

## **THE CADDY (7/28/09)**

by  
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I'm a caddy. I used to work as a runner for guys trading pork bellies and other crap at the Board of Trade, but I loathed those people. How can you respect morons in snot yellow jackets squealing and shoving and making silly hand signals? These creeps really thought they were something special. But I knew they weren't worth shit. The Exchange was one huge pit full of kids. They were all kids, even the old ones. It makes me want to vomit just to think about them. I could have strangled every one of them.

Now at Pine Acres, where I caddy, you find adults, not guys crouched over the toilet cutting lines of coke with their plastic ID cards. You find confident men who move slowly, even when they have to have somewhere to go. And they always smile. They smile at me and the other caddies. They smile at the black guys and the Mexicans who work in the kitchen. They smile at each other. Not big, toothy grins, just simple smiles.

I love everything about the place. That's why I came back. I love standing all alone in the bag room with the lights out. It's dark in there except for the light reflecting off the metal clubs. It smells of leather and earth. In the whole world, there's nothing like the smell of the bag room at a country club. Once when I was a young caddy, I spent the whole night in the bag room. I waited until my mother was asleep and then I snuck out of our apartment back to the club and climbed through the window. I curled up next to a huge black leather bag and made a pillow out of some club covers. I still go in there any chance I get. Anyway, I see caddying as real work. And I get to meet the finest people you can find anywhere— people like Mr. Roger Burrows.

There's a picture of Mr. Burrows on the wall of the men's grill. It was taken after a special golfing event. It shows a bunch of men sitting around the pool sipping gin and tonics. Most of them are wearing green pants or yellow pants with light blue blazers. They look tanned and freshly showered. The tables have bowls of chips and smaller containers of dip. A black waiter in a white coat is standing behind. Mr. Burrows is off to the side looking past the men sitting next to him. He's wearing black slacks with a green shirt and a light sports coat.

Mr. Burrows and I knew each other in high school. But after he went to Princeton and I went to work, we didn't see each other. Some time after I had given up the bag the first time, he joined Pine Acres—just like his parents.

"Remember me?" I asked him the first time I caddied for him. We were walking down the fairway of the first hole. I had to hurry to keep up with his long strides.

He slowed down just a bit and turned to look at me. "William? William? My God, of course I do! We played football together in high school." I can still picture myself in that green Pine Acres t-shirt with the big bunker behind me. Mr. Burrows was looking right at me, not at anything else in the whole world.

At thirty-two he was already graying just a bit. But he still looked like the running back I used to block for—broad shoulders, strong jaw, big forearms, deep intense eyes. My mother remembered those eyes. She used to clean his family's house. She said the whole family joked about Roger's eyes. "They're staring all the way from Chicago to Princeton," they would say.

He asked me if I'd been a caddy for a long time and I told him how I'd caddied at Pine Acres through high school and that I had come back after my rotten experience at the exchange. He told me that lots of people our age were caddying. We both shrugged. Then he lowered his voice and kind of smiled and said, "Maybe some day I'll quit the bank and join you."

By now we had reached his drive and I handed him a five iron. We both stopped talking as he lined up the shot. He wagged the club a few times and then started his backswing. He had a nice full swing with a complete follow through. The ball landed on the green and bounced backwards.

“Nice shot, Mr. Burrows.”

For the rest of that round we jabbered on about high school. He said that when we played football, he liked to run to the right because he knew I would clear a hole for him. He didn't seem surprised that I was still living at home. A few holes later he had me shake hands with the others in the foursome. “If you ever need help, William here is your man.” One man in the foursome, a fat bald guy, made a point of not looking at me when he shook my hand.

On the way back to the clubhouse after the eighteenth hole, I asked if I still could call him Mr. Burrows.

“If that's easier, fine. But I get to call you William.”

“That's the way it should be.” On the way to the clubhouse, we talked about his game. If he played in the club championship, he wanted me to carry the bag. He had broken 80 for the first time that summer.

It was that way all summer. If I wasn't out on a loop already, I would caddy for Mr. Burrows. I got to know his game. The four times he shot in the seventies, I was his man. He'd ask for advice, and I'd give it to him. When he was having trouble in the bunkers, I told him to keep his weight forward. “It always works for me.” On long irons, I had him line up a little bit left and throw his arms out towards the target. I could get him to slow down if he was getting too excited. He would never putt until I had given him my opinion about the green.

What I really liked about Mr. Burrows was that he could see all the way through bullshit. This one time the others in his foursome were talking about alcoholics. I guess someone in the club had just joined a dry-out program or something and had gone off to

some place in Minnesota. Then one of the other players came out with the crap you hear all the time about not being able to help someone unless “He wants to be helped.” Now if you think about that statement, it’s pretty fucking stupid. In the first place people say it because other people have said it. They haven’t really thought up the words themselves. But people still nod and frown like something smart has been said. And it’s bullshit. Who says you can’t make someone stop drinking? And how can you tell what people want to do? Anyway, on this afternoon, this guy frowned and lowered his voice, “You know it doesn’t do any good to help a drinker unless he wants to be helped.” Everyone else—even the other caddies — nodded like pigeons and mumbled. Not Mr. Burrows. He just studied the scorecard and didn’t say one word. He might have known my dad was a drinker who would have been better off if someone had kicked his ass until he stopped.

After caddying, I would usually stop at the Wonder Bar for shots and beer. I didn’t have any friends at the club. Most of the caddies were much younger. They wouldn’t want to hang out with a thirty-two-year-old. And their parents wouldn’t be too hot on the idea either. I’d sit there and drink beer and think about what I had done that day. And I’d always think about Mr. Burrows. Sometimes I’d drive past his house on the way home from the bar so I could imagine his life better. He lived in a big brick place back in the woods. And I did know what his wife and kids looked like because they would hang around the pool. Her name was Henrietta. She was tall and handsome. And I guess very rich. A waitress told me that Mr. Burrows met her at a party on Long Island.

One time I took a short cut from the caddy shack to the parking lot, and on the way I passed the swimming pool. Mr. Burrows and his family were there but sitting off in the corner. She was on a lounge chair reading a big book. Mr. Burrows was sitting on the ground near her. It looked he was doing a crossword puzzle. The daughters, who are tall and handsome like their parents, were sitting on the grass playing cards. No one looked too happy.

In late August things slowed down. The weather turned hot and humid. A lot of caddies went back to school. I was often the only guy at the club carrying bags. One afternoon I was watching a ball game in the caddy shack and Mr. Burrows walked in and came right over to me. "Let's play nine, William. We'll carry our own bags." I looked at the caddy master, but he just shrugged a "Why not?" and we went off and played. I figured it would be awkward for a few holes, but then it would be fun. I wanted Mr. Burrows to see how far I could drive a golf ball. But he was off somewhere else and I could barely get him to talk. After seven holes, it started raining and we left. In the parking lot he apologized for being so gloomy. I said it was gloomy weather. Then we got into our cars and drove away.

In the middle of August, Mr. Burrows played a few rounds with a man named Ben Flowers. It seemed strange because Ben was not really Burrows type—or anyone's for that matter. In the first place, he had to be at least seventy-five years old. He wore shiny pants. He talked during the game. He had a terrible sense of humor. And he was mean. A few years ago, he got a caddy fired for laughing. My mother never liked working for people like that. "Watch out for the mean old men. They can hurt you." But I bet that prick was a mean young man too. No wonder he never married

The caddy master told me that Mr. Burrows had worked for Flowers at the First National Bank, and when Flowers retired, he took over most of his accounts. In the winter he lived in some old people's place in Florida; in the summer he stayed in Chicago. This summer he was actually living in an apartment owned by Pine Acres. Even though he and Mr. Burrows belonged to the same club, they looked more like two strangers who happened to be walking along side each other. They were like people who leave the train together. They have nothing in common except the train ride.

The Club Championship was played the last weekend in August, but Mr. Burrows decided to enter. I thought maybe he had gone east with his family because I hadn't seen the wife and kids at the pool. But it turned out he had stayed behind, and that's

when he started playing golf with Ben Flowers all the time. Most of the other caddies had gone back to high school, so I caddied for him every day. They would play at odd times; it seemed like we were the only ones on the course. Once a guy playing alone joined us, but usually it would just be the three of us—Mr. Burrows, Mr. Ben Flowers, and me carrying both their bags. It was the autumn, and the leaves had started to fall, and there's nothing worse than trying to find a golf ball in the leaves.

Things got uncomfortable fast, especially when they started playing for \$50 a hole. Sometimes people play for money, but not for that much. But the season was over, so no one would notice anyway. Mr. Burrows was a much better golfer so he had to give Flowers a stroke on practically every hole.

A few days later things got ugly. As we were walking down the first fairway, Flowers started talking into Mr. Burrow's left ear. He would stop occasionally to spit and then catch up with Mr. Burrows and grab him by the elbow and start jabbering again. I couldn't quite hear what he was saying but I could hear the old man kind of giggling. Every so often he would poke Mr. Burrows in the ribs and cackle. Once he said something and looked over at me and grinned. I just stared back at the little wrinkled bastard. Mr. Burrows stopped walking and just shook his head. He had a pained look on his face. I really felt sorry for him, but I couldn't do anything. It wasn't like football where I could make the block to spring him loose.

On the back nine that day, Flowers started saying things to me, but he made sure Mr. Burrows heard him. Did I know that Mr. Burrows worked for him when he first came to the bank? Did I know that Mr. Burrows was a real party boy back in the early days? He said "boy" with kind of a smirk. Did I know some of the "special" bars that he used to go to? Had I ever seen any pictures of him dancing? The stuff didn't make any sense to me, but Flowers laughed so hard he was finally snorting. Mr. Burrows just walked on ahead with his hands stuffed in his pants. I stared at the grass and wished I was somewhere else. At the end of the match Mr. Burrows paid Flowers \$100 and walked

off to the parking lot without even saying good-bye to me. That had never happened before.

Two nasty things happened when we played a few days later. On the first tee Mr. Flowers bumped into me and then stuck his face right onto mine. He had yellowish pink skin with dark liver spots. One eye had a lot of mucus in it. And he wore this little gold chain around his chicken neck. He reeked of bourbon and cigarettes. "William, I don't want any more fuck-ups today. When I'm putting, keep your mouth shut." I started to say something but he just laughed and walked away and stared at the ground. People don't say things like that at our club. And I never talk when people are putting. Mr. Burrows heard it all and tried to make a joke, but he knew I felt. Flowers must have been drunk, though, because he forgot it right away.

For the rest of the round, he taunted Mr. Burrows. They were playing for even bigger money. Flowers would whisper things during his shots. Once I looked over and they were pointing fingers at each other. I looked back again and Flowers had his arm around Mr. Burrows' shoulder, and Burrows was squirming to get loose. Finally on the fifteenth hole, Flowers lost his ball in the woods. He found it, but he had obviously dropped another one. I was his caddy, for Christ 's sake. I knew he was using a Pinnacle. But he picked up a Titleist that he swore was his. He had a shot to the green and ended up somehow winning the hole. When we were walking to the next green, he was whispering in Mr. Burrows' ear. Then he reached into the pocket of his plaid pants and pulled out a color picture. Mr. Burrows took one look at it and marched off to the clubhouse. Flowers shrugged, "I think I'll quit too. Come on, William. Let us follow our man child back to the bar."

The next day, which was yesterday, there we were on the first tee ready to play again. Flowers was moving more steadily. They had agreed to play for less money. I had never seen Mr. Burrows play better. After seven holes he was one under par, and I think the pressure was affecting him less than me. I was really excited for him. He was

quiet. He made a point of walking down the fairway near me. Flowers was off by himself. One time he cheated, but no one said anything. By the ninth hole, Mr. Burrows had slipped over par, but he was still playing great. At this rate he was going to be in the low seventies.

On hole number twelve he was still just one over par. It was a short hole, just 140 yards. This would be perfect for one of Mr. Burrows' nine irons. Right before he started to swing, Flowers started talking frantically. "Roger, does William here know that there have been other Williams in your life? Have you told him about Billy? Have you told him where you got the money to get darling Billy to vanish? Flowers had this crazy smirk all over his face. He was leaning on his club in a way that made him look like an old sheepherder. Mr. Burrows stared right at him. His jaw was moving a little. It looked like his eyes about to explode. He looked down at the ball and then swung wildly. It shot off to the left into the trees, and that was it. He ended up shooting an 84. I felt terrible for him because this was going to be his day.

Afterwards, they both went to the bar. I went back to the caddy shack. I was just about to leave when the phone rang.

"William?" It was Mr. Burrows. His voice sounded tight. "I'd like you to do me a favor." It was not a happy voice.

"Of course, sir. Whatever you want."

"Ben and I are going to stay here at the bar for a while. I don't want him driving home. He's already finished off nine martinis. I thought it would be better if he left his car here and you walked him home through the woods. He lives in one of those houses on the other side of the course."

"I know just where it is. A lot of retired members stay over there."

"That's right. At 10:00 p.m. be near the door of the bar. We'll be the only people at the club so it won't look funny for a caddy to be standing there. When we leave, I'll



hand you Ben. You can take him by the arm and escort him to the woods. He won't have much to say."

"I'll get him home. No problem."

"One more thing, William," he hesitated for a long time, "I want you to pick up something from my car. It's in the glove compartment. Make sure you do it before you walk him home. Thanks for everything, buddy. You're the best person I know."

I knew where Mr. Burrows parked his Lexus. I looked to make sure no one thought I was breaking in. Then I opened the passenger door and sat down. The car had a warm, leathery feeling to it. It reminded me of the bag room. It was empty except for some books in the back seat. I guess Mr. Burrows liked to read. I pushed the button of the glove compartment. The little door came down slowly the way they do on good cars. On my cars they always flop down like they have been dropped from the sky. Inside I could see the title to the Lexus, the insurance forms, and some maps. Below the maps something glistened. It was a long hunting knife, and even before I touched it, I knew it would be razor sharp.