutes away from wherever we were headed.*

And then he saw the email from God.

"What the hell?" Ray asked no one, his eyes squinting as his teeth gnawed at a coagulation of dead skin on his lower lip, a biological protest against the hours he had just spent in the hot sun. It was someone's idea of a joke, he quickly concluded, reading the subject line – *A reward for your good deed* - as the cyber-envelope magically opened before his eyes.

He read the message and then sat back in reflection; nearly slipping off the milk can in the process. (Besides being hard and uncomfortable, milk cans have no backrest.) *But it was free.*

Scrolling through a list of suspects – everyone he knew - Ray narrowed his suspicions to his three golfing buddies, aficionados at the fine art of punking each other out. That very spring, while on their

first golf outing of the season, Derek had pulled Ray aside on the first tee and in hush-hush fashion revealed a bare-all picture of Gerry with Ray's current girlfriend, Melinda. "I just thought you should know, dude. Before you go getting all serious with her and shit," he whispered. Dazed, Ray sprayed his next three shots into the woods, creek and a homeowner's screened porch respectively. It only got worse from there. Before the round was over Al had produced a similar photo of Derek and Melinda that not-so-coincidentally mirrored the first one *and* a third one that Gerry pulled from his pocket exposing Al and Melinda in high-res relations, both men exuding their desire to protect their friend from the "slut" just as Derek had. Later, in the clubhouse, an inebriated Derek confessed that he had doctored all three photos using his digital camera and some porn clips. "None of us have slept with her, Ray," Gerry confessed seeing the mix of trepidation and relief on his friend's face. "But the night's still young!" The three pranksters then burst out laughing.

This new, ball-busting message from the Almighty had one, if not all three, of their fingerprints all over it, explaining that Ray had earned a mulligan – a do-over – for his exemplary compassion of several weeks ago. *What exemplary compassion?* But not just any do-over. A life do-over. The email said that Ray could go back to any single moment in his life and relive it, altering his own actions – and *only* his own actions - in any manner he chose. It also included a short list of rules.

Never one to read the assembly instructions, ingredient lists or employee attendance policies, let alone life do-over rules, Ray ignored them and went straight to the closing salutation, reading it aloud with a suspicious grin, "Yours truly, God."

"Yours truly? Why not *sincerely yours*, or *best regards*, or *affectionately*? Something a little warmer, I mean, Jesus Christ, you're supposed to be God - creator of heaven and earth. I should think that would warrant more than *yours truly*." He then closed the email, leaving it in his inbox for later reply. What would he say to an offer like to that - to God? *Thanks for thinking of me but I'm really swamped right now so I'll have to get back to you? My girl will call your girl to setup a lunch sometime and we can discuss the nitty-gritty then? Who would be God's girl anyway, Cleopatra? Mother Teresa? Marilyn Monroe?* He decided at that moment to play along, conspiring to have the last laugh, though he didn't yet know how.

Pulling a beer from the refrigerator, Ray recalled the only nomination-worthy incident in recent memory. He'd just had lunch in the business district downtown and was strolling back to the office when a woman heading in the opposite direction blew out a three-inch heel and tumbled head first onto the sidewalk. She was a very attractive blond in a bouncy summer dress that Ray had been watching bounce toward him for several minutes. And just that suddenly, as their personal space approached intercourse, she fell, dropping with a thud like the bundled morning news flung from a delivery truck.

Extending a helpful hand, Ray asked her if she was alright. But his next question, meant to reveal her relationship status and availability for dinner, caught in his throat, bushwhacked by the blood dripping from the trembling fingers that reached out to his. A wave of nausea spiraled down his esophagus, landing in a heap (just as the woman had) in his belly and threatening to deliver his still-digesting corned beef sandwich into the poor woman's lap. Darting his eyes away, he averted adding insult to her injury, instead finding sanctuary in her perky cleavage that was luridly peering up at him. With his organs reprioritizing, he then lifted her up to her feet. A hollow conversation ensued, the woman condemning her footwear and the shameful condition of the sidewalk while Ray complimented the weather in regard to the golfing conditions. Not a golfer, the woman smiled and thanked Ray for his kindness but then abruptly continued on her way, scraped fingers and all, limping appealingly down the street like a Ferrari with one flat tire.

*Was that the good deed God was referring to?*

Ray shrugged it off and went to bed not remembering that he hadn't told his buddies about his chivalry, fearful of the ridicule he would have received for not securing her name and phone number.

One week later, Ray received his second email from God.

*Have you decided on your mulligan yet?* the message read. This time there was no closing salutation. It was signed simply, *God*.

*What happened to yours truly,* Ray thought. And just as he began to ponder the prospect of God being pissed at him, he caught himself. *This is definitely Derek,* Ray concluded.

A computer systems analyst, Derek did have the technical smarts to pull something like this, Ray reasoned. And he definitely had the twisted sense of humor to go along with it.

"The perfect combination to play God," Ray said aloud as he reached for the mouse. He then scrolled to the "reply" button and was just about to click it when another message arrived. It was God again.

*Derek is a sharp guy, the message said, and those pictures with your ex-girlfriend Melinda were ingenious but this do-over thing would be way over his head."*

Vaguely anxious, Ray read the message twice before retreating to the kitchen for a thought-cleansing beer. After three good slugs, he carried it back into his "home office" convinced that it was Gerry, not Derek, who was orchestrating the pious prank. Gerry knew Derek would be Ray's first suspect and would use that knowledge to enhance the whole Goddamn *God* thing. When he sat back down at his desk there was another email waiting for him.

It was from you-know-who and it read, *Oh please, Gerry? He has trouble putting his shoes on the right feet and even then he has to have his wife tie them. I'm talking some serious shit with this reward thing and you're picking a guy with a fourteen handicap from the lineup?*

Gerry *was* a fourteen handicap (his short game needed work, skulling more balls per round than a streetwalking whore,) but the only person other than Ray and Derek who would care enough to know that was his frequent playing partner Al.

Staring at the glowing computer screen, Ray asked quizzically, "Al?"

*Bing,* Ray had mail.

*Don't even go there,* God wrote. *I know I love him like a son, but Al's a bit of a moron.*

"He is not!" Ray shouted.

For a several tense moments Ray actually believed he was arguing with God. With his neck bulging and his face reddening, he spat out counter punches before finally concluding, "Well, if he is then it's your own damn fault – you made him!"

It was then that the villainous Melinda portfolio flashed in his mind. "You fucking bastards! You're all in this together. Again!"

Fit to be tied (not by Gerry, of course) Ray pressed and held the computer's power button until the quiet hum of the processor died like the song of a singing cricket befallen a hungry frog. But the LCD monitor didn't change; it continued to broadcast the fact that Ray still had unopened mail.

"What the fuck?"

*Bing,* Ray had another cyber-letter.

*Go to the window,* God wrote.

Ray didn't budge. He turned and looked out at clear blue sky beyond but he was not eager to approach it, his decaying thoughts turning to murderous bolts of lightning.

*Please?* God asked.

Hesitantly, he lifted his numb behind from the milk can and cautiously approached the window. They would jump out at him, Ray anticipated, those three sons-of-bitches, painted in ghoulish faces with fake blood and vampire teeth. But as he slowly closed in on the window - inch by painful inch - the big fright never materialized. There was no one outside. No Derek; no Gerry; and no Al. Looking down into the empty courtyard, Ray then realized that living on the second floor made the anticipated scare impossible without scaffolding or a bucket truck. As his nerves began to settle, he gazed out blankly, wondering which of his buddies might have access to a bucket truck.

*Whack!* A sparrow barreled beak first into the glass, inches from Ray's nose. Exploding in a girlish whimper he'd never heard before (and hoped to never hear again,) he jumped backward and farted.

*Bing*, Ray's powerless computer announced another arrival.

It was God again. *Made you blink, lol!*

Frantically, Ray unplugged everything in the room, locked the door behind him as he exited and drove down the road to get a twelve pack of whatever beer was on sale.

Catherine was in no mood for Ray's brain teaser. Monday mornings were tough enough, but this one followed a long weekend of camping with the two dozen hyperactive cub scouts she presided over in her spare time as Troop 24's den mother. Her mind was mush, her nerves were shot, her skin was dotted with calamine lotion and she couldn't stop the echoing in her ears – *B-I-NGO, B-I-NGO, B-I-NGO, and Bingo was his name Oh!* But Ray persisted.

"So what would you do?" he asked as the two sat with their morning coffee in the employee break room (although it wasn't proving to be one for Catherine.) "If you could take one moment in your life and live it over again."

"I don't know, Ray," Catherine answered tersely. "I'd have to think about."

"So," he replied, never taking his deadly serious eyes off hers as he leaned back in his chair. "Think about it."

"When did *this* bug crawl up your butt?"

"Can't I ask a serious question?"

"You never have before. Are you taking a philosophy class or something?"

"No!"

"Well, color me suspicious, but you've only asked me two questions in the past five years: *What's the afternoon weather forecast?* and, *Have you got any ideas for helping me slip out of here early?*"

"Golf isn't everything, Catherine."

Catherine clutched at her bosom, faking a heart attack. "Say it isn't so, Ray!"

"Seriously, I've been thinking about this a lot," Ray said, leaning furtively forward into the table. He spoke quietly and earnestly, carefully plodding forward as if his words were fragile. "Somewhere over the course of my life there was one moment that, if I had handled it differently, could have made my whole life turn out completely different."

"One moment?"

"Yes."

"Resulting in a completely different life?"

"Yes."

"You're nuts."

"No. Enlightened."

"You found Jesus?" Catherine asked, struggling to control her momentarily caged laughter.

"No, nothing like that," Ray said, knowing he'd lose her for sure if he mentioned the email for the Man upstairs. He looked past her grinning skepticism, searching the bulletin board behind her for the right words. But all he found was a sales ad for a used, red moped. Half the phone number tabs had been peeled away leading him to conclude that it had already found a new home. (Ray had secretly always wanted a moped.)

But before Ray could offer further explanation (about the do-over rules, not the moped,) Catherine spotted a lottery ticket sitting on the next table – a discarded loser, no doubt – and quickly seized the opportunity to play along.

Mirroring Ray's stoic expression, she said, "I'd go back a few months and pick the winning numbers for that multi-state drawing that paid two hundred and fifty million bucks. One quarter of a billion dollars, Ray. Now that's a life changer."

"You can't do that," Ray said.

"Why not? I picked losers the first time, so I'll go back and pick the winners."

"That's against the rules."

"What rules? You didn't say anything about rules?"

After Ray had found the courage to re-electrify his computer, he reopened the original email from God and read the rules – a dozen times. They seemed simple enough – straight forward and ethical – but then what else would one expect from God.

"All forms of gambling are out-of-bounds," Ray said, "including government run lotteries."

"Shit!" Catherine exclaimed. "Where's the fun in that. How am suppose to change my life with no bankroll?"

Ray just shrugged, before detailing the highlights from the list that he'd replayed all weekend, much like the scouts and their campfire songs. He explained that the do-over player, as Ray was referring to the beneficiary of the mulligan, could not utilize any current knowledge to duplicitously manipulate anyone or any event from the past; that they could only alter their own personal thoughts or actions; and, that the do-over would last exactly one minute – no more and no less.

"One minute?" Catherine snorted. "It takes longer than that to butter my bagel in the morning?"

"Hey, I didn't make up the rules."

"Well, if you didn't, then who did?"

"God!" Ray blurted out, before he could stop himself.

Catherine at first just stared back at him and then the giggles escaped, tearing through the bars like a horde of rampaging monkeys. Several times during the fit she told Ray she was sorry, but his woeful eyes only heightened her amusement. He was weirdly serious and that only made her laugh harder.

Wiping her now tearing eyes, Catherine asked, "Did you go for a hike in the Adirondacks over the weekend and stumble upon a talking burning bush? You should have called me; my boys would have loved to see that."

"Ray," she then said in deep, soulful voice, "you are the chosen one; chosen to bring my message to the people. And from this day forward you will no longer be Ray Granfield. You will be known throughout the universe as the Mulligan Man!" More chimps fled the cage, barreling over the momentarily hapless man who'd gotten an email from God.

"Most people would have just called the park rangers, Ray; told them to send fire trucks."

"I didn't mean..." Ray stammered. "I didn't go..."

Knowing Catherine the way he did - that the bridge he had just unwittingly crossed had been dynamited behind him – he rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. "Never mind," he conceded. He then stood up and left.

With her laughter subsiding, Catherine silently thanked her colleague for washing off the grump that had accumulated during the scouting excursion. Then, unexpectedly, a vision flashed in her mind. She was twelve years old, riding in the back seat of the car with her parents, pretending to be asleep. ("When I want to eavesdrop on Mom and Dad, I just pretend I'm asleep," she had confessed to her seven year old sister, who responded by asking what the word eavesdrop meant.) They were making the long drive home from Catherine's first soccer tournament, an invitational event that had attracted teams from across the state, and everyone was tired.

"I had no idea this thing would go on *all* day," her father had lamented as he carefully steered them along, peering anxiously out at the meager thirty yards of headlight-illuminated highway. (Catherine's father was a worrisome nighttime driver; her mother preferring not to drive at all.)

"It was exhausting," her mother chimed in. "And she has another one in two weeks in Rochester."

"Ouch," he father said. "That's going to be another long day. Are you sure she's really into this soccer thing? Enough to be on this recreational team that will have us traipsing all over the state all summer?"

"She seems to be," her mother replied. "You remember how she begged to be on it. Said if she

wasn't she would have no chance of making the school team in the fall; and, more importantly, how all of her friends are on it."

"She is very good, a real monster out there on the field." Her father said proudly. Catherine could see him smiling through the slit of her barely opened eyes, her own smile blooming in the darkness of the backseat.

"Catherine is good at anything she puts her mind to."

"Too bad her mind isn't on something closer to home," her father chuckled.

"Child Psychology 101. If it's right across the street, then it can't be any fun. And, if we say no, then they want it even more."

Her father nodded in agreement.

"You know, there's a new dance school opening up this week in the plaza - ballet, tap, you name. I'll bet I could dangle that in a way that would catch her eye," her mother said conspiratorially before looking into the backseat to confirm Catherine's slumber.

Raising an eyebrow, her father responded, "that's seems a little devious, dear. I had no idea your mind worked that way."

"How do you think I got you to ask me out the first time?"

Her father laughed. "Now that I think about it..."

"Don't worry," her mother reassured her father, "a week into the dancing and she will have forgotten all about soccer."

But Catherine never forgot.

"One minute," Catherine said aloud in the otherwise empty break room. That's all it would have taken to awake from her sly slumber and tell her parents that she loved playing soccer; loved competing; loved doing something she was good at. But she hadn't. She stayed "asleep" in the car and for many years to come, succumbing to her mother's urgings by quitting soccer and taking up dance a few weeks later; piano lessons at a neighbor's house after the dance music stopped; horseback riding at a farm a mile away when the piano notes soured; and pottery classes in the studio of a local art shop when the horse eventually died.

Catherine could never say no to her mother. She couldn't handle the disappointment in her eyes. But as she picked up her coffee cup and headed back to the pile of reports waiting for her on her desk, still tickled by the image of Ray walking down the mountain in a long beard, a flowing robe and two stone tablets tucked under his arms, she wished with all her heart that she had found to courage to speak up that one precious time. Maybe, just maybe, one minute *could* have changed everything.

Poking his head into Catherine's immaculate cubical, Sherman Noonan asked his employee to run over to Ray's desk and find the latest quarter's sales report. "He's been working on them all week," Sherman said, "but he assured me they were ninety-eight percent complete before he left. If you could finish them up that would be awesome."

"Sure, no problem," Catherine replied. "Is Ray sick or something?"

"No," Sherman replied. "He got a call from his mother. It seems his father is standing out in the middle of the street in his underwear with a shovel in his hand screaming for the Nazis to show themselves. Said he's had bouts with dementia before and that he only recognizes Ray when he does. I told him to get the hell out of here before the old man killed one of the neighbors."

After his boss left, Catherine just shook her head and smiled. *Truly inspiring.*

Looking agitated, Derek watched Ray butcher his third attempt to exit the sand bunker that stood like a burly bodyguard in front of the seventh hole green.

"Maybe if you took your head out of your ass," Derek muttered to himself, "you might actually

hit the ball.”

Gerry and Al stood off to the side, all smiles.

“Don’t go counting your winnings too soon,” Derek said just as his partner’s ball finally sprang free from the death trap. It didn’t go very far, but it was out and Ray could now hack away with his putter.

Having drawn the short straw for today’s match, Derek had approached the first tee with wary optimism, remembering Ray’s exceptional previous performance – the day pigs flew, as they were calling it – and praying for a repeat. Seven holes into the eighteen hole contest they were six holes down and his buoyancy was sinking fast, tossed and battered by the waves of Hurricane Ray that was now blowing across the seventh hole green.

Four putts later Ray walked off after carding a ten while Derek futilely attempted to alter the betting arrangement with their opponents. Gerry and Al wouldn’t budge. They liked the idea of a free dinner and drinks.

Standing on the eighth tee, the slow foursome ahead of them still waddling about the fairway, Derek fumed over the delay – lighter fluid sprayed onto already glowing red coals.

“Christ, it’s going to be a six hour round at this rate,” he grouched. “God damn retirees; there should be a law that requires anyone over seventy to drive a cart.”

“Relax,” Gerry said. “The beer will still be cold when we finish.”

“Yeah, cold like my partner’s putter,” Derek replied, giving Ray a disgusted look.

“Oh, lighten up, Derek,” Al said. “It’s only a buck a hole. It’s not like it’ll put you on the edge of bankruptcy.”

“No, but it just strikes me funny that he plays like Phil Mickelson against me and then like Punxsutawney Phil when he’s my partner.”

Derek wasn’t laughing when he said it, but now Gerry and Al were.

“Yeah,” Gerry said after regaining his composure, “what’s up Ray. I’ve never seen anyone’s game deteriorate so fast. Last week you were in a groove. This week you’re carving ugly ones all over the course.”

“I’m a little distracted,” Ray said feebly.

Derek snorted. “A *little* distracted?”

Al, the more compassionate one of the group, walked over and put his arm over Ray’s shoulder and winked at the other two. “Grandpa Jones and his Hee Haw gang up there are going to be while,” he said. “So, why not tell Uncle Al all about it.”

Ray looked at him suspiciously, eyeing the other two the same way a few seconds later. Though the three had apologized profusely for unintentionally contributing to Ray’s breakup with Melinda (Ray had found he could not longer look at her naked without visions of his buddies “sugarplums” dancing in his head,) and had vowed to never duplicate such a “dastardly” stunt again, he wasn’t ready to trust them just yet. Still, he desperately wanted more opinions before he took God up on the do-over offer. Hesitantly, he proceeded to spill his guts, wisely leaving out the part about the email from above.

“So, why the one minute limit?” Derek asked.

“It’s like a mulligan in golf, right Ray?” Gerry said. “The replay of a single shot out of the eighty or ninety taken during the round.”

“Or one hundred and twenty,” Derek interrupted with a grin, chiding Ray again.

“Sometimes one shot can set the tone,” Gerry continued. “You drop a long putt for birdie on the first hole and just that quickly your confidence triples and every club in the bag feels lighter than air.”

“Just like one moment from the many over a lifetime,” Al offered with an understanding nod.

“Exactly,” Ray said, feeling more secure that a ticker-tape parade of pornographic images was not about to rain down upon him. “One do-over could change your life.”

“Interesting theory,” the doubting Derek said. “A man could get rich off something like that, *if* it was actually possible.” (Ray didn’t bother interrupting to explain that gambling was against the rules.)

Like Catherine, they would have asked about the origin.) "But since it isn't, why waste time thinking about it."

With the fairway now clear, Derek wasted no time launching his ball high and long down its center. He then walked back to his bag, a satisfied smile tilting across his face. "Do it right the first time, that's my motto."

The other three men then hit their drives before the foursome continued on their way, two of them thinking very deeply about what Ray had just placed before them.

Three holes later, their shots having both found the same thick patch of rough bordering the left side of the fairway, Al and Gerry stood waiting for the pokey gentlemen ahead to finish up on the green.

"I would say no this time," Gerry said. "When my ex-wife asked me for a divorce, I mean. I would say no if I could go back to that moment and insist that we go see a counselor."

"Why didn't you say no then?" Al asked.

"Unlike Derek, some of us don't recognize what the right thing is in the heat of the moment. At the time I was in shock, and hurt I guess. I just wanted the whole mess to go away. Two years later it looks completely different."

"Do you think changing that moment would really have altered the big picture?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've told me before that it seemed you and Karen were destined to split. So, let's say for arguments sake you told her no the first time she asked. Would that have changed the way she was feeling inside?"

"It might have," Gerry replied unconvincingly. In his heart he knew it probably wouldn't have.

"I've been thinking a lot about Ray's scenario ever since he explained it," Al said, "and I believe the pivotal moment in one's life is something less obvious."

Gerry's face scrunched with bemusement.

"Take your divorce for example. The path that led the two of you there probably started long before she popped the question, so-to-speak, maybe even before you ever met. Maybe something that happened with your first girlfriend or her with her first boyfriend. Or when you were a kid and your DNA was irrevocably altered after looking at your older brother's girlie magazine. Nothing extreme, just a simple moment where the slightest nudge in a different direction would have changed the overall course of your life. Like the asteroid in that movie. You know, the one where there's an asteroid headed for Earth and Bruce Willis and Matt Damon fly up in shuttles to give it a dynamite shove and save the day."

"It was Ben Affleck, actually," Gerry said.

"Oh, right. I always get those two mixed up. You get my point though?"

"Yeah, the slightest variation in aim might only yield an inch after one step but it will grow into miles by the time your feet get tired."

The green ahead was now empty.

"So the trick, my friend," Al said as he stepped up to his ball, "is to correctly identify that first step." He then swung and laced his shot a praiseworthy ten feet from the breeze-caressed flagstick.

"Nice shot," Gerry said.

"If, in fact, do-overs were possible, that is."

"If only," Gerry replied with a regrettable smile.

Ray's computer screen glowed like a lighthouse beacon.

It was past two in the morning and he'd been lying on his living room couch for hours, unable to sleep. With his head full of reruns - endless clips from high school and college and the six years since - Ray channel surfed, determined to find that one life altering moment; determined to make the most of the do-over God had offered him. But just like late night television, nothing caught his eye and he continued

to flip. Red-eyed and frustrated, he finally got up and went to the kitchen for a beer.

After several sips, he asked himself if he was crazy. The email was a joke, he reminded himself; a prank by his buddies or even Catherine perhaps. But what if wasn't? He couldn't shake that gnawing question. *What if it wasn't?*

Ray scanned his surroundings, taking inventory of his life. He seemed to have everything he wanted - a good job, a comfortable place to live, a reasonably solid bank account, a twelve pack in the fridge (eleven now) and friends to hangout with. His parents were healthy and tolerable, keeping their distance while still offering to throw him a temporary life preserver from time to time. So, what was missing?

"A green jacket," Ray said, disrupting the silence. Ever since picking up the game as a long-limbed teenager, he had dreamed of winning The Masters, the ultimate professional golfer's championship, the prize for which was a million dollars and a swanky green sport coat. In his dream, Tiger Woods would help him slip it on as was the custom at Augusta National Golf Club to have the previous year's champion do the honors. Oh, how he would love to have that jacket hanging in his closet, stuffed full of the cash that accompanied it.

*Bingo!*

Ray hurried into his office, sat down and retrieved the original email from God. He then carefully reread the rules.

"One minute," Ray said thoughtfully, his mind searching through reel after reel of memories for that one moment that, if altered, might catapult him to the top of golf's summit. But the more he analyzed it, the more it appeared that he had done everything he could have. He had taken endless lessons, emptying his parent's of their patience and most of his college savings account; played on his high school team as well as his Division III college team; entered challenging tournaments across the state since graduation, basically playing golf six times a week, sometimes seven. There didn't appear to be a single mulligan-inspired minute that could have changed his results and just when the neon sign of realization started to flicker - *you can never be that good, Ray* - something his father once told him hit the kill switch.

*Natalie!*

Ray was only a few months out of college and had just accepted his first job offer when, sitting at the kitchen table the night before "the big move-out," as his friends were calling it, his two-sheets-to-the-wind father decided it was time to pass along his secret to a successful life. "A good woman, Ray," he said, although at first Ray thought he had said, "a good worm." "That's the key, my boy. Find yourself a good woman who believes in you and then, watch out world!" (Ray's father didn't drink often, but when he did his advice came sudden and slurred.)

*Natalie Falcetti.* She was the good woman. The one that got away, as the saying goes.

Ray and Natalie had never dated, actually; never so much as a peck on the cheek, though Ray had fantasized a cheek or two on occasion. She played on a girl's softball team his married buddy coached, shortstop to be exact. A walk-off homer in her uniform - short shorts and a skin tight v-neck jersey - Ray noticed her turquoise earrings first, followed by the rest of her lithe, tanned accessories when he'd stopped by the field on his way home from work one Friday evening. After a narrow one run loss, the team relaxing along the sidelines, Ray wasted no time introducing himself to Natalie. He was in serious *like* with her from the start and after she told him what a golf fanatic she was, it quickly evolved into ankle-deep love. And it was apparent to everyone, he would learn later, that she liked him. But then came the fork in the road when they all retreated to their sponsor's bar where the coach's wife - the team's centerfielder - then proceeded to introduce Ray around as if he were the perfect wool pullover to go with their green and yellow uniforms. Ending at Natalie's feet, the matchmaking tour had grown horns by then, Ray personally reaching a whole new level in vulgarity and intoxication. (Like his father, Ray was a light drinker and a jovial, but somewhat annoying drunk.) Natalie found him amusing, but not enough to buy tickets to any of his future performances.

*X marks the mulligan spot!*

Describing that moment in history as best he could with 104 keys, Ray explained to God that instead of accepting that first drink of the evening he would volunteer to be the team's designated driver. "If I'm sober, Natalie and I continue the conversation we started at the field and live happily ever after," he concluded. *A big church wedding; a honeymoon in the Caribbean; an enormous house in some high-priced suburb; a wife to kiss me when I win The Masters.*

With a smile as big as his fantasy, Ray signed the email, "Affectionately yours, Ray."

He then clicked the *Send* button and went off to bed, confident that he would awake to a whole new, wonderful world. One with a good woman by his side and a green jacket in his closet. And don't forget the cash oozing from the pockets like lava.

Ray woke that morning with a start. Prying his sticky eyelids open, he rolled over and peered at the clock on the bedside table and groaned. It read a foggy nine-thirty, meaning he was an hour and half late for work already. Two hours after a shower and the drive in. *What happened to my alarm? Why did I sleep so late?* Suddenly, Ray remembered. It was Saturday and he didn't have to go to work. *Oh it's Saturday, it's Saturday, nonnie hotcha-cha...*

Relieved, he sat up on the edge of the bed and ran a hand through his rumpled brown hair, patted his post-washboard stomach twice and rose to his feet. He then scratched his boxer-clad behind – left cheek first, then the right – and lumbered out of his bedroom heading toward the kitchen. He never made it to the refrigerator.

*The do-over!*

He'd done it – dreamt it at least. He'd talked to Natalie for hours and then drove her home – alone. They'd kissed on her doorstep after which she'd written her phone number on the palm of his hand.

Ray raised his hand now, hoping to see the black-inked evidence. *Stupid, it would have washed off by now? Or rubbed off?* Ray felt a surge of panic. Her scent, her lips, her hands caressing his neck, it had gotten him quite aroused and having never been the master of his own domain, he froze. *I didn't rub it off when I got home, did I?*

Standing in the middle of his early-frat-house decorated living room, Ray's heart sank. Nothing had changed. The walls were still empty; the couch still looked like a death-bed basset hound and there wasn't a single picture on the entertainment center shelves. No family group shots, no in-laws, and most importantly, no brunette in a white dress. *Where are the wedding pictures?*

Ray ran into the second bedroom (his home office, I mean...oh, never mind,) and jiggled the mouse without even sitting down first. The computer screen sprang to life.

"Nice work, Ray," God wrote. "You really turned her head this time around."

A tentative smile inched across Ray face. *That's the way I saw it too.* He scanned the room, searching again for signs of Natalie. But everything was just as it had been before his dream. *So, why isn't she here? Maybe the do-over hasn't taken affect yet? Maybe there's a grace period, so I can prepare myself for the change?*

*Bing!* New mail arrived.

"Sorry, Ray," God wrote. "There's no grace period."

"But nothing's changed," Ray wrote back. "I didn't get drunk. I didn't make a fool of myself. And we clicked. We kissed and she gave me her number. I didn't lose her number did I?"

"No, you didn't lose her number," God responded.

Ray wanted to say, "Well, what the fuck then?" but he didn't. (God heard it anyway, but since he knew Ray was stressed by the disappointment he let it go.) Instead, he typed, "Well, what then? Why isn't my life completely different?"

"Well Ray, sometimes one do-over isn't enough. You know the old saying: old habits are hard to break?"

*Yeah, I know. I probably got drunk on the first date and that was the end of it. If only I could hold my liquor. That's the do-over. Develop a tolerance for booze.*

*"That's not it, Ray," God wrote.*

*"Well, what then," Ray typed frantically.*

*God replied, "You canceled the date with her to go golfing."*

*No! Tell me I didn't!*

*"I'm afraid you did, Ray. Something about your cat was about to have kittens? I don't see anything in my files about you ever having a cat, Ray."*

**The End**